



Extended Abstract of PhD Dissertation

The Role of Women in Jesus Christ's Religious Movement with an Emphasis on Mary Magdalene

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the status and representation of women in early Christianity, with a specific focus on Mary Magdalene as reflected in both canonical and apocryphal texts. Within the broader field of Christian studies, feminist theology provides a renewed interpretive framework for reading the Bible and early Christian writings. By analyzing the Gospels alongside selected noncanonical sources, this study investigates how Jesus' teachings introduced reformative perspectives on women's roles within the patriarchal context of Jewish society. The research highlights the distinctive portrayal of Mary Magdalene in apocryphal works such as the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Thomas, and Pistis Sophia, in which she is depicted as a figure of wisdom, leadership, and spiritual authority. Although the institutional Church later rejected these texts, they nonetheless reveal the intellectual and theological engagement of early Christian communities with questions of gender and discipleship. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how feminist reinterpretations of these sources can shed new light on the evolving position of women in both early Christianity and contemporary faith contexts.

Keywords: Mary Magdalene; Women in Christianity; Feminist Theology; Early Christian Texts; Jesus Christ; The Bible; Apocrypha.

Background and Research Context

The study is situated within the interdisciplinary fields of early Christian studies, biblical hermeneutics, and feminist theology. In recent decades, scholarly attention to women's roles in the formative stages of Christianity has grown significantly. Yet the portrayal of key female figures, particularly Mary Magdalene, continues to be shaped by centuries of theological, cultural, and institutional reinterpretation. Traditional readings of the canonical Gospels have often marginalized women's participation in Jesus' ministry, emphasizing male apostles as the primary bearers of authority and revelation. Contemporary research in both historical and feminist biblical studies has reopened this discourse by reassessing the evidence found in apocryphal and noncanonical writings. Feminist theologians argue that patriarchal interpretations have historically obscured female perspectives, necessitating a reconstruction of early Christian history that centers women's experiences and agency (Fiorenza 1994). These texts, once excluded from ecclesiastical orthodoxy, reveal a more diverse and inclusive understanding of discipleship, in which Mary Magdalene emerges as a central and authoritative voice. This project builds upon that evolving academic context, addressing the critical gap between canonical representation and extracanonical evidence. By situating the inquiry within feminist theological frameworks, it contributes to the re-evaluation of women's spiritual and intellectual authority in the earliest Christian communities. Ultimately, the research seeks to illuminate how early Christian narratives, canonical and apocryphal alike, reflect the complex processes through which gender, authority, and sacred knowledge were negotiated in the nascent Jesus movement.

Objectives and Research Questions

This study aims to explore how Jesus Christ's movement transformed women's status in early Christianity and how such transformation can serve as a model for feminist theology. The research examines the social and religious position of Jewish women before Jesus' ministry, their participation in his movement, and the distinctive role of Mary Magdalene as a leading female disciple. By integrating feminist theological perspectives, it seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions on gender and religion.

Research Questions:

1. What was the position of Jewish women before the rise of Jesus' movement?
2. Which women are identified in the New Testament as followers of Jesus, and what roles did they play?

3. How is Mary Magdalene represented as a significant female figure in this movement?

Hypotheses:

1. Jesus redefined the perception of women's roles within a patriarchal Jewish society.
2. Mary Magdalene held a distinctive and possibly leading role among Jesus' followers.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

This research is anchored in the intersection of feminist theology, historical-critical biblical studies, and gender theory. Feminist theology provides the primary theoretical foundation, emphasizing the reinterpretation of Christian scripture and tradition through the lived experiences, agency, and spiritual authority of women. Building on Fiorenza's argument that feminist reconstruction destabilizes patriarchal historiography (Fiorenza 1994), the study treats feminist theology not merely as a corrective but as a full hermeneutical paradigm for reading both canonical and extra-canonical texts. Scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether (Ruether 2004) have highlighted how patriarchal readings of the Bible historically marginalized women's voices, inspiring the present study's effort to recover female perspectives within early Christianity and to highlight how these perspectives redefined religious participation and leadership. The study also draws on sociological and hermeneutical approaches to understand the socio-religious structures of first-century Jewish society in which Jesus' movement emerged. By contextualizing Jesus' reformative message within this patriarchal environment, the research identifies how his teachings subverted traditional hierarchies and opened new pathways for women's active discipleship.

Methodologically, this dissertation employs qualitative textual analysis that combines historical-critical and comparative readings of canonical and non-canonical sources. Canonical texts such as the four Gospels are examined alongside apocryphal writings, including the Gospel of Mary, the Gospel of Thomas, and Pistis Sophia, to trace variations in the representation of women. Attention is given to language, symbolism, and theological motifs related to authority, purity, and revelation. Through this integrated framework, the study seeks not only to reconstruct the historical role of women in Jesus' movement but also to engage with contemporary feminist hermeneutics that reinterpret these texts as empowering models for gender equality. This methodological synthesis

ensures a balanced inquiry that is both historically grounded and theologically relevant, bridging early Christian discourse with ongoing feminist reflections in modern theology.

Findings and Main Arguments

Analysis of the canonical and apocryphal texts reveals several key dimensions of women's roles in Jesus Christ's movement. First, the canonical Gospels depict women as active participants in Jesus' ministry, often accompanying him on his journeys, providing support, and witnessing critical events such as the resurrection (King 2003). Their presence challenges the patriarchal norms of first-century Jewish society, indicating that Jesus' approach to discipleship was inclusive and transformative.

Second, apocryphal writings such as the Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Thomas, and Pistis Sophia highlight women not only as followers but as authoritative interpreters and leaders within early Christian communities (Marjanen 1996). Mary Magdalene, in particular, is consistently portrayed as a figure of spiritual insight and leadership, sometimes surpassing male apostles in understanding and devotion. These texts illustrate an alternative narrative where women are central to theological discourse, suggesting that early Christian communities grappled with the tension between gender inclusivity and emerging patriarchal structures.

Third, a comparative reading of canonical and non-canonical sources reveals that while the official Church eventually marginalized women's public roles, these apocryphal accounts preserve a memory of female agency and intellectual authority. They offer insight into the contested space women occupied, both theologically and socially, and demonstrate the potential for feminist reinterpretation to recover these marginalized perspectives.

Overall, the research argues that Mary Magdalene and other female disciples were central not only in supporting Jesus' mission but also in shaping the theological and communal ethos of early Christian movements. Recognizing these roles challenges patriarchal historiography and contributes to broader feminist theological discourse, offering new insights for contemporary scholarship on women in religion.

Discussion and Significance

The findings of this dissertation demonstrate that early Christianity, particularly within the movement led by Jesus, contained a transformative vision for women's roles in religious and social life. By elevating women such as Mary Magdalene to positions of spiritual authority, the texts reveal a subversive challenge to prevailing patriarchal norms in first-century Jewish society. This suggests that debates over women's

participation were central to early Christian communities and that the marginalization of female voices was a later development associated with institutional consolidation (Laffey 2001).

The study underscores the interdisciplinary relevance of these findings. From a historical perspective, it reconstructs the social and religious contexts that enabled women's active discipleship, highlighting their engagement not only in communal practices but also in theological reflection. From a theological standpoint, the research illuminates how feminist readings of canonical and apocryphal texts can correct long-standing interpretive biases, offering a more inclusive understanding of early Christian spirituality.

Furthermore, the research has contemporary significance. By reclaiming the authority and contributions of women in the Jesus movement, it provides a model for re-evaluating gender dynamics in modern faith communities. These insights challenge churches and religious scholars to consider how historical erasures have shaped contemporary perceptions of female leadership, offering avenues for greater inclusivity in both academic and religious settings.

Finally, the dissertation identifies limitations and areas for further research, including the need to explore additional apocryphal texts and regional variations in early Christian communities. Future studies could expand comparative analyses to other religious movements of the period, enhancing understanding of women's leadership across early spiritual traditions.

Conclusion

This dissertation concludes that early Christian narratives, both canonical and apocryphal, preserve significant traces of women's active participation and theological influence, which were gradually obscured as patriarchal authority solidified within the institutional Church. The research highlights how the transition from inclusive discipleship to male-dominated hierarchy unfolded across successive interpretive layers. Early Christian women not only accompanied Jesus and the apostles but also transmitted teachings, performed acts of faith, and shaped community life. Yet, as orthodoxy was defined, their presence was diminished and their voices confined to marginal texts. This process mirrors a broader socio-religious evolution observable in the centuries following the rise of Christianity.

By recovering these suppressed narratives, the dissertation contributes to a reconstruction of early Christian gender history, emphasizing that the silencing of

women was not inherent to the faith's origins but a later distortion. The study thus provides new foundations for feminist theology, offering a more inclusive vision of spirituality rooted in historical evidence. Ultimately, the research opens pathways for re-evaluating how women's religious authority might once again inform and renew contemporary understandings of faith and leadership.

Dissertation Information

This doctoral dissertation was successfully defended and refereed in January 2022 at the Department Religions and Mysticism, Faculty of Law, Theology, and Political Science, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

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