“Blessed Art Thou Among Women”

The Identity of Mary Through a Gnostic Lens

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Abstract

When it comes to the figure of Mary from Christianity, there are certain preconceived notions surrounding her name and meaning which are often based on the canonical texts of the New Testament. Conversely, when this figure is studied through the lens of Gnosticism, new information comes to light which goes against the norms created by the Church. The purpose of this study is to take a fresh look at Mary using the Gnostic texts and research in the field for the purpose of more fully identifying her characteristics when set against a gender perspective. Mary has scarcely the number of textual references in comparison to Jesus but in light of her intrigue as one of few females referenced, it is worth searching for alternate takes on her persona. This research study presents various theories about Mary’s identity, based on early apocrypha to show how they differ within Gnosticism research, giving rise to a debate and illustrating why has this been problematic for her identity as a female. Some researchers propose she is actually a composite identity while others argue she is two separate persons. In order to carry out this research, a qualitative method has been applied in order to answer the question of who Mary is from a Gnostic viewpoint and how this is revealed to be a gender issue. This study has revealed a woman with a strong character who carried out apostolic and priestly duties alongside male counterparts as told in ancient Gnostic texts. Furthermore, these texts were purposefully hidden, left out of the canon of the New Testament and declared heretical. Despite this label, they remain as evidence of a past that is relevant to religious studies. If the identity of Mary has changed shape even slightly from what has been told for centuries, it is worth finding out what these changes are and how religions other than orthodox Christianity tell her story for the advancement of women in religious roles.

Keywords: Gnosticism, Mary, Nazareth, Magdalene, Christianity, identity
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Introduction

Mary is a name that brings forth a number of religious associations and her fame is tied not only to the New Testament but to Gnostic texts as well. Her presence at the resurrection of Jesus is a pivotal moment in her identity as an important female character in the stories of early Christianity and Gnosticism. There is some discussion regarding whether the Mary from these texts consists of the separate identities of Mary of Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus, or if they are in fact a composite identity. This question of Mary’s identity is provocative when viewed from a historical Gnostic and theological perspective through a feminine lens. Who is Mary and what is her connection to Gnosticism? This identity has numerous titles including: blessed mother, mother of God, the blessed virgin Mary, our lady, queen of heaven, saint, disciple, first witness and apostle. This name, Mary, is most commonly associated with two figures namely, Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus also known as Mary of Nazareth; these names are mentioned less than Jesus but are equally important figures in the Gospels. Mary Magdalene is believed to be a follower or disciple of Jesus and some gospels hold that she is the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ; however, there are those who consider the lines between Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene blurred or less separate than one may consider. There is even discussion of Mary of Nazareth as having carried out priestly duties alongside her son. Perhaps there is even a connection to the Sophia of Gnosticism who gave birth to the demiurge (creator deity) much as Mary gave birth to the son of God.

Purpose

A qualitative research method will be used through a close reading of texts written about Mary in the Gnostic Gospels, and early Christian texts with the purpose of finding the best answer to the question of who she is within the Gnostic frame of reference. Was she a disciple, a priest, a virgin mother, or all of these identities? In other words, was her identity two separate persons or a composite figure. By comparing and contrasting the Mary identities using early Christian and Gnostic texts one can attempt to learn more about her pivotal role in the ministry of Jesus Christ illustrating how a woman in the early Church could be considered a disciple, a supreme icon and a mother figure amidst the great censorship of religious texts.
that ensued. Furthermore, through this investigation the researcher may come to important conclusions regarding her role in Gnosticism and its relationship to gender norms. The meaning of these two “Mary” identities will be explored to illustrate the importance of this female mystery, and to prove the relevance of the feminine side of God as viewed through the lens of Gnosticism. This perspective employs an arguably dualistic androgynous deism which contrasts the patriarchal dominated orthodox Christian dogmas that are practiced to this day.

Research Questions

The research questions are: how do various theories about Mary’s identity, based on early apocrypha, differ within Gnosticism research, giving rise to a debate and why has this been problematic for her identity as a female?

Previous Research

Previous research within the subject of Mary within Gnosticism has gained momentum due in part to the discovery of the hidden texts at Nag Hammadi. Therefore, it is pertinent to this study to briefly mention which research will be taken up in this essay and how it relates to the topic at hand. This previous research section will outline the general aspects of the religion Gnosticism through critical texts from Hans Jonas’ book, The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity, illustrating his general theories on the religion as a whole. Secondly, certain terms will be defined which pertain to this particular research study, followed by an explanation of the characteristics of Gnosticism using The Encyclopedia of Religion, which provides foundation for this study. Next, previous research comparing early Christianity to Gnosticism will be discussed using Elaine Pagels’ book, The Gnostic Gospels. Further on in the theoretical background section, The Encyclopedia of Religion, Jaroslav Pelikan’s book, Mary Through the Centuries, and the book, Women in World Religions, will be used to underline the basic elements of the separate identities of Mary of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene. Various theories on Mary’s identity as seen through Gnosticism will be discussed using articles and books of researchers in the field including: Elaine Pagels, Ally Kateusz, Stephen J. Shoemaker, Antti Marjanen, Ann Graham Brock, Karen L. King, Therasa Topete, Sarah J. Balstrup, Max Dishu and M.S. Compton. Historical Gnostic texts such as the Pistis Sophia, the Gospel of Mary, the Apocrypha Syrica, the Gospel
of Bartholomew and an excerpt from the New Testament will be used to shed light on her identity, gender role and its significance for this research paper. Of particular significance to this study is the research of Stephen J Shoemaker and Ally Kateusz, who provide relevance to the research questions by evidencing the composite theory and the theory regarding Mary’s leadership role and priestly duties.

Gnosticism may be described as several religious groups with common philosophical roots within Hellenism and Platonism with the common goal of spiritualism through knowledge. They rejected materialism and held that within every human being there exists a part of the transcendent which longs to reunite with the creator. This belief system is esoteric in nature and drenched in mystery with mystical texts and gospels describing a complex deism and cosmology. Although there is little textual evidence illustrating the life of Mary, both of Magdalene and Nazareth, the evidence within Gnosticism that does exist, paints an alternate picture to the one discussed in orthodox Christian canonical texts. In fact, Gnostic texts contain concepts which include references to male and female apostleship and gender balanced roles in contrast to the cultural shift to gender norms which occurred within Abrahamic religions. During the second to the fourth century when Gnosticism is said to have occurred, several groups were vying for religious power which translated into political power for this time period. It is no wonder that figures such as Irenaeus declared Gnostic texts heretical and rejected them. Arguably, even the Christian Bible was written long after said events and based on oral tradition that was passed down and interpreted, not to mention translated into numerous languages. Therefore, the argument that Gnostic texts are somehow less reliable than canonical biblical texts is fallible and certainly they are as relevant as any other text from this genre. Furthermore, it is highly plausible that a figure, such as Mary, could have been a strong, powerful, leader of her time with priestly duties and a respected role within her community, apart from the fact that she was a woman. Certainly, gender seems less important when it is discussed through the Gnostic perspective due to their seemingly progressive ideals. In the next section of this paper, some earlier research and perspectives on Gnosticism will be taken up in order to place the discussion within the frame of this belief system. After the previous research and theoretical background on Gnosticism are explored, the research will be concluded with a description of the method and an outline of the analysis of the identity of Mary and Sophia theories, a discussion of the paper as a whole and finally, the conclusion.
The Gnostic Religion

Hans Jonas, a philosopher and researcher in the field of Gnosticism, wrote, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* and took a detailed look at the existential aspects and symbolism of Gnosticism and related it to not only Western ideology but highlighted its roots in other disciplines such as Zoroastrianism, Mandaeism and other Eastern faith systems (2001). In this book, Jonas begins by defining Gnosticism as being knowledge but he further explains that to Gnostics, knowledge is not simply that which is acquired rationally but gaining knowledge in Gnosticism is knowing on a “supranatural” level and it is more akin to faith than reason (Jonas 2001, p. 34). Specifically, he states that,

> gnostic knowledge has an eminently practical aspect. The ultimate object of gnosis is God: its event in the soul transforms the knower himself by making him a partaker in the divine existence (which means more than assimilating him to the divine essence. (Jonas 2001, p. 35).

Moreover, he explains how it is inaccurate to discuss Gnosticism solely in relation to Christianity because it is much deeper and is as he states, “a heterogenous spiritual substance” which had developed outside of the Hellenistic atmosphere (Jonas 2001, p. 36). Jonas further argues that Gnostics were non-conformists who practiced intellectual individualism with a complex mythological foundation marked by a vast creativity in explanation of their theology, cosmology and eschatology (Jonas 2001, p. 42).

For example, Gnostics held that the universe is made up of “cosmic spheres…ranged like concentric enclosing shells…the seven spheres of the planets” (Jonas 2001, p. 43). Jonas argues that this extravagant explanation of cosmology is meant to create distance between God and humans and show how removed one is from the divine (Jonas 2001, p. 44). Basically, a human is a prisoner in one of these spheres and must work his way through the various levels in order to reach God. Further on he posits how in Gnosticism the human was the archetype of the divine primal and shaped in its image and that the urges or astral soul of a human are the “psyche”. Enclosed in the soul is a human’s “pneuma” or “spark” which is a small piece of the divine trapped in his or her body (ibid).
In its unredeemed state the pneuma thus immersed in soul and flesh is unconscious of itself, benumbed, asleep, or intoxicated by the poison of the world: in brief, it is “ignorant” … its awakening and liberation is effected through “knowledge”

(Jonas 2001, p. 44).

Hans Jonas’ previous research has contributed to a wider understanding of the field of Gnosticism and for this particular study, its relevance speaks to the fact that gender was not a factor for this religion. There was no obvious power struggle as in the case of orthodox Christianity because gender segregation did not exist. Gnostics, as he points out, were concerned with knowledge as this study has discussed.

Definitions

Some key terms relevant to this study will be defined in order to provide a background to the topic of this study. When discussing identity and persona it is in relation to the historical figure of Mary who is most associated with the Abrahamic religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. According to the online Cambridge dictionary, identity is defined as, “who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that makes them different from others.” (2019). Most often in reference to Mary, she is represented as either the mother of Jesus who comes from Nazareth or the female apostle and companion of Jesus who comes from Magdala and is called Mary Magdalene. For the purposes of this paper, religion, may be defined as, “the belief in and worship of a god or gods, or any such system of belief and worship” (Cambridge 2019). Regarding the terminology of the early texts, apocrypha, denotes works which are not considered canonical and there are questions surrounding the authorship of said texts. The word, Gospel, is defined by Merriam Webster’s online dictionary as, “the message or teachings of a religious teacher.” (2019). This definition fits the usage in this study which considers not only canonical Gospels of the New Testament from Christianity but also Gnostic Gospels.
What is Gnosticism?

In order to discuss the research question concerning the identity of Mary and her place within Gnosticism it is necessary to provide background information on this religion on a broader basis and synthesize its relationship to the foundation of this study. This will be accomplished by outlining the general characteristics of this faith, defining it and discussing it using well-known authors who have written books on the subject as it relates to the feminine aspects as represented in Mary. For the purposes of this study the focus will be on the Christian Gnostics.

Generally speaking, the word Gnosis is understood to mean ‘knowledge’ and this religion is concerned with knowledge of God. However, as pointed out in the Encyclopedia of Religion, Gnosticism as a term came about in modernity and the only information known prior to finding codices or texts was based on the writings of opponents of the religion; “ecclesiastical heresiologists such as Irenaeus (c. 180 CE), Hippolytus (c. 200), and Epiphanius (c. 350)” (2005 p. 3508). A breakthrough discovery was made in 1945 when Gnostic writings written in the early Coptic language were found at Nag Hammadi near Egypt. As a result of these findings, researchers have been able to study a wider selection of writings of early scribes within the Gnostic faith and find further evidence of Jesus’ teachings outside of the orthodox Christian canon. However, the research on these later findings of the Nag Hammadi texts continues with no conclusive evidence regarding them due to the nature of their content and the age of these artifacts.

Early Christianity and Gnosticism

Elaine Pagels wrote, The Gnostic Gospels, which takes a look at the political aspects of Christianity’s roots, by comparing and contrasting between Gnosticism and the orthodox or traditional form practiced today (2006). She explains how these two branches of the same religion had conflicting interpretations of Jesus’ teachings and she accomplished this by comparing the gospels of the new testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John with books from the Gnostic Gospels which were buried away in a desert in Egypt and not discovered until 1945 (Pagels 2006, p. 13). Moreover, her interpretation includes important aspects concerning Mary’s character.
Firstly, the resurrection of Christ is used as a discussion point to show how Gnostic Christians perceive it, with some describing it as meeting Christ on a “spiritual level… in dreams, in ecstatic trance, in visions or in moments of spiritual illumination” (Pagels 2006, p. 36). In contrast, orthodox Christians take the literal stance on the resurrection and claim it is of the flesh, and an alternate view is heresy (ibid.). Pagels theorizes that this interpretation is one of political purpose on the part of the orthodox Christians, in order to legitimize their version and keep their power as exclusive leaders of the Church (Pagels 2006, p. 38). Their claim gives control of the church to the bishops, because they claim to be successors of Peter the apostle, based on the claim that he was the first witness to the resurrection. However, as the author discusses, it all depends on who the correct successor of Jesus is considered to be. The orthodox branch holds fast to the version that Peter is the rightful successor and rock of the church, but some Gnostic Christians claim it is Mary Magdalene who holds the secret knowledge passed on by Jesus to her after his resurrection (Pagels 2006, p. 39). In fact, as Pagels points out, “the gospels of Mark and John both name Mary Magdalene, not Peter, as the first witness of the resurrection” (ibid.). As Pagels further posits,

Mary lacks the proper credentials for leadership, from the orthodox viewpoint…But as Mary stands up to Peter, so the Gnostics who take her as their prototype challenge the authority of those priests and bishops who claim to be Peter’s successors

(Pagels 2006, p.44)

Another aspect that is taken up in this book is monotheism as analyzed using the apostles’ creed, because some Gnostics argued about the mention of a dualistic God in the old testament versus the new testament. It is argued that the creed was used to reiterate that there is only one God and all other ideas are heresy (Pagels 2006, p. 55). Pagels argues that the creed was used to substantiate the bishop’s authority over the church and the Gnostic view was “an attack upon that system. For when gnostic and orthodox Christians discussed the nature of God, they were at the same time debating the issue of spiritual authority” (Pagels 2006, p. 59). However, as the author posits, Gnosticism is not merely a political movement,
but it developed in reaction to not only the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, but the teachings of the nature of God (Pagels 2006, p. 70).

Thirdly, Pagels discusses the patriarchal nature of the orthodox followers compared to the mother-father dualism of gnostic teachings. Some of this can be explained using the social norms of the time, where the Church was moving away from pagan traditions of gender equality in ritualistic practices, and towards male-dominated hierarchical structures, placing the male in power positions and women urged into silence (Pagels 2006, p. 83). As she points out, Gnostic followers held that the Genesis 1 account of an androgynous or equality-based creation myth was the more accurate version, and their communities mirrored this belief (Pagels 2006, p. 85). Despite the progressive rituals of allowing women to hold active roles within Gnosticism, orthodox Christianity as exemplified in the Catholic Church forbade women to participate and as Pagels states that as late as 1977, Pope Paul VI “declared that a woman cannot be a priest ‘because our Lord was a man!’” (Pagels 2006, p. 88). This brings up another researcher, Ally Kateusz who wrote an article on artifactual evidence pointing to the possibility that Mary of Nazareth had a priestly role within the Church. She has also written a book called, *Mary and Early Christian Women: Hidden Leadership*, about the fact that earlier texts about Mary, the mother of Jesus which were transcribed were also redacted (2019 p. 21). The scribes, in fact, left out or changed certain aspects in order to sometimes hold with the social norms of the time, which held that women were not respected as liturgical leaders, but were supposed to let the male members take on the role of preaching and performing priestly tasks (Kateusz 2019, p.20).

Theoretical Background

Because certain theories concerning Mary’s identity are discussed it is relevant to mention the descriptions of these various identities revealed in the early Gnostic and Christian Gospels. For the purposes of this paper, only two Mary identities will be brought up: Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdalene, despite the fact that the name is given to at least six different women in the New Testament. Researcher, Stephen J. Shoemaker, posits that Mary is a composite identity while others remain on the side of Mary as separate persons with separate characteristics and identities. Ally Kateusz, who has researched Mary in regards to breaking gender norms, provides compelling evidence to support the theory of Mary carrying out priestly duties. In order to further explore the identity of Mary in the analysis section, this
study will discuss Sophia from Gnosticism due to the connections between these women that provide background evidence to her gender role. The name Sophia, comes from the Greek word which means wisdom, and it has a direct connection to knowledge. It may be argued that Sophia is a crucial part of the Gnostic Religion and helps to form the foundation for its doctrines. It is no coincidence that one of the major texts of Gnosticism is titled, *Pistis Sophia* (Mead 2005) wherein *pistis* is often used to denote faith according to early Christian teachings. This next section, will first generally outline the characteristics of Mary as two separate identities and finally discuss the conflict researchers have regarding whether or not she is a composite identity.

**Who is Mary of Nazareth?**

Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus, is a pivotal figure in Christianity, but her role seems to be more subordinate in nature, and as a role model for Christian women she is certainly pious and demure, but not often seen as a strong leader. Certain researchers have found information that brings to light unknown or hidden aspects of her persona that have been disguised or edited in order to maintain a Petrine order in orthodox Christianity. Through closer study of apocryphal and early Gnostic texts, it has become evident that she was not the same figure that exists today, but conversely, the literature leads scholars to conclude that she was in fact portrayed as a strong role model and leader with qualities on the same level as her male peers. Although, she does not have a gospel in her name in official texts, other literature has been found which were left out and hidden away in secret much like Gnosticism itself.

Jaroslav Pelikan wrote, *Mary Through the Centuries*, which provides various descriptions and aspects of this prominent female persona (2002). Of particular interest in his book is the chapter referring to the dogmatic doctrine of her Assumption into heaven or as other texts refer to it as her Dormition or sleep (Pelikan 2002, pp. 201-213). Vatican I, which was held in 1950, issued a declaration on November first of that year, which stated that the Virgin Mary was bodily assumed into heaven and seated at the right hand of the son, sharing the throne of the holy trinity (Pelikan 2002, p.204). As a result of this doctrine, Protestants fervently disagreed with and it was a point of further conflict within Christianity. However, as Pelikan mentions, it elevated her status as something like a deity or holy royalty (Pelikan 2002, p.204). This seems unusual for a male-dominated religion such as Catholicism to honor a female figure with such prestige and at the same time deny women the right to be ordained.
as priests. However, there is evidence to the contrary which paints an alternate view of this Mary.

**Mary’s Dormition and Assumption**

Researcher, Ally Kateusz, performed a discourse analysis of the Dormition narratives which tells the story of Mary of Nazareth’s life and death. The oldest Dormition narrative was published in 1902 by British Syriac scholar Agnes Smith Lewis and described Mary performing exorcisms, healing the sick, baptizing, sprinkling water, preaching and leading apostles in prayer. According to Kateusz, “copyists of the texts later redacted heterodox markers of Mary’s ecclesial authority and Dormition homilists added orthodox markers of female respectability to their texts” (Kateusz 2013, p. 75). She explains in her article, *Collyridian Déjà Vu: The Trajectory of Redaction of the Markers of Mary’s Liturgical Leadership*, how these narratives were popular and exist in nine ancient languages with characteristics that she believes links them to the very early Christian era. She further explains how the early Gnostic idea of angel Christology found in early Dormition texts such as *Liber Requiei* depict Christ visiting Mary as a Great Angel and bestowing her with a secret book of mysteries (Kateusz 2013, p.76).

Kateusz points to Marian scholar Stephen J. Shoemaker’s argument that if the Dormition texts were dated in the same manner as other texts with heterodox elements like the Nag Hammadi texts, one could deduce that the Dormition narratives are from the fourth century or even earlier, such as the third or even second century (ibid). This would theoretically place the texts within the timeframe of the Gnosticism movement and could explain the idea of a woman such as Mary of Nazareth in a priestly role. Several other researchers have confirmed that Gnostic priests were both male and female, and that females took on leadership roles within this religion, and performed the same duties as men before the tide of Christianity turned toward a patriarchal norm, and forced women into subservient and silent roles within society and their religious practices. As Theresa Topete confirms in her thesis paper, *The Gospel of Mary: Reclaiming Feminine Narratives Within Books Excluded from the Bible*, many Gnostic sects were considerably more egalitarian than the other religious communities of the time with women sharing ritual and eucharistic responsibilities within the church (2017 p. 4).
Many gnostic cosmologies were based on a godhead that possessed both masculine and feminine attributes, and argued that the physical realm was transitory and illusory. Gnosticism promoted the idea of the body as intangible and immaterial, therefore it is not surprising that gender divisions and gender roles were also considered illusory in many gnostic communities.

(Topete 2017 p. 7)

Moreover, on the theory of the Virgin Mother in a priestly role, Kateusz provides evidence of artifacts depicting Mary in the pose of a Eucharistic minister. According to her, Mary is pictured with hands raised with a straightforward gaze showing a posture of confidence denoting a leadership role which contrasts later artist renderings of a submissive woman with eyes cast downward denoting an arguably more subservient role (Kateusz 2019, p. 122). In her essay, *She Sacrificed Herself as The Priest: Early Christian Female and Male Co-Priests*, the author cites textual evidence from various Gnostic texts including; *The Life of the Virgin, The Gospel of Bartholomew* and *The Acts of Philip*, thus illustrating Mary performing priestly duties (Kateusz 2017, p. 52-54). The following excerpt from the *Apocrypha Syriaca: transitus Mariae*, translated by Agnes Smith Lewis M.R.A.S in 1902, demonstrates how Mary performed acts which were like a priest’s such as blessing followers of Jesus, “And at morningtide came men and women and they worshipped the Blessed one, and were blessed by her” (Lewis 1902, p. 136). This is part of a long narrative that describes the life of Mary of Nazareth. Likewise, she argues towards a Gnostic view of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as being portrayed textually in a position of power and assertion in the older Gnostic texts in contrast to the later orthodox ones (Kateusz 2017, p. 62). This assertive Mary is described in the following excerpt from the same *Apocrypha Syriaca* translation which depicts a scene of guards at Jesus’ tomb who tried to make Mary leave and stop praying there, “The Blessed one answered and said: I will not do your bidding; and I will not listen to your words; and I will not do your will” (Lewis 1902, p. 134). This is in stark contrast to the Mary of the New Testament who is usually depicted with a submissive demeanor.

Furthermore, Stephen J Shoemaker discusses in his article, “A Case of Mistaken Identity? Naming the Gnostic Mary,” how the Mary from the Dormition apocrypha is described using Gnostic terminology and shown to be a teacher of esoteric cosmic knowledge as the mother of Jesus (2002, p. 6). The text mentions the word *demiurge*, a platonic term adopted by adherents of Gnosticism which is a type of being responsible for creation of the
physical world but is not the same as the creator in traditional monotheistic religions. Gnostic followers generally believed that the demiurge had an antagonistic role with humanity (Shoemaker 2002, p. 5). He further mentions,

the theologically peculiar ambiance of the narrative, including its angel Christology and the presence of certain classically “gnostic” themes, all of which would seem to indicate an existence as early as the second or third century, as many students of the Dormition apocrypha have observed. (Shoemaker 2002 p.7)

Thus, once again it is confirmed by researchers in the field that the Gnostic Mary described in early so-called Gnostic apocrypha, is a very different one from the Mary represented in orthodox Christian canonical texts. However, there is still a question about which Mary is being represented in these Gnostic writings or if she is actually a composite identity.

Who is Mary Magdalene?

Arguably, Mary of Magdalene is just as famous as Mary of Nazareth but for different reasons. She has been accused of being a reformed prostitute and chastised by Peter after the resurrection in some interpretations. Her struggle, although similar to the previously mentioned Mary, is told in a different way and her name figures prominently in early apocrypha with a Gnostic Gospel titled, The Gospel of Mary (2016). This Mary is perhaps mentioned less than the other Mary in the Christian canon, but the fact that she has what some scholars argue is her own Gnostic Gospel, contributes to her intrigue when considering the inherent esoteric nature of Gnosticism. This study will now attempt to demonstrate how Mary of Magdalene can be viewed through a Gnostic lens.

According to the Encyclopedia of Religion, Mary Magdalene was believed to be involved in a business within the fishing industry and that she had contact with the Herodian court (2005, p. 5756). In the New Testament, she is mentioned in merely fourteen verses according to this same source and the Gospel of Luke mentions that she was a follower of Jesus, was healed by Jesus for some unknown affliction, and that she helped him minister to his followers suggesting that she was a successful businesswoman with a prominent status within the community at that time (ibid). Furthermore, this source states that she is named in
all four New Testament gospels as a witness to the resurrection which confirms her status as apostle (ibid).

When discussing Mary Magdalene, it is important to mention her portrayals in not only canonical texts but in non-canonical literature. There was a substantial amount of such textual evidence of her persona found in the late nineteenth century and also in 1945 at Nag Hammadi, Egypt. Firstly, fragments of a Coptic manuscript and also further finds written in Greek, were discovered and dated by experts to around the second century, which lines up with the historical timeline of Gnosticism (E o R 2005, p. 5757). Secondly, the Gospel of Thomas provides a story of a conflict between her and Peter, where he doubts the validity of her story of receiving a vision of Christ, and it is also considered a second century text. Thirdly, the literature found at Nag Hammadi include: the Pistis Sophia, the Gospel of Philip and the Dialogue of the Savior and possibly The Sophia of Jesus Christ (although some argue that the latter is from the fourth century) as discussed in the Encyclopedia of Religion (2005, p. 5758).

Another reoccurring aspect from Gnostic literature is the conflict between Mary and Peter as mentioned previously in this paper from Elaine Pagel’s commentary (Pagels 2006, p. 39). The Encyclopedia of Religion also mentions that certain scholars have made a correlation between Mary as representing the Gnostic side, and Peter the orthodox Christian side of a power struggle, due to a hostility towards female authority (2005, p. 5757). The Gospel of Mary narrates this famous conflict. To summarize, Jesus is with his disciples discussing the nature of matter and the nature of sin. During this discussion, Jesus imparts his knowledge about these subjects in what scholars describe as a Gnostic perspective. Mary comes in as a voice of comfort to the apostles due to their dramatic reaction and Peter basically scoffs at her validity as a reliable source of knowledge in an arguably jealous tone stating that Jesus loved her more than the others to which Levi comes to her defense and argues on her behalf. Mary then discusses her vision which is incomplete due to missing pages but seems to portray her as a medium for Jesus’ words and is reminiscent of esoterism (Jacobs 2016, p. 56). In keeping with the tradition of Gnosticism, her vision is described as a journey of the soul and its struggle with powers that are explained as a path back to the source (Balstrup 2015, p. 11). “It is no exaggeration to say that the discovery of this transcendent inner principle in man and the supreme concern about its destiny is the very center of gnostic religion” (Jonas 2001,
p.124). In other words, a woman such as Mary having a vision like this was significant for her character and for Gnosticism.

**Mary Magdalene’s Reputation**

In consideration of the fallacy of the penitent Mary theory, it is worth taking a brief look at the feminine theological theory of Mary Magdalene vis-à-vis the Gnostic portrayal and the orthodox characterizations. It has been stated in the Encyclopedia of Religion that as male authority within orthodox Christianity prevailed, Mary Magdalene’s reputation as an apostle declined (2005, p. 5757). Pope Gregory I from the sixth century claimed that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Nazarene and Mary of Bethany were one in the same person and then proceeded to proclaim that Mary Magdalene was a reformed prostitute in a sermon he gave in 591. The reason for this incorrect characterization was that she was confused with an unknown sinner named in the following passage from the Gospel of Luke (ibid),

36 When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. 37 A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. 38 As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. 39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.

*(Luke 7:36-39)*

This discrepancy stained her reputation and mislead followers of Christianity for decades which is in sharp contrast to the early portrayal of this figure within the realm of Gnostic literature.

In the book, *Women in World Religions*, the essay on women in Christianity written by Rosemary Radford Ruether, discusses the male-female dichotomy during major periods of Western Christianity (1987, pp. 207-233). Of particular interest to this study, she discusses how this syzygy is perceived in Gnosticism which relates to the early formation of
Christianity and even affects later movements within that religion. According to her, there are a few similarities between early female asceticism that was growing during medieval periods but that it differed from Gnosticism (Ruether 1987, p.216). She states that, “the Gnostic seeks to follow Christ by renouncing marriage and sexuality and thereby returning to androgynous spiritual unity” (Ruether 1987, p.217). However, as she posits, the Gnostic preaches that women can be redeemed, just like men, but with one caveat: they have to rise above or transcend their femaleness and become like men (ibid). Furthermore, she states that the monastic life was similar in nature to the preaching roles of male and female priests in early Gnostic sects. Both were fairly gender neutral due to the androgyny factor (ibid). However, despite having less of a focus on subordinating females, Gnosticism was perhaps not quite as progressive as one may think. Scholar, Antti Marjanen stated that the generalization that, “Gnosticism without exception held a positive attitude toward women and their participation in leadership roles in religious communities has been proven to be incorrect.” (Marjanen 2002, p 32). Despite whether they had a positive attitude, the status of women was arguably more equal than in orthodox Christianity. In regards to her reputation as it stands today, Mary Magdalene has been redeemed by historians and is no longer considered a reformed prostitute, but is in fact regarded as an important figure and one of the apostles of Jesus, regardless of her gender and despite what any scholar deems true or false about the gender situation in Gnosticism.

**Mary Identity Theories**

In order to discuss the identity question posed about Mary, several theories relating to this topic will be handled. These theories will be mentioned in relation to the background of Gnosticism with a feminine aspect in order to ascertain Mary’s identity. The following theories are taken from a symposium of essays concerning the identity of Mary by several scholars in the field including: Stephen J. Shoemaker, Antti Marjanen, Ann Graham Brock and Karen L. King.

Stephen J. Shoemaker’s essay, *A Case of Mistaken Identity? Naming the Gnostic Mary*, is concerning how the figure of Mary is a composite identity that includes at least two identities in one and that not one scholar can prove without a doubt who is who due to the inconsistency of the spelling of her name. Sometimes she is called Maria, Mariam and other times Mariamme but he states that the inconsistencies of the name are the key to his theory of
a composite identity (Shoemaker 2002, p.9). This is reminiscent of when Pope Gregory I stated that Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany and another Mary were a composite of the same identity, although his consideration did not include the mother of Jesus in the scenario. Shoemaker also posits, as other scholars in the field such as Deirdre Good, that there exists a universal Mary and he casts doubt on the theory that the Mary in the *Pistis Sophia* and other Gnostic texts is Mary Magdalene (Shoemaker 2002, p10). He discusses that the proof of identity is inconclusive and making assumptions taints other research attempts. Shoemaker argues that there is no strong argument in favor of one Mary over another. He states,

> the firm notion has developed that the forms of the name Mariam and Mariamme, as opposed to Maria, reliably indicate the Magdalene’s presence, with some scholars even going so far as to assert that Mary of Nazareth is always specifically identified in early Christian literature, making any unspecified Mary a reference to Mary of Magdala… it is usually the only evidence…that is offered.  

(Shoemaker 2002, p10)

Shoemaker argues that the spelling or usage of the name alone as proof is unreliable as a distinction of these two women in early Christian literature (Shoemaker 2002, p12).

Another important aspect that has been discussed is the resurrection scene with Mary as the first witness and purveyor of secret knowledge imparted by Jesus. The popular assumption here is that this is Mary Magdalene, but as Shoemaker and even Kateusz theorize, this could easily be Mary of Nazareth if one considers the source. He considers the source of textual evidence from early Syriac Christianity proving the identity of the Mary in this scene to be uncertain and when other scholars attempt to use the Gospels in the New Testament, they fall short because those accounts are inconclusive (Shoemaker 2002, p.18). Furthermore, he points to the dormition narratives as another aspect toward reconsidering the identity of Mary. Shoemaker strengthens his point when he argues that there is nothing that can begin to prove what the early Christian writers of the texts had in mind, deeming it as merely a popular hypothesis based on modern interpretation (Shoemaker 2002, p.20). Lastly, he writes that there is no simple answer to identifying the Gnostic Mary as either Mary Magdalene or Mary
of Nazareth, “we must proceed…with a caution that is nuanced by ambiguities present in
what is in fact a composite figure, who draws on both the Nazarene and the Magdalene into
her identity” (Shoemaker 2002, p. 30).

In his essay, *The Mother of Jesus or the Magdalene? The Identity of Mary in the So-
Called Gnostic Christian Texts*, Antti Marjanen takes a critical look at Shoemaker’s
previously discussed essay in an attempt to come to some conclusion about Mary’s identity.
Marjanen breaks down the essay into three basic arguments and then considers the validity of
each one. On the first argument of the spelling of the name, he disagrees with Shoemaker on
the identity question when referring to the *Pistis Sophia* where he asserts a distinction
between Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. When the Nazarene is mentioned it is clear
according to him due to the spellings of the name (Marjanen 2002, p. 33). His second
argument is that apocryphal Mary of Nazareth texts, Dormition and Assumption texts and
Mandaean texts are similar in their portrayal of Mary to Gnostic texts that are believed to
describe Mary Magdalene. However, Marjanen argues that the comparison Shoemaker asserts
is too broad and dismisses it. His third argument is regarding Shoemaker’s assumption that
the phrase, “You are blessed among all women on earth,” alludes to the same words from the
Gospel of Luke’s birth narrative, and as a result, throws a shadow of doubt on the identity of
Mary in *Pistis Sophia* (Marjanen 2002, p.36). In this instance, he points out that there are
basically three types of Mary references in this Gnostic text, those pertaining to Mary of
Nazareth, some pertaining to Mary Magdalene and others which do not specify any particular
Mary. According to him, there is no definitive answer as to which Mary was meant in each
and every instance but it is left to one’s interpretation (Marjanen 2002, p. 37).

Ann Graham Brock focuses on the *Pistis Sophia* text in her essay, *Setting the Record
Straight-The Politics of Identification: Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother in Pistis
Sophia* by looking at this gnostic text in two parts: *Pistis Sophia* 1-3 and *Pistis Sophia* 4. She
discusses Shoemaker’s claim that this Mary is the Virgin and proceeds to evaluate it using this
gnostic text (Brock 2002, pp. 43-52). In summary, her primary argument is that *Pistis Sophia*
1-3 is clearly meant to represent Mary Magdalene due to titles given to describe her such as,
the “other one,” “the blessed one,” and the “pure spiritual one” (Brock 2002, p. 47-52) She
argues that these are distinctive ways the early authors highlighted that the Mary in this text
was in fact Mary Magdalene. Moreover, she states that she used textual based reasoning for
the most part but that for *Pistis Sophia 4*, there are merely literary parallels and motifs to support her findings (Brock 2002, p.52).

In the next essay, *Why All the Controversy? Mary in the Gospel of Mary*, Karen L. King takes a look at the identity issue of Mary using the Gnostic *Gospel of Mary* as a point of reference (2002). She brings up several questions regarding who Mary was in this Gospel such as: was she the Virgin or the other Mary, was it important that she was a woman and a leader and what does this have to do with Gnosticism (King 2002, p. 54)? For the first point, King states that she is in agreement with other researchers that it is Mary Magdalene and not the Virgin Mother who is represented in this Gospel. She bases her premise on the fact that more texts point to the Magdalene than the virgin and that it rests on gender presentation because these Marys are always presented in a certain role (King 2002, p.57). According to her, the Mother of Jesus is more often described in depictions of motherhood and submissive roles while Mary Magdalene represents the conflict by rising above this gender role to an apostle (King 2002, p.57). King’s argument goes against what Shoemaker and Kateusz have proposed due to her bias towards the Magdalene identity.

Finally, King brings up the gender conflict between Peter and Mary found in the *Gospel of Mary*. She believes that this disagreement between them does not translate to a favorable view of women leadership by Gnostic groups but merely illustrates how she is an important figure to Jesus whose significance comes from her esoteric and ascetic qualities. She further adds, “The Gospel of Mary affirms that men and women exercise leadership on the basis of spiritual maturity, not on gender or sexual identity.” (King 2002, p.60). Furthermore, King asserts that the Gnosticism presented in this text reflects gender neutral souls with genders tied to the physical body favoring a more Gnostic view in her opinion (ibid). According to her, the text was written to contrast male versus female and demonstrate the Gnostic principle that the spark or soul has no gender. One can only achieve knowledge or gnosis through rejecting the body and transcending back to the source (King 2002, p.61).

**Method and Material**

This study has employed a qualitative research method using hermeneutics and close reading of texts on Gnosticism, Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdalene, translated Gnostic gospels and articles written about the question of Mary’s identity. The primary instrument for data
collection and analysis is the researcher who has taken an inductive analysis approach to articles and historical data on the topic of Mary from the standpoint of Gnosticism for the purpose of coming to conclusions about her identity and what this means for women today. The background of Gnosticism has been explained using the writings of Hans Jonas and *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. Various theories on Mary’s identity juxtaposed with Gnosticism have been taken from documents of researchers in the field including: Elaine Pagels, Ally Kateusz, Stephen J. Shoemaker, Antti Marjanen, Ann Graham Brock, Karen L. King, Therasa Topete, Sarah J. Balstrup, Max Dishu and M.S. Compton. Historical Gnostic texts such as the *Pistis Sophia*, *the Gospel of Mary*, *the Apocrypha Syriaca*, *the Gospel of Bartholomew* and an excerpt from the New Testament have been referenced in this study in order to provide insight into her identity and to discern its relationship to her gender role and its significance for women.

Analysis

Which Mary is it?

To sum up this debate, researchers disagree on which Mary is portrayed in early scenes involving Jesus. Brock and King rush to a conclusion about Mary being Mary Magdalene based on rather weak arguments and Marjanen is uncertain in his deduction. For example, King’s argument about gender portrayals showing Mary of Nazareth as weak and submissive has been proven as inaccurate when one is aware that she performed priestly duties as shown by Kateusz and as illustrated in the translated *Apocrypha Syriaca: transitus Mariae*, a confirmed text portraying the life of the Mother of Jesus. The following excerpt from this text illustrates this point as it shows Mary fighting a snake after appearing to answer the call of her followers,

> She appeared to two women in the land of Egypt…a great snake came out against them…and they called upon the name of the Blessed Lady Mary. Then the Lady Mary appeared…struck the snake on its mouth, and split it in two, and these women were delivered and did not perish.

*(Lewis 1902, p. 162).*
Shoemaker describes the scene when after Jesus ascends into heaven, an angel appears and imparts secret knowledge to Mary with instructions for her to deliver it to the apostles (2002 p.5). He argues that the text that he references comes from the ancient Dormition and Assumption apocrypha which are some of the earliest known texts about the life of Mary of Nazareth (Shoemaker 2002, p.5). The reliability of texts lose validity the more they are translated and the more they are retold in various ways and in multiple Gospels and texts. Furthermore, when the Gospels were chosen for the New Testament there was likely a political motive for choosing to tell the stories about the different ‘Marys’ rather than striving for accuracy. The Gnostic texts had been deemed heretical making their version arguably more believable because of the underlying idea that if it created conflict and had to be hidden, then it must be significant.

Furthermore, Shoemaker has discussed how “there is much to suggest that the gnostic Mary is in fact a composite figure, and that she has absorbed elements of both the Magdalene’s and the Virgin’s identities” (2001, p. 560). He goes on to state that a simple answer to her identity question does not account for all of the evidence. In this article titled, Rethinking the “Gnostic Mary”: Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala in Early Christian Tradition, he iterates that several other researchers have come to the same conclusion that these Marys are more than likely undistinguishable or a ‘universal Mary’ identity as researcher Marvin Meyer has suggested from his study of the Gospel according to Philip which is part of the Nag Hammadi Codex (Shoemaker 2001, p.571). He points once again to the language used as evidence of the presence of Mary of Nazareth in the Pistis Sophia from this famous passage.

And Jesus the compassionate, answered and said unto Mary: “Mary, thou blessed one, whom I will perfect in all mysteries of those of the height, discourse in openness, thou, whose heart is raised to the kingdoms of heaven more than all thy brethren…for thou art blessed before all women on the earth”

(Pistis Sophia translated by G.R.S Mead, 2005 p. 20)

He comments, once again, that such language is undeniably aligned with the gnostic Mary’s identity as the Nazarene (Shoemaker 2001, p. 573). Interestingly, the Pistis
Sophia is assumed to contain merely the identity of the Magdalene which is contradictory to Shoemaker’s assertions. He points out that there is much evidence which points to the Nazarene as the Mary in the first book, and the Magdalene in the second book where she is specifically referenced resulting in a multiple Mary composite identity in these early texts (Shoemaker 2001, p. 575).

Kateusz discusses how early Christian texts regarding women were often redacted and censored due to the gender norms of the time, and that the old rule of thumb for judging the reliability of a text was that the shorter version was better than the longer version (Kateusz 2019, p. 22). However, she argues that this is not the case with the dormition and assumption narrative of Mary, which is one of the longest apocryphal texts and arguably, it is more reliable than later versions of Mary’s life (Kateusz 2019 pp. 20-24). This leads to the conclusion that her theory about Mary of Nazareth in a priestly role and Shoemaker’s theory about a composite Mary, are the most accurate and believable arguments. Instead of merely arguing over the translation of the name Mary, he and Kateusz have studied these older texts and found connections that argue toward Mary of Nazareth as being more present than previously believed. This supports the composite Mary theory illustrating a woman who has various roles depending on the situation. In one instance she is the virgin Mother, in another she is an apostle and still another she is sacrificing alongside Jesus with priestly duties. If she can play all of these roles at once, how does she relate to the Sophia from Gnosticism?

The Sophia Connection

There are researchers who see a resemblance between Mary and Sophia from Gnosticism. Some connections are that Sophia has represented the holy spirit and in early Christianity the holy spirit is often said to be the grammatically feminine word for wisdom just as Sophia is said to likewise mean wisdom. Feminist historian Max Dashu, discussed the relationship between Sophia and Mary within the realm of Gnosticism in her text titled, *The Gnostic Goddess, Female Power, and the Fallen Sophia* (2010, pp. 1-21). Her research has centered around the matriarchal roots of religions and societies, that were obliterated and transformed into patriarchal belief systems with hidden remnants of strong pagan dualistic gender motifs (Dashu 2010, p.2). Other researchers in the field see a connection between Sophia and Mary Magdalene as in the case of M. Sophia Compton. In fact, she discusses the androgynous aspect and tendency of Gnostics to make gender irrelevant in the role of Sophia and Jesus.
Dashu explains how some Gnostics held that the three Marys were in the inner circle of the disciples of Jesus, and that there is artifactual evidence of Mary Magdalene pictured at the Last Supper (Dashu 2010, p. 2). Tertullian, an early Christian author from Carthage, complained of the Gnostic practice of women in leadership roles which included priestly duties. “The very women of these heretics, how wanton they are! For they are bold enough to teach, to dispute, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures—it may be even to baptize.” (Tertullian 2004 as cited by Kateusz 2019, p. 26).

Pagels describes how this idea of Sophia as a female persona has led some to make connections to the holy trinity with the holy spirit either perceived as feminine or androgynous (Pagels 2006 p 75). When considering the feminine aspect of the holy spirit, one may see correlations in the Gospel of Philip, which is also considered a Gnostic text. In this Gnostic Gospel, there are descriptions of the virgin birth that point to the Spirit, as both Mother and Virgin, and that the virgin birth is not meant to be taken literally as the Gospel of Philip alludes, but it is symbolic. The “virgin birth refers to that mysterious union of the two divine powers, the Father of All and the Holy Spirit.” (Pagels 2006 p 75). This points to the idea of Sophia as a divine Mother or creator deity. According to Pagels, as part of the Nag Hammadi text, the Apocalypse of Adam, tells a story of a feminine power who desired to conceive on her own and became pregnant of her own desire (Pagels 2006, p. 76). This is mirrored in texts by Valentinus, who talks of a myth where Wisdom succeeded in conceiving without her masculine counterpart, and became a great creative power from which all other things originated, also known as Eve. However, as Valentinus further explains, something went wrong and in order to correct her ‘mistake’ she made the demiurge, creator-God of Israel to be her agent. This Mother creator is described using words such as ‘Grace, incorruptible wisdom and insight.’ (Pagels 2006 p.76).

Jonas describes the Valentinian Speculation in great detail in the book previously mentioned in this paper, and points out connections between Sophia and Jesus (2001, pp. 174-205). She is portrayed as a creator of a male God or demiurge, who is tasked with the creation of humanity, but is ignorant to her existence and believes himself to be all-powerful (Jonas 2001, pp. 190-192). According to his interpretation of the text, in order for Sophia to communicate salvation to the souls she must use the aeon, Jesus, who is thought to be the same historical Jesus known in Christianity (Jonas 2001, p.191). Jonas further adds,
His advent is in a paradoxical way prepared for by the prophets, who were those of the Demiurge but through whose mouth the Mother, unknown to him, frequently conveyed her messages, which therefore are embedded in those of the world-god.

(Jonas 2001, p.192)

Compton iterates, “In some Gnostic texts, Christ is said to be the offspring of Sophia: in others, she is his consort, or the fallen woman whom he redeems.” (Compton 2017, p.33). This is reminiscent of the composite identity theory of Mary. However, she goes on to explain that it did not seem plausible that Gnostics were preoccupied with gender as other feminist theologians have asserted. In her opinion, it was more likely that there was a feminine and masculine duality and in this way Sophia or Mary Magdalene and Jesus were mirror images or two halves of the same androgynous self (Compton 2017, p.49).

Discussion

This study has explored the question surrounding the identity of Mary and her characteristics within the second to fifth century, when Gnostic sects practiced their faith and early Christianity established itself. Gnostics were labeled as heretics because their practices were alternate to what early orthodox Christian Church leaders deemed normative. It is in these places of conflict and divergence from norms, that one may find a female figure called Mary who is a modification from what the Church canon dictated. The findings of this qualitative research will now be discussed.

In regard to the question of which Mary, Shoemaker and Kateusz have provided compelling evidence for her multi-faceted identity. She was a woman with various visages who could be a mother, a priestess, and an apostle. Regarding the claims by Antti Marjanen, Ann Graham Brock and Karen L. King about Mary Magdalene, it is far more likely that if she was a facet of the Mary composite identity, then there is no real conflict. Mary is sometimes shown as separate figures, while at other times she is a composite identity. The compelling aspect is that all of the Mary identities and portrayals lead back to the Gnostic Sophia as the researchers, Therasa Topete, Sarah J. Balstrup, Max Dishu and M.S. Compton have stated and that is the consensus of this study.
If one sees her in this light, it becomes clear that Gnosticism in its symbolic nature attempts to explain the existence of mankind using knowledge gained through mystical initiation. Sophia was the embodiment of wisdom and knowledge. When Mary was given secret knowledge to pass on, she was marked as an important figure. On the subject of Mary’s priestly acts as shown in the research by Kateusz, she performed the same duties as the men and broke gender norms. It is not surprising that these rituals or initiations could be performed by women, as well as men, due to the fact that Gnostics believed attainment of Gnosis happened in the soul, and the soul according to many Gnostics, had no gender. Thus, it would stand to reason that the body whether male or female was less relevant to their faith because the soul was the important aspect as reflected in Jonas’ descriptions of this religion. Therefore, it is relevant to interpret Gnostic texts with an ambivalence towards gender, making Mary more than just a female. In this way, one can see Mary as representative of several aspects and a composite identity as Shoemaker has proven. Firstly, she may be viewed as the virgin who gave birth to the son of God through the holy spirit, without a male sexual consort. This aspect mirrors Sophia’s creation of the demiurge which occurred without a male consort. Secondly, Mary Magdalene is often described as a companion or consort to Jesus just as Sophia’s lower self was sometimes beheld as his consort. Thirdly, Sophia was also portrayed as a fallen woman which is reminiscent of the false portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a redeemed prostitute which was covered in the Mary Magdalene theoretical background.

The research questions this study has attempted to answer have been: how do various theories about Mary’s identity, based on early apocrypha, differ within Gnosticism research, giving rise to a debate and why has this been problematic for her identity as a female? To answer, the qualitative research provided several theories with correlations that together painted a composite picture of an important female figure named Mary, who shared characteristics with Sophia. She was shown to have carried out priestly duties, and she was imparted with esoteric knowledge from Jesus and Angels in order for it to be passed on to her fellow apostles. It is known that a theme of matriarchy has reoccurred in early history in Pagan belief systems, and that the orthodox Christians purposefully censored texts and cherry-picked their own version of these myths as canon. As for the Gnostics, they were a vast group with many different types of sects who were likely affected by the historical events during the time they were known to practice their faith.
The findings in Nag Hammadi were a breakthrough that provided further textual evidence to alternate viewpoints within the field of religion. Thus, it is relevant to this study due to the fact that certain orthodox Christians took on a more patriarchal viewpoint, because this created a conflict that has brought about debate and discussion in the field of religious studies. What is crucial is that Mary of Nazareth, Mary Magdalene and Sophia were important female aspects of a composite figure in the Gnostic religious philosophy. They were pivotal in creating a female image that was godlike for those who study or put faith in these religions mentioned. The version of Mary varies depending on who views her countenance. For some, she is pure and virginal, untouched by man. For others, she is earthly and real with human qualities. More importantly, she is much more than her gender. Gnostics seemed to have a way of thinking that was ahead of their time in comparison to Christians who arguably copied some aspects and used them to create a belief system that kept people of the time in a state of ignorance and under their control. Wherein Gnosticism was concerned with knowledge, early Christians leaders chose only scriptural canons that suited their aims toward power. This is arguably a case of free thought versus social control. It is also well-known that religion and politics are closely related and it appears that Gnosticism lost the race in the early history of the world to a larger and more powerful system. However, their texts and legacy remain and illustrate alternate viewpoints, while continuing to provide clues to a past full of myths and figures that are the basis for modern thinking. The modern conclusion should be that Mary was a composite identity because her role was complex and instead of dividing her identity up into different roles such as priest, disciple and Mother, her composite identity makes a stronger case towards elevating her status. If one can see her performing all of these roles it makes her character on more equal terms with her male counterpart, Jesus. If he was part of a holy trinity then arguably Mary could have had her own trifecta of identity proving her equal status within history. Thus, in order to answer the question of Who is Mary? It is clear that she is everything all at once. She is a female of godlike proportions who had to be censored, because it was, and is today, heretical for a woman or Mother to be worshipped on equal ground to Jesus and his Father. It was heretical for a woman to perform priestly acts according to these norms and in the Catholic Church this fact remains and it continues to be a source of conflict within the religious community.
Further Research

This research has taken a critical look at the portrayal of Mary and what her role has been within Gnosticism according to various theories. Further discussion of her role as a priest could lead to advances within orthodox Christianity and provide women with a higher status within the Catholic Church. If the Pope’s previously mentioned argument was that Jesus was an important man and that his gender determines the gender of priests, one could make the same argument for women using the identity of Mary which has been brought up in this paper. As a result, it could lead to the ordination of women priests based on her history of strong leadership as evidenced in the early apocryphal texts of Gnosticism. It is not impossible for this to happen considering the current Pope has already changed his stance on divorced persons receiving holy communion. However, there needs to be more research done on this topic so that more people are made aware of this discovery and these theories on Mary’s identity. Through important and forgotten texts, the legacy of Mary’s identity and pivotal status as a leader provides a voice to all women, making her a role model toward the aim of a balanced gender norm within the study of religion.

Conclusion

To sum up, the identity of Mary has been viewed through a Gnostic lens using close readings of research in this field, and attempted to come to grips with who she was and what her legacy has been based on various theories. It is relevant to find new theories about this female figure due to the fact that modernity has resulted in the development of alternate gender norms and ways of thinking about religion in general. Hans Jonas has stated that Gnostics were non-conformists and individualists as previously mentioned in this paper (Jonas 2001, p. 42). It is therefore logical to conclude that the Gnostic Mary is not the submissive demure Mary of the New Testament. Their version points to a woman who performed priestly acts alongside men such as leading male apostles in prayer as in the following excerpt from the Gospel of Bartholomev.

And she, for she could not refuse to hear the apostles, said: Let us stand up in prayer. 7 And the apostles stood behind Mary: but she said unto Peter: Peter, thou chief, thou great pillar, standest thou behind us? Said not our Lord: the
head of the man is Christ? now therefore stand ye before me and pray. 8 But they said unto her: In thee did the Lord set his tabernacle, and it was his good pleasure that thou shouldest contain him, and thou oughtest to be the leader in the prayer…10 The apostles say unto her: Thou oughtest to pray, thou art the mother of the heavenly king.

(Schneemelcher 1991, p. 543)

This passage is evidence of Mary leading the apostles in prayer and them standing behind her while recognizing her as the Mother of Jesus. Gnostics seemed to have an advanced way of thinking that was arguably more modern than other religions at the time. For example, the idea of the soul as being without gender was complex, and they seemed to have a firm grip on metaphysical aspects that were ahead of their time. Notably, their concept of the soul and the physical body has been closely studied by the modern psychoanalyst, Carl Gustav Jung, who likely based his theory of individuation on Gnostic ideals. Therefore, the reason that Mary’s identity as a female has been problematic is due to the patriarchal nature of the early Christian Church whose leaders purposefully left out the whole truth about the nature of her leadership role and important status. They merely made her a vessel from which the son of God could be born when she was shown to be a leader and arguably a minister of the faith. This was part of the conflict between the two religions that caused Christianity to be the established faith and made Gnosticism the heretical religion.

Answering the question of who Mary is may be resolved by stating that she is much more than who she was in the beginning, she is a modern goddess who has the difficult task of being multiple versions of an impossible female identity. She is arguably crucial to the identity of Jesus, the Son of God, for where would he be without her? Moreover, when one reads the phrase “Blessed Art Thou Among Women,” it speaks of both identities and is crucial to her story. For Gnostics, she is a multi-faceted composite figure who bears a strong resemblance to Sophia, and is truly a woman who could do it all and be everything all at once in the name of faith. This makes her a relevant topic for a critical discussion of gender norms which continue to cause conflict within the study of religion.
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