

MARY MAGDALENE: BIBLICAL ENIGMA
Eric D. Huntsman

Original presentation: February 25, 2004 as part of the Museum of Art lecture
series *Mystery, Metaphor, and Meaning: LDS Perspectives on The Da Vinci Code*
Revised presentation: May 26, 2004, KBYU Studios

The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown has caught the imagination of many, including many Latter-day Saints, because of its use of the historical figures of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene as well as its references to little known apocryphal texts as backdrops for an engaging mystery novel. The *Da Vinci Code* is just that, a novel, that does not purport to be exact history or actual theology. Nevertheless, as a novel it has raised interest in textual and historical issues without giving sufficient background to evaluate these issues adequately, and nowhere is that more apparent than its allusions to Mary Magdalene and the possible nature of her relationship to our Savior, Jesus Christ. In both ancient and modern accounts, Mary Magdalene emerges as an enigmatic figure, with the evidence suggesting, but not definitively confirming, her full identity and role in the early Christian Church.

My intent is not to evaluate Brown's novel but rather to examine the evidence that survives regarding Mary Magdalene, starting with the biblical, that is New Testament evidence, and then looking at other ancient evidence, particularly the references to her in apocryphal writings. After briefly considering how modern scholarship—and in the case of Dan Brown, modern novelists—use this evidence, we can then look at what some of the implications may be for those of us in the LDS community, not so much to speculate as to what Mary Magdalene's relationship with the Savior *might* have been but rather to understand *why* she becomes a prominent figure at the end of all four of the gospels.

In all of this, it is important to remember the working difference between how a

historical figure is used as a *literary character*. Mary Magdalene, Peter, and of course the Lord himself were real people who lived and acted in a particular historical time and context. Texts, some better than others, provide evidence for historical figures and their activities, but they also use these figures as characters in their narratives, characters who are portrayed a certain way by authors to achieve certain ends. In some instances, particularly in authoritative texts such as the New Testament gospels, the assumption is that the historical figures and literary characters converge quite nicely. However, in other instances, both ancient and modern, the portrait painted of these characters might differ substantially from historical reality.

New Testament Evidence

In considering the ancient evidence for Mary Magdalene, we properly begin with the evidence from the New Testament gospels, the texts that Latter-day Saints and most other Christians accept as authoritative. In the gospels we find 20 direct references to Mary Magdalene, with an added, possibly indirect reference to her in the Book of Acts. She is consistently referred to as *Mary Magdalene*, the epithet “Magdalene” probably being a toponym indicating that she came from the Galilean seaside town of Magdala, a community of somewhat questionable reputation. Too much should not be made of this however, since Mary or *Miriam* in Hebrew was one of the most common names for Jewish girls, necessitating individual identification based upon the name of a father, a husband, or, apparently in this case, place of origin.

Her role is basically the same in the Synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew, and generally of Luke. In each of these she is associated with other women who together serve as direct

witnesses of the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In chapter 15 of Mark, probably the earliest of the gospel accounts, we read the in verses 40–41:

Here were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome; (Who also, when he was in Galilee, followed him, and ministered unto him;) and many other women which came up with him unto Jerusalem.

This passage is repeated, with only minor variation, in Matthew 27:55–56 and Luke 23:49.

Whereas the male disciples had fled, these women provide the direct that the Lord did indeed *die* on the cross for our sins.

All three Synoptics—Mark 15:47, Matthew 27:61, and Luke 23:55–56—agree that Mary was among the women who then saw the place where the body of Jesus was laid, providing crucial evidence later that the tomb found empty Easter morning was indeed the very one where he had been buried. All three—Mark 16:1–8, Matthew 28:1–10, and Luke 24:1–11—also note that the women were the ones who found the tomb empty, receiving in addition an angelic witness that Christ had truly risen from the dead.

Mary's role in the Synoptics, then, is basically being one of a group of several witnesses of the death, burial, and resurrection of the Savior. She gains some distinction from the other women by being consistently named, often first, in all three accounts, and in Mark 16:9–11, we find our first evidence that she was the first one who actually saw the Savior alive, an incident much expanded by John.

Only in Luke do we have what we could call biographical information, with other passages that provide us of some idea of Mary's conversion and her role in the early movement following Jesus. Luke 8:1–3 reads:

And it came to pass afterward, that he went throughout every city and village,

preaching and shewing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God: and the twelve were with him, And certain women, which had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary called Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, And Joanna the wife of Chuza Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, which ministered unto him of their substance.

This last phrase, “which ministered unto him of their substance,” is particularly interesting.

Although many assume that these women were very wealthy, Joanna being the wife of an important Herodian official, the consensus of scholarship is that they were not all necessarily wealthy. Rather, comparatively speaking, they had some means, and were legally and socially able to dispose of their property. We need to imagine Christ and the wider band of the disciples, more than just the inner twelve, as a traveling group or band of preachers, going from place to place. Questions immediately arise: How did they live? Where did they buy food? How did they get their money? Luke provides the answer to this, suggesting that some women who were attracted to the Savior's message early on were committed enough not only to follow the Savior but to cover the bills. There are other interpretations, of course. The Greek verb ministering in this instances, *diakoneo*, has the same root as our “deacon,” which means “one who serves,” and a minority school suggests that these women were just brought along to cook and clean.

Nevertheless, Luke portrays a group of women who are traveling with the Savior, something that would have been a bit odd in the Jewish context of the Second Temple period. Women would not generally travel with such a group unless they were family or related to some of its members in some way. Of course Christ is does not seem to have been constrained by many of the social conventions of the time, but the presence of Mary and the others may well have been provocative.

In this passage of Luke, as well as in Mark 16:9, the texts state that out of Mary went

seven devils. While this may help to explain how Mary gained her witness of the divinity of the Savior and chose to follow him throughout the Galilean ministry and then to witness his death at Jerusalem, her exorcism is the source for some later misconstructions of Mary. The assumption is that if she needed to have an exorcism performed on her, she must have done something wrong—one does not suffer from demon possession unless he or she has done something evil. This is partially at the root of the myth of Mary the Sinner, that she had done something wrong and consequently was afflicted by demons, and seven of them at that. The number seven, however, was probably not intended to indicate that she suffered from a particularly large number of demons; after all the Gadarene demonic was afflicted with legions of devils in the gospels. Rather seven is symbolic, the number of completion, indicating that before Christ healed her, Mary was totally in the thrall of Satan. Somehow, the Adversary was totally in control of her. Also, we should recall that in the gospels, demonic possession was often a sign as someone needed to be healed from a physical infirmity as it was from a spiritual infirmity. Often in the gospels we find someone who is deaf or dumb or palsied, and when Christ casts out the evil spirit that is afflicting that individual, that person's healed.

Rather, then, than seeing Mary as a sinner, Luke and Mark's emphasis of her possession may have indicated that she was healed of serious or "complete" physical or emotional illness, illness that was perceived as having been caused by Satan or at least aggravated by him. Even if Mary's possession is seen as a sign of being in a state of sin, the emphasis in the exorcism is not on the sin as much as it is on her being freed from it. In this Mary serves as a type for every woman and every man: we are all in the thrall of Satan until we are saved, until we accept Christ. As a fallen woman, subject to death, disease, and sin, Mary was enslaved to Satan; through her

Lord Jesus Christ, she was freed.

This is, importantly, the only secure information that we have concerning Mary Magdalene before all four gospels begin to treat her role as a witness of the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. Although later writers associated her with the “sinful” woman of Luke 7:36–50 who washed the Lord’s feet with her tears as he sat at dinner, this woman is anonymous and the passage occurs *before* Mary is introduced in chapter 8. Likewise, the woman caught in adultery of John 8:1–11, is not named and there is no textual reason to associate her with Mary Magdalene. There is nothing in the texts that make these identifications explicit. Indeed, it may have been Jerome, the translator of the Bible from Greek to Latin, who was the first to begin to associate Mary Magdalene with the sinful woman of Luke 7 and the adulterous woman of John 8, an idea that became standard in Medieval Christianity beginning with Pope Gregory I in the sixth century, who explicitly conflated these three distinct historical women into one character. Luke 7’s woman washing Christ’s feet was then associated with other anointing episodes in the gospels, all of which happen to be positive. Nevertheless, the idea of Mary Magdalene as a reformed prostitute became common, although it was not necessarily intended to denigrate her. Rather it emphasized the redeeming and fully transforming power of Christ’s redemptive grace.

The portrayal of Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of John includes some significant differences from her depiction in the Synoptics. Like Mark and Matthew, John portrays her solely as a witness of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In John 19:25 we read: “Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene.” The important difference here is that while in the Synoptics Mary and the other women were witnesses of the crucifixion, there they stood afar off. In the

account of John, Mary is part of an intimate group that stands directly at the foot of the cross. The other women are all family members: Mary, his mother; an aunt, the sister of Mary; the wife of Cleophas, in some sources assumed to be a paternal aunt; and then Mary Magdalene. Some rush to the conclusion that Mary too must have been a family member, but we should remember that if so, there are other relationships, such as being a cousin, that might apply.

Rather than implying a particular relationship, John's placement of Mary is an example of his using someone he knew, a real *historical figure*, and using her as a *literary character* to emphasize a particular point, namely that those who knew the Savior, who were close to him, were physically close to him to witness the culminating act of his mortal ministry. He then uses these literary characters to teach important points applicable to all true disciples, including, presumably, many of his readers.

An example of this usage from this very scene is seen in how John uses the mother of Christ, who is actually never named in the gospel, and John himself, who is also never named but is kept anonymous and referred to as the Beloved Disciple or the Disciple Whom Christ Loved. In the famous exchange of John 19:26–27 we read, “When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home.” Here John may have been taking an actual event and using it to illustrate a broader, more symbolic point. If the Beloved Disciple became the “son” of Christ's mother at this point, then the disciple's relationship to the Savior was no longer just that of master and servant but now that of brother. By keeping the two players, the mother and the disciple, anonymous (remember that Mary's name is never mentioned in John), readers are more

able to identify with the characters, putting themselves in their places. Hence any true disciple of Christ can lean in his bosom at the time of the Last Supper, just as he can symbolically stand at the foot of the cross, receiving his own sure witness that Christ died for his or her sins. We will see, at the end, that this kind of typology is important for John's portrayal of Mary Magdalene at the tomb.

Indeed, perhaps the most important scriptural passage in regard to Mary is John 20, which we will treat here and then come back to again. In this account Mary Magdalene came early to the sepulcher, apparently alone, found the tomb empty, and then ran and told Peter. Peter and the Disciple Whom Jesus Loved, once again anonymous, ran back, found the tomb empty, and left Mary there weeping. At this point Mary actually sees the Risen Lord, but John, in a passage important enough to quote at length, provides more detail than did Mark.

But Mary stood without at the sepulchre weeping: and as she wept, she stooped down, and looked into the sepulchre, And seeth two angels in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him. And when she had thus said, she turned herself back, and saw Jesus standing, and knew not that it was Jesus. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, why weepest thou? whom seekest thou? She, supposing him to be the gardener, saith unto him, Sir, if thou have borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away. Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master. Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God. (John 20:11–17)

This episode is quite detailed, stressing the progressive unfolding of Christ's identify, Mary's gradual recognition of the Savior, and then her powerful, emotional response to his presence.

Additionally, the Savior's address of Mary as "woman," *gynai* in the Greek vocative, has a generalizing effect. It is not only to Mary as a particular person that he is speaking; he is talking

to “a woman,” perhaps any woman, and in that case Mary is not only the historical figure who first saw the Lord, she is a literary character meant perhaps to represent the women of John’s audience.

Christ’s injunction “touch me not” may have particular relevance here, although not necessarily that which we first assume looking at the King James translation alone. *Me mou haptou* in Greek is a present imperative stressing a repeated or continuous action, and so actually means something like “don’t keep touching me.” Accordingly some modern translations render this as “don’t cling to me” or “don’t hold on to me.” The sense is not that somehow, metaphysically, it is dangerous to touch a newly resurrected being, but rather that Mary in her joy at seeing the Savior alive had fallen at his feet and was clinging to him. This can be seen as a particularly intimate posture or, symbolically, the Savior’s words, “Do not hold on to me,” could be reminding Mary that the Risen Lord had much to do—he needed to ascend to his Father to report his mission, he had further ministries to perform, perhaps Mary herself needed to move on with the rest of her life without the Savior always present and could not cling on to the mortal Messiah whom she had known up that point.

Much has been made, both in early postapostolic Christian writings and in modern scholarship, of Christ’s direction to Mary that she goes to his brethren and share her witness. Playing upon the meaning of the Greek word *apostolos*, which means “one who was sent,” she is sometimes referred to as “the apostle to the apostles.” The Greek, however, does not support this notion as easily as many would like it to, the command for “go” here being the imperative form *poreuou*, a verb with a completely different stem from *apostellō*, meaning “to send.”

Mary is not mentioned again by name in the New Testament, although she may well have

been part of the group mentioned in Acts 1:13–14. After the apostles returned from the Mount of Olives, having witnessed the Ascension of the Risen Lord, they return to the upper room where “these all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, *with the women*, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.” “With the women” here is a translation here of *syn gynaxin*, which could refer to the group of women accompanying the disciples mentioned earlier by Luke in his gospel, or perhaps, since *gyne* also means “wife,” it could refer to the wives of the apostles, brothers of the Lord, and the other early disciples gathered there. If so, Mary Magdalene again is portrayed as an intimate associate, even a family member. Nevertheless, in Acts as in the gospels, ***the scriptures suggest a close association but do not explicitly define the relationship between Mary and the Savior.***

Apocryphal Evidence

Some of the apocryphal New Testament, non-canonical gospels provide intriguing bits of information about Mary Magdalene that may or may not be historical. There are literally dozens of these apocryphal gospels, each attributed to an important New Testament figure such as one of the apostles, a member of Christ’s family, or even to Mary Magdalene herself. These kind of texts began to appear in the late 1800’s and the mid 1900’s. In 1896, for instance, the so-called Berlin codex was unearthed in Egypt. It was a papyrus book found in the desert that was taken to Berlin, where it sat until it was finally completely translated in the 1950s. Few people paid attention to it until the 1970’s, when, for reasons that we will discuss in later, it suddenly became very interesting to a new generation of scholars of early Christianity. A more famous group apocryphal documents was found at a place called Nag Hammadi in 1945.

While these documents bear titles such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Philip, and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, we must not assume because these documents bear their names that Thomas, Philip, and Mary were actually the authors. Nevertheless, several of these extrabiblical gospels provide interesting and intriguing details about postapostolic Christianity, and perhaps even about Christianity in its earliest periods. These details include material about Mary Magdalene and her relationship with Jesus.

One of the better known apocryphal gospels is the Gospel of Thomas. Thomas is not a narrative gospel like the Gospel of John, rather it is a collection of 114 *logia* or sayings of Jesus and the disciples that do not appear in any obvious chronological or topical order. Logion 114, the very last one in this collection, has Simon Peter saying to the disciples, “Let Miriam (Mary) go out from among us.” She is portrayed as being regularly present with the apostles, and Peter is bothered by this, growing rather harsh and saying, “Women are not worthy of the life,” referring, apparently, to Eternal Life. Indicating a special interest in Mary, Christ then replies “Look, I will lead her and guide her. She can have life through me.” The kind of Eternal Life that the Jesus of Thomas offers, however, is not the one with which we are familiar: “I will lead her and make her male. I will make her male in order to make her spirit resembling you males. For every woman who maketh herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”

This oddity suggests an interest in and a connection between Christ and Mary, but the so-called Gospel of Philip provides even more tantalizing details. Philip consists of 127 paragraphs or text units, which are longer than the *logia* or sayings of Thomas. Number 2 reads: “There were three women who kept company with the Lord at all times. Mary his mother, and his sister, and Magdalene, who is called his companion. His sister, his mother, and his companion were all

called ‘Mary.’” The meaning of “companion” here is not explicit, but a later saying, 55b, clearly suggests an intimate relationship between Christ and Mary Magdalene: “The Savior loved Mary Magdalene more than all of the disciples, and kissed on her mouth often. And the other disciples said unto him, ‘why do you love her more than us?’ The Savior said to them, ‘why do I not love you, like her?’”

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene was found in the Berlin codex in the late 1890's, before any of the Nag Hammadi documents. A fragmentary text, we only have a very small portion of the overall gospel. The surviving portions fall into two parts. The first part is a narrative in which the resurrected Christ, the Risen Lord, speaks with his disciples and teaches them. After he has finished teaching and has enjoined them to go out into the world, he suddenly disappears, and the disciples panic. “They were grieved and wept sore, saying ‘how shall we go to the heathen and preach the gospel, the king of the son of man. If he was not spared at all, but he was crucified, how shall we be spared?’” They fear to go out into the world and do not know what they will do without a present Christ to guide them, and at that moment Mary Magdalene steps forward to calm and reassure them. “So then arose Mary, saluted them all and spake to the brethren ‘Be not sorrowful, don’t be undecided, his grace will be with you all and will protect you. Let us rather praise the greatest. For he has made us ready, he’s made us men.’” The second part of this document, only portions of which survive, portrays Mary as she recounts an incredible vision that she has had. When she has finished, Peter grows angry, and Andrew does not believe Mary, answering, “‘Well brethren, tell me what you think about what she said. I don’t believe that the Savior said this. These aren’t the doctrines he taught us.’ And then Peter says, ‘did he speak privately, privily with a woman rather than and not openly? Are we

supposed to listen to her? Did he mean to like us more than her?’ And she burst into tears. ‘Peter, how can you say that about me my brother Peter? Do you believe that I lie about the Savior?’”

These documents, then, portray a Mary that had an intimate, even a physically intimate, relationship with Jesus Christ, a Mary who received visions and presumed to teach and lead the apostles themselves. *But what I have just done by quoting these passages has broken several basic rules of scholarship.* As intriguing as these passages are, ***reading them in isolation without any context does not allow us to evaluate their reliability.*** Some of these very passages appear in *The Da Vinci Code* with as little or less background than I have provided here. We need not be critical of Dan Brown for this, because he was writing a novel, not a scholarly article on the New Testament Apocrypha, but when we study these documents or seek to use them as historical evidence, we must follow a sound methodology. We do that first by establishing the provenance of a text: When was this text written? Who wrote it? For whom was it written? What is its theme or purpose? What are its biases? What are its objectives? Was the author reliably recording historical information, or did he perhaps manipulate it for his own ends?

Considering briefly the backgrounds of these texts puts the evidence they provide in a very different light. For instance, The Gospel of Thomas which made the unusual statement that Christ can make a woman male so that she can be saved, was found in Nag Hammadi. The manuscript that we have seems to have been written around 400, although the text upon which it is based is considerably older. Conservative scholars think that it was probably originated in Syria in the Greek language in the second century, around A.D. 150. This is early but at least 60 years after the last gospel, presumably John, appeared in its final form. About

half of the *logia* or sayings of Christ in Thomas seem quite familiar, paralleling the kind of sayings that show up repeatedly in Matthew and Luke. The rest, however, do not seem to represent traditional Christianity. For instance, some of them say that Jesus, when he was resurrected, set aside human form. He did not have a physical body, and he could only be recognized only by the elect. The kingdom was not coming in a big winding up scene, but the Second Coming had happened already, although the present Christ could only be seen by the elect.

These *logia* are very Gnostic. Gnosticism, an alternative strand of post apostolic Christianity, developed over time. Even in its earliest forms, it seemed to stress the idea that knowledge, particularly *gnosis* or secret knowledge alone rather than the Atonement, was what saved the individual. Proto-gnostics show up early in the New Testament: many of Paul's writings seem to be combating this very kind of false doctrine. Gnosticism also emphasized the spiritual rather than the physical. Perhaps influenced by Greek Platonic thought, spirit was considered good whereas the physical was considered corrupt. Spirits have been trapped in physical bodies, and as a result different Gnostics went to two extremes in regard to moral behavior. Some were Libertines, meaning they did whatever they wanted because this physical body and what we did with it did not matter—one is saved by knowledge anyway, so one could indulge in all kinds of conduct. Others went to the other extreme—since the body was bad, these Gnostics did not want anything to do with it, so they become extremely aesthetic. Some of these Gnostic texts describe our bodies as living corpses. One form of Gnosticism, the Marconite heresy, tried to explain this duality of the spiritual and physical worlds with a peculiar view of creation. Because the God of the Old Testament seemed so different from the New Testament

God, he must have been a different god. He was the Demiurge, a sort of half-god who did not really know what he was doing. He created a flawed physical world that trapped the spirits of men in physical bodies. He then gave Israel an impossible law and then demanded justice. Christ descended to provide men with the knowledge of their true identity so that they could escape their physical prisons and the tyranny of the Law and the Demiurge.

This is, of course, an oversimplification of the beliefs held by the many different groups that we call Gnostics, but it illustrates how wary many Latter-day Saints and most other Christians should be about accepting the teachings of Gnostic texts as representing gospel truth. Accordingly, if the Gnostics distorted some fundamental Christian teachings, should they be considered reliable in matters of history—particularly their depiction of a historical figure such as Mary Magdalene?

Looking at the provenance of the Gospels of Philip and Mary Magdalene, we find that they, too, are quite Gnostic. The Gospel of Phillip is dated anywhere between the mid-150s and as late as the late-300s. The longer sayings or paragraphs that constitute the gospel were put together in an anthology of questions and answers on theological matters—for instance, a question on the sacrament is posed that the Risen Lord then answers. In most of them, the Savior is portrayed as the bridegroom of a fallen deity, Sophia or Wisdom, who had become trapped in this wicked physical world that the Demiurge had created. Christ came to save Sophia and then takes her to the bridal chamber in a spiritual journey that is related to the disciples so that they will learn how they too can pass the various demigods and angels that stand as guardians or oppose them in their way. In this sense it is more typically Gnostic than the Gospel of Thomas—it focuses on conveying the secret knowledge that allows the initiate to

ascend through the spheres, passing the guardians. This, then, is the text that provides the most specific references to a personal relationship between Christ and Mary Magdalene, relating that she was his constant companion and that their relationship was physical and intimate.

Likewise the Gospel of Mary, written probably between 180 and 250 A.D. according to conservative scholars, contains large sections between Mary's claim that she had received a special revelation for the apostles and Peter's becoming angry with her that readers of Dan Brown do not know about. Reading "Mary's" account of her vision, we find that it is a typical Gnostic exploration of the soul and its journey through spiritual realms—how the soul migrates through planetary spheres and has conversations with hostile powers as well as with friendly guardians.

Knowing the background of these texts, scholars take a variety of positions on their reliability. On the conservative end of the spectrum, scholars would claim that the contents of the apocryphal gospels are spurious, that the early Church Fathers were correct when they condemned them and proclaimed that they were written by heretics. From this perspective, one would assume that the Mary Magdalene who appears in these documents is largely a literary character, one whose actions and relationship with the Savior are fabricated to prove Gnostic points and which diverges widely from the historical figure. On the other end of the spectrum are revisionist scholars, who suspect that the beliefs in these documents represent a legitimate strain of Christianity, perhaps a more legitimate strain than that which is preserved in the canonical, scriptural texts. According to this view, "historical" Christianity and its bishops were opposed to the Gnostics and tried to suppress their texts because these documents proved that the "official" versions of Christianity were not correct. A moderate position is that these texts may

contain some genuine traditions that Gnostic and other schismatic groups preserved which mainstream Christianity had lost. This is appealing to the LDS tradition because of understanding that plain and precious things have a tendency to slip out of the record when they are not being yanked out. Nevertheless great care must be exercised since much of the material might have been changed or “interpolated.” This is in line with D&C 91:1–2, in which Joseph Smith learned of the Old Testament Apocrypha that “there are many things contained therein that are true . . . there are many things contained therein that are not true, which are interpolations by the hands of men.”

Consequently, **whereas the New Testament canonical gospels neither affirm nor deny the proposition of a personal relationship between Christ and Mary, *those apocryphal texts that are suggestive of such a relationship cannot be considered definitive.*** Perhaps they do preserve a tradition that might be genuine, such as that which noted that Mary, along with Christ’s mother and sister, was a frequent companion of Jesus, but some of the more sensationalistic suggestions could be exaggerations of fabrications.

The Spin of Scholarship

Before turning to the real significance that Mary Magdalene may have for Latter-day Saints, we should briefly consider how the figure of Mary has been treated in modern scholarship, since the positions of some scholars are the same as those used as the backdrop for *The Da Vinci Code*. Just as we need to understand the provenance—the origins and context—of an ancient text, so must we be aware of the background and agendas of modern scholarly treatments of these texts. The standard edition of *The New Testament Apocrypha*, begun by

Wilhelm Schneemelcher, is a hefty, two-volume collection of the texts that one finds in most academic libraries. It contains translations of most of the texts with a thorough, generally objective discussion of their provenance. Rigorously academic, these volumes are rather daunting for the reader newly interested in the apocrypha. However, in the past couple of decades, a number of more accessible treatments have appeared. These are the kind readily available on Amazon.com—paperback, relatively inexpensive, written for an educated but non-professional audience, with attractive covers and engaging titles, these are the treatments of the Apocrypha that most people whose interest has been aroused by *The Da Vinci Code* will seek out. One does an Internet search for “Gospel of Mary” or “Mary Magdalene,” and a list of these books shows up. You click it, it comes in the mail, you anxiously read it, and you pay for it some other day. If one does not read these books carefully and critically, one can be convinced that certain positions are established fact.

I will mention briefly the works of two women whom I respect a great deal. They are both very accomplished scholars, are very well-trained, do good research, and write engagingly. One of them is a friend of our university. Elaine Pagels has a Ph.D. from Harvard and is the Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion of Princeton. She helped bring many of the New Testament Apocryphal Texts to the attention of a wider audience with her books *Gnostic Gospels* and *Beyond Belief: Secret Gospel of Thomas*. Another interesting book is the wonderful edition of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* by Karen L. King, a frighteningly bright woman, very smart. Dr. King is Wynn Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Harvard University. Their works are very good, but we all have biases, and when we write, we all have agendas or objectives.

Both of these wonderful scholars have a particular position in regard to historic

Christianity and the possible validity of some of the Gnostic traditions as viable alternatives that might be more amenable to modern positions on gender, individual freedom, and church government. These positions affect how these scholars interpret the evidence and explain the texts. Taking the Gospel of Mary as our case study, let us recall that it was discovered in 1896 but was not formally translated until 1950. Even then, it did not really become the talk of scholarship until the 1970s, which was about the time that feminist Biblical scholarship came to the fore. Now the concerns of feminist scholarship are often interesting, but consider how it affected one particular edition, that of Karen King's.

Her *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* is a great book, particularly for people who have not read a lot of this kind of scholarship. The actual translated text of comprises only five pages of this book, which is all that has survived. After the translation, this edition provides some plates and facsimiles of the text so one can look at the Coptic and Greek fragments. It is very well done. The rest of the book is commentary. On page three, in the second sentence, King writes: "Few people today are acquainted with the Gospel of Mary, written in the early second century," that would be about 110, 120? "It then disappeared for 1500 years," she continues. At this point in her text, King does not explain how she arrived at that date for the gospel's composition. That discussion is saved until page 183 and following. At that point she reviews the pros and cons of her early date and acknowledges that many conservative scholars do not think that The Gospel of Mary was written until AD 250, some 100–140 years after she thinks it was written. Why the down dating? Because if the Gospel of Mary was written in the 110's, then it was written very near the time of the canonical gospels. For example, Mark may have been written in the 60s, Matthew and Luke in the 70s, John as late as the 80s and 90s's, thus making this apocryphal

gospel almost as early, and by implication, almost as reliable, as the canonical gospels. The reader of this book does not know that this early date is still debated, however, until after she or he has read almost all of King's book and accepted the proposition that what the Gospel of Mary says about early Christianity, or Mary Magdalene, or the role of women in the church is correct.

As a result, it is often wise to read works with a differing point of view. For instance, in 2001 Philip Jenkins, Distinguished Professor of History and Religious Studies at Penn State, wrote *Hidden Gospels: How the Search for Jesus Lost its Way*. He felt that in view of the volume of what we can call "liberal scholarship" making its way into the reading public that he needed to take a stand. In his book he attempted to explain why some texts had been accepted by traditional Christianity and others had not. Directly addressing King's work, he suggested that she was anxious to down-date the Gospel of Mary so it would have more validity. In what he calls "inverted fundamentalism," he claims that the canonical gospels are increasingly questioned while more recently discovered, apocryphal texts are often accepted with less critical evaluation because they support the positions of the many current scholars. I raise these issues because if reading Brown's novel has inspired you to explore some of the scholarship on these interesting texts, you need to be careful how quickly you accept everything you read.

Implications for Latter-day Saints

Although I do not presume to stake out an LDS position on what is, after all, simply a novel, our understanding of the evidence regarding Mary Magdalene should make us cautious at seeing *The Da Vinci Code* as anything but a fun and interesting read. Knowing that the portrait of Mary that serves as the backdrop of this mystery novel is not one confirmed by scripture or

necessarily established by other ancient texts should make one cautious. Just because Brown quotes a few, short passages of real apocryphal texts does not mean that what those passages say is true.

This is important because the proposition of Mary Magdalene's being married to Jesus that appears in the novel is appealing to many Latter-day Saints. Our understanding of the importance of eternal marriage and the importance of families might incline us towards this position. Yet while our theology allows the *possibility* of a married Christ, our scriptures and official doctrine do not *teach* this. True, some nineteenth century Church leaders considered the possibility, but opinions do not constitute the doctrines that we are directed to teach each other and take to the world. The official teaching of the Church is what appears in the standard works and is taught by the current apostles and prophets. *On Christ's personal life the scriptures are silent*. If the Lord wanted us to concern ourselves with his personal life, he would have inspired his ancient apostles to write it in the New Testament scriptures or would direct his current apostles and prophets to speak more explicitly on the matter.

Instead, the problem is that many Latter-day Saints are attracted to this aspect of Brown's book and thus fail to see the other propositions that he develops as an author. His character of Mary Magdalene is not only a consort, she becomes priestess in an Isis-type religion. More disturbingly to me, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ becomes a literary character as well, one that is different from the historical figure whom I know and worship. *The storyline of The Da Vinci Code does not affirm the divinity of Jesus Christ, the salvific nature of his death, or the reality of the resurrection.*

Back to John 20

What, then, is the importance of Mary Magdalene, both historically and particularly in the *scriptural* record? To do this, let us turn back to John 20 and his detailed portrait of Mary at the tomb. Remember that here we are confident that we have a reliable convergence of a historical figure and a literary character, that is to say, he took a real event and is using it to illustrate a greater truth in his gospel. John records that the historical Mary Magdalene was above all a preeminent personal witness of the resurrection. She was the first to see, and perhaps touch, the Risen Lord, newly victorious over death. She was directed to share that testimony with others. As a literary character, Mary further represents all disciples, particularly female disciples, each of whom can gain a sure witness of the reality of the Resurrection.

Remembering the historical and cultural context of Mary Magdalene's day, one recalls that there was very little that a woman in that society could do without the approval or assistance of the men in her life. Mary had already demonstrated new independence in joining the following of Jesus, apparently alone, and using her means to support it. Then at the tomb, without the aid, support, or approval of any other man, Mary is able to gain that most important of all testimonies. This, I would suggest, is a powerful and empowering image for LDS women, indeed for all Christian women, today. It is also an image that is lost when one instead focuses on the sensationalistic, obsessing instead on what the personal relationship *might* have been between the historical Jesus and Mary while failing to see what is being taught by the characters of the Victorious Savior and a Loved and Loving Witness.