CHAPTER 1

Background and Perspective

Feminist scholars have rightfully argued that today the Virgin Mary often operates as an unhealthy feminine ideal of obedience and self-sacrifice.[1] The reality of their arguments sank in one morning as I had coffee with a Hispanic friend who had suffered years of domestic violence. As she sipped her coffee, her childhood seemed close to the surface. She talked about growing up and then told me what her priest had taught the girls. She bowed her head and looked down. I barely heard her words. “Sea sumisa, como la Virgen.” *Be submissive, like the Virgin*.

My friend’s words, and the way her posture changed as she spoke them, deeply affected me. The power those five words had upon her, their influence on a little girl and her expectations for her life, took away my breath. Later, I wondered if her life might have followed a different path had her priest instead taught the girls to be like the early Christian Mary.

What I have discovered is that some early Christians described Jesus’s mother as a very different female role model for girls. These authors and artists did not portray Mary as submissive. They depicted her with an upright posture and a direct gaze. They described her as a liturgical leader in the early Jesus movement—a movement in which women were apostles and preached, healed, washed/sealed/baptized, led the prayers, and presided at the offering table.

In 1983, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza proposed that the Jesus movement began as a “discipleship of equals.”[2] Evidence of this gender philosophy is first found in Second Temple Judaism, and new evidence—as we shall see—demonstrates that this gender philosophy remained strong

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into the sixth century in many Jesus communities, including in the liturgy at the offering table of some of the most important basilicas in Christendom. Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, Mary, the Jewish mother of Jesus, provides a key to fully understanding this new evidence. Her story, however, like that of Jesus's women disciples, has long been suppressed.

Mary Magdalene and the Mother of Jesus

In the last decades, feminist scholarship has taken wings restoring the reputation of Mary Magdalene as a leader in the early Jesus movement.[3] By contrast, relatively little scholarship has been dedicated toward restoring the reputation of Jesus's mother as a leader in the movement. Yet, there could have been two women leaders named Mary—two Marys—both of whom were recast as female caricatures, one as a sinful whore and the other as a submissive virgin.

A woman, after all, can be both a mother and a leader, and vestiges of the strong role that Jesus's mother played are in the canonical gospels themselves. The author of Luke/Acts, in particular, closely associated Mary with prophecy in Luke 1:46–55, the *Magnificat*, giving her the longest speech of any woman in the New Testament. This author again associated Mary with prophecy at Pentecost, when the flames of the Holy Spirit descended, and "Mary the mother of Jesus" alone was named among the women gathered in the upper room (Acts 1:14).

The author of John elevated Mary the Magdalene as the first witness to the resurrected Christ and apostle to the apostles. Yet John also elevated the mother of Jesus during her son's adult ministry. The synoptic gospels barely mention Jesus's mother during his ministry[4]—and when they do, Mark and Matthew seemingly denigrate her and Jesus's brothers (Mk 3:21, 31–35; Mt 2:46–50). John, by contrast, three times identifies Jesus's mother as being with her son during his ministry—and each time presents her in a positive light. The first instance is at the wedding at Cana where Mary launches her son's ministry by instigating his miracle of transforming water into wine (John 2:1–11). The second time is when Jesus and his mother, and his brothers, and his disciples—in that order—traveled from Cana down to Capernaum (John 2:12). The third is at the foot of the cross on Golgotha (John 19:25–27). John does not name "Mary the Magdalene" anywhere in the gospel until we see her at the end of the list of women at the foot of the cross—yet that in no way

diminishes the Magdalene's subsequent role as the first witness to the resurrection. The author of John did not place Magdalene and mother in competition during Jesus's ministry. This author elevated both Marys, each in her respective leadership role, and elevated both more than any other gospel writer did.

A further indication that the author of John intended to signify that Jesus's mother was a leader during her son's ministry is that the first person in a list is often thought to signify the leader of the other people in the list. For example, Peter is listed first among the twelve disciples at Matthew 10:2–4, Mark 3:16–19, and Luke 6:14–16, and he is considered their leader. In the same way, Mary the Magdalene is listed first among the women who followed Jesus at Luke 8:2–3. In John 19:25, however, Jesus's mother is listed first among the women at the cross. One might argue that she was listed first because she was his mother, but the authors of the three synoptic gospels listed Mary Magdalene first. In addition, at John 2:12, when they traveled with Jesus from Cana to Capernaum, Jesus's mother is listed before "his brothers" and "his disciples." These passages affirm that the author of John was deliberate, both in three times positively affirming Mary's relationship to her son during his ministry and also in twice identifying her leadership among the other disciples, both women and men.

The author of Luke/Acts, thus, signified Mary's prophetic leadership. The author of John signified Mary's leadership role during her son's ministry, including specifying that she was with him, at Cana, Capernaum, and Golgotha. The authors of both John and Luke/Acts appear to have omitted parts of the original story, but each preserved that both Marys—Magdalene and mother—were important leaders.

Mary, a Jew

Historians know with a degree of certainly only a few things about Jesus. He was born. He died. He and his mother were Jews. Almost certainly he learned Jewish culture, traditions, and teachings from his mother. What did Jesus learn about women from her?

Even today, Judaism is not monolithic in its gender ideals—that is, multiple philosophies regarding the proper roles for women compete within modern Judaism, from Orthodox to Reform. In some synagogues today, women are rabbis and leaders, whereas in others they are not permitted. Likewise, there were multiple streams of Judaism during the era

in which Jesus and Mary lived. The third-century painted walls of the Dura-Europos synagogue provide an excellent example where archeology has turned upside down our false imagination of a monolithic Jewish past. Prior to the excavation of this synagogue, most biblical scholars argued that scriptural injunctions against making graven images or likenesses—such as in the second of the Ten Commandments—meant Jews never used such images. The idea that paintings of biblical scenes covered the walls of a third-century synagogue was almost unthinkable. Yet the Dura synagogue walls were painted from top to bottom with biblical scenes. Since its excavation, scholars have catalogued even more synagogue art, especially floor mosaics, which survived when frescos did not.[5]

Corresponding to this cultural diversity in Judaism, but related to women specifically, Judaism, after the destruction of the Second Temple, underwent what is often thought of as a structural change from patriline to matriline[6]—that is, from a child being born a Jew only if its father was a Jew to a child being born a Jew only if its *mother* was a Jew. The speed at which this legal shift seems to have taken place, and the lack of understanding with respect to why or how the change came about, provides another potential witness that within Israel at that time, legal philosophies regarding the role of women were diverse, not monolithic. Diversity in the ritual roles of women in various Jewish communities is further suggested by surviving descriptions of male and female groups paired in community ritual, such as a Qumran liturgical text's description of two groups called Mothers and Fathers,[7] and the Jewish historian Philo's report about the Therapeutae Jews in Judea who had a gender-parallel meal ritual with a female leader who stood in for Miriam and a male who stood in for Moses.[8] Bernadette J. Brooten's study of stone epigraphs that memorialized Jewish women with synagogue titles such as "Head of the Synagogue," "Mother of the Synagogue," "Elder," and "Priestess," suggests that traditions of gender-parallel ritual may have continued in some synagogues in the Mediterranean diaspora.[9] Competing Jewish philosophies about the rights of women during this era are witnessed by multiple pieces of evidence, for example, the two creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2, rabbinical debates,[10] and bills of divorce and other documents evidencing that while some Jewish women had the right to divorce their husbands, others did not[11]—a right also witnessed in Mark 10:1–12 when a rabbi named Jesus ruled that the gender parallelism of *elohim* in Genesis 1:27 meant that both sexes had the right to divorce. Did his mother teach him that?

What kind of Jewish woman was Mary? Cleo McNelly Kearns, in *The Virgin Mary, Monotheism, and Sacrifice*, analyzes in depth the priestly symbolism that the authors of Luke and John associated with Mary, especially their parallels between Mary and Abraham. For example, according to Luke, Mary received a divine Annunciation regarding her miraculously conceived firstborn son—just as Abraham did. In John, Mary's son carried the wood for his own sacrifice on his back up the mountain—just as Isaac did. Mary stood on top of Golgotha at her son's sacrifice—just as Abraham stood on top of Mount Moriah. From this and much more, Kearns proposes that these gospel authors saw Mary as "the New Abraham,"[12] with both Mary and Abraham "later invoked as a founding figure in the cultic and sacrificial discourses that follow in the wake of those narratives; Abraham in the priesthood and temple cult of Israel and Mary in the ecclesiastical body and sacerdotal discourse of the Christian church."[13] The authors of Luke and John, thus, appear to have believed that a Judean woman could be both a mother and a leader.

Mary Remembered in the Extracanonical Gospels

Consistent with Mary's portrayal in Luke and John as a founding figure like Abraham, the authors of extracanonical gospels—that is, gospels outside the New Testament canon—remembered her as a religious leader. Many Christians today do not know very much about the extracanonical gospels because in the fourth century these gospels usually were not included in the lists of books that became the modern Bible. Around the Mediterranean, however, many Jesus followers considered these gospels sacred and translated them into the same languages that they translated canonical gospels.[14]

Perhaps the most popular of these was the *Protevangelium of James* which was about Mary's own birth and childhood, as well as about the birth of her son. This gospel is usually dated second century although some scholars argue that it may contain first-century traditions, in part due to its lack of anti-Jewish language when compared to the canonical gospels.[15] Its author self-identified with Israel and did not even seem to know the later term "Christian."[16] Recent research demonstrates that although some of this author's descriptions of Jewish customs are not what we might expect given scripture—much like the painted walls of the Dura-Europos synagogue are not what we might expect given scripture—they nonetheless were consistent with Jewish custom as told in the Mishnah and other Jewish texts of that era.[17]

We can additionally detect that Jesus followers considered these books scripture by the fact that some of their narrative motifs are in the oldest surviving Christian art. For example, Michael Peppard recently proposed that a painting in the third-century Dura-Europos church baptistery represented the Annunciation to Mary at a well, a scene from the *Protevangelium*.[18] In a recent article in the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, I proposed that a third-century fresco in the Priscilla catacomb in Rome portrayed Mary praying in a scene from the Dormition narrative about her death, a motif appropriate to the funeral environment of the catacombs.[19] In another example, the oldest artifacts to depict the birth of Jesus almost invariably depict him as a swaddled infant in a manger with a donkey and an ox nearby, as prophesied in Isaiah 1:3.[20] This prophetic detail of the donkey and ox at the birth of Jesus is not in the canonical gospel accounts. It is only in the *Protevangelium*, which specifies that Mary rode a *donkey* to the cave where she gave birth, and that an *ox*-manger was inside the cave.[21] For the oldest surviving Nativity scene in art (see Fig. 1.1).

Fig. 1.1 Oldest art of the nativity of Jesus. Jesus swaddled in a manger flanked by an ox and a donkey. Third-century sarcophagus lid, Saint Ambrose Basilica, Milan. © Fratelli Alinari Museum Collections, Florence

Perhaps the least understood aspect of the *Protevangelium* is that its author twice specified that Mary had been inside the very Holy of Holies of the Jerusalem Temple.[22] This seems to be our first serious clue that the author was comfortable presenting Mary with the qualities of a high priest, because the Holy of Holies was the innermost sacred place that, according to Leviticus 16 and Hebrews 9:7, only a high priest was permitted to enter. Mary as a high priest also is consistent with her role as a founding figure in Israel, a New Abraham, as Kearns describes, and even more so after the destruction of the Temple and the structural change to matriline Judaism—that is, you were a Jew only if your *mother* was a Jew.

The *Protevangelium* was not the only gospel to depict Mary inside the Jerusalem Temple as if she were a priest. Another, the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, which is sometimes called the *Questions of Bartholomew*, described Mary partaking of bread and wine at the Temple altar just before the Annunciation.[23] This gospel probably was compiled sometime between the second and fifth centuries, and is usually dated third century without much controversy, because its text preserves archaic literary artifacts such as Mary giving birth without pain and Jesus disappearing from the cross, docetic theology usually dated no later than the second century.[24]

In addition to depicting Mary at the Temple altar, the *Gospel of Bartholomew* also describes her standing in front of the male apostles as their liturgical leader[25]—a scene retrospectively suggested by the scene in the upper room at Pentecost in Acts, which named only "Mary the mother of Jesus" among the women who were there. According to the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, Mary said, "'Let us stand up in prayer.' And the apostles stood behind Mary."[26] Mary actually leading their prayer in this gospel, however, ensued only after a debate between her and the male apostles, a debate in which alternatively she, and then they, gave humble reasons why the other had more right to lead the prayer. This gospel's debate is particularly noteworthy because more typically after such debates, Peter ends up leading the prayer.[27] This author, however, took care to describe Mary's liturgical leadership as greater than that of the male apostles, including even greater than Peter's. Most striking, in this debate the male apostles themselves denied the right of Peter, "chief of the apostles," to lead the prayer.[28] They also rebutted a patriarchal argument today still used against women church leaders: "The head of the man is Christ but the head of the woman is the man."[29] Instead, they

told Mary: “In you the Lord set his tabernacle and was pleased to be contained by you. Therefore *you now have more right than we to lead in prayer*.”[30] In this debate, thus, the male apostles undermined their own authority—and validated Mary’s.[31] Signifying their subordination, they stood behind Mary. Then, after the debate, she “stood up before them, and spread out her hands to heaven and began to pray.”[32] And she spoke a long prayer, praising God.

A second debate in the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, this one between Mary and Peter, is of additional interest because it depicts Peter denying his own authority. In this debate, Mary repeatedly rejects Peter’s requests that she ask her son a question. She instead tells Peter he should ask—which Peter, seemingly afraid, never does. Instead, he tells Mary that she has more authority than he does, and that *she* should ask. Finally, Mary dismisses Peter, telling him: “In me the Lord took up his abode that I might restore the dignity of *women*.”[33]

Other early Christian writers similarly described Jesus’s mother as a defender of women. A discourse attributed to Demetrius, the third-century Archbishop of Antioch, says: “Hail, Mary, through whom and by whom all the *women* in the world have acquired freedom of speech with her Lord!”[34] In the early fourth century, in the same area, the famed poet Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306–373) wrote: “In Mary there has come hope for the female sex: from the insults they have heard and the shame they have felt *she has given them freedom*.”[35]

Also in the fourth century, and further suggesting the importance of Mary for women leaders, Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 310–403) complained that in a wide swath of Eastern Christianity, from Scythia (southern Russia) to Thrace (Bulgaria) to the Arabian peninsula, women priests were sacrificing bread to the name of Mary on the altar Table.[36] This liturgy may have been especially common in churches in Ancient Syria, the territory that ran from beyond Jerusalem to beyond Antioch. In any case, a liturgical manual written in Old Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic) and embedded in the Dormition narrative about Mary’s death preserves a liturgy that similarly instructed that bread be sacrificed to the name of Mary on church altars.[37] Both Stephen J. Shoemaker and I have argued that when Epiphanius complained about women priests who sacrificed bread to the name of Mary, he apparently was complaining about this liturgy, or a liturgy like it.[38]

Many of the early views of Mary are quite different from our ideas about her today. Kim Haines-Eitzen points out, “What is surprising is how little the earliest stories of Mary emphasis her virginity.”[39] Many attributes that preachers today most closely associate with Mary—such as virginity and purity—were not closely associated with Mary in the oldest narratives about her. For example, a cornerstone feature of the text of the oldest largely complete manuscript of the Dormition narrative—the fifth-century Old Syriac underscript of a palimpsest—is that, unlike later Dormition homilists who repeatedly called Mary “pure,” this author did not once call Mary “pure.”[40] This author described Mary as a liturgical leader who praised God, preached the gospel, led the prayers, set out the censer of incense to God, healed with her hands, exorcised, sealed, sprinkled water, and gave women evangelists powerful writings, or books, to take around the Mediterranean.[41] Extracanonical gospels such as these, as well as the canonical gospels of Luke and John, reveal that many Jesus followers remembered Mary as a founder of their movement, a woman founder who was, as Kearns argues, a New Abraham.

Methodology

I use redaction analysis—a philological tool in the critical discourse analysis toolbox—to expose the changes that later scribes and artists deliberately made to texts. Then I analyze what was at stake in their changes. Ideological struggles in particular provide a treasure trove of discursive data for critical discourse analysis, because, as Norman Fairclough explains, an ideological struggle “pre-eminently takes place in language.”[42] Scribal changes to a text, thus, can reveal sites of social conflict.[43] My analysis demonstrates that Late Antiquity underwent an ideological struggle over female gender roles, a struggle reflected in the redactions and excisions that later scribes made to the oldest narratives about Mary and other women leaders.

Because literary and iconographic artifacts depicting women leaders eventually fell out of favor with the hierarchy of some Christian communities, and were censored, outliers in the early data are best studied as a pattern across time and geographical locations around the Mediterranean, rather than as unrelated disruptions at specific times and

places. I therefore follow the footsteps of scholars like Peter Brown, who followed the path established by the Annales school in demonstrating the merits of a more macro-historical approach.[44] This approach is particularly appropriate for the study of Christianity during Late Antiquity (ca. 250–650) given the relative abundance of travel and trade during those centuries. Books and small pieces of art were easily transported. Jewish and Christian religions spread around the Mediterranean.

This larger data set illuminates larger patterns, for example, a pattern of female and male leaders with equivalent authority among Jesus movements around the Mediterranean. Another pattern exposes a powerful female gender role during the earliest layer of the Jesus movement—a leadership role modeled by the mother of Jesus. Yet another pattern reveals women who were called "apostles"—women who evangelized, preached, sealed, and baptized. And finally, women who presided at the table come into view—women officiants, who, depending upon the era and the community, were variously called president, bishop, priest, presbyter, deacon, and minister.[45]

The Power of Bio-Power

Michel Foucault's concept of bio-power, which he describes essentially as mapping micro-structures of social control onto the body, helped me construct a framework for my research.[46] The subtext of each of the following chapters is how texts and iconography represent female bio-power. Whether you can raise your arms in prayer as the liturgical leader or not. Whether you stand or kneel. How you speak, if you can speak. Whether you can look directly at someone or whether your gaze must be lowered. Whether you can travel outside your home or if you must stay inside. Whether you can touch the altar, the censer, the Eucharistic bread, or raise the chalice—all are examples of a normative power structure that has been mapped onto your body to control it.

One means of social control over the female body is to provide illustrations of right behavior—both narrative and iconographic. Mary, as "the mother of the Lord," is culturally situated to provide a powerful exemplar for Christian women and girls. Religious authorities as well as women themselves have used, and continue to use, Mary's gendered behavior to validate similar behavior in women and girls. Mary's body performs as a model for Christian women. When scribes

and artists gradually changed their portrayal of Mary from an arms-raised liturgical leader to a silent woman who physically expressed her submission by looking at the floor, we may conclude that at least metaphorically, something dramatic had changed with respect to this feminine cultural ideal for women. For an example of the way artists in the city of Rome over time portrayed Mary's bio-power while praying, see Figs. 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4.[47]

The arms-raised posture of prayer leadership seen in Fig. 1.2 became exceedingly rare in the city of Rome during the Middle Ages, while the much more submissive posture seen in Fig. 1.4 was virtually unknown

Fig. 1.2 Leadership. 300s. MARIA on gold glass, Rome. Perret, *Catacombes*, pl. 4:32.101

300s. Leadership.
Catacomb gold glass.

Fig. 1.3 Queenly. 900s. Maria in Pallara Church, Rome. Wilpert, *Römischen Mosaiken*, pl. 226

900s. Queenly.
Maria in Pallara.

for Mary prior to the end of the first millennium CE. Numerous scribes, artists, and their masters participated in this profoundly subtle mode of influencing the way Mary was seen. Mary's image in churches communicated what was morally possible for a woman to do with her arms, her gaze, and her voice. From an early age, a girl learns what is acceptable or socially obligatory for her body. She learns from pictures, from stories told at home or read in Church, and from what others of the same rank or sex do. She also learns from what authorities, such as priests, tell her—priests who themselves learned as children in the same way—priests such as the one who, when he learned of her domestic abuse, told my friend, "Be submissive, like the Virgin."

Fig. 1.4 Passive. 1500s. Antonio Solario painting, Rome. CC-BY-SA Jakob Skou-Hansen, National Gallery of Denmark

Early 1500s. Passive.
Antonio Solario.

Breaking the Box of Our False Imagination of the Past

What we think we know about the past can impede our ability to see what was actually there. I believe that is especially the case for the Marian religious practices, which for many centuries were central in Church iconography, literature, and ritual. Today the study of ancient Marian religious phenomena is fraught with modern Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic interpretation, not to mention layers of their associated gender theology. Setting aside for the moment the Reformation's ideology of *sola scriptura* and its enormous implications for subsequent historical perspectives on Mary in the West, a modern analogy of a Great Church Council—in this

case, the Council of Vatican II, which ended in 1965—illustrates how our false imagination of the past, that is, what we *think* we know about the past, can make it difficult to see what was actually there.

In 1965 after a nearly tied vote, the council of Vatican II demoted Mary. Afterward, in Catholic churches, the old liturgies featuring Mary were mostly replaced. Similarly, over time the old statues of Mary were quietly moved to less conspicuous places.[48] These changes took place over decades, church by church.

What we can see and hear in today's churches, both Catholic and Protestant, has implications for how we imagine Marian religion in churches of the past. Today it is much more difficult, at least in the West, to visualize Mary ever having been a central figure in Christianity. So consider the following scenario: Imagine that centuries from now archeologists dig up the remains of a twenty-first-century church—a church such as the colonial era church in Catemaco, Veracruz in Mexico, which sits on the shore of a volcanic lake.

These future archeologists would discover a three-foot-tall statue of the Virgin of Catemaco inside a window in the wall behind the altar. Seeing this statue, these archeologists might assume that the priest of the Catemaco church had immoderately elevated Mary, perhaps, they might theorize, to satisfy the indigenous people's need for a goddess. These archeologists, however, would not know that, prior to Vatican II, for centuries the same statue of the Virgin of Catemaco was in the *very center of the nave*, elevated on an enormous pedestal that stood beneath the sun-lit cupola that features stained glass scenes from Mary's life. These archeologists would not know that even during Mass, men, women, and children stood in a long line, waiting to climb the steps that encircled the huge pedestal and led up to the Virgin. When the people, young and old, finally ascended to the round platform with its statue of the Virgin, they carefully placed near her their handwritten notes tied with red yarn, photos of their children, and what they called *milagros*—tiny silver replicas of an arm, leg, cow, ear of corn, car, swaddled baby—all asking Mary for help (see Figs. 1.5 and 1.6).

These future archeologists would imagine that the placement of a statue of Mary in the wall behind the altar was a novel elevation of Mary—they had never seen such a thing—but in reality it had been a demotion of Mary, a demotion instigated by a great Church Council, Vatican II. But what if the archeologists dug out the basement of the

Fig. 1.5 Before Vatican II. Mary on huge pedestal. Public domain

Mary on her huge pedestal

church? What if they found the beautiful old columns that had encircled Mary's pedestal, and then, what if they found the huge pedestal itself? Would they be able to imagine the past? Or would they just try to explain away this new evidence? What if they found the little notes carefully tied with red yarn? What if they discovered an old book with a liturgy where women priests sacrificed bread to Mary on the altar table? Who knows what they would discover in the basement of the church. What would it take for these future scholars to break out of the box of their own false imagination?

That is where we are going—to the basement of the Church.

Pedestal removed

Fig. 1.6 After Vatican II. Mary removed. Courtesy David Edward Kateusz

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