EXCELLENT WOMEN: FEMALE WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION

CLAUDIA SETZER
Manhattan College, Riverdale, NY 10471

Feminist biblical scholarship has illuminated places where early authors obscured the part that women played in the earliest communities. Nowhere is this clearer than in the resurrection narratives.1 Women’s presence and testimony as witnesses to the empty tomb and Jesus’ appearance after death seems an early and firmly entrenched piece of the tradition. Equally early and entrenched is the embarrassment around that fact. This article will delineate the mixed attitudes toward women’s roles in the resurrection narrative of each Gospel and consider women’s part in the resurrection story relative to the roles of women in the rest of that Gospel. It will then consider the audiences that may have called forth these mixed responses.

I. The Indispensability of the Women’s Witness

In untangling the strands of the resurrection narratives, it becomes clear that in certain ways the women, and one woman in particular, are essential.

1. Most compelling is the memory of Mary Magdalene2 as the first to dis-

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2 Several recent scholars have helped to rehabilitate the image of Mary Magdalene. They point to the way the first resurrection witness and follower of Jesus has been conflated with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1–11); the sinful “woman of the city” who wets Jesus’ feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses and anoints them (Luke 7:36–50); Mary the sister of Martha, who anoints Jesus’ feet and wipes them with her hair (John 12:1–8); and the anonymous woman who anoints his head with costly ointment (Mark 14:3–9; Matt 26:6–13). They demonstrate
cover the empty tomb. She appears in all four Gospels and several noncanonical works. Even in the Gospel of Peter, which is more concerned with matters such as Jewish witness of the resurrection and supernatural events, she plays a part. Mary Magdalene, identified as "a woman disciple of the Lord," and her women friends discover the empty tomb, are invited to look in, then run away afraid, leaving in doubt whether they looked or not.

2. In two of the Gospels (Matthew and John) Mary Magdalene is the first to see the risen Jesus. Yet, as Schüssler Fiorenza and others have noted, she is missing from the pre-Pauline tradition in 1 Cor 15:5, where the empty tomb tradition is absent and Peter is the first to see Jesus after resurrection. Elaine Pagels shows that some Gnostics regard Mary Magdalene as one who receives visions from the Lord, superior to Peter. Pagels and Schüssler Fiorenza speculate that there was some competition in the later tradition between Peter and Mary Magdalene for the role of chief disciple, symbolic of the orthodox–Gnostic struggle.

3. Connected to Mary Magdalene's discovery of the empty tomb and equally important is her witness of Jesus' death and burial. There is considerable shifting of characters among the Synoptics and different identifications of witnesses to the death, burial, and discovery of the empty tomb, but Mary

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3. The Gospel of Peter is little concerned with Mary Magdalene, but seems to arise from a context of Jewish–Christian polemic. "The Jews" actually crucify Jesus, bury him, seal the tomb, set a watch, see him emerge from the tomb and then fret over their misdeeds. The Gospel of Peter functions as an elaborate apologetic against Jews who question the resurrection, saying there is no doubt the Jews saw the resurrection and willfully deny it. See C. Setzer, Jewish Responses to Early Christians (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 116–25.


6. In Mark, Jesus' death is witnessed by Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, Salome, and other anonymous women (15:40); his burial is witnessed by Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses (v. 47); and the empty tomb is discovered by Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (16:1–5). Some speculate whether the second person in the list is the same in all three instances and whether this might be Jesus' mother. In Matthew, the same two people, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary," witness his burial (27:61) and the empty tomb (28:1), but those at his death are identified as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee (27:56). Again, the second
Magdalene remains a constant. This element of Mary's witness to Jesus' death and burial has received scant scholarly attention\textsuperscript{7} compared to her presence at the empty tomb, but it is essential to prove to scoffers and doubters within the community and without that there was no confusion over which is the right body and the right tomb. Matthew shows that there were people who doubted that the empty tomb was proof of resurrection. In 28:11–15 some Jews argue that the body was stolen, a debate Matthew also places in his own time. Thus Mary Magdalene is essential to the apologetic that appears in Matthew's time, apologetic that probably arose as soon as the resurrection was proclaimed.\textsuperscript{8}

The \textit{Gospel of Peter} counters this same charge with an airtight apologetic where the tomb is guarded every moment and some of the same people who bury Jesus keep a watch and see him emerge from the tomb.

In Mark 15:40 Mary Magdalene witnesses Jesus' death. She and others clearly see where he was buried (v. 47). Thus she provides a continuous witness to counter those who might argue that followers were confused about which tomb was Jesus'. Matthew also reports Mary Magdalene as a continuous witness, adding the poignant visual image of her sitting across from the sepulchre with another woman (27:61). Luke also cites Mary as a continuous witness to Jesus' death and burial (23:49, 55). The triple tradition has one constant—Mary Magdalene as the one who saw Jesus' death and burial and discovered the empty tomb. So the assurance of the correct tomb and the correct body hangs on the reliability and testimony of one woman. Those who wanted to discredit the resurrection would focus on this fact, as Celsus's Jew does in the second century, "But who saw this? A hysterical female" (\textit{Against Celsus} 2.55).

In John, Mary Magdalene is near the cross (as well as Jesus' mother and the character could be Jesus' mother and either could be "the other Mary." Luke does not identify by name the women who witness Jesus' death and burial, though they seem to be the same group, namely, the women who had accompanied him from Galilee (23:49, 55). Those who report the empty tomb are Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and some anonymous women with them (24:10). Similarly, in the second-century \textit{Epistula Apostolorum} Mary Magdalene is the constant in these events, while new names appear, Sarah, Martha, and Mary the daughter of Martha. In the second-century \textit{Acts of Pilate} the women are waiting at the tomb and the guard overhears an angel speaking to them. A helpful chart of the details of the empty tomb traditions appears in Pheme Perkins, \textit{Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection} (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984) 91–93. A chart of the details of the women at the death, burial, and empty tomb scenes appears in Raymond E. Brown, \textit{The Death of the Messiah} (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 2.116.


Discussions of whether or not women's witness was legally valid seem out of place since this is hardly a legal context. Furthermore, the work of Judith Romney Wegner has shown that even in later rabbinic law, women's witness was valid in some contexts (\textit{Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah} [New York: Oxford University Press, 1988]).
Beloved Disciple and two other women) at Jesus' death and the first to discover the empty tomb and see the risen Jesus, but she does not serve as a guarantor that there is no confusion about the right tomb. John seems less concerned with proving the authenticity of the resurrection itself than with explaining the nature of the resurrection. He seems more concerned with the physicality of the event, as when Jesus resists Mary's touch (20:17) or when Thomas insists that he see and touch the wounds (20:24-20).

The scenes in John contain both high drama and confused choreography. Mary Magdalene is the first to discover the empty tomb (20:1-2) and the first to meet the risen Jesus (20:14-18), but sandwiched between these incidents is the scene where Peter and the Beloved Disciple run to the tomb and the Beloved Disciple is the first to arrive and the first to believe in the risen Jesus. This contrivance accomplishes two things. It retains the tradition of Mary Magdalene as the first to discover the empty tomb (as well as John's own tradition of Jesus' appearance to her in the garden). Yet it also gives the Beloved Disciple pride of place as the first person, besides Mary, to reach the empty tomb and the first to actually believe that Jesus has risen. Given the Beloved Disciple's importance in the rest of the Gospel, the evangelist would be likely to make him the first to witness the empty tomb and the first to see Jesus. The fact that it is Mary Magdalene who fills these roles in John, combined with the unanimity of the Synoptics and the Gospel of Peter concerning her place in the empty-tomb tradition, suggests that it is a firmly fixed tradition that John cannot violate.

4. In spite of implied or explicit statements that no one believed Mary Magdalene or the women's report of the empty tomb, the narratives make clear that someone believed them, because others act on their report. In Matt 28:16 "the disciples made their way to Galilee to the mountain to which Jesus had summoned them." The only way he summoned them was through the women in v. 10, "Go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." Even in Luke 23, which says outright that the apostles did not believe the women (v. 11), it is clear that Peter did believe them, because he immediately got up and ran to the tomb (v. 12).10

Furthermore, in Luke 24:22–24, on the road to Emmaus, Cleopas and the anonymous disciple relate the story of the women's testimony as if it had been believed, saying that they found the tomb "just as the women had said." So Luke's statement that no one believed the women is disproved by the narrative itself.


10 Verse 12 is not in all the ancient manuscripts but is in the best manuscripts. Joseph A. Fitzmyer argues for its inclusion in the original text (The Gospel according to Luke [AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981, 1985] 2.1547). Even if not original, it is obviously a very early memory of women's testimony believed by Peter.
In John 20:3, Peter and the Beloved Disciple race to the tomb on the basis of Mary Magdalene's report. John shows no apparent discomfort with the reliability of her witness. He is merely anxious to include Peter and the Beloved Disciple in the scene.

5. In Mark 15:41, the named women who witness Jesus' death from afar are identified with a word signifying discipleship, ἄκολοουθέω. The verb occurs in the imperfect, suggesting customary past action that continues into the present, "they used to and continue to follow him." Were male names or the names of the Twelve substituted here, would anyone doubt for a moment that they were disciples? In Mark and Matthew, these women "were serving him when he was in Galilee," using the imperfect form of διακονέω, a phrase that carries the implication of continuing support. We will see that Matthew and Luke use different forms of ἄκολοουθέω that dilute the sense of discipleship and Luke eliminates διακονέω (but uses it in 8:3).

6. Although in the Gospel as a whole Matthew shows little interest in women's discipleship as such, in the resurrection narrative he mitigates Mark's picture of the women showing nothing but fear and amazement. In Mark 16:5-8, six words indicate their fear or bewilderment. They are alarmed, they are amazed, they flee, and they fail in their task to report to Peter. The Gospel ends with them trembling and distracted. In Matthew that fear is joined to great joy, and the women's last appearance shows them immediately recognizing Jesus and worshiping him, poised to report his resurrection to others.

7. In Matthew, Jesus appears first to the women. No small thing in itself, his appearance causes them not bewilderment and fear but recognition and worship. Matthew combines the discovery of the empty tomb and the epiphany to the women, both of which take place before the male disciples have heard a word of it. In John, Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene. John gives no hint that she is disbelieved, and her declaration "I have seen the Lord" is echoed by the disciples in 20:5. In spite of the insertion of Peter and the Beloved Disciple into the scene, Mary Magdalene is the first to find the empty tomb and the first to see Jesus.

11 Even in secular Greek it had the sense of following a teacher. G. Kittel says that in the NT it can only mean following Christ as a disciple ("ἄκολοουθέω," TDNT 1.213). BAG notes that it can mean "to accompany," as when the crowds follow Jesus. When the word is used with individuals, however, it normally means "to follow as a disciple" (Matt 9:9; Luke 5:11; John 1:43; 18:15).

12 Most commentators suggest that it implies financial support or care for physical needs.


14 Pheme Perkins argues for two early forms of women's witness to the resurrection, an angelophany to a group of women and an appearance to Mary Magdalene ("I Have Seen the Lord," 31-41).
In the longer ending of Mark, supplied in later manuscripts, Jesus also appears first to Mary Magdalene (16:9). While not part of the original Gospel, it confirms the strength of the tradition of the appearance to Mary Magdalene.


9. Although Luke retains the Markan elements of the women’s fear and bewilderment, Jesus predicts his death and resurrection to the women (24:6) and in v. 8 they remembered his words. So all three Synoptic resurrection narratives contain some reference to Jesus’ previous relationship with the women, whether in their following him, their serving him, or his predictions to them.

These elements confirm that the memory of the involvement of Mary Magdalene and other women is firmly lodged in many accounts of the resurrection. In addition to forming a primary element of the tradition, it is indispensable to certain apologetic concerns of the Gospel and pre-Gospel traditions. For whatever reasons, the evangelists and those before them did transmit these elements and did not entirely scour them from the narrative.

II. The Embarrassment of the Women’s Witness

In spite of their unanimous transmission of the tradition of women’s witness, in other ways the evangelists or the pre-Gospel traditions mute the women’s role and discredit their witness, a tendency continued in later documents like *Epistula Apostolorum* and certain church fathers.

1. In Mark 15:41, using the language of discipleship, women are depicted as habitual followers of Jesus. Mark uses the imperfect form to portray past action continuing into the present, “the women who were following him in Galilee and serving him.” Matthew uses the same verb, but changes it to an aorist and changes the preposition from ἐν to ἀπό, rendering it “they followed him from Galilee” (27:55–56). *Διακονέω* changes from an imperfect to a participle, “serving him.” Matthew retains Mark’s vocabulary, but changes the form of the verbs to describe the simple physical act of following at a certain point in time, thus diluting the sense of continuing discipleship.

Similarly, Luke changes the verb to a participial form of *συνακολούθεω*, “they accompanied him from Galilee” (23:49), also weakening the sense of discipleship by substituting a more ambiguous verb. He repeats the perfect participle form of the verb in v. 55. Furthermore, Luke adds to the women a new group: “all the people who knew him.” This odd phrase implies that the women do not belong to this group and were not acquainted with him. Robert Karris
and others argue that this group refers to the male disciples and is meant as a 
negative foil to point up the faithfulness of the women followers. Yet this is a 
vague way to refer to the male disciples. They are never so identified elsewhere 
in the Gospel, and this group quickly drops out of sight. These acquaintances 
appear suddenly on the scene and immediately disappear, but the effect of 
their appearance blunts the distinctiveness of the women’s witness. The 
women were not standing alone, but were part of a larger crowd. Constance 
Parvey and Mary Rose D’Angelo have pointed out Luke’s tendency to pair 
women with men, as a means of instruction, control, or both.

2. Three times Luke affirms the women’s report of the empty tomb as 
legitimate: in the report of the angelophany (23:1–9), Peter’s reaction (23:12), 
and the report of the two on the road to Emmaus (24:22–24). In this last refer­
ence, we can only wonder about the gender of the second anonymous compan­
ion. Yet Luke hastens to tell us that no one believed Mary Magdalene and her 
companions because it seemed an idle tale (24:22–24). Luke outwardly deni­
grates the significance and effect of the women’s witness, while his narrative 
affirms it.

3. Luke is careful to report that Jesus appears to Simon (24:34), but he 
ever describes the appearance to Peter in the narrative. In v. 35, the evangelist 
implies that Peter was either the other disciple on the road to Emmaus or one 
who broke bread with Jesus (v. 30). But then why not mention Peter by name? 
He may want to implicate Peter by juxtaposing the claim in v. 34 that Jesus 
appeared to Peter with the two incidents of Jesus’ appearance on the road to 
Emmaus and at the breaking of bread. He does not do so directly, perhaps 
because he cannot. But it does hint at some competition in later memory 
between Mary Magdalene and Peter for the role of chief witness to the resur­
rection.

4. Luke’s narrative revolves around the issue of overcoming disbelief. The 
remedy is not to affirm Mary’s reliability. Rather, Jesus reveals himself in sev­
eral ways that underscore the physicality of the resurrection. He breaks bread 
with them (24:30–31); shows them his hands and feet and invites them to touch 
them, telling them that he is not a ghost (vv. 37–39); and eats a broiled fish with 
them (vv. 41–43). Similarly, later manuscripts of the longer ending of Mark 
include three examples where they disbelieve Mary Magdalene’s report (16:11,

16 Parvey notes the frequent pairing of men and women in Luke-Acts. She suggests that it 
points to the role of women as prophets and leaders in the early communities and argues that it is a 
catechetical device (“The Theology and Leadership of Women in the New Testament,” in Religion 
while providing catechesis, this pairing is also a way of reining in women’s influence as prophets 
Epistula Apostolorum carries on the tradition of disbelief of Mary’s report, as does the Gospel of Peter. So alongside a firmly entrenched tradition of Mary Magdalene’s witness and a dependence on it is a growing tradition that no one believed her or the other women.

5. The role played by Mary Magdalene and the women in each of the resurrection accounts does not correspond to their roles in that Gospel, nor to that Gospel’s presentation of women’s discipleship. Mark, as we have seen, calls women “followers of Jesus.” He mentions women more than any other Gospel, as among the crowds around Jesus or enjoying private meetings with him (1:31; 5:26–34; 5:41; 7:24–30; 14:3–9). The implication of 16:7 is that they were among the disciples who received Jesus’ prediction of his death in 8:31–38. Yet in spite of the relatively positive view of women’s discipleship in the Gospel as a whole, the women do not shine in the resurrection account. Four references underscore their fear. In 16:8 they flee in fear and astonishment, the fear making them disobey the order to report the risen Jesus to the disciples. They do not at this point perform any better than the male disciples. The men forsake Jesus in fear before his death (14:50), but the women forsake him in fear after his death. A disparity emerges between the trembling, fearful women at the resurrection and the faithful followers of 15:40 or the appealing individuals in the earlier part of the Gospel.

6. Matthew is the reverse of Mark in the portrayal of women. Reading the Gospel through chap. 26, no one would guess there were women disciples. All the stories of individual women he inherits from Mark and he adds no new ones, except to say it is the mother of the sons of Zebedee who asks that her sons sit at his right hand (20:20), whereas in Mark it is the men themselves. In 28:7 Matthew removes the reference to Jesus’ earlier relationship with the women. In Mark the angel says “as he told you,” underscoring their earlier relationship, while in Matthew it becomes “Look, I (the angel) have told you.” Yet in spite of Matthew’s indifference to the idea of women as disciples, women fare better in his resurrection account than they did in Mark’s account.


18 In this I agree with Brown (Death of the Messiah, 2.1157–58). The women are not portrayed positively enough to contrast with the male disciples. Brown discusses the views of Luise Schotroff and others who suggest that the women are meant as model disciples. Yet Brown’s view may be too highly nuanced, that Mark would consider the women disciples if asked, but did not have them in mind when he mentioned the disciples in connection with the ministry.
They do not cower in fear, but react with both fear and great joy. The guards are the ones who tremble. The women apparently do report to the disciples as Jesus and the angel instructed them and are believed, since the disciples show up where they are supposed to. Finally, Jesus appears first to them, and they both recognize him and worship him.

Again, a disparity emerges in the way women are depicted in the Gospel as a whole and their status in the resurrection accounts. If the women's appearance as followers in Mark at 15:40 is unexpected, the reader must be even more unprepared for their sudden, heroic appearance in Matthew's account. The resurrection narratives are not places where either evangelist is working out a theory of women's discipleship.

Luke is very mixed in his depiction of women, both in the Gospel as a whole and in the resurrection story. Women figure frequently in the Gospel: Mary and Elizabeth in the infancy narratives, Mary and Martha where Mary is called a "hearer" (10:38–42), the women in the crowd who utter a blessing (referring to Jesus' mother, 11:27), the women of Jerusalem who lament Jesus (23:27–31), the women who accompany Jesus and the Twelve and provide for them (or him) in 8:3. Women seem to be among the disciples in 8:9–10 who are given the secrets of the kingdom of God, though only by implication from vv. 2–3. D'Angelo elaborates on Parvey's insight that Luke tends to pair women and men, but notes that he limits them to conventional roles. Parvey attributes this to catechesis, but D'Angelo maintains that it is also meant to steer women away from prophecy and Spirit-ministry. As mentioned above, this may explain Luke's addition of "and all his acquaintances" to the women who accompanied Jesus from Galilee in 23:49, as if the women were not acquaintances. The narrative refers to the women's earlier relationship with Jesus (24:6), and in v. 8 they are the only ones to explicitly "remember" Jesus' words. This is also the only narrative where they explicitly carry out the command to report to the disciples (though it is assumed in Matthew). While v. 11 says that the women were not believed, Peter does believe them (v. 12) and so do some others (v. 24). Yet in spite of their faithfulness, Jesus does not appear to them as he does in Matthew. We can say that Luke is most consistent in matching his picture of the women in the resurrection narrative to his picture of them in the rest of the Gospel. But what is consistent is his ambivalence.

8. John presents the most dignified picture of women in contact with

20 See n. 13.
21 Karris notes the importance of "remembering" in Luke, which is not mere recall but a transformative act, signifying movement from bewilderment to faith ("Women and Discipleship," 14–15).
Jesus, though the examples are few and the women are never clearly identified as disciples. Mary and Martha, along with their brother Lazarus, share a unique relationship with Jesus (11:1–6, 28–29). Some see Jesus' mother in 19:25 as a symbol of discipleship. Mary Magdalene comes alone to the tomb and meets Jesus alone, but there is no hint that her report is disbelieved. Rather, it sends Peter and the Beloved Disciple off at a run. Her report "I have seen the Lord" (20:18) is echoed, or possibly included in the disciples' statement "We have seen the Lord" (20:25). Yet John seems to assume that Mary is not a disciple and that her encounter with Jesus does not "count," since in 21:14 the narrator says, "Now this was the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead." The unassailable candidates for these revelations are 20:26; 20:29; and 21:1. The summary statement then assumes that Mary is not a disciple. Here, too, even within the narrative is some discrepancy between Mary Magdalene's pivotal place as witness and her lack of status relative to the other disciples.

The lack of congruence between the picture of women in the Gospels and their role in the resurrection narratives, particularly clear in Matthew and Mark, suggests several things. First, as Brown shows, the resurrection narratives are discrete, not mere additions to the passion narratives. Second, certain elements of the story were deeply embedded at an early, even pre-Gospel stage, and the later Gospel authors or the traditions they received were not entirely at ease with these elements, producing an uneven "fit."

This uneven fit shows up as a pronounced ambivalence toward the part played by the women in the narrative of the resurrection. On the one hand, they are indispensable to the story. In all four Gospels Mary Magdalene is the first to discover the empty tomb. She provides proof that there is no confusion about having the right tomb where the right body had been buried. In two Gospels she is the first to see the risen Jesus. Yet in many ways we have seen the Gospels soft-pedal these elements. The evangelists seem to erase partially the women's role from the narrative. Their discomfort hints at how firmly entrenched the tradition of women's involvement must have been, since the authors do not feel free to eliminate it.

III. Mixed Voices, Mixed Audiences

What is the source of this discomfort over women's unique place in the

22 See Adele Reinhartz, who suggests that Mary's anointing of Jesus is a sign of discipleship, ("From Narrative to History: The Resurrection of Mary and Martha," in 'Women Like This' [ed. A. J. Levine; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991] 161–84).


24 Brown, Death of the Messiah, 39.
resurrection story? It could arise from several sources or a combination of them. First, objections may have come from Jews who did not believe in Jesus. Several sources suggest that some Jews openly disputed the veracity of the resurrection. The Gospel of Matthew includes a report that the chief priests and Pharisees start a rumor that Jesus’ body was really stolen and that is why it is missing from the tomb (28:11–15). The historicity of the events is doubtful, but the claim that the resurrection and its reporting were a point of attack is probable. Matthew uncharacteristically steps out of the narrative to give the aside: “this story has been spread among the Jews to this day.” Matthew’s response to the charge that the resurrection is fraudulent involves no stirring defense of the credibility of Mary Magdalene and the women, but simply puts the source of the rumor of fraud in the mouths of the Jewish leaders.

A similar reluctance to rely on the women’s testimony characterizes the Gospel of Peter. This work is more openly anti-Jewish and presents a blatant apologetic. A delegation of Jewish men goes to the tomb, seals it up, waits overnight, and actually witnesses the resurrection. The concrete details give it an air of defensiveness. We actually know the centurion’s name; the tomb is sealed with seven seals; and the Jews actually see Jesus emerge from the tomb. Thus, the details provide a clear, though implicit, answer to a possible Jewish charge that the body was stolen, as if to say “not only was the body not stolen, but we can even tell you the centurion’s name.” William Craig calls it “fail-safe apologetic.” The animosity toward the Jews and the fact that they function as the chief players here, actually crucifying Jesus, pulling out the nails, removing his body from the cross, and burying him, suggest that document comes out of a situation of Jewish-Christian hostility where the veracity of the resurrection is a sore point. Yet again, as in Matthew, the Christian defense steers away from any shoring up of the women witnesses’ credibility. Indeed it seems to do the opposite.

The Gospel of Peter revises the women’s role considerably. The women show up on the scene of the resurrection but refuse to look at the empty tomb. They run away afraid. Mary has no contact with the male disciples. The Gospel of Peter seems to suppress the women’s role in the drama even more than the

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25 I would resist the idea that in general women fared worse in Jewish circles than early Christian communities. A. J. Levine observes the near unanimity of studies on the historical Jesus and formative Judaism concerning the status of women. Despite an appreciation for diversity in other aspects of Judaism, these studies assume that Judaism devalued women, whereas Jesus and his teaching offered them more freedom and higher status. Levine’s review of the data shows both sides of the generalization to be overly simple and misleading (“Second Temple Judaism, Jesus and Women: Yeast of Eden,” Biblical Interpretation 2 [1994] 8–33).

26 Ron Cameron, John Dominic Crossan and others argue that a stratum of the Gospel of Peter is earlier than the canonical Gospels. This does not affect my argument, except possibly to place the suppression of women’s witness even earlier.

canonical Gospels. The entourage at the tomb, those who witness the resurrection (8.28), and those who take counsel to go report to Pilate (11:43) are men. The Gospel has deliberately placed its apologetic version of the passion and resurrection in the world of men. Particularly since this work is bitter about the Jews, I suspect that behind it may be a Jewish complaint that this group, the Christians, defines itself on the basis of a tall tale reported by an unreliable woman. The Gospel's convoluted response does not defend the women, but removes them further from the narrative. In this respect, the Gospel of Peter is a more extreme example of the same discomfort that surfaced in the canonical Gospels over the crucial role of the women as resurrection witnesses.

John 20:15 presents a tantalizing exchange that suggests that the author perceives some tension around a woman's report of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for a gardener and assumes that the empty tomb means someone has taken the body, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." As in v. 13, the appearance of the woman is juxtaposed with the idea that someone is saying that the body has been removed. Mary's report engenders no immediate response in the text. It is not until Jesus shows the disciples his hands and side that they rejoice to see him. Someone doubts the physical reality of the death and resurrection, and the witness of Mary is not brought as proof. The story is later picked up by Tertullian, who alludes to a Jewish claim that a gardener named Judas removed the body lest curiosity seekers come in droves and trample his cabbages (De Spectaculis 30.6).

Justin Martyr, in the mid-second century, presents a number of proofs for the reality of the resurrection in his Dialogue with Trypho. Addressed to the Jew Trypho, it includes the charge from the Gospel of Matthew that Jews spread the tale that Jesus' body was stolen (106–8). However, predictions in scripture prove the reality of the resurrection (32.3–6). As in the Gospel of Peter, Justin claims that Jews actually know that Jesus rose from the dead but willfully deny it, "When you knew he had risen, you sent out godless men" (17.1). The apostles are persuaded of the resurrection by Jesus himself, when he reminds them of his predictions. Again, any mention of Mary or the women and their witness and report is absent.

In the pagan Celsus, all the elements that I have targeted in these earlier works appear together: the resurrection as a point of contention between Jews and believers in Jesus, the Jewish charge that the resurrection is a fraud, and the argument that it is a fraud because it was only reported by an unreliable woman. Celsus attributes to a Jew the following argument: "After death he rose again and showed the marks of his punishment and how his hands had been

28 Perkins notes that many understand Mary's words in 20:2 to imply that hostile authorities have taken the body (Resurrection, 172).
pierced. But who saw this? A hysterical female” (Against Celsus 2.55). The convergence of these elements does not appear in an explicit way until now (late second century), but they may be behind the curious reserve about women’s witness in the earlier works.

Objections to the claim of Jesus’ resurrection may have come also from pagans. Celsus himself finds the idea repugnant, saying “[Christians say] it was necessary for God to regain his spirit. And it follows from this that Jesus could not have risen with his body; for God would not have received back the spirit which he gave after it had been defiled by the nature of the body” (6.72). Part of the objection to the claim could have been its report by a woman. A stereotypic motif of women as gullible but dangerous appears in the complaints by Lucian, Celsus, and Caecilius, who blame Christians for preying on women.29 Juvenal, Josephus, and Apuleius show women vulnerable to Judaism as well.30 Tacitus tells of a pathetic woman arrested for “practicing a foreign religion” and condemned to lifelong regret. David Balch has shown that these charges against Judaism and Christianity are repetitions of earlier complaints against the Dionysus and Isis cults.31 These references illustrate a pervasive notion that women are most vulnerable to excessive superstitions and exotic oriental religions. Furthermore, women are a conduit for these superstitions to invade the larger groups, where they threaten prevailing households and social systems. Not surprisingly, the charge of luring women occurs in tandem with charges of being antifamily and a menace to society.

Finally, the embarrassment over women’s essential place in the resurrection story may have been generated within the Christian communities. Second Timothy articulates a view of women’s gullibility that sounds substantially the same as the pagan critique.32 He complains about those “holding the form of religion, but denying the power of it. Avoid such people. For among them are those who make their way into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and swayed by various impulses, who will listen to anybody and can never arrive at a knowledge of the truth” (3:5–7). The Montanists of the second

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29 Lucian, On the Death of Peregrinus 12.341; Origen, Against Celsus 3.55; and Minucius Felix, Octavius 8.3–5.
32 Kate Cooper discusses the topos of womanly influence in the later Roman Empire and its role in christianization. Women’s influence is a rhetorical device used to assign value to the actions of men. It could be turned to shaming men who were lured by women into embracing false ideas and betraying duty. Men could also be praised for allowing virtuous women’s modesty and “soothing charm” to lead them on the right path. Cooper discusses a later period, but her observations seem relevant here (“Insinuations of Womanly Influence: An Aspect of the Christianization of the Roman Aristocracy,” JRS 82 [1992] 150–64).
and early third century in Asia Minor are attacked as heretical in part because they allow women to teach and prophesy. John Chrysostom focuses on the vulnerability of the women to the snares of the synagogue in fourth-century Antioch. In the late fourth and early fifth century, Jerome cites examples of women leading men into heresy, and, conflating verses from Eph 4:14 and 2 Tim 3:6–7, complains about “wretched women... carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Letters 133.4). The discussion in section II above suggests that these subsequently persistent themes of women’s credulousness and unwholesome influence began with the earliest proclamation of Jesus’ resurrection.

Whatever the sources of the discomfort, it resulted in a partial erasure or muting of the role of the women, and one very important woman in particular, from the canonical and some noncanonical texts. In at least some places, even the oral retelling of the death and resurrection is missing this element (1 Cor 15:3–7). The set of references in section II attests to the embarrassment over women’s witness of the resurrection. Yet these texts also reveal the singular importance and indispensability of Mary Magdalene (and others) to the earliest resurrection story. The set of references in section I demonstrates the essential part the women’s witness played and its importance for answering those who disbelieved or detracted from the resurrection, both within the communities and without. The result is some strangely ill-matched statements appearing side by side in the narrative. The evangelists and other early proclaimers may have veiled the crucial importance of women to the story at the heart of Christian belief, but they did not entirely efface it.33

33 My thanks to Robert Goldenberg, Michael Greenwald, and Adele Reinhartz for their advice and critiques of an earlier version of this article.
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