The Intersectional Significance of Voice and Testimony: Suggestions for a 21st Century Womanist Reclamation of Mary Magdalene

K. Evangeline Frye[1]

Abstract

In her groundbreaking work, ***White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus, Feminist Christology*** *and* ***Womanist*** *Response, Jacqueline Grant engages both Letty Russel and Rosemary Reuther in their feminist assessments of the liberating qualities and potential of Christology. Grant challenges Reuther's "suggestion that perhaps Mary Magdalene is a more adequate model for women than Mary the virgin mother of Jesus, and that the Christ can be conceived of as sister as well."*[2] *While Grant agrees with the emphasis on "women's experience as a primary source for doing theology,"*[3] *she questions whether Reuther and other feminist scholars, "are able to understand the particularities of non-white women's experience."*[4] *A reading of John 20: 11-18 from an* ***expanded*** *womanist perspective offers a new look at the relevance of gender, class and community in the story, in which Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus. Through this exploration, I assert a recent lack of attention to this passage by womanist scholars who are interested in biblical and theological questions and their relevance and impact for the Black Church, in general and Black women, in particular. Through a prismatic view that considers the relevance of intersectionality in the text and the reader, a womanist reading can inform and reshape the way that the story is read and interpreted by Black women scholars, which can inform its message to the Black Church and its members. The notions of* ***voice*** *as manifest through witness and* ***testimony*** *to one's* ***experience*** *offer the appropriate womanist window through which this passage can be considered.* ***Ultimately, John positions Mary Magdalene as "voice" of the Johannine community, ordained by Jesus as the first to affirm***

---

[1] K. Evangeline Frye, Ph.D. is an ITC alumni (2015) and Founder and Exeeutive Director of Coalition for Healthy African American Relationships and Marriages (CHAARM). She is a Program Assoeiate in the Office of Black Women in Church and Society and an Adjunct Assistant Professor of World Religion at the ITC.

[2] Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus Feminist Christology and Womanist Response,* p 145.

[3] Ibid,145.

[4] Ibid, 145.

and reflect his transformative power. *A "re-reading" emphasizing her role in community with others and relationship with Jesus can help womanist scholars identify meaning, relevance and power in the most important story about the greatest news in Christianity. This re-reading of Mary Magdalene as* ***the*** *voice in the Johannine community proposes a reclamation of Mary Magdalene and offers a portal for re-inserting the African American voice into the extensive discourse about Biblical relevance, women, identity, power, justice and [the Johannine] community. It also offers a reading of Mary Magdalene that affirms women's voice and power as community leaders and proclaimers of the word.*

The Pericope: John 20:11-18

> 11 *But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb.* 12 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had laid, one at the head and one at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, '1 am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' " 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"—and that he had said these things to her.

In this passage, it is Jesus's voice and Mary's testimony that conveys meaning and relevance. Ultimately, John positions Mary Magdalene as "voice" of the Johannine community, ordained by Jesus as the first to affirm and reflect his transformative power. This re-reading of Mary Magdalene as the voice in the Johannine community proposes a reclamation of her and holds great potential for (re)inserting an African American voice into the extensive discourse about Biblical relevance,

women, power, justice and [the Johannine] community. It can assist womanist scholars in identifying meaning, relevance and power in the most important story about the greatest news in Christianity. Such a reading offers a new look at the relevance of gender, *class and community* in the story, and can perhaps inform and reshape the way that it is read and interpreted by Black women, which, in turn, can inform the message by the Black Church.

Through this exploration, I recognize a lack of attention to this pericope by womanist scholars interested in issues that affect the Black Church and Black women, and in the hermeneutical and homiletical potential of Biblical images and stories. For African American Christians, I suggest a broadened view that serves as an entre´ into the discourse about authority that begins with initial attention to the interaction between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and subsequently looks to the Johannine community as a whole. Even though there (purportedly)[5] is not a significant African presence in this gospel there are rich possibilities for connections, and as David Rensberger notes, opportunities to "ask about the presence of the unrecognized people in general and in this Gospel, specifically, the oppressed and their oppressors."[6] Too, revisiting this story offers an opportunity to examine its relevant implications about the powerful, yet tenuous nature of women's roles and leadership in the Johannine Community.

In my reading, Mary Magdalene succeeds in "making the invisible visible" and also in contextualizing the lives of not only women, but the whole community of which they were a part.[7] Through an expanded womanist/ socio-historical paradigm, I will explore Mary Magdalene's role as a disciple, minister and model of women's leadership in the context of her time and its implications beyond. This expanded approach relies on identifiable womanist constructs, as well as other strategies. My discussion responds to historical, liberationist and feminist readings.

---

[5] This is a response to the suggestion that there were no Africans in this area as well as to the counter argument that Mary Magdalene, herself, may have been of African descent, usually asserted by the Essenes. While it is relevant to note, Space prohibits me from addressing this in detail.

[6] David K. Rensberger,"Oppression and Identity in Gospel of John," Jacquelyn Grant and Randall Bailey, eds., *Recovering the Black Presence in the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 77.

[7] Ibid.

An "expanded" womanist view extends its methodology to recognize not only similarity or parallels, but also value in other approaches, as well as in previously neglected or marginalized texts. The benefits of such a perspective include providing important contributions to the interrogation and understanding of biblical texts and ongoing development of womanist biblical exegetical methodology. Again, this becomes important as it potentially leads to further womanist inquiry into and engagement with the inherent potential in aspects of Mary Magdalene's life found in an examination of the Synoptic Gospels and other sources – potential for celebration as well as critique.

Contemporary Black women, particularly in the Black Church, have not embraced Mary Magdalene as a sister and model of leadership as quickly as they have identified with the characters and stories of some of the other Biblical women, such as Hagar, Naomi and Ruth, Hannah and even the other 'Mary's.' This may also be true of other ethnic or racial groups, as well. However, white feminists have readily done so, leading the effort to "correct" Mary Magdalene's story, and reconstructing her image, role and responsibility as the "first apostle to preach the Gospel."[8] Their work has yielded some questionable but largely sound, meaningful, thought-provoking and diverse ideas. These explorations have thoroughly, but not necessarily exhaustively interrogated the Magdalenian texts, including this pericope. This work has enhanced social-historical and especially feminist practice and offers opportunities for engagement that womanists have sometimes shunned.

A womanist perspective is not necessarily concerned with "reclamation," but instead, through the lens of Black women's lives, identifies what lies beneath the story in women's experience, excavating that which that other approaches may or may not perceive or find relevant. . This is not to suggest that a womanist reading will necessarily reveal *new* information, but instead argues for willing engagement and widening of the conversation and its perspectives to consider new *perspectives*. As Adele Reinhartz points out in the introduction to her treatment of "Women in the Johannine Community", "In reading the Fourth Gospel for the socio-historical situation of women [in the Johannine Community], I follow along a path that has been cleared by

[8] This has been asserted by numerous women Bible scholars, such as Karen King, Mary Thompson and others.

others before me over the last quarter century or more."[9] As I seek relevance in this text and "follow the path" of a womanist reading, I acknowledge here as well, as Randall Bailey notes, an awareness of my own bias.[10]

I do not suggest that Black women fail at all to acknowledge and even reference Mary Magdalene's role, nor do I suggest that womanists and Black feminists do not engage feminist theology, Biblical interpretation and hermeneutics. What puzzles me is our (womanists) limited attention and seeming reluctance to explore this text when considering the vigor with which white feminists pursue research about and claim this figure in their understanding of women in Christianity, and its use in so many sermons by Black (largely male) preachers. Feminists' scholarly fervor has produced impressive work, yet as Grant noted in 1985, has been accompanied by a general failure or refusal to acknowledge perspectives or strategies that bring to bear on the text (albeit) subtle and not so subtle differences in Black women's and White women's experience. This raises a simultaneous question and perception that womanist biblical and theological scholars perhaps have determined that Mary Magdalene is not necessarily an apt model for women's leadership. Do womanist theologians find no value in this story? Have feminist theologians covered its meaning so fully that to contribute an additional exploration is redundant? Is this absence perhaps due to the methodology out of which the prevailing research and assertions arise? I would suggest that this precise juncture of racial and gendered commentary offers a point for womanist theologians and biblical scholars to (re)enter the conversation, challenging and extending the work of the New Testament scholars and theologians who have and continue to interrogate the controversial Gospel of John, as well as preachers who wrestle with the book's meaning and application. Revisiting this particular passage also holds possibility for female preachers to assert a womanist perspective that considers gender and sociocultural contexts.

---

[9]Adele Reinhartz, "Women in the Johannine Community: An Exercise in Historical Imagination." In *A Feminist Companion to John, Volume 2*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 14-15.

[10] I refer here to Randall C. Bailey, "The Danger of Ignoring One's Own Cultural Bias in Interpreting the Text." in. R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1998), 66-90.

Roman Empire of the First Century

Ancient tradition "perhaps correctly locates the community at Ephesus in western Asia Minor at a time when persecution by Roman authorities was becoming more frequent, and conflicts between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians as well as between Christians in general and Jews were becoming more intense." [11] Historical biblical critic Warren Carter adds:

> The New Testament texts, written in the decades between 100 in the first century, originate in a world dominated by the Roman Empire. In places, New Testament texts refer openly to this imperial world and its representatives such as emperors (Luke 2:1), provincial governors (Mark 15:25-39), and soldiers (Act 10). In places...New Testament writers speak critically about this imperial world. In places they seem to urge cooperation with Rome. "Pear God." "Honor the Emperor." (I Peter: 17)...But in most places, they do not seem to us to refer to Rome's world at all." [12]

Carter also states that "[But] in the first century Roman world, no one pretended religion and politics were separate. Understanding Rome's world, though, matters for reading the New Testament texts because these texts assume the readers know about the Roman world and how it was structured. The texts don't explain to us. They don't stop and spell it out to us. They expect us to fill in the relevant knowledge."[13]

The sociopolitical climate is significant to this particular chapter, as well as the future of the Beloved Community so prominently figured in John 20 and 21. The New Testament documents were written within the Roman Empire, even if that empire and its influence are not readily apparent to us. The emperors were powerful, and although power was centered in the empire and seated with the emperors, theirs was a difficult lot. During 70-90 CE, when the Gospels were written, numerous

---

[11] Jerome H. Neyrey, "Gospel According to John." in Michael D. Coogan, et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Fully Revised Fourth edition, NRSV*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1879-1881.

[12] Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide.* 1.

[13] Ibid, 2.

emperors were murdered or committed suicide, and only Vespian – with two sons as successors – demonstrated any consistency. In addition to power struggles with the elite, "emperors secured their power by claiming the favor of the gods."[14] Christians, and those who did not deny the name of Christ, were subject to overt persecution and the threat of harsh treatment. According to Cassidy, "...correspondence between Pliny and Trajan established that Christians were liable to death simply 'for the name,' that is, simply because they identified themselves with the name of Christ. The name of Christ, then, was a capital offense."[15] Elites exercised material domination over non-elites even though they were in the minority. This insight into the social and political context informs our reading of this Gospel, but is not necessarily obvious in the text.

Among New Testament scholars, it is general acknowledged that the Johannine community was also oppressed by Jews, and faced expulsion from the Synagogue for pronouncing and adhering to the belief in Jesus. The Johannine community also struggled against the presence and growth of Gnosticism, which believed that the Messiah could not be touched by filth/flesh and therefore was not incarnate. Neyrey writes that while scholars no longer believe this Gospel to be the work of one single author, it is asserted by some that they are a part of a "Johannine school."[16] The Johannine community's social location contributes to their Gospel. Cassidy notes the significance of John 20 (and 21) in light of its audience being constituted of readers "who faced Roman imperial claims and possibly Roman persecution as well."[17]

Development of the Johannine Community

From the 1920s through the 1960s, numerous discussions and postulations arose concerning the sources, form and inconsistencies in the Fourth Gospel. In response to Bultmann's more conservative view, Brown and Martyn propose two different theories about how the

[14] Ibid, 7.

[15] Richard J. Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), 77.

[16] Jerome H. Neyrey, "Gospel According to John." in Michael D. Coogan, et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Fully Revised Fourth edition, NRSV*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1879-1881.

[17] Ibid, 75.

Community formed, with Brown suggesting four stages in the Johannine Community's growth. Brown's theory coneerning the development of the community vis a vis the writing of the Gospel provides context and offers the most coherent explanations of events. These include an original "Before the Gospel" group, when the Beloved Disciple was significant, "beginning with a circle of ex-disciples of John the Baptist" and continuing through the period when the Gospel was written and the admission of Samaritan and other anti-Temple groups, "a conflict with the Jews arose."[18] This period is characterized by a "higher" Christology leading to the absolute belief that Jesus was God and that Jesus preexisted. This is a critical period in which, "as the Gospel was written, the community takes an increasingly determined stance against those they would regard as nonbelievers: 'the world,' 'the Jews,' and adherents of JBap." This list also included "non-believers" and "crypto-Christians."[19] Significant here is this schism between Jews and the Johannine community. During the time when the letters were written, and the community closed its ranks against outsiders, internal divisions developed. Brown identifies at least two groups, and notes that they "were moving in the direction of what was later known as a docetic Gnosticism.[20] The final stage was "after the letters were written," characterized by the group behind the letters merging "with the greater church." This progression is important as it provides a good conception of the community's development and context for Brown's theory. The expulsion from the Synagogue was significant as it "had several side effects that eventually would leave their mark on the Fourth Gospel."[21]

Interrogating this pericope in the context of Roman Empire requires that women's lives, in particular be measured, as well. Mary Magdalene's life as a woman must be viewed through the lens of imperial Rome to understand its particular contours, strictures and attitudes about women and their roles. Likewise, to extend such a reading to draw parallels between Mary Magdalene and African American or other women's experiences or extract meaning from the story, one must examine those lives through the prism of these readers'/listeners' historical and contemporary experience. Adele Reinhartz provides the soundest perspective on examining the lives of the women and the

---

[18] Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (Yale, 2003), 74.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid, 73.
[21] Ibid, 74.

Johannine community. She eschews the traditional "two level reading" of Brown and others, as "a story of Jesus and a story of the Johannine community," further refining it to perform what she identifies as "reading the pericope depicting women in their interactions with Jesus rather strictly...as a direct reflection of the experience of women in the Johannine community." [22] While not claiming Mary Magdalene as African American, Black women read the Bible and listen to sermons for liberating purposes, with an eye and ear attuned for meaning based on the intersections of their own lived experiences. Rather than reflecting an essentialism or narrow view of Biblical (and other) texts, Black women incorporate and apply and ascribe significance to this meaning within a larger context of understanding, as Mitzi Smith notes in her agreement with "Australian feminist historian Jill Kerr Conway when she argues that readers turn to stories, even biblical and religious stories, for a variety of reasons."[23]

Proceeding from the assertion that the Fourth Gospel is a "rich resource" of "information about the situation of women in the Gospel of John...and the situation of the community as a whole within the broader religious and cultural context of Asia Minor in the late first century,"[24] Reinhartz works from an extensive set of assumptions through which she bases her modified two-tiered reading. The assumptions are: "(a) that the Beloved Disciple is the leader of the community; (b) that the disciples and the other believers who travel with Jesus represent the core of the Johannine community; (c) that other characters represent particular religious or ethnic communities, such as the Jews, the Samaritans or the Gentiles; (d) that those who are sympathetic to Jesus may be seen as being in some sort of positive relationship with the Johannine community, as members, sympathizers or hangers on (those who are shown as not believing would be in conflict with the Johannine community; (e) that the unaffiliated crowds represent the unaffiliated population among whom the Johannine community lives; and (f) that Jesus represents, or rather is himself the content of Christian faith, the gospel that is preached within and by the community and encountered in a variety of ways, including the activity of the paraclete, the testimony of

---

[22] "Women in the Johannine Community: An Exercise in Historical Imagination," p. 15.

[23] Smith, Mitzi J., ed. *I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader,* (Cascade Books Eugene: 2015), 52.

[24] Adele Reinhartz, "Women in the Johannine Community," 14.

witnesses and other disciples, and through reading the gospel itself."[25] These assumptions help Reinhartz answer questions about women's roles within the Johannine community and offer insight to the community as a whole.

Literary/Rhetorical Context

John chapter 20 is a very significant chapter in the structure of the Fourth Gospel, particularly when one considers the controversy regarding its form and sources. The text contains many redactions, and in some places, is clearly put together to create a specific flow, or meaning, although this works better in some places than in others. Additionally, in many places the Fourth Gospel version of the same stories bears little or no resemblance to its parallel in the Synoptic Gospels. This is evident in scenes such as in the Temple, which the Synoptic Gospels place later in the chapter, but John places near the beginning. Brown points out that Bultmann, the most famous of New Testament Biblical scholars, noted many of these the textual inconsistencies, for example in the revelatory discourse and the Fassion and Resurrection stories; he asserted that the Evangelist wove together these sources, which later someone redacted into proper order. Brown, too, noted that the texts were out of order.[26]

The Gospel of John celebrates Jesus, but in a very different way than the Synoptic Gospels. This Fourth Gospel is dedicated to validation of the relationship between Jesus and the Johannine community. Its literary and rhetorical style is designed to privilege Jesus as the Messiah, God's Son, King of Israel, the prophet, Son of Man. But even still, Jesus is viewed as higher, elevated more – having been with God when creation began, and now on earth; he is *from God,* not simply sent *by God.* "Thus he is uncreated in the past and brokers God's creative power. Jesus...entered this world, becoming flesh. Jesus, moreover, returns to the heavenly world when God glorifies him, God thus vindicating all that he said and did. This descent-ascent motif permeates the narrative, from beginning to end."[27]

In this pericope, John 20:11-18, Mary Magdalene proclaims this ascent to the other disciples. She had already gone to the tomb, while it

[25] Ibid, 18.

[26] Raymond E Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (New Haven: Yale Press, 2003), 71.

[27] Jerome Neyrey, "Gospel According to John, 1879-1881.

was still dark. It was she who first saw that the stone had been removed, and ran to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple that "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." (John 20:2) From verse 3, when Peter and "the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb," through verse 10, a series of significant events took place. The two men arrived, each went inside the tomb at separate times, and discovered that he was not there and that the linens in which he had been wrapped were rolled up and laid to the side. The other disciple "saw and believed" but neither of them understood the full significance of what they saw and they "returned to their homes."[28]

In the section that follows the pericope, Jesus again appears and "stood among them" (v 19) – this time to the disciples gathered at "the house where the disciples had met" (v19) and said, "Peace be with you," (v 19) showing them his hands and his side. Jesus also breathed on them, telling the gathered disciples to "Receive the Holy Spirit," (v 20) and told them about forgiveness. Thomas was not with them, and did not believe when they told him about the visit ("We have seen the Lord"), saying that "unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." (v 25) A week later when the disciples were again gathered in the same house and Thomas was with them, Jesus appeared again. "Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them, and said, "'Peace be with you,'" as he had before. (v 27) Jesus told Thomas to put his finger and his hands "in my side. Do not doubt but believe." The chapter concludes with Jesus doing "many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book." (v30) The final verse of the chapter explains why the signs were written, "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (v 31) These events and their order are significant, each reflecting, signifying and commenting on the other. The structure of Chapter 20 connects the message that began in the first chapter, and runs throughout the text.

In order to understand the literary and rhetorical context of the pericope, it is helpful to know the audience and authorial intent. Here, the author is the Evangelist and the audience is the community, the disciples and those they will tell and evangelize.[29] In this pericope (John

---

[28] The Gospel of John 20:3-10, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible.* Fully Revised Fourth edition, NRSV (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[29] Brown, "An Introduction to the Gospel of John, 79.

20:11-18) as in this entire chapter, the writer uses a narrative rhetorical strategy that includes dialogue, description and characters to subtly convey significant meaning. Comparison and contrast is used also, in imagery as well as voice, description and dialogue. For instance, the imagery of light and dark begins and occurs throughout the narrative, and the author employs antitheses, particularly to point out the contrasting beliefs about Jesus. Additionally, it can be said that the irony of "witness" and "counter-witness" are also used as a narrative strategy, particularly in this chapter and pericope.

Form, Structure, Movement

The writing in the book of John has been called varied, with some sections being more literary than others, and some sections more well written and well-structured than others. The entire text is primarily presented in a chronological order, and as scholars have claimed, many sections have been redacted and structured in this ostensibly seamless order. This contributes to the support that the structure provides to the veracity of the events and claims made in the text. By the time we come to this pericope, the Gospel writer claims that the text in its entirety is set up and should be viewed in service to a larger goal: "that...you [the reader] may have life." (20:31) This, along with "that you may know," is the ultimate message of the Gospel, added on to draw together all that has been previously written.

Understanding the form, structure and movement of the Gospel of John requires us to be aware of the many literary, rhetorical and structural strategies the author(s) used to shape, connect it and move the narrative along. In the first chapter, the poetic narrative includes the first redaction, which signals a different style or form. The Gospel also moves from a low Christology to a high Christology at this point, creating a mix throughout the first chapter. In the third stage, community experience is depicted. Jesus and the Johannine community in the Gospel of John are called anti-Semitic (although some scholars have reinterpreted this as "anti-power"), and present themselves as the children of God – as such, they could do what God could do, whereas the Synoptic Gospels present Jesus in contention with the religious leaders.

The Gospel of John flows like an up-to-the minute news account in some sense, in which "Jesus and John function at the same time." We can see distinct differences in this and the other three Gospels, indicating

that in many cases, John often did not use the synoptic Gospels as a source. When the Synoptic Gospel is used as a source (Mark, i.e.) we can detect a redundancy, understanding that he writer of the text used other sources to write his accounts. But regarding this, Mark Stibbe puts it most succinctly when he writes, "all we can say is that John's story of Jesus is at the same time a story of a community in crisis, and that John the storyteller uses the narrative and literary devices at his disposal to address the pressing social needs of his day."[30]

Detailed Analysis

The Gospel of John is implicitly read by contemporary scholars "as both a story of Jesus and a story of the Johannine community." (Reinhartz, 15)This pericope, written to the Johannine community, closely relates to the message of the entire text, witnessing, experiencing, and giving voice and testimony to the central message of the Fourth Gospel: Jesus is Lord. The text here speaks to the *dunamis*, the sovereign power of God in Jesus. Through a motif of ascent and descent, John connects Mary Magdalene to that power. A rereading of this text, taking into account recent contemporary examinations and exploring missing links to the real lived experiences of Black women will render an expanded womanist reading. This reading does not require the African American womanist "to suppress some one aspect of her identity to express another,"[31] thus allowing them freedom to read this pericope as revolutionary. For instance, what if such inquiry lifted the possibility that John has written about Mary Magdalene in this manner not to focus on *her*, but to position and connect her as a woman, with other characters who do the same – to demonstrate how humanity is *transformed* by the power of Jesus. This interpretation holds several possibilities: it speaks to the difficult questions about the roles and views of women; it further ties this chapter and pericope to the full gospel and its meaning and intent that we *would see* and *would have faith/believe;* and it reinforces the Johannine assertion that they/we (the reader) can do what Jesus can

[30] Mark W.G Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 61.

[31] Renita J. Weems, "Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible" in Cain Hope Felder, ed., Stony *the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 70.

do, through the God's power in Jesus. This also accounts for the distinct difference in form from the Synoptic gospels.

I read significance into the *presence* of Mary Magdalene, as well as the deeper, varied meaning *behind* that presence – some of which has been excavated and other parts which inhere from a close reading of the text and an open consideration of other readings. Mary Magdalene is *there:* she experiences Jesus' resurrection, she witnesses it, and she gives voice to it through her testimony. No matter what is said of her in subsequent centuries, as we look at the text, Mary is established in this text as an integral part of Jesus' ministry, entrusted with conveying the message of Jesus' transformation and confirmation of God's promise. Her relationship with Jesus allows her to be the one to convey this important message. Mary Magdalene is *there first.* I stress this presence not so much as to privilege Mary Magdalene, the person, but instead her role as a voice of the Johannine community, chosen by Jesus to proclaim the message of Jesus' awaited transformation. Significantly, beyond this pericope, she is the constant in all the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection. This point has been made crystal clear through feminist readings of the text by more than one Biblical scholar, as noted earlier. This is significant because it reinforces her primacy as the first to witness the resurrection, as well as the first – per Jesus' instructions in John's Gospel – to tell of the fulfilled promise. In appearing to Mary Magdalene first and then to the men, Jesus not only transforms himself into a new being, but Mary Magdalene, as well. In positioning her as first and then also appearing to the men, Jesus equalizes their authority, affirming the Scripture from "in the beginning," concerning the relationship of men and women, when Jesus was with God when God created them. This full circle affirms and adds depth to similar perspectives already held by African Americans.

Numerous readings of this pericope have yielded a view of Mary Magdalene as a model of women's leadership, fully embraced by women, in general. These readings counter those that have minimized her significance and attempted to cast her aside. But what purpose does it serve to shed a womanist lens on its meaning? And what value does Mary's story have for womanist biblical scholars and theologians seeking to affirm Black women's view of the Bible as "a meaningful resources for shaping modern existence."[32] I find this question significant

[32] "Reading Her Way Through the Struggle, 57.

in that for the Black church, the value in this story has been diminished, due largely to a lack of attention by Black [including womanist] scholars. These scholars have been at the forefront of identifying, theorizing, privileging and establishing the texts, figures, and messages that are important and beneficial for the liberation of the Black church and community. Yet, for a number of reasons, ranging from disagreement with the sources and foci of White feminist readings to a simple lack of regard of Mary Magdalene and her story as the most relevant or effective, womanist scholars generally do not address the Fourth Gospel or this pericope. While we gloss over this text as the Easter story without reading for deeper meaning, we forego the opportunity to teach valuable lessons that have been excavated in this text and other "hidden" connections waiting to be illuminated. As a leader, Mary Magdalene signifies hope for women, and for a stronger community. Reinhartz's reading has womanist tones that offer a point of departure for a womanist interrogation. She writes, 'Her receiving the first vision of the risen Lord and being given a message to carry to the other disciples speak to her role as witness and 'apostle to the apostles'. In asking Mary, 'Whom are you seeking?' Jesus evokes the call of the first disciples in 1:38 and thus establishes continuity between them and Mary."[33]

I suggest that in addition to those stories which African American clergy, educators, Bible scholars, theologians and laypersons typically look to as a resource (some of which are cited elsewhere in this essay), Mary Magdalene's story should be reexamined for other content and meaning. This story has been correctly read through most contemporary hermeneutical lenses as being about the Johannine community and its ability to live and reach Jesus, his transformation and everlasting life for those who believe on him. Although historically, Mary Magdalene was embraced by African Americans, as attested to in our spirituals, hymnals and Christian Education journals, an alternate reading is required to garner its full power in the lives of contemporary African American Christians, particularly women.[34] Understanding that although these contemporary Christians surely read the Bible on their own, I concur with Renita Weems that reading the Bible is a "sublime and complex process," and that "...such sublimity and complexity [as

---

[33] "Women in the Johannine Community, 25.

[34] Allan Dwight Callahan, "The Gospel of John." In Brian Blount, et. al., *True to our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress , 2007) ,209.

reading the Bible] are magnified all the more when the book is imbued with the kind of power that the Bible has had over Western women's lives." [35] Much of the guidance in approaching this reading emanates from the pulpit, pastors, Bible study and Sunday school, and trickles down from the academic inquiry of African American scholars. As Renita Weems notes, "modern readers from marginalized communities [Black and others] continue to regard the Bible as a meaningful resource." [36]

We know that the Bible has historically been used to conquer, dominate, exploit, enslave and otherwise oppress nations and groups. Liberationist, feminist, womanist and other scholars have plumbed the Bible and "have convincingly demonstrated that specific texts are unalterably hostile to the dignity and welfare of women..."[37] But re-evaluations of this pericope can shed new relevance. For it is in the spaces thinly covered and left empty from which womanist readings can lift the unseen and unheard pieces of the story, weaving together strong, relevant (con)textual meaning for the marginalized Black woman and community. Dwight Callahan's reading offers a new perspective on Mary Magdalene's tears, and compares John's version to the Synoptic writers' lack of epiphany, encounter with Jesus, or tears." From their own perspectives, womanist scholars can similarly offer new insights. Likewise, read against – or in concert with – Adele Reinhartz's interdisciplinary emphasis on the ambiguity of the portrayal of women in the text or Schneiders' provocative feminist notions, this text leaves plenty of room for questioning and informed, provocative speculation by womanists.39Renita Weems rightly notes that where the Bible "has been able to capture the imagination of African American women, it has been and continues to be able to do so because significant portions speak to the deepest aspirations of oppressed people for freedom, dignity, justice and vindication." [38] I suggest that beyond the traditional readings and uses of this text by the Black church and scholars, we instead allow ourselves to embrace and create new readings -- an expanded view that is emblematic of womanist readings, in general; I am only suggesting that in reading this pericope and (re)turning a womanist gaze towards Mary Magdalene we can find rich sources for ongoing explorations of gender,

[35] "Reading Her Way Through the Struggle", 59.
[36] Ibid, 57.
[37] "Reading Her Way Through the Struggle, 57.
[38] "Reading Her Way Through the Struggle", 70.

class and community. Hence, John 20:11-18 allows us to look further at the ways that African American people can enter into the discourse, embracing this and other stories with a willingness to accept, challenge, reject and synthesize ideas that will produce new meaning. For instance, Richard Cassidy raises interesting questions ripe for further exploration when he suggests that "John's reports concerning Jesus' first two resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning and to the disciples on Easter evening testify both to his sovereignty over death and to his passage beyond the laws of space and time."[39]

At a basic level, African Americans can identify, if not *with* then *through* the experience of living in a community in distress, under the threat of death for being oneself and holding ones' beliefs. Sandra Schneider's reading touches upon several significant points of consideration for womanist readers: 'Here Mary, symbolic representative of the New Israel, the Johannine community and the readers, makes the salvific choice, Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the teacher, even – according to John – for the Jews." [40]

This discussion, which this space does not permit me to explore more extensively, raises questions about parallels between the Johannine community and the historical and contemporary experience of African Americans. Many Africans brought to America brought a belief in the circularity of life. For many, death represented freedom from earthly oppression. Strains of these ideas remain in the African American worldview. As musicologist Melva Costen points out, traditional beliefs that are still expressed among African Americans hold at their core that "God created an orderly world and remains present and is dynamically involved in ongoing creation throughout the inhabited world and that God exists both in and out of time." [41] Like the Johannine community, many African Americans view moving beyond this space and time as a gift of believing in the resurrection of Jesus and his promise of everlasting life.

---

[39] Richard Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective,* 76.

[40] Sandra M. Schneiders, "John 20:11-18 The Encounter of the Easter Jesus with Mary Magdalene," 164.

[41] Melva Wilson Costen, *African American Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 6, 7.

Conclusion

I have briefly suggested that Mary Magdalene is significant to African American Christians and that a womanist reading can render new meanings beyond the way this pericope has been traditionally viewed. An approach that includes engaging other contemporary readings and making connections based on the womanist concern with gender, class and community, can offer African American women readers (clergy, Christian educators, scholars, parishioners) and by extension the Black Church community, a new way of approaching, reading and accessing this pericope. This assertion opens other possibilities for gaining meaning, while maintaining a focus on relevance of the Bible for Black Christians. As a start, this pericope offers numerous opportunities to synthesize existing readings to develop new perspectives.

John 20 is an integral part of the entire Gospel of John. That chapter, along with the one which follows (21), provides the ending intended by the writer to bring the proper closing to the Fourth Gospel. This pericope is central to that message, that Jesus is risen, glorified and will come to be with the reader, and will give them everlasting life. In addition, it is important to note that in this pericope, Jesus was transformed in the encounter with Mary Magdalene, rendering him, as Cassidy suggests, "No longer subject to the restraints of space and time." [42] This transformation is significant as it sets up Jesus' subsequent appearances. Mary is central to the transformation *and* the voice and body that convey this important message, chosen by Jesus and recorded by the Beloved Disciple. As such, her role is central to the community and to future of its discipleship in the world.

[42] Cassidy, *John's Gospel in New Perspective,* 71.

Work Cited

Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the Gospel of John.* New Haven: Yale Press, 2003.

Callahan, Allan Dwight. "The Gospel of John." In *True to our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, edited by Brian Bount. Minneapolis: Fortress , 2007, 186-212.

Carter, Warren. *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide.* Nashvlle: Abingdon Press, 2006.

Cassidy, Richard J. *John's Cospel in New Perspective: Christology and the Realities of Roman Power.* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979.

Coogan, Michael D. et al, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Fully Revised Fourth edition, NRSV*, London, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Costen, Melva Wilson. *African American Christian Worship.* Nashville: Abdington, 2007.

Grant, Jacquelyn. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Respsonse.* Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999.

Reinhartz, Adele. "Women in the Johannine Community: An Exercise in Historical Imagination." In *A Feminist Companion to John, Volume 2.* ,edited by Amy-Jill Levine, London: Sheffield Academic Press, 15-33.

Rensberger. David. "Oppression and Identity in the Gospel of John" in Recovering the Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration (Essays in Honor of Dr. Charles B. Copher, edited by Randall C. Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994, 77-94.

Schneiders, Sandra M. "John 20:11-18 The Encounter of the Easter Jesus with Mary Magdalen - A Transformative Feminist Reading" in *"What is John?" Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, edited by Fernando F. Segovia, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 154-168.

Smith, Mitzi J., ed. I Found God in Me: A Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics Reader, (Cascade Books Eugene: 2015), 52. Stibbe, Mark W.G. *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel.* London: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Weems, Renita J. "Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible." In *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Cain Hope Felder. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, 57-77.