

Mary Magdalene's friendships deserves more attention

BY RICHARD N. OSTLING
The Associated Press

There's an interest with gospels from the Gnostic movement that early Christians barred from the Bible as inauthentic and heretical.

Touted by some feminists, it also plays into Dan Brown's promotion of Gnosticism in his popular novel, "The Da Vinci Code."

Did the Gnostics provide reliable information about Jesus? Birger Pearson, a University of California-Santa Barbara, expert, notes in *Bible Review* magazine that Gnostic writings involved were fourth-century translations from third- or second-century writings. The New Testament Gospels were first-century texts.

Brown's celebrated claim that Jesus married Mary Magdalene and sired a royal bloodline is debunked by Pearson, who says "nothing at all" in biblical or Gnostic materials provides evidence.

The "Mrs. Jesus" theory depends on the assertion that Jewish men were required to marry. But we've known that's untrue since the first century, when Josephus wrote about celibate Essene holy men.

Speaking of women, in the same issue of *Bible Review*, Ben Witherington III of Asbury Theological Seminary in Lexington, Ky., writes that

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And who is Joanna, you say?

Joanna and Mary, both close companions of Jesus, attended his crucifixion and burial after the male disciples fled (Luke 23:49-56). They witnessed the empty tomb on Easter morning and went to tell the men, who initially dismissed the good news as an "idle tale" (Luke 24:1-11).

The first scriptural mention of Joanna says that Jesus "went on through cities and villages, preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the 12 were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from

whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means" (Luke 8:1-3).

Chuza was the household administrator for Herod Antipas, the tyrant infamous for executing Jesus' cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist.

Joanna's travels were extraordinary because "women in early Jewish culture were not supposed to fraternize with men they were not related to," Witherington noted.

Since Joanna's husband was well-placed, she presumably had the freedom to travel and the financial means to support Jesus' entourage. But this would have "put her husband's career at risk," he surmised.

That shows what a powerful attraction Jesus had for women followers, Witherington says. Jesus not only dismissed the taboo against men talking with women who weren't their relatives but apparently didn't treat women as ritually unclean during their monthly cycle (see Mark 7:15).

Witherington offers an added theory also proposed in *Gospel Women* (Eerdmans, 2002) by Richard Bauckham of Scotland's University of St. Andrews.

An important statement about the role of women in the earliest church is Romans 16:1-16. There, Paul greets important church workers. One of them is Junia (or Junias), wife of Andronicus, whose Latin name is the equivalent of the Hebrew Joanna. Could she be the same Joanna of the Gospel account?

Witherington thinks she is. Paul says that Junia and Andronicus were notable "apostles," making Junia the first woman given that exalted title, which clearly implies that she had seen the risen Jesus and had been commissioned directly by him.

Paul also says Junia and Andronicus "were in Christ before me." Since Paul became a Christian two or three years after Jesus' crucifixion, the couple would have been among the very earliest Christians when believers were virtually all Jews located in the Holy Land.

Witherington speculated that Chuza divorced Joanna, who then married the Christian Andronicus.

"Herod Antipas would hardly have retained Chuza as estate agent if Chuza retained Joanna as a wife," he said, and maybe the divorce made her free to follow Jesus to Jerusalem.



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