***Gospel of John Bible Study***

Study #14

The Raising of Lazarus – Jn. 11:1-12:11

The account of Lazarus is identified by three things.

1) Even though it is a most remarkable incident, and one that involves more disciples than John, it is left out of the Synoptics and is found only here in the gospel of John. This has led to speculation in two areas – the source material and the factuality.

a. It is readily observed that much of the material that appears in John’s gospel is not found in the Synoptics. Yet, this incident is so remarkable as to make it difficult to be satisfied simply with that fact. Why would the others leave this out? One suggestion is that the disciples were physically separated at the time. In other words, perhaps Peter and others were not there to see it. If Peter were not present, that might explain why it does not appear in Mark’s gospel account (which was, most likely, dictated to Mark by Peter). But this presumes that Mark was the earliest gospel written and that it was from Mark that both gospels of Matthew and Luke take their cue. That is only a small part of the so-called “synoptic problem” – the struggle to harmonize the accounts and sayings of Jesus in the first three gospels so that they all agree with one another. That effort remains an unsolved mystery among scholars, and the order of the writing of the Synoptics or their actual dependencies on each other still cannot be confidently established.

b. Skeptical scholars simply deny the historicity of the account and claim it to be just another parable of Jesus, the recounting of which was elaborated on too much by the writer. While that does not suit conservatives, it would better explain its absence in the Synoptics. As a parable, it would still effectively introduce Jesus’ words to Martha – “I am the resurrection and the life” – and be a prologue to John’s attention to the last week in Jerusalem. But this denial is only an effort to dismiss the dilemma, not to explain it.

2) The incident spectacularly follows the previous dialogues with the Jews who demand for signs, reject the works of Jesus, and still insist on his proving his credentials, which they already know he cannot physically do. This is deliberate on the part of the writer; however, it is beyond dispute that this incident did not follow immediately after the interchanges that occur in ch.s 9 & 10.

3) It is the last episode in the ministry of Jesus before he enters into Jerusalem for the last time. John will spend literally half of his gospel record on the last week of Jesus’ mortal life – the so-called ‘Passion week’. Literarily, this is, of course, out of balance and only reinforces the fact that John is not trying to write a chronological account but is purposely emphasizing things the other writers have left out and placing the necessary emphases where he chooses by the leading of the Holy Spirit and the circumstances of the fact that he writes much later than the others have done.

All three of these are contextual framings which are necessary and relevant to the study of the incident itself. When it is left in its literary context, the raising of Lazarus explodes in its importance. But on its own, historically, it might not have been more significant than the raising of the son of the widow of Nain (Lk. 7:11ff) or the daughter of Jairus (Mt. 9:18ff; Mk. 5:21ff; Lk. 8:40ff). That may sound crazy (after all, we are talking about resuscitating dead people!), but there must be some explanation as to why those other accounts would be in other gospels and not in John.

I. The Incident Itself

* *Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill.So the sisters sent to him, saying, “Lord, he whom you love is ill.” (vs. 1-2)*
  + The principal characters of this account are clearly designated and introduced to the reader here for the first time. Even so, Lazarus is introduced to the reader through the voice of his sisters as being one whom Jesus loves. Mary’s introduction is with a referent to an account yet to occur (rf. ch. 12)! Martha is described as only being the sister of Mary and Lazarus. It will be Martha who takes the spotlight.
    - The incident describing the (previous) action of Mary with Jesus is recorded in all four gospels (Mt. 26:6-13; Mk. 14:3-9; Lk. 7:36-50; Jn. 12:1-8).
      * That account would already be something the readers would have been familiar with from the other gospels; however, John will tie her anointing of Jesus to be in a worshipful response to Jesus raising of her brother as well as in the anticipation of Jesus’ own death.
      * The account in both Matthew and Mark appear very similar in time, place, and intent. The time of the anointing agrees with John’s account; but the place appears different. The house in Mt. and Mk. is that of one “Simon the Leper”, whereas in John, it is assumed to be that of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The intent in all three seem the same for she anoints Jesus, he explains, in anticipation of his burial.
      * In Luke, however, things are very different. The time is much earlier in the ministry of Jesus than the last week. The place is the house of a Pharisee (which could not possibly be confused with anyone known as “a leper”), and the intent also appears different. The unnamed woman is described as “a sinner”, and the propriety of her presence and worship become the topic of conversation at the table. The appropriateness of her worship is the lesson, not the issue of the ointment’s cost or the anticipation of Jesus’ burial. (This might raise the question as to the possibility of multiple accounts: were there two anointings? That might also explain why John describes the anointing as something already in the past.)
      * In all three Synoptics, the woman is left unidentified, perhaps deliberately. But in Luke, as stated previously, she is described as a (notorious?) sinner, and she is forgiven by Jesus at the end of his dialogue with the Pharisee. It is also only in Luke that we read of Jesus’ visiting of the two sisters, which occurs later, and Jesus’ defending Mary for sitting and listening to Jesus instead of helping Martha in the kitchen. It is only now, in Jn. 11, that the two incidents in Luke are connected and the same woman is identified with both.
    - Our previous knowledge of Martha is only found in the one incident recorded in Lk. 10:38-42. She is also introduced as if she were only in the background: it was Mary who worshipped the Lord, and Lazarus is Mary’s brother. But it becomes clear later in the chapter that the focus is on Martha and not Mary. Mary never speaks with Jesus. Martha does and to Martha Jesus here reveals himself as ‘the resurrection and the life’.
    - Lazarus is completely unknown to us previously.
      * While some speculate as to whether this Lazarus might be the same as the Lazarus in Lk. 16:19ff, a connection seems doubtful. Although the Lukan account is not framed as being a parable (with words such as “The kingdom of God is like ...”), neither are other teachings in that section of Luke. So to deny that it is a parable but a true account in and of itself cannot be proven on that literary basis alone. Also, in Lk. 16, that Lazarus appears to remain dead as the angels carry him to Abraham’s side.
      * The only description of Lazarus’ relationship with Jesus is given us here by the sisters as being one whom the Lord loves. Yet, he earns no place in any gospel record, nor is ever quoted for any verbal exchange he might have had with Jesus, and has to be introduced to the reader here as if for the first time. It would seem clear that the focus is meant to be on what Jesus does for Lazarus (and, therefore, for all of his people), and not on the man individually.
  + “The sisters sent to let our Lord know that Lazarus was ill, ... They do not name Lazarus but refer to him simply as ‘he whom thou lovest’. ... There is no request that Jesus should come to them. Doubtless the sisters were well aware of the dangers that would beset Jesus if He were to visit them, and they refrain from asking Him to imperil Himself.” (Morris, p. 538) The sisters might also be aware of dangers of being associated with Jesus (rf. 11:8, 16; 12:9-11), and so they keep their request anonymous and without specific plea.
* *But when Jesus heard it he said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” (vs. 4)*
  + ouk estivn proz qanaton – “not is to death”. Because Jesus deliberately waits for Lazarus to die, he must mean here that the purpose for Lazarus’ physical death is not unto hopelessness or even divine judgment. Instead, as Jesus offers, the death of Lazarus is for the purpose of revealing God’s glory.
  + Jesus also refers to the purpose of his own impending death as to the glory of God, and this is another connection John is making between this account with Lazarus and the next chapter which begins the week of Jesus’ passion.
* *Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.* *So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Then after this he said to the disciples, “Let us go to Judea again.” (vs. 5-7)*
  + “It might be supposed that the remark introduced parenthetically into the narrative, vs. 5, has as its purpose to prevent the idea that the delay of two days mentioned in v s. 6 arose from indifference. But the oun, *therefore*, of vs. 6, is opposed to this explanation. In order fully to understand the design of this remark, account must be taken of the men of vs. 6, which supposes a de understood in vs. 7: ‘Jesus loved Martha and Mary ... and Lazarus. ... When therefore He heard of it, He remained, *it is true* (men); *but* afterwards He said: Let us go ... ‘ We perceive thus that the remark of vs. 5: He *loved*, refers not to the: He *remained*, of vs. 6, but to the order *to set out* given in vs. 7. This quite simple explanation does away with several forced suppositions, for example, that Jesus meant: *Although* Jesus loved, or this other: *Because* He loved, He remained, to the end of testing longer the faith of the two sisters. Jesus uses here the term of dignity, agapan, instead of that of tenderness filein (vs. 3), either, as the interpreters think, because the question is of the affection of Jesus for the two sisters – but would not the Lord’s disciple be raised above such prepossessions? – or rather because the nobler term is better suited to the pen of the evangelist while the expression of tenderness was more appropriate in the mouth of the sisters.” (Godet, p. 172)
  + Vs. 5 deliberately sets up Jesus’ actions in vs. 6-7. The sisters appealed to Jesus based on his love for Lazarus. But John explains Jesus has set his love on all three. Lazarus remains in the background, Mary has experienced the love of Christ, so the focus quickly becomes Martha. Jesus loves Martha, has a cathartic purpose for Martha, and therefore remains away until after Lazarus dies.
* *The disciples said to him, “Rabbi, the Jews were just now seeking to stone you, and are you going there again?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” (vs. 8-10)*
  + The disciples would not have regarded Jesus’ decision to return to Judea now to be due to the fact that he plans to minister to Lazarus’ family. His assurance in vs. 4 and this two day delay would have put Lazarus out of their minds. “[T]hey cannot understand why Jesus wishes to return to a territory which *so very recently* made an attempt to stone him (10:31 cf. 10:39).” (Hendriksen, p. 141)
  + “The men of antiquity did not have time-pieces as we have and twelve hours did not stand for any precisely calculated period. Their procedure was to divide the whole of the daylight period into twelve, so that one hour stood for one twelfth of the available day. The actual amount of time in twelve hours would thus vary from one part of the year to another.” (Morris, p. 541)
  + Jesus uses the comparison of daylight to suggest 1) that his time is short to do the work he has to do and must make the most of it, and 2) that he is confident that he will have the fullness of his time in which to do that work – no one will be allowed to cut it short.
* *After saying these things, he said to them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.” (vs. 11)*
  + After announcing his intention to return to Judea – with his mind on Martha, particularly – he now remembers that he wants his disciples to understand what he is doing as well.
  + With as much confidence in saying that this illness would not lead to Lazarus’ death, he now says with confidence that Lazarus has now ‘fallen asleep’. “The death of believers is often compared to sleep: Gen. 47:30, 2 Sam. 7:12, Mt. 27:52, Acts 7:60, 1 Thess. 4:13, ... The comparison is, of course, very appropriate: believers expect a glorious awakening on the other side. ... In this connection it is instructive to observe the beautiful and comforting manner in which Scripture everywhere speaks about the death *of believers*. *That* death is ‘precious in the sight of Jehovah’ (Ps. 116:15); ‘a being carried away by the angels into Abraham’s bosom’ (Lk. 16:22); ‘a going to Paradise’ (Lk. 23:43); ‘a going to the house with many mansions’ (Jn. 14:2); ‘a (blessed) departure’ (Phil. 1:23; 2 Tim. 4:6), in order ‘to be with Christ’ (Phil. 1:23), ‘to be at home with the Lord’ (2 Cor. 5:8); ‘a gain’ (Phil. 1:21); ‘very far better’ (Phil. 1:23); and, as here, ‘a falling asleep’ in the Lord. (Hendriksen, p. 142-43)
  + The passages which speak of believers falling asleep do not teach an intermediate state of unconscious repose (soul-sleep, psychopannychy). Though the soul is asleep to the world which it has left (Job 7:9, 10; Is. 63:16; Eccl. 9:6) it is awake with respect to its own world (Lk. 16:19-31); 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:21-23; Rev. 7:15-17, 20:4).” (Hendriksen, p. 143)
* *The disciples said to him, “Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover.” Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus has died, and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” (vs. 12-15)*
  + The disciples express hope in this news, assuming that Jesus has received this information in their absence somehow. Their response is to express hope for Lazarus but also to give Jesus another rationale as to why it is unnecessary for him to venture toward Jerusalem again.
  + In this latest interchange, we can now see the lesson that Jesus has for the disciples. The delay in going was not only to heighten the tension for Martha but also for these men. “The results now would be most advantageous to the disciples. Their faith would receive an immense confirmation, by witnessing the stupendous miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Thus, great good, in one respect, would come out of great evil. ... Let us note that our Lord does not say, ‘I am glad for the sake of Martha and Mary and Lazarus that I was not there, but for your sakes.’ It is no pleasure to Him to see His individual members suffering, weeping, and dying; but He does rejoice to see the good of many spring out of the suffering of a few. Hence He permits some to be afflicted, in order that many may be instructed through their afflictions. This is the key to the permission of evil in the world: it is for the good of the many.” (Ryle, vol. 2, pp. 284-5)
* *So Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (vs. 16)*
  + This is the first time Thomas’ name is mentioned in the gospel of John. But he becomes virtually prominent in the chapters ahead. Why? It would seem that John brings Thomas in as one who is, by nature, skeptical and ‘doubting’ of any good thing occurring until he is faced with the resurrected Lord in a deliberate catering to that doubt (rf. Jn. 20). Outside of Peter, none of the other disciples’ personalities come out so much as does that of Thomas. “Let us remember that this same Thomas, so desponding in our Lord’s lifetime, was afterwards the very Apostle who first preached the Gospel in India, according to ecclesiastical history, and penetrated further East than any whose name is recorded. Chrysostom says, ’The very man who dared not go to Bethany in Christ’s company, afterwards ran alone through the world, and dwelt in the midst of nations full of murder and ready to kill him.’” (Ryle, p. 286)
  + “Elsewhere Thomas is only mentioned in the lists of apostles (Mt. 10:3; Mk. 3:18; Lk. 6:15; cf. Acts 1:13). The Fourth Gospel *describes* him, indicates his character. *Despondency* and *devotion* (to Jesus) mark the man (cf. 11:16; 14:5; and 20:24-28). ... He does not think first of all of Lazarus nor of himself but of his Lord, who must not be permitted to die alone!” (Hendriksen, p. 144)
  + “I must admit that this was hardly a cheery statement. It was melancholy, even a bit grim. Thomas did tend to look on the worst side of things after all. Still, I cannot help admiring his words. For one thing, they were honest. The way to Jerusalem *was* the way to death. Second, they were loyal. Thomas was saying that no matter what lay ahead it was better to be with Jesus. And so it is. It is always better to be with Jesus. Finally the words were courageous. In taking this stand Thomas was literally stating his willingness to walk with Christ into the lion’s den.” (Boice, p. 844)

II. Jesus speaks with Martha and Mary

* *Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. (vs. 17)*
  + As was according to Jewish custom, the body would have been buried or entombed within 1 day (roughly 24 hours) of death. Beginning with Jesus’ initial delay, Thomas’ hesitation, and now the reminder of the passing of days – all soon to be combined with Martha’s own blunt conjecture to come – John is painting an absolutely hopeless picture for any misunderstanding regarding the fact that Lazarus is, indeed, dead.
  + “The evangelist makes special mention of this fourth day in order to stress the magnitude of the miracle. According to a rabbinical tradition the soul of a deceased person hovers around the body for three days in hope of reunion, but takes its final departure when it notices that the body has entered the state of decomposition. *Scripture* nowhere teaches this; rather, the very opposite: the soul goes immediately to its eternal state (see on 11:11-13); but it is *possible* that the people of Jesus’ day were deluded by this bit of superstition. (Hendriksen, p., 146)
* *Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. (vs. 18-19)*
  + “It is interesting to notice that he locates Bethany with precision as ‘about fifteen furlongs’ from Jerusalem. By contrast, when he is speaking about this family Luke speaks only of ‘a certain village’ (Lk. 10:38), giving neither the name nor the location.” (Morris, p. 546)
  + The Jews “apparently came with the intention of staying for some time and not simply of paying a passing visit. A fairly prolonged stay to comfort the bereaved was apparently usual at a time of bereavement. At the funeral itself the mourners were left alone with their sorrow and their friends refrained from speaking to them. But later it was expected that visits for consolation would be made, and the Jews rated this duty highly.” (Morris, p. 547)
  + “Lazarus was, as became his station, not laid in a [common] cemetery, but in his own private tomb in a cave – probably in a garden, the favourite place of interment. Though on terms of close friendship with Jesus, he was evidently not regarded as an apostate from the Synagogue. For, every indignity was shown at the burial of an apostate; people were even to array themselves in white festive garments to make demonstration of joy. Here, on the contrary, ... every mark of sympathy, respect, and sorrow had been shown by the people in the district and by friends in the neighbouring Jerusalem.” (Edersheim, vol. 2, p. 317)
  + “Chrysostom thinks the Evangelist mentioned the Jews coming to comfort Martha and Mary, as one of the many circumstances proving that Lazarus was really dead. They evidently thought him dead, or they would not have come.” (Ryle, p. 293)
* *So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. Martha said to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha said to him, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” (vs. 20-24)*
  + “When Martha met Jesus, she repeated, in substance, what, in all probability, she had been saying so often during the illness of her brother. Then she – and also Mary (see 11:32) – had been uttering the sigh of near despair: ‘If only Jesus were here.’” (Hendriksen, p. 147)
  + Commentators insist we not read into Martha’s words any criticism of Jesus for arriving too late. However, it is plain that they regarded Jesus’ presence as necessary for any miraculous healing to take place (compare that with the faith of the Official’s son in 4:46ff).
  + “Martha is an excellent example of a certain type of believer, ... They do not distrust the Lord, but neither do they believe with that full confidence that would allow them to lay aside their care and rest in his good provision. ... Such faith *always attempts to limit God* ... to scale down his promises. ... *she treated the words of Christ impersonally* (see below).” (Boice, pp. 850-51) Her immediate self-consolation is more philosophical than theological.
* *Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” (vs. 25-27)*
  + “Here follows another great I AM, the fifth one. ... Jesus is the resurrection and the life; ... *in person*, the full blessed life of God, ... .” (Hendriksen, p. 149-50)
  + In order to behold Jesus as the resurrection, believers must face the reality of death. Had Jesus been there ‘in the nick of time’, or even healed Lazarus from a distance, he would not be revealing himself as the resurrection and life.
  + “He tells her that He is not merely a human teacher of the resurrection, but the Divine Author of all resurrection, whether spiritual or physical, and the Root and Fountain of all life. ‘I am the great First Cause and Procurer of man’s resurrection, the Conqueror of death, and the Saviour of the body. I am the great Spring and Source of all life, and whatever life any one has, eternal, spiritual, physical, is all owing to me. All that are raised from the grave will be raised by Me. All that are spiritually quickened are quickened by Me. Separate from Me there is no life at all. Death came by Adam: life comes by Me.’” (Ryle, p. 297-98)
  + Jesus’ statement here is one of fact, not of religious point-of-view. Jesus is, therefore, not asking Martha ‘do you agree with me?’, he is asking if she believes in the truth. Here is a remarkable conjoining of faith and evidence. Faith is not disconnected to reality or reason (as though you must choose to have one or the other); it is not equal to faith in anyone or anything else (as if faith in anything was just a psychological crutch); it is ‘take it or leave it’. Lazarus will soon be resuscitated to mortal life once again in demonstration of the truth that Jesus states; but had Martha shown skepticism or not confessed Jesus as Lord, he might well have left the man in the tomb.
* *When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, “The Teacher is here and is calling for you.” And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still in the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary rise quickly and go out, they followed her, supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there. Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet, saying to him, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” (vs. 28-32)*
  + Whereas Martha had sought out Jesus as he approached and had the opportunity to have a quiet conversation with him, Mary did not. Martha had tried to provide that for her, but the crowds seemed more sensitive to Mary than to Martha and followed Mary out to where Jesus had remained. But instead of being with her at the tomb of Lazarus, they were standing with her around Jesus and his disciples.
  + Mary, whose faith might well have been deeper and more aware, came and fell at Jesus’ feet before beginning their talk with precisely the same words that Martha had used earlier (most likely denoting the topic of repeated conversation between them during the time of Lazarus’ dying). It is not possible to decipher the true meaning behind this move on the part of Mary. But what is in contrast is that Jesus spoke to Martha about the resurrection – and elicited a confession of faith from her before anything else happened – while with Mary, Jesus proceeded directly to the tomb.
  + “Both had built all their hopes on Jesus coming. Both had felt confidence that His coming would have saved their brother’s life. Both were bitterly disappointed that He did not come.” (Ryle, p. 307)
* *When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. (vs. 33)*
  + “Not many passages in the new [sic] Testament are more wonderful than the simple narrative contained in these eight verses. It brings out, in a most beautiful light, the sympathizing character of our Lord Jesus Christ. It shows us Him who is ‘able to save to the uttermost all who come to God by Him,’ as able to feel as He is to save. It shows us Him who is one with the Father, and the Maker of all things, entering into human sorrows, and shedding human tears.” (Ryle, p. 302)
  + evmbrima,omai – “to be moved with anger”, “to admonish sternly” (rf. Mk. 14:5; Mt. 9:30; Mk. 1:43) “The answer that is generally given is this: Jesus was concentrating his attention upon sin, as the underlying cause of all suffering, grief, and sorrow. He was filled with indignation against sin. ... The intense emotion which surged in the heart of the Lord comprised at least one other element besides indignation. It went beyond *anger* and included more than this. The entire setting clearly indicates that it also included *sympathy*.” (Hendriksen, p. 154)
  + “What follows is difficult to understand; still more difficult to explain: not only from the choice of language, which is peculiarly difficult, but because its difficulty springs from the yet greater difficulty of expressing what it is intended to describe. The expression, ‘groaned in spirit,’ cannot mean that Christ ‘was moved with indignation in the spirit,’ since this could not have been the consequence of witnessing the tears of Mary and what, we feel sure, was the genuine emotion of the Jews.” (Edersheim, vol. 2, p. 323)
  + “We have a problem at this point, however, for the word that is translated ‘deeply moved’ in most of our Bibles is one that is difficult to understand. ... Part of the problem is that the word occurs only three other times in the New Testament and that even then it has a meaning does not seem to fit this situation. ... [S]ome commentators have placed the idea of indignation or even anger in John’s passage. ... If we ask why Jesus should be angry, they answer either that he was angry with the supposed unbelief or hypocrisy of those who were weeping over Lazarus or else with death, which he would have viewed as a tool of Satan and a great enemy. It may have been that some of the weeping of the crowd was less than sincere, but this is not said or implied in the passage. ... So we reject the idea of anger, at least at the hypocrisy of the crowd.” (Boice, p. 869)
  + evta,raxen – “to be troubled”, “to be thrown into confusion”
* *And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept. (vs. 34-35)*
  + Commentators seem to defend Jesus’ divinity here by denying his need to inquire as to where the body had been laid. The reason seems much more in line with his being a part of the mourning party. In asking, he is saying “let us go to the tomb and mourn”.
  + dakru,w – “This is the only place in the New Testament where this *verb* occurs. [The noun root appears in Heb. 5:7.] [T]here surely is a connection between 11:35 and Rev. 7:17: because of his tears ours shall be wiped away. Note the difference, which cannot have been unintentional: in 11:31, 33 another verb is used (klaiw) than here in 11:35. Mary and the Jews *wept*. In Mary’s case such weeping was, of course, genuine, the expression of real, inner sorrow over the loss of a dear brother. In the case of the Jews it was, in many cases, probably tantamount to *wailing*. See on 16:20. ... The verb dakruw, used here in 11:35 does not mean to wail. ... They were tears of genuine sympathy (Heb. 4:15; cf. Rom. 12:15).” (Hendriksen, p. 155)

**Excursus – Jesus wept (Jn. 11:35)**

This wonderful little verse has given rise to an enormous amount of comment. The difficulty is to select thoughts, and not to overload the subject. ... There are three occasions where our Lord is recorded to have wept, in the Gospels: once when He beheld the city (Lk. 19:41), once in the garden of Gethsemane (Mt. 26:39, and Heb. 6:7), and here. We never read of His laughing, and only once of His rejoicing. (Lk. 10:21) The reasons assigned by commentators why our Lord wept here, before He raised Lazarus, are various and curious.

(a) Some think that He wept to see the ravages made by death and sin.

(b) Some, as Hilary, think that He wept to think of the unbelief of the Jews.

(c) Some think that He wept to see how weak and feeble was the faith of Mary and Martha.

(d) Some, as Jerome and Ferus, think that He wept at the thought of the sorrow Lazarus would go through by returning to a sinful world.

(e) Some think that He wept out of sympathy with the affliction of His friends at Bethany, in order to give an eternal proof to His Church that He can feel with us and for us.

“I believe this last opinion is the true one. We learn the great practical lesson from this verse, that there is nothing unworthy of a Christian in tears. There is nothing unmanly, dishonourable, unwise, or feeble, in being full of sympathy with the afflicted, and ready to weep with them that weep. Indeed, it is curious to gather up the many instances we have in Scripture of great men weeping. We may draw great comfort from the thought that the Saviour in whom we are bid to trust is the one who can weep, and is as able to feel as He is able to save. We may learn the reality of our Lord’s humanity very strongly from this little verse. He was one who could hunger, thirst, sleep, eat, drink, walk, groan, be wearied, wonder, feel indignant, rejoice, like any of ourselves, and yet without sin; and above all, He could weep. ... Tears are peculiar to flesh and blood. Chrysostom remarks that ‘John, who enters into higher statements about our Lord’s nature than any of the evangelists, also descends lower than any in describing His bodily affections.’” (Ryle, p. 311-12)

“The text is only two words, which makes it the shortest verse in the English Bible. Yet is of such importance that it rightly deserves to stand alone. Underline it! Mark it with red ink! Add and exclamation point! Print it in capital letters! ‘JESUS WEPT!’ Spurgeon who preached two sermons on this passage in the course of his ministry, wrote, ‘There is infinitely more in these two words than any sermonizer, or student of the Word, will evert be able to bring out of them, even though he should apply the microscope of the utmost attentive consideration.’

What do these words teach about Jesus? The first answer is that they teach us that Jesus was truly a man. ... Second, the fact that Jesus wept teaches us that Jesus experienced grief as we do. ... This verse teaches us a third truth about Jesus. It teaches us that he was not ashamed to be human. ... This leads us to our fourth point. ... that he was pleased to thus identify with his brothers. ... Finally, ... that he loves.

[What do these words teach about God the Father?] [I]f Jesus wept, then there must be a sense in which we can say that God the Father weeps too. ... First, we may say that *God notices our tears*. ... God knows of our tears but also that *he is touched by them*. ... Notice also that *God remembers our tears* and that they are therefore precious to him. Finally, I want you to see that *God acts to remove our tears*.

[What do these words teach us about ourselves?] First of all, the text teaches us that we are precious in the sight of God. ... [M]an is said to have been made ‘in God’s image.’ Man is made in God’s image and is therefore valuable to him. ... [T]hat is true even after the fall. ... Here is the unique quality of Christ’s tears at the tomb of Lazarus. If the situation had been redeemable by human effort, Christ would not have wept. If sin could have been overcome or if death, the product of sin, could have been eradicated, we should expect Jesus to have said, ‘Dry your tears. Stop feeling sorry for yourselves. Gen on with the work. Solve your problems.’ But he does not do that. Instead, he weeps, because from man’s point of view man is hopeless and his problems unsolvable. But with God all things are possible.” (Boice, p. 867-884)

“{1.} That Jesus Christ was really and truly man, and partook with the children, not only of flesh and blood, but of a human soul, susceptible of the impressions of joy, and grief, and other affections. Christ gave this proof of his humanity, in both senses of the word; that, as a man, he could weep, and, as a merciful man, he *would weep*, before he gave this proof of his divinity. {2.} That he was *a man of sorrows*, and *acquainted with grief*, as was foretold, Isa. 53:3. We never read that he laughed, but more than once we have him in tears. Thus he shows not only that a mournful state will consist with the love of God, but that those who sow to the Spirit must sow in tears. {3.} Tears of compassion well become Christians, and make them most to resemble Christ. It is a relief to those who are in sorrow to have their friends sympathize with them, especially such a friend as their Lord Jesus.” (M. Henry)

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* *So the Jews said, “See how he loved him!” But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?” (vs. 36-37)*
  + Having finally arrived at this verse, I can now make the suggestion that such thoughts in the minds of the Jews who were attending to Mary and Martha could be the reason for the verb used by John up in vs. 33: evmbrima,omai – “to be moved with anger”, “to admonish sternly” (rf. Mk. 14:5; Mt. 9:30; Mk. 1:43) Explaining this as anything more than internal grief may not get us there. Perhaps being frustrated with a skeptical crowd does explain this.
  + “This sentence sounds to me like the language of enemies determined to believe nothing good of our Lord, and prepared to pick a hole or find a fault if possible, in anything he did. Does not a sarcastic sneer ring throughout it? ... Let us note that nothing will convince, or satisfy, or silence some wicked men.” (Ryle, pp 312, 13)

III. Jesus addresses the tomb

* *Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. (vs. 38)*
  + “From the narrative we infer that the burial of Lazarus did not take place in a common burying-ground, which was never nearer a town that 50 cubits, dry and rocky places being chosen in preference. ... Lazarus was, as became his station, not laid in a cemetery, but in his own private tomb in a cave – probably in a garden, the favourite place of interment. (Edersheim, p. 316)
* *Jesus said, “Take away the stone.” Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” Jesus said to her, “Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?” So they took away the stone. (vs. 39-41a)*
  + In a day and age when families took care of the deceased – preparing the body and keeping it in possession until burial – family members would be all the more familiar with the reality of death than even we are today who trust in doctors to pronounce a death and caretakers to remove, prepare and retain the body until burial. Martha, undoubtedly, would have been the one to have washed and dressed the body, herself. This response of hers is only natural with her understanding of the situation. She probably thought Jesus had the desire to anoint the body himself. But she knew the time had passed for that and present conditions would not allow for such an action without the humiliation of the exposure. This is the last bit of evidence in the account to demonstrate clearly that Lazarus was, indeed, dead, and that no one expected Jesus to raise him from the dead.
  + “At this point Martha, the sister of the deceased, [is] riveting her attention upon the brother’s corpse and not upon death’s Conqueror. ... Embalming was a custom foreign to the Hebrews, but practised with great thoroughness among influential Egyptians (cf. Gen. 50:2, 26). The anointing that was customary among prominent Jews was less effective.” (Hendriksen, p. 157)
  + “This verse is of the greatest importance for John’s understanding of what took place. The Evangelist puts some stress on the actuality of the death of Lazarus. He leaves no doubt but that he is describing a miracle of resuscitation.” (Morris, p. 560)
* *And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me.” (vs. 41b-42)*
  + In saying this prayer, we note his use of the past tense – indicating that this miracle had been on his heart and mind since before the time of Lazarus’ illness (and, therefore, part and parcel with Jesus’ delay in answering the summons) as well as suggesting that Lazarus has already been returned to life.
  + Jesus speaks his explanation for such a prayer for the purpose of connecting his claim of union with the Father to the success of this miracle work, knowing full-well that not all who witness or hear of the miracle will, indeed, believe.
* *When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out.” The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, “Unbind him, and let him go.” (vs. 43-44)*
  + “Nothing is said here about a white, winding sheet around the body. It seems that though bound hand and foot, Lazarus was able to walk, though perhaps with difficulty.” (Hendriksen, p. 159)
  + “We should observe that we are not told of anything that Lazarus said about his state while in the grave, and nothing of his after-history. Tradition says that he lived for thirty years after, and was never known to smile: but this is probably a mere apocryphal invention. As to his silence, we can easily see there is a Divine wisdom about it. If St. Paul ‘could not utter’ the things that he saw in the third heaven, and called them ‘unspeakable things,’ it is not strange that Lazarus should say nothing of what he saw in Paradise. (2 Cor. 12:4)

We should observe that we are told nothing of the feelings of Martha and Mary, after they saw their brother raised to life. The veil is drawn over their joy, though it was not over their sorrow. Affliction is a more profitable study than rejoicing.” (Ryle, pp. 328-29)

IV. Aftermath

* *Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what he did, believed in him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. So the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council and said, “What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.” (vs. 45-48)*
  + “‘If we let him alone thus’ – the very advice which Gamaliel was going to give them a few years later with respect to Christ’s disciples (cf. Acts 5:38)” (Hendriksen, p. 162)
  + “What a strange council this was! And what an evil one! We look at the action of those who had witnessed the raising of Lazarus, then went and told the Pharisees, and we say, ‘How could they show such ill-will toward Jesus? How could they be so hateful to him and so impervious to his miracles?’ ... Here were the best men of the nation – at least in their own opinion. There were chief priests in their robes; the chief priests were all Sadducees. There were Pharisees, the ‘holiest’ men of all, in their phylacteries. These met in holy council. No doubt they opened their meeting with prayer. Yet, what were they meeting for? They were meeting to oppose a perfectly innocent man. ... The interesting thing is that these two groups were enemies or rivals. That is, they hated each other and often opposed each other bitterly. Yet – and this is the wonder – we find them working together here in their opposition to Jesus.” (Boice, pp. 898-99)
  + “That He was doing these miracles, there could be no question among them. Similarly, all but one or two had no doubt as to the source of these miracles. If real, they were of Satanic agency – and all the more tremendous they were, the more certainly so. But whether really of Satanic power, or merely a Satanic delusion, one thing, at least, was evident, that, if He were let alone, all men would believe on Him? [sic] And then, if He headed the Messianic movement of the Jews as a nation, alike the Jewish City and Temple, and Israel as a nation, would perish in the fight with Rome.” (Edersheim, vol. 2, p. 326)
  + “The amazing wickedness of human nature is strikingly illustrated in this verse. There is no greater mistake than to suppose that seeing miracles will necessarily convert souls. Here is a plain proof that it does not. Never was there a more remarkable confirmation of our Lord’s words in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus: ‘If they believe not Moses and the Prophet, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.’

Musculus observes what a wonderful example we have here of the sovereign grace of God, choosing some, and leading them to repentance and faith, and not choosing others. Here is the same miracle, seen under the same circumstances, and with the same evidence, by a large crowd of persons: yet while some believe, other believe not! It is like the case of the two thieves on the cross, both seeing the same sight, one repenting and the other impenitent. The same fire which melts wax hardens clay.” (Ryle, p. 328)

* *But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.” He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they made plans to put him to death. Jesus therefore no longer walked openly among the Jews, but went from there to the region near the wilderness, to a town called Ephraim, and there he stayed with the disciples. (vs. 49-54)*
  + “Having been appointed to the highpriesthood by Valerius Gratus, the predecessor of Pontius Pilate, the year A.D. 18, he was going to be deposed by Vitellus, the successor of Pontius Pilate, in the year A.D. 36. ... The words of Caiaphas had a deeper meaning than he himself realized. The prophets of old, too, often spoke words which they themselves did not fully understand. Cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-12. Caiaphas poured *one* meaning into his words; God, *another*. ... This passage affords a glimpse into the mystery of the wonderful relationship between the divine counsel and providence, on the one hand, and the exercise of human responsibility, on the other; Caiaphas was left entirely free, was not prevented in any way from saying what his wicked heart urged him to say. Nevertheless, God’s will, without becoming even in the least degree defiled, so directed the choice of phraseology that the words which issue from the lips of this coldblooded murderer were exactly the ones that were needed to give expression to the most sublime and glorious truth regarding God’s redemptive love. ... There are, then, two groups. All of those included in these two groups are children of God (tekna tou qeou; for the meaning of this phrase see on 1:12). But the first group consists of those children of God who are not scattered abroad; that is, it consists of Jews, and Jews only, the fold of Israel (see on 10:1); while the second group consists of those children of God who are scattered abroad; that is, it consists of Gentiles, and Gentiles only, those elect children of God (whether already born or not yet born) who are not of the fold of Israel (see on 10:16).” (Hendriksen, pp. 162-5)
* *Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before the Passover to purify themselves. They were looking for Jesus and saying to one another as they stood in the temple, “What do you think? That he will not come to the feast at all?” Now the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should let them know, so that they might arrest him. (vs. 55-57)*
  + “[Passover] was a seven or eight day festival, one of the three great pilgrim-feasts. From all over the country the people began to wend their way toward Jerusalem, ‘going up’ to the holy city. Many of the pilgrims wanted to reach their destination before the Passover in order to comply with the regulations regarding purification. See Ex. 19:10-15; Num. 9:9-14; 2 Chron. 30:17, 18; and cf. Jn. 18:28).” (Hendriksen, p. 166)
  + “[to purify themselves] This refers to the ceremonial washings, purifications, and atonements for ceremonial uncleanness, which all strict Jews were careful to go through before eating the passover. (See 2 Chron. 30:18-19) ... The persons here mentioned seem o me to have been the Jews from all parts of Palestine, ... who had come up to prepare for the passover. The fame and history of our Lord were probably so great throughout Palestine, that one of the first inquirers the comers would make of one another would be about Him.” (Ryle, pp. 344-45)
* *Six days before the Passover, Jesus therefore came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. So they gave a dinner for him there. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those reclining with him at table. Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was about to betray him), said, “Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?” He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it. Jesus said, “Leave her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of my burial. For the poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me.” (12:1-8)*
* The chapter division distracts the modern-day reader from the continuing context with which chapter 11 closes. Orders of the chief priests and the Pharisees had been given to the public that Jesus be betrayed in order that he might be arrested (11:54). In response to that, Martha and Mary give Jesus a dinner. Even though there is some time between the events, this clearly is in commemoration and thanksgiving to Jesus for the raising of Lazarus.
* “Whether he came directly from Ephraim where the Fourth Gospel last located him (11:54) or whether he now came from Jericho (from the home of Zaccheus; cfr. Lk. 18:35-19:10), as seems possible, the Fourth Gospel does not say. If Jesus withdrew to Ephraim in the early part of February and remained there two or three weeks, there would be sufficient time for other journeys before Passover in April. Accordingly, there is certainly no conflict here between John and Luke.” (Hendriksen, p. 171)
* The flow of this storyline works very well following the raising of Lazarus. The awkwardness of 11:2 still stands; as well as the mystery behind the fact that this family, being introduced for the first time in ch. 11 is described as being individuals that Jesus loved. Martha is described here as serving, which is what she had done in the account recorded by the Luke in 10:38-42, an interchange without much connection to surrounding material. (The other account which seems similar – that being the anointing of Jesus by the ‘sinful’ woman (Mt. 26:6-13; Mk. 14:3-9; Lk. 7:36-50) – is probably just that – similar. Rf. to the Appendix)
* The exchange between Judas and Jesus provides the literary transition necessary between the thankful adoration of the family of Lazarus and the maliciousness of the Jews represented by Judas.
* Jesus’ words in vs. 7 prove difficult to interpret. 1) “Let her keep it until the day of my burial”. The parallels in Matthew and Mark indicate that she broke the flask in order to anoint Jesus, rendering it impossible to keep it further. 2) “Let her alone. She has kept it against the day of my burial.” This is a better reading but it does not fit the Greek as well. 3) Let her alone. It was in order that she keep it for the day of my burial.” This is preferable and credits Mary with the true understanding of Jesus’ impending death.
* *When the large crowd of the Jews learned that Jesus was there, they came, not only on account of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus. (vs. 9-11)*
  + “It is difficult to conceive a greater proof of hardened and incorrigible wickedness of heart than this sentence exhibits. The chief priests could not possibly deny the fact of Lazarus having been raised, or explain it away. He was a witness whose testimony against their unbelief was overwhelming. They must therefore stop his mouth by killing him. and These were the chief ecclesiastical leaders of Israel! -Moreover Lazarus had done them no harm. Though a disciple, there is no p0roof that he was a leading follower of Christ, much less a preacher of the Gospel. But he was an inconvenient standing evidence and so he must be removed!

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All Biblical quotes are from the English Standard Version

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Appendix A

Mary’s Anointing of Jesus

“It is claimed by many interpreters that, in describing the beautiful deed of Mary, the evangelist borrowed from Lk. 7:36-50, and that the Mary mentioned in John 12:3 is the same as the sinful woman of Luke 7; or, that, while the two events are distinct, the author of the Fourth Gospel got his sources mixed up and simply added to the story which he had found in Mt. 26:6-13 and Mk. 14:3-9 the detail concerning the wiping of Jesus’ feet, which feature he had found in Lk. 7. We completely reject this theory.

There is hardly any resemblance between the two accounts. Note the following differences:

Luke 7:36-50

*The Occasion*

The dinner was in all probability occasioned by the desire of a certain unfriendly Pharisee to examine this famous rabbi, perhaps in order to confirm his suspicions with respect to Jesus. Note the unfriendly manner in which he treated the Lord. (Lk. 7:4-46)

*The Place*

The house of a Pharisee

*The Main Female Character*

A woman who was in the city, a sinner. Even according to Luke this woman was not Mary, the sister of Martha, for these sisters are subsequently introduced as new personages (Lk. 10:38-39).

*The Act*

This woman wept. Her tears dropped on Jesus’ feet. She then proceeded to wipe off these *tears*. She also kissed and anointed them.

*The Result*

Jesus sharply rebuked the Pharisee. He praised the woman and dismissed her with a friendly and encouraging word.

John 12:1-8

The dinner is in all probability occasioned by the desire of a group at Bethany, friendly to Jesus, to honor him and to express their gratitude.

The house of Simon the leper, according to Mt. 26:6.

Mary of Bethany, a devout disciple of Jesus. She is mentioned in connection with her sister Martha and her brother Lazarus.

Mary did not weep. She did not wet Jesus’ feet with her tears. She anointed these feet with ointment, and then wiped off the excess *ointment*. – It is clear, therefore, that even the detail concerning the wiping of the feet is completely different in the two accounts.

Jesus rebuked Judas Iscariot for criticizing May. He defended Mary’s deed in the light of its purpose.

(Hendriksen, pp. 174-75)

“The story in [John] seems clearly distinct from that in Luke. There is no reason for equating Mary of Bethany with Luke’s ‘sinner’. ... It is not without its interest that in some points John’s account is nearer that of Matthew than of Mark. ... It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Matthew, Mark and John all refer to the same incident. But Luke’s story appears to be different.” (Morris, pp. 572-574

“These discrepancies, in my judgment, are insuperable, and make it necessary to believe that there were two distinct anointings at Bethany during the last six days preceding the crucifixion. I grant that it is a choice between difficulties, and that there are difficulties, and that there are difficulties in the view I maintain. But I do not think them so weighty as those of the other view.” (Ryle, p. 355)

Appendix B

Has Mary Magdalene been Disgraced?

*“The threat Mary Magdalene posed to the men of the early Church was potentially ruinous. … The Church, in order to defend itself against the Magdalene’s power, perpetuated her image as a whore … . … her name was forbidden by the Church, … ”*

*(Prof. Teabing, The Da Vinci Code, p. 254)*

In Dan Brown’s book, Mary Magdalene’s reputation becomes a key factor in building the case against the ancient Church and in finally revealing to the world the truth that has been suppressed for centuries. In fact, it is vital to Dan Brown’s argument that a smear campaign against her character be seen as having taken place in the early church in order that Professor Teabing and other Neo-Gnostics can then come to her rescue. You see, reader, if Mary has not been smeared she cannot be exalted.

Over 100 years, perhaps as many as 150 years, passed from the time the gospels were written until the time the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* was penned with its outrageous, Gnostic, counter-Christianity and its portrayal of the apostles as rejecting Mary and her message. The Apostolic Fathers did not fail to energetically recognize and refute the opposition of Gnosticism as it reached its hay-day. And they did that not with slander or malicious attacks but with solid exegesis and argument. They defended the orthodox Christianity according to the authority of the gospels themselves and by applying good logic to the Gnostics’ own teachings which displayed the fallacies of their claims.

Nothing else changed for another 300 years until the era of Pope Gregory (590-604). Gregory is the pope recognized historically as having firmly established the supremacy of the Roman See over all the church and who did much to move the Roman Church into the medieval age. He was not a theologian but a trained lawyer. His homilies are generously preserved and they are known for their pastoral simplicity and his use of anecdotal illustration. Katherine Jansen describes Gregory’s typical preaching style as showing “recourse to the tropological sense of the text, [that is,] its moral sense.”1

Olson and Miesel points out in their book that when Gregory applied this to the person of Mary Magdalene, it meant that he “believed that the seven demons that had once possessed Mary Magdalene were not only literal demons but also represented the seven deadly sins.”2 Pope Gregory’s actual homily put it this way:

*She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices? … It is clear, brothers, that the woman previously used the unguent to perfume her flesh in forbidden acts. What she therefore displayed more scandalously, she was now offering to God in a more praiseworthy manner. She had coveted with earthly eyes, but now through penitence these are consumed with tears. She displayed her hair to set off her face, but now her hair dries her tears. She had spoken proud things with her mouth, but in kissing the Lord’s feet, she now planted her mouth on the Redeemer’s feet. For every delight, therefore, she had had in herself, she now immolated herself. She turned the mass of her crimes to virtues, in order to serve God entirely in penance, for as much as she had wrongly held God in contempt.” (Hom. 33, PL 76:1239)*

Clearly, Gregory is guilty of confusing one Mary with another. He is also guilty of assuming Mary Magdalene’s past was that of prostitution. But this could not, even in the farthest reaches of exaggeration be considered a smear campaign. Rather, Gregory is saying that even a prostitute, with as wicked and shameful a past as that had been, can still be redeemed, cleansed and forgiven. Even such a sinner as her can find a place of worship and adoration and praise at the Savior’s feet. And if Mary, then you, too, can be forgiven; you, too, can be saved.

Furthermore, an illustration within a homily, as this was, is not the same as a papal pronouncement declaring a formal position of the Church. That association of Mary with the woman of prostitution did, indeed, become a western tradition, but Mary’s name was never forbidden or scandalized by such an association because the focus was always on the mercy and grace that Christ had shown to her. Her memory and service were not banned but celebrated in the Roman Catholic Church and there are ministries and organizations of mercy named after her.

Meanwhile, in the Eastern Orthodox Church, Gregory’s suggested link of the anonymous sinner of Luke 7:36-50 (which never even identifies the sin as prostitution) with the introduction of Mary Magdalene (Luke 8:1-3) was never accepted or believed. Nevertheless, the tradition of the Eastern Church also remembers and celebrates Mary’s name and memory as a faithful follower of Christ. Nowhere is Mary attacked or degraded.

You see, the real scandal for the Gnostics, neo-Gnostics and feminists is in thinking of Mary Magdalene as a sinner in any sense of the word at all. Gnostics do not understand the gospel. They do not accept the work of Christ on the cross, the truth of the resurrection, forgiveness and gift of salvation through faith in him. They reject it all and have no need for any of it.

To the Gnostics, it is important and vital to declare to the world that Mary was not a sinner. She was not in need of salvation. If anything, Jesus was in need of her! In fact, the rest of the supposed conspiracy is built on that very premise. Mary had to be the first among the apostles because Jesus loved her more than anyone else. She came from a kingly lineage. The supposed hope of Jesus was that from their supposed sexual union, a new heir for the throne of David might come forth. And after Jesus was martyred, the real hope of all the world rested in her womb alone. All of this is an absolute denial of who Jesus truly was and is. In fact, to the Gnostics, Jesus’ time is past. Now is the age of the Magdalene.

There simply is no exegetical or historical evidence for any of this whatsoever. There is absolutely nothing that successfully links Mary Magdalene to a past of prostitution. But in all our study and defense of Mary’s honor, we must not fall into the trap of arguing the Gnostic and feminist side for them. Mary was not a woman without sin. To be possessed of seven demons meant to be completely enslaved to the temptations and wickedness of this world. And to be vulnerable and prone to such enslavement required her natural, Adamic propensity to reject God in her life and choose selfishly. Mary sinned because she was a sinner. And only through her trusting in Jesus as her Savior gave her much more life than giving herself to him as her lover.

Jesus rebuked those demons and commanded them to release her and filled her instead with new life by the Holy Spirit. And for the rest of her life, she was devoted to the One who could do for her what she could not do for herself. She only wished to served Him who had ministered to her in a way that she could never do for Him.

1Jansen, Katherine Ludwig, The Making of the Magdalen: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 33.

2Olson, Carl E. & Sandra Miesel, The Da Vinci Hoax, San Francisco:Ignatius, 2004, p. 82-83.

from “Confronting the Da Vinci Code” by David G. Barker, <http://www.ephesians515.com/Site/Miscellany/MiscIndex.htm>