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Religion and Spirituality

Mary, the Mother of Jesus

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During the Christmas season, people hear the familiar account of Mary's role as the mother of Jesus. The popular story uses facts from the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke in the New Testament, but surprisingly little of what is popularly believed about Mary actually comes from the Bible, since nonbiblical traditions and false dogma about Mary developed later through the centuries.

So let us see what the Bible clearly states about Mary. Luke specifically mentions the accuracy of his account and may have obtained his information from Mary herself. The story begins when an angel announces to the priest Zacharias that his wife Elizabeth will miraculously give birth to a son to be named John (Luke 1:5–25). He later became known as John the Baptist.

It was during Elizabeth's sixth month of pregnancy that an angel also appeared to Mary, who was living in Nazareth. Although she was "betrothed," or engaged, to Joseph, Mary was still a virgin (Luke 1:34). The angel said to her:

"Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women! . . . Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end. . . The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:28–35, New King James Version throughout unless otherwise noted).

Jesus was miraculously conceived of the Holy Spirit before Mary had any sexual relations with Joseph (Matthew 1:18–25). He "did not know her [sexually] till she had brought forth her firstborn Son" (verse 25).

God bestowed a great blessing on Mary by choosing her to give birth to the Son of God. Mary later went to visit her relative Elizabeth, who "spoke out with a loud voice and said, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!'" (Luke 1:42). Yet Mary remained humble, as can be seen by her song, recorded in Luke 1:46–55. It begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God *my Savior*" (verses 46–47, emphasis added).

Mary acknowledged that, like all human beings who have sinned (Romans 3:23), she needed a Savior, and was grateful that God had "regarded the lowly state of His maidservant" (verse 48).

Throughout her journey to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born and was later visited by the shepherds, "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19, 51). Although she did not understand everything happening in her life, she trusted God to make it all plain eventually.

After the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph had to nurture their infant son. In addition to the normal duties of childcare, they had to protect Him from the threat of King Herod, who had heard of a new "King of the Jews" being born in Bethlehem and therefore wanted to kill all the babies born there. The new parents took their son and fled to Egypt, returning to Nazareth after the death of Herod (Matthew 2:1–23).

Mary and Joseph were zealous in obeying the law God gave to Israel. They therefore had Jesus circumcised eight days after His birth (Luke 2:21). They also obeyed the law concerning purification and redeeming the firstborn male child (Luke 2:22–24, 27; Leviticus 12; Numbers 18:15–16).

Not many details about the early childhood of Jesus are given in the Bible. We are simply told that “the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him” (Luke 2:40). Jesus’ knowledge and wisdom would certainly be partly due to the training Mary and Joseph provided during those early years. By the time Jesus was 12 years old, He was able to amaze the scholars in the temple with His ability to discuss the Word of God (Luke 2:46–47).

That is where His parents found Him after anxiously searching for Him for three days. He had become separated from His family and was engrossed in discussion with the scholars. “Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them, but His mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:51–52).

MARY’S FAITH IN HER SON

Jesus was well aware of His origin and the mission given to Him by His Father in heaven. Even at the age of 12, He had a strong desire to “be about [His] Father’s business” (Luke 2:49).

That desire was again pointed out to Mary when He performed His first miracle in the Galilean town of Cana by turning water into wine (John 2:1–12). At a wedding feast, the supply of wine was depleted. Mary saw the need and wanted to help. She explained the situation to her son, who replied, “Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come” (verse 4).

Although Jesus didn’t address Mary as “Mother,” the term *Woman* was one of endearment in those days. Jesus respected His mother, but He had a more important mission than that of providing wine for a wedding feast. The time had not yet come when He would perform miracles in a public ministry.

Mary’s faith in her son’s ability to solve the problem is illustrated by her instruction to the servants: “Whatever He says to you, do it” (verse 5). Jesus then performed the miracle of changing more than 120 gallons of water into wine.

After that event in Cana, Jesus “went down to Capernaum, He, His mother, His brothers, and His disciples, and they did not stay there many days” (verse 12).

DID MARY HAVE ADDITIONAL CHILDREN?

The Bible indicates that Mary did not remain a perpetual virgin, as some believe. After an angel had revealed to Joseph that Mary’s conception was of the Holy Spirit, Joseph “took to him his wife, and did not know her [sexually] till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus” (Matthew 1:24–25).

Because Jesus is called Mary’s firstborn son, the implication is that others were born afterward.

Another account verifies that. When Jesus returned to His hometown of Nazareth during His ministry, the people were astonished to hear from a man who had grown up in their midst. They asked: “Where did this Man get these things? And what wisdom is this which is given to Him, that such mighty works are performed by His hands! Is this not the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not His sisters here with us?’ So they were offended at Him” (Mark 6:2–3).

The Bible gives the names of Mary’s sons and mentions daughters as well. It is sometimes claimed that these were not brothers but cousins. But the Greek word for “brother” in Mark 6 is *adelphos*. A different Greek word (*anepsios*) is used for “cousin” in Colossians 4:10.

There is no evidence that Joseph had children by a previous marriage.

The Jews considered marriage a divine institution, and having children was a blessing from God. According to Mark 6:3, Mary became mother of five sons and at least two daughters. That was the family that Jesus grew up among. But during His ministry, He considered His followers as members of an extended family.

THE PHYSICAL AND THE SPIRITUAL FAMILY OF JESUS

At a time when Jesus was persecuted and falsely accused, His mother and brothers were concerned about His welfare. They came to the house where He was residing: “A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And he replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother’” (Mark 3:31–35, New Revised Standard Version). Although Jesus loved and respected His physical mother, brothers and sisters, His primary concern was for the spiritual family that followed His teaching.

The biblical record of Mary’s role in the life of Jesus is only incidental as the ministry of Jesus becomes predominant in the Gospels.

There are indications, however, to show that Mary, as a mother, was interested in what her son was doing. At the time of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion, she was among the group of disciples who followed Him. What was she thinking as she watched her son die in such an excruciating manner? Did she remember Simeon’s prediction just after Jesus’ birth?

When Jesus had been taken to the temple to be dedicated to God, “Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, ‘Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed’” (Luke 2:34–35). Mary’s sorrow and anguish must have been like a sword piercing her heart.

As Joseph is not mentioned in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ crucifixion, he very likely died some years earlier. But Jesus had concern for the woman who had reared Him from babyhood. He realized that, as the eldest son in the family, He had the responsibility to provide for her care after His death.

When He saw her, along with John, from the crucifixion stake, He carried out that responsibility by saying, “Woman, behold your son!” Then He said to the disciple John, “Behold your mother!” And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home” (John 19:26–27).

BEYOND THE BIBLE

When the disciples had a meeting in Jerusalem after Jesus ascended into heaven, they were “with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers” (Acts 1:14). This is the last reference to Mary in the Scriptures, although her son James, the brother of Jesus, is mentioned several times as the book of Acts unfolds, particularly when the focus of the narrative is on the church at Jerusalem.

But if this is all the Bible tells us about Mary, from where did ideas and doctrines such as the Assumption, the Immaculate Conception, and Mary as co-redemptrix arise? Let’s look at the ideas associated with the Assumption of Mary to begin to understand the origins of these teachings and how they differ from biblical teachings.

WHAT HAPPENED TO MARY AFTER SHE DIED?

The Catholic Church teaches that Mary’s body did not remain in the grave to decompose and decay. Instead, they say it was raised from the grave shortly after she died. They believe her body and soul were reunited before being taken up to heaven, where she was enthroned as the Queen of Heaven at the right hand of Jesus Christ. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* recognizes that this dogma doesn’t come from the Bible, noting the importance

of “external testimony and the teaching of the Church” to establish the idea. “Queen of heaven” was a title of the mother goddess, who was worshiped centuries before Mary was born (see Jeremiah 7:17–20).

Since the time of the Babylonian goddess Semiramis and her son, Tammuz, many nations have worshiped a mother goddess with various names. That kind of pagan worship was transferred to Mary down through the centuries as Marian devotion and worship evolved. To provide biblical justification for the teaching, the Catholic Church presents Mary as the spiritual mother of all, “the new Eve,” based on Paul’s statements to the Corinthians relating to Jesus, whom Paul characterized as the new Adam (1 Corinthians 15:22). The attempt to connect Mary with Eve in the same way that Paul connects Christ with Adam is flawed, however, in that Eve was Adam’s wife, not his mother.

The idea of Mary as a sinless and holy mother figure, exempt from the penalty of death, culminated in 1950 when Pope Pius XII proclaimed that her body had seen no corruption but had been taken to heaven. At the heart of such a belief is the teaching that the soul is immortal. A careful reading of the Scriptures, however, reveals that the soul is mortal and is not conscious after death (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10).

The apostle Paul said that “the dead in Christ” are “asleep” in the grave waiting for the resurrection (1 Thessalonians 4:13–17). There is no scripture that even suggests that Mary was an exception—that she was “assumed into heaven.” Based on the Bible, she remains dead until the resurrection.

IS MARY THE MOTHER OF GOD?

One of the titles by which the Egyptian Isis was known is “mother of God.” In Catholicism Mary is called the Mother of God. The title was applied to her by the Council of Ephesus in 431 C.E., and it appears in the Creed of Chalcedon, which was adopted in 451 C.E.

But the Bible nowhere refers to Mary as the Mother of God. She was the mother of Jesus, who came as the Son of God, begotten of the Holy Spirit.

Mary gave birth to Jesus, the human being. His divine attributes came from God, His Father, through the begetting of the Holy Spirit.

The apostle Paul said that, by his time, Jesus Christ was the only one who had received immortality (1 Timothy 6:13, 16). John, in writing his Gospel account late in the first century, also noted that no one other than Jesus Christ had ascended to the Father (John 3:13). So Mary was not an exception. She was still dead and in the grave. And if she is truly dead, she cannot hear repetitions of the “Hail Mary” or other prayers.

Jesus Christ taught His followers to address their prayers to “our Father in heaven” (Matthew 6:9). He also said we should avoid empty repetitions (verse 7). Praying to Mary for intercession is therefore unbiblical. As she is not with Jesus in heaven but is still dead, she cannot act as a mediator between Christ’s followers and God the Father. Further, Paul said there is only “one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). There is no biblical authority for the belief that Mary is coequal with Jesus Christ and a co-redeemer.

But if so much of what is popularly taught and believed about Mary is nonbiblical, how did it become so widespread?

Even at the time of the early church, differing interpretations of Scripture abounded. Most people poorly understood the message of the Scriptures and began interpreting them through the prism of Greek philosophy, thereby raising questions that were based on a wrong metaphysical criterion. Philosophy is by its very nature incompatible with the Bible. Thus, over a relatively short time, a wide gulf developed between biblical teaching and popular belief, resulting in, among other things, the nonbiblical traditions and dogmas relating to the veneration and importance of Mary.

Although Mary should not be worshiped, it *is* right and proper to acknowledge her example of humility and obedience as the caring mother of Jesus, the Son of God. As her relative Elizabeth said, she was “blessed among women” (Luke 1:42).

Another woman acknowledged the same fact during Christ’s ministry. As He was teaching the people, “a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts which nursed you!’ But He said, ‘More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it’” (Luke 11:27–28).

Mary was blessed, but so are all those who hear God’s Word and practice it.