

Chapter 1: Mary

My Spirit Rejoices in God My Saviour

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The threat of scandal

A scandal is afoot – one that won't be easy to live down. It will be the talk of the town for years to come, a disgrace and an embarrassment of epic proportions that will set tongues wagging across the community. The appalling episode happens at a town party, and the incident has the potential to both shame the hosts and insult the guests. It's a local wedding, and the scandalous scene isn't a bad speech from a groomsman, mass food poisoning, or some dance floor disaster. Instead, the disgraceful humiliation is that they have run out of wine. The guests will think the host is lazy or irresponsible because he either can't provide what is needed for a party, or hasn't made the correct catering calculations. Even worse, they will think the host didn't care for them; love was to be shown in the sheer volume of party provisions. Everyone

in town will remember this event if the unthinkable happens and news of the wine shortage gets out.

This party's invitation is dated around A.D 30, the location is probably in today's Lebanon, and the guest list included Jesus, His mum Mary, and His newly formed band of disciples. This party is not imaginary: these events really took place and are described in chapter 2 of John's Gospel. The host avoided the looming social disaster through a series of events kickstarted by Mary's simple yet loaded statement to Jesus: 'They have no more wine' (John 2:3 NIV). Clearly, Mary hoped to accomplish something by pointing this out. Jesus' response to her is even more laden with meaning: 'Why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come' (John 2:4 NIV), indicating that Jesus is not at the beck and call of His mother, but instead of His Father in heaven. In John's account of Jesus' life, 'the hour' is a significant term predominantly used to allude to His impending death on the cross, which will occur around three years after this wedding. Jesus weighed the significance of this moment, knowing it would begin a chain of events with only one ending.

Mary then stopped instructing Jesus and instead assumed the posture of a disciple, inviting the waiters to listen to Jesus, saying, 'Do whatever he tells you' (John 2:5 NIV). Jesus told them to fill six large stone water jars with water, around 600 litres in total. They obeyed without hesitating and to the utmost degree, filling them right up to the brim. Jesus then instructed them to take

some to the master of ceremonies. Once the MC had tried it, he pulled the groom aside to compliment him on bringing out the best wine last, saying this generosity is unusual at a wedding. The cheaper wine usually comes out near the end when the guests are not in the best position to tell the difference! The party scene finishes with the ominous, marvellous words indicating the direction of Jesus' life – the cross: 'What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him' (John 2:11 NIV). John is a book full of 'signs' and 'glory', paving the way to the last, definitive sign of Jesus' glory: His death and resurrection. This wedding marked a turning point in the course of history.

What can we make of Mary's role in this narrative? Understanding her in this story helps make sense of the rest of her. In the end, Mary must also learn what it is to be a disciple of Jesus. This story shows her moving from trying to influence Jesus and expecting Him to do something to address the wine shortage, to submitting to His timing, His 'hour,' and then pointing others towards listening to Him. At the end of this story, Mary is named in the group that travels with Jesus, alongside Jesus' earthly brothers and His disciples (John 2:12); she was enmeshed in the early community of Jesus' followers. If Mary were alive today, we could imagine her saying the same thing to us as to those waiters: 'Do whatever he tells you.' While it is not popular in current, Western culture to hear such calls to obedience, it is the person

we listen to that makes the substantial difference. Mary is encouraging obedience to ‘the Word [who] became flesh and made his dwelling among us,’ the one who is ‘from the Father, full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14 NIV).¹ She is a picture of a woman who received grace from God her Saviour. Mary points us to her son and shows us a model of following Him – that is why she is a “dead gal” worth knowing.

The Mary of history

We are not told much about Mary in the Bible; the spotlight is rightly on her son, where Mary would want it to be. She is not out of sight in the narratives of Jesus’ life, but she is certainly not centre stage. However, what we do encounter of her in the pages of Scripture is her testimony to God’s kindness towards her, displayed in the living embodiment of God’s grace and kindness: the Lord Jesus Christ, whom, humanly speaking, she brought into the world. The Gospels in the New Testament, especially Matthew and Luke, give us the greatest historical record of Mary, for, as they testify to Jesus’ life, the thread of Mary’s story also runs through them. The Gospels help us consider Mary’s place in the world in her time, her pregnancy with Jesus and His birth, snippets of her life as a disciple of Jesus, and her witness to His death and resurrection.

1 ‘The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us’ is the only allusion to Jesus’ birth in John’s Gospel.

It is significant that Matthew's Gospel opens with the impressive genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:1–17). Jesus is in the family line of God's promises to Abraham, David, and their descendants. To Abraham, God promised to bring blessing to the whole world through his offspring. To David, God promised that one of his descendants would hold and rule God's kingdom forever – a kingdom shaped on the character of God Himself, full of mercy, justice, and enduring love (e.g. Gen. 12:1–3, 2 Sam. 7). Jesus' genealogy is full of scandal and what could be considered skeletons in the closet. Matthew, however, does not hide or airbrush over these scandals; rather, they are front and centre, forming the very opening of his Gospel. The presence of women in the genealogy is scandalous enough; however, added to this is that some are *Gentile* women, pointing to God's plan to bring salvation to the Gentiles too.

Furthermore, this honour roll includes women deemed dishonourable by many in that society, including prostitutes and outcasts. Tamar slept with her father-in-law, Rahab was the town prostitute, Ruth was a foreigner, and Bathsheba is only mentioned as another man's wife, brought into the Davidic family line through David's sin and his callous, cowardly murder of her husband. Mary appears as the final mother in this colourful genealogy – another curious, socially awkward mother. These women all point to God's grace and kindness that transforms social and religious stigmas, and that redeems and

refashions lives: not just theirs, but also in the generations to follow.

Mary was an ordinary Jewish girl living in the first-century Roman Empire. As a result of her time and place in history, her life path was set out for her. She was engaged to marry Joseph, but before marriage or consummation, an angel tells Joseph and Mary separately that she will become supernaturally pregnant by the Holy Spirit. They are told to name the child Jesus, which means, 'The LORD saves' (see Matt. 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38). This situation put Mary in a difficult position culturally: children born out of wedlock carried a stigma in her community and put her in grave danger too (cf. Deuteronomy 22:23). Mary's socially awkward situation is not from any insufficiency in herself. She is neither deserving of the unique position in history that God will place her in, nor of social shame that may come her way from a child born before she was married. Yet God's grace will work in these strange circumstances, as He did in the lives of the mothers in her family line. God's sovereign choice of Mary to bring the eternal Son into the world in human form is where the focus of Mary's life lies in these infancy narratives.

Luke contains the most about Mary out of the four Gospels. This is perhaps not surprising, for the Gospel of Luke particularly tells the tales of the down-and-outers of first-century Roman society, including women. Yet these outcasts enter God's kingdom because of their allegiance to the person and words of Jesus. In his two-

volume narrative of Luke-Acts, Luke names Mary thirteen times and refers to her three more times. Luke depicts Mary as an active agent; Joseph often stands in relation to her, not the other way around. For example, he is *her* fiancé, he accompanies *her* to Bethlehem, he is named *after* Mary at the scene of Jesus' birth (see Luke 2:5, 16). Simeon addresses Mary rather than Joseph despite blessing both of them (Luke 2:33–34), and Mary speaks on behalf of her and Joseph (Luke 2:48).

Mary is identified as both 'favoured' and 'blessed' in Luke. Mary is told twice over via the angel Gabriel that she is 'favoured' (Luke 1:28, 30) as he comes to announce to her that she will 'conceive and give birth to a son...Jesus' (Luke 1:31 NIV). Mary is also called 'blessed' several times. Elizabeth, her cousin, proclaims it twice (Luke 1:42, 45), and Mary declares it of herself in her surging poetic praise of God and His grace in *The Magnificat* (Luke 1:48).² When a woman in the crowd calls out to Jesus, 'Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you'. Jesus replied, 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it' (Luke 11:27–28 NIV). Jesus emphasised 'rather' here, distancing Himself from allegiances to His earthly family and stressing the blessedness that comes from listening to and heeding God's words. However, Mary is also part of this blessed group that listens and heeds. After

2 *The Magnificat* comes from the Latin translation (the Vulgate), and is the first word of the poem, simply meaning 'magnifies', as in, 'my soul magnifies the Lord' (Luke 1:46).

asking Gabriel, 'how will this be,' echoing Zechariah's question of 'how can I be sure of this?' (Luke 1:18), she responds as a person of faith, taking God at His Word and believing He will bring about what He promises: 'I am the Lord's servant, may your word to me be fulfilled' (Luke 1:38 NIV). Mary is blessed and favoured by listening to God and believing the words He spoke to her, both as an individual and as part of the community that does likewise.

In this way, Luke's depiction of Mary is primarily as a disciple of Jesus, as an 'accessible exemplar' who demonstrates the life of not just a woman in the kingdom of God, but of all followers of Jesus.³ Twice at the beginning of the Gospel, Luke draws our attention to Mary pondering the works of God. Mary 'treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart' (Luke 2:19, 51 NIV). Luke also shows her embedded in the early church. In the last explicit mention of Mary in the New Testament, Luke names Mary as amongst the praying band of disciples in Jerusalem in the days following Jesus' resurrection (Acts 1:14). Luke portrays Mary as an 'everyday disciple' who is blessed by meditating on, heeding, and treasuring up in her heart God's words in God's community.

3 This term 'accessible exemplar' is borrowed from Joel Green, 'Blessed Is She Who Believed: Mary, Curious Exemplar in Luke's Narrative' in *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* ed. Beverly R. Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), p. 10.

In Mark's Gospel, however, we see that Mary did not always fully understand the purposes of God. Mark helps us gain a portrait of Mary as sometimes perceiving and sometimes missing the point: sometimes listening and other times interfering and demanding (see, for example, Mark 3:21). In this way too, she is a disciple like us: *simul iustus et peccator*, which means 'at the same time justified and a sinner.' In Mark, she pleads for allegiance to blood relatives; Jesus took this opportunity to redefine family, highlighting that loyalty to Him created a new family (Mark 3:31–35). In fact, Jesus' family, including Mary, thought Jesus 'out of his mind' as he conducted some of His ministry (Mark 3:21), showing that at times Mary did not understand what her son was accomplishing in the world. Mary is also depicted in Mark as fearful, trembling, and bewildered at the mouth of the empty tomb, saying nothing to anyone, because she was afraid (Mark 16:8). Whatever we make of the abrupt ending of Mark, depicting scared disciples...including Mary...is a stark and honest finish, perhaps suggesting an invitation to the reader: 'how will you respond to the empty tomb?' The scene's honest portrayal of the disciples' reaction reeks of authenticity, and Mary is amongst the female cast members fearful on discovering that Jesus' body was not where they left it.

In terms of the incarnation, Mary as Jesus' mother demonstrates how utterly human the Son of God became. She helps point to the inescapable truth that Jesus was made like us in every way, yet was without sin

(Heb. 2:17, cf. 4:15). Just like us, Jesus existed as a minuscule embryo. Like us, when it was time to be born, He exited His mother's womb and had His umbilical cord cut. Like us, He relied on milk to sustain His tiny, vulnerable body, and He had His newborn head supported by His mother when He had no neck control. Jesus experienced complete human embodiment just as we do, and Mary was integral to this. She would have interacted with Him in the closest, physical ways as His human mother; she would have carried, kissed, cuddled, tickled, swaddled, washed, changed, fed, played with, and sung to her little baby. She would have helped Him navigate His way through toddlerhood, patiently teaching Him to make sounds, then words, and then sentences, and how to reach and grasp objects and use them. As He grew into boyhood, Luke tells us twice immediately after mentioning Mary that Jesus grew both physically and in wisdom (Luke 2:39–40, 51–52). In addition to taking care of His physical needs so that He 'grew and became strong' (Luke 2:40 NIV), Mary presumably also taught Him the Word of the Lord, how to memorise the Scriptures (as demonstrated in Jesus' constant quotation of them, particularly the Psalms), and taught Him how to pray. Perhaps she even taught Him how to cook (cf. John 21:1–14). As Mary bore, birthed, and breastfed Jesus, cared for Him as a growing boy, and prepared Him for adulthood, Mary proved integral to asserting and celebrating the complete humanity of the Son of God.

As Jesus grew into adulthood, Mary became one of His disciples. She remained close to Him, and we get glimpses of her in that band of early followers. Mary followed as Jesus headed, for the final time, to Jerusalem and His impending death. At the cross, Mary remained unto the last – a faithful, remnant disciple when others fled. Back when Mary and Joseph had taken newborn Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem, Simeon warned Mary; ‘a sword will pierce your own soul too’ (Luke 2:35 NIV). Now, that time had come. For a mother to watch her child die is to experience heartache of the acutest kind. She remained with her son, her precious firstborn whom she lived for and followed, as Roman soldiers...renowned for their brutality and skills in execution...worked their trade on Jesus and two other men with Him that Friday after the Passover celebration.

Yet in this grim and grisly scene, as Jesus pours out His life for the very ones inflicting this violence upon Him, Jesus continued to demonstrate His graciousness and love towards His disciples, including Mary. As Jesus hung there drawing in agonising, stunted breaths, He bequeathed to Mary a son in the form of His disciple, John. John had been one of Jesus’ closest earthly companions; the previous night, he had sat affectionately close to Jesus as they celebrated the Passover meal, reappropriated as a meal of remembrance of what Jesus was now accomplishing. In this moment at the cross, John received a mum, and Mary received a son. Jesus’ grace and kindness to her extended even in His dying

breaths (John 19:25–27). Whilst Mary is one of the last to remain at the cross, she is among those first at the tomb. Three days later, Mary is part of a group of women who are the first witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus; death has been consumed in an instant by her son's ground-breaking, boulder-shifting resurrection. Jesus' permanent return from death is game-changing, and the world would never be the same again. Mary had front-row tickets to these remarkable events; her son was also God her Saviour (cf. Luke 1:47).

Mary in history

The Mary of history soon became the Mary *in* history. After her last appearance in the Bible amongst the community of Jesus' disciples (Acts 1:14) Mary's story and legend took on a very different path. Today, she is regarded by many millions of people as having a special place in the salvation of humankind, ultimately being a *co-redemptrix*, or co-redeemer, having participated with Jesus in redemption.⁴ Among her other attributes and roles are some very illustrious titles indeed, including Mother of the Church, Queen of the universe, Mediatrix (because she mediates Jesus' grace having co-operated with God in accomplishing salvation), and Advocate (because she hears the prayers of God's people and

4 This fifth Marian dogma that Mary is 'co-redemptrix' has yet to be officially recognised, although it is widely believed and practiced throughout the Roman Catholic Church, including by the papacy. At the Vatican II Council (1962–65) Mary was given the titles of 'co-redemptrix' and 'mediatrix' but this is not yet an official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church.