

## THE LATEST THING

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# MARY

“Devotion to Mary” is music in the ears of Catholic Bishops and anathema to Protestant zealots. How should we think of it? There are two areas of attention: Scripture and Tradition.

**Mary in Scripture** The Bible is not in any sense an ordinary book. It was made by different rules, and it works by different rules. A modern author, in writing, consults primarily what’s going on in his own mind. When he’s finished his book, it’s his intellectual property, and we’d be sued for representing it as the work of someone else. In the Bible, by contrast, the authors primarily consulted the traditions of the whole people, and were often happier to ascribe their books to great figures of the past (David, Solomon, Isaiah, Moses, etcetera); and no-one ever sued them, because Biblical literature is not the intellectual property of its authors, but of the whole people.

The working of the Bible is also *cumulative*; one part is fed from all the others, and illuminates them in turn. The way in which a great figure of Scripture is described and set forth will take fire from the preceding material; Jesus, in Matthew’s mind, is *a new but greater Moses*. What’s more, by subsequent editing, which was a constant process in the making of the Bible, ancient Scripture could be made to reflect the future. Thus the Book of Numbers, describing the wandering flock of Israel coming to the Promised Land (about 1300 BC) can include a prophecy of the coming of David (about 1000 BC) uttered by the Zoroastrian prophet Balaam (Num 24).

Throughout Scripture there are many moments when the rôle of a woman is crucial in the story of the work of God. Practically all of them have been evoked in one way or another to contribute to the picture of Mary. She is the personified figure of Jerusalem, the “daughter of Zion”. She is the personified figure of Wisdom, in Greek *sophia*. She is not only compared to particularly virtuous figures: Matthew’s Gospel draws our attention to four women who precede Mary in the genealogy of Jesus: Tamar, a seductress and pretended prostitute, Rahab, a prostitute out loud, Ruth, whose arrival in the marriage-bed may be called a little forward, and Bathsheba, who was an adulteress. What unites these women is that all of them came to be mothers in unorthodox fashion, and the motherhood of each of them accomplished a new stage of God’s plan. Also they all took initiatives to move things on: Tamar’s scandalous union with Judah furthered the line of descent. Rahab’s intervention opened the promised land to Israel. Ruth’s insistence on union with Boaz was of cardinal importance (she was David’s great-grandmother). Bathsheba’s wife became the mother of Solomon.

In the Gospels Mary has an equivocal position. In the oldest, Mark, she only appears amid the forces of unbelief, setting out to take charge of Jesus with the rest of the family, because they all think he is out of his mind. When they arrive they find the crowd of disciples is too great for them to get through, and Jesus approves of this, saying that his mother and brothers are *those who hear the word of God and keep it*. Mark is telling us that Christianity is not to do with earthly relationships like family, but is a whole new way of relating, based on faith. Matthew sees Mary as one in a series of divinely-ordained persons whose involvement with the Messiah is typically something of a wild card. Everything in the genealogy of Jesus, for instance, leads down to Joseph; but precisely because he’s such a decent human being, Joseph is all ready quietly to cancel his wedding to the pregnant Mary - thus breaking the link between the Messiah and the royal line of David - when an angel speaks to him in a dream, and encourages him to trust God and take her home as his wife. God uses unexpected persons to triumph over human

obstacles, and Mary is the expectant mother who peacefully awaits the will of providence. In Luke this is taken a step further, as Mary herself becomes the recipient of an angelic annunciation, and it is she who is asked to consent to her rôle as Mother of Jesus. This meeting with the angel is a vital moment in the development: Mary is greeted as “graced above all” (*kecharitomene*); the meaning of that word lies behind the doctrine that Mary did not suffer from the inherited wound of original sin. This leads on to the comparison of *Mary and Eve*, the mother of all (sinful) humanity. In her holiness Mary becomes the mother of all the holy, and because she brings forth their Saviour, the mother of all forgiven sinners, or *Mother of Divine Grace*. In Luke the picture of Mary receiving the word of God (from the angel) is accompanied with the sentence: *Mary kept all these words and pondered them in her heart*. She thus came to qualify as Mother of Christ, not only physically, but spiritually - as one who *hears the Word of God and keeps it*. In Luke we are also told that Mary would find a sword piercing her own heart, and this refers to the conversion required of a disciple, *leaving all things to follow*; Mary has to leave her natural relationship with Jesus in order to become the disciple of her own Son. This development reaches its apogée in the Fourth Gospel, where John shows us Mary at the foot of the Cross with the idealized Beloved Disciple: she is told: *Woman, this is your son*, and the disciple: *This is your Mother*. In this way the natural family of Jesus and the spiritual family are at one, and Mary becomes the mother of all believers and of all disciples.

**Mary in Tradition** The development of thought about Mary was important in the early Church. She is said to be among the disciples on Pentecost day, and thus appears amid the other members of the apostolic church (though she is never accorded any apostolic, teaching, or priestly function). Very early on, however, in the great debates about the nature of Jesus Christ, the Church found itself meditating on Mary: the change in the Gospels is evidence of that. Mk first gives us Jesus fully-grown at his baptism; Mt goes back to the time just before his birth. Luke presents us with Mary before his conception. One of the questions the Church asked was: *to whom did Mary give birth?* The answer to that question would be the answer to the question: *Who is Jesus?* - an answer that would take account of the humble fact of his human origin. The Jews could not use divine titles about him because of his patent humanity (on the Cross he had died like a man). They were not willing to use Messianic titles about him (he had died as a criminal). The Christian Church knew his humanity, and treasured it, but could not be satisfied with definitions of Jesus which restricted him to human life. The Church moved inexorably towards recognizing that his life was divine. All sorts of theories limiting this definition were attempted, but the Church refused them all, and the rôle of Mary was the theological theatre of operations. At last the definition of Mary as *Mother of God* closed the circle, and the understanding of Jesus as *fully human and fully divine* was defined.

**Mary as the first of the faithful** The woman who receives the annunciation is the first to profess faith in the incarnation - God becoming man - and in becoming his mother she gives a total expression to her faith, “bringing forth the Word made flesh”. In her sinlessness she becomes the perfect receiver of the word, the “Ark of the Covenant”; the Old Testament Ark enshrined the stone tablets of the Law; Mary enshrined the living, incarnate Word. In preceding the Paschal mystery she presents a first manifestation to the world of redeemed humanity (her holiness is a “throwback” of the Resurrection). This is why she is envisaged as assumed into heaven crowned in the kingdom, the first of redeemed humanity. These ideas of Mary are the work of ongoing thought in the mind of the Church - *tradition*.