

Mary, Mariology and Feminism

There is not a lot about Mary in the NT and not all of what there is is complimentary. There is nothing at all in Paul, or in the other epistles. Mary appears once or twice in Mark; and apart from parallels to those negative passages, Matthew and Luke confine her to the infancy story; there are two appearances in John, one of them rather ambiguous. Nevertheless, for many Christians since the 3rd century onwards, Mary has been of central significance for their understanding and practice of faith. But for many others, the popular RC cult of Mary and the doctrines about her, for which they can find no warrant in scripture, are the single biggest obstacle to Christian Unity.

What I intend to do in this paper is FIRST to look at the biblical material on Mary; SECOND to look at the differences between Christians on doctrines relating to Mary; and THIRD to look at recent feminist interpretation of scripture to see how far that is changing our perspective.

First, Mary in the Bible.

The Birth stories of Matthew and Luke are about as different as they could possibly be. It is extremely difficult to harmonise them in a single drama, as you will know if you have ever tried to produce a nativity play at Christmas. The tone of Matthew's is blood and thunder: Luke's is all sweetness and light. In Matthew we find the manic King of the Jews, Herod the Great, insecure in his kingdom, constantly afraid of being usurped. History tells us he was even afraid that his own children might be plotting against him, and had several of them put to death; and he frustrated the ambitions of the others by dividing up the kingdom when he died. Against this background of political intrigue and fear, the Matthean story tells us about a young pretender to the throne of David, whose birth is attended by miraculous signs read by astrologers, and by a massacre of innocent babies in Bethlehem.

The tone of Luke's story is completely different: the expectation for the Messiah here is expressed in the quiet longing of ordinary people - the shepherds, Simeon and Anna. The baby is brought to the Temple, uninterfered with, to be offered to God in the normal way, and is greeted as the hope of Israel.

The pictures of Mary in the two narratives are correspondingly different. In Matthew, the young and dutiful bride to be, who retires behind her man; it is Joseph who receives help and warnings from God in dreams. In Luke, Mary is centre-stage, conversing with archangels and going off alone on a trip to visit relations. In the Magnificat, she is the first to express the vision of God's Kingdom which is developed through the remainder of Luke-Acts, and to see its social implications in the fall of the mighty and the raising up of the meek. Luke's Mary has sounded to some interpreters like a thoroughly liberated modern woman.

The only details in which the two infancy accounts agree are that Jesus was of David's line (through Joseph) that he was born at Bethlehem, the city of David; and that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Mary being still a virgin at the time.

The Virgin Birth is such a problem for many Christians today that one or two comments on it are needed, and it has a bearing on how we think of Mary in relation to salvation through Christ. If you are one of those who take the Virgin Birth as a poetic symbol, and not as a fact of history, you will probably also be inclined to treat the question of Mary as a matter of little theological importance. Doubt over the Virgin Birth is the typically liberal reason for opposing Mariology; and it is a very different reason this from the typically Protestant objection. Some liberals are content with the story as an evocative symbol. But others find its implications disturbing - they are worried by several aspects of it, chiefly the implied genetic oddity of Jesus which cuts him off from

solidarity with the rest of humankind, and the implied depreciation of human sexuality.

In response, briefly, to these worries, I would say this: that Mary in the biblical narratives is not a symbol of virginity, she is a symbol of virginal motherhood. Her virginity is the symbol of pure devotion to the God of Israel, as the Virgin Daughter of Zion. It is as mother of the Messiah and of the messianic community that she figures in the text. And the motherhood of Mary has produced more theological fruitfulness than her virginity. Child-bearing is dignified not depreciated by this story, especially when the wider biblical context is brought into view; for scripture assumes everywhere that human sexuality is a gift of God, that it is not the paramount occasion for sin - as Christians in some periods later have tended to think - and that for most sexual partnership is their proper vocation. The other worry was that of Jesus' human solidarity; this is a very important issue; any theologian liberal or conservative should be seriously concerned with it. But the Virgin Birth cuts both ways. The primary intention of the phrase 'born of the Virgin Mary' in the Creed was not to distinguish Jesus' humanity from ours, but to insist upon its similarity. As Galatians 4,4 has it, 'he was born of a woman, born under the law.' The incarnation did not bypass the processes of human birth and maturation, as it did not sidestep human death. But today we know ( or think we know ) more about the genetic inheritance of human beings than the gospel writers knew - and this is where our gravest problems arise. Was Jesus' a genetic clone of his mother, with God supplying merely the male chromosome which Mary could not have supplied? Or did God create a whole set of genetic data ex nihilo to complement that which he inherited from Mary? (The first would make God worryingly chauvinist: the second equally worryingly a genetic engineer!) Needless to say the birth narrative refuses to answer such curious questions. And one can sympathise with liberal theologians who would prefer not to be troubled with them, either.

But if I may be allowed to address the worried liberals among you for a moment - it is very difficult from the point of view of biblical research to explain away the Virgin Birth. Neither Matthew nor Luke was the sort of writer, as far as we can tell, to have picked up some pagan myth from his surrounding culture and used it to express belief in Jesus' divinity. Secondly, the arguments which the evangelists use are not mythological but scriptural: Matthew sees the Virginal Conception as prophesied in Isaiah 7,14 'a young girl (parthenos, virgin in the LXX) shall conceive' Luke uses a more general typological argument: the birth of John the Baptist recapitulates the birth of Isaac from elderly and sterile parents, and the birth of Jesus, so to speak, goes one better. That these scriptural arguments are so different clearly indicates that they were built up on an already existing tradition. Admittedly the tradition was not part of the official proclamation about Jesus as crucified and risen Messiah - St Paul and perhaps also St John do not use it. But equally it was perfectly possible as these two NT writers prove to expound a lofty belief in Jesus' divinity without recourse to the idea of a Virgin Birth. In other words Matthew and Luke would not have felt under any pressure to express belief in divinity in this way.

A sober conclusion therefore would be that some historical fact probably underlies the accounts of Matthew and Luke at this (rare) point on which they are in agreement. If the Virgin Birth was a miraculous sign, What was it meant to signify? One answer, I hesitantly put forward, might be this: that the birth of the saviour from Mary alone, a male child from a virgin female, was chosen as a way of signifying the transcendence of the male-female distinction in human nature and pointing to the truth of Jesus oneness with the whole of our humanity which a doctrine of redemption requires and which goes beyond the categories of male and female. (Bp Stephen Sykes, in Sykes and Clayton, Christ Faith and History, CUP, 1972, p.69) (on the other hand, admittedly the same sort of argument could be

used against the Virgin Birth: e.g. might it not be as significant to have Jesus born naturally of a gentile father and a Jewish mother, and so transcend the Jew -Gentile category?) To return to a few more comments on Luke's version of the birth story. The greeting of the annunciation is 'Hail Highly favoured one; in Greek it is an alliteration which you may be able to hear 'Chaire Checharitomene'. Perhaps the equivalent in semitic speech would have been 'Peace daughter of Peace'. When this greeting was translated into latin, however, it came out as Ave Gratia plena, with emphasis on plena for which there is no equivalent in the Greek. Hail Mary Full of Grace - that translation has been the peg on which a considerable mariological development has been hung, relating to the doctrine of Grace.

Another seminal feature of the narrative is the reference in the Magnificat to all generations calling her blessed. there is something of a tension between this statement and one that occurs later in the gospel (Luke 11,27-8) where someone in the crowd enthusiastically cries out 'Blessed is the womb that bore and the breasts that suckled you!' - roughly in modern language 'I bet your mother's proud of you, dearie!', only to receive the curt reply: 'Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and keep it.' And Mary's words in the Magnificat have a certain irony about them in context. Was she to be blessed by all generations? Was she for instance 'blessed' by her neighbours in Nazareth, when she appeared pregnant before her wedding day? Only, surely, in that paradoxical sense in which, as Jesus said, Blessed are you when men revile you and say all manner of things against you falsely for my sake.' The blessedness of Mary is not, in Luke's presentation, a retreat from the preaching of the Cross. As the evangelist notes, her role includes 'the sword that will pierce your heart also'.

The Lukan infancy story contains a whole series of echoes from Israel's history: the birth of Isaac we have mentioned, the song of Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, the overshadowing of the divine glory as over the Ark of the Covenant, the faithful expectancy of the virgin daughter of Zion awaiting the coming of the Messiah. In other words, she becomes a figure of Old Israel at the moment of her transformation into the renewed People of God, a deliberate symbol for the Church.

Outside the birth stories, the picture of Mary is rather ambiguous. In John's gospel she appears at the foot of the Cross, with the beloved disciple; and is given into his care and he into hers. As well as its immediate historical sense, a wider meaning has been discerned in this scene: that the Fourth Gospel presents Mary as painfully relinquishing her natural motherhood in order to gain a supernatural motherhood in the new community, that by sharing in his sufferings to the end, she becomes the mother of disciples in the realm of grace.

The other reference in John is the wedding at Cana, where Mary tells Jesus that the wine has run out; and instructs the servants to do whatever he tells you. This is the classic NT text for the idea in Catholic theology of the intercessions of Mary. But the ambiguity of the incident should also be noted. As she makes her request, Jesus says very sharply to her: "Woman, Keep away from me, my hour has not yet come."

In the account of Jesus' first Passover at the age of 12 (Luke 2) when Mary tried to give her child a good talking to for lagging behind in Jerusalem and making his parents anxious, she got ticked off herself. 'You should have known I would be in my Father's house.' In Mark 3, she joins the rest of the family in thinking him 'beside himself' ( 'He must be crazy for the company he keeps') and she must have felt aggrieved when he said in front of them all 'Who is my mother? Anyone who does my Father's will'.

These incidents, especially the last are likely to be an accurate portrayal of how things actually were. But before we use them for polemical purposes to prove that Mary is not worth a candle, because she was not even a disciple, I wonder whether they could not be seen in a different light. Clearly, Mary was not by nature the sort of Jewish mother who worships the ground her boy walks on. She had her reservations, as all

the disciples did - which makes it even more remarkable to find that in the Acts of the Apostles (1,14) she became one of the first Christians. How hard it must have been for her, who had washed and changed his clothes, fed him and comforted him and done all the down to earth things a mother does for a child, to find in him her Saviour; to see him as her Creator and not as her creature. It is then no criticism of Mary to say that she stumbled now and again over the scandal of particularity, for she had the closest, most particular knowledge of him. And her hesitations only serve to emphasise the magnitude of her eventual faith. The uncomplimentary passages in the gospels could be, when properly understood, some of the most deeply mariological.

Section Two of this paper will take up the major points of conflict between Roman Catholics and most Protestant churches on Mary.

I do not know of any agreed Ecumenical text that has yet covered these points, extensively, though several bilateral conversations have them on their agenda. Aside from the issue of Church authority and papal infallibility in defining certain Marian doctrines as essential to salvation, the content of Marian piety and devotion is the subject of considerable variety within non-Roman Catholic denominations. For the Orthodox churches there is dispute only in minor details of doctrine, and their Marian piety is even more developed and pronounced. Within Anglicanism, there is a distinct undercurrent of Mariology, which has never been entirely suppressed. Most of the feasts of Mary in the Calendar were retained in the English Prayer Book; there is a flourishing Anglican shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham in Norfolk, which has to be seen to be disbelieved. In Lutheranism and Methodism too because of some very moving passages in Luther's commentaries and in Charles' Wesley's hymns, it would be incorrect to characterise the position as one of hostility towards Mariology. But in most cases, apart from the Roman Catholic Church, the cult of Mary has been left as a matter of personal preference and official distance. As ecumenical dialogue progresses, the divide within certain denominations, between conservatives and liberals, on the question of the historicity of the Virgin Birth will, I think, be more important than anything that separates them from Roman Catholics. That said, I will look at four topics where there is traditional dispute and much lingering suspicion.

First, the intercession of Mary.

The second half of the Hail Mary 'Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death'. This may be only one instance of the general theory of the communion and intercession of the saints, but it gains peculiar prominence in Catholic liturgy and in the use of the Rosary. The main objections are that Mary threatens to replace Christ as the mediator between the believer and God; and that the implication is that Mary is more compassionate with sinners and more ready to listen to their prayers. These may be Protestant misconceptions but there is too much popular evidence to support them for them to be easily dispelled. The reforms set in train after Vatican II have changed the situation considerably, but the recent encyclical Redemptoris Mater and other actions on the part of the present Pope, *risk reversing them.*

There is no real difficulty with the doctrine that the saints in heaven continue to share with Christ in the ministry of intercession to the Father, as they did on earth - on the principle, stated in the Epistle of James 5,16, that the prayer of a righteous person has great power in its effects. But at the level of psychological perception and the style of the Christian life, this is a source of unspoken disagreement and mutual suspicion, which has prevented ecumenical convergence from being expressed in local growing together. The extent to which any Christian finds it helpful to implore the assistance of Mary's prayers is a matter of personal choice. In this matter there is fortunately no party line, so Cardinal Newman asserted (speaking with theological, if not sociological accuracy!). If Mary is really the mother of all Christians, then it seems to me likely

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that she has at least as much affection for those of her children who insist on toddling on their own, as for those of them who are always tugging at her skirts.

The second issue is that of the Virginity of Mary.

Despite what was said above, The virginity of Mary, rather than her motherhood, has influenced the ideology of monasticism and priestly celibacy in the Roman Catholic Church. In reaction to this, Protestants enjoy pointing out that according to the NT Jesus had 4 brothers and an unspecified number of sisters, so Mary cannot have been that much of a virgin.

On the purely historical question, it is not absolutely clear that Jesus' 'brothers' might not be half-brothers of a former marriage of Joseph, or cousins, children of Mary's sister or sister in law, mentioned in John's gospel (19,25). These are certainly very ancient views in the Church, and they might help to explain why the Mother of James and Joses in Mark 15,40 is not identified more simply as Mary.

On the other side, however, even if Joseph and Mary had no other children, this would not in itself indicate that Mary remained a virgin after her marriage: in the context of Jewish attitudes to sexual and conjugal rights this would be extremely unlikely.

When Mary is called "Ever-Virgin", what is meant is principally that her place in the history of redemption depends on the Yes she said to God at the Incarnation. It says nothing about whether or not she had sexual relations with her husband or produced children by him later on. Questions remain about priestly celibacy and monasticism. but they can and ought to be strictly detached from discussion of the perpetual virginity of Mary.

Thirdly, the Immaculate Conception - the doctrine that Mary was sinless from the very beginning of her life and was a pure vessel for the Incarnation of the Word. The NT tells us nothing at all about Mary's earlier career, though apocryphal gospels of the third century and later begin to take an interest in her parents, Joachim and Anna; and this has frequently been reflected in Christian art. In the NT itself, the symbol of the Woman in Revelation 12, crowned with twelve stars clothed with the sun and with the moon beneath her feet, was referred to Mary from the sixth century onwards, though earlier (and more correctly) it was taken as an image for the Messianic community. This became an identifying picture of the sinlessness of Mary, culminating in the visions of St Bernadette.

It would be wrong to suggest that the Immaculate Conception is simply a case of a rank outcrop of superstition which forced its way by popular demand into a dogmatic definition in 1854. Catholic theologians are well able to resist the pressures of popular demand, when necessary - indeed they are rather better at it than Protestant theologians! There was a much more serious and much more biblical point at issue - the problem of <sup>original</sup> ~~sin~~ <sup>original</sup> ~~sin~~ which is the idea that we are born in sin and conceived in wickedness, to use the scriptural phrases; it does not refer to actual personal transgressions) According to St Augustine, basing his view on an interpretation of Genesis and of Romans 5, all human beings are tainted by original sin, except Mary "about whom for the honour of the Lord, I want there to be no question where sin is mentioned, for concerning her we know that more grace for conquering sin in every way was given to her." There is a pull in two directions here : 1) the universality of original sin, biologically transmitted in the human race, and therefore as a direct consequence the universal need of redemption; and 2) the sinlessness of Christ's human nature. Augustine had no answer to this tension, other than to make Christ, and with him Mary, the exception that proves the rule. Later theologians tried to find some way of resolving the tension. Eventually the 13th century theologian Duns Scotus (the only British theologian they really approve of at the moment in the Vatican) proposed that Mary was sinless from the moment of her conception by a special act of divine grace. She was in need of redemption like all human beings, but the form redemption took in her case was preservation from sin rather than

original



rescue after sin. The Immaculate conception is not so much a doctrine about Mary as the resolution of a theological problem concerning original sin, and the Incarnation.

This does not automatically make it acceptable, for the Dogma endorses as an article of faith necessary for salvation, the Augustinian doctrine of original sin ( which the Protestant reformers incidentally took over almost completely from western Catholicism) but against which there are very serious objections, when the Bible as a whole and other schools of Christian theology are taken into account. Adam's disobedience does not completely destroy the natural goodness of human nature created by God, and Paul in Romans 5 is writing, I believe, not about the inheritance of sin from Adam, but about the inheritance of death and mortality. This is the view taken by many of the Greek fathers who read Paul in the original rather than in Latin translation.

My point could be made rather naughtily the other way round: there is no problem at all with the dogma of the Immaculate Conception as long as it is interpreted universally and ecumenically. Not only Mary, but every human being is immaculately conceived. Getting conceived is about the only thing we do which is immaculate; whatever may be in the minds and hearts of our conceiving parents does not affect the sanctity of the life they produce.

In the particular case of Mary, the Immaculate Conception stands for something which Protestant theologians have often neglected: that her holiness cannot be confined to the moment of her response to God at the Annunciation: it has to have a deeper meaning in relation to the whole manner of her life. At Jesus' birth God takes upon himself - so Christians believe - that experience of total dependence which is essential to being a human baby. One religious psychologist ( without thinking of Mary at all) puts it this way: (R.S.Lee 1961)

Unless the baby learns from his mother what love is, and learns in turn to love her, he is going to find it difficult if not impossible, to understand later on that God is love. If he has met the right kind of wise love from his mother, he will face the world with trust and confidence, even when it hurts him.

Incarnate love condescended even to this - to be willing to learn about love from a human mother. If we deny this, our understanding of the Incarnation is in danger of becoming psychologically docetic. If we believe in the Incarnation, we have also to believe in the holiness ( It is perhaps unnecessary to specify sinless<sup>ness</sup>, whether original or actual) of Mary - indeed that she is the outstanding example of the effect of transforming grace in the human heart.

Fourthly, The Assumption.

There is no biblical evidence for the Bodily Assumption of Mary as a historical event, unless we argue from analogy. The basic analogy of course is the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but the transfiguration story also implies the bodily assumption of Elijah and Moses. (The case of Moses is less clear in the OT than that of Elijah, but it is referred to explicitly in the Epistle of Jude). If Elijah and Moses make it to heaven in advance of the Messiah, why not Mary? Would Jesus have left his own mother to wait for the general resurrection? Would he not rather have taken her to be with him immediately she died? The importance of Mary's intercession in Catholic devotion, which we mentioned earlier, finds its theological grounding here.

As with the Immaculate Conception, although this doctrine was promoted by popular piety, with a touch, in 1950, of anti-Protestant malice and the sheer bravado of using Papal Infallibility to promote it, at root it has to do with something much broader, which is indeed a scriptural problem, the way we understand the resurrection of Christians.

There are two principles in tension with each other:

1. that death cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ and that to depart from the body is to be at home with the Lord

2. that those who sleep in Christ will be raised only at his coming; that bodily resurrection is a future hope, not yet realised in this life or by those who have died.

Paul says both things and leaves the conundrum unexplained. And it has had many practical repercussions for instance in the attitudes taken by Christians towards the appropriateness of interment or cremation in disposing of the bodies of the departed.

Perhaps the most unfortunate thing about the Bodily Assumption is that it promotes the second proposition (that most of us, apart from Mary, will have to wait till the general resurrection) over the first, that for everyone 'to depart is already to be with Christ'. Again, we ought to be able to interpret the dogma ecumenically, not as a special privilege of Mary, the final chapter of her individual biography, but in an eschatological and ecclesial sense - a sign and promise of the glorious destiny of all the children of God. Such an interpretation of this and previous Marian doctrines is encouraged by the decision of the Second Vatican Council to reintegrate what Catholics want to say about Mary into the statements on the Doctrine of the Church, which we have seen from Luke 1-2 is a properly scriptural position.

### Section Three: Feminism.

The final section of my paper is recent feminist interpretation of scripture; and I have time only to say a little about it before tying it in with our theme.

First, there are various sorts of feminist interpretation. There is "post-Christian feminism" which is particularly harsh on scripture, identifying it as the source-book for Christian anti-feminism, as they would see it. Second, there is what I call "soft-Christian feminism" which stoutly defends the Bible against the charge of Patriarchalism, making as few concessions to the former as possible. And Third, and most interesting for our purposes, there is "radical-Christian feminism", which proposes a complete re-interpretation of scripture from the female perspective, recognising the difficulty of biblical patriarchalism, but committed to finding a way through it, rather than abandoning scripture. There is a very close similarity between this and the hermeneutic of liberation theology, the main difference being that feminist interpretation is for the moment a feature of Western Christianity, while liberation theology has its roots in the political struggles of Christians in the Third World.

The essentials of a radical feminist hermeneutic are these:

1. that it is suspicious of masculine ideological deformations in the text and also (perhaps even more) in the work of male biblical scholars.
  2. that it seeks to reclaim the Bible as feminist heritage by criticism, and by detection of the often muted and overshadowed aspects of both its feminine language for God and its articulation of women's experience.
  3. that it evaluates and selects and translates from scripture those parts of it which can be proclaimed today as a vision for the integrity of human life and the future.
  4. that its controlling aim is a change in human behaviour; it has to do finally with praxis not with academic speculation.
- In each of these characteristics, the similarity with Liberation theology is close.

Some feminist theologians have taken great interest in the figure of Mary as the female face of the Church, rejecting the traditional passive interpretation of her and emphasising the notion of female power and active cooperation in the bearing of the Word.

Others perhaps frightened off by Catholic overloading of the Marian tradition have preferred to concentrate their attention rather on the female wisdom language for God in the Bible, on OT women like Deborah Ruth Esther and Judith - though she is a bit blood curdling; and in the NT on

Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha of Bethany and the other women of the early Church.

It is remarkable how different the Bible comes across, when all this so often neglected material is brought to our attention, and how much more egalitarian Israel and the renewed Israel begin to appear ( rightly, I believe). And Mary ought to be firmly included in this, for the feminist interpretation of her in relation to the Church is exactly what we need to bring Protestant and Catholic interpretation into closer harmony, so that Mariology no longer constitutes the great stumbling block to ecumenism, which it does at the moment , on the doctrinal and even more on the devotional levels.

However, if I may dare to suggest one or two criticism of this feminist hermeneutic, they would be these:

1. that its search for female experience behind the text can lead to an idealism which distracts our attention from scripture itself.
2. that those texts that are demonstrably tainted with a patriarchal ideology ought not to be permanently deselected from our preaching, because they have other things to say which we need just as much to hear. There is a danger that we might lose an awareness of the totality and richness of scripture by a too narrow, i.e. unecumenical, hermeneutic
3. that faithful translation of the scriptural text is an attempt to render its intended meaning ( and more sensitive translation does in fact remove several of the grosser chauvinisms that are not intentionally present in the originals). But translation should not be used as a means of surreptitious interpretation, for otherwise the Church will only see its current views reflected back to it from scripture, and will not be confronted by the text and invited to enter into dialogue with it.

But I must end on a positive note and say that full justice can be done to the insights of feminist interpretation, as of those liberationist and charismatic interpretation, if they are incorporated within the broad definition of ecumenical interpretation of scripture which I have been attempting to outline in these lectures.

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