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Why Mary Matters

What we learn from Mary and the Virgin Birth

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Introduction

Singing of Mother Mary

By Kelli B. Trujillo

I used to feel an inner struggle whenever I'd hum or sing the famous Beatles' song "Let It Be." I loved the tune, and I really liked the general message of the song . . . except for that darn, pesky line about "mother Mary" coming and urging the songwriter (Paul McCartney) to simply "let it be." The idea of Mary showing up to give the Beatles advice seemed like just one more wrong, off-the-rocker example of Marian mythology in our culture. As an evangelical, I always felt it was my duty to shrug off and fastidiously avoid anything mystical, magical, mythical, or even remotely special regarding Mary.

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So it was a great relief the other day when my husband (a Beatles scholar/fanatic) informed me that Paul wasn't talking about Mary the mother of Jesus—he was writing about a dream he had of his own mother (named Mary). She'd died of cancer when Paul was a teenager; as the song describes, Paul dreamed of his mother coming to him and speaking words of peace.

Phew. Now I can sing that song (one of my favorites) in good conscience!

Many of us Protestants experience a similar discomfort with all things Marian. This subtle aversion to Mary (except, of course, in December) seems to be bred into us. Though our beliefs affirm how blessed she was to be chosen by God, in our practice we hardly mention her for 11 months of the year.

To a certain degree, there's good reason for this impulse. Within some segments of Catholicism, Marian devotion appears heretical and even borders on the bizarre. There are the countless claims of Marian apparitions—some even believe in and make pilgrimages to see her image on water-stained drywall, a pancake, or a potato chip (no joke!). Other Catholics put such a heavy focus on their devotion to Mary, the "Queen of Heaven," that Jesus seems to take a far distant second place. (It should be noted that these degrees of obsession with Mary fall well outside the bounds of official Catholic teaching.)

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Yet in our efforts to differentiate ourselves from these unbiblical approaches to Mary, we've swung the pendulum too far the other direction. Lest people think we worship Mary, we hardly talk about her. We study, read about, and discuss biblical heroes like Hannah, Esther, Ruth, or Mary (of "Mary and Martha" fame), but rarely give our attention to the one woman, out of all the women on the planet throughout all of human history, whom God chose to bear and raise his son, Jesus.

If any woman in Scripture deserves our attention, *she* does!

Thankfully, one time a year (at Christmas), we do draw our attention to Mary. In our hearts, we journey with her to Bethlehem. We wait by the manger. We, too, ponder the miracle and treasure it in our hearts. We at Kyria have created this download to help you consider Mary's story in-depth—no matter what time of year! Read the articles, think through the Reflect questions, explore what God's Word says. Our hope is that you'll be challenged and inspired by Mary's godly character and her example of faith and submission to God.

Grace,

Kelli B. Trujillo
Managing Editor, Kyria downloads
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Leader's Guide

How to use "Why Mary Matters" for a group study

"Why Mary Matters" can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.
2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.
3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.
4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.
5. When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
6. End the session in prayer.

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Venerate Mary?

One conversation with a Catholic friend has stuck with me through the years.

By Joy-Elizabeth Lawrence

"I'm just not a fan of how you Catholics venerate Mary," I said to my college friend "Erica" (not her real name) during one of our regular conversations about the differences between my evangelical Protestant faith and her Roman Catholic one. At that time, I was thinking about the "Hail Mary" prayer and certain statues in front yards, not the fact that the *Oxford Reference Dictionary* defines *venerate* as "to regard with deep respect." Looking back at this conversation with Erica, I realize that I didn't really know what I was talking about—rather than understanding Roman Catholic theology, I was parroting what I'd heard others say. My comment was knee-jerky rather than thoughtful and informed.

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To me, a dyed-in-the-wool Protestant, making Mary more special than any of the other folks in the Bible was just too Catholic. To me, Mary was . . . well, just plain Mary. She was the person I was loathe to play every year in my family's at-home Christmas pageant because it's embarrassing to pretend to be pregnant, especially when the only males of the house are one's father and eight-year younger brother. (I preferred the angel of the Lord and his speech to the cowering shepherds. Mary always seemed a little mousy.)

Erica replied, more graciously than I deserved, "You have to understand that through the veneration of Mary, *women* are given a model of how to follow God's lead. Jesus is a great example, of course, and we follow him. But he was still a man—and we're women. Mary is a wonderful model for us because she shows *us* how we, as women, should follow God." That threw me for a loop. First, Erica answered my question even though I'd probably sounded like a jerk. Second, it was a good answer.

Certainly there are significant and important differences between the Protestant and Roman Catholic understandings of Mary, as well as on several other matters of faith. Yet, though Erica and I had different theological perspectives on key points, we found unity in Christ. Our friendship grew as we together studied a fine arts program at a secular school that had few other Christians. What Erica taught me about Mary in that simple conversation has stuck with me since then.

I've remained Protestant in my faith and practice, but this Advent I've been thinking that Mary teaches us, to put it in Erica's words, "how we, as women, should follow God."

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This past year, I started to identify with Mary even more because I had a baby. I knew what it felt like to be "great with child," to waddle around and have to go to the bathroom every five minutes, to give birth the old-fashioned way. (I'm not trying to sound self-righteous about natural childbirth here, but seriously, that's what Mary did.) And I've realized that there was something about Mary that caused her to be highly favored.

Let's go to the Gospel of Luke where Mary is first introduced. Luke says a virgin from Nazareth is pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. An angel, Gabriel, comes to Mary and tells her that she has found favor with God and will have a son that she should name Jesus. Gabriel continues, "He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:32–33).

"How will this be . . . since I am a virgin?" Mary asks. Mary, understandably, seems more concerned that she will give birth than that she will birth a king. But once Gabriel answers Mary's question, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you," she accepts willingly by saying, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Let's look closely at Mary's response to Gabriel's news in order to better see how Mary can be an example of faithfulness to us.

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She's gracious.

Mary models how we should follow God in that she graciously accepts the angel Gabriel's news. The graciousness Mary demonstrates is amazing. She doesn't communicate worry about her reputation, her family's response, Joseph's response, or concern about how she will provide for her baby. She doesn't ask 57 questions. She doesn't burst into tears and run from the room. Mary's graciousness involves a certain amount of self-control, which many of us could learn from in this age when emotional authenticity is often more valued than emotional self-control.

As a servant, she accepts her "job."

Mary understands that accepting the news means being a servant. Have you ever toured a home that had servant quarters? Last year, I visited the historic Biltmore Estate in Ashville, North Carolina. This enormous house has a staggering number of bedrooms, an indoor swimming pool, and a bowling alley. Along the top of the house are servant quarters filled with small rooms, a bit like rooms on a boat. When I visited the Biltmore house, I imagined what it would be like to be a servant of the house a century ago. Tasks were assigned and completed on a schedule to keep the household and grounds running smoothly. I hoped that my role would, perhaps, involve a little more creativity (an assistant to the pastry chef?) or excitement (watching the daughter?) than doing something that involved fine attention to detail such as cleaning the windows or polishing silver. Hopefully, the mistress of the house would have assigned me to something I was good at.

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Similarly, God gives Mary a specific assignment. When she hears what she's called to do, she understands her role in this drama. She doesn't merely say "I'll do it" (or as Scripture puts it, "May it be to me as you have said"); she also adds, "I am the Lord's servant." There's a certain no-nonsense practicality in her response. God's given her a job, and just as a servant in a large household would accept and perform her duties, Mary matter-of-factly accepts the assignment God's given her. Because she views herself through the lens of servant-hood to God, Mary is willing to do whatever God asks, even if this call involves nausea, fatigue, social alienation, relational struggles, and, perhaps, a marred reputation for life.

She rejoices.

Later in the story, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth who, as she has learned from Gabriel, is pregnant in her old age. When she reaches her, Mary says, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant" (1:46–48). From Mary's song, we learn that Mary is no longer just graciously accepting Gabriel's news but is rejoicing in the role God has given her. Although she is God's servant, Mary feels honored (and she is honored) that God has chosen her to carry his Son. We can only imagine if there are inner struggles Mary is working through—but nevertheless, she's rejoicing. Most of us have days of struggle; but despite difficulty we can rejoice in the role God has given us and that he is mindfulness toward us.

As we move through Advent and observe this season of waiting, quiet, and reflection, reflect on Mary's response to Gabriel's news and God's call for her life. Look for

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opportunities to graciously accept what God has in store for you (even if it is not what you would have planned for yourself), to understand that serving God means being a servant, and to rejoice in the role God has given you. Over the years, I've lost touch with Erica, but some days I think about her and give thanks that she was in my life for three years. I trust that, wherever she is, she remains a faithful Christ-follower, just like Mary. It was her insight that compelled me to understand what it means to venerate Mary in the best sense of the word.

*Joy-Elizabeth Lawrence (**www.joyelizabethlawrence.wordpress.com**) is a writer, actor, and staff member at Calvin College.*

Reflect

- *In her earlier years, Joy-Elizabeth's perspective toward Mary was partly based on her reaction to Catholic teaching rather than a firm development of her own views about Mary. Can you relate? In what ways have Catholic teachings or Protestant reactions to those ideas influenced your view of Mary? Explain.*

- *Carefully review Luke's account of the Annunciation in* **1:26–38** *and Mary's visit to Elizabeth in* **1:39–56**. *Based only on these passages, what glimpses do you get into Mary's personality and demeanor? How would you describe her?*

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- *"Mary's graciousness involves a certain amount of self-control which many of us could learn from in this age when emotional authenticity is often more valued than emotional self-control," Joy-Elizabeth writes. How does Mary's graciousness contrast with our culture's priority of expressing one's emotions at any and all times? How does it compare or contrast to the way you usually react to difficult news or surprising situations?*

- *Mary calls herself the "Lord's servant" or, as some translations put it, his "bondslave" (NASV), "maidservant" (NKVJ), or "handmaid" (KJV). What does it really mean to say this? What might this mind-set look like in the life of a modern-day Christian woman?*

- *Joy-Elizabeth emphasizes that Mary not only accepts the role God has given her, but she rejoices in it. What does it mean to rejoice in one's God-given role in life? What struggles or difficulties are you having a hard-time rejoicing in? Explain.*

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Whose Child Is This?

Does belief in the Virgin Birth really matter?

By Richard Longenecker

When they tell their stories of Jesus' birth, Matthew and Luke have little in common. Matthew dwells on the fulfillment of prophecy, the visit of foreign astrologers, and the slaughter of the innocents. Luke, by contrast, reports the poetic utterances of Zechariah, Mary, and Simeon, and focuses on Mary's relatives and the visit of the shepherds.

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Matthew 1:18–2:23 and Luke 1:5–2:52 are quite different. Neither writer seems to have known the other's account. Yet Matthew and Luke make one major point in common—that Jesus was born of a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit. This agreement, amidst otherwise diverse presentations, suggests that a common tradition regarding the Virgin Birth existed before either writer recorded his story.

How did a divine mystery, agreed on by the Gospel writers, become the subject of modern-day debate?

The contemporary debate

From at least Ignatius of Antioch (writing about A.D. 110) to the 19th century, almost all Christians accepted the Virgin Birth as both a fact of history and a datum of theology. Believers expected marvelous events to accompany God's actions, and so the miraculous served to support faith. In addition, the Virgin Birth fit nicely with church teaching about Jesus' being the Son of God and having a sinless nature.

After the 18th-century intellectual revolution we call the Enlightenment, however, the miraculous created suspicion rather than faith—even among Christians. This stemmed from more than mere rationalism or the association of miracles with credulity. It also arose from the conviction that God works in and through a history like our own—and a history studded with miracles is not the kind of history we know. So in the 19th and 20th centuries, many scholars refused to believe that Jesus was conceived any differently from anyone else. Furthermore, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth seemed impossible to reconcile with the true humanity of Jesus.

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Today scholars remain sharply divided regarding the Virgin Birth. Is it a fact of history—that is, that Jesus was conceived in the womb of a virgin without the aid of a human father? Or should it be considered an attempt of the early church to translate the mystery of God becoming a human being into terms intelligible to unsophisticated people, and so to be taken as a *symbol* of the truth that Jesus' birth was God's gift to humanity given entirely by grace, but without any necessary reference to the mechanics of procreation?

The hole in the sermon

If the Virgin Birth is so clearly taught by Matthew and Luke, why would some Christians question it? One answer is that the earliest Christian preachers fail to mention it, and the earliest confessions of faith omit it.

To judge by the Book of Acts, the apostles' sermons did not refer to Jesus' virgin birth, but began with his adult ministry and focused on his death, resurrection, and ascension (see, for example, Peter's Pentecost sermon of 2:14–36). But that is to be expected. In choosing a replacement for Judas, the apostles stated his successor must be one who had "been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us" (1:21–22). And it is the redemptive events that transpired during the time the apostles were eyewitnesses that the early Christian preachers proclaimed.

Likewise, the early forms of confessions of faith, incorporated by New Testament writers into their letters, do not mention the Virgin Birth. However, two expressions in confessional portions have sometimes been claimed to allude to Jesus' virgin birth. First, some have taken "born of

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a woman" in Galatians 4:4 to imply a virgin birth, since it refers only to "a woman" without mentioning her husband. But *born of a woman* is simply a Jewish idiom for being human (as, for example, in Job 14:1 and Matthew 11:11/Luke 7:28. See also Josephus, *Antiquities* 7.21 and 16.382). The phrase itself gives no information about the biology of Jesus' birth. Rather, it tells us Jesus was truly one with us, and that he came as "the Man" to stand in our place.

Second, some take an expression found in Romans 1:3-4 to allude to Jesus' virgin birth. In speaking of our Lord's human credentials, Paul says he was "the seed [or, descendant] of David according to the flesh." Some have claimed the word seed (*sperma*) means male sperm from David's line, and that royal sperma, according to Luke's genealogy (as it is argued), came through Mary's line, not Joseph's. But seed here means no more than it does elsewhere in Scripture: simply a descendant (cf. 2 Samuel 7:12; Psalm 89:3–4; John 7:42; Galatians 3:16, 29; 2 Timothy 2:8). What Romans 1:3–11 sets out is a two-stage Christology: that humanly, Jesus was a descendant of David; that because of the Resurrection, he is legitimately declared God's Son and Lord of the human race.

Nothing is said here about a virginal conception.

Philippians 2:6–11 is a particularly significant case. Here is a Christological hymn or confession that seems to come from the heart of earliest Christian conviction and that runs the gamut from pre-existence to exaltation. Yet this "Christ-hymn" does not mention Jesus' virgin birth. Though fully human ("born of a woman") and with Davidic blood in his veins ("seed of David"), Jesus the Christ was also pre-existent and divine ("the divine nature was his from the first," NEB;

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"being in very nature God," NIV) and has become the Lord over all ("every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord"). Yet there is no reference to Jesus' virginal conception. Early Christians, evidently, did not see the Virgin Birth as a necessary part of speaking about our Lord's taking "the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (v. 7).

The silence of Paul, Mark, and John

If the Virgin Birth is missing from the apostles' sermons and the earliest confessions of faith, we still might expect to find it elsewhere in the New Testament. But apart from Matthew's and Luke's infancy narratives, the New Testament has no direct statement about Jesus' virginal conception.

Paul's letters, probably the first materials of the New Testament written, speak nowhere of the Virgin Birth. And he makes no attempt to improve on the confessional statements he incorporates by adding a virginal conception.

Mark's gospel, probably the earliest canonical gospel, is likewise silent on Jesus' virgin birth. For Mark, "the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1) has to do with John the Baptist's preparation for Jesus, Jesus' own baptism, his temptation, his announcement of the kingdom, and Jesus' call to four fishermen to follow him (1:2-20). Mark's gospel essentially agrees with the scope of the apostles' sermons in Acts, beginning with the baptism of John and concluding with the resurrection of Jesus.
The only possible hint of a virgin birth in Mark is to be found in 6:3, where it is reported that people of Jesus' hometown called him "the carpenter . . . Mary's son." In a patriarchal society, to identify someone by reference to his mother and

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not his father would have been unusual. But the statement is cryptic. It probably originated as a taunt by the local townsfolk suggesting that Jesus' birth was illegitimate, and so witnesses indirectly to rumors. The fact that Mark included their taunt probably signals his own consciousness of unusual circumstances associated with Jesus' birth. But it may be that the people's statement and Mark's inclusion of it are innocuous. At any rate, when both Matthew and Luke (who seem to depend here on Mark) rephrase the question, it seems that neither writer understood Mark as conveying a suggestion of illegitimacy. "Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary?" writes Matthew (13:55). "Isn't this Joseph's son?" writes Luke (4:22).

Apart from their infancy narratives, the virgin birth of Jesus receives no attention at all in either Matthew or Luke, the two gospels that appear to be built on the structure of Mark. In fact, even though Matthew and Luke present Jesus' birth as coming about without a human father, they elsewhere recast Mark 6:3 so that the townsfolk of Nazareth call Jesus "the carpenter's son" or "Joseph's son" (Luke 4:22).

Likewise, there is no teaching about Jesus' virgin birth in John, which may have been the last canonical gospel written, but which preserves material about Jesus that circulated among the earliest Christian believers. For John himself, Jesus is pre-existent, "the Word" who was divine, the Creator, the source of life, but one who "became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (1:1–14). For others portrayed by the evangelist, Jesus was "the son of Joseph" (1:45; 6:42). From neither John nor those he presents, however, is there any direct statement regarding the Virgin Birth. The only possible allusion to such an occurrence is the retort of the

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people in 8:41, "We are not illegitimate children." Like Mark 6:3, this retort may be a veiled insinuation that Jesus was illegitimate.

One minor variant of the text of John 1:13 is sometimes introduced into the discussion. All our Greek manuscripts, virtually all the early translations, and most of the Fathers read this verse as "[those] born not [*hoi ouk . . . egennethesan*] of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." *Those* is understood to mean "those who believe" to whom God has given the right to become "children of God."

One Old Latin manuscript of the third century, however, changes the plural *those* to the singular *he*. This reading was accepted by Tertullian and some of the Latin Fathers, who charged their opponents with altering the text in order to deny the Virgin Birth. But though a few modern critics and exegetes have argued for the originality of the singular, such a reading has little textual warrant and has been rightly rejected by almost all New Testament scholars.

"Nothing is impossible"

Despite the lack of explicit references to the Virgin Birth elsewhere in the New Testament, Matthew's and Luke's infancy narratives clearly present Jesus' virginal conception in the womb of Mary without the involvement of a man. In Matthew, Mary is discovered to be already pregnant before having marital relations with her betrothed husband Joseph; Joseph contemplates divorcing her so as not to put her to "public disgrace"; but "an angel of the Lord" assures Joseph that Mary's pregnancy is the result of God's design through

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the action of the Holy Spirit; and so Joseph "took Mary home as his wife, but had no union with her until she gave birth to a son," whom he named Jesus.

In Luke 1:26–38 the angel announces to Mary the conception of a son in her womb through the intervention of God's Holy Spirit; calms her fears regarding the unnaturalness of such a conception by assuring her of divine providence; and points to her aged relative Elizabeth's pregnancy as a sign that "nothing is impossible with God."

Matthew's and Luke's infancy narratives have, of course, a number of features in common: (1) the principal characters are Jesus, Mary, and Joseph; (2) Jesus' birth occurred during the reign of Herod the Great; (3) Mary was betrothed to Joseph; (4) Joseph was of Davidic descent; (5) Jesus was born in Bethlehem; (6) Jesus was given his name by heavenly direction; (7) Jesus as (reputedly) Joseph's son was also of Davidic descent; and (8) the family finally settled in Nazareth.

In matters of perspective, organization, and almost every other detail, however, the two accounts are decidedly different. Neither writer, it seems, was dependent on the other's account; nor, in all probability, did either of the evangelists even know of the other's work.

Yet the one major item that both evangelists, despite their diverse presentations, include—an item which goes far beyond the expected matters in the story line—is Jesus' virginal conception by the action of the Holy Spirit. Despite the lack of reference to the Virgin Birth elsewhere, its appearance in these two independent accounts (as well as the prominence it holds in both) suggests that a common tradition

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regarding the virginal conception of Jesus circulated within the early church prior to the writing of both Matthew's gospel and Luke's.

A number of questions, of course, immediately arise: Historically, it must be asked, where did this tradition of Jesus' virgin birth come from? Why is it absent from what we know of the earliest confessions and preaching of the early church, in the earliest letters we have from the early church, and in our earliest canonical gospel? Why does it appear in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, with attention being focused on it in both?

Doctrinally it must be asked: Of what significance was the Virgin Birth for first-century Christians? And of what significance should it be for Christians today?

Some suggest that Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the Virgin Birth are seen as having been motivated by their desire to counter a rising heresy in the early church, the mistaken belief that Jesus was not really human, but only *appeared* to be flesh and blood. A later form of this heresy, called *Docetism*, prompted Christians to include phrases such as "born of the Virgin Mary" and "suffered under Pontius Pilate" in their creeds.

This suggestion would explain, to some extent, why there is no reference to the Virgin Birth in the earlier New Testament materials, and why the idea appeared only later when the docetic heresy arose. Yet while such an explanation is a possible rationale for the inclusion of infancy narratives in both Matthew and Luke, it does not adequately answer the question of why there is an emphasis on Jesus' virgin birth

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in these two narratives, for a virgin birth would seem to separate Jesus from the rest of humanity rather than simply identify him as being truly human.

A more likely explanation for the stress on the Virgin Birth in Matthew and Luke has to do with the need of first-century Christians to counter the suggestions of irregularity and the rumors of illegitimacy that were probably then circulating about Jesus' birth—hints of which may appear in the Gospels themselves. Reports that Jesus' birth was illegitimate were widespread among both pagans and Jews in the second and third centuries (see, for example, Origen, *Contra Celsus* 1.28, 32, 69; Tertullian, *De Spectaculis* 30.3; Mish. *Yebamoth* 4.13; Tos. *Hullin* 2.22-23; JerT. *Abodah Zarah* 40d; JerT. *Sabbath* 14d; BabT. *Sabbath* 104b; BabT. *Sanhedrin* 67a). And it is highly probable that such rumors had their origins in Jesus' own day.

It seems that the early Christians had only two choices when opponents used such rumors to deny their proclamation: They could either accede to such a charge (which, of course, they couldn't) or they could affirm the supernatural character of Jesus' birth in a way that accounted for the unusual circumstances. And Christians today, when they stop to think about it, are faced with the same alternatives.

Yet though apologetic interests may have motivated Matthew and Luke to lay stress on the Virgin Birth, it is equally important to recognize distinctions between early Christian proclamation and early Christian teaching that was given in support of that proclamation. The earliest Christian confessions and preaching, so far as the New Testament itself tells us, did not include the Virgin Birth. Nor did Mark's

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gospel, which shares the flavor of the early proclamation; nor John's gospel, which is evangelistic; nor Paul's letters, which deal with specific pastoral problems.

Matthew's gospel and Luke's gospel, however, have more distinctly teaching functions and were written to serve in support of the basic Christian proclamation, with each writer suiting his portrayal of the life and ministry of Jesus to the particular mindset of his respective audience. Each in his own way has reorganized Mark's proclamation to serve his own instructional purposes, has added to Mark more narrative material, and has inserted many more sayings of Jesus than Mark has given. And so both Matthew and Luke have set out the basic Christian proclamation about Jesus ("beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us") with introductory material that focuses on Jesus as having been born of a virgin—a focus understandable when seen as part of their teaching purpose, but especially understandable in light of probable rumors of illegitimacy that were then current.

The Virgin Birth today

Martin Luther once remarked, somewhat lightly, that the Incarnation consists of three miracles: "The first, that God became man; the second, that a virgin was a mother; and the third, that the heart of man should believe this." The way people think about miracles, however, has always been plagued by predispositions, presuppositions, and prejudices. And thinking about the Virgin Birth has suffered the same fate—there are signs today of a changing attitude toward the miraculous among many New Testament scholars and theologians.

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Indeed, Christians must always affirm that "born of the virgin Mary" is a theological statement signaling that Jesus is, in a unique sense, God's Son. Yet we may also affirm that the God of the miraculous has accomplished his purpose in the Incarnation in the manner stated by both Matthew and Luke. The Incarnation itself, of course, is the greater miracle and the primary focus of Christian proclamation. The Virgin Birth, while an important facet of Christian teaching, has to do only with the means God used in the Incarnation. No doubt God could have brought about a true union of divinity with humanity in a number of ways, some quite natural and others extraordinary. In a theology that is biblically based, the Virgin Birth is neither the basis for nor the evidence of the Incarnation. Nevertheless, Jesus' virginal conception is a further sign in the whole story of Christmas signaling that God's great gift to humanity is given entirely by grace. That sign seems to have been brought to the fore only to counter specific attacks on the Christian proclamation, but it continues today, apart from that apologetic interest, as a sign of divine grace.

At Christmas, it is the Incarnation we celebrate. In our proclamation and pastoral care, it is that Incarnation we proclaim and build upon. In our fuller understanding of the message of the gospel, however, the Virgin Birth has its place. It may be an offense to those who consider themselves "too modern to believe such nonsense." But it is hardly as offensive to the modern world as the Incarnation itself, "the preaching of the Cross," belief in the resurrection of Jesus, or trust in Christ's promised return—matters that form the basis of Christian belief. So at Christmas we celebrate what God has done to incarnate

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his Son, understanding something of how the proclamation of the Incarnation was clarified by the early Christians and accepting the Virgin Birth as one gleaming facet of that shining story.

"Whose Child Is This?" originally appeared in Christianity Today *on December 17, 1990. At that time, Richard N. Longenecker was a senior editor of* Christianity Today. *He then served as distinguished professor at several universities; he is now retired.*

Reflect

- *Imagine for a moment that you were not familiar with the "Christmas story." With fresh eyes, read the infancy narrative of Jesus in* **Matthew 1:18–2:23** *and review the text of* **Luke 1:5-2:52**. *Take note of details that seem important. What ideas or details seem to be most emphasized?*

- *In your opinion, is it significant that the earliest recorded confessions of faith do not emphasize (or even mention) the Virgin Birth? Or that, other than Matthew and Luke's infancy narratives, there aren't direct references to it in the Gospels or the Pauline epistles? Why or why not?*

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- *Controversy surrounding the Virgin Birth is tied to the fundamental teaching of the Incarnation; the foundational truth that God himself became human. Read John's description of the Incarnation that begins his gospel in* **John 1:1-18**. *How does John's introduction shed light on your understanding of the Christ-infancy passages in* **Matthew 1:18-2:23** *and* **Luke 1:5-2:52**? *Or vice versa: how can the Christ-infancy passages help you understand and interpret John 1?*

- *Richard Longenecker points out that Matthew's and Luke's direct teachings about the Virgin Birth may have been necessitated by common aspersions cast on Jesus' "illegitimacy" and by the spread of Docetism, a heresy that minimized Jesus' humanity and distorted the doctrine of the Incarnation. In what ways does the doctrine of the Virgin Birth help you understand the mystery of the Incarnation?*

- *The Apostles' Creed (as well as several other early creeds) affirms the belief that Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Ghost [and] born of the virgin Mary." Why is this truth so central to what it means to be a Christian? What would be lost if one didn't understand and affirm the mystery of the Incarnation and the miracle of the Virgin Birth?*

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Recovering a Protestant Mary

Beliefs about Jesus' virgin mother vary, but her example of trustful devotion has lessons to teach all Christians.

Interviews with J.I. Packer, Thomas Oden, and Timothy George

Protestants pay a lot of attention to Jesus' mother at Christmas, but she's largely forgotten the rest of the year. How has the church historically viewed her? And has that changed?

Christianity Today assistant online editor Todd Hertz sat down with CT executive editors and theologians J.I. Packer and Tom Oden to discuss the role of Mary throughout history and why she remains important to all Christians today.

What were early church impressions of Mary?

Oden: It is very speculative, but my own view is that the mother of Jesus was quite important to the earliest church—the church during the writing of the Gospel of Luke. It was probably written in Ephesus during the middle part of the first century, and there is a very good chance that Mary was living there at that time.

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Now if you take that as a premise, which is uncertain historically, you then have a very important figure in the church who is still alive. She has stored these memories in her heart. She is highly revered. After she died, [the church] was facing much persecution, and there was a great emphasis on the memory of holy lives. She was certainly at the center of that.

From the outset she was remembered as a virgin in whom the Holy Spirit conceived the incarnate Lord. In my view, the Incarnation was an early recognition of the church. There's good textual evidence [to support that] in the earliest documents we have. Luke supported this view, as did other documents such as Paul's writings.

How did official church thinking about Mary change?

Oden: In 431 A.D., there was the ecumenical Council of Ephesus, which raised the question as to whether the liturgy is right or wrong in calling Mary *theotokos*. That Greek word means "Bearer of God." There was a certain party that said, "We should not say *theotokos*, we should say only *christotokos*." They were saying, "No, Mary didn't bear God, she just bore Jesus Christ."

The council affirmed that the liturgy is right—not that Mary is the source of God but rather that Mary is the bearer of the Incarnation. She is the one through whom the fleshly incarnate Lord becomes living history for us. That was a key point of doctrine that Protestants later took. Both Calvin and Luther affirmed the term *theotokos*.

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As Catholic piety began to develop, you see Mary viewed as an intercessor. It is hard to say when that began to develop, but it is evident in the early second century. So then Marian piety becomes increasingly important. In almost every decade of the church's life in the first four or five centuries it seems to accelerate.

How did the Reformation change Protestant impressions of Mary?

Packer: At the time of the Reformation, Anglican Archbishop Thomas Cranmer produced an evening prayer book that included Mary's song, the Magnificat, from Luke chapter one. The effect of its use was to celebrate Mary as the model, the pioneer, and the archetype of the saved sinner. The shift [this represented] was from Mary as a focus of devotion to Mary as the first beneficiary from the Incarnation. So straightaway you have a changed perspective on Mary.

Since evening prayer has ceased to be a reality in [many] Anglican churches in the last 50 years, Anglicans simply do not think of Mary, and many don't know the Magnificat by heart.

When you say, "What about Mary?" to Anglicans, the question is met with a sort of blank answer of "Well, I have never thought about Mary. I have never been taught about Mary." I think that has been the story in other Protestant denominations ever since they came into existence in the 17th century.

Oden: There were important reforms in Marian theology right at the beginning of the Reformation. [The Reformation] cleaned up some of the abuses. [Before this] Mary was overly sentimentalized and took on an intercessory role for the

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saints. For the most part, the Reformation accepted the ecumenical doctrine established [at the Council of Ephesus] in 431. But it did not accept all of the accumulation of piety and merit that Catholics believed can be acquired through prayers to Mary, like the rosary.

Why should evangelicals pay attention to Mary?

Oden: It is important that evangelicals clearly affirm that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. But there is nothing unusual with that: it is a consensual, classical teaching. What is more controversial is the notion of Mary as intercessor. That is very controversial between Catholics and Protestants because in the 16th century [that teaching] had been abused. Luther never revolted against the Virgin Mary. There is no hint of that. But he did revolt or protest against abuses of Mary as intercessor.

Packer: I think we lose by not focusing on Mary. On the one hand, she is a magnificent model of total trustful devotion. She's being told she is to fulfill the public role of an unmarried mother. Yet she says, "Be it to me according to your will." We evangelicals ought to remember Mary for that.

Second, we ought to take the theology of the Magnificat seriously and celebrate Mary, the mother of the Lord, as head of the line of those who are blessed to be saved sinners.

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Theologian Timothy George is author of "The Blessed Virgin Mary in Evangelical Perspective," a chapter in the book **Mary: Mother of God**, *edited by Carl E. Braaten (Eerdmans). In this interview, he shares his thoughts on Mary and her role in the Christian life.*

You suggest that Protestant believers have cut themselves off too hastily from Mary, a biblical figure who was at the forefront of the church's imagination from the post-apostolic period through the Reformation and beyond. Could you say a little about this?

George: I take my bearings from the Reformers. On the one hand, they were very critical of what they considered Marian excesses, and they talked at length about some of the ways in which Mary was given too much veneration, too much almost idolatrous worship, substituting her for Christ himself in some ways at the popular devotional level. On the other hand, they had an explicit devotion to Mary, especially Luther but also Zwingli and Calvin in their own way. They wanted to give honor to Mary. They wanted to remind the church that she was to be called *blessed* in every generation. They honored her as the vehicle of God's grace in giving Jesus to the world and an example of justification by faith alone, because she believed so purely in the gospel. I think we need to go back and reclaim something of the Reformers' more positive view of Mary, insofar as it is biblical. It's a part of our own Protestant heritage.

Read a Christianity Today article adapted from Timothy George's chapter about Mary here.

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How did Martin Luther's regard for Mary manifest itself in particular beliefs or practices?

George: Luther continued to celebrate three of the great Marian festivals—Purification, Annunciation, and Visitation. He also continued to use the *Ave Maria* prayer; that is, the first part of it: "Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." The latter part, "Pray for us sinners in the hour of our death," actually came later, added by the Carthusians after the Reformation. All the Reformers, even the relatively radical Zwingli, continued to say the first part of the *Ave Maria*. Of course, they did not say it as a prayer to Mary—they made that very clear—but as an acknowledgement of the fact that God's grace was so manifest in the virginal conception and her giving birth to Jesus.

Also, Mary is prominent in some of the hymns that come from the Lutheran Reformation. And if you take it to the next century, obviously this continued with, for example, Bach's *Magnificat* and so forth surrounding both the Advent of Christ and also Mary at the Cross. So in worship, in liturgy, in theology, despite the Reformers' critique, Mary continued to have a prominent place for early Protestants—I think an appropriately prominent place.

Sometimes there would also be religious plays. This is the one part of the Marian devotion that we still practice, in a way, with the Christmas pageant. That is a remnant of medieval Marian devotion: it enters the Christian tradition with St. Francis's devotion to the crèche. So today, even we good old-fashioned Southern Baptists always have a Christmas pageant: one of the young ladies dresses up like Mary; sometimes she carries a live baby. This is a

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good thing, to keep this part of the tradition. But sometimes that's the only acknowledgement that we have, and even that is often done without serious reflection on the meaning of the Incarnation, which is what Advent and Christmas are all about.

If the Christmas pageant is not enough, how else can Protestants reconnect, without buying into some of the non-canonical doctrines?

George: I think a good place to start—perhaps the best place for today's Christians—is with Mary under the Cross. Many people have started here as they've viewed Mel Gibson's powerful movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Here we see the events of the passion through the *mater dolorosa*, the weeping Mary, witnessing her son's death, cradling his corpse. This Mary stands in solidarity with all believers who also live under the shadow of the Cross, including many whose lives are at risk today because of their witness for Christ.

This Mary was the one disciple of Jesus who didn't flee when all the other disciples fled, but who stayed and accepted the burden of being under the Cross to the very end. When we suffer or are persecuted, we can look to this Mary who remained faithful and obedient even in that grim moment. That's the Mary that you see in the famous Gruenewald painting, for example.

But Mary at the Cross is important even for those of us not under persecution. Wendell Berry puts it well in his poem "The Way of Pain": "Unless we grieve like Mary / at His grave, giving Him up / as lost, no Easter morning comes."

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Is this a sense in which the traditional view of Mary as a forerunner and symbol of the whole church is on the right track?

George: Yes, Eastern iconographers have it right: they never depict Mary alone, but always with Christ, the apostles, and the saints. The New Testament portrays her as bridging the Old and New Testaments at Jesus' birth, and then at the end of Jesus' life, Mary is both among the last at the Cross, and among the first in the Upper Room, for the birth of the church at Pentecost.

And it has not been just the Eastern Orthodox or the early and medieval fathers who have seen Mary as a representative *par excellence* of the church. The Reformers noticed that when all of the disciples had fled in fear, Mary remained true to Christ and his word. Her fidelity unto the Cross showed that the true faith could be preserved in one individual. And the Reformers honored her for this, considering her the mother of the (true remnant) church.

What other traditional moments or characterizations of Mary can be helpful for us today as Protestants?

George: There are two statements that Mary makes in the Gospels, both of which I think are absolutely exemplary for the Christian life.

The first is this: "Let it be unto me according to your Word." This act of surrender, submission, standing in awe before the presence of the Holy, is the very posture of humility and surrender all of us are called to take before God. And Mary's words anticipate Jesus' statement in the garden, "Not my will but yours be done."

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Mary's second exemplary saying comes at the wedding at Cana. First Jesus has this little, almost tussle with his mother, saying, "Woman, my hour has not yet come"—which sounds a little bit gruff, Jesus speaking to his mama like that. But then she says to the wine stewards, "Whatever he says unto you, do it." Well, again, this is the call to, as evangelical Protestants sing, "trust and obey." So from the lips of Mary you've got probably the two most salient words of counsel for living the Christian life.

The first interview, originally called "There's Something About Mary," was published online at **ChristianityToday.com** *in December 2002. The interview was conducted by Todd Hertz. J.I. Packer is Board of Governors' Professor of Theology at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia. Tom Oden is Henry Anson Buttz Professor of Theology and Ethics at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey and general editor of the* Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture.

The second interview is adapted from a more lengthy article, "Recovering a Protestant Mary," published in the July 2004 issue of Christian History & Biography. *Timothy George is dean of Beeson Divinity School and an executive editor of* Christianity Today.

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Reflect

- *Oden points to Mary as a likely key figure in the early church. Some scholars believe that Mary was a key source for Luke in his recording of his gospel and the Book of Acts (Luke 1:1–4). We know for certain that she was a central member of the early church at least at the very beginning; read* **Acts 1:12–14.** *Purely speculatively, how do you imagine the members of the early church treated Mary? If you were a member of that first church, how might you have viewed and related to Jesus' mother Mary?*

- *Oden explains that practices regarding Mary as an intercessor in Christian prayer date back to as early as the second century. What's your reaction to this? How might you graciously discuss this with a Catholic friend who asserts this historical tradition demonstrates the rightness of seeking Mary's aid in prayer?*

- *Are you surprised to read that the main leaders of the Reformation each intentionally esteemed and honored Mary? Why or why not?*

- *Revisit the initial Ave Maria declaration in Scripture in* **Luke 1:28** *and also* **1:42.** *Timothy George explains that the Reformers used this prayer; "they did not say it as a prayer to Mary . . . but as an acknowledgement of the fact that God's grace was so manifest in the virginal conception and her giving birth to Jesus." What role, if any, do you think these declarations or prayers should play in a Christian's life? Explain.*

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- *J. I. Packer explains that a key emphasis in the Reformation was "to celebrate Mary as the model, the pioneer, and the archetype of the saved sinner." This was especially noted through praying the Magnificat. Revisit Mary's declaration recorded in* **Luke 1:46–56**. *How is Mary, here, an example for you personally of what it means to be a "saved sinner"?*

- *Packer concludes by stating: "we lose by not focusing on Mary." What do you think he means? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?*

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Hail Mary

Exploring various portrayals of Mary in Christian history and art

By David Lyle Jeffrey

In the sixth month of her elderly cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy, a young, betrothed Jewish girl was astonished by a visit from an angel. It was the angel Gabriel, and he greeted the girl Mary with a reverential "Hail" and announced that she had "found favor" with God and was to conceive and bear a child to be called Jesus. Shocking enough; but there was more: the conception would occur not by natural means, but by the agency of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35–37).

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Mary responded in obedience. She called herself the Lord's "handmaiden" (Luke 1:38)—a humble title that set the tone for the rest of the New Testament accounts and became the foundation for centuries of Marian devotion.

Mary recognized that she had become, like Enoch (Genesis 5:22) and Noah (who "found grace in the eyes of the LORD" [Genesis 6:8]), one "highly favored" by God (Luke 1:28, 30). She saw that she would forever after be recognized as one "blessed . . . among women" (28, 42). This blessing was not for her alone, as she sang in her *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46–55), but for all God's children. She was the one woman, out of all women, through whom God would fulfill his covenant love and promise.

How improbable! This obscure Jewish girl became, through the work of the Holy Spirit and her willing obedience, the instrument of divine grace. Through her, the majesty and unapproachable holiness of God joined the frail impermanence of fallen humanity. She was the chosen vessel of the Incarnation, at the pivot point of God's saving plan. How could Mary not loom in the imagination of the church?

The woman and the Word

Although Mary the mother of Jesus is of almost unrivaled importance in historic Christianity, and although her role in salvation history is central, she has a comparatively modest role in the Bible itself. Even where Mary does appear in the Gospels, she often has only a cameo, and in several instances, she does not even get a speaking part.

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The gaps and silences in the biblical texts have invited speculation, and writers of a number of apocryphal books purport to reveal details of her biography not found in the canon, inspiring much art and even some doctrine.

The central importance of Mary in Christian tradition, however, is rooted in the Bible. It is in her role as the "mother of Jesus"—or, in Elizabeth's words, "mother of my Lord" (Luke 1:43)—that we meet her in the Gospels' pages.

Luke, of course, tells her story most fully. There we find not only Gabriel's Annunciation to Mary, but also her poetic response, the prayer-song known as the *Magnificat* (because it begins "*Magnificat anima mea Dominum*" or "My soul magnifies the Lord").

The Magnificat reveals Mary as, like Miriam and Hannah before her, a divinely inspired poet. This trait she also shares with her ancestor David. Indeed, her spontaneous poem recalls the Psalms (especially Psalm 111:9), just as Elizabeth's words of greeting to her, "Blessed are you among women," echo Psalm 1: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly."

The Magnificat soon entered the liturgy of the church. Among Anglicans it continues to be recited daily at evensong, and Catholics use it in worship, where it is often sung rather than spoken, as in the beautiful version of the Franciscan singer and liturgist John Michael Talbot. In this context the entire congregation joins Mary in praise: "Holy is his name."

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Mary's Visitation to Elizabeth, whose fetal child John the Baptist "leaps for joy" in her womb at Mary's approach (1:39–56), completes the story of the Annunciation. Along with Gabriel's Ave Maria and Mary's Magnificat, the Visitation confirms that the events Mary is caught up in are indeed God's fulfillment of "all that the prophets had spoken." Not surprisingly, along with the plethora of artworks dedicated to the Annunciation, Christian artists have created many images depicting this portentous visit.

Mary the Bible student

Because of the doctrine of the Incarnation, Mary is associated with the fulfillment of the Word of God and thus with Scripture. In many Renaissance paintings, the angel Gabriel finds her reading the Bible. It is historically unlikely that Mary would have had access to a scroll of Torah. Yet artists seeking to symbolize her faithfulness pictured her as a careful student of the Word of God. This attentiveness to God's written Word was not only a sign of her obedience, pious artists thought, but also a preparation for her coming role as the receptacle for his Word made flesh in Jesus.

Moreover, Mary's supposed study of Scripture would make her a model for all those who would seek to harbor Christ in themselves. So, in Roger van der Weyden's (ca. 1400–1464) *Annunciation*, Mary's bedroom is imagined as a church sanctuary, and her hand is shown raised over the Bible. This makes visual her verbal words of faith and obedience: "Be it unto me according to thy Word" (Luke 1:38). Following this line of thought, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), among others, spoke of Mary as the model and patron saint of all those called to study Scripture.

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No painting of the Annunciation captures this theme so well, perhaps, as that of Robert Campin (1375/80–1444), sometimes called "The Master of Flemaille." We see Mary seated on the floor rather than on the bench, absorbed in reading Scripture. Another book, perhaps a commentary, lies on the table beside a kind of book bag and some notes. Behind her hangs the talit, or prayer shawl—presumably of her father Joachim. The vase on the table holds a lily; on it are visible Hebrew letters; the vase symbolizes Mary's virgin womb. The angel Gabriel has just entered the room; the beating of his wings has snuffed out the candle, and Mary is captured, by the painter's brilliance, just as she is beginning to shift her eyes toward Gabriel. Intent upon the Law, she is about to be surprised by grace. The Scripture cradled in her arms has its binding protected by a cloth, an allusion to the swaddling cloths in which she will wrap the newborn Jesus: this touch renders powerfully transparent the link between the Word and the Word-made-flesh.

She who was foretold

Christians seeking links between Jesus' birth and Old Testament prophecies focused early and often on Mary's unprecedented virgin conception. In this, they followed the New Testament sources. Matthew, in his telling of Jesus' birth (1:22–23), brings the promise in Isaiah to bear on Jesus—"Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (7:14). The virginity of Mary became one of the crucial tokens for early believers that Jesus was "the Christ" long expected.

Christian readers of the first century would have expected Mary to be about 12 years of age—the age ascribed to her by two apocryphal gospels and the common age of betrothal.

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Mary's youthful virginity was nonetheless theologically important, as was her lineage as a scion of the root of Jesse, the house of David. These matters, along with the spare canonical narratives, gave rise to apocryphal accounts of her childhood and parentage.

References to Mary are in other respects slight in the first centuries of the church. From the time of Irenaeus (d. A.D. 200), Christian apologists combated gnostic heretics by pointing out Mary's significant place in salvation history. This allowed them to clarify the biblical case for Christ's human as well as divine nature, over against the gnostics' spiritualizing of Christ. The formula offered by Irenaeus, that Mary is a "second Eve," becomes standard in Marian literary typology.

In second-century frescoes from Roman catacombs, we see Mary represented as the fulfillment of the "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14. Such representations amount to a statement about the two natures of Christ and the purity of his birth—a statement verbalized and made binding in the Apostles' Creed, the Chalcedonian Council, the Old Roman Baptismal Creed (Hippolytus), and the Niceno-Constantino-politan Creed (A.D. 381).

The trouble with Mary

By the fourth century, apocryphal Mary narratives had become popular among sects such as the Collyridians, whom Epiphanius (310–403) denounced for offering sacrifices of cakes to Mary, saying: "Let Mary be held in honor. Let the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be adored, but let no one adore Mary." Ambrose (ca. 339–397) similarly cautioned that worshipers must not divert to Mary the adoration due

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only to God: "Mary was the temple of God, not the God of the temple. And therefore he alone is to be worshipped who is working in his temple."

Later controversy concerning Mary's role led to various attempts by the church Fathers to clarify her specific virtues. Virginity was already a high ascetic ideal for Jerome (340/2–420), Ambrose, and Augustine (354–430), each of whom readily celebrated Mary as the premiere example of virginity as a spiritual vocation. Jerome wrote his influential *De perpetua virginitate Beatae Mariae adversus Helvidium* (A.D. 383) as a reply to Helvidius, who maintained that mention in the Gospels of the "sisters" and "brethren" of Jesus, as well as the statement that Joseph "knew her not until she had brought forth her firstborn son" (Matthew 1:25), suggests that the virginity associated with Jesus' conception and birth had evidently given way subsequently to a normal marriage relationship between Mary and Joseph.

Concerned that such a view might rank virginity lower than matrimony, for Jerome an impossible reversion to the patriarchal system of the ancient Hebrews, he uses the *Pseudo-Gospel of Mary* and the *Protevangelium of James* (ca. 180) to argue three positions that subsequently became central to Marian literature: (1) that Joseph was only apparently, not actually, the husband of Mary—in particular, that he was elderly and remained a virgin; (2) that the "brethren" of the Lord were actually his cousins, children of another Mary, the wife of Cleophas; and (3) that virginity is spiritually preferable to wedlock, which entails many hindrances to prayer.

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Perpetual bride

Since very early in the history of the church, Christians have dwelt devotionally on Mary's virginity—often insisting that that virginity was never violated throughout her life. Like other Marian themes, this one had its heyday in the medieval period. Anthony of Padua (1195–1231), who saw Mary as the natural human channel for devotion to the Passion of Christ, championed and codified the idea of the "virgin bride"—a common theme in medieval iconography. Anthony found "types" of Mary's perpetual virginity in many places in Scripture: the burning bush of Moses that burned without being consumed (Exodus 3:2); the fleece of Gideon that, as a sign of God's election, remained untouched by the night-time dew (Judges 6:37–38); and the "closed gate" of Ezekiel 44:2, which after being entered by "the LORD God of Israel" was never again to be used.

Anthony also found Mary's virginity prefigured in the mountain from which, without hands, is hewn the little stone that destroys the empires of this world (Daniel 2:34) and the "rod out of the root of Jesse" (Isaiah 11:1) which, like Aaron's, miraculously blooms.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) had written, in his commentary on the Song of Songs and in a Marian hymn, of the *"rosa sine spina"*—the rose without thorns. After Bernard, this became as frequent a symbol for Mary's loveliness as the lily was for her purity (as the medieval carol goes, "A roose hath borne a lilly white"). Finally, in one of the most important papal announcements of the Middle Ages, the *"Unam sanctam"* of Pope Boniface VIII (1302), Boniface made the bride of Song of Songs 6:8 stand officially for Mary as representative of the church, thus coloring and amplifying much of the other typology.

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Especially after the later Middle Ages, Christians saw Mary as a representative of the church in heaven—the "church triumphant"—to whom prayer might be addressed. Even so strict a biblicist as the "morning star of the Reformation," John Wyclif (1324–1384), thought it "impossible that we should obtain the reward of heaven without the help of Mary. There is no sex or age," he wrote, "no rank or position of anyone in the human race which has no need to call upon the help of the Holy Virgin."

Perhaps if England had been more influenced by Wyclif and Luther than by Calvin and Cromwell, even Reformation poets might have shied away less sharply from Mary as a subject for poetry. Calvin's central contention that Mary's "virtues and all her excellences are nothing other than the generosity of God" (*New Testament Commentaries* 1.22) leads him to say that "to this day we cannot enjoy the blessing brought to us in Christ without thinking at the same time of that which God gave as adornment and honor to Mary, in willing her to be the mother of his only-begotten Son."

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Reflect

- *David Lyle Jeffries draws connections between Mary and other great prophet-poets in the Bible. Compare Mary's poem-song (in Luke 1:46–55) to Hannah's in* **1 Samuel 2:1-10** *and David's in* **Psalm 111.** *What common threads do you discover? How often do you think of Mary as a truth-proclaimer—a "preacher" or "prophet," per se?*

- *Read* **Isaiah 7:14** *(which is quoted by Matthew in 1:22–23). How significant is it to you that God foretold Mary's role in his plan hundreds of years before it ever happened? How does this truth impact your exploration of Mary's experiences and her life?*

- *How have you seen Mary portrayed in art (painting, sculpture, and so on)? What's one artistic rendering of Mary that's particularly meaningful to you? Describe it.*

- *Throughout Christian history and in religious art, Mary has been associated with ideas not enumerated in the Bible, such as the idea that Mary was a student of Scripture and the teaching about her perpetual virginity. What other extra-biblical ideas have you heard about Mary?*

- *How can these teachings be detrimental to our understanding of who Mary really was? On the other hand, can some of these ideas (though not made clear in Scripture) aid in our understanding of Mary? Explain your perspective.*

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His Mother

Learning from Mary

by Elva McAllaster

Ever since the Reformation, Protestants have tended, in their scorn for Madonna-worship, to ignore what all Christians can learn from her. Mary's experiences were unparalleled in human history; yet at significant points they can provide a pattern for all Christians.

First, we note **Mary's total submission to God's will for her personal life** expressed in Luke 1:38: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (KJV used throughout). Our attention tends to glide too smoothly over the surface of those familiar words. What must have whirled within her consciousness on that annunciation day and afterwards? Surely there was uncertainty, fear of misunderstanding, fear of scorn, fear of unknowns. Which of us, facing a decision to accept Christ initially or to accept any new yielding to him, has not experienced similar emotions? But how often is our response so wholly affirmative, so accepting?

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In the instant of the angelic greeting, did Mary have any prophetic awareness that her acceptance and submission would mean an arduous trip over interminable hills during the final stages of pregnancy? (To see Mary more intelligently and more humanly, one who has never been pregnant might ask any pregnant woman, any mother, what it would have been like to walk or ride a donkey across all those hills between Nazareth and Bethlehem.) Did Mary have any inkling that "be it unto me" would mean an exile in Egypt, and the sword-piercings that would come to her own heart when his was pierced by a Roman blade?

Perhaps she did. One would think, however, that she did not yet know what she gave assent to; that like any of us she agreed sight unseen; that her acceptance of God's will was just that, acceptance of God's will. Acceptance of the unknown, the never before experienced, the potentially ominous; acceptance of that which may carry a bitter price to the one who says "be it unto me."

Mary accepted, and saw herself as "the handmaid of the Lord." In her submission she was an exemplar for any Christian of any era, for any Christian at any level of spiritual maturity, for any stumbling seeker after an encounter with the Holy. "Be it unto me according to thy word" is an appropriate response—the only totally appropriate response—in any of the circumstances of life. In practical decisions of mundane affairs, in one's efforts toward specific Christian service, in the prunings of the believer's soul that the Holy Spirit would carry out day by day: "Be it unto me according to thy word."

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Secondly, Luke 2:51 suggests that **Mary found and understood the roles of authority and responsibility within God's plan:** "He went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them."

Her son was divine, and she knew that fact from the Annunciation moment, from the first moments when he began to become flesh within her flesh. Yet Divinity as a human teenager "was subject unto" human parenthood. In accepting the authority of God over her life ("be it unto me"), Mary accepted also the role of a disciplining mother. Imagination supplies conjectures as to what being "subject" meant, day by day. When to get up. When to go to bed. When to bring water from the village well. When to carry lumber into the carpenter shop. When to give fraternal care to the other children. When to help with the grubbiest chores in a peasant household. Whatever the details, he was "subject unto" his parents.

One wonders if Mary sometimes squirmed against and questioned the task of instructing and disciplining Deity. However difficult she may have found it to do, she carried her responsibility: her Son was subject unto her and her husband. The implications seem inescapable for any family that thinks carefully about Christian lifestyles. Even in (or especially in) an era that tends to see adults as being subject unto their teenagers rather than vice versa, the implications are inescapable.

Next, **she was a meditating mother**. The record continues in Luke 2:51: "His mother kept all these sayings in her heart." And the Christmas story reported (Luke 2:19) that Mary "kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart."

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Again, her experiences were unique among those of all human beings, and yet she was an archetype, a pattern for all mortals. She is especially a pattern for hurried, flurried, materialistic Americans who do not know how to ponder on anything, who do not know even faintly how to ponder upon God's actions in their own lives.

How often do we even linger through a postlude after a Sunday-morning service to "ponder" on God's Word that has just been preached to us? How often do we watch a sunset through, and ponder? How often do we ponder his doings while we commute, shop, clean floors, or pull weeds in a garden? How often do we "ponder" together, in conversation with other Christians, his ways with us?

Mary was, furthermore, **one who gave leadership to the Christian community in its communal prayer**. Among the scriptural allusions to her, one of the strangely neglected ones is Acts 1:14. In their preparation for Pentecost, the disciples in the upper room "continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus." Obviously they were not praying to his Father through her; she was a supplicator with them, a part of the "one accord." But one would assume that her presence contributed strength and energy, faith and fervor, to the apostolic prayers, and that she was a resource in "supplication" on many other occasions. Without undue extrapolation from Acts 1:14, one would assume that she knew, as intensely as did any of the others in that prayer fellowship, the yearnings that preceded Pentecost and the vitality that succeeded it.

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Every Christian community (tiny local church, mission, denomination, fellowship, or organization) needs those who are ready to join "with one accord," on all sorts of occasions, "in prayer and supplication." Within the community, every day brings its opportunities, its pressures, its sorrows, its yearnings. Every community needs a Mary—many a Mary—to carry the weight of supplication within, for, and beyond the community.

In her prayer, and in the other ways we have noted, Mary is an inspiration and pattern for us all.

This article originally appeared in the May 1972 issue of Christianity Today*; it was republished online at* **ChristianityToday.com** *in May 2000. Elva McAllaster, professor of English at Greenville College (Illinois) from 1956 until her retirement in 1988, died August 12, 1997 at age 74.*

Reflect

- *Elva McAllaster highlights four key ideas about Mary: her total submission to God, her understanding of her responsibilities within God's plan, her meditation, and her significant role in the early church's prayer life. Which of these ideas is most new or unique to you—something you may not have thought of before? What stands out to you about it?*

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- *What does it really mean to have an attitude of submission to God? How, particularly recently, have you struggled to submit to God's will for your life? Explain.*

- *Mary—like many of us—was given the role of the "disciplining mother." Jesus (God-in-the-flesh) was subject to her! Imagine yourself in Mary's place; what might it have been like to be "in charge" of Jesus?*

- *How can Mary's example guide you in your own attitude toward the responsibilities or authority God has given to you in this season of your life?*

- *Elva emphasizes that Mary was a "meditating mother." Read the context surrounding the two instances in which Scripture draws attention to Mary's habit of contemplation:* **Luke 2:15–19** *and* **41–42**. *What, specifically, do you imagine Mary was pondering? How can following Mary's example in pondering the things of God strengthen one's Christian walk?*

- *Mary's presence during a key period of prayer in the early church was important enough to be specifically mentioned by Luke. How dedicated are you to praying with and for others? How does Mary's example inspire you?*

- *In light of all you've read in this download, how has God used Mary's story and experiences to challenge and inspire you in your own Christian life?*

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Additional Resources

Articles, books, and Bible studies to help you further.

Articles

"The Blessed Evangelical Mary"—*Why we shouldn't ignore her any longer*
By Timothy George, available from **ChristianityToday.com**

"Come, Thou Long Unexpected Jesus"—*Why Christ's incarnation is just as surprising today as it was 2,000 years ago.*
By Sheila Walsh, available from **Kyria.com**

"The Gritty Reality of the Nativity"—*Are we participants or watchers of the Christmas story?*
By Jill C. Perrin, available from **Kyria.com**

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"The Mary We Never Knew"—*Why the mother of Jesus was more revolutionary than we've been led to believe.*
By Scot McKnight, available from **ChristianityToday.com**

"More Important Than Christmas?"—*Why pro-life Protestants don't say much about the Annunciation—or the unborn Jesus.*
By Ted Olsen, available from **ChristianityToday.com**

"Our Lord's Virgin Birth"—*Why it matters that "a real son of a real mother" did not have a human father.*
A Christianity Today editorial from 1959, available from **ChristianityToday.com**

"The Serene Contradiction of the Mother of Jesus"—*Why I reclaimed the virgin mother as a significant figure in my faith*
By Kathleen Norris, available from **ChristianityToday.com**

"A Spirit of Surrender"—*We can learn a lot about letting go from Jesus' mother, Mary.*
By Wendy Murray Zoba, available from **Kyria.com**

"Virgin Facts"—*Is there proof that Mary gave birth to Jesus, the Messiah?*
By Christin Ditchfield, available from **Kyria.com**

"The Way to Bethlehem"—*The figurines in my nativity set were drawn to the Christ child for different reasons, but God called them all.*
By Elesha Coffman, available from **Kyria.com**

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Books

Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary, edited by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia Rigby (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002; 168 pages). Despite her prominence in the Christian narrative, Mary has largely been neglected within the Protestant church. Recent interest in such issues as feminism, spirituality, parenting, and ecumenism, however, force a serious reexamination of Mary's place in Protestant faith. In this book, widely respected Protestant scholars seek to answer three basic questions: Who is Mary? How does Mary's story intersect with contemporary life? and What does Mary teach us about God? This thoughtful and highly accessible book will be of great interest to all engaged in the debates of the contemporary church, Protestant and Roman Catholics alike.

Mary: Mother of God, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Eerdmans, 2004; 136 pages). Since the Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431), orthodox Christianity has confessed Mary as *Theotokos*, "Mother of God." Yet neither this title nor Mary's significance has fared well in Protestant Christianity. In the wake of new interest in Mary following Vatican II and recent ecumenical dialogues, this volume seeks to make clear that Mariology is properly related to Christ and his church in ways that can and should be meaningful for all Christians. Written with insight and sensitivity by Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant scholars, these seven studies inquire into Mary's place in the story of salvation, in personal devotion, and in public worship.

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The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus by Scot McKnight (Paraclete, 2006; 164 pages). Evangelicals and Catholics can find common ground on Mary, says this widely respected New Testament scholar. In provocative chapters he considers "woman of justice," "woman of witness," "woman of sorrow," "woman of wonder," "woman of surrender," "woman of faithfulness," "woman of controversy."

Bible Studies

"Giving Mary Her Due"—a single-session study exploring how Evangelicals can learn from Mary, available from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**

"The People of the Nativity"—a five-session study looking at Mary and other key figures of the Nativity story, available **ChristianBibleStudies.com**

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