

Viewpoint

Who Was Mary?¹

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This is not a theological disquisition. It describes a personal conception of the most popular woman in the New Testament: Mary, the mother of Jesus. It does not relate in any way to a formal religion. While most of us profess some kind of religion there is a difference between religion as professing and as belief or faith that transcends sense experience or even reason. The latter view is rejected by logicians and obstinate epistemologists who argue that what is not verifiable through empirical test or logical analysis cannot be true and therefore does not deserve belief. That is why Bertrand Russell said he believed in the multiplication table and not much else.

The American philosopher John Dewey went further. He argued that moral propositions should pass the criterion of intelligent testing. He did not mean that we should try stealing to determine whether honesty works or not. Some government officials and employees have found that indeed dishonesty “works” or pays (well). There is a lesson here for people who are always proposing pilot testing to solve problems.

On the other hand, there are those whose faith is so strong that no amount of contrary evidence can shake it, viz., the belief that the world is flat, that evolution is a figment of scientists’ imagination, that overpopulation can be resolved by prayer.

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Let us focus on Mary, the mother of Jesus, a powerful icon in the Roman Catholic religion. What was she like? Conventional wisdom informs us that she is the Mother of God, a powerful intercessor for people, and a healer if her reported frequent apparitions are to be believed.

No less than Pope Pius IX defined Mary's immaculate conception in 1854 when natural science was leaning increasingly toward materialism. In 1864, this Pope published a comprehensive list of modern errors that was a total rejection of the modern outlook. It included the 8th error: "The Roman Pontiff can and must be reconciled and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization."

This rejection of the secular outlook was regressive. It arrested the development of the Church into an intellectually open, humane organization until Vatican II, although Pope Leo XIII corrected to some extent Rome's negative attitude toward democracy and liberal freedom.

Today one question has been raised by unorthodox thinkers, which relates in some way to Mary: Is God masculine?

Hans Kung states that it was Jesus who proclaimed God as Father. Other religions also suggest a male god called father, viz., Zeus. But in an age of "women's emancipation," we must be cautious about using this title. The conception of God as Father often served as religious justification of a sociological paternalism at the expense of women. It was a means of suppressing permanently the feminine element in the Church. This father ideology is the basis of an exclusively male Son Christology...

However, in matriarchal cultures, instead of God the Father, there is the Great Mother "out of whose fertile womb all things and beings emerged, and into which they return... it is quite possible... that matriarchy is older than patriarchy. In that case the cult of the mother deity, which exercised some influence... in Asia Minor, or the cult of Mary... would have preceded chronologically, that of the Father God."

In other words God could be feminine. This might offend those male chauvinists in Congress who bristled with outrage when the definition of rape was expanded to include various forms of sexual harassment.

I did not question the image of Mary acquired in the early years of schooling in convent school: an image of an obedient, submissive, beautiful maiden and mother who was chosen by a male God to be His Son's mother. Only in later life did I begin to question this conception of Mary.

In our culture, we ask of a man or woman nominee for some important position: who is he/she? And then we investigate antecedents like family or even ancestors. But in multinational companies, an applicant is asked What are your skills and how low a salary will you accept? This also applies to overseas contract workers (OCWs).

So it seems relevant to ask: Who were Mary's biblical predecessors? They may not have been blood relatives but the personalities they projected might yield an inkling of Mary's personality.

In *The book of J.*, a masterpiece of literary restoration by a nameless woman, it is the women, not the men, who live at greater risk, grappling with present dangers and threats. These women Sarai, Rebecca, Rachel, Tamar and Zipporah — all show a grand hardness, a **GEVURAH**, in which they surpass most men. Perhaps a more apt term is toughness. I prefer an American slang term: gutsiness. These women were gutsy. They had guts. To use a more formal phrase, they had intestinal fortitude.

1. Sarai, wife of Abram. A conspicuous structural feature of the biblical patriarchal family is its location of women within the role of motherhood. A woman is a child bearer. This is her primary, legitimate place. It is her identity. What did Sarai do about this?

...Sarai, Abram's wife, had not borne him a child, but she had an Egyptian servant named Hagar, and she said to Abram, "Now

since Yahweh has kept me from having children, go to my servant; perhaps I shall have a child by her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said.

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He went in to Hagar and she became pregnant.

When she was aware of this, she began to despise her mistress. Sarai said to Abram, "May this injury done to me be yours. I put my servant in your arms and now that she knows she is pregnant, I count for nothing in her eyes. Let Yahweh judge between me and you." Abram said to Sarai, "Your servant is in your power, do with her as you please." Then Sarai treated her so badly that she ran away. (Genesis 16: 1-19)

Sarai was bitter; she blamed Yahweh for her childlessness. This drove her to suggest that Abram beget a child by Hagar, who became the mother of Ishmael. Sarai reproached Abram and drove the pregnant Hagar away with her jealous cruelties. Note too, how cold bloodedly Abram left Hagar's fate to Sarai's impaired judgment.

2. Rebecca fooled her husband Isaac into bestowing his Blessing on her favorite son Jacob instead of Esau. How did she do this?

Rebecca ordered Jacob to catch two kids so that she could prepare the dish that the blind Isaac, his father, liked. "You will bring it to your father and he will eat it and give you his blessing before he dies."

Jacob objected that he was not hairy like Esau, Rebecca covered his hands and neck with goat skin and put Esau's clothes on him. She assuaged his fears by insisting that if anything went amiss, she would bring Isaac's curse on herself rather than on Jacob.

The trick worked. Rebecca not only used deceit, she was also willing to bear the consequences if that deceit was revealed prematurely.

3. Rachel was Jacob's chosen but rejected when he was tricked into marrying her sister Leah. Later she did marry Jacob. Why did she steal her father's household gods, her figurine idols or teraphim?

After staying a long time with Laban, Jacob and his family decided to return to his father Isaac in Canaan. This they did by leaving without notifying Laban. Enraged, Laban pursued them.

...Laban entered Jacob's tent, then Leah's and then the tent of the two maidservants but he found nothing. When Laban came out of Leah's tent, he entered the tent of Rachel. Rachel had taken the gods, had put them into the camel's saddle, and sat on them. Laban felt all about the tent but did not find them. Rachel said to her father, "Do not be angry with me, my lord, if I do not stand in your presence, for I am having my period." So he searched but did not find the gods. (Genesis 31: 33-35).

Rachel was a very resolute wife stealing her own father's figurine idols to ensure her husband's share in her inheritance. There is weird humor in the scene where she sits on the idols and tells her father that she cannot rise because she is having a woman's period.

Moral lesson: woman can use their monthly period for political purposes.

4. Who was Tamar?

She was the widow of Judah's first born son, Er who, however, died young. In accordance with Hebrew law, Judah instructed his second son Onan to "lie with your brother's widow and fulfill the duties of a brother-in-law; the child to be born will be the heir of your brother. But Onan knew the child would not be his, so whenever he slept with his father's widow he spilled the semen on the ground..."

Judah told Tamar to live as a widow in her father's house. (In Hebrew society, a childless widow had little, if any, social status.)

Then Judah himself was widowed. After some time he went to Tinnah to shear his sheep. When Tamar learned of this, she took off her widow's clothes, wrapped herself in a veil and sat on the road to Tinnah.

Judah saw her and took her for a prostitute. He promised that he would send her a kid from his flock if she slept with him. When

she demanded a pledge to guarantee his sending her a kid, he gave her his seal, his cord and staff. So he had sex with Tamar who became pregnant.

Word reached Judah that his widowed daughter-in-law was pregnant. This angered him. He demanded that she be burned as punishment for her sin.

“As they were bringing her out, she sent word to her father-in-law. “I have become pregnant by the man who own these things. Find out to whom this seal, cord, and staff belong!” Judah acknowledged them and said, “She is more righteous than I am since I would not give her my (third)son Shelah!” (Genesis 39: 24-26)

Tamar was driven by a desire to become the bearer of the Blessing (a prophetic statement of future fame or glory) through her sons. And she insured this role for herself through her initiative and resourcefulness.

Tamar’s story ended with the birth of twin boys, Peretz whose name means “breach” and Zerah, or “brightness” who thus replaced the pallid Er and the unpleasant Onan. Through Peretz she became an ancestor of David.

5. Zipporah was the wife of Moses. A strange incident showed her strength and bravery.

“At a lodging place on the way, the Angel of Yahweh approached Moses and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flintstone and cut her son’s foreskin and with it, she touched the feet of Moses saying, “You are now my husband by blood.” And the Angel left him. Zipporah said ‘husband by blood’ because of the circumcision.” (Exodus 4:24-26)

She smeared the blood from their infant’s son foreskin between the legs (feet?) of Moses, “because you are my blood bridegroom.” This caused Yahweh to retreat from an ostensive and strange plan to destroy Moses.

These were Mary’s biblical predecessors. How does she compare with them in strength of will and intestinal fortitude? What is

the image of Mary which the Church hierarchy projects? A local Marian publication promotes a consistent image of Mary.

1. The Virgin is an eschatological prophet. We must pray, do penance for our sins, live simple and obedient lives to avoid the wrath of God in the last judgment.

2. Like a sorrowing mother, she urges us to pray constantly. Her interpreters are also ideological. She is credited with having induced the collapse of communism. Does she have a political agenda?

3. She is a healer. Through her reported apparitions she is said to have healed people afflicted with serious diseases and other ailments.

4. She is also a prophet of crisis. According to a report that is not verifiable, she has predicted that the early 1990's will be a period of deadly natural disasters, famine, wars. (What about Year 2000?)

5. Her message is: we can reach Jesus through her.

There is some disrespectful informality in the way people, even clerics address her: Mama Mary. As the Mother of God, she deserves better titles.

I suggest that Mary is more than this role of meek, quiet suppliant. She had intestinal fortitude. Despite the deplorable silence of the Bible on the interesting facets of her character, I suggest that she was a strong-willed woman. Certainly, Christ could not have deserved less.

There are some incidents that suggest this.

1. The annunciation

The angel came to her and said, "Rejoice, full of grace, the Lord is with you." Mary listened and was troubled at his words, wondering what this greeting could mean.

But the angel said, "Do not fear, Mary, for God has looked kindly on you. You shall conceive and bear a son and you shall call

him Jesus. He will be great and shall rightly be called the Son of God..."

Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be if I am a Virgin? And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the holy child to be born shall be called Son of God."

She did not receive the message without protesting. Her objection can be paraphrased: "Why me? I have had no contact with any man." (Luke 1: 28-32; 34-35)

2. In the Magnificat, she sang exultantly as a champion of the poor.

"He has acted with power and done wonders and scattered the proud with their plans. he has put down the mighty from their thrones and lifted up those who are downtrodden. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."
(Luke 1: 51-53)

3. Her silence during the search for lodgings when she was about to give birth and on the flight to Egypt was due more to the patriarchal biblical writers than to the assumed total surrender, even abjectness, on her part.

4. When the twelve year old Jesus was lost in the temple, having chosen to have discussions with the scribes, she reprimanded him as a strong mother would. It is not certain that his reply appeased her. (Luke 2: 48-50)

5. At the wedding in Cana, she waved away His protestations and practically ordered Him to help the hosts serve more wine. Like it or not he obeyed his mother: he performed a miracle. (John 2: 1-10)

6. Throughout His mission, Mary was there, agonizing with Him, but determined to be with Him. She remained with a few women and the beloved Apostle, under the cross until the very end. The other male apostles had run away in fear.

I do not know that these perceived strengths make her a co-redeemer. However, these incidents suggest a strength of will, a character entirely different from the conventional image that the Church has promoted.

After all, she was a Jewish mother.

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NOTE:

Priscila Santos Manalang died on 11 June 1995 at the age of 76. Although she was often beset by illness, she served actively as a Coordinating Committee Member of the University Center for Women's Studies, committed to its goals and closely involved in its projects and activities.

The editors are proud to include in this issue one of the last essays she wrote. We remember her for a wisdom that was never ponderous, an incisive and forthright style and her inevitable wry humor.