



A Contemplative, Biblical Analysis of Mary, Mother of Christ

What did Mary really know?

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Lesson 2: What did Mary know through her virginity and the conception of our Lord?

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This lesson we will discuss Mary's life, and contemplate what she really knows concerning the events surrounding her young life, with a detailed look at her virginity, conception, and pregnancy. It is important to understand that there are some Jews who allege that Mary is not a virgin when Christ is conceived, but rather, an adulteress.¹ This charge reaches to these modern times as Bible scholars argue the meaning of the word virgin, debate Greek translation of the word, compare it to Hebrew interpretations of the word that mean *young maiden*, and use the worldview of the person to claim or disclaim Mary's virginity. Those who hold faith in their priori worldview that God acts in history recognize the important historical narratives that both Matthew and Luke present; those without faith in God's acts in history are not always convinced.² It is important for Christians to examine in detail the proofs offered by the Word of God, as we attempt to determine what Mary must have known during this important time in her life.

Proof of Mary's Virginity

When Gabriel is sent from God to visit Mary in Nazareth, his message declares Mary's virginity three specific times in Luke 1:26-38. It is mentioned twice in verse 27, first declaring that the woman espoused to Joseph from the House of David to be a virgin, and then giving the

¹ Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 16.

² Ibid.

virgin's name as Mary. Then in Luke 1:34, Mary asks the angel how she can conceive in her womb when she has never known a man in that way. The declaration of Mary's virginity in these two verses allows us to recognize the purity of her body reserved for her soon-to-be husband Joseph, the recognition by God of her purity, and Mary's knowledge of the need for sexual relations to reproduce children.

Matthew 1:18-25 also declares the historical truth that Mary is a virgin prior to conception of the Christ child. Verse 22-23 shows the angel of the Lord appears in a dream to Joseph that announces Mary will conceive through the Holy Ghost a child to be called JESUS, in fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 that announces Emmanuel's birth from a virgin. Then in verse 25, we learn that Joseph does not have sexual relations with Mary until after she brings forth her firstborn son.

Mary is betrothed to Joseph at the time of her conception. A betrothed engagement in 1st century Judaism is a formal pre-nuptial contract binding the man and young woman, around twelve or thirteen years of age, with promise to marry in a second and final public ceremony later on.³ There are witnesses present for the betrothal ceremony that is usually arranged between the parents; though it is not yet considered a marriage, the girl can be charged with adultery and face stoning should she betray her contract with her betrothed.⁴ The relationship requires a formal divorce should a break-up occur and if one party dies before the official marriage then the other partner is known as a "widow" or "widower."⁵ Legally, the betrothed

³ Ibid., 17.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

girl stays at her parent's house, and does not have sexual relations; it is only after the second official ceremony of marriage that the full expression of sexual intercourse is allowed.⁶

The Greek word used in Luke's text that is translated as "virgin" is *parthenos*. This word represents the period between childhood and adulthood, which is a young girl's ripe time when she is able to bear children, but has not yet, attained the status of *gyne* of "womanhood" in which sexual intercourse is implied.⁷ But, *parthenos* does not fully deny sexual intercourse has taken place; it is the word *parthenia* that indicates the virgin status of a pure young woman.⁸ *Parthenos* can, but does not fully reveal the status of the young girl's virginity. That leaves just enough gaps for alternate interpretations to Mary's virginity. When all other supporting Scripture in both OT and NT are examined together, there is no doubt to the historical account of Mary's virginity. But, when the same sources are fully neglected, a small bit of argument can be made, and is usually made by scholars seeking attention for their Greek exegesis skills without a thorough inclusion of all Scripture in their evaluation.

There is no account in early pagan literature or pre-Christian Judaism that reports virginal conception.⁹ In fact, the only Jewish tradition of virgin birth can be only referenced to Isaiah 7:14, which is prophesy of the Lord being born one day in human form.¹⁰ In that verse,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sarah Jane Boss, "Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary," *Theology Today* 62, no. 1 (2005): 106.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary : Luke 1:1-9:20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 47.

¹⁰ Ibid., 45.

Jewish scholars try to argue that the word for "virgin" is represented by the Hebrew word "alma" which can mean young woman and does not fully claim virgin status for the young lady; but, they acknowledge the presumption of virginity is also contained within the expression of the word.

When all evidences of the historical accounts in Matthew, Luke, and Isaiah are considered together, and the Greek and Hebrew words examined closely, there is no doubt to the virginity of Mary before the conception of Christ. Joseph and Mary remained without sex until after the birth of Christ. It was the Holy Spirit, and only the Holy Spirit, that came upon Mary and made her with child. We will examine that process next.

Conception

The Angel Gabriel comes to Mary in the sixth month and tells her that she is highly favored by God, and blessed among women. After hearing the message, she receives the vision of Gabriel's presence and becomes troubled. This unusual greeting puzzles Mary, and she ponders what sort of message is being given to her by an angel that has supernaturally appeared in her sight. The Angel Gabriel comforts her fear, restates that God favors her, and then delivers the core message that he was tasked to deliver:

And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. (Luke 1:31-33)

The young virgin girl quietly ponders this supernatural message that seems impossible to understand, and in direct conflict of her peaceful, predictable life as a Jewish maiden

betrothed to the carpenter Joseph. "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" she asks (Luke 1:34-35); Gabriel carefully explains the process of the Holy Conception to the young girl in a very detailed way that allows us to understand the conception of the Son of God inside the womb of human flesh.

The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. (Luke 1:35)

The Holy Ghost, the Spirit emanating from God, will come upon the virgin girl, and His power will overshadow her. The word "overshadow" is translated from the Greek word *episkiazo* and its usual meanings are to shade, to cover, or to conceal.¹¹ Overshadowing with the power of God is first seen in Exodus 19:9 when God comes upon the mountain and instructs Moses to bring the people to Him; this cloud concealing God's full power from the eyes of humans develops further in the divine manifestation that comes upon the tabernacle raised by Moses (Exodus 40:34). This shadowing of God rests upon the tent of the Covenant, preventing mere human beings from entering into His Presence. It is a special protection placed by God to prevent casual entrance into His Holy Presence that would destroy unprepared human flesh with contact of His power and glory. This overshadowing always possesses the place His power comes upon.¹²

¹¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, electronic ed., vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 399.

¹² *Ibid.*

Mary is overshadowed by the power of God at a time and place unrecorded in the Bible,¹³ when He comes upon her to place into her womb the presence of His Son into human flesh formed by Him alone. God's full power is hidden from the being of Mary by a shadow, to protect her human life from possible destruction from an inadvertent glance. This impregnation process is much different than normal conception, where sexual intercourse fertilizes a mother's egg with the father's sperm as the egg tumbles down the fallopian tube and eventually implants in the womb and develops into a baby. Mary's holy child, the Son of God, is conceived in her womb by the power of God. There is no egg, no sperm, no intercourse; the babe Christ is formed in Mary's womb by the power of God.

Deep thinkers can be confident that God placement of His Son in the womb of Mary has philosophical, metaphorical, and typological implications that reach far past the humble understanding of the young maiden. The Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle, and the Holy of Holies in the Temple of God, all hold a part of God's essence that is overshadowed by Him. God's presence with humanity (divine immanence) inside the constructed places made for Him to dwell within, still prevent human beings from approaching, keeping Him separated in transcendence.¹⁴ Mary's womb duplicates this process of divine immanence as her womb holds the presence of the Son of God; yet, God no longer separates Himself from His Creation. Rather, He joins His Son to the human race, no longer separated by the power that would destroy humans in His presence.

¹³ There are some rogue scholars that suggest Mary is already pregnant when Gabriel first visits her, because his greeting "The Lord is with thee" recorded in Luke 1:28. However, if the following verses (Luke 1:28-35) are taken into account, it is apparent that the overshadowing by God has not occurred yet.

¹⁴ Lyn Holness, "Mary's Womb as the 'Space within Our Space for the Gestating Son of God'," *Religion & Theology* 16, no. 1-2 (2009): 27.

Mary accepts God's will by verbally acknowledging her role: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word." Her acceptance of the Lord Jesus Christ into her womb makes her the first disciple of His; while this is probably not known to her immediately, His later ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection redeems Christ's human mother with all other believers in the Son of God. It is a promise that His mother claims first by trusting God's will and assenting to His way (Luke 1:38).

But that is just one half of the drama of the supernatural conception of the Lord Jesus Christ through a human mother. There is also her betrothed husband that must understand the supernatural process to assume the natural life role of the human father to the Christ child. The angel of the Lord informs Joseph of Mary's pregnancy in Matthew 1:18-25 a little later than probably Mary would have liked. First he learns of Mary's pregnancy and then is forced to spiritually and morally contemplate the option of private divorce to avoid public stoning (Matthew 1:18-19). Finally, in what must have been a distressful sleep, he dreams a dream that comforts him and makes him understand the supernatural adventure of parenthood that God has placed into his hands and Mary's womb:

Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which is being interpreted is God with us.

When Joseph wakes up, he does just exactly what the angel of the Lord has instructs him to do; he makes Mary his wife. While we will learn later of the conflicts of opinions of what the nature of this marriage, with one false idea expressing the perpetual virginity of Mary that is

recorded by Jerome and celebrated by Roman Catholics,¹⁵ one can be assured through the implication of Scripture that it is a normal marriage with normal sexual relationship following the birth of Jesus, the Christ (Matthew 1:25).

Mary's Kin

Mary first learns of her Cousin Elisabeth's pregnancy from Angel Gabriel. Gabriel tells her of the impending birth of John that was six months in the womb of Elisabeth in her old age (Luke 1:36) to support God's ability through His power to give life even through a barren old lady past the age of childbearing, "for with God nothing shall be impossible." (Luke 1:37) Interesting parallels are shared between Mary and Elisabeth in that both women are miraculously pregnant, each aware of the other's condition through supernatural revelation (Luke 1:36, 41-45), and each with great blessings flowing from their heart toward their Lord (Luke 1:42-45) and God (Luke 1:46-55).¹⁶

John leaps in Elisabeth's womb as Mary and newly-formed Jesus within her womb come together. It is the Holy Ghost that guides through their praises to perfect expressions of Holy joy; He enters Elisabeth as the babe in her womb leaps when she hears the salutation of Mary. In a loud voice, she declares:

Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. (Luke 1:42-22)

¹⁵ Irven M. Resnick, "Marriage in Medieval Culture : Consent Theory and the Case of Joseph and Mary," *Church History* 69, no. 2 (2000): 354.

¹⁶ Nolland, 62.

The supernatural movements of God connect the two women and the two babes even closer than their relationship had been in the past; their first meeting after God's overshadowing of Mary bring their spirits to the highest peaks of spiritual ecstasy. The fruit of Elisabeth's body understands deeper than what her mind might comprehend, forming significant words with the Holy Ghost's help to express their joy of standing together in the presence of the miraculous conception of their Lord.¹⁷ Mary feels the babe Jesus growing inside her, and is comforted by the witness of God through her kindred as they declare the miraculous conception with uncontrollable praise. For the next three months, Mary stays with Elisabeth as they support each other in the most miraculous days of their lives and ponder together the coming of the Lord.

Cousin Elisabeth

Previously we learn Mary meets Cousin Elisabeth when she is six months pregnant with John the future Baptizer who prepares the way for his second-cousin, the Lord Jesus Christ; but, we need to consider the setting a bit deeper to learn fully the things that Mary knows. Baby John's miraculous conception occurs when his parents are very old and past the time of childbearing. This shocking circumstance is talked about throughout their neighborhood, amongst both friends and family (Luke 1:58-59).

It must have seen quite strange observing an old woman pregnant with her first child. To make things even more interesting for the gossip mill, the honored Priest Zacharias has been made mute during this time. And when the child is born, he is named "John" according to the

¹⁷ J.P. Lange, Dods, Marcus, *The Life of the Lord Jesus Christ: A Complete Critical Examination of the Origin, Contents, and Connection of the Gospels*, 4 vols., vol. 1 (Edinburgh, London; Dublin: T&T Clark, 1872), 295.

angel's instructions, with total disregard for traditional name after his father at his baptism (Luke 1:59-63).

All of the miraculous details of John's conception, the visit by the angel and Zacharias' speech relayed by the angel of the Lord were told to the inquisitive onlookers; of course, Mary quietly receives this information during her three month visit before the birth of the baby. The stirring interest of townsfolk and kin with their excitement in the birth of the baby John must have been quite an exciting time for her, as she ponders the future for her own child and tries to put the pieces of all the supernatural events into an order that her young mind can understand.

In our next lesson, we will exam the exaltations of Elisabeth, Mary, and Zacharias that are stirred by the Holy Spirit in this period of John's conception and birth. It is in these holy songs and prayers that we learn more about the knowledge Mary has prior to the birth of her son.

Bonus Lesson: The Development of Marian Theology in History

Seldom is a Protestant Bible study done without complicating Mary's story with traditional beliefs reflecting differences in various historical periods and doctrine. Scripture is rich in material that allows us to know much more about Mary than we first realize with casual reading and is able to provide a full character Bible study without addressing the peripheral issues. However, this Bible study is written for more mature Christian students that might run into these differences as their Bible study progresses. The more maturity Christians gain, the more opportunities and challenges come to defend evangelical Protestant faith which makes it important to examine these things.

At the end of Lessons 2 and 3, these different ideas and perspectives are explained to equip Protestants to understand the conflicts of tradition. They are somewhat outside the regular lesson, to provide the information, but stand away from our Scripture study of Mary's life.

Our first Bonus lesson briefly examines Mary through different historical periods of Christianity:

Gnostics – Some interest is paid Mary, with a gnostic document entitled *Pistis Sophia*, questioning the actual occurrence of the human birth of Jesus.¹⁸ Though Mary's virginity is maintained before childbirth in Apocryphal literature in that time, they also contain some accounts of Mary's own birth described in miraculous terms.¹⁹

Early Church Fathers – The writings of the early church fathers reemphasizes biblical accounts of Mary as the mother of Jesus.²⁰ They fight against the gnostic denial of Jesus' human birth, and the extremes expressed in Apocryphal literature. They are not interested in Mary as the object of their faith; rather, they approach her as a sign of proof that God has intervened in human history and taken the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth through her womb.²¹

Early Church reflection often associate the Virgin Mary with the new Eve; while the first Eve brings forth disobedience and death by obeying the serpent, the Virgin Mary takes on faith

¹⁸ Jim Ernest Hunter, "Blessed Art Thou among Women : Mary in the History of Christian Thought," *Review & Expositor* 83, no. 1 (1986): 35.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 36.

and joy by giving permission to God through Gabriel, "Be it unto me according to thy word."²² (Luke 1:38) This idea of Mary rescuing the fallen human race is faulty in the excess blame given to Eve and the undue credit given to Mary for human salvation.²³

The early church does not question Mary's virginity, but many early writers declare her sinless.²⁴ Hippolytus says Mary is the "incorruptible wood" from which the body of Jesus was formed.²⁵ Augustine declares, "Concerning the Virgin, I wish to raise no question when it touches the subject of sin, out of honor to the Lord, for from Him we know what abundance of grace to overcome sin in every way was conferred upon her who undoubtedly had no sin."²⁶

Council of Ephesus – The turning point in Marian doctrinal and traditional development comes at The Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431.²⁷ Her divine maternity is defined by the Council as *Theotokos*, God-bearer.²⁸ Before the Council, Christian leaders fear that the uniqueness of Christ will be compromised if Mary is elevated.²⁹ And, there are many different worshippers of

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, *A Treatise on Nature and Grace*, trans., Peter Holmes, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, vol. V (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 135.

²⁷ Hunter: 36.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 447.

false goddesses prior to the Council, and the leaders do not want Mary to fall into that group by mistaken association.³⁰

When Mary is declared *Theotokos*, it is for the purpose of reflecting the human nature of Christ initially.³¹ However, it soon migrates to the “perfect disciple” concept that is a model for the Church, and her chasteness, purity, and poverty become an ascetic ideal in orthodoxy.³² She becomes an ideal woman, representing a pure Church, and separate from a normal human existence.

Medieval Period - After Ephesus, a complex and excessive Marian dogma develops during the medieval period.³³ For the first 500 years, the doctrines expressing Mary’s virginity and divine maternity are added upon. Then 500 years prior to the Reformation, Mary is officially embraced as “Co-redemptrix, Queen of heaven, and Queen of Mercies.”³⁴ Anselem prays:

Therefore, O Lady, Gate of life, Door of salvation, Way of reconciliation, Entrance to restoration, I beseech thee by thy saving fruitful-ness, see that the pardon of my sins and the grace to live well are granted to me, and that thy servant is guarded even to the end under thy protection God, therefore, is the father of created things, and Mary is the Mother of re-created things— The Mother of God is our Mother.³⁵

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 37.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Anselem, *A Prayer to Saint Mary*, A Scholastic Miscellany (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 202, 204, 205.

Thomas a Kempis refers to Mary as “the expiator of all the sins I have committed” and “my only hope.” Soon most in the church believe that Mary’s intercession and mediation are the basis for the grace of God bestowed upon them and providing answers to their prayers.

Reformation – Martin Luther is a great admirer of the “mother of God” and Huldrych Zwingli insists upon devotion being shown her. He thinks she is “an instrument of salvation-history, and a model of Christian life, a sign and a witness, who points to the miracle and mystery of Christ.”³⁶ John Calvin remains guarded in discussing Mary; though he writes a great deal about her, he is uncomfortable with the title *Theotokos*, and fears that Mary will be praised more than Christ.³⁷

Modern Period – Mary’s identification as the perfect Christian, with divine maternity, worthy character, and a role in mediation of sins is the view of most Catholics today. The Doctrine of Mary’s Assumption, which we will cover a bit more in the next lesson, is added in the Modern Period belief in Mary by Pope Pius XII officially.

Mary continues to be a symbol for the Roman Catholic Church while many conservative and evangelical Christians stand a bit aloof from her in response to faulty Catholic doctrine. In recent years, a feminist movement has taken hold that rejects both traditional and Scripture Mary as a model for women that they charge absurdly displays femininity and subordination.³⁸ Some feminists try to rewrite Scripture by creating a Mary that is historically remembered as a

³⁶ Walter Hollenweger, *Zwingli’s Devotion to Mary*, *Mary in Protestant Theology* (One in Christ, 1980), 65.

³⁷ Hunter: 40.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

strong woman that stands alone, and associate her with the false goddess “Sophia” to achieve their end goals.

Thanks be to God that He has placed Scripture in our hands, and we don't have the need to rely upon man's tradition to learn about the blessed mother of Christ! It's time to return to our Scripture lessons and recapture Mary's human experience in a supernatural event that rocks her world, and provides her and all other believers salvation through the belief in the only Son of God.

Conclusion

Mary ponders. She receives information from Gabriel that she has never heard before. She takes it all in, with her Cousin Elisabeth's support in a very supernatural time in her life. But, Mary is not supernatural, and she is neither a pretend hyper-spiritual nor a perverse hyper-sexual; she is not superhuman, she is not sinless, and she is not the redeemer of sin. She is a young virgin girl that finds favor with God, and is chosen by Him to conceive His Son through the process of miraculous conception. To suggest that Mary is more than what she is corrupts faith and the Word of God, giving false power to people rather than expressing the full omnipotence of the LORD God that expresses his will perfectly.

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