

Mary for Today - Part 7 of 10 – Mary in St Matthew

Introduction

Mary plays a small but significant role in Matthew, principally in the infancy narrative. Questions were being asked about the origins of Jesus, his ancestry, his birthplace, his place in the Old Testament, and his parents. This Gospel attempts to answer such questions, firstly by placing Jesus deep within the Jewish tradition and as the fulfilment of their messianic hope. These ancestors were mainly ordinary folk who advanced God's plan by their fidelity to the usual tasks of everyday life.

Genealogy 1:1-17

This moves from Abraham to David to the Messiah, one end of Jewish history to the other, humble beginnings to glorious fulfilment. Four notable exceptions occur in the patriarchal cadences; women rarely were mentioned in Jewish genealogies; four in a brief genealogy is exceptional. Why should these four women be part of a list that ends with Mary, the mother of Jesus?

- a. St. Jerome regarded the four as all sinners, and Jesus came to save sinners; later Jewish tradition considered Rahab and Ruth as heroines. Most certainly, these women were not considered sinners in Jewish tradition. They were looked on with respect and praised for their deeds.
- b. Luther said they were all foreigners; Matthew makes much of Jesus' mission to foreign Gentiles. But Matthew does not emphasise their non-Israelite origins. This is not necessarily the case with Tamar or Bathsheba. And the theory fails to take into account the fifth woman, Mary, of whom Jesus, called the Christ, was born.
- c. All five share irregular marriages yet were vehicles of God's messianic plan. All have something extraordinary or irregular in their situation, their marriage relationship, and their pregnancy. It was a scandal to those outside the mystery of God's plan working through them.
- d. Each occurs at a critical moment in the history of God's people. All preserve the God-willed line of the Messiah. Tamar at the critical origins of the tribe of Judah, before the entry into Egypt, Rahab at the moment of entry into the Promised Land, later marrying Joshua and becoming ancestor to several prophets including Jeremiah, Ruth at the beginnings of Kingship in Israel, and Bathsheba at its full flowering in Solomon. In difficult circumstances these foremothers each dreamed of a future and acted to bring it about.

Fulfilment in the Unexpected

Mary brings to fulfilment the promise inherent in the life of all these women. God works through the extraordinary and unexpected. These final two explanations seem to apply to all five women, not just four. "That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (1:20); there is just enough whisper of a scandal, and a clear history that the God of Israel who is the God of Jesus sides with the outcast, the endangered woman and her child.

God works in history through the abused Tamar who suffers injustice from Judah and his sons; through Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute who becomes a heroine of Jewish liberation; through Ruth, vulnerable Moabitess, who enters the messianic line; through Bathsheba who is violated by the king, whose husband is murdered, whose life is appropriated to the royal purposes without negotiation or discussion, and yet who becomes a vital link in the Davidic history. The same is true of Mary. She is not a member of the Davidic line (see Lk 1:5) but becomes so through Joseph's espousal of her, a sort of "illegitimate" royalty, as with her Son. She is vulnerable to the sanctions of the law and

liable to rigorous punishment. She is voiceless in Matthew's narrative, yet, along with her extraordinary predecessors, embodies and brings to pass the blessings of God, becoming the arena of sacred history, the place where God's promises to Israel are carried out. Against the prejudices and head-wagging of contemporary culture and social standards, all these women were to be considered as the wonderful instruments of God's plan for humanity.

Wisdom from the East (2:1-12)

Matthew and Luke tell very different stories. Matthew begins in Bethlehem then brings the family up to Nazareth by a circuitous route, via Egypt, that reflects his own theological interest. The parents live in a house in Bethlehem, settled rather than transient, where the child is born. The magi enter this house as the goal of their quest. The danger of death that Mary earlier faced from patriarchal law now gives place to the menace of the state in the form of Herod. The messianic title 'King of the Jews' appears here in its only use before the passion narrative where it appears above the Cross. Suffering looms on the horizon.

The magi were people engaged in mystic, supernatural arts, notably astrology, rather than kings. They represent the wise and learned among the Gentiles. They make the first public acknowledgement of the messianic identity of Mary's child, but it brings peril by drawing the unwelcome attention of the powerful to the existence of this young vulnerable child. The magi find the child 'with Mary his mother'; she is there at the heart of the new things God is doing in this world. But she is also at the centre of the terror and displacement that follows the visit of the magi as Joseph, warned in a dream of those who sought to put out the light of the star at its rising, took 'the child and his mother' and fled by night into Egypt.

This is a scene of terrible fear propelling escape in the dark from oncoming murder with no guarantee of success; the iron swords, the baby blood, the red pavement stone, the empty eyes and grief of shocked mothers, a young family's life in exile in a foreign land, with a strange language, customs, and institutions. The plight of millions of refugees is in solidarity with the plight of this small family of 2,000 years ago. Few things are more traumatic than losing your family's home. In a foreign land, Joseph, as a migrant worker, a non-national, would have had to do the most menial tasks in order to survive - the position of many underprivileged refugees. Mary's own situation would not have been any better. It is a pity that popular devotion to Mary does not recall her in this experience as a poor courageous woman.

References

Brown, R. et al. (1978). *Mary in the New Testament*. Fortress/Paulist Press: NY.
Moloney, F. J. (1988). *Mary Woman and Mother*. St. Paul Publications: Homebush.

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Reflection

1. Does this picture of Mary seem far removed from the Mary we have grown up with?
2. What risks did Mary take with her "Yes" to God to be the mother of Jesus?
3. What elements in Matthew's account bring it close to our own day?
4. An annunciation to Joseph rather than Mary. Why does this happen in Matthew?