



A Place for Mary in Protestant Ministry?

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Is there a place for Mary in Protestant ministry? Apart from her appearances in crèches and brief references in the sermons of Advent and Christmas, the answer reflected in practice seems to be resolutely negative.

For the last several years, I have been at work on a literary analysis of the characterization of Mary in the gospels. The responses to such a project among a diverse group of Protestant acquaintances have been revealing, for many have taken the conventional stance of disinterest, perpetuating the notion that Mary is the property of Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions and, thus, of no real significance to Protestants. Some others have expressed an interest in my project, motivated by feminist discussions of Mary in the Catholic community¹ or, less often, by ecumenical discussions of Mary.²

These differing responses share an attitude toward Mary that is largely reactive; that is, they begin as responses to the traditions of others rather than as attempts to think about Mary from a Protestant perspective.³ To think about Mary

¹For a recent survey of this discussion, see Els Maeckelberghe, *Desperately Seeking Mary: A Feminist Appropriation of a Traditional Religious Symbol* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991) 7-42.

²This appears to be a prime motivating factor in John Macquarrie's book, *Mary for All Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

³Many traditions about Mary are part of common Christian tradition, of course, antedating the Protestant reformation by many centuries. Nevertheless, most Protestants have little experience of these as living traditions within their own faith communities.

in a way consistent with Protestant traditions will mean, of course, to give serious consideration to the place of Mary in Scripture.⁴

Even beginning a consideration of Mary with Scripture will raise some objections, however. First, attention to Mary may seem to compromise the centrality of Jesus Christ in the gospel stories. The gospels are about Jesus, not about Mary or anyone else. Nevertheless, other characters—even minor figures—regularly function in our preaching and ministry without seeming to threaten the place of Jesus. Peter's denial of Jesus provides reminders of the vacillation to which even the staunchest allies are susceptible. Thomas' unwillingness to believe the story of Jesus' resurrection becomes an avenue for thinking about the nature of faith itself. Why should not the stories in which Mary appears be considered in similar ways?

A second objection is that Mary appears so seldom in Scripture that virtually nothing can be said about her. If our questions about Mary are primarily historical, then this objection must be acknowledged; we know virtually nothing about the real woman who gave birth to Jesus. If

our questions are literary and theological, however, we will find that even minor characters can play important roles in the unfolding story of the gospels. In fact, the evangelists' treatments of Mary connect her with themes that are fundamental to the gospel itself and to ministry in the name of that gospel.

In this essay I shall briefly consider three of those themes: the scandal of Mary (Matthew), the reflection of Mary (Luke), and the witness of Mary (John). With each theme, I move from discussion of the gospel narratives to some reflections about the way that theme might be embodied in ministry. Space constraints necessitate omitting the methodological considerations that should accompany these reflections, but they are in any case intended to suggest and provoke rather than to define and restrict.⁵

I. THE SCANDAL OF MARY

To speak of Mary having any role in the gospel of Matthew may seem odd. Most studies of Matthew 1-2 note that this story is focalized on the figure of Joseph and especially on the dreams that motivate his actions. Mary initiates no action and, in fact, Mary speaks not a single word in this account. Few words are required for the instigation of a scandal, however, and it is the dire consequences of scandal that threaten Mary throughout at least the first chapter of Matthew.

Matthew introduces Mary at the end of the genealogy of Jesus (1:16), following the inclusion of four other women (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and "the wife of

⁴This statement is not intended to suggest that Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians neglect the place of Mary in Scripture, for a glance at their Marian studies will indicate otherwise. Because of the characteristically Protestant emphasis on Scripture, however, biblical study provides the appropriate starting point for Protestant reflection. It also provides the best starting point for conversation among these three major forms of Christianity.

⁵The following observations are based upon my work-in-progress, "Mary: The Mother of Jesus," which is to be published by the University of South Carolina Press. In an earlier essay, I have suggested ways in which texts involving Mary might be appropriate for preaching ("A Place for Mary in Protestant Preaching?" *Journal for Preachers* 14 [1991] 32-36).

Uriah"). Whatever should be said about these four women (and there remains considerable debate about the precise significance of their names in the passage⁶), each in her own way constitutes a threat to the status quo and each is, in turn, threatened by the status quo. Tamar's difficulties arise when Judah wrongly understands her as a threat to the life of his sole remaining son. Judah's subsequent injustice then threatens Tamar, leaving her with neither husband nor child, and the justice she seeks again threatens her safety (Genesis 38). Rahab becomes a threat when her awareness of Joshua's spies places the conquest in jeopardy. The eventual fall of Jericho threatens Rahab, who must be delivered from the destruction of the general population (Josh 2:1-21; 6:22-25). Ruth threatens the status quo when she decides to break with custom and remain with Naomi and again when she takes initiative with Boaz. In both cases, her actions also threaten her own safety, since her loyalty to Naomi might lead to disaster for them both, and her advances toward Boaz could result in the charge of harlotry. According to the narrator, "the wife of Uriah" takes one small action informing David of her pregnancy, an action that threatens both David and Uriah. She in turn becomes threatened with the prospect of having no father for her child (2 Samuel 11).

Matthew never makes explicit the nature of Mary's relationship to these women, and it may well be that readers notice only the inclusion of women's names (women other than Sarah and Rachel!). When he turns to the way in which Jesus' birth occurred, however, the connection of Mary to the other women comes into view.

Few details are needed to make the situation painfully clear. Mary and Joseph are engaged, and he learns that she is pregnant. Despite its benign portrayal of Joseph, the narrator's comment reveals everything: "Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly" (Matt 1:19). Reconstructing the historical situation behind this verse is exceedingly difficult, as a reading of the commentaries will demonstrate. No reconstruction of which I am aware, however, explains how it would have been possible for Joseph's actions to result in anything less than an explosive scandal for Mary. Even with the best intentions and the fewest words spoken in public, the action he contemplates leaves Mary pregnant and without a father for her child. In the world of the first century, the consequences for Mary and her child would be devastating. Only divine intervention in the form of a dream prevents the scandal from erupting.

Apart from its dramatic power, what does this aspect of Matthew's gospel suggest for and about Christian ministry? One answer to that question might focus on the marginalized, those who live at the fringes of power and acceptability. Mary's existence on the margins, as reflected both in the scandal in Matthew's

⁶For surveys of these discussions, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977) 71-74; Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) 20-34.

gospel and in Mary's poverty implicit in Luke's gospel, re-presents to the church the claims of those who continue to live on the margins.

Without diminishing the force of this point, I want to suggest that the scandal attached to Mary pertains not to the marginalized alone but to the whole of the gospel itself. The scandal of the gospel begins here. If it culminates at the cross in the most public and inescapable way, the scandal nonetheless begins even before Jesus' birth. Scandal is an intrinsic feature of the Christian message from the beginning.

We know that, of course, but we keep trying to avoid it, precisely because its implications for Christian ministry are costly in the extreme. To take but a single illustration, to insist that the scandal of the gospel may not be confined to Good Friday is to insist that ministry may not turn away from those things that threaten the church's own comfortable status quo. As deeply disturbing as is the severe decline of what were once called the "mainline" churches, the appropriate response to that decline cannot be simply to seek out those programs and approaches that make people comfortable at church. Public relations strategies would continue to insist that Joseph "dismiss" Mary quietly, and those strategies are therefore antithetical to the gospel.

II. THE REFLECTION OF MARY

Luke's treatment of Mary differs dramatically from that found in Matthew's gospel. Even where the two accounts agree on certain details, as in the pregnancy of Mary before her marriage to Joseph, they use those details in very different ways. No longer the silent figure of Matthew, the Lukan Mary announces her consent to the words of Gabriel (1:38), interprets her pregnancy

along prophetic lines (1:46-55), and lives in a way that is faithful to the law of Moses (e.g., 2:22-24, 41).

Luke (or the Lukan narrator) also comments on Mary's private responses to events. The first such comment appears immediately following the greeting of Gabriel: "But she [Mary] was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be" (1:29). Because biblical narratives customarily regard awe as a proper response to the presence of God or a messenger from God, this particular response does not seem unusual.

The second comment regarding Mary's response to events follows the visit of the shepherds in 2:8-20. The shepherds tell of the angelic visit that has prompted their trip to Bethlehem, and "all who heard it were amazed" (2:18). The narrator then adds that "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (2:19). The third such comment closely parallels the first and comes at the very end of the Lukan infancy narrative, just after Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the temple. The confrontation that follows leaves both parents perplexed (2:50), but only of Mary is it said that "she treasured all these things in her heart" (2:51).

How are we to understand these comments about the "pondering" of Mary and the "treasuring" of words and events? One approach might be to read them as sentimental reports about the loving motherhood of Mary, but Luke is not else-

where given to sentimental remarks. A more historical approach, occasionally found in the commentaries, is that this "treasury" of Mary becomes one of the sources of Luke's gospel. Even if that were true, of course, it does not explain Luke's need to comment on Mary's memory.

When quite similar expressions appear in the Old Testament, they refer neither to sentiment nor to memory, but to honest perplexity. Joseph's dreams of his own future greatness prompt his brothers to jealousy, but "his father kept the matter in mind" (Gen 37:11). Similarly, Daniel concludes the narration of one of his visions with the remark: "As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly terrified me, and my face turned pale; but I kept the matter in my mind" (Dan 7:28; cf. 7:15; 8:27). In both cases, as in Luke's infancy narrative, events have taken place that are beyond the understanding of the characters involved. Each must consider what has happened, searching for meaning. Mary does so as a mother earnestly concerned about her son's future (note the ominous tone in 2:35). That maternal reflection does not lessen her search, but makes it more intense.

The reflection of Mary poses an important challenge for Christian ministry. Have we left room for Christians to ponder? The frantic programs of our churches offer little time or encouragement for reflection on the part of either clergy or laity, especially for those who may already be carrying tremendous responsibilities at work and at home. In addition, the polarization that characterizes discussion of many issues in the church, as elsewhere, leaves little room for Mary's honest pondering. When Christians demand instant responses to issues, little space remains for one who wishes to ponder, to reflect, to think things through.

In the Lukan narrative context, Mary's reflection on events serves to underscore once again the significance of the child who is born to her. In our context, her reflection may also encourage us to think of providing space for reflection as a vital aspect of Christian ministry.⁷

III. THE WITNESS OF MARY

As is the case with much in the Gospel of John, its treatment of Mary departs radically from that of Matthew and Luke. Mary, here referred to not by name but as “the mother of Jesus,” appears in two brief but significant scenes: the wedding at Cana (2:1-12) and the crucifixion (19:25-27). Each scene has prompted extended discussion as to the symbolic significance John attaches to Mary (e.g., Mary as representative of the church, the New Eve, Lady Zion, Jewish Christianity, and the church in general). Setting that debate aside for the present, I want instead to draw attention to the presence of Mary at the cross.

In 19:25, John reintroduces Jesus’ mother, whose only prior appearance was also Jesus’ first reference to the coming of his “hour” (2:4). Attention usually focuses on the giving of the beloved disciple and the mother of Jesus to each other, but the very introduction of Mary and the other women is also intriguing. They are described as “standing near the cross.” This constitutes the single action of the four

⁷This discussion of the need for a ministry of reflection was suggested to me by Patrick J. Willson.

women. By “standing near,” the women enact their opposition to the four soldiers of the previous scene, who do not stand near Jesus but over against him (19:23-25). This brief comment dramatically differentiates the women from Judas, who stands with those who arrest Jesus (18:5), and even from Peter, who stands “outside at the gate” as Jesus is questioned (18:16; cf. 18:18, 25). Along with the other women, Jesus’ mother here becomes a witness to Jesus’ death. She does not stand with Jesus’ enemies, nor will she be relegated to the outside. She stands as witness.

Other features of John’s treatment of Jesus’ mother may seem more productive for reflection on Christian ministry. Her enigmatic statements at Cana can be read as confidence in Jesus’ power. The fact that she goes to the home of the beloved disciple is sometimes taken as suggestive of the maternal role of the church. By contrast, her silent witness at the cross may appear all too timid and passive. In a sense, however, Mary’s presence at the cross touches on a profound feature of Christian ministry. Unlike those who appear to be insiders (Judas, Peter), she has neither betrayed nor denied Jesus. Unlike those who appear to be powerful (Pilate, the Roman soldiers), she knows where to stand. Standing by, she watches what God is doing.

These three themes connected with Mary—scandal, reflection, witness—by no means exhaust the texts in which she appears. Perhaps they will provoke others to give attention to ways in which reflection on Mary has a place in Protestant understandings of Christian ministry. Even the willingness of Protestants to consider this question opens the door for genuine exchange with sisters and brothers in other Christian traditions.

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