



# Mary among the Mothers of Israel

SARAH HINLICKY WILSON

Over the past twenty centuries, Mary, the mother of Jesus, has accrued an extraordinary range of titles and images: from the ever-virgin to the mother of God, from the lady of sorrows to the queen of heaven. Such accolades are more or less warranted by the New Testament writings.

What has been largely absent from mariological interpretation and innovation, however, is the entire span of Old Testament writings. Her firstborn son has been amply documented and defended as Messiah, Lord, Savior, and God from the Scriptures of Israel, but little effort has gone into interpreting his mother from the same sources.

*Mary is not present in the Bible in a vacuum; her portrayal is linked to the many mothers and sons throughout the biblical records. Mary is like those many who are mothers of relinquished sons, of murdered sons, and of resurrected sons. In each case, Mary joins a long line of biblical mothers whose obedience to God was personally distressing.*

It is high time to recognize the company that the mother of our Lord keeps: as a mother among the mothers of Israel.<sup>1</sup> Here we will look at her in the company of Israelite mothers of relinquished sons, murdered sons, and risen sons.

## MARY AMONG THE MOTHERS OF RELINQUISHED SONS

The mothers in Genesis acquire their sons irregularly and at great cost: Hagar and Sarah, Leah and Rachel, Bilhah and Zilpah. But they keep their sons, even if after a narrow miss—Hagar with Ishmael, Sarah with Isaac.

Exodus, too, opens with a series of close calls. Pharaoh has decreed that the sons of Israelite women are to be exterminated upon birth. Faithful midwives, Shiphrah and Puah chief among them, refuse to execute orders and lie inventively to spare the boys' lives. So far, so good. But then we come to the first biblical account of a relinquishing mother—that is, a birthmother who must make the costly choice to give her son into another woman's care.

That woman is Jochebed, whose story (Exod 2:1–10) we learn before we learn her name. Daughter of the house of Levi and wife to Amram, she is identified in Exodus 6:20 as the mother of Aaron and Moses and therefore, presumably, is also the mother of Miriam, though not specified as such here.

It's a bad time to be having a son. Seeing that he is a "fine child," Jochebed hides him at home for three months. When that stops working, she engages in a reckless act of hope, placing him in a "basket made of bulrushes" lined "with bitumen and pitch," a tiny Noah's ark that might just carry one single life over the threatening waters of the Nile to peace and safety elsewhere. Noah's crew landed on Mt. Ararat after all the wicked people had drowned, but Jochebed's baby could not possibly have landed anywhere worse: namely, at the foot of Pharaoh's daughter.

<sup>1</sup> "The mothers of Israel" or "matriarchs of Israel" is a formal title awarded to Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah by the *Talmud Berakhot* 16b.13–14 (<https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.16b.14?lang=bi>), and only to these four women. I am using the term expansively to indicate women who are mothers and of the people of Israel, rather than as the original mothers or maternal sources of the people of Israel.

But Pharaoh's daughter is not Pharaoh. We have no idea whether the woman already has children of her own, but the sight of a crying baby moves her to pity, despite her immediate recognition that he counts as one of the expendables. The baby's big sister (again, presumably Miriam) offers to find a wet nurse, so in a second enormous irony, the birthmother becomes wet nurse to her own child.

The die has already been cast, though. Jochebed wins the right to nurse and mother her own child only for a season, and only on loan. Once the boy is weaned ("older," as the text vaguely puts it), Jochebed herself brings him forward and relinquishes him into the care of Pharaoh's daughter. His adoptive mother retains the right to name him, and so he becomes Moses.

It is hard to read this story as anything but a loss for Jochebed, a loss of her child twice over. And maybe a third time, as she watches from a distance her Hebrew son identifying with and ranking among his new Egyptian family. Moses himself will go on to display the confused identity of children adopted across ethnic and cultural lines, which reaches a pitch in his murder of the Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew slave—and then getting skepticism and disdain from the very kin he was trying to help. No surprise that he ran for refuge among a third people, the Midianites, outside the Israelite-Egyptian struggle.

But, of course, the outcome of this story is blessing and victory for the Hebrews. Jochebed had to relinquish her son for the blessing to come upon her people. It wasn't just historical happenstance that she lost her boy, but a veiled action of God to set God's people free. If Moses was appointed to carry the people out of the house of bondage, no mother's claim could override it.

Which takes us some generations down the line to Hannah, one of two wives to Elkanah in the hill country of Ephraim (1 Sam 1:1–2:21). Hannah is just about the only mother of Israel to whom Mary is regularly compared—because of the obvious literary connections between their songs of praise. But that is to stop short of the other and deeper resonance. Yes, Hannah and Mary are both mothers to miraculous children. But the coda to their happy stories is both of them being forced to relinquish their sons to God's higher cause.

Unlike Mary, who is not particularly looking for a son—at least not yet—Hannah has yearned for one so intently that Elkanah is rather offended that he isn't enough for her. Hannah insists, though, with a prayer God can't refuse: "O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed

look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.” The latter part sounds like a Nazirite vow, recalling Samson and looking forward to John the Baptist. But the more significant part is the exchange “If you give a son to me, I will give that same son back to you.” Hannah goes into the venture of motherhood knowing, from the start, that relinquishment is part of the deal. Like with Mary’s *fiat*, it is an interesting but unanswerable question whether there would have been a Samuel at all had it not been for Hannah’s offer.

And so “the Lord remembered her,” and “in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son.” The child’s name recalls Hannah’s request, but not quite her promise, for Samuel means “I have asked for him from the Lord.” The Lord, however, will most certainly ask for him back again, and Hannah knows it. She delays the yearly visit to offer sacrifice to the Lord, knowing full well that after Samuel is weaned, she “will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the Lord and dwell there forever.”

It isn’t that long till Samuel is weaned; the text even makes a point of saying that “the child was young.” With generous sacrifices Hannah presents the boy to Eli, explaining, “For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord.” The verb sounds hopeful. If Samuel is only “lent,” but not “given,” maybe she will get him back again.

But she won’t. After her exemplary song, Hannah returns home while Samuel stays on with Eli to minister to the Lord. From this point onward, Hannah will see her son once a year only, bringing him a new garment along with the appointed sacrifices. The Lord doesn’t leave her comfortless; she receives three more sons and two daughters. But Samuel is no longer hers.

It was surely grievous for Jochebed to see her little Moses grow up among the enemy outsiders. But it might well have been worse for Hannah to see Samuel grow up among enemy insiders. Eli was the priest of the Lord, but his two sons were “worthless men” who “did not know the Lord,” engaging in outrageous acts of religious corruption, stealing choice meat and seducing women. Not exactly the kinds of stepbrothers a mother would hope for as her son’s role models. Eli, passive and resigned, never lifts a hand to restrain the

wayward issue of his loins and ultimately dies of shock and his own ponderous weight.

Despite the dysfunctional environment of his new home, “the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and also with man.” If anything, that he didn’t turn out like the men around him is the proof that the Lord was with him. Samuel grows up to be the prophet *par excellence*, eventually anointing both the first king and the best king. But the gift comes at a cost to his mother, forced to relinquish him to the Lord’s purposes.

Jochebed, mother of Moses; Hannah, mother of Samuel; and Mary, mother of Jesus: an impressive lineage. Jesus, at least, is not taken from Mary the moment he is weaned. But she raises him with Simeon’s warning hanging over her that “a sword will pierce through your own soul also” (Luke 2:35). The almost immediate sequel to this warning is Luke’s unique account of the boy Jesus in the temple, when the parents of the twelve-year-old suffer the first great loss of their son (2:41–52). The loss is temporary—a significant “three days”—but the upshot is both a preview of the greater loss that is coming, and the strange logic by which the birthparents discover that they are, in God’s eyes and even their son’s eyes, adoptive parents. The heavenly Father is the true parent, whom the earthly parents should have known and ceded to.

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To the relief of nervous parents everywhere, the story ends with the preteen Jesus returning home to be “submissive” to Mary and Joseph. But only for a time. Jesus will slip their grasp again, and permanently. The Synoptics all report the exceedingly awkward story of Mary and her younger children trying to haul a troublemaking Jesus home, out of the limelight (Mark 3:31–35; Matt 12:46–50;

Luke 8:19–21). He responds, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” With that, he severs their last biological bonds. Of course, in the same breath, he reconfigures the family that will become the church with a wide adoptive embrace: “Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.” Including his biological mother and siblings. But only on those terms. That is not something any mother wants to hear.

### MARY AMONG THE MOTHERS OF MURDERED SONS

As a mother, Mary is most often set in apposition to Hannah, but as a woman, she is most often set in apposition to Eve. Early church father Irenaeus in particular lifted up those resonances in his recapitulation of human history through Christ, contrasting the disobedient Eve with the faithful Mary.<sup>2</sup>

So far as it goes, the compare-and-contrast is legitimate. But much as in the case of Hannah, it usually stops short before getting to the really interesting part: that both Eve and Mary are mothers to murdered sons.

Cast out of the garden, Eve and Adam get right to work on populating the earth (Gen 4:1–26). “She conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord.’ And again, she bore his brother Abel.” What ensues is the first story of ordinary human history, and the oldest story in the book: brother turns on brother, and one of them ends up dead. The first mother in history is also the first mother of a murdered son, as well as the first mother of a murderer—both, her own boys. It’s not quite as bad with Jesus and his brothers, but hardly ideal: “not even his brothers believed in him” (John 7:5). And though Paul says almost nothing of Mary directly—at most, an allusion in Galatians 4:4—he often compares himself to a mother, and he grieves at how Christ’s own kin do not know and receive him.

Unlike Mary, Eve will not know the comfort of receiving her dead son back again. Nevertheless, a consolation is given her in the person of her third son, whom she names Seth, for “God has appointed for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him.” Seth is a substitute for the murdered son, standing vicariously in the murdered

<sup>2</sup> See *Against Heresies* III. 22

son's place. Seth in turn has a son named Enosh, and "at that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord." Luke makes a point of tracing Jesus's genealogy backwards through Seth, and it is hard to escape the conclusion that those living in the immediate wake of murder are the ones who learn to call upon God. As Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23), which he interprets in the light of Joel's prophecy, "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:21; Joel 2:32).

Another Israelite woman is a still more powerful prefiguration of Mary as the mother of a murdered son, though she has been all but ignored in the history of interpretation. That mother is Rizpah in 2 Samuel. In the aftershocks of Saul's loss of the kingship, she is first mentioned as an offstage character in 2 Samuel 3:6–11, which reports how Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, accuses Abner, Saul's general, of taking the by-now-dead Saul's concubine Rizpah for himself. While neither the text nor Abner's angry retort confirms whether the rumor is true, Abner takes such offense at Ish-bosheth that he instantly defects to David's side. (Not like this goes well for him, though; Joab, jealous of his position in David's army, ends up murdering Abner before the chapter is over.)

Rizpah then vanishes for a good deal of the action, reappearing only in 2 Samuel 21:1–14. By now Saul's house is thoroughly defeated, and David reigns not only unchallenged but adored. He has no reason to fear anyone, even in his rival Saul's lineage, to say nothing of the oath he made with Jonathan for the mutual protection of their families.

And yet, in a twist worthy of a thriller, in the final act David reverses course. A famine strikes the land for three years, and David "[seeks] the face of the Lord." The Lord names "bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death." This is actually the first we hear of the episode in the Bible, though not the first mention of Saul's misplaced and miscarried zeal. David approaches the Gibeonites with the equivalent of a blank check: "What shall I do for you? And how shall I make atonement, that you may bless the heritage of the Lord?" After demurring coyly, they ask for seven sons of the "man who consumed us and planned to destroy us," so that they might "hang them before the Lord at Gibeah of Saul, the chosen of the Lord."

David agrees. Even a reader disinclined to the hermeneutic of suspicion may feel that David agrees a little too readily. Maybe it's the Gibeonites still calling Saul "the chosen of the Lord" that frightens him. The one descendent David spares is Jonathan's son Mephibosheth, which might sound like keeping that old oath, except for the fact that Mephibosheth is lame in the feet and can't possibly pose a threat to vital David (2 Sam 9).

Excepting this one nonentity, David conveniently hands over seven men in the direct lineage of Saul: "the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore to Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth [a different Mephibosheth]; and the five sons of Merab the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite." We are then told that the Gibeonites "hanged them on the mountain before the Lord, and the seven of them perished together." The verb translated as "hanged" is ambiguous. It might mean exposed, impaled, or even something akin to crucifixion.

But—it doesn't work. The rain does not come. The famine does not end. Rizpah comes out to the place of "hanging" and lives on a patch of sackcloth, defending the seven corpses of her two sons and five step-grandsons from the scavenging of birds and beasts.<sup>3</sup> It's only when David gets wind of her actions that the "atonement" reaches its rightful conclusion. He himself, in direct response to Rizpah's vigil, gathers up the bones of the hanged men, as well as of Saul and Jonathan, and buries all of them in the tomb of Kish, Saul's father, in their ancestral home of Zela in Benjamin. "And after that God responded to the plea for the land."

The necessity of Rizpah's vigil to see the atonement through raises the question: Did David really hear a charge from God to avenge the Gibeonites? Or was it after all the ruse of an absurdly paranoid king to eliminate the last vestiges of competition for his throne? What is truth? And what is righteousness? Does the murder of the sons in itself set anything right, or only what happens in the aftermath of murder?

Rizpah never speaks. She does not or cannot give an answer to the supposed justice of murder. But she does insist through her actions

<sup>3</sup> The Old Testament has a particular horror of corpses picked at by wild animals. For example, see Gen 15:11 and 40:19; Deut 28:26; 1 Sam 17:44; 1 Kgs 14:11; Isa 18:6; Jer 7:33; and Ezek 29:5.



on keeping faith with the condemned all the way to the point of their honorable burial, which will resound down to the time of Jesus's death.

The Synoptics do not place Jesus's own mother at his crucifixion. But, remarkably, they do make a point of placing *mothers* at the crucifixion. Among the many women at the cross, Mark names "Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses" (15:40–41), while Matthew names "Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee" (27:55–56). Luke vaguely refers to "the women who had followed him from Galilee" (23:49), but he includes a report of the "women who were mourning and lamenting for" Jesus on the way to his cross, who responds to them specifically as grieving mothers: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us,' and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (23:27–31).

John 19:25–27 alone sets Mary at the foot of the cross: "Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene." Jesus sees her and provides for her with an adoptive exchange considerably more heartwarming than the one in the Synoptics. "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home." Like Rizpah, who has adopted another woman's sons posthumously for her own, Mary adopts her son's beloved disciple to be her own son.

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In the Synoptics it is the women—including the mothers—who go to the tomb with the intention of caring for the corpse: "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome" (Mark 16:1), "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary" (Matt 28:1), or "Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with

them” (Luke 24:10). Mothers or not, they are all daughters of Rizpah. They stay by the dying and the dead, discontented with death as a solution to anyone’s problem.

### MARY AMONG THE MOTHERS OF RISEN SONS

Jesus’s resurrection is unique in kind. It is a new life, on the other side of death, not a stay of execution or delay of a death that will come again at some future point. Yet it is clear that, in the biblical imagination, there is a correspondence between the resuscitations of the dead back to this life and the ultimate resurrection to new life that Jesus alone has pioneered and passed through so far. And notably, the two most significant resuscitation stories in the Old Testament prominently feature mothers.

In 1 Kings 17:8–24 we learn about the widow of Zarephath, a story that was certainly on Jesus’s mind (Luke 4:26) and that he later recapitulated with the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11–17). An objection immediately arises: Can this widow really count among the mothers of *Israel*? First Kings specifies that Zarephath is in the territory of Sidon—a plus for Elijah, currently in flight from the wrath of Israel’s corrupt king Ahab—and so presumably, the widow is a Sidonite.

This would be a fair objection, were it not for the remarkable non-Israelite women who became mothers of Israelites, in particular Rahab of Jericho and Ruth of Moab, both listed by name in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus. The Sidonite widow’s reception of Elijah, and the Lord’s favor shown to her through Elijah, mark her out as an ingrafted mother of Israel. It is also worth noting that both Matthew and Luke’s genealogies point to Jesus’s own state of being ingrafted through adoption into Joseph’s line (Matt 1:16; Luke 3:23). To put it another way, it is the faithfulness of his mother, not the biological qualifications of his (supposed) father, that makes Jesus the son of a mother of Israel.

The story opens by establishing both the rapport between the widow and Elijah, and the power of God to have mercy on them both. She, he, and the household are fed from flour and oil that never run out, despite the drought-induced famine in the land. But during Elijah’s sojourn, the son (presumably a young one, since Elijah can pick him up and carry him) falls severely ill and stops breathing. The widow, convinced by now that Elijah has divine power backing him,

turns on her guest: “What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!” The death cannot be accidental or incidental. God and God’s servant must be tangled up in it somehow.

Elijah evidently agrees. “O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by killing her son?” Astute readers of the Bible know by now that God and sons have a dangerous relationship. Elijah intercedes, stretching himself out across the child’s inert body and crying out, “O Lord my God, let this child’s life come into him again.” Remarkably, “the Lord listened to the voice of Elijah.” It’s one of those rare cases when the Lord obeys the man instead of the other way around. The “life of the child came into him again, and he revived.” Elijah brings the boy downstairs and can proclaim, “See, your son lives.”

The dead son has been brought to life again. The widow of Zarephath completes her catechumenate into the people of Israel by confessing, “Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.” Note the christologically weighted turn of phrase “the word of the Lord.” A church father would not hesitate to call this the presence of the to-be-incarnate Logos, at a resuscitation meant to be a sign of his eventual resurrection! And if anyone would recognize his presence here, it’s a mother, or his mother, or a foremother of his mother.

Elijah’s successor, Elisha, presides over the next resuscitation, recounted in 2 Kings 4:8-37. Elisha is mentioned only once by name in the New Testament, by Jesus, right after his allusion to the widow of Zarephath (Luke 4:27), in reference to the healing of Naaman the Syrian. However, to trace out the narrative logic of John the Baptist as the recapitulation of Elijah, Jesus is in turn the recapitulation of Elisha, with a “double portion of the Spirit” (2 Kgs 2:9).

In this story, the mother is unambiguously an Israelite, a wealthy woman living in Shunem, a town in the territory of Issachar. She and her elderly husband regularly feed Elisha as he passes through, and even build a guest room for him complete with bed, table, chair, and lamp. In gratitude, Elisha offers to grant her a boon, all the way to royal and military protection, but he settles on a son, since she and her husband have remained childless. Like barren wives before her, the Shunammite woman doubts very much that even a man of God

can grant this gift: “No, my lord, O man of God; do not lie to your servant.” But it comes true. She gives birth to a son, and he grows up to help his father in the fields.

Except, one unlucky day, the child cries out to his father, “Oh, my head, my head!” The father has the boy, still small enough to be carried, brought to his mother, where he sits “on her lap till noon, and then he die[s].” It doesn’t take much imagination to feel that losing a miracle child is much worse than never having one in the first place. The Shunammite mother connects the dots and places her son’s corpse on Elisha’s bed in Elisha’s room: a tomb of rebuke against him and his God, who give only to take away. Then she gallops off on a donkey to Mount Carmel to have it out with the man of God.

There is something wonderfully canny and tactical about this Shunammite mother. Her servants wonder why she’s off to visit Elisha when “it is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” She lies baldly: “All is well.” When Elisha sees her coming, he sends Gehazi to greet her with the polite inquiries, “Is all well with you? Is all well with your husband? Is all well with the child?” Again she lies, “All is well.” She lies in order to get at the one man who both caused and can conceivably solve her problems. As soon as she’s near enough, she grabs hold of Elisha’s feet and won’t let go. Gehazi can’t shake her free. But Elisha doesn’t object. “Leave her alone, for she is in bitter distress, and the Lord has hidden it from me and has not told me.” The Lord, evidently, does not disclose everything about the death of sons and what it might signify.

Then the Shunammite mother really has at him. “Did I *ask* my lord for a son? Did I not say, ‘Do not deceive me?’” To receive a son, but then to have him snatched away again by death, is a dirty deal, and God knows it. Elisha proposes a solution with his staff. She won’t hear of it. She will not leave his side until he comes, in person, and does something about her dead son.

So Elisha goes into his room/tomb with the corpse and does much like Elijah once did. He prays, he lies on the child—mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands—warms up the dead body, stops to pace, repeats the stretching action. And then, in one of the most delightfully specific details of Scripture, “the child sneeze[s] seven times” and lives again. The mother comes in and picks up her son, carrying him bodily out of the room/tomb.

This time there is no concluding confession of faith. But then, this mother was already an Israelite. Her faith was expressed in advance, demanding that God make good on his promise to deliver and maintain a living son to his loving mother. This time, it was up to God to prove Himself with His power over the death of a miraculous, God-given, only-begotten son.

We have only one brief glimpse of Mary after the resurrection. She doesn't appear in the final chapter of any of the Gospels, but she does turn up in biblical history one last time in Acts. The eleven remaining disciples had taken an upper room in Jerusalem, and "all these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers" (Acts 1:14). Since the narrative flows on uninterrupted into the next chapter, it has often been inferred that Mary was present on the day of Pentecost, inspiring some of the most beautiful icons in the Eastern church.

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Whether or not Mary was there on Pentecost, what we do know for sure is that she *knew*. She knew that her murdered son was raised back to life by the power of the heavenly Father who gave the boy to her in the first place. Like many mothers of Israel before her, Mary suffered the death of her son. And like two mothers of Israel before her, she rejoiced to have her son given back to her again. But his deliverance was not like that of the widow of Zarephath's son nor the Shunammite woman's son. Mary does not get to keep him, for he ascends into heaven. But she joins in a community of prayer only just beginning to parse out the significance of her son's resurrection for them, for Israel, and eventually for the whole world.

And so Mary, a mother among the mothers of Israel, can say truly and unequivocally, “All is well.” Which, in the end, is exactly what a mother hopes for. ⊕

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