



Preaching Mary: Recovering Mary in Protestant Pulpits

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I have been reflecting and writing about Mary and her place in the church now for twenty years and have done so self-consciously *as a Protestant*—not simply as a professional theologian but indeed, as a clergyman ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament. In that time, however, Mary has entered into my preaching in a sustained way only once.¹ Offered as a series in 2004, those sermons reread New Testament passages familiar in their Christmas contexts with a twist: they were primary sermon texts for Lent. What themes, sometimes obscured by the secular sentimentality of the Christmas holidays, are illuminated when read in a decidedly less festive and less public

¹ See Tim S. Perry, *Blessed Is She: Living Lent with Mary* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2006).

Sixteenth-century Protestants tended to move away from Marian piety as a consequence of their battles with the papacy. Post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism also saw a diminishment of this, for other reasons. But Mary is an important element of a complete biblical preaching of the gospel, and it is time that all Christians hear of her witness to the Holy Trinity.

season of penitence? My convictions about Mary's important place in the Christian dogmatic edifice have only grown over the last two decades, but that strength of conviction has not made it into my proclamation of the word.

I suspect that my experience reflects that of those regular preachers who will read this article: we intuitively grasp, whether from her presentation in Matthew and Luke (and perhaps John), or from dimly recalled church history lectures on the Council of Ephesus, that Mary is somehow important, but we just can't bring ourselves to say how. Or if we can, we find it difficult to the point of impossibility to integrate her significance into our ministry, and into the lives of our parishioners, through our preaching. This article is an attempt to address this paucity in my own work and, hopefully, in that of my colleagues in ministry who find themselves in a similar impasse.

Given the doctrinal focus of the Reformation, at least as the story is told in most Protestant church history texts, it might come as a surprise that Mary was not a dogmatic problem early on. Nevertheless, even a casual reading of the earliest documents shows this to be the case. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, Protestant hesitancy toward Mary was, at least for the first Reformers, a practical, pastoral matter.² Luther, for example, is well known for holding side by side a warmhearted devotion to Mary with a volcanic rejection of any pious presentation that would make her a rival to her son or, worse, transform him into "Christ the Angry Judge" whom only she could sway or even manipulate. And while it is certainly the case that his most positive Marian reflections come earlier in his life, at no point did he reject received Marian doctrine—her status as *Theotokos*, her perpetual virginity, or, strikingly given his preoccupation with justification, her miraculous preservation from sin.³ Likewise, the Reformed confessions, though more circumspect than Luther, preserve the language of

² See Tim Perry, *Mary for Evangelicals: Toward an Understanding of the Mother of Our Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2006), 230–39; Tim Perry and Daniel Kendall, SJ, *The Blessed Virgin Mary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 43–53; Tim Perry, "Marian in the Reformed Confessions," *Ad Fontes*, June 13, 2023, <https://adfontesjournal.com/member-exclusive/mary-in-the-reformed-confessions/>.

³ Luther's only lengthy Marian work, the commentary on the Magnificat, was produced in 1521 (cf. *LW* 21: 297–358). While it is certainly the case that it marks a watershed in Luther's Marian reflections, with the polemic coming increasingly to the fore after 1522, that polemic is always pastoral and essentially christological as opposed to Marian. To make of Mary a rival to her son is to dishonor both as far as Luther is concerned.

Mary's (perpetual) virginity almost without exception and sometimes deploy adjectives such as "pure" and "immaculate" when describing her. If, following Calvin, the Reformed tradition has resisted or attenuated the use of the term *Theotokos*, it nevertheless preserves that term's doctrinal content, insisting in its Confessions that Mary was the mother of "the whole Christ."⁴ Protestant hesitancy toward Mary, in other words, begins with and remains rooted in pastoral concerns that at least some Catholic reformers, such as Erasmus, both shared and affirmed.

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It was pastorally vital for the first reformers that the faithful be freed from the falsehoods that the Blessed Mother could change her son's mind; that she was merciful while he was angry and needing maternal soothing; that she along with the saints "helped" him save the world and the faithful save themselves. None of this, however, had anything to do with accepted church teaching about Mary's virginity, maternity, sinlessness, or status. Rather, these messages were communicated through a piety that had grown up alongside and become intertwined with the gospel of grace. Although unofficially in place, late medieval Catholicism had constructed another savior in the minds of the faithful. And to have done so, in reformers' minds, was to preach "another gospel" (Gal 1:8), opposed to that which presented the Lord Jesus as the loving, merciful savior who justified sinners freely. Widely accepted, common Marian practices hindered the faithful from seeing Christ as he truly is, to their pastoral detriment.

A final pastoral observation: Marian reticence was not uniquely Protestant. Catholic voices from Erasmus to John Henry Newman expressed similar concerns, albeit with greater reservation. At issue was not whether Marian devotion could sometimes go off the rails, but what to do about it. One could engage in what Newman called

⁴ Perry, "Mary in the Reformed Confessions."

“continual meddling,” in order to avoid excess. Or one could act more circumspectly, correcting specific abuses if and as they arose.⁵ One might even observe a tacit affirmation of Protestant pastoral worries among the Council Fathers at Vatican II. Their inclusion of matters Marian within *Lumen Gentium*, rather than according to them a separate document, was done primarily to insist that proper Marian devotion was not a spirituality disconnected from the worship of her son. Indeed, the document insists that Marian devotion ought to return to more explicitly biblical forms of expression that led the faithful to the Eucharist and to Christ.⁶

Of course, this is not to say that dogmatics did not come into play. They did. By the third generation of the Reformation, Mary had in the collective Protestant mind come to embody *the* Roman edifice against which the Reformation *solus* protested. Where Protestants insisted that salvation was by faith alone (*sola fide*), Mary embodied a soteriology of faith and works. Grace alone (*sola gratia*) was opposed by a Mary who represented grace and merit. Christ alone (*solus Christus*)? No, it was Christ working through and alongside the saints, and especially his mother, who got believers to heaven. And finally, where all that was necessary to obtain salvation was to be found in Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*), Mary was the crucible in which revelation through Scripture *and* tradition shone most clearly. By the third generation of the Reformation, the breach between the communities was full and final. Mary was, at least on the Protestant side, the sum of the most serious objections. It is hardly surprising therefore that from the early seventeenth century forward in Protestant dogmatics, both Lutheran and Reformed, Mary’s christological significance was affirmed even as she remained a lightning rod for increasingly refined and rare anti-Catholic polemic.⁷

The consequence for Marian proclamation from Protestant pulpits was devastating. The sermon is no place to unpack the dogmatic

⁵ John Henry Newman, *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching Considered*, vol. 2 (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1900), 79.

⁶ “The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church,” in *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution of the Church* (1964), § 52–69.

⁷ See the extensive summaries found in Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1899), 293–309; and Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. Ernst Bizer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 421–28.

intricacies of the incarnation, and Marian piety of any sort was a sermonic nonstarter. Furthermore, with Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and other churches now firmly established, the Reformation was now a permanent feature of Western Christianity. Accordingly, the Marian rift with Rome was simply left unaddressed. Banished from the piety of the faithful and severely restricted in the dogmatic handbooks, Mary ceased to be a feature in Protestant preaching because she was so thoroughly evicted from the Protestant imagination. Modern American fundamentalists may decry liberal Protestantism's two-century-old dismissal of Mary (along with miracles in general) as irrelevant to authentic Christian commitment,⁸ but apart from a nod at Christmas, their pulpit practice is no different.

In short, Protestant history accounts for the Marian silence in our pulpits. What began as a pastoral worry became a dogmatic definer. It is not too much to say that today, Marian silence defines Protestant practice as Protestant, at least in part. And yet, it is not history that I run into when I challenge this silence both for myself and for my colleagues in ministry. Other, more immediate reasons instead quickly assert themselves. Joseph Ratzinger very helpfully illumines these in his 1975 Marian lectures, *Daughter Zion*.⁹ Ratzinger is worried about the decline of Marian piety in Roman Catholic churches, especially in Europe, following Vatican II. Nevertheless, his observations transcend both time and tradition to complete my account for contemporary Protestant silence, at least as I experience it. First among these is the perceived paucity of Marian material in the Bible and classical creeds.¹⁰ Outside the opening chapters of Matthew and Luke, Mary appears in snippets in the Gospels and Acts; once, or on a stretch twice, in Paul;¹¹ and finally (at least in its canonical context) in Revelation 12. The first answer I receive from thoughtful Protestant preachers about Marian silence is that there simply isn't enough material.

⁸ See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1928), 403–5.

⁹ These are available in English as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church's Marian Belief* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983).

¹⁰ Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*, 9.

¹¹ Galatians 4:4, affirming that Jesus was “born of a woman,” is undisputed. First Timothy 2:15a, “yet she shall be saved through childbearing,” is questioned in terms of both authorship and interpretation. Did Paul write it? What on earth does the author mean? Both are questions for New Testament scholarship.

Ratzinger's second reason is more complex. With the Bible no longer seen as the root of the church's Marian devotion, many are quick to find pre-Christian, pagan antecedents—echoes of the Great Mother cults of antiquity, for example. Those who do, however, come to diametrically opposed strategies. Conservatives or traditionalists (my language) might come to see such syncretism as opposed to Catholic truth and react accordingly by excising it. Liberals or progressives (again, my language) seem blithely to ignore any such problems and embrace syncretism for the sake of minority inclusion. Neither group seems interested in the question of whether these pagan antecedents have been suitably baptized or, indeed, if they are pagan antecedents at all.

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This leads directly to Ratzinger's third reason for Marian decline. It neatly sidesteps allegedly lacking biblical material and supposed pre-Christian roots because neither issue matters. Ratzinger observes that there are those who are keen to adapt, adopt, indulge, and promote (some) Marian practices regardless of their historical or dogmatic validity because of their functional spiritual value. For Ratzinger, what appears to be a genteel tolerance in this instance is in fact most insidious, for it cuts Marian practice off entirely from truth-claims, destroying "the correlation between truth and life."¹² I ran into this mindset among a group of Protestant seminarians when teaching a course on Mary several years ago. After a lecture on the rosary, I was quite surprised to find most of my students quite willing to incorporate this ancient form of prayer into their own devotional practice. So I pressed them, "What about Luther's worry about a rival savior?" They didn't blink at the question. For them, truth, if it was a concern at all, was limited to theology class; the rosary could be

¹² Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*, 10–11.

adopted without any critical assessment of the convictions on which it rested and within which it “lived.” If it contributed to one’s spirituality, it could be used; if it didn’t, then it need not. I never did succeed in retying Ratzinger’s connection between truth and life for this group of students.

Let’s draw the diagnostic threads together: Pastoral concerns hit Protestant preaching directly, and later Protestant dogmatics set the foundation for a trajectory into silence that persisted until the twentieth century. Anti-Catholic, anti-Marian sermons of course emerged early in various Protestant movements, taking aim at pastoral matters even as positive Marian dogmatic material dwindled. As Protestantism became established, however, even these went into decline, such that today, even in the most biblical of Protestant communities, Mary is dutifully brought out at best for Advent and Christmas. Perhaps she is mentioned in one or two sermons during those six weeks and is quickly returned with the crèche to the closet to wait again for next year. Today, with the possible exception of those parishes finding themselves on the more Catholic end of the Anglican spectrum, the Protestant position on Marian preaching is crickets. Can the silence be overcome, a chink found in the wall? To that question we now turn.

A proper answer requires us to revisit Ratzinger’s observations—that the post-Vatican II perception of a lack of Marian material in the Bible and creeds has led to a diminishment of sound Marian reflection that shows up either in reticence or in ungrounded speculation. What he discerned in 1975 certainly seems to me to describe the situation of his separated brothers and sisters in Catholic Christianity: the apparent paucity of biblical material regarding Mary has led either to suspicious silence or to uncritical functionalism. That being the case, if we Protestants are to recover our Marian voice, the Bible is the place where we ought to begin. If we can show that the *perception* of paucity is just that—an erroneous perception—then suspicions can be set aside and spirituality can be biblically grounded.

In 1980, David Steinmetz invited Protestants to broaden their hermeneutical methodologies in his then-revolutionary article “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis.”¹³ As the title makes plain, Steinmetz had become convinced that historical-critical methodologies,

¹³ David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37 no. 1 (1980): 37–38.

though they continued to be of great value to critical readers of the Bible, unfairly and prematurely limited the readers' focus. The medieval "fourfold sense" of Scripture, he countered, continued to offer insight into the scriptural text that did not so much dismiss its literal sense as help unfold its complexity. In the four decades following, those accepting Steinmetz's invitation have produced a significant bibliography under the umbrella term "the theological interpretation of Scripture." One of the most important achievements of this movement, in my opinion, has been the liberation of the "Hebrew Bible" from its sequestration in history (which neatly played in to the incipient Marcionism deeply embedded in my own evangelical tradition¹⁴) to become again *Christian* Scripture. The question of just *how* the books of the first testament are to be read as Christian Scripture, of course, remains open, with contributions by Richard Hays, Christopher Seitz, Hans Boersma, and, of course, Ephraim Radner leading the way.¹⁵ And it is beginning to seep its way helpfully into discussions about how to *preach* the Old Testament as Christian Scripture.¹⁶

Advocates of a theological interpretation of the Old Testament may disagree with each other about the manner and extent of figurative readings, but they agree that the Old Testament bears witness to Christ. And I am heartened when I read commentaries and works of theology that deliberately draw from or are deliberate aids for sermons that seek to find Christ in, for example, Leviticus.¹⁷ I, however, have yet to see Protestants turn their attention to potential Marian figures in the Old Testament in any sustained way, whether in the theological academy or in the pastor's study. And that is where the answer to the charge of biblical paucity must begin. If we recover Mary's place in the

¹⁴ See Wesley Hill, "Andy Stanley's Modern Marcionism," in *First Things Web Exclusives*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/05/andy-stanleys-modern-marcionism>.

¹⁵ The bibliography is too extensive to reproduce here. A good recent introduction to the state of the question can be found in Myk Habets, "Theological Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 23, no. 2 (2021): 235–58, and the response, Tim Meadowcroft, "Wisdom and Theological Interpretation: A Biblical Studies Response to Myk Habets on Theological Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 23, no. 2 (2021): 259–78.

¹⁶ See Annette Brownlee, *Preaching Jesus Today: Six Questions for Moving from Scripture to Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 29–35.

¹⁷ On this, see Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008); Katherine Sonderegger, "Leviticus and the Holiness School: Trinity as Holy," in *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2, The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: Processions and Persons* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2020), §5.

Old Testament, the preacher's primary problem will not be lack, but abundance, of material.

Here, of course, we are merely following the trajectory set by the New Testament itself. Luke's nativity story is so steeped in the biblical imagination that, I wager, it's impossible to tease out all the biblical references and allusions in his text. I'll say more about that in a moment. As important is the additional observation that the evangelists and other New Testament authors often take for granted that their readers will come to their works with a well-worked-out theology of the Old Testament already in place. As Christopher Seitz has argued quite persuasively, the Old Testament with its own integrity is, apart from the New Testament, a testimony to the gospel.¹⁸ "The Old Testament," writes Catholic theologian Gary Anderson, "is not simply *background* to the gospel; it is part of the very fabric of the gospel whose full meaning can only be articulated by a conversation between the two."¹⁹

Thus, the church fathers, for instance, both follow the New Testament (such as they had it) into the Old Testament to find that the latter amplifies and deepens the former's Marian material *and* they treat the Old Testament (which though fluid, was established as Scripture in a way that the New Testament was not for two centuries) as a Marian witness in its own right. Ratzinger puts it this way: "Methodologically, one can approach this question . . . backwards or forwards so to speak: either one can read back from the New Testament into the Old or, conversely, feel one's way slowly from the Old Testament into the New. Ideally, both ways should coincide."²⁰ Beginning with Eve, when we read the whole Bible, what emerges is a profound "theology of woman,"²¹ a narrative arc spanning the biblical witness that finds its fullest expression in Mary. Unpacking this arc fully is well beyond the scope of this article; readers are invited to consider Ratzinger's little book more fully. It is enough now to say that the biblical challenge has been met. The problem is not that material is lacking, but that biblical studies for two centuries has trained pastors and

¹⁸ See, e.g., Christopher Seitz, *Word without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹⁹ Gary Anderson, "Mary in the Old Testament," *Pro Ecclesia* 16, no. 1 (2007): 38.

²⁰ Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*, 11.

²¹ The term is Ratzinger's. See *Daughter Zion*, 12–29.

theologians not to see what is, in fact, there. Now, a more practical question needs to be addressed.

Namely, how does this material preach? I'd like to suggest in this final section that biblically rich Marian sermons are both possible and necessary for discernment as churches in North America, across the theological spectrum, seem to be suffering a crisis of vocation. The four themes suggested below are hardly exhaustive but show the possibility for recovery of and theological potential in Marian preaching in Protestant pulpits. In each case, I take my start in the Lukan corpus and allow it to lead me backwards into the Old Testament, and then forward for ecclesiological application.

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The Old Testament threads in Luke's nativity tapestry are nearly impossible to number, and I will not try here.²² Rather, I will focus on four Marian snapshots to see what Old Testament themes might underlie, amplify, and enrich Luke's story. We begin with the *fiat*. "Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her" (Luke 1:38). The word rendered "servant" in most English translations is *doule*, which means, straightforwardly, slave. Obviously, the word will make most preachers flinch. But we are wise to sit with its weighty reality rather than searching for softer translations too quickly. Not only is it a favorite Pauline descriptor for disciples, whether male or female, elsewhere in the New Testament, but it also has a deep Old Testament

²² Interested readers may wish to read the fourth chapter of *Mary for Evangelicals*, where I treat Luke's Marian material in a more fulsome way. Cf. Perry, *Mary for Evangelicals*, 63–96.

resonance which challenges the facile reading of straightforward female subservience. In taking the title slave as her own, we are wise to ask, in what company does Mary place herself? What stories from Ratzinger's narrative arc deepen our understanding? Four immediately spring to mind. Predominant among these are the characters Shiphrah and Puah, slaves who disobeyed Pharaoh's instructions to kill the Israelite boys they delivered (Exod 1:15–21). And immediately, a line of female liberators opens up: Deborah the judge and Jael the assassin come from lowly stations, one to lead an army and the other to dispatch a general for the sake of God's people (Judg 4–5); Esther—a harem slave raised to a queen “for such a time as this” (Esth 4:14); and finally, Judith, who delivers God's people by beheading the pagan general Holofernes (Judith 13). Luke's readers, or at least those versed in the Jewish Scriptures, doubtless would have placed Mary in this company as easily as they did with the barren mothers, with which we are more familiar. As God's slave, Mary is free to be God's cooperative agent in the liberation of God's people—indeed, of the human race.

In this presentation, Mary is the ideal disciple and, indeed, a type of the church. The language of liberation is politically fraught, especially in the United States and Canada, where competing visions of liberty seem constantly in conflict and where churches are constantly tempted to substitute (part of) the gospel for one political program or another. Mary's adoption of the title “God's slave” reminds us just whose we are and to whom we belong. We are God's. We have no program but God's kingdom. We have no message but God's gospel. Like the mother of the Lord, both individual disciples and, indeed, the community of faith as a whole are most fully themselves, most active in the redemptive mission of the triune God, when they adopt the position of obedience before the Lord who has from all eternity bestowed his grace upon us and exalted the lowly.

God's final exaltation of the lowly over the wicked wealthy is, of course, the theme of Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46–56), where we turn second. The Old Testament imagery in the Magnificat is well known and documented.²³ Mary has embraced her status as chosen with the title “servant,” and with that a receptive posture. And what

²³ See Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke: New Updated Edition* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 358–60.

she receives is no less than God's Word, both in heart and in womb. Thus, in her great hymn, she is the culmination of the prophetic office that begins with Moses himself (Deut 18:15–18). It is striking that, as the culmination of prophetic speech, Mary's Magnificat is not simply an announcement that the mighty liberating acts of God—in which status is reversed, the hungry fed, the mighty cast down—find their culmination in the miraculous conception of her child, but an announcement cast as a prayer from its first word. She is blessing God for what God has done to lead to this moment and what God will surely do through her; in so doing, she is interceding to God on behalf of God's people. Robert Jenson is especially apt here: "Mary intercedes for the church as did Moses for Israel, or rather does so as Moses' prototype, pleading God's own Word to him."²⁴

Again, the ecclesiological dimension is immediately apparent. The announcement of the coming of God's kingdom is neither a political stump speech nor the proclamation of a social program. It is, first and last, a prayer. And its first and last audience is the Lord through whom and in whom the kingdom comes, who is both the author and subject of the gospel. The first task of the church, in other words, is the faithful worship through which God has chosen to redeem the world. This is the exaltation of the lowly, the rejection of the wicked wealthy, the remembrance of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants: our rendering to God, God's own words. "Mary is the type of the church in that the church is the prophetic community. . . . Mary is the archprophet, the paradigmatic instantiation of the church's prophetic reality."²⁵ Far from cutting the church off from the world in some self-enclosed sectarianism, faithful worship is what opens us to God's world, enabling us to participate in the redemption accomplished once and for all in the self-giving of God to the world in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Which brings us to the third Old Testament theme: Mary as the bearer of Life. Mary's total receptivity to the will of God (her *fiat*) resulted in her receiving and proclaiming the word of God (her Magnificat) in both heart and womb. As the carrier of the Word, she is the new Eve. In her miraculous pregnancy, she bears not simply a new

²⁴ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2: The Works of God* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 203.

²⁵ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, 202.

life, but Life. In the previous two examples, Luke's own deliberately chosen language draws us into Marian motifs of the Old Testament—motifs the first believers would have seen even before reading Luke's gospel. Now, the allusion is more indirect. But indirect does not mean unreal or imaginary. Consider this: Justin Martyr offers the earliest known "New Eve" description of Mary with a point-by-point contrast: Although both attend to the words of an angel, Mary's obedience undoes Eve's disobedience. Mary receives that word with faith and joy, and thus brings forth the One who destroys the demonic forces and delivers Eve's children from death to life.²⁶ Three points are worth noting here: First, we can safely conclude that, as a Palestinian Christian, Justin had access to the Gospel of Luke, and he is clearly reading it alongside Genesis 2–3. Second, even if Luke did not make the comparison so explicit, once the reader sees it, it cannot be unseen. The two texts, in their canonical context, sound each other out in a way that neither does when read separately. Third, Justin does not write as if he is inventing this comparison, but he is drawing on the commonly practiced rule of faith. The Eve/Mary comparison arose early among the first followers of Jesus, perhaps, as I believe, even *before* Luke's Gospel was written, and has persisted through two millennia.

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So just what is going on here? With the New Eve, we see the advice that Augustine will formalize over two centuries later: "*Novum Testamentum in Vetere latet, Vetus Testamentum in Novo patet,*"²⁷ rendered, popularly, "The New Testament is in the Old concealed; the Old Testament is in the New revealed." What was so obvious for Justin (and Irenaeus and Tertullian) that it could be stated in an almost offhand way emerges for us, on the other side of criticism, as truly revolutionary as we learn to read the Bible again as a loosely structured historical novel, which is but a safer way of saying, canonically. Once more, an

²⁶ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 1:248–49.

²⁷ Augustine, *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, 34:623.

ecclesiological dimension is immediately suggestive: The Life which the church has received and indeed carries for the world's sake is no more its own than the gospel is. It is, to use a good Lutheran word, extrinsic: it breaks in upon us from outside and so transforms us from the inside out that we cannot but bear witness to it, and indeed offer it to the world. We glimpse this in the narrative arc that begins with the unhappy receptivity of Eve and concludes in the joyful reversal, the receptivity of her descendent, her prototype, the Blessed Virgin Mary.

One last move will complete this section. Mary's reception of her exalted status (*fiat*), when coupled with her reception of the Word of Life (incarnation and Magnificat), completes not only the arc that begins with Eve but one salvation motif that is underplayed in the New Testament: namely, the motif of the remnant. We begin with Luke's glimpse of Mary at the heart of the formal birth of the church: his inclusion of Mary in the upper room just prior to Pentecost: "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers" (Acts 1:14). The inclusion of Jesus's kin, with Mary named in particular, is odd. While she is a prominent figure in the nativity narrative (and indeed may well be its literary source), there is nothing preceding in Luke that requires that she be there in the upper room. Following the nativity, Mary fades rather quickly into the background. She is spared harsh treatment in Luke's version of Jesus's rejection by his family (4:24; cf. Mark 6:4 and Matt 13:57) and when narrating Jesus's discussions of the claims of family vs. the claims of discipleship (Luke 8:19–21; 11:27–28). Most strikingly, Luke does not note Mary's presence at the cross. The most a reader can do is infer it—including her among the anonymous women "mourning" (23:27) or "standing at a distance" (23:49). Why then is she among the disciples, and the only woman mentioned by name alongside the eleven and Matthias? To have her included by name in the new community—indeed, at its very heart—is strange. How do we account for her?

Is there an Old Testament narrative arc that will help us give an account? Indeed, there is: it is the arc of the remnant. That small group of people beginning with Noah and his family (Gen 6) and running all the way through the Old Testament, whom God saves not by redemption but by preservation for the sake of the salvation of the world. Perhaps the most notable Old Testament reference is from the Elijah story, when God assures the prophet that while Jezebel and her

soldiers are searching to take his life, there are “seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him” (1 Kgs 19:18). Interwoven with this Old Testament arc is that of children set aside, from childhood and earlier, to God’s service—Samuel (1 Sam 1; 3. Cf. affinities with the Marian *Protoevangelium of James*), Jeremiah (Jer 1:4–9), and bridging the testaments, John the Baptist (Luke 1). There is a narrative theme of God preserving in Israel a remnant uniquely called and equipped by grace for a saving purpose. And at the head of the line is the Blessed Virgin Mary. As such, she is the first, preeminent among the disciples (and accordingly, named last in Acts 1). She is daughter Zion, the climax of the Old Testament’s theology of woman, who, as faithful Israel, fulfills faithful Israel’s calling: to bring forth the One who is the salvation of the world.

No wonder then that the first generation of Reformers, and Luther in particular, took for granted the medieval and patristic insistence that Mary was uniquely graciously prepared for her role from before her birth, such that they never questioned her sinlessness. If our Roman friends look at Mary within remnant theology for biblical justification for the Immaculate Conception,²⁸ surely those on the far side of the Tiber can look at Mary and find one prepared by grace alone (cf. Luke 1:37) to the degree that her cooperation with grace is itself the climax of grace at work within her. She is, accordingly, rightly named blessed among women. She is uniquely one of us insofar as she is animated from her beginning by the unique favor of God (Luke 1:28), disclosing the fullness of human being by being preserved from sin. She is the personification, the visible type, of the Bride being prepared for her Bridegroom, presented “without a spot or wrinkle” (Eph 5:27), the Bride into which every disciple is being incorporated by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I once heard an old preacher pause mid-sermon and comment on his own work, saying something like this: “If you can’t preach that, you’d better find another line of work.” Surely this is the case once we rediscover the Mary of the Old Testament. Ratzinger’s recollection of post-Vatican II objections has been met. With respect to the paucity of material, the problem is precisely the opposite: we suffer from an abundance. With respect to alleged pagan origins, we reply

²⁸ Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*, 62–71.

that whatever pre-Christian history certain terms and practices have or might have had (and at the head of the line is the christologically indispensable term *Theotokos*), the richness of the biblical witness stands on its own, and any term that serves that witness is thereby baptized, regardless of its pre-Christian use. And it simply is not the case that spiritual functionalism is enough. What matters is not *Is it useful?* but rather *Is it true?* And there is more than enough true Marian material to render the rest, at best, superfluous. Disciplined by the Holy Scriptures, Mary is neither a pastoral nor a theological problem. She is not a rival in the redeeming work of her son, but directs us always and only to him. Insofar as she is an indispensable part of the Bible's thinking about the people of God, to avoid preaching the Marian texts of both Testaments is to fail in our duties as preachers to declare the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). So I, at least, no longer have any excuse to avoid Mary in my preaching, and I invite you to join me as I "take her in" (John 19:27). ⊕

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