

Mary

We believe that Jesus is true God who became man for us. His mother, therefore, cannot remain unimportant for us. It is **our desire to attain an objective image of the mother of our Lord** on the basis of the only reliable sources concerning her person, i.e. the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. In this article we want to show **our respect for the faith of the woman who called herself “the handmaid of the Lord”** (Luke 1:38), but we also want to express **criticism of the “veneration” of Mary** that neither corresponds to the will of God nor of His handmaid.

Mariam¹, the mother of Jesus

A new chapter in God’s history with mankind opened in the year 7 or 8 BC when a girl called Mariam from the Galilean village of Nazareth was unexpectedly confronted with God’s call to become the mother of the Saviour (Luke 1:26-38). Mariam said “Yes” to this task that God entrusted to her. She became the mother of the Saviour of mankind, Jesus, the eternal Logos who became man. In her Son, the infinite God united Himself with a created being in one person.

Mariam, being the mother of the Messiah, **was included in her Son’s humiliation from the very beginning.** At His birth she had to suffer homelessness (Luke 2:7). A short time later she had to emigrate with her husband and her child (Matthew 2:13-15). When her Son was twelve years old she saw that she had to submit her maternal feelings to her Son’s relationship with His eternal Father (Luke 2:48-49).

In the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry Mariam was confronted with a problem. When she asked her Son only indirectly to solve it, Jesus told her rather directly that **God isn’t dependant on her intervention to fulfil His plans:**

O woman, what have you to do with me? (RSV) Has not my hour already come? (John 2:4)²

Mariam understood this admonition and left everything else to Jesus. We should understand the last word uttered from her mouth which has been recorded and handed down to us as **the principle of her life from that time on:**

Whatever He says to you, do it. (John 2:5)

She had to go through the split of her family caused by the public appearance of Jesus when His own relatives considered Him to have lost His senses (Mark 3:21). Her attempt at mediation in this conflict failed when Jesus explained clearly – not only to His other relatives, but also to her – that for Him biological relationships do not count. **Only spiritual relationships are important:**

But Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?” And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, “Behold My mother and My brothers!” For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.” (Matthew 12:48-50)

From that time on **Mariam remained in the background.** Although she often did not understand her Son’s behaviour she remained faithful to Him till His death on the cross. In this situation Jesus chose to entrust her rather to His disciple John than to His unbelieving relatives (John 19:25-27). After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus we find Mariam among His disciples when they were gathered together in prayer (Acts 1:14). That is the last thing we know about her. We can suppose that she remained with John for the rest of her life and died as faithful disciple. **The fact that the remaining chapters of Acts and all letters of the New Testament³ fail to mention her again shows that Mariam did not see herself in a leading role. Instead she contributed to**

the edification of the church in submission and humility.

Veneration of Mary?

Mary herself said,

For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. (Luke 1:48)

Surely then, it must be right to turn to the Mother of Jesus trustfully in prayer, mustn't it?

We consider Mary blessed in the same way as Elizabeth her relative expressed it:

And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord. (Luke 1:45)

In the same way, in agreement with the words of Jesus, we consider every believer blessed:

Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed. (John 20:29)

When Mary said the aforementioned words she was following the example of Leah who, at the birth of Asher, the ancestor of one of the twelve tribes of Israel, said,

Happy am I, for the daughters will call me blessed! (Genesis 30:13 KJV)

The importance of the birth of Jesus surpasses the importance of the birth of a patriarch by far. The birth of Jesus has significance for all generations. Therefore all people of all generations have enough reason to rejoice over Mary's faith. But Christians do not have any more reason to pray to the Mother of the Messiah than the daughters of Israel had to pray to Leah. **Only God is worthy of receiving our prayers!** When Mary expressed her joy and gratitude in a prayer because she had been elected to be the mother of the Saviour, she was totally concentrated on God, whom she called her Saviour (Luke 1:47). **Neither in the words of Mary nor in any other passage of Holy Scripture do we find the least reason to worship Mary in our prayers, or to ask her for her intercession.** The Bible is full of prayers. But **all prayers are directed to God or Jesus.** There is not a single prayer directed to a mere human being, as perfect as they might have been during their lifetime.

You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only! (Matthew 4:10)

"Venerators" of Mary frequently say that they do not worship Mary; they simply ask her for intercession on their behalf, similar to how we can ask every other Christian to pray for us. This reasoning fails not only because of the lacking Biblical base, but also because of the fact that **Mary does not live among us any longer but she lives in God's presence.** The limits between this perishable world and the eternal world of God exist now as before. The following statement made by an Old Testament prophet about Abraham and Israel (= Jacob), the ancestors of the people of Israel is valid for Mary as well:

For You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us And Israel does not recognise us. You, O LORD, are our Father, Our Redeemer from of old is Your name. (Isaiah 63:16)

Of all the disciples, who knew Mary better than John, who took care of her after the death of Jesus? In all probability John survived Mary by several years and finished all his New Testament scriptures only after her death. If John had asked Mary for intercession after her death we should find traces of it in

his scriptures and also in the tradition of the second century. As it is we cannot find any mention of this practice. Who are we to think that we know better than the Apostles? Everyone who has real reverence for Mary will follow her example and magnify the Lord and rejoice in God their Saviour (Luke 1:46-47).

Mary - our mediator?

The Bible makes very clear statements on the question of mediatorship:

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)

Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. (Hebrews 7:25)

“Venerators” of Mary agree formally with these statements, but they make Mary the “mediatrix to the mediator”, as “Pope” Leo XIII. claimed:

Thus as no man goeth to the Father but by the Son, so no man goeth to Christ but by His Mother. (Octobri mense, Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on the Rosary (1891))

If, however, our access to Jesus is again only via Mary this theoretical agreement turns into a practical denial of the unique mediatorship of Jesus.

But did not Jesus, whilst hanging on the cross, present His own mother to mankind as the mother of all men (John 19:25-27)? Is this not reason enough to hasten to Mary full of trust? Who could ever know us better than our own mother?

The fact is that we cannot find anything about this in the Bible. Jesus, being a responsible Son, preferred to entrust His mother to His closest disciple than to His “brothers”⁴ who did not yet believe in Him at that time. Even on the cross Jesus showed His responsibility for His mother whilst at the same demonstrating that spiritual relationships have priority over family relationships.

But does not Jesus listen especially to His mother? How could a Son disdain the suppliant requests of His mother? Whoever thinks in this way denies the love of God who turns to all people without respect of persons. **If I approach God with a pure attitude he will listen to me. If I do not have this pure attitude not even Mary can help me.** It is Jesus who calls us, saying,

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. (John 6:37)

Mary - without sin?

According to the testimony of the New Testament **Jesus was without sin:**

Which one of you convicts Me of sin? (John 8:46)

Whoever speaks in such a way must either be a megalomaniac or he is justified in what he says. **In**

unison with the first Christians we believe that Jesus was the only man who had the right to say this sentence.

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15)

For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, ... (Hebrews 7:26)

He committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth. (1 Peter 2:22)

Concerning Mary, however, no such statement can be found anywhere in the Bible. That is why the angel's greeting in Luke 1:28 is usually quoted as Biblical proof of her sinlessness:

Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.

"Venerators" of Mary build the whole doctrine of Mary's sinlessness on this one expression, "favoured one", which is incorrectly rendered in the Vulgate⁵ as "gratia plena", i.e. "full of grace". However, even modern catholic translations do not use the expression "full of grace" any more. Nevertheless Mary is still venerated with these words. The expression "favoured one" is actually much more an indication that **she herself is in need of grace**, hence it expresses quite the opposite of sinlessness. Concerning Stephen, however, we do find the following statement:

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. (Acts 6:8)

In his case nobody draws the conclusions as in the case of Mary. Even in Stephen's case we cannot speak of sinlessness, although we highly respect the obedience and devotion of the first martyr.

The ecclesiastical writers of the first centuries were also aware that Mary sinned. Let us have a look at **John Chrysostom's comment** on Matthew 12:46-50:

For in fact that which she had essayed to do, was of superfluous vanity; in that she wanted to show the people that she hath power and authority over her Son, imagining not as yet anything great concerning Him; whence also her unseasonable approach. (John Chrysostom, Homilies to Matthew, Homily 44)

Maybe Chrysostom overrated the situation depicted in Matthew 12. Nevertheless his example shows that even for this 4th century Catholic "saint" Mary's sinlessness was not dogma.

Likewise, in unity with **Clement from Alexandria** we confess:

... wherefore also He alone is judge, because He alone is sinless. (Clement from Alexandria, Paedagogus (The Instructor) I,4,2)

Mary - the mother of God?

The council of Ephesus (431) coined the term "theotokos" (God's bearer) for Mary. This expression is correct as far as the one born to her is true God and true man. Of course it is clear that God, the eternal Creator of the universe, is without any origin. It is impossible for Him to have father or mother.

In the same way as Paul could write,

... they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (1 Corinthians 2:8)

which effectively means that they crucified God, we too, can say that Mary gave birth to God. This is, however, a statement about Jesus' nature and not about Mary. Unfortunately though basically correct, the wrongly accentuated teaching of the council of Ephesus led to a strong emphasis on unbiblical **Mariolatry**. At that time masses of pagans were integrated in the church with the effect that the pagan cult of the Magna Mater – a cult Paul was already confronted with in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-40) – was finally accepted into the ranks of Christianity.

The term “bearer of God” (or still more simplified: “Mother of God”) is frequently misunderstood, especially by people without any theological education, in whom the image of a mother commonly evokes corresponding emotions. The “Heavenly Father” receives the “Heavenly Mother” at His side. Monotheism is formally retained, but practically polytheism is introduced. The majority of their prayers are directed to the ‘Queen of Heavens’ (Compare Jeremiah 7:18). The fatherly God is far away. Mary has to keep back the punishing hand of her Son.⁶⁾

The Bible, however, teaches us about a different God. The God the Bible speaks about is not far from us:

...that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist... (Acts 17:27-28)

The God of the Bible cannot be pressed in the framework of man and woman, father-god and mother-goddess. The infinite Creator of the universe is above these categories. Therefore we find in the Bible not only many passages showing us God as Father, but also statements comparing Him to a mother:

Can a woman forget her nursing child And have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. (Isaiah 49:15)

As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you. (Isaiah 66:13)

We want to serve Him alone, who for us is much more than father and mother. We want to serve Him, our sole God and Saviour, in the same way Mary did, within the fellowship of the disciples of Jesus.

MARY

Look what they've to Mary done!
Did they make of her just fun?
She's disgraced like an idol
By a people proud and idle.

Once she was a simple maid.
All honour to her God she paid.
But now she's called the Heavens' Queen
Who comforts us in all our pain.

Our “Great Mother” is she called
Like pagan goddesses of old.
The Lord's poor maid from Nazareth
Is worshipped just like Ashtoreth.⁷

“Immaculate” they call her name,

Though blessed, was sinful all the same.
In spite of doubts she found her faith,
Defeated sin through God's great grace.

As "Mediatrice of all grace"
They give her all impudent praise,
Though Mary humble was and true:
"Do everything He says to you!"⁸

If you believe as Mary did
You'll throw away your rosary.
Don't use "blessed" medals - you're no witch! -
Avoid each place of pilgrimage!

One mediator is to God:
Jesus, who salvation brought.
The only way to God is He,
For you, for Mary and for me.

Together we will praise the Lord,
With Mary within one accord.
We'll serve for all eternity
Our God who saved her, you and me.

Footnotes:

1. In many passages of the New Testament (e.g. Luke 1:27,30,34 ...) Jesus' mother is called "Mariam". The Hebrew form of her name was "Miriam", in her Aramaic mother tongue she was called "Mariam". We consciously chose this (original) version of her name to take a fresh slant on the mother of Jesus as a historical person.
2. The context suggests the translation of this second sentence as question (unlike all usual translations). The original text was without punctuation marks. The Greek wording permits this translation
3. Galatians 4:4 "born of a woman" cannot be understood as if Mary is given a special mention. Paul wanted to underline the fullness of the incarnation of the Son of God.
4. "Jesus' brothers" were most probably his cousins. To deal more with this question would go beyond the scope of this article.
5. Latin translation of the Bible by Jerome in the 5th century
6. Statement of "Mary" in La Salette (An "appearance" of Mary officially accepted by the Roman-Catholic Church
7. Canaanite fertility goddess
8. Cf.: John 2:5

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