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Mary, Mother of Jesus: Vessel for God

by Stephanie Catmull

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“Mary was in the right place at the right time, and was a willing and able vessel for God at the time He needed her.”

Her family lived in humble stone and mud-brick houses, with Mary

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spending her days grinding wheat and barley into flour, and making their meals which consisted of vegetables, eggs, fruits, and nuts. Her daily routine would consist of making the bread, feeding the chickens, caring for their donkey, and making clothing from their sheared sheep's wool. She would carry water from the well for drinking, cleaning, and cooking. She would harvest ripe olives, grapes, figs, and pomegranates.

Yet, the most enigmatic woman of the Bible, Mary, the mother of Jesus, has very little known about her.

Mary's biography first begins with her 60-year-old pregnant cousin, Elizabeth between 4 B.C.– 6 A.D. (exact dates are unknown). Not surprisingly, Mary would likely have a close affinity with a relative who becomes pregnant in an extraordinary manner, and thus seek her wise counsel. The angel Gabriel announces to Elizabeth's husband Zacharias the details, specifically emphasizing that their son John [the Baptist] will be filled with the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit. God's Spirit has been mentioned over and over again in the Old Testament, but never was referred to as the *HOLY SPIRIT* until the New Testament, and specifically, with regards to the conception of both John and Jesus. This is obviously a new and baffling idea to both Mary and Elizabeth. Elizabeth was told that John would be "filled with the *Holy Spirit*, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15) and Mary would conceive Jesus once "The *Holy Spirit* will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:35, NKJV)

In retrospect, Mary gives these details to Luke once he has written the Book of Acts, since the presence of the Holy Spirit was obviously the Comforter that Jesus promised after His Resurrection. Luke, of course, is the careful transcriber of the Acts of the Holy Spirit to the newfound Christian churches. Yet before these two male cousins - Jesus and John the Baptist - are conceived within months of each other, the idea of the Holy Spirit is a foreign concept. Certainly the two women would not have understood what this meant.

Mary, born approximately 13-10 B.C. was a mere 12-year-old preteen living in a small, uncultured, closely-knit, deeply religious rural farming community of 500 people called Sepphoris, about 4 miles north of Nazareth. Nazareth, where her husband would hone his carpentry trade, was located within Galilee and known to be an important caravan trading route between Egypt and Mesopotamia.

Mary presumably lived as an only child with her parents who are never named in the Bible, though tradition names them as Anne and Joachim. Mary is named

after Miriam, Moses' famous sister, an especially common name during that time. Mary, as a woman and second-class citizen, was not educated and would not have been taught to read or write. All her religious training would have come through following cultural tradition, and by hearing the oral recitations of Old Testament scripture.

The political landscape during Mary's time could only be described as war-torn, dangerous, and unpredictable. Ruthless Roman occupation was rampant, and Jewish uprisings were equally as common. The Jewish people for centuries held onto God's promise that they would be sent a Savior – a Savior that would presumably put an end to their horrendous oppression. In the meantime, the Israelites were enslaved, and their towns were burned to the ground. Considering such turbulent times, it is astonishing that Mary later has the courage to travel to visit her cousin Elizabeth on the hillside– alone.

So, **why Mary?** And why this time in history? Why not, say, in 1000 A.D. to a different woman instead of Mary? Why make the Messiah's first appearance now? Mary is quite obviously a faithful, devoutly religious Jewess during the time. Yet many women are faithful Jews. Mary is a virgin, just like many Jewish women throughout history. She is unquestionably favored, blessed, and loved by God. She is not even unique by having an angel speak to her, since at least two other women throughout the Old Testament also garnered a similar, though rare, visitation (Hagar and Samson's mother).

At no other time in history – either past or present - could this seemingly impossible convergence of events take place. At no other time in history is a *woman* a descendant of David AND the royal priestly tribe of Levi, engaged to a carpenter, and living in Nazareth during the times when crucifixions would become the punishment du jour. At this exact moment in history, there would be three planets (Saturn, Jupiter, and the Moon) align to create the bright Star of Bethlehem – a once in a multi-millennium event - that guides the magi across the desert to worship the Christ child. As of 70 A.D., the Jews would permanently stop their ritualistic animal sacrifices during Passover, effectively eliminating the possibility of a sacrificed Lamb as prophesied in the Old Testament. If no animals are used for atonement, then Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross is unnecessary. Jesus' appearance is also heralded by a forerunner, who could only be His cousin, John the Baptist. Jesus, too, is called the Son of God and Son of the Highest, as predicted by the prophets and confirmed through the angel Gabriel.

As a matter of fact, of the entire 300 prophecies of the Old Testament pertaining to the birth of the Messiah, only one man – JESUS - could fulfill at least 8 of them. The odds of fulfilling these mere 8 prophecies are astronomical: 1×10^{28} ,

or 1 in 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. Consider that Jesus fulfilled all **300** prophecies of the Old Testament. Only with God are all things possible.

Accordingly, Luke carefully traces Mary's family tree to show her as a descendant of David through Nathan (Luke 3:23-31). This small detail is incredibly important since this lineage gives Jesus the legal right as King David's heir. Also, Mary is betrothed to a carpenter named Joseph, who also traces his lineage to that of King David, Solomon, and eventually Jacob (Matthew 1:7-16). Hence, BOTH parents are from the house of David, a point specifically emphasized by the gospels of Luke and Matthew, therefore providing Jesus with the double authority to ascend the priestly Throne.

Luke writes,

"And having come in, the angel said to her [Mary], 'Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!'" (Luke 1:28, NKJV)

Favored. The literal Greek translation means "You who have been graced." Mary was given a gift of unmerited, undeserved, unearned grace with God. Yet, just because she lived a pious life in Nazareth does not mean that she did not sin. Far from it. If that were the case, even Mary would not have had the need for a Savior. She was in the same company as other women in the Bible who were the ancestors of Jesus – Sarah, Rebekah, even Rahab the prostitute – and yet interestingly does not earn herself a place on the honorary Wall of Faith as mentioned in Hebrews 11. However, Mary was obedient. Mary loved and was committed to God. Mary was in the right place at the right time, and was a willing and able vessel for God at the time He needed her. She was going to be given preferential treatment and extra kindness for her role.

Make no mistake, Mary was not a deity to be worshipped or prayed to. Jesus would detest the fact that the person He calls "woman", never Mother, would be erroneously considered an intermediary between His people and God. The only way to God is through Jesus, as Paul states very clearly in 1 Timothy 2:5:

*"For [there is] one God, and **one** mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."*

However, Mary will be blessed forever as she is remembered for her role in Jesus' life and throughout the rest of history as Gabriel predicted.

Blessed. The Old Testament Hebrew word ("barach" or "beruch") means knee – to bend down on the knee to plant a vine. God is bending down to Mary in order to plant in her womb the True Vine. Even Jesus says later in John 15:5, "I am the vine, and you are the branches." God's true intention is for His blessing to

come down to Mary.

Blessed. The New Testament Greek word (“makarios”) is used during Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He describes how the “stooped down” and “lowly” would inherit the earth. Yet how would this apply to Mary? Because she lived a humble, righteous life; she would *bring down* upon her God’s spiritual blessings such as strength, authority, courage, peace, and patience. And she would be respected and honored throughout all generations as a woman who has been given such blessings by God.

Mary, to her courageous credit, does not cower in fear at the sight of Gabriel. She believes him with unquestioning faith. And she humbly submits herself as God’s maidservant and bows to His will.

The remainder of the angel’s speech recorded by Luke is known as the Annunciation:

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus [literally, Yahweh is salvation]. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.” Then Mary said, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38, NKJV)

Mary may be blessed, and she may be favored, but Mary is also in a precarious predicament. She will become pregnant (she isn’t yet), and her husband Joseph will not be the father. Notice that when Gabriel relays this stunning prophesy about her coming Son, Mary only comments on her upcoming pregnancy. To be fair, it’s not what Gabriel has to say doesn’t matter, but Mary’s miraculous “situation” will become front and center to her and Joseph’s lives. She might, at the very least, be shunned from her Nazarene society and left to starve. More likely, she could be stoned to death for adultery as dictated by Mosaic law. As it states in Deuteronomy 22:21:

“then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father’s house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done

a disgraceful thing in Israel, to play the harlot in her father's house. So you shall put away the evil from among you."

Where, then, does this leave Joseph?

Joseph has every right to divorce her quietly - which would only serve to limit any options for Mary's future. Her family is seemingly out of the picture, which leaves only Joseph as her sole support. And God picks the right man for the job - to protect Mary, to love Mary - and more importantly, a man who also has absolute faith and trust in God. Joseph even takes Mary with him for one of the required censuses in Bethlehem (the annual counting of the people so that the Emperor Augustus could impose heavy taxes), which Mary was not required to attend. Joseph only wants to keep her safe. He knows the whispers, the condemnation, the accusatory pointed fingers that threaten his beloved, and he risks all for the sake of Mary, for Jesus - a son that he did not conceive, and for God.

Mary is cradled in her husband's capable hands - the hands of a carpenter who has been busy at work, ironically helping to craft and rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem, one of many monolithic architectural projects begun by King Herod. This same Temple that Joseph was hired to rebuild would one day become *THE* Temple of his stepson Jesus, who would not only become the chief cornerstone, but would destroy it through His crucifixion and resurrection. Joseph helped rebuild this Temple in more ways than one.

But until that day, Mary must deal with an impending crisis. She remembers Gabriel's not-so subtle hint: to visit her cousin Elizabeth for advice, encouragement, and to escape the rising tensions of her Nazarene community. Even the dangerous riotous lands that Mary would travel through by herself were safer than staying in Nazareth. At some point between Gabriel's announcement and Mary's arrival at Elizabeth's doorstep, she is truly, immaculately, miraculously pregnant.

There, Luke records the most famous exchange between two women: Elizabeth's first ever proclamation of Jesus as Lord, and Mary's Song of praise and worship to God, otherwise known as the Magnificat. Elizabeth, being filled with the Holy Spirit, loudly and boldly speaks out to her cousin:

*"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of **my Lord** should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed, for there will be a fulfillment of those things which were told her from the Lord."*

(Luke 1: 42-45, NKJV)

Elizabeth is the first person to announce Jesus as Lord even before Mary has had a chance to tell Elizabeth she's with child. Only the Holy Spirit could do that. Similarly, during Jesus' life, Peter boldly tells Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Mt 16:16), where Jesus effectively answers: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah [Peter], for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven." (Mt 16:17) This knowledge was first revealed to Elizabeth, and only the Holy Spirit gives her the power and boldness to speak His words of prophecy.

Luke recognizes the hand of the Holy Spirit here, and through God's breath of inspiration, records this entire exchange for posterity. The Holy Spirit has announced the arrival of God's Son and the Savior of the world, the One who will defeat the ultimate enemy – DEATH – and give sinful man the opportunity to obtain righteousness by believing in Him, thereby living eternally in heaven.

And Mary's glowing response is reminiscent of other women in the Bible when they find themselves blessed with a precious baby growing inside them. These women recognize God's miracle of life, and the One that created the universe is the One that also created their future bundle of joy. Mary, in turn, humbly glorifies and magnifies His name in the Magnificat:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name. And His mercy is on those who fear Him. From generation to generation, He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty. He has helped His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy, as He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever." (Luke 1: 46-55, NKJV)

Mary stays with Elizabeth for 3 months, soaking in the presence of her elderly cousin and confidante. They both know what it is like to be ashamed and condemned, yet they also have both been blessed by God, and their sons would become irrevocably intertwined with each other, playing out their purpose and destiny in God's kingdom.

Time is of the essence, though, and Mary returns to her husband before John the Baptist is born as they quickly prepare to walk their 100-mile, 10-day journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Joseph, because he is from David's lineage, must register there for the census, and unwittingly fulfills the centuries-old prophecy that the Savior would be born in this tiny, inconsequential town. Though the trip is arduous, Mary is nestled under the protective wing of her husband, and looks

forward to staying with his family and relatives where she will finally enjoy their company and hospitality. But because Joseph's older brothers get there first, the guest-room (the inn) is taken, and the couple has nowhere to stay. Instead, they are relegated to the animal stables where Jesus is born, wrapped in swaddling cloths, and placed in the feeding trough. Overjoyed at their son, Joseph and Mary are subsequently visited by shepherds and by the magi, all proclaiming their son as the Redeemer of sins.

Henceforth, the King of the Jews and Savior of the World is alive on earth for a short 33 years. Mary and Joseph have their Son circumcised on the 8th day according to Jewish custom, and on the 40th day present Him as their firstborn to the Temple that Joseph helped build. Two different people – Simeon and Anna – boldly bear witness to this infant as the Redeemer and Messiah. Simeon's dire warning falls upon Mary as he says:

"Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against 35 (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." (Luke 2:34-35, NKJV)

Mary at this point could have been proud and haughty with all the overwhelming attention she has received on behalf of her Son. She could have shouted from the rooftops that she was selected by God to be the mother of the Christ. The expensive baby gifts could have easily gone to her head. But she remained God's lowly maidservant throughout, and her heart remained humble and steadfast, a true testament to her faith and belief in God. Mary, Luke writes, continued to ponder with deep introspection all that she had seen and heard – from the angel Gabriel's words, to Elizabeth's proclamation, to the shepherd's chorus, to the magi's (the wise men's) visitation, and finally to the prophetic words spoken over Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem.

Understandably, Mary could not fully grasp what everything meant. For Mary to "ponder" these events (the Greek word "sumballo") meant to bring all the bits and pieces of knowledge together and weave the threads into a comprehensive whole. But that "whole" was beyond what Mary's limited 13-year old human understanding would allow. For not even Mary was privy to God's entire, ultimate plan for His Son. She did not know the miracles of healing that He would perform. She did not know of His profound, overarching ministry to Israel and to the rest of the world. She did not know that "Savior" and "Messiah" did not mean saving the Jews from Roman oppression, but rather that her Son would save the world from its ultimate enemy of sin and Death.

Mary also could not have foreseen that Jesus would not embrace her as a

mother, but rather regard her as a common “woman” later in life and hand her off to an apostle to be taken care of in her widowhood. She does not understand when Jesus, at 12 years old at the Temple of Jerusalem, tells her:

“Why do you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?” (Luke 2:49, NKJV)

When Mary tries to gain his attention at the wedding feast at Cana, she submits to His authority:

“Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come.” (John 2:4, NKJV)

Understanding her place, Mary does not take offense when Jesus would later say to His followers:

“My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:21, NKJV)

Mary knows that her role in Jesus’ life was diminishing as it would for any mother in a Jewish household once their boys celebrated their ceremonial bris at 13 years of age – a significant rite of Jewish passage into manhood. And as the clear leader of the household upon Joseph’s death, Jesus becomes the authoritative head over her and the rest of their family. As events unfold, Mary cannot even prevent her Son’s execution by her own people. Yet, she would stand as a fortress by His side during His brutal crucifixion that would pierce His hands and ultimately – as prophesied - her own soul. Only she, her sister-in-law, the apostle John, Mary Magdalene, and Salome would be present at Jesus’ death on the cross.

Meanwhile, Mary’s life would continue in routine and uneventful fashion, giving birth to several other sons and daughters that would become Jesus’ half siblings – ones that later would be the center of the Judeo-Christian church and write at least two letters of the New Testament (James and Judas). Mary would raise Jesus in the Jewish faith, and as expected, she would faithfully accompany her family to Jerusalem every year during Passover.

She would visit Elizabeth, where Jesus and John [the Baptist] would play together in the streets of Jerusalem. She would stay at the house of Martha and Mary in Bethany, cementing the friendship that Jesus would ultimately continue during His ministry. He would befriend Lazarus, whom later He would raise from the dead. Mary would lovingly watch her husband train Jesus as a carpenter, not knowing that Joseph was training the very One who would fashion the Lamb’s Book of Life.

Keep in mind that Jesus never disrespected Mary, nor did He ever dishonor her. He specifically was subject to her and Joseph, as stated in John 2:51, until He began His public ministry. Jesus had great affection for her as evidenced within minutes of His dying on the cross, for He made sure that she was handed over to His beloved apostle, John – a true believer – instead of his non believing siblings:

*“Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother; and His mother’s sister[in-law], Mary the wife of Clopas, and Magdalene. When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by [John], He said to His mother, **“Woman**, behold your son!” Then He said to the disciple, “Behold **your** mother!” And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.” (John 19:25-27, NKJV)*

Yet even then, He addressed Mary with the familiar “woman”, not Mother. He was authoritative with her when needed, as He was with every other person who clearly did not understand His mission. Jesus made it very clear that His place, His family, His purpose was not of this world.

Mary was not singled out, nor did she demand to be. Even though she was Jesus’ blessed earthly mother, she allowed herself to be humbly treated just like everyone else. Jesus states again in Luke:

*“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and **mother**, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.” (Luke 14:26, NKJV)*

Keep in mind that “hate” does not mean despise, or an angry emotion of complete and utter intense, passionate dislike. Rather, Jesus means not to put one above the other. And no one – not even your own family, *especially* your own mother – should take the place of Jesus. Jesus never put Mary above Him, nor even equal to Him. Jesus demands to be your be all and end all, your *raison d’être*, your sole purpose in life. Everything and everyone else is secondary. Mary understood this. Do you?

Mary dedicated her life to Jesus, to raising Him, to loving Him, to putting Him first above herself and fulfilling her role that God had given her 33 years ago. Finally, Luke places Mary in the upper room in the book of Acts, where she is last seen with the apostles and disciples patiently awaiting Jesus’ return. She is not graced with the glimpse of Jesus’ Glorious reappearing like so many others. But that isn’t necessary, for Mary completely believes in Him as the Son of God and as the Savior of the world. She knows firsthand what He has done, and what He will continue to do. Her heart, though broken, remains strong in the knowledge that her mission is accomplished.

Well done, good and faithful servant. You are truly blessed
among women. Amen.

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