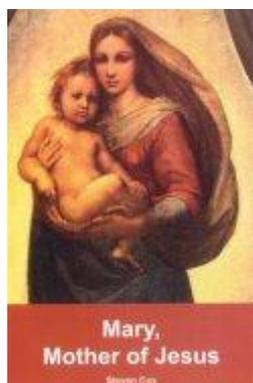


# Mary, Mother of Jesus

by Steven Cox



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Mary is one of the most famous characters in the Bible. Even people who have never read the Bible have heard about the mother of Jesus Christ. But what was Mary like? What part did she play in the Gospel story?

## An Angel appears to Mary

The first mention of Mary in the Gospels concerns the appearance of an angel:

*"In the sixth month God sent the angel Gabriel to Galilee to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David" (Luke 1:26-27)*

Luke records here that Joseph was a descendant of David, yet when he records the family tree of Jesus in Luke 3:23-38 he gives the ancestors, not of Joseph, but of Mary. Mary was also a descendant of David, but she was descended from David's son Nathan, while her husband Joseph was a descendant of David's son Solomon (the genealogy of Joseph is found in Matthew 1:1-16).

*"The angel went to her and said; "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you". Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You*

*will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered, "May it happen to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.' (Luke 1:28-38)*

## **Mary's Song**

When Mary heard the words of the angel she sang a song of praise to God:

*"My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, For the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name. His mercy extends to those that fear Him from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; He has scattered the proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers." (Luke 1:46-55)*

Mary thanked God for helping Israel and remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants. Mary herself was a descendant of Abraham, as were all the people of Israel, and by providing this special child God was showing his mercy not only to Abraham's descendants but even to Abraham himself. It may sound strange that God could "show his mercy" to Abraham by the birth of Jesus, as he was long dead when Mary sang this song. This is because Mary saw that the child, Jesus, would be a fulfilment of promises that God had made to Abraham. (see Galatians Ch.3)

There is another song in the Bible like Mary's song. This is the Song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, in 1Samuel 2:1-10.

## **The birth of Jesus**

Mary and Joseph lived in the north of Israel, but the prophecies concerning the future King of Israel, "the Messiah", said that the king must be born in the town of Bethlehem, in the south of Israel. (see Micah 5:2 as quoted in Matthew 2:6). In order for the prophecy to be fulfilled God arranged circumstances so that Mary, even though she was heavily pregnant, had to travel to Bethlehem:

*"In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who has pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room in the inn." (Luke 2:1-7)*

## Jesus 'came down from heaven'

Jesus' birth was the most important birth in history. More than that, the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus form the central point in the purpose of God in making the world. God had seen so clearly the need for Christ that he is described as *"the lamb slain before the foundation of the world"*. (Revelation 13:8)

This kind of language can be confusing. In God's eyes Jesus was *"the lamb slain before the foundation of the world"* yet we know that in human terms, Jesus was not slain before the foundation of the world at all. His death at the hands of the Jews and the Roman governor Pilate was a historical event at a fixed point in time (28 or 29AD). Before the lamb was slain, and raised from the dead, there was no way for men to be saved. All those who died before this event - slept (a Bible term meaning -died, but death with hope of resurrection). Faithful men born before Jesus, like Abraham and David, faced death with the faith that God would one day provide a way for them to be saved, but not denying that death was real. The fact is that none of them could be saved without Christ. If Christ had failed when he was tempted, or not submitted to the cross, then all those who died before Jesus - and we too - would have perished without hope. Consider Paul's words on the importance of Christ's resurrection from the dead:

*"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost."* (1Corinthians 15:17-18).

This is what Jesus meant when he said that *"no one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6)

Because of a few difficult passages like the *"lamb slain before the foundation of the world"* many people have assumed that Jesus existed in heaven before he was born of Mary. Also, the Gospel of John several times speaks of Jesus as having *"come down from heaven"* - which taken literally suggests that Jesus had physically left heaven and entered the womb of Mary for nine months.

We cannot deal in full with such a complicated subject in this short booklet. (If you want to know more about this subject please write to the address on the back cover for related material). But we can list some simple points as follows:

1. The language used in the Bible about Jesus, such as *"slain before the foundation of the world"*, does not refer to time from a human perspective, but the central importance of Jesus' work in God's plan and purpose.
2. When Jesus says he *"came down from heaven"*, the context (in John chapter 6) is that he is the true *"bread of life"*, as contrasted to the bread which *"came down from heaven"* (same words) in the days of Moses. The old bread, or manna, which Israel had eaten in the wilderness, had fed their stomachs but not saved them. In contrast, this new bread of Jesus would save men's lives.
3. If we take the *"came down from heaven"* verses in John 6 literally, we are then required to change all the rest of the story of Jesus' life to fit this one unusual phrase. Jesus' *"conception"* (Luke 2:21) must then become a non-literal conception meaning that it is not the real start of Jesus' existence. His *"birth"* (Luke 2:7) was not really his birth. When he was a *"baby"* (Luke 2:6) he was never really a baby. Then as a child Jesus did not really *"grow and become strong"* (Luke 2:40), and as a being

descended from heaven he could not *"grow in wisdom"* or *"grow in favour with God"* (Luke 2:52). Likewise Jesus was not really *"tempted in every way just as we are"* (Hebrews 4:15). And most seriously - to take this way of thinking to its natural conclusion - when Jesus *"died"* (1 Corinthians 15:3) he did not really die.

This last point may sound like an exaggeration, but sadly it is not. Time and time again people who believe that Jesus literally came down to earth from the heavens will tell you that "yes, his body died, but Jesus himself did not die" - which is not at all Bible teaching. Paul says that the death of Christ is the most basic Gospel teaching (1 Corinthians 15:3). Depart from this and *"you have believed in vain"* (1 Corinthians 15:2). It would be better to take John 6 figuratively, (as it was obviously meant to be taken - see John 6:55) and to take the rest of the Gospel story literally.

4. Finally, and most particularly relevant for this booklet, if Jesus already existed in heaven and simply inhabited the womb of Mary for nine months, then Mary was not really his mother. Being a mother means more than just bearing a child for nine months and giving birth, motherhood is also about rearing and caring for children. Mary was Jesus's mother, not only because she carried him, but also because like every son he inherited some of his mother's physical characteristics, and because she reared him as a baby and cared for him as a child. If Mary was truly the mother of Jesus, then like any son Jesus could not have existed without her, and he could not have been born in heaven before Mary conceived him on earth. The word *"conceived"* which Luke uses to describe the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary (Luke 2:21) is the same word *"conceived"* as he uses of the conception of Jesus's cousin John the Baptist in the womb of Elizabeth (Luke 1:24,36).

## **Born of a woman**

We have seen above that it is important to believe that Mary was the literal mother of Jesus, because that then means that we can read the rest of the Gospel records in a simple and literal way. It is also important because when Jesus was literally born of a woman, that means that he also was human - he was made with certain characteristics common to all men and women. These characteristics which Christ shared with us were essential to his work.

*"But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law that we might receive the full rights of sons."* (Galatians 4:4-5)

Christ was both *"born of a woman"* and also *"born under law"*, together meaning under both the law of death which the first woman, Eve, brought into effect by disobeying God in the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 3), and the Law of Moses which all descendants of Jacob were subject to.

People often think of Jesus as somehow being the son of God in heaven before he was born, and his life on earth as a stage during in his life. The Bible does not speak of Jesus in this way at all:

*"The gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding His Son, who as to his human nature ('the flesh') was a descendant of David, and through the Spirit of holiness was declared to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead"* (Romans 1:2-4)

This means that the good news regarding God's son was promised before. It was foreseen long before Jesus was born by the Old Testament prophets. But it also says that he was promised as a descendant of David. If the words are to make sense this means that Jesus, the Son of God, must be born **after** David, and not have existed before. Again, if he already existed before David then he was in no way the real descendant of David, nor the actual son of David's descendant Mary. Further, we see here that what "*declared Jesus to be the Son of God*" had nothing to do with existing in heaven before his birth, but the amazing (and to this day unique) fact of his resurrection from the dead.

Another mistaken view, related to the idea that Jesus existed before he was born of Mary, is that Mary was the "Mother of God". This is a completely unbiblical concept. Mary was the mother of Jesus - the son of God - not God.

### **The Seed of the woman**

There is another reason why we should think that Jesus did not exist until his mother, Mary, gave birth to him. And that is the curse on the serpent in the garden of Eden:

*"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."* (Genesis 3:15)

The woman meant here is Eve, the wife of Adam, not Mary. All mankind are descended from Eve, and all are offspring of women. But the special offspring referred to here who would crush the serpent (meaning "sin", see Psalm 91:13, Luke 10:18) was Jesus. It was only because Jesus was born of Mary, "*born of a woman*", that he was able to fulfil these words. If Jesus had existed in heaven before he was born, then he would not have been a descendant of the woman at all - in fact he would have preceded Eve.

### **The baby Jesus presented in the temple**

Jesus was circumcised, and named, where he was born, in Bethlehem:

*"On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived."* (Luke 2:21)

Mary, like all Jewish women after giving birth, had to observe a 40 day period of purification. Then when this was completed she and Joseph made the 10km journey to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer the poor person's sacrifice, a pair of doves, for Jesus. The old priest at the temple, Simeon, had been promised by God that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah ó the Christ. When he saw Jesus he took the baby in his arms and praised God:

*"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."* (Luke 2:30)

Also at the temple there was a widow, Anna, 84 years old, who was a prophetess.

*"Coming up to them at that very moment she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem"* (Luke 2:38)

## Escape to Egypt

Following this visit to the temple Mary and Joseph received a visit in Bethlehem from some wise men from the East who had seen the star over Bethlehem and who presented them with gifts (Matthew 2:1-12). But Joseph was warned in a dream that the king, Herod, was seeking to kill the baby so the family fled to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-19). Only when Herod died did Joseph return with Mary and Jesus, to Nazareth in Galilee. (Matthew 2:19-23, Luke 2:39)

*"And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him."* (Luke 2:40)

## Jesus aged 12

In the Bible there is only one incident that shows Jesus as a boy:

*"Every year his parents went up to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the feast, according to the custom. After the feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and answering questions. When his parents saw him they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they (Joseph and Mary) did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. (Luke 2:41-51)*

## The unknown years of Jesus

Between the visit to the temple aged 12, and his baptism at the age of 30, we know very little about the life of Jesus. Consequently we also know little about the life of Mary in these years.

All we have is one verse:

*"And Jesus grew in wisdom, and stature, and in favour with men and God".* (Luke 2:52)

This verse emphasizes again what was said earlier about the birth of Jesus being a real birth, and Mary being his real mother. If Jesus had existed before birth in heaven then he could not have "*grown in wisdom*", nor "*grown in favour with God*". Mary, who had "*treasured in her heart*" the incident at the temple must have had many occasions to wonder as her godly son grew into a godly young man.

During this period Mary would have been busy looking after her other younger children. Mary had at least four other sons; James, Joses, Simon, Judas, as well as daughters (Matthew 13:55-56, Mark 6:3). When he began to preach in Nazareth the people said "aren't all his sisters with us?" (Matthew 13:56). This suggests that his sisters were still at home waiting to be married. Perhaps Jesus, as the older brother, even had to help provide for their weddings.

Mark tells us that Jesus, like Joseph, worked as a carpenter (Mark 6:3). This job was much as it is today, a skilled, but honest and hardworking trade. It would have given Jesus opportunity to meet all kinds of people and travel in Galilee. We know from historical records that when Jesus was in his teens, just starting his trade, the nearby town of Sepphoris underwent a major rebuilding which brought stonemasons and carpenters from all over the Roman empire. As it was less than an hour's walk to Sepphoris it is almost certain that any young carpenter of Nazareth would also have spent some time working there. Sepphoris was a Greek-speaking town, and Jesus, who probably only spoke Aramaic (a form of Hebrew) at home, would have learned to speak Greek. The rebuilding of Sepphoris would also have provided extra income for his family.

A more important education in the life of Jesus is hinted at in the law of Moses which lays the following duty on all kings of the Jews.

*"When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees, and not consider himself better than his brothers, and not turn from the law to the right or to the left". (Deuteronomy 17:18-20)*

How many of us today would spend their time and money on making, by hand, a personal copy of the Bible? Yet according to the requirements of the law at some time before starting his preaching of the kingdom this is what the young Jesus did. Did Mary notice this and again *"treasure all these things in her heart"*? (Luke 2:51).

Jesus certainly "read it all the days of his life" because in the Gospels we find that Jesus quotes the Scriptures in almost every one of his sayings. His mind was full of the Scriptures.

Another insight into the life of the young Jesus comes in Psalm 22 (the famous psalm which prophesies in detail the crucifixion - see v.18). This is a Messianic psalm, where the Psalmist gets into the mind of Christ, saying:

*"Yet you (God) brought me out of the womb, you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast. From birth I was cast upon you. From my mother's womb you have been my God." (Psalm 22:9-10)*

From the womb of Mary, even as a young child, Jesus trusted in his Father, and depended on him. In the same way we read of Jesus' obedience to his Father:

*"During the days of Jesus' life on earth he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries to the one who could save him from death, and was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered." (Hebrews 5:7-8)*

We can also conclude that at some time between the visit to the temple when Jesus was aged twelve, and the crucifixion, Mary's husband, Joseph, had died. Jesus would never have asked John to look after his mother if Joseph was still alive (John 19:25-27). Also, at some point before the start of his own work, his slightly older cousin John the Baptist became a great preacher (Luke 3:1-18).

## **John baptises Jesus**

When Jesus was 30 years old he went to be baptised by John.

*"As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:16-17)*

After this Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness where he was tempted (Matthew 4:1-11). The temptations that Jesus faced were all things with which the Jewish crowds demanded from him to prove that he was the Messiah. Some people mistakenly think that this was the first and last time in Jesus's life that he was tempted, but the Bible does not say this (see Hebrews 4:15). Also we read:

*"When the Devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13).*

This means that Jesus was tempted many more times during the rest of his ministry.

It is after this that Jesus left the family home in Nazareth, moving to the town of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee, where he called his first disciples from among the fishermen there. (Matthew 4:13) It is likely that Mary would have remained at home in Nazareth, and that Jesus's brothers took up the family carpentry business.

## **The Wedding at Cana**

Jesus's first recorded miracle was performed at the request of his mother. His mother was at a wedding feast in a town about 20km north of her home in Nazareth, and an equal distance from Capernaum, from where Jesus and his disciples had also been invited. When the wine ran out, Mary came and asked Jesus to help.

This was a strange request, her son was a carpenter, not a wine-seller. Jesus had only received the power to do miracles at his baptism, and up to this point Jesus had not made use of the power - even when hungry and thirsty for 40 days in the wilderness. Somehow Mary suspected that Jesus would be able to help. It may be that Mary remembered the prophecy about the Christ in Isaiah 55:1 *"Come all ye who are thirsty... buy wine and milk without money and without cost"*. Jesus himself alludes to this prophecy shortly afterward (John 4:14). Yet Jesus was not totally happy with Mary's request:

*"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come." (John 2:4)*

Perhaps Jesus did not want to do a miracle that would encourage people to follow after him for the wrong reasons. Yet he agreed to his mother's request and turned the water in six giant stone jars into wine.

## **Who are my mother and brothers?**

What follows next marks the start of an unfortunate period in the life of Mary. Jesus's younger brothers did not believe in him and even made fun of him:

*"Jesus' brothers said to him; "You ought to leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples may see the miracles you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world." For even his own brothers did not believe in him." (John 7:3-5)*

That incident was at the start of Jesus' ministry. Shortly afterward, when Jesus had begun to attract large crowds and many disciples, his brothers' attitude hardened, and even Mary fell in with them:

*"Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said 'He is out of his mind' (Mark 3:20-21).*

When Mary and her other sons arrived at the house where Jesus was speaking they found a great crowd. Not able to enter in, they stood outside and called him. The people who relayed the message obviously expected that Jesus would get up and go out to meet his family. He did not:

*"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. Then he looked round at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:33-35, cf. Matthew 12:46-50, Luke 8:19-21)*

With these words Jesus cut the relationship with his natural mother and brothers. We do not read of Mary and her son Jesus being together again until the crucifixion, three and half years later.

### **The first Mary worshipper?**

It is not so long after the incident at the house, and the break between Jesus and his mother and brothers, that we meet a woman who probably would qualify as the first worshipper of Mary.

*"As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you."" (Luke 11:27)*

No doubt the woman thought that Jesus would be pleased with what she said about his mother. However she received a reprimand:

*"He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and do it". (Luke 11:28)*

It would have given Jesus no pleasure to reply in this way, but it was the sad truth. At this point in time Mary herself was very far from "blessed". Despite having the announcement of the angel, and all the other things she had experienced when Jesus was born, and in the 30 years of life with him after, she had chosen to follow James and the other brothers in thinking Jesus was crazy. Mary needed to believe in Jesus too, or suffer the same fate as all men and women.

*"I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother's sons" (Psalm 69:8)*

However, in one way Jesus' bad experience with his family was useful. It means that, just as he can sympathise with our troubles in so many other areas, the Lord Jesus can understand the problems of believers today whose family members are slow to come to a knowledge of the Gospel, or even oppose them.

### **Jesus rejected at Nazareth**

It was not just Mary and his brothers who rejected Jesus, it was all who knew him in his home town. One time Jesus travelled from Judea, via Samaria, to Cana in Galilee and stopped to preach in the synagogue of Nazareth. The people there rejected him, causing Jesus to say "*a prophet is without honour in his country*" (Matthew 13:53-57, Mark 6:1-6, compare John 4:3-4, 43-46)

### **Honour your father and mother**

But Jesus did not let his own personal troubles with his family affect his duties to his mother as required by God. He taught his disciples to respect their parents. (Matthew 15:4-6, Mark 7:10-11, Luke 18:20)

### **A sword will pierce your soul**

When the aged Simeon had seen the eight day old baby Jesus in the temple, he had made a prophecy to Mary:

*"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that is spoken against. - yes, a sword will pierce your own soul too - so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed"* (Luke 2:35)

The words "*a sword will pierce your own soul too*" are often assumed to prophesy the grief Mary would experience at the foot of the cross. This is probably true, yet the context of Simeon's prophecy suggests that it means more than this.

Simeon said that Jesus was "*destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel*". This Jesus did by causing those rich and powerful who did not believe in him to spiritually fall, and the poor who believed in him to rise. It also came true that Jesus became "*a sign that is spoken against*", and that "*the thoughts of many hearts*" were revealed in people's reactions to what was spoken about Jesus.

The thoughts of Mary's heart also were revealed. She fell when she listened to Jesus' brothers, but she was later raised when she accepted Jesus as her Lord. This was a sword revealing the thoughts of Mary's heart.

The thoughts of men's hearts are still revealed in this way today:

*"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges all the thoughts and attitudes of the heart".* (Hebrews 4:12)

### **Behold your mother!**

After the time Jesus was rejected in the synagogue it is not recorded that he returned to his home again. But for three and half years, while Jesus travelled and preached throughout Israel, Mary must have followed carefully what people were saying from the family home in Nazareth. She did not follow Jesus among his disciples, but some women of Galilee did; Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Younger and Joses, and Salome the mother of James and John, Joanna wife of Cuza, and Susanna. (Matthew 27:55-56, Mark 15:40-41, Luke 8:2-3)

Yet when Jesus was arrested by the high priests, Mary was in Jerusalem, together with her sister - Jesus' aunt. (John 19:25). She and her sister were present at the crucifixion along with the women who normally followed him.

*"Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved (John) standing nearby he said to his mother, "Dear woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time, on this disciple took her into his home."* (John 19:25-27)

### **The resurrection of Jesus**

Mary is not listed among the first women to see the resurrected Lord (Luke 23:55-24:9). However as John was one of the first disciples to meet Jesus, and he would have been looking after Mary, it is quite likely that Mary was among those who met Jesus in the first days after his resurrection from the dead. What a happy, and no doubt tearful, reunion it must have been!

### **The baptism of Mary**

The baptism of Mary is not mentioned specifically in the Bible. But we do know that Christ commanded all believers to be baptised, as even he himself was baptised in the river Jordan (Mark 16:16, John 3:5). It is hardly thinkable that his own mother would disobey Jesus in this regard. Like her son, Jesus, Mary would have been baptised not by sprinkling, but by full immersion in water (see Romans 6:4, Colossians 2:12)

In the weeks following the ascension of Jesus, Mary met with the early church:

*"They all joined constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus"* (Acts 1:14)

### **Jesus' family reconciled**

One of the most moving meetings must have been when Jesus appeared to James (as Paul describes in 1Corinthians 15:7). James, who had thought Jesus was crazy, who had tried to drag him out of the house, who had convinced Mary and the other brothers not to believe Jesus, now was a changed man. In obedience to Christ's commands he was baptised, and in the forty years that remained of his life, James was to become one of the pillars of the early Christian church. Eventually he gave his own life for his new faith in Christ. The other brothers also converted, were baptised, and became leading members of the church.

### **The death of Mary**

The Bible does not tell us when or where Mary died. Church tradition records that John, her adopted son, took her with him to Ephesus and she was buried there.

Many hundreds of years later a legend started to be told in the church about the "Assumption of Mary" - that Mary's body went up into heaven in the same way as Christ's. This is nonsense. John, who looked after Mary till her death, probably wrote the Gospel of John late in the 1st Century when Mary would have been nearly 100 years old if she were still alive (and in those days very few people lived to such an age). He records in John 3:13 that "no man has ascended into heaven". This statement includes Mary.

Likewise Paul says that each will be made alive "*in their own order*" (1Corinthians 15:23). First Christ, then "*when he comes*" those, such as Mary, who belong to him. Paul was teaching about resurrection to eternal life with Jesus in God's kingdom on earth, which is what the Bible teaches as the only hope for life after death. The Bible does not teach, not once, that people go to heaven when they die. (A leaflet on the subject of resurrection is available free from the address on the back cover).

### **Prayer to Mary**

If Mary is not in heaven, and the Bible says that she is not, it does not make sense to pray to Mary. She is sleeping in the dust, like all those who await resurrection, and cannot hear prayers.

*"The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing"* .(Ecclesiastes 9:5,10)

*"The dead do not praise the Lord, nor any who go down in silence"* . (Psalm 115:17)

Another reason not to pray to Mary is that anyone who does so is breaking one of God's commandments. In the Bible God forbids anyone to consult the dead:

*"Should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living?"* (Isaiah 8:19).

The third reason not to pray to Mary is that Jesus taught that all prayer must be addressed only to "*Our Father who art in Heaven*". (Luke 11:2) Jesus did not even teach us to pray to himself; when he prayed he prayed to God. There are no examples of prayer to anyone except God, our Father in the whole Bible. Not to Jesus. Certainly not to Mary. And Mary herself, as we have seen, sung to and prayed to God, and Him only.

The same goes for the singing of Ave Maria, or saying Hail Mary. People who do this need to understand that (1) the Bible teaches that Mary cannot hear them, (2) they are disobeying God's commandment on talking to the dead, and (3) they are disobeying Christ's instructions on prayer.

### **Visions of Mary**

The same has to be said of the visions of Mary seen by Joan of Arc, by the girl who founded Lourdes, and by many other pious, but imaginative, young girls. Mary is dead, and cannot appear to anyone.

Some believers, for whom Mary occupies a special place in their religious affections, may be offended, even angry, at these words. But please ask yourself: what shows greater honour to Mary? To believe what the Bible says about her, and what she herself believed about Christ? Or to believe something which disagrees with the Bible, and which Mary herself would have been the first to deny?

If we really want to show respect to Mary we should do so by thanking God for having provided such a wonderful mother for His only begotten Son, and by taking this godly, pure, but otherwise quite normal woman, as an example of what to believe and how to live.

## **The Woman of Revelation 12**

A few people have identified the *"woman clothed with the sun"* who gives birth to the *"man child"* in the book of Revelation as Mary. And wondered about the woman's flight from the dragon.

This is not the place for an explanation of Revelation. It is a complicated book of symbols, and it weaves together many hundreds of references from the Old Testament prophets. However we should show that the passage is not about events from the life of Mary:

One possible interpretation of the passage is as follows: The son of the woman who is *"snatched up to heaven"* is almost certainly Christ (compare Revelation 12:5 with 2:27 and Psalm 2:9). But this does not mean that the woman is Mary. The description of the woman (compare Genesis 37:9) is probably intended to be taken as faithful Israel, "the daughter of Zion", which waited for the birth of the Messiah, and afterward becomes the spiritual "mother" (Galatians 4:26) of the Jerusalem church - which in the years following the ascension would be persecuted and finally flee to the wilderness. This is supported by Christ's own use of similar language (John 16:21) and that in the prophets (Micah 4:10, Isaiah 13:8,21:3,26:17).

This is only one possible interpretation, given simply to illustrate that the story does not have to refer to Christ's literal mother. There are other interpretations relating this to different historical events in the early church. The important point is that these things, like all the people, beasts and objects that appear in Revelation, are intended as symbols ó as they are in other Bible prophecies such as Daniel and Zechariah.

## **Conclusion : The hope of Mary**

The great list of faithful people who "sleep" in hope in Hebrews 11, which starts with "we" (meaning you and I) and progresses through Abel, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to David and the prophets, also mentions a group which includes Mary:

*"Women received back their dead, raised to life again"* (Hebrews 11:35)

Of course there were several examples of this in the Bible; the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17:23, Luke 4:26), the widow of Nain (Luke 7:12), Mary and Martha of Bethany (John 11:39), Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the others with them (Luke 24:1,10). But this must include also Mary and Jesus's sisters, who would have been with James when he and his brothers saw Jesus after the resurrection (1Corinthians 15:7).

So Mary is included in Hebrews 11 alongside Abraham's wife Sarah (Genesis 21:1, Hebrews 11:11), Moses' mother Jochebed (Exodus 6:20, Hebrews 11:23), and Rahab (Joshua 6:25, Hebrews 11:31).

These men and women were promised great things by God, but died without receiving them (Hebrews 11:13, see Acts 7:5). But the hope of those listed in Hebrews 11 was firmly based on faith that God could raise the dead (Hebrews 11:19). They still had not received what was promised at the time the letter to the Hebrews was written ó about 30 years after Christ had ascended to heaven:

*"These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. (Hebrews 11:39)*

If they had not received what was promised, they were obviously not in heaven. And if these great men and women were not in heaven then no one has ascended to heaven. In fact Jesus clearly teaches that "no man has ascended to heaven" (John 3:13). And this is confirmed by the next verse in Hebrews 11:

*"God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:40).*

So Mary, and all the other faithful men and women, will only be "made perfect" together with us. We have not yet been made perfect, so neither have they. But what is *this "something better"*?

God has promised to send his son, Jesus, back to this earth and establish a kingdom where there will be no more injustice, poverty, pain and suffering.

When Jesus returns those who "*belong to him*", such as Mary and other believing men and women of old, will be raised from the dead to join in this kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:23).\*

**Steven Cox**

\* If you would like more information on what the Bible teaches on this subject please read the booklet *The Kingdom of Heaven on Earth* in this series.

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## Questions

1. What did the angel tell Mary?
2. Did Jesus exist before he was conceived in Mary's womb?
3. In Genesis 3:15 who is "the woman"?
4. In Genesis 3:15 who is the "seed of the woman"?
5. Who did Jesus say "are my mother and brother"?
6. What was the "sword" which pierced Mary's soul?
7. Did James and Jesus' brothers believe Jesus?
8. What happened to Mary after Jesus went to heaven?
9. Where is Mary now?
10. What was Mary's hope?

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