

## Women in the Bible

### **MARY OF NAZARETH** **The mother of Jesus Christ**

*Mary means 'wise woman' or 'lady'. It is a Greek form of the Hebrew name Miriam or Mariam.*



Born to St Joachim and St Anne, Mary of Nazareth was a Jewish peasant girl living in a world in which about 70% of people were peasant farmers. The small, conservative town of Nazareth had a population of no more than 400. Mary probably knew everyone in the town, especially the women with whom she worked and lived. Women have been involved in agriculture and food production since prehistoric times, and she and other women in her family group had the responsibility of farming any land that the family owned, whether it was fields, orchards or vineyards (olives were the largest crop produced in Galilee at this time). She was probably physically robust, strong-minded, practical, respectful of tradition and loyal to her family – all characteristics of scriptural women in general. Mary would have spoken Aramaic, a language with a strong poetic tradition. Her society valued the oral transmission of tradition, ideas, stories and news. Being able to talk well was a valued skill in

the ancient world. She would have known the Jewish Scriptures, especially the stories and prayers in them, and been aware of the women in these stories, many of them favourite role models. There were three main social levels in Mary's world: the rich, who were usually landowners and/or entrepreneurs; the poor, who worked on the land or at a variety of trades; and the destitute, who had neither land nor job, and who survived by begging. Mary and her family belonged to the middle group.

### **MARY IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES**

*(Acts 1:13-14)* Written before the gospels, Mary is shown as a mature woman who devoted herself to prayer within the early Christian community. She thus lived out the Jewish ideal of holiness. Jews believe that holiness is found in active participation in the life of the community. Holy people do not avoid the company of others. They share the happiness and sadness of the people around them, because they believe that God is found in humanity, not in isolation. Mary is shown within a community, focused on God.

### **MARY OF THE SCRIPTURES**

Writers of the New Testament saw Mary as relatively unimportant. For them, Jesus was the central figure. He was the focus of all their attention and hopes. Mary is included only when something she does throws light on the person of Jesus.

The four evangelists show Mary in four different ways. Like modern authors, they do this because:

- each was writing for a particular audience, for example Christians in Rome, Jewish Christians in Jerusalem or in the Diaspora, and Gentile Christians
- each was trying to convey particular ideas about Jesus and about God.

## MARY IN MARK'S GOSPEL

Mark places Mary firmly at the centre of her family. One of his stories tells of a visit she and her family made to Jesus when he was preaching. 'A crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you".' (*Mark 3:31-35*). Mary is shown as the leader of the family of Jesus, confident and loving. The members of his family did not understand Jesus' purpose, but were concerned about his welfare. Mark showed that Jesus reset the boundaries of family life. Firstly, he was obviously trying to break away from his roots and take his message to a larger audience. He had also widened the family circle so that the kinship group was extended to a community of people who believed in him. Mark was implying that the community of believers should function like a close-knit family. Women were clearly a part of the new type of family that Jesus proposed.

Mark's image of Mary may be the closest to the historical Mary of Nazareth (*Mark 6:1-6*).

## MARY IN LUKE'S GOSPEL

Luke's gospel contains stories not found in the other gospels. In his gospel, Mary was a model of what a follower of Jesus ought to be: she had faith in God, she thought deeply about what was happening to her, and she co-operated with God, holding nothing back. She was also a very human figure, experiencing distress and joy as she watched over her child. Mary promised herself in marriage to a young man called Joseph. He was a 'worker' in wood, metal or stone, producing practical objects for agricultural or domestic use. But Mary's life was not to be the normal one a young Galilean woman might expect.

The gospels say that an 'angel' came to her, telling her that she was to be the mother of an extraordinary man, one who would be called the Son of God. "*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and shalt bring forth a son; and thou shalt name him Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the most High; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of David his father; and he shall reign in the house of Jacob for ever.*" (*Luke 1:26-38*) This event was called the Annunciation.

Mary became pregnant, even though she and Joseph had not had marital relations. Being an unmarried mother in that culture was very difficult. People were not seen as individuals but as members of their group/clan, and any action of an individual reflected on the whole group. Mary's family would have found it very hard to believe that there was no human father; her pregnancy would bring dishonour to all of them.

Soon after this, Mary went to visit an older cousin of hers, Elizabeth. (*Luke 1:39-56*). When they met there was a moment of mutual recognition, where each woman realised that the child of the other would be a person of great importance. Mary spoke the words of a beautiful prayer, expressing her wonder at what had happened. The prayer is called the 'Magnificat'.

Mary and Joseph had to attend a census-taking in Joseph's ancestral town, Bethlehem, and Mary gave birth to her son there. This census may or may not be an historical fact; possibly it was a device to situate them in Bethlehem, from which the Messiah would spring, for the birth of Jesus (*Luke 2:1-7*). In traditional portrayals of the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph were the only family members present. In fact, Mary would have been helped during the birth by a group of her female relatives. After the birth, he was taken to the Temple in Jerusalem (*Luke 2:21-38*). A religious ceremony for the women followed the birth of a Jewish child. As a devout Jewess, Mary observed the rituals surrounding the birth of a child (*Leviticus 12*). During the ceremony in the Temple, two people, Anna and Simeon, foretold an extraordinary future for Mary's son.

After this, Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth, where they lived with their family. During these years, Mary lived the normal life of a Galilean peasant woman. A Jewish woman had the responsibility of giving her children their basic education. Jesus' introduction to the richness of Jewish religious ideas came initially from his mother, with male teachers later educating him in Torah. Mary and her family seem to have been conservative Jews who took their religious duties seriously. Jesus was about twelve when they made the journey to Jerusalem. They travelled with a group of pilgrims to visit the great Temple and make sacrifices there. (*Luke 2:41-52*). For a woman from a small town in far-off Galilee, Jerusalem would be confusing, noisy, full of strangers, but also exciting, with strange sights and new experiences.

## **MARY IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL**

Matthew's gospel contains several stories not found in the other gospels. The story of Jesus' birth is told from Joseph's point of view, not Mary's. The story is preceded by a genealogy, in which Joseph is named as the legal father of Jesus. In the Jewish world, a genealogy established social position because her culture emphasized family honour. Her pregnancy could bring dishonour to her whole family. At first, Joseph was reluctant to marry, knowing that he was not the father of her child. But in a dream he realized that what was happening was remarkable and amazing, and cannot be treated in an ordinary way. So Mary and Joseph were married.

*'When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him. He took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son.'* (*Matthew 1:18-25*)

In *Matthew 2:13-21* Mary, Joseph and Jesus fled to Egypt. The story about Jesus' escape to Egypt paralleled other escape stories in the Hebrew Scripture: Joseph in the book of Genesis, and Moses' escape from the Pharaoh.

There is no mention of Joseph in the later stories. In her maturing, Mary may have been widowed or Joseph forced to be away looking for work. Builders, stonemasons and carpenters from Nazareth would have been hard-pressed to support themselves if they worked only in their own village. There was work at Sepphoris, four miles north of Nazareth. The Romans rebuilt this town with a Greek-style theatre and temples during Jesus' boyhood, so there would have been plenty of work there for building tradesmen.

## **MARY IN JOHN'S GOSPEL**

John's gospel contains stories not found in the other gospels. This gospel developed complex ideas about Jesus: who he was and how this was evident in his life. The emphasis was on the divinity of Jesus, with not many stories about Mary. But the stories we have show a woman who was sure of herself, and confident about her place in the community. One story tells about a wedding that she and Jesus attended in a town in central Galilee called Cana: *'When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her "woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim.'* This story gives us an example of Mary's assertiveness as she insists that Jesus help in a difficult situation. Mary had often been represented as quiet and submissive in iconography and tradition. As a Jewish peasant woman, it is unlikely that she was either of these things.

Mary watched her son during the three years he spent teaching and travelling around the country. She saw that the authorities viewed his actions and words with mounting apprehension. The Jewish authorities were in a difficult situation. They were trying to maintain a delicate balance of political stability between the Romans and the Jewish population. They saw Jesus as a threat to this stability. The situation became progressively worse. Mary saw the danger coming, but was unable to protect

her son. Eventually, during an incident in the crowded city of Jerusalem, Jesus was arrested, given a swift trial and executed in the hideous manner reserved for criminals.

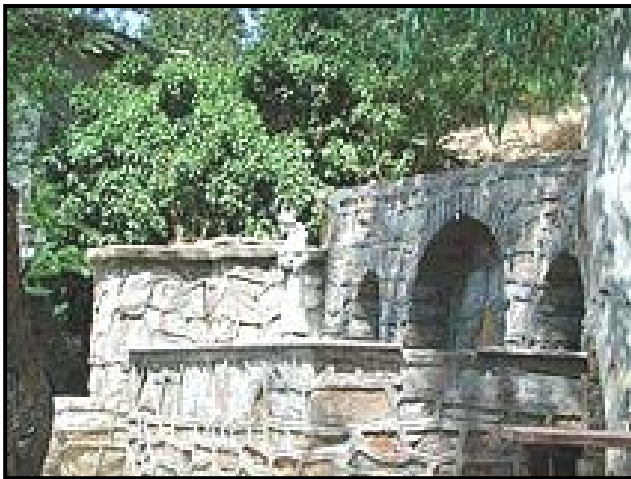
*‘Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. (John 19:25-27)*

Mary saw her son tortured and killed. Jesus had been her baby, the boy she educated, the young man she was so proud of. She now saw him tormented and executed by brutal soldiers. It is impossible to imagine how she felt as she watched the full horror of the crucifixion.

***Sections of the text have been adapted from Elizabeth Fletcher’s women in the bible***

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Tradition states that Mary then accompanied St John across the Mediterranean Sea to the ancient city of Ephesus in Turkey, once the glorious Roman capital of Asia Minor. Here today can be seen the ruins of St John’s Basilica where he came to write the fourth book of the New Testament and where lies his tomb. The house where Mary lived, now known as the Shrine of the Virgin Mary,



was described in a vision given to the pious nun, Catherine Emmerich, in the 1820’s and was discovered by researchers in 1892. Then only the ruins of the walls were left standing. The current structure is of Byzantine origin. In her visions, she had seen the Virgin Mary leaving Jerusalem with St John and their coming to Ephesus. She said furthermore that the house was built by St John, that it was rectangular in plan with a round back wall and had an apse and a hearth. Emmerich’s vision also revealed that after three years in Ephesus, Mary had a great desire to return to Jerusalem and was accompanied there by John

and Peter. While there, she was taken ill and lost so much weight that everybody thought she was going to die. However, Mary recovered enough to return to Ephesus but on her return she again became very weak and died at the age of 64. The saints around her performed a funeral ceremony, putting the coffin they had specially prepared into a cave about two kilometres away from the house. St Thomas arrived too late and crying with sorrow his friends took him to the cave where they prostrated themselves. Two of them entered after removing the bushes at the entrance of the cave and knelt down in front of the grave. John neared the coffin, a part of which was protruding from the grave, and unlacing its ties he opened the lid. When they all approached the coffin they were stunned in amazement when Mary’s corpse was not in the shroud even though it had remained intact. After this event the mouth of the cave containing the grave was closed and the house was turned into a chapel. Now a place of pilgrimage and recognised as a shrine by the Vatican, it is visited by thousands of tourists every year.

