



Women in the Bible

New Testament: Mary, Mother of Jesus

Luke 1 (especially 1:26-56), Matthew 1:18-25

The Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, the God-Bearer is a central figure in the Christian tradition. What does the New Testament say about her? Is there anything new we can read in her story when we give special attention to gender and power?

Mary and Elizabeth

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Luke 1:41). This is how Elizabeth greets Mary when she comes to stay in the Judean hills. Elizabeth, previously understood to be barren, is at the end of her reproductive years. Her husband Zechariah just received news from an angel of the Lord: they will soon have a son, whom they will name John. He will become known, we come to see, as John the Baptist.

After Mary finds out that she, too, is pregnant in an *even more* unlikely way, she goes to stay at her relative Elizabeth’s house. (Some translations call Elizabeth and Mary “cousins” in verse 36, but “relative” is a better translation; there was no word in ancient Greek for “cousin” in the specific way we use it today.) Both women are in vulnerable positions, Elizabeth because of her advanced age and childlessness, Mary because of her youth and lack of husband.

The author of the Gospel of Luke may be intentionally reminding us of the many stories in the Hebrew Bible that deal with childlessness. Mary’s and Elizabeth’s stories are similar to other miraculous pregnancy stories from their own Jewish texts: Sarah and Rebecca in Genesis, Hannah in 1 Samuel, etc.

Both women, although vulnerable in their world, are about to bear sons who are destined to do great things. Elizabeth’s son John “leaps for joy” in her womb when the pregnant Mary comes near (Luke 1:44). Even from Elizabeth’s womb, John recognizes the divinity Mary is carrying in her own. We do not find out much about these two women other than in the contexts of their pregnancies with these future male leaders. Dr. Vayntrub suggests that we can read them as narrative “placeholders,” intended to get us ready for what is about to come rather than being significant in their own right.

Bechdel Test

The brief exchange recorded between Elizabeth and Mary in the Gospel of Luke is one of the few moments in the Bible that passes the Bechdel Test. Originally used for works of fictions like movies, a work passes the test when:

1. There are two (named) female characters
2. who talk to one other
3. about something other than a man.

These guidelines were first outlined in 1985 by American cartoonist Alison Bechdel. She published a cartoon called “The Rule” as part of her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*. One female character outlines these three criteria that determine which movies she will see. (Consequently, she hasn’t seen a movie for six years.)

The Bechdel test has since been used a measuring stick for all kinds of media, including the books of the Bible. The three criteria offer a low bar, yet many movies, television shows, and books – even modern ones – cannot leap over it. Only four books of the Bible pass: Ruth, Tobit, Mark, and Luke.

Magnificat

To her relative Elizabeth, Mary proclaims: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Luke 1:46). In the verses that follow, she prophesies that generations will call her blessed, that God will cast down the mighty and lift up the lowly, that God has remembered God’s promise to Abraham.

This passage came to be called the Magnificat, the first word of the Latin version of the text, which means “magnifies.” It is difficult to ignore the text’s similarities to Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2. “My heart exults in the Lord,” Hannah begins, “my strength is exalted in my God” (1 Sam 2:1). She continues to declare similar themes to Mary: God “raises up the poor from the dust” (verse 8) and “breaks the bows of the mighty” (verse 4).

Where Mary proclaims the Magnificat while she is pregnant, Hannah sings her song after committing her son Samuel to the service of God. Mary sings in response to the gift and responsibility that God has given her, and Hannah sings in thanksgiving for God having answered her prayers by giving her Samuel. In both cases, these are rare moments of power for women in the Bible: the divine is speaking directly through these female prophets.

The Virgin Birth

The virgin birth of Jesus is a doctrine that has drawn debates from Christians and non-Christians alike, but what does the New Testament actually say about Mary’s virginity? Matthew and Luke are the only two books in the Bible that mention Mary’s virginity. They are also the only books that tell Jesus’ birth story.

The Gospel of Matthew notes that when Jesus is conceived, Mary is engaged to Joseph but does not yet live with him. An angel comforts Joseph that the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (Matt

1:20). Joseph believes the angel, and he marries Mary, but the gospel is quick to tell us that he “had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son” (Matt 1:25).

Similarly, the Gospel of Luke shows Mary’s confusion when Gabriel announces she will conceive a son. “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” she asks (Luke 1:34). The Greek means literally “since I do not know a man.” Why is this important for these authors to mention?

Mary’s virginity proves to ancient readers that Jesus is not simply some person, the son of Mary and Joseph. Instead, he is exceptional, the Son of God. Ancient medicine believed that the male seed did all the action in procreation, and the woman’s body provided the neutral ground for it to grow in. They did not imagine that the woman contributed anything constructive to the process.

With this in mind, it is easy to see why the source of the male seed that created Jesus is so important. It came from God and no one else. Greco-Roman readers of the gospels would have been familiar with this idea. Special men in their history had been conceived by the procreation of gods with women, for example: Romulus, founder of Rome and son of Mars, and Caesar Augustus, emperor of the Roman Empire and son of Apollo. While the gospel writers do not want us to think of Jesus as a Roman ruler *per se*, they nevertheless want to convey Jesus’ divine status beyond the shadow of a doubt. Joseph may be Mary’s husband, but he is *not* Jesus’ father.

The Gospel of Matthew has a second motive in mentioning Mary’s virginity. This author takes pains throughout the gospel to show how Jesus’ story is the fulfillment of prophecies in the Hebrew Bible. To that end, after Jesus’ birth, Matthew says, “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son’” (Matt 1:22-23). This is a reference to the words of Isaiah 7:14. The “argument” of Matthew’s gospel is that Jesus is the consummation of the Jewish faith, so the author shows all the Jewish prophecies that Jesus fulfills.

Interestingly, the author of Matthew is working with a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible called the Septuagint. In the Hebrew version, the word “virgin” in Isaiah 7:14 was *almah*, which meant a young woman who was of childbearing age but had not yet given birth. If you have the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV) or the Revised Standard Version (RSV), your Isaiah 7:14 verse says “young woman,” not “virgin.”

Since ancient Greek did not have a word that meant the same thing as the Hebrew *almah*, the Septuagint translated it as *parthenos*, which could mean both “maiden” and “virgin.” The author of Matthew did not know about this translation choice; he read the word *parthenos* and said to himself, “Aha, Mary’s virginity fulfilled our prophecy!”

Mary’s Virginity

Very early in church history, people began trying to make sense of Jesus, and in the process, they sought to understand Mary. Why did God choose her instead of someone else? Why did God need a human at all to become flesh? How much of Mary’s humanity did Jesus take on in the womb?

There are medical questions and theological questions, and they all have very high stakes. At the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE, a group of bishops from across the Christian world agreed: Mary is not just the birth-giver of Christ (*Christotokos* in Greek). She is the birth-giver of God (*Theotokos*). This declaration did not end the arguments, but it has stayed the stated belief of most Christian churches until this day.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, the Greek Orthodox tradition, and some others, Mary was not just a virgin at Jesus' birth but remained a virgin until her death. This detail is not found in the Bible but in the early theological writings that emerged after the New Testament books and letters were written.

Furthermore, the Roman Catholic Church also avows Mary's Immaculate Conception. Many people think this refers to Mary giving birth as a virgin, but it actually refers to *Mary's* conception and asserts that she was born without Original Sin. These doctrines formed long after the New Testament was written, but they have had a huge impact on the Church throughout history.

One of the earliest texts to discuss Mary's own birth is the *Protoevangelium of James*, which tells the story of Mary's mother Anna being unable to conceive and then becoming pregnant thanks to her great faith. We see, again, an implicit reference to the Hebrew Bible's Hannah in 1 Samuel. The reference may even be explicit in this case: many believe that Mary's mother's name Anna is taken from Hannah's story in 1 Samuel. The *Protoevangelium* also tells the story of Mary's exceptional life and then Jesus' birth. The text never becomes part of the Christian scriptural canon, but theologians have referred to it throughout the centuries.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

www.yalebiblestudy.org