

The True Mary of Bethlehem

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During this most recent advent season we have heard many vocalists sing the beautiful Ave Maria. Whether or no you realize it, that song title is a direct quotation from the KJV of the Bible, the version most revered by Baptists through the years. Therein one finds the angel Gabriel addressing young Mary and saying "Hail, thou art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women." (Luke 1:28) Ave Maria is Latin for "Hail Mary." She was about to learn that she was soon to be pregnant with the baby who was to be called Jesus. In a sense, we believers are all blessed having been chosen by God to meet a particular purpose and fill a specific need in the life of the church universal.

A Sinner Saved By Grace

Our Roman Catholic brethren repeat that same passage in their Rosary Prayer, when they say "Hail Mary, mother of God, blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus." The term "highly favored" means that she was afforded Yahweh's grace which is the unmeritable favor of God that saves a sinner's soul. All Christians believe that she was chosen by the Father to be the human instrument whose womb was to provide growth for the developing child to be born and the Son to be given that had been prophesied by Isaiah 600 years before Mary's time. There was never a woman before Mary, nor has there been any woman since Mary of Bethlehem, who has ever been so blessed as she. God became a man, the Word became flesh, the incarnation was accomplished through this blessed teenage virgin.

While Mary was truly the most blessed of all earthly women, having been chosen by God the Father for this specific purpose, she remained a fallible human who was just as much in need of the Lord's gift of salvation grace as any other human ever born on this earth; she was, like all of us, possessed the stain of original sin from the moment of her conception. (Psalm 51:5) Even Mary herself recognized that fact and implied as much when she sang her song of praise to the Lord (known as The Magnificat), for in those lyrics she referred to her Benefactor as "God my Savior." (Luke 1:47). Unless one is a sinner one does not need a Savior. Mary rightfully and intuitively recognized her sinful state.

Mary was never born of the miraculous event which the Roman doctrines call "The Immaculate Conception." That was a doctrine is not support by the Holy Scriptures and was instead espoused by a former pope, and basically invented in his mind, in order to dodge the inevitable problem that would have arisen if Jesus had been born to, and had been genetically related to a sinner; just like all other humans have. There would have been real theological and soteriological problems if Jesus had been a familial descendent of Mary; but he wasn't. God had prepared an embryonic body, uniquely His, with His own compliment of DNA, for the eternal Spirit of Christ to enter, when the Word became flesh. That fact is taught quite clearly in Hebrews 10:5 and Jeremiah 31:22. In the Hebrews passage one reads the words of Jesus saying "A body you have prepared for me." In the Jeremiah verse God announces through the prophet that He will do "a new thing" when "a woman surrounds a man." The "man" Jesus, during his prenatal, intrauterine existence was surrounded by the "woman" Mary's womb.

Mary did not have to be perfect in her own right, she was made perfect in the sight of God when His favor (grace) came upon her and the Holy Spirit came upon her. That is what happens to each of us when we are saved by grace through God's gift of faith. (Ephesians 2:8-9) We then appear absolutely holy in His sight, without spot or blemish from our indwelling sinful nature. (Colossians 1:22)

The Child's Unique Birth

If one examines the original Greek in which it was transcribed by the apostles, one will find that the Bible clearly teaches the fact that Jesus was not conceived in the manner in which all other persons have been. That was the "new thing" which Jeremiah predicted; it had never happened before. Adam and Eve had been made, by God out of the dust of the earth and a rib, respectively. But they were made in a fully developed adult form, not in an embryonic stage as Jesus was. When Jesus spoke of John the Baptist He said, "I tell you the truth. Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist..." (Matthew 11:11). If John and Jesus had both been conceived and delivered of a woman in the same manner, then Jesus would have been saying that John was greater than He; a man would have been declared greater than God. That is impossible and could not have been a "truth" as Christ had averred His statement would be. That passage of Scripture is strong evidence for the fact that Jesus was born in a manner that was entirely unique to the entire human race. However, when one examines the Greek word for "born of" women it is *gennetos*. That implies a natural birth preceded by a natural conception. That is the way in which all of us came to be, and compared with us there is no one greater than John the Baptizer. On the other hand, Jesus did not come into the world in that manner, for if we look at Galatians 4:4 we are told that "...God sent his son, born of a woman..." Now that sounds like a very normal conception and delivery and much like the passage from Matthew. However, the Greek word used there for "born" is *ginomai*, which means "made out of nothing," and the Greek word for "of" is *ek* which is translated, "proceeding out of." Thus Galatians 4:4 in the original Greek language would have read that Jesus had been made from nothing and had proceeded out of Mary. That was an entirely "new thing" which fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy.

Once A Virgin; Not Always A Virgin

Another Roman Catholic doctrine that has no support in the Scriptures is the notion that Mary remained a virgin during her entire life. Thus her marriage to Joseph would have never been consummated and she would never have had other children. Since Jesus was nearly a two year old child when the Magi visited and warned Joseph that Herod was about to murder all sons in Israel who were approximately two years of age and under (Matthew 2:16) in order to destroy Jesus, and since Joseph took Mary and Jesus into Egypt to flee the wrath of Herod, it is apparent that Joseph and Mary had cohabited for at least two years. Furthermore, when Jesus was twelve, we know from the Scriptures that Joseph and Mary has been highly upset (Luke 2:48) when Jesus stayed behind on one of their yearly missions to Jerusalem so that He could have a profound discussion on theological issues in the Temple with the Jewish clerics. It is inconceivable that Mary would have remained a virgin during those twelve years of marriage.

As to the fact that Mary had other children, we can begin with the testimony of my medical colleague and brother in Christ, the Greek physician, Dr. Luke. He had probably received much of his information about the birth and life of Jesus from His earthly mother. Luke wrote of Mary "...and she gave birth to her firstborn son..." (Luke 2:7) Now it stands to reason, if Mary was to have only one son, the good doctor would not have referred to Jesus as her firstborn. He was the Father's "only" son (John 3:16), but He was the first child to proceed out of Mary's womb with several to follow through natural conceptions. In fact, since Luke interviewed Mary later in her life, it is quite probable that Joseph was dead and all of her other children were grown and gone from home. Luke wrote his gospel in the year 60 AD., approximately 27 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. His next work, the book of Acts, was written about one year

later.

In Mark's gospel (6:3) we find further evidence for Christ's step siblings. Those who questioned the validity of the teachings of Jesus promptly relegated Him to the household and occupation of a mere carpenter. They said, "Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon?" Jesus' foster father Joseph must have been deceased, given the reference to "Mary's son," for Jewish custom was to mention only the father's name since women were considered unworthy of such recognition. It is also apparent that Jesus had taken over the carpentry business in which Joseph had been engaged. The detractors went on to say, "Aren't his sisters here with us." Thus Mark makes it ultimately clear that Jesus grew up in a household of several step brothers and sisters.

A further Scriptural proof of Mary's multiple pregnancies is found in the gospel of Matthew. There, "While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside...Someone told him, 'Your mother and brothers are standing outside wanting to speak to you.'" Then actually denying His physical relationship to any of them, Jesus pointed to his disciples and said, "'Here are my mother and my brothers.'" "

In that last statement Jesus was saying that those who follow Him and adhere to His teachings are the real members of His spiritual family; the Bible calls us "children of God." (John 1:12) The Roman Catholic's interpretation of that Scripture implies that "brothers" there means "believers." Not so. The disciples were the true believers, the step brothers at that point in time had rejected Christ.

In his letter to the Galatians the apostle Paul mentions the fact that three years after his conversion he met "...James, the Lord's brother." (Galatians 1:19) James went on to become a leader in the church of Christ and wrote the epistle bearing his name between 45 and 50 A.D. Another of Jesus' brothers, Jude, also ultimately believed and wrote the epistle named for him. Whether or not any of Christ's other step siblings ever became Christians is a matter of pure speculation, but not supported by Scripture.

What to Make of Mary?

Our friends and brothers in the Roman Catholic tradition hold Mary in high esteem and so should we. However, esteem is totally different from veneration or reverence. We hold many believers in high esteem, but only God is to be revered. No shrines or alters dedicated to her worship are appropriate.

With that in mind however, we should never denigrate the highly favored woman, this Mary of Bethlehem, nor should we make disparaging remarks about a Roman Catholic friend who has an elevated opinion of that dear saint of God. If the occasion arises, we should respectfully and gently point out that many of the things being taught by the Roman church are not supported in Scripture. My approach has always been as follows: I say, "I want to know the truth about these matters and I am not infallible. So I may have missed the part in God's Word that tells of these things that you honestly believe concerning The Blessed Virgin Mary. Please show me where they are so that I will no longer have the proclivity for teaching erroneous things about her." Having used that method, I have never had one person come back and show me the biblical evidence for that which they have been taught and believe concerning that very blessed, yet very human Christian person, the most blessed woman in all of human history.