

# MARY, MOTHER OF JESUS AND FIRST DISCIPLE: A RE-READING

*Judette Gallares, rc\**

## ABSTRACT

The article offers a re-reading of biblical accounts on Mary in the Gospels and in Acts with consideration of the theological perspectives of the gospel writers' way of presenting Mary's role as mother of Jesus and disciple. Biblical scholarship has established a strong case that the evangelists are drawing the readers' attention away from Mary's blood relationship with Jesus and more towards her bonds of discipleship and faith. This signals a reinterpretation of the symbol of Mary's motherhood for our time and for particular cultures so that women and men may find in it a meaning that they can re-appropriate for themselves.

**KEYWORDS:** Discipleship; Prophetic character; Faithfulness; Witness

Volumes have been written about Mary. She is a woman of many names and titles, honored by peoples and generations. She has inspired hymns, prayers, devotions, liturgical art and religious architecture. Churches and chapels have been built and named in her honor. Apparitions of her have been reported and authenticated in different parts of the world. Numerous feasts have been assigned to her and many miraculous events attributed to her intercessions. There seems to be no limit to the Christian imagination about Mary. The present multiplication of Marian devotions and sites of pilgrimage is evidence that she is still prominent in the imagination of Christians. Yet she also figures as the center of controversy between Catholicism and other Christian sects and the focus of intense debates and conflicts even among those who profess Christianity.

Whatever way people might prefer to look at her, one thing is certain: no other woman in history has reached the stature she has. But would Mary, if she were alive today, recognize herself in all the traditions and portrayals of her? Would she identify herself with the cults that have evolved around her? These are questions that would only evoke speculative answers either in agreement or disagreement with the way she has been described and projected through the ages. Beyond the traditions, cults, images, descriptions of her, we need to return to what Scriptures tell us of her. We need to reread the biblical accounts of Mary in the context of her situation as a woman of her culture and time, the theological orientation of the gospel writers, and

---

\* Sr. Judette Gallares, rc is a professor of theology and spirituality at the Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia, Philippines. She is a visiting professor of theology at the Faculty of Religious Studies, University of St. Joseph, Macau. She is a formator for the Religious of the Cenacle, Asia Region.

in the light of our present understanding and consciousness of ourselves as Christians who are confronted by contemporary issues that continue to challenge our faith. She needs to be regenerated for Christians today, and her biblical story to be re-appropriated by women and men in the light of their self-understanding.

From the perspective of history, theological interests about Mary may have waned and risen at different periods of Christianity but have never ceased. In more recent years between the Second Vatican Council and the mid-1980s, after a seeming hiatus in Marian curiosity, theologians who are sensitive to gender issues have shown re-surfing interest about Mary. But theologies, more often than not, run the risk of remaining within the confines of seminaries and theological schools, while many traditions and devotions that have fed the faith of the common people, but are not solidly based on theology continue to flourish in many parishes and local churches, thus failing to challenge the faithful to live their Christian commitment in a more radical way. With more current Marian studies undertaken, Mary has resurfaced today in the context of a more balanced theology and piety, which take into consideration scriptural, patristic and biblical roots as well as pastoral and ecumenical implications.<sup>1</sup> These studies caution us against Marian devotions that seem to have made Mary an equal with Jesus Christ or have presented her as a divine figure displacing sometimes the central liturgy of the Eucharist through excessive focus on devotional activities surrounding her. The proclamation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church makes sense: "What the Catholic faith believes about Mary is based on what it believes about Christ, and what it teaches about Mary illumines in turn its faith in Christ."<sup>2</sup>

According to theologian Elizabeth Johnson, Marian tradition has been shaped by the forces of a patriarchal history where Mary became the receptacle of indispensable religious themes and symbols for which there was no room in the dominant androcentric image of God.<sup>3</sup> This traditional Mariology has placed Mary on a pedestal as the good virgin and mother, contrasting her faith with the sinful Eve as the symbol of all ordinary women.<sup>4</sup> Because of her often exalted position, she seems beyond imitation by ordinary women (*PMR* 242).<sup>5</sup> Bishops and theologians alike have noted

---

<sup>1</sup> Doris Donnelly, "Introduction," in *Mary, Woman of Nazareth: Biblical and Theological Perspectives*, ed. D. Donnelly (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #487, accessed June 12, 2017, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P1K\\_.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P1K_.HTM).

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, "Mary and the Image of God," *Mary, Woman of Nazareth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 55.

<sup>4</sup> See Donnelly, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>5</sup> Catholic Church, *Partners in the Mystery of Redemption: A Pastoral Response to Women's Concerns for Church and Society*: First Draft, March 23, 1988, Washington, D.C, Publication / Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, United States Catholic Conference no. 208-X (Washington: Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, United States Catholic Conference, c1988).

these negative effects for women. In the document, *Partners in the Mystery of Redemption (PMR)*, U.S. bishops noted that many women today are unhappy with representations of Mary that propose her as a model of “passivity and submission to male authority, a woman valued chiefly for her virginity and maternity, a woman confined to domestic and familial roles” (PMR 242).<sup>6</sup> Theologian Kathleen Coyle reflects the sentiments of many awakened persons today when she said that Mary has become an ambiguous symbol, especially for women, because of the passive virtues of submission, humility, and docility that have been emphasized and projected onto her through the centuries.<sup>7</sup> The history of Marian devotion, rich and beautiful as it may be, need to be subjected to biblical-theological criticism if it is to be regenerated for Christians today.<sup>8</sup> One way of doing this is to change the excessive traditional way of presenting Mary. How do we begin to do this in the midst of persistent temptations to leave tradition unexamined? Coyle proposes that:

A distinction has to be made between the Mary of the gospels and the Mary of the fictional stories that have grown up about her in a devotional tradition. She needs to be liberated from some of the images into which she has been formed. Following Mary as she is often depicted by tradition may deter rather than challenge the radical living of the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

For Mary to regenerate in our Christian consciousness, a closer attention must be given to the biblical foundations of Mariology. We need to go back to the New Testament writings and re-read her stories to see and appreciate her person and the meaning that person offers us based on God's word for us today and not on how she has been presented to us by unexamined tradition. The “entire” Mary in her humanity needs to be articulated through gospel texts which speak of her difficulty or struggle to understand her son's vocation as well as her own, and thus speak of her way of living out her faith, a faith that also has to develop and mature. In this way, we can begin to free her from the “ambiguous symbol” she has become over the centuries and to identify with her as our sister in our efforts to reclaim our dignity and personhood as women and as our companion in our ongoing journey of faith.

This paper will therefore attempt to re-read and explore the meaning of the New Testament writings on Mary. Amazingly, there is scant information about her in scripture. We only have very little historical information from which to construct a historical picture of Mary. However, we are not after a quest of a historical Mary. We are well aware that applying twentieth century biblical interpretation, which uses tools of cul-

---

<sup>6</sup> Noted by Anne Carr, “Mary: Model of Faith,” *Mary, Woman of Nazareth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Coyle, *Mary in the Christian Tradition* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1993), xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Neal Flanagan, O.S.M., “John,” *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 97.

<sup>9</sup> See Coyle, *Mary in the Christian Tradition*, xvi.

tural, historical, and archaeological analyses to recover the historical setting of biblical persons and events, will only yield speculative information on Mary. Nonetheless it would be helpful for us to see how the gospels portray Mary and how the theology of the gospel writers shape an image of her based on the limited information available to us.

In the gospels, Matthew and Luke mention her in the context of the infancy narratives that are not considered historical materials. Mark, together with Matthew and Luke, mentions her in connection with Jesus' proclamation of discipleship as the basis of true kinship with him. The only other reference to Mary in Mark's gospel is in 6:1-3 when Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth and is welcomed with skepticism by his townspeople. Luke in Acts 1:14 specifically mentions Mary by name together with the names of the first believers gathered in the Cenacle at Jerusalem awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit. Of the gospel writers, only John gives her prominence, but his gospel is more of a theological reflection of the fourth evangelist and his community and not an account of the life of Jesus. In this fourth gospel, she is not mentioned by name but only referred to as the "mother of Jesus." Paul's writings, which represent the earliest Christian literature, do not also mention her by name.

No matter how limited the information that are available to us through the New Testament, texts that refer to her will certainly provide us with enough material for our re-reading and reflection. In our re-reading, we shall allow to surface on our consciousness fresh images and perspectives of her which will give enough consideration of her historical and cultural context as well as our present understanding of who we are today as women and men of faith.

As recent Marian studies have observed, it was lopsided on the part of the church to have focused primarily on Mary's maternity. This was perhaps a more unconscious intention on the church's part as the infancy narratives were given more prominence in the liturgical seasons and Marian feasts. Even in the reading of the passion and death of our Lord in the fourth gospel where Mary stands alongside John the beloved and the two other Marys, the part that has always received greater emphasis is 19:27. (This is when Jesus, after having entrusted the beloved disciple to his mother turns to him and says, "This is your mother.") Certainly the truth cannot be denied that her historically unique personal involvement in the birth of the Messiah combined with her own life of faith in God gave stimulus to the sense that in some way she was intimately linked with the mystery of redemption.<sup>10</sup> But as biblical scholar Donald Senior points out, it was a mistake of the church to assume that Mary's motherhood commands the complete attention of New Testament writings. Biblical scholarship has established a strong case that the evangelists in fact are drawing the readers' attention away from Mary's blood lines to Jesus and focusing

---

<sup>10</sup> See Johnson, "Mary and the Image of God," *Mary, Woman of Nazareth*, 25.

much more closely on bonds of discipleship and faith.<sup>11</sup> This is also a signal that perhaps the symbol of the motherhood of Mary should be reinterpreted for our time and for particular cultures so that women may find in it a meaning that they can reappropriate for themselves.

Jesus' definition of what constitutes true kinship gives impact to the synoptics' message in Mk 3:31-35, Mt 12:46-50 and Lk 8:19-21 (i.e. "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother."). Since we have been fed with theologies that have focused on Mary's role as mother, perhaps these scriptural texts would be a good place for us to begin our re-reading as these help us refocus our attention more on Mary's discipleship rather than on her motherhood. From these passages, we can work back on the infancy narratives in Luke and re-read them within the context of Mary's growth in awareness of her own vocation which manifests itself in its maturity at the Upper Room scene. After re-reading the texts on Mary in the synoptic writings, we shall also examine the fourth gospel to get a glimpse of Mary and how she is seen in the early Christian community of John. Finally, we shall look at her role in the infant church of Acts, chapter 1.

## MARY IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS (MARK 3:31-35, MATTHEW 12:46-50, LUKE 8:19-21)

The beginning verse of Mark's narrative (3:31) presents us with an opening scene, a visual picture of Jesus' "family"—his mother and brothers—standing outside the place where he is preaching. They are calling for him. Then the narrator brings the situation to the consciousness of the characters in the scene—primarily Jesus and the crowd gathered around him—by repeating the statement in the opening verse (3:32). Instead of responding in a way that is normally expected in such a situation, Jesus responds with a rhetorical question (3:33), which is meant to challenge the crowd around him to wonder at what he might be driving at. This also prepares his listeners (v. 34) for his central message in verse 3:35: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother."

Notice that Mary is not even referred in these verses by her name. This is the same reality in the versions of Matthew and Luke. She is simply referred to as Jesus' mother. It is not altogether uncommon that women in the bible are not called by their names. Mary shares the same situation as the other women of her time and culture. Even the gospel writer did not accord her any special place based on her blood relationship with Jesus.

---

<sup>11</sup> Donald Senior, C.P., "Gospel Portrait of Mary: Images and Symbols from the Synoptic Tradition," *Mary, Woman of Nazareth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 93. The author refers to the general surveys provided by A. Tambasco, *What Are They Saying About Mary?* (New York: Paulist, 1984), and R. Brown, K. Donfried, J. Fitzmyer, J. Reumann, eds., *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

The phrase, “and sister” in 3:35 only appears when Jesus states his central message. In re-reading it, this omission in the first four verses (3:31-34) and its appearance in the final verse could be interpreted as the gospel writer’s way of contrasting the crowd’s lack of recognition of women’s presence with that of Jesus’ sensitivity to their presence. For Jesus, gender is not the basis for determining whether a person can be his disciple, neither is blood relationship the basis of determining true kinship with him, but anyone who does the will of God becomes his true family. Thus, in a society where family relationships are extraordinarily significant, the notion of a spiritual family had the effect of relativizing other relationships and making Jesus’ followers judge them in the light of the criterion of God’s will.<sup>12</sup>

The harshness of Mark’s version of this story leaves us with a trail of questions regarding the gospel writer’s attitude. Why would he have such a negative attitude toward Jesus’ blood relations? What was his impression of Jesus’ own mother and relatives? What are possible explanations behind Mary’s action to go after her son?

We could only deduce some of the answers to these questions. But on the evangelist’s side, in order for him to get the centrality of Jesus’ message across he seems to employ some sort of “shock treatment” in the way he portrays Jesus here. This may explain the harshness in the way the gospel writer treats Jesus’ natural family in this particular text and in an earlier passage that mentions his family (Mk 3:21) where they were standing outside a house in Capernaum ready to take him back home because of reports that he was “insane.” Mark seems to portray Jesus’ family, including his mother as lacking in understanding of his mission and vocation and would be willing to stand in opposition to his continuing it under the impression of protecting him and his family’s reputation.

The problem which prompted Jesus’ family appears to be that his every success at healing and preaching drew huge crowds to him that prevented him from even being able to eat, a situation that was seemingly out of control and was perhaps beginning to make some people think of him as insane or possessed by a demon.<sup>13</sup> This explanation would make sense in the light of Mark 6:1-6 where Jesus returned to his own hometown and began to teach in the synagogue on a Sabbath. Although his neighbors and friends were at first impressed with him, they were eventually angered by his words and actions, prompting them to ask among themselves: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” (6:3 NRSV). Perhaps surprised at their reaction he said, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house” (6:4 NRSV). It seems that in this episode of Mark 6, even Jesus’ own relatives, possibly including his own mother, did

---

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Harrington, S.J., “The Gospel According to Mark,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Philippines: Claretian Publications and St. Paul Publications, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Mary Ann Tolbert, “Mark,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 271.

not appreciate his words and deeds. So strong is the people's lack of faith that Jesus is "unable" to work miracles in Nazareth, his own hometown (6:5).

Mark presents us with a very human depiction of Jesus' family and neighbors who still could not comprehend why Jesus had to change his work and lifestyle from that of a carpenter to that of an itinerant preacher and miracle-worker. They need to break out of the human tendency to look at a person's life based on customary assumptions, which consider relationships within family and neighborhood only within the context of conventional blood ties and social connections. In this tendency to categorize people, individuals are not allowed to be anything else but the way they are expected to be. Thus Jesus' family and friends, including his human mother, need to break out of their confining assumptions and expectations to begin understanding his mission and message. It seems that Mark is simply mirroring to his audience and to us his readers the reality of our human tendencies.

Re-read from the human perspective, Mary's attitude as projected by Mark, is quite understandable. It resonates as well with the Asian view of family life and relationships where families are closely knit and where the family reputation has to be closely guarded and protected. Asian mothers could even identify with this image of Mary who is protective of her son and his future and who seemingly wishes that her son would choose a "regular" kind of work and vocation. Understandably so, when mothers find out that their sons and daughters choose a vocation that goes against their wishes or expectations of them, they are the first to object and the last to understand their son's or daughter's decision. And so Mary does not seem to be different than any other normal human mother who wishes a stable and happy future for her son.

But in re-reading this passage we may also ask ourselves these questions: How about Mary? Would someone try to understand her side in this situation? Was her behavior normative of Jewish mothers during her time? We do not have anything written in scripture that would explain her side. We can only assume that like Jesus and any other human being, she too has to grow in consciousness and understanding of her own vocation and that of her son's as well as her own relationship in faith with God. For the gospel writer, the perspective of Mary does not seem to figure prominently in his mind. What seems more important for him is to present Jesus as fulfilling the mission God has given him.

As we return to the third chapter of Mark from the perspective of Jesus' encounter with his family and townspeople in the sixth chapter, we begin to see the author's seeming intention for painting a negative picture of his mother and other relatives. What the author seemingly wants to stress in the episode is that the gospel draws a deep wedge between familial ties and discipleship ties. In the context of Mark's theology he clearly defines through these harsh passages that true kinship with Jesus is based on the ties of discipleship. He wants to stress what Jesus expects from his followers: the same single-minded dedication to God's will as he does, even if it may mean "crazy" to others, including members of one's own family!

Evangelist Matthew rewrites Mark's version of this incident. Like Luke he softens Mark's aggressive portrayal of him. They simply want to talk to him (Mt 12:46). Mark's crowd disappears. Instead, a "man" communicates to Jesus the presence of his natural family (12:48) rather than through a crowd. Jesus no longer looks around at those sitting in a circle around him (as in Mk 3:34), but points directly at the disciples (Mt 12:49a) and gives a description of what a true disciple of his is. Matthew lists male and female, without any sign of division or distinction. The disciples are Jesus' mother and brothers and sisters, all doing the will of the one Father (Mt 12:49b-50). We find in Matthew's version the essential characteristics of any Christian community: "There is neither male or female, for you are all one in Christ" (Gal 3:28). Christian discipleship cannot allow the setting up of culturally or historically conditioned barriers.

If ties of discipleship are the primary criterion for being related with Jesus, what are the manifestations of Mary's discipleship in the infancy narratives? Besides being related to Jesus as his mother, how is she projected as a disciple in these narratives? If she, like Jesus and any other human being, had to grow also in her consciousness and understanding of her call, how is this being presented in the narrative of Luke and Matthew? We can only begin to answer these questions within the context of the evangelists' theology and within the larger designs of their gospels. Since Matthew's infancy narrative focuses more on Joseph rather than on Mary and gives her a passive role in the events, we will not do a re-reading of it. If necessary, we will only make references to his version. But the focus of our re-reading will be the Lukan infancy narrative in which Mary has a major role.

## MARY IN LUKE'S INFANCY NARRATIVE

Luke's audience was mostly composed of Christian citizens of the Roman Empire who were unfamiliar with the Jewish writings that the preachers often referred to in explaining the story of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> Many of the new generation of Christians were not poor; they were well-to-do urbanites who were far removed from Christianity's Jewish roots. The challenge for Luke was how to make relevant and appropriate to a modern Greek audience Jesus' words spoken to a Hebrew audience a half century earlier. He therefore wanted his readers to know that they had been included in God's plan of salvation from the beginning, even though historically the Jews were the first to hear the message as the channel for all others in the present and the future.<sup>15</sup> His Gospel tells the story of the origins of Christianity, starting with the first announcement of the fulfillment of salvation until its completion in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

---

<sup>14</sup> Jerome Kodell, O.S.B., "Luke," *The Collegeville Bible Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 936.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 937.



The infancy narrative is considered one of the author's finest creation. Like Matthew, Luke composed his account at a time when the early church was reflecting back beyond Jesus' public ministry to his earthly beginnings. But there is no indication whatsoever that both evangelists knew of each other's work. What we know of the infant Jesus comes from the teaching of the adult Jesus and the early church's reflection on his life, death, and resurrection.<sup>16</sup> In other words, we must keep in mind that the essential meaning of the infancy stories can only be perceived from the perspective of our faith in Jesus who lived, died and rose from the dead in order to save us.

The episodes of the Lukan infancy narrative where Mary has a prominent role includes the annunciation of the birth of Jesus, the visit of Mary to Elizabeth, the birth of Jesus, the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, and Jesus at the Temple.

*The Annunciation.* The structure of this pericope is based on the standard birth-announcement pattern from the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Gen 17; Jdg 13) that Luke creatively weaves into his story. This birth-announcement pattern involves an interaction between the human and the divine. First, there is a divine apparition (usually an angel), which the human acknowledges with fear and apprehension; then a divine reassurance is given with an announcement of the birth; but an objection to the divine plan is raised, and so the divine apparition gives a sign. But Luke adds a unique element to the Hebrew Scriptures' pattern—Mary's submission to the divine plan.

In the pericope, the narration begins by giving us the time and the place of the divine announcement as well as the name of the divine messenger who is to bear the good news (Luke 1:26). This opening verse provides the link between the previous scene where the angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah the birth of a son who shall become a prophet of the new dispensation by his barren wife Elizabeth (1:11-17) and the present scene where the same divine messenger appears before Mary to propose the divine plan of salvation. Nazareth, the place of the annunciation bears some significance because it gives us an idea of Mary's background.

Nazareth during the first century was a small, unimportant rural town, with a population of 150 people, in Galilee, a predominantly agricultural province. Israel's precarious survival was closely connected to the hard work and technological skills of the farm families that lived in tiny highland villages in the biblical period.<sup>17</sup> The way of life in these villages probably remained fairly constant throughout Israel's history. A large number of women, perhaps even a majority, lived and worked in rural areas which urban centers like Rome depended for food.<sup>18</sup> There were also artisans who lived in Nazareth who contributed their technical skills in the building of Galilee's

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 939.

<sup>17</sup> Carol C. Meyers, "Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible," *The Women's Bible Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 246.

<sup>18</sup> Amy I. Wordelman, "Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the New Testament," *The Women's Bible Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 393.

capital, Sepphoris (today Zippori). Recent archaeological studies<sup>19</sup> claim that Joseph, to whom Mary was betrothed, was probably one of the artisans recruited for the capital's construction. Based on studies done of that period, we can say with relative certainty that Mary was a peasant woman, probably illiterate, as most women of her time were because opportunity to study scripture was a man's domain. She was occupied with domestic chores of village life and whose religious observance centered in her home.<sup>20</sup> Thus from the perspective of the unschooled, poor women from Asian villages, Mary is someone with whom they could identify in their daily hard work.

From the gospel text itself, there seems to be nothing so extraordinary about Mary before the event of the annunciation. Nothing has come down to us either about how she appeared to her fellow villagers. The only other description of her is that she was a "virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David" (1:27a NRSV). Consistent with the pattern of biblical narration, the woman is always identified with a male family member. Here she is identified with Joseph, her future husband. Only after such identification does the narrator give her a name, Mary (1:27b), which means "excellence." In this verse alone (1:27), the gospel writer uses the word, "virgin" twice to identify her. Luke builds on the historical base that Mary became pregnant before she had sexual relations with Joseph. Matthew and Luke are in agreement with one another that Mary's pregnancy occurred between their betrothal and the home-taking or completion of the marriage (Mt 1:16,18; Lk 1:27). They also agree that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father. There are other common points which will not be taken up here, but for the purpose of understanding this verse, these two commonalities would be sufficient to point out what many scholars have deduced, that is, if Matthew and Luke wrote independently of each other, these agreements must have stemmed from an older tradition they had inherited and worked with in writing their gospels.<sup>21</sup> We have to realize that Luke's audience was acquainted with patterns of stories of the marvelous or miraculous conceptions of heroes, immortals, and benefactors of humanity in Greco-Roman biographies. It was perhaps his way of establishing the divine origins of Jesus among his readers. However, the emphasis of past interpretations given on Mary's virgin-birth has been the source of the development of excessive mariologies which has had both positive and negative effects on women's spirituality, self-understanding, and political empowerment.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land*, New Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3379. According to the author, although Joseph belonged to a Judean family, he probably decided to move his family to the north during the time of Archelaus (4 BC – AD 6) to escape his murderous unpredictability. Settling at Nazareth (6 km to the south-east on the Roman road from Sepphoris to Samaria and Jerusalem) at the time when Herod Antipas who had become tetrarch of Galilee was recruiting artisans for the construction of Sepphoris.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, "A Modern Mary," *Praying* 54 (May-June 1993).

<sup>21</sup> Jane Schaberg, "Luke," *The Women's Bible Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 283.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

Simply reading what the text says, we have a picture of a young woman, who at the time of the angel Gabriel's appearance to her, was a virgin. And so when Gabriel greeted her, she naturally reacted with fear and wonderment, speechless before such an amazing apparition (1:29). The divine messenger went on to assure her and to give the message to Mary, how she would become pregnant and bear a son whom she must name Jesus, the son of the Most High (1:30-31). But the angel's message was not all that clear to this simple, unschooled rural girl. Not having the opportunity as Jewish men had to study scripture during her time and in her culture, perhaps she truly did not understand the message and therefore she must have struggled to make sense even of the phrase, "son of the Most High" in its truest sense. But in her simplicity, she expressed so spontaneously her lack of understanding and puzzlement. For the first time and only time in the New Testament, a woman is allowed to speak to a divine figure who represents God. She simply asked, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (1:34 NRSV). Her question stresses that she and Joseph are in the period of betrothal and not having sexual relations. It does not reflect her lack of faith, only her lack of understanding.

But her query gives the divine messenger an opportunity to speak about the character of the child to be born of her and about her cousin Elizabeth's "miraculous" pregnancy in her old age, a further sign that with God nothing is impossible (1:36-37). Gabriel's statement in 1:35 mentioning the Holy Spirit "coming upon" and "overshadowing" Mary may be interpreted figuratively or literally. Figuratively, it may be understood as a way of speaking about the child's special relation to God, not the absence of human paternity (cf. Gal 4:29, where Isaac is called "the child who was born according to the Spirit").<sup>23</sup> Literally, the angel's statement further supports the theological contention of Luke (as well as of Matthew) that Mary's conception was a pure gift from God through the power of God's Spirit. However, the vastly different interpretations of this verse have been the subject of debate and much speculation among biblical scholars, which has resulted in the polarization of ideas and images about Mary among Christians. Extreme mariologies have also developed as an offshoot of this.

But for Luke, the foundation of his portrayal of Mary as model disciple is carefully established in the infancy narrative. In the midst of her very human reaction to the amazing encounter with the divine, her response to the angel's message is made clear in 1:38: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be done with me according to your word." The reassurance of the angel and the news about her cousin were enough proof for her that what she experienced was truly from God. Only then does the angel leave her. However, this verse has also been the source of the interpretation that the discipleship of women is different from that of men. For centuries, Christianity has used this as an argument that women's service in the church should be characterized by passivity and submission. This verse is also responsible for the

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 284. Schaberg adds that "conception with Joseph as the biological father is an idea not expressly denied in Luke 1 or 2, however it is denied in 3:23: Jesus is only the 'supposed' child of Joseph. The reader who understands Luke 1 to be about a normal conception is thus faced with another alternative: the biological fatherhood of some unnamed person and the illegitimacy of Jesus."

interpretation that the subjugation of women both in church and society is divinely ordained. The image of Mary as passive and submissive has been projected as the ideal for all women. However, a careful re-reading of this verse tells us the opposite. Mary is not a passive hearer but an active one. This is the image that stands out in the next scene when she acts immediately to affirm the fulfillment of God's word in her.

*The Visitation.* Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth. Luke's foundation of Mary's discipleship is further confirmed in the visitation scene. Here, the witness of Luke's Gospel relativizes, if not eliminates, the idea of Mary's "passive receptivity."<sup>24</sup> The writer gives us an image of Mary who is active and self-conscious, a Mary who acts courageously and takes initiative not for herself but for the sake of others. Thus her cousin Elizabeth blesses her not just for her being the "mother of my Lord" but also for her being a believer that God's word spoken to her would be fulfilled (1:42-45). In Elizabeth's conception what is conquered is her humiliation as a barren woman while in Mary, what is conquered through her conception is her deeper humiliation, the violation of her virginity as a betrothed woman.<sup>25</sup> This is the context of her song of praise in the Magnificat. It evokes a reflection upon God who is active in the conception of Jesus. Composed of two parts, the first part of the song (1:46-50) deals with Mary while the second (1:51-55) deals about God's dealing with humanity through the universal experience of Mary. In this song which Luke places on the lips of Mary, she proclaims the historical revolution that began with the coming of her son. She sings of all that God has planned for creation and humankind and of her exaltation from lowliness to greatness, a reversal that describes the new order that will dawn on humankind with the coming of the Savior.

However, her song is not to be taken as a manifesto of a political and economic revolution, but as a basis of a more profound revolution—a revolution of the heart that effects a reversal in the moral and spiritual lives of people. A revolution that empowers people to stand up for the truth and makes them turn away from self-destructing lies. A revolution that makes people critique the social structures of their common life and calls the political (1:51), social (1:52), and economic spheres (1:53) to repentance and change. Through her song key themes for the Gospel are introduced, especially the proclamation of the good news to the poor (4:18-19; cf. Isa 61:1-2).

Mary proclaims a revolution that can only happen because of God's faithfulness and mercy (1:54). Evoking the memory of God's deliverance of Israel throughout its history (1:55), she proclaims in her son the change that can take place in the human condition when people believe in God's power and when people allow the Spirit to empower them. Thus read from the perspective of women and other oppressed people, Mary's song speaks of the vision of concrete freedom from structural injustice—from oppression by political rulers on their "thrones" (1:52) and by the arrogant and

---

<sup>24</sup> Anneliese Herzig, "Mary—hopeless ideal or sister in faith?," *Theology Digest* 39, no 3 (Fall, 1992): 211.

<sup>25</sup> See Schaberg, "Luke," 284.

the rich (1:53)—which has caused widespread poverty as well as untold suffering to the powerless and the marginalized. The spiritual realm (1:54-55) cannot be separated from the socio-economic, political and cultural realities, for it is there, in our everyday life, that the Spirit of God is active. It is there that God is to be found.

The point of these verses is not that the peasant girl who utters the Song is lowly, humble, and insignificant in comparison to the mighty God; it is rather that God has looked on her “humiliation” (1:48) and has “helped” (1:54) her and the child.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, Mary’s discipleship has taken on a prophetic character as she speaks of the poor and represents their hope as a woman who has suffered and been vindicated. Her whole Song therefore puts in proper perspective her response of submission to God’s will in 1:38 when she said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be done with me according to your word” (NRSV).

## FROM THE BIRTH OF JESUS TO HIS BEING FOUND IN THE TEMPLE

Luke’s picture of Mary in 2:1-6 becomes ambiguous. Gone is the image of a Mary who is active, self-conscious, courageous and an initiator, a Mary in the Magnificat who is both prophet and evangelist. Instead, we have a portrait of Mary who strikes us as a quiet, submissive and dependent wife to Joseph, a Mary who is a model listener as she treasures the shepherds’ words in her heart (2:19), a Mary who is a law-abiding citizen, and a Mary who is a “contemplative heroine” as she listened to Simeon’s awesome and fearsome prophecy about the child Jesus and about a sword piercing her own soul too (2:33-35). The only other image of her that stands out in these texts aside from her being a mother which fulfills what the angel has previously announced to her (that she would give birth to a son who shall be named Jesus), is her being homeless in her own country and therefore, she had to deliver her child in a place fit only for farm animals. All throughout this second chapter, the dominant mood is a quiet celebration of the fulfillment of a promise. In fact, what contributes to the serenity of the atmosphere is the silence of the main characters. In the telling of the story, only the narrator’s voice is mostly heard except the angel’s announcement to the shepherds and the latter’s response to the divine message. The birth of the promised one is wrapped in an atmosphere of silence, simplicity and poverty.

But a closer look at Mary’s attitudes of receptivity and humble obedience throughout these events reveal something active in her person. We should not confuse these traits with dependence, powerlessness and self-depreciation for receptivity and humble obedience presupposes a positive self-image and a capacity for self-possession.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Mary could not have surrendered herself to God’s will had she not achieved a certain level of self-possession derived from her relationship with God. She may be quiet in these scenes, but her silence could not be interpreted only

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Robert J. Karris, O.F.M., “The Gospel According to Luke,” *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Philippines: Claretian Publications and St. Paul Publications, 1993), 683.

as passivity. Rather, it should be taken as an active cooperation with the work of the Spirit in her life to bring about the promised salvation.

Re-read from the perspective of poor and homeless women, of the rejected and the marginalized, Mary becomes a sister and companion to them, someone with whom they can identify, a village woman who knows hard work and who is forced to give birth to her son in a stable because of a government decree. She is someone who understands their condition of poverty and homelessness, a peasant woman who knows what it is to suffer from social oppression but one who does not simply sit passively and accept her condition in a fatalistic way. She is one who knows the poverty of unfulfilled longings and in her emptiness is filled by God's promise. She is one who has been empowered by the Spirit to stand up and reclaim for oneself and for all women the dignity of womanhood and personhood.

In the intervening years, we get a sense of the quiet, ordinary life Mary and her family lived in Nazareth. Only the event of the finding of Jesus at the Temple, twelve years after her son's birth, breaks through the ordinariness of their lives. In the narration, stress is laid on Jesus' family and its devout adherence to the Law as the environment in which he was brought up,<sup>28</sup> such as the yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. The statement in Luke 2:44, which describes the discovery by Jesus' parents that he was not among them, is a literary device used by the author to heighten for his readers the anxiety of Mary and Joseph. Here we have an image of Mary as a worried and anxious mother looking for her only child. The entire story has been leading up to the finding of Jesus in the Temple by his parents where Luke records Jesus' first words. But these first words are drawn out of him through Mary's query, "Child why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety" (2:48b NRSV). Mary is the one who articulates the feelings she and Joseph have felt. After so many years of silence since the time of the annunciation, we are allowed to hear her voice again. Her words reflect a struggle within her to understand in her humanness her son's behavior. But in recording Jesus' response to his mother's query, Luke no longer uses Gabriel, or Mary, or Zechariah, or the angels, or Simeon to pronounce who Jesus is; Jesus himself pronounces who he is.<sup>29</sup> We are told that neither Mary nor Joseph understood what he said to them. Again, Mary "treasured all these things in her heart" (2:51), stressing through this verse the contemplative discipleship of Mary. This verse also implies that in time, Mary will come to understand the meaning of her son's words and his vocation as well as her own. But at this point in her humanity, she is not ready to engage in further dialogue with Jesus about the meaning of his words for clearly she has not yet entered the spiritual realm of his experience. Yet from another dimension, this could also be interpreted as the gospel writer's way of limiting the discipleship of women by projecting Mary who represents other women disciples as one who is not in a position to understand the vocation of the Temple where his son was engaged in theological discussion and dialogue with the teachers

---

<sup>28</sup> See Herzig, "Mary—hopeless ideal or sister in faith?," 211.

<sup>29</sup> See Karris, "The Gospel According to Luke," 684.

of the Law. Is this the gospel writer's way of reminding the women among his audience that the Temple is no place for them?

Women at that time knew their conventional role and place, but they have also gone a long way from the women in the Hebrew Scriptures through the liberating experience of their encounter with Jesus. But the struggle of the first-century church to integrate and understand the discipleship of women in a predominantly patriarchal culture is still reflected in this pericope. From our present perspective where we are in a position to pose the issues of gender and role, such a question could evoke many speculative answers and interpretations as well as lead us to further reflection about the place of women disciples in the church.

Nevertheless, if the text is re-read from the perspective of parents who have lost children, who do not know their whereabouts or what had happened to them, of parents who do not understand the life choices and decisions of their children, of mothers who have searched in vain for their husbands, sons or daughters among the *desaparacidos* in countries with militaristic governments, the image of Mary it presents is one that they could identify with. In a sense her query to Jesus articulates the feelings of all mothers or parents who are in the same predicament that she is in. Her image as disciple in this pericope is not only of a contemplative, but of an active searcher and articulator of the human struggle to understand God's ways.

## MARY IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The narrative of the author of John is an effort to provide fresh answers to the question of who Jesus is to a community that is already familiar with his story and might be tempted to be complacent about Jesus' identity. It is from this perspective that we examine and understand the role and identity of Mary, who in this fourth gospel is simply referred to as the "mother of Jesus."

*The wedding at Cana.* In this opening miracle of Jesus' ministry, his mother plays a prominent role. It is referred to as one of Jesus' "signs" and is made the occasion for a revelation of Jesus' glory that leads his disciples to believe in him (John 2:11).<sup>30</sup> This story according to biblical scholars appears to have been taken by the evangelist from an earlier source, more likely of Palestinian origin.<sup>31</sup>

In this pericope (1:35-51), the presence of Mary in this important event in the company of the group of disciples may be taken as an indication that she is considered as one of the disciples. As an invited guest, Jesus is a recipient of a gesture of hospitality at the opening of his ministry where an atmosphere of celebration and of intimate, personal and familial relationships pervades.

The first miracle in Jesus' ministry happens at a woman's initiative. Mary, who is simply introduced to us in the episode (2:1,3) as "the mother of Jesus" is the catalyst

---

<sup>30</sup> Pheme Perkins, "The Gospel According to John," *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Philippines: Claretian Publications and St. Paul Publications, 1993), 954.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

for the miracle to occur. It so happened that the wine ran out and she simply informed her son that “They have no wine” (2:3b NRSV). To her statement, Jesus replies in a rather harsh tone, “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come” (2:4 NRSV). His reply to his mother raises many questions in our minds: Why does Jesus address his mother, “woman”? Why does he sound so negative and yet later he will act positively in response to the situation? What is the meaning of his “hour” within the context of his response to his mother? Biblical scholars have tried to answer these questions by giving divergent comments about this verse. One of the most probable explanation is that this verse (2:4), which was not in the original pre-gospel account was added by the evangelist to affirm, as do the other gospels, that during Jesus’ public life, until his hour came, his work was determined solely by the Father’s will, not by human will.<sup>32</sup> It is in this context that the use of the generic word, “woman” to address Jesus’ mother is understood. The term “woman” gives an initial impression of someone who is a stranger and who is not within the circle of relationships with Jesus. The evangelist may have used it to symbolize the human dimension and origin of the statement. This was Jesus’ initial understanding of his mother’s statement. And so his seemingly harsh response to his mother is his way of asserting that he is free from human control and his actions will not be dictated by anyone else’s time or will, not even his own mother’s.<sup>33</sup> But the evangelist in mentioning Jesus’ “hour” must have another theological reflection in mind in linking the two symbols, “woman” and “hour” in the same response. These terms point further into the Gospel, into two further passages where they reappear; one is in 16:21-24 where John uses the images of the woman in childbirth (16:21—“When a *woman* is in labor, she has pain, because her *hour* has come” [NRSV]),<sup>34</sup> and the other is at the cross (19:26-27). Already at Cana we have the first hint of the theme which will stand at the center of the scene at the cross, where the mother of Jesus becomes the mother of the disciple and the mother of the first community of Christians.<sup>35</sup>

In our re-reading, we can see the importance of both the mother’s request and the son’s reply, no matter how vague they may be. When Jesus’ mother speaks in 2:3, she says nothing explicit to him, but his response in 2:4 appears as if there is something implied in her request. It seems to carry an assumption on the part of Jesus’ mother that her son could do something about the scarcity of wine and thus save the celebration from possible ruin. Without responding to her son’s vague statements, she goes ahead and gives instructions to the headwaiter to do whatever Jesus tells him (2:5). Through her statement, “Do whatever he tells you,” she is not only showing the first disciples that trust in Jesus is essential to discipleship, she also is directing the community to obey Jesus’ words, just as he obeys his Father’s will even unto his death on the cross. This suggests that Jesus’ mother does believe

---

<sup>32</sup> Neal M. Flanagan, O.S.M., “John,” 984.

<sup>33</sup> Gail R. O’Day, “John,” *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 295.

<sup>34</sup> Italics are for emphasis.

<sup>35</sup> Francis J. Moloney, S.D.B., *Woman in the New Testament* (Pasay, Philippines: St. Paul Publications, 1984), 131.



in him, as she will when she next appears at the foot of the cross (19:25).<sup>36</sup> As Jesus' disciple, she trusts in him and allows him to act in freedom according to his own judgment and discernment, not according to the way she sees things. This attitude is contained in her instruction to the headwaiter, "Do whatever he tells you!" — not according to anyone else's way but only according to his way. Apparently, Jesus had no thought or intention of beginning his mission in that manner or at that moment for it was not yet his "hour," but in listening more deeply to his spirit after his initial response to this mother, he discerned the Spirit speaking through his mother and thus he granted her implied request. What follows is the miracle itself—of water being turned into wine of best quality, a "sign" of the arrival through Jesus of the new Messianic age as symbolized by the wedding feast.

Introducing his theology of glory, the fourth evangelist appropriately ends this episode with a comment in 2:11, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (NRSV). Because his disciples saw his glory through the example of his mother's trust in him and through her initiation, they came to believe in him.

The evangelist closes the first section with Jesus, together with his mother and disciples leaving for Capernaum to stay there for a few days. This is the last time Jesus' mother will be mentioned in the body of the Gospel until her final appearance at the foot of the cross in 19:25. However, even if she will not be mentioned again, it does not mean that she was absent in the other important events of Jesus' life. This statement is pregnant with implications. One implication is that Jesus' mother who was with him and his disciples from the beginning of the first "sign," who initiated the miracle and taught the disciples through her action that trust in Jesus is essential for discipleship, and who travels down to Capernaum to stay there with them, has always been part of Jesus' company of disciples, invisible though she may be in the narration of the other sections. The fourth evangelist will affirm her presence and faithfulness as a disciple when she will be seen standing at the foot of the cross of her son to be with him at his hour of glorification. In making her absent in the rest of the Gospel after Cana but making her present at the cross, what the fourth evangelist wants us, the readers, to do is to connect Cana and the cross. What Jesus wants to accomplish at Cana will be evident only in the seventh and last "sign," the hour of his glorification on the cross.<sup>37</sup>

*At the Foot of the Cross.* In the synoptic tradition the women who followed Jesus up to Calvary are standing at a distance while all the other disciples have fled. But the fourth evangelist presents us with a different scene—the women are not witnessing the crucifixion and death of Jesus from a distance but more closely, "near his cross." Unlike the synoptic tradition, Jesus' mother is not mentioned among the women standing at a distance from his cross. Only the fourth evangelist mentions categorically her presence there. She stands with her sister, Mary wife of Clopas and

<sup>36</sup> See Perkins, "The Gospel According to John," 954.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph A. Grassi, *The Hidden Heroes of the Gospels: Female Counterparts of Jesus* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1989), 123.

Mary of Magdala (19:25). Her appearance beneath the cross of Jesus has a special significance especially in the light of her role in the first “sign” at Cana where, through her action and words, the essential elements of discipleship—trust and obedience—became clear. On the cross, Jesus gives witness to the true meaning of discipleship—his total trust in the Father who alone can save him from death and his obedience to his will, an obedience that will bring to fulfillment the “hour” of his glorification. As she was with her son at the first “sign” in Cana, so she must be at the foot of the cross to share the meaning of his “hour” of glorification.

The two remaining verses in this pericope (19:26-27) focus on Jesus’ last words, which appear in parallel sentences, to his mother and to the beloved disciple, who stands with her. This “beloved disciple” is unnamed and is identified solely on the basis of Jesus’ love for him and like Mary of Bethany in chapter 12, the disciple returns Jesus’ love by being present to Jesus in his need.<sup>38</sup> Notice that Jesus addresses his mother again as “woman.” This is the second and last time he will directly speak to his mother. The first time was at Cana (2:4). The evangelist’s use of the word “woman” in both occasions is meant to connect both events—Cana and the cross—in his theological reflection of Jesus’ life. In the first occasion, at Cana, the word “woman” represents humanity that still has to be formed into a community of disciples where love and service abound through trust and obedience in God’s will. In the second occasion, at the cross, “woman” represents humanity that has been included into a new order of relationship in a community that is characterized by the bonds of love, not by blood ties. As the “woman” among her people, Mary becomes the symbol of every woman who wishes to attain full self-realization, not alone but among her people.<sup>39</sup> Biblical commentators believe that these two verses reflect the tradition circulating in the early Christian community that Jesus’ mother has been entrusted under the care of the beloved disciple. It can be said with certainty that both Jesus’ mother and the beloved disciple function as symbolic figures. Jesus’ mother who has been a witness from the first “sign” represents the continuation of Jesus’ earthly ministry; while the beloved disciple represents the Johannine community and is the symbolic connection between the Jesus tradition and the life of the faith community.<sup>40</sup> However, scripture scholars are not certain how much symbolism is attached to the figure of the mother of Jesus.<sup>41</sup> But the verses could be interpreted to mean that entrusting the beloved disciple and his mother to each other shows that Jesus’ mission is completed in the care and provision that Jesus has made for “his own.”<sup>42</sup> These verses give assurance as well that there is continuity between Jesus’ earthly ministry (symbolized by Jesus’ mother) and the life of the faith community (symbolized by the beloved disciple) at the completion of his mission. Even if Jesus was rejected by “his own” (cf. 1:11), the beloved disciple’s reception of Jesus’ mother

---

<sup>38</sup> See O’Day, “John,” 300.

<sup>39</sup> Carlo M. Martini, *Women in the Gospels* (New York: Crossroads, 1990), 13.

<sup>40</sup> See O’Day, “John,” 300.

<sup>41</sup> See Perkins, “The Gospel According to John,” 982. The symbols of Mary as the new Eve and that of the messianic Zion giving birth to her children only developed in the twelfth century mariological piety.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

marks the possibility of an inclusive community where believers are related with one another by the blood of Christ. This seems to be the vision and understanding of the church the fourth evangelist wants to impart, a church that is in its incipient stage at the foot of the cross of Jesus.

There is another tradition, aside from the Johannine one, that places Mary and the brothers of Jesus in the circle gathered around the Twelve. This appears in the first chapter of Acts. The author's intention in writing the second book (Acts of the Apostles) is to use the story of the church not to point backward to the church's past, but to point forward to the ongoing witness of the gospel which is accomplished through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in the church.<sup>43</sup>

## MARY IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Mary appears only once in Acts. Her appearance in the first chapter is her last recorded appearance in the New Testament. Her role, like the role of other women in Acts is limited as a result of Luke's emphasis on the ministries of Peter and especially Paul, which for him embody the movement of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles and on the symbolic importance of the "twelve" apostles representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Mary's role in Acts is a parallel of her role in the Lukan infancy narrative. Although it establishes Luke's particular emphasis on the limited role of women in the accomplishment of his purposes in Acts, the image and role of Mary nonetheless manage to assert themselves even through the limited texts given us by the evangelist.

The opening verse (1:12) connects the event of Jesus' ascension as witnessed by his disciples after his last instructions to them (1:6-11) and situates them at the upper room in Jerusalem where they were staying. For many, it was natural to assume that the upper room referred to in this verse of Acts is the same one in which Jesus ate his last meal with his disciples (Mk 14:15), but this is an unreliable tradition. Biblical archaeologists assert that the location of the upper room where the last Supper was held is not clear.<sup>44</sup> Most probably, the supper was held somewhere within the city walls. Although tradition locates the events of the Last Supper and Pentecost in the same upper room, there is no solid evidence that the Cenacle (upper room) in Acts is the same Cenacle in the Last Supper event.

Nevertheless, it is at an "upper room" in Jerusalem where men and women disciples gathered together in prayer after witnessing the ascension of Jesus in heaven (1:6-11). But only the men, especially the remaining eleven of the Twelve apostles (1:13) are named. Of the women who are gathered with them, only Mary is identified by name. She is "Mary the mother of Jesus" (1:14). The anonymity of the remaining

---

<sup>43</sup> See O'Day, "John," 306.

<sup>44</sup> John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem as Jesus Knew It: An Archaeological Guide to the Gospels* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), 124-125.

women suggests that they do not have equal standing with men in this gathering.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps we can ask, why is Mary, of all the women present in the assembly, the only one identified? And why is it significant for Luke to mention her by name? Does this mean that she has an equal standing with the men disciples in this gathering? What picture of Mary does the author portray in this scene? Again, we can only begin to answer these questions within the context of Luke's theological intention and the literary structure of the beginning of his first (Gospel) and second (Acts) books.

For Luke, the mention of Mary is significant because it establishes a link between the birth of Jesus and the birth of the church. This pericope does not give us further descriptions of Mary nor her role in the assembly. From the statement in 1:14 ("All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers."), no specific role is given her as all of them are engaged in the same activity, that of prayer. After this event describing her in prayer with the gathering of believers, she remains silent and invisible in the preaching of the apostles and disciples. Even Paul is surprisingly silent about her except for an allusion of her in Galatians 4:4 in mentioning that Christ was born of a woman. This silence and invisibility seem to reveal that she had no direct place in the community after the Pentecost event, that she did not impose herself nor claimed any rights or favors as the mother of Jesus, that she did not carry out any teaching or preaching office, and that she did not even appear as a privileged source of revelation about the intimate life of Jesus.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, this silence reveals that "to be the mother of Jesus was not a special title of honor nor an essential element of Christological faith for the first witnesses to the faith."<sup>47</sup> It seems that her primary role was simply to usher in the two beginnings--the beginning of the new dispensation through the birth of Jesus and the beginning of a new community of faith through the birth of the church.

Although Mary seemed to have vanished after the establishment of the church in Acts, based on what we have learned from the other gospel texts, especially from Luke's infancy narrative, where she in her humanity struggled to understand her vocation as well as her son's, and where she believed the angel's message no matter how impossible it might seem, Mary becomes for Luke, the prime believer and the model for all believers. In this sense she is closely connected to Mary of Magdala's essential role as one of those who first remembered Jesus' "impossible" prediction about his coming suffering and death according to the divine plan.<sup>48</sup> Mary first heard these difficult and disturbing prophecy through the lips of Simeon: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be

---

<sup>45</sup> See O'Day, "John," 307. Acts 1:21-26 makes the inequality between men and women even clearer: only a man can be elected to replace Judas as the twelfth apostle.

<sup>46</sup> José Cristo Rey García Paredes, *Mary and the Reign of God: A Synthesis of Mariology* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1990), 18.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> See Grassi, *The Hidden Heroes of the Gospels*, 106.

opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (2:34-35 NRSV). These were the words she treasured in her heart, which tested her faith and which she remembered later when the meaning of the prophecy was gradually unfolded to her in the passion and death of her son. In this way, she is a model for those who would later accept the most difficult scriptures about Jesus' suffering and death as God's plan of salvation.<sup>49</sup> This remembering of all the events of her life and that of her son must have led her to the meaning of her son's life and vocation. Her struggling human faith during the infancy narrative which led her to make an assertion of faith in spite of her lack of understanding and a proclamation of the fulfillment of God's promise, has now come to maturation and fullness. Mary in the Cenacle brings her faith journey to its culmination by becoming integrated into the community of those who believe in the Risen Christ, forming part of the church. Even if she vanishes in the texts, the witness of her faith remains in the memory of the church. The words of Elizabeth, "Blessed is she who believed," continue to reverberate in the heart of the church from generation to generation as the members are exhorted to grow and mature in their faith.

After the Easter experience, the "following of Jesus" and "discipleship" take on a new form. According to C. R. García Paredes,<sup>50</sup> the category of "following" is succeeded by that of "faith" and "being a disciple" is succeeded by "believing." Thus in Acts, the term "followers of Jesus," is now replaced with the new category of discipleship which is simply referred to as the "faithful" or "believers." They are the men and women who came to believe in Christ. This is the same category wherein Luke places Mary in his Infancy narrative—Mary was the first believer. As the first believer, she remembers her own journey of faith from her "not understanding" to her "trusting in God's promise," from her "pondering" to her "obedience," from her "prophesying" to her "witnessing."

In mentioning her name in the midst of the infant church in Acts, Luke therefore proposes her as a model for all believers. Mary in the midst of the believing community is therefore a fitting image of her in her mature years. As she made possible the birth of Jesus through the Holy Spirit, so also she takes part in the parallel birth of the church through the Holy Spirit. But these two births were not without pain and struggle. She did not breeze through life as if she were not a human being. Her faith, like our own, had to be tested in time through many difficult and anxiety-laden events. As a human being, she was subject to the same doubts and obscurities as many of us are. Because of who she was and is, we continue to identify with her in our own continuing struggles of faith. In the Cenacle scene, we finally have an image of her who has weathered through life, of one who can look back at her life and experiences without any regrets or despair but with gratitude and peace, of one who can willingly share her rich memory of her son's life and of her relationship with him to a young still fragile church. Fading into the background, we are left with an image of a woman

---

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> See García Paredes, *Mary and the Reign of God*, 18.

who has finally come to her own and has found peace and joy in the fulfillment of her role, a woman who perhaps remained active in the church without drawing attention to herself but instead finds peace and happiness in the attention to Christ and his body, the new community of believers.

Read from the perspective of women who experience exclusion or marginalization in church or society, this image of Mary gives them a sense of hope that through their faithfulness, vigilance, and efforts in raising the consciousness of other women and men in the church, women may someday be recognized as equal partners in the service of the church. The scant information about her life, the silence about her in significant events of her son's life, and her invisibility from the church after its inauguration in Acts, connect her with most women from our biblical past until the present whose stories or contributions to the spreading and proclamation of the gospels have not been preserved or may not be fully recognized.

## CONCLUSION

We looked at Mary to see how the gospels and Acts portrayed her and how the theology of the biblical writers shaped an image of her based on the limited information available to us in scripture. We saw that far from the “ambiguous symbol” she has become as a result of excessive mariologies that developed over the centuries, the biblical Mary is and continues to be a woman with whom all other women and men could easily identify in their various experiences and circumstances of life. We saw her faith that was also subjected to obscurity, testing, and challenge—a faith that nonetheless developed and matured to its fullness. We saw her role in the birth of Jesus and in the birth of the Church and her openness to the working of the Holy Spirit in her life and in the infant church. We saw her as a true disciple and believer, one who trusted and obeyed the word of God and fulfilled the divine will.

Although the New Testament writers have only given us a few glimpses of Mary's life, these have given us the opportunity to appreciate her role as both mother and disciple and to re-appropriate for ourselves her meaning in our life and in the world today.