

# MARY, DAUGHTER OF SION

## The Mother of Jesus in the Scriptures

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THE CHURCH'S THEOLOGY OF MARY, as it has developed in both East and West, flows directly from its understanding of Jesus Christ. To be more precise, it has its beginnings—after some hints in Irenaeus—in the christological disputes of the fourth and fifth centuries. The discussions about Jesus Christ at that time dealt with questions that were implicit in the New Testament, but not systematically dealt with there. Jesus is a human being, but also and at the same time God. How both these statements can be made is something that the New Testament nowhere explains, and precisely for this reason there were arguments. Once the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) had established the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit as realities attested in Scripture, further questions opened up about Mary. Did she, perhaps, simply give birth to him as a human being, and did divinity somehow lay hold of him later? It was in response to this that the Council of Ephesus established that Mary was *Theotokos*, 'God-bearer'. The issue here was not really about Mary, but about Christ. Both the Eastern and Western Churches came to call Mary *Theotokos* because they wanted to assert Jesus' full divinity, as well as his humanity, at the very beginning of his existence.

### **Private 'Privileges'?**

The theology of Mary that developed from this ecclesiastical christology starts from Mary's divine motherhood, and revolves around this idea. All the other mariological themes, such as perpetual virginity, sinlessness, and the assumption into heaven, are interpreted on the basis of her being the Mother of God. All of which is fine, but this way of thinking has some intrinsic limits. All too often Mary's 'privileges' appear in this sort of mariology as personal, and indeed private, privileges for the Mother of God. The suggestion is that her immaculate conception happened because of who she was as the

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potential mother of God, and that her assumption into heaven was just a matter of her personal privilege. But a question arises. Why would the Church teach these doctrines and make them binding if they were just about Mary herself, and had nothing in particular to do with us, with the Church?

What follows is an attempt to bring out another aspect of Marian doctrine: its connections with the theology of the Church. For this is how the New Testament thinks about Mary. The christology developed later by the Church talks about Christ's divinity and humanity, about 'natures'. But the New Testament just assumes that Jesus is God and human; it does not explain the matter.<sup>1</sup> The New Testament's understanding of Christ is couched in quite different terms: not natures, but functions. The key words are words such as 'Messiah', 'Son of David', 'King', 'Son of Man'.<sup>2</sup> Now, one cannot have a king without a kingdom; hence talk of the Messiah, of the anointed King, generates talk of his kingdom, of his people: 'the kingdom of God', 'the people of God', 'Israel', 'the Church'. It is for these realities that Jesus is the Christ, the King. For the New Testament, the central title for Christ is the one that stands over the Cross: 'King of the Jews'.

Now, if the New Testament understanding of Jesus as Messiah is not set forth in terms of Christ's 'natures', and is centred rather on his kingship for Israel, then it should not surprise us that the New Testament understanding of Mary is not so much concerned with her being the mother of God. What matters, rather, is that she is an Israelite, a daughter of Abraham. Hence the title of this piece: Mary, Daughter of Sion.

### ***'The Woman': The Symbol of Israel***

The writers of the New Testament come out of an Old Testament world, and it is only when we read the Bible as a whole that we can understand the New Testament at all. When, therefore, we ask about the image of Mary given by the New Testament, we need to look at the

<sup>1</sup> The word 'divinity' turns up once (Colossians 2:9); 'divine nature' occurs only in 2 Peter 1:4, and then not in connection with Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> Even the title 'Son of God' once was just a royal epithet (2 Samuel 7:14), though in John's Gospel it of course means more.

texts of both Testaments, and take the whole Bible into account. Let us begin with the end of the Bible, the book of Revelation:

A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth. Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born. And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. (12:1-8)

Who is this woman, whom John the seer beholds in his vision? Some will reply, 'Mary—who else could it be?' And, of course, she is presented just like this in many pictures and statues: the woman clothed with the sun, with a crown of twelve stars and the moon at her feet. But obviously no one seriously thinks that the mother of Jesus has ever stood on the moon. What we have here is obviously not meant to be a realistic picture, but a symbolic one. John sees a figure who—this much is true—brings the child Messiah into the world, but who is not simply the historical mother of Jesus.

If we read further in the book of Revelation, we find another female figure, in chapter 17:

So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations'. (17:3-5)



The Woman Crowned with Stars  
from the Bamberg Apocalypse

Here it is said quite clearly that the woman is not simply an individual figure. She is the whore of Babylon, the great she-enemy of the people of God. And now it becomes clear who the woman of the stars actually is: the other city, Jerusalem, the Daughter of Sion. She stands for the people in their twelve tribes. After all, Michael the Archangel has fought on her behalf, and we know from Daniel 12:1 that he is the guardian of Israel.

The visionary beholds the people of God, the twelve tribes of Israel, in the form of the Daughter of Sion, who is crying out in birth pangs. In Scripture, birth pangs are a symbol of severe need and pressure.<sup>3</sup> The ancient covenant people is in serious difficulty, and under attack from the enemy. But in this situation of distress, it brings

<sup>3</sup> See Jeremiah 4: 31, Micah 4: 9.

forth the Messiah. He too is threatened by the dragon. But God carries him away; the messianic people of God must flee from the dragon into the desert. And the woman, who before the Messiah's birth was Israel, has now become, as a result of the Messiah, the Church. Through the Messiah, the old people of God has become the new people of God. The woman crowned with stars that we find in the book of Revelation is thus both Israel and the Church.

Has she, then, just nothing to do with Mary? Not quite. Obviously it is Israel which brings forth the Messiah here—but the specific Israelite woman who brought the historical Messiah into the world was of course Mary. Israel may be in the pangs of mortal danger; but the actual birth pangs as Jesus entered the world were Mary's.

John the seer has here in just a few sentences sketched a whole history of Israel, Jesus and the Church. The dense symbol of the woman crowned with stars evokes the whole of the Old and New Testaments. To understand who she is, we need to look at the two Testaments as a whole. That will enable us finally to see the full significance of this particular one-in-three: Israel, Mary and Church.

### ***Special Election and God's Universal Will to Save***

A central theme in Scripture is the election of Israel. God is, after all, the creator of all human beings, and also desires their salvation. What sense, then, are we to make of the idea that one people is singled out by God from all the others, and given privileges? Are the ideas of love for all and special election compatible? Indeed they are compatible—and in fact it is necessary that God choose something particular if all God's dealings with humanity are to be truly dealings of love.

Of course all things are created by God. All that exists depends on the creator for its existence, whether it is a stone, an animal or a human being. Nothing created can escape from this relationship with the creator. If it were ever to manage it, the result would be its immediate annihilation. In this sense, *all* creatures are in God's hand, and Augustine can pray: 'you hold all things in your hand which is Truth'.<sup>4</sup>

But over and above this inescapable relationship between creator and creature, God has willed to be in relationship with us in a further,

<sup>4</sup> Confessions 7.15 (21): *quia tu es omnitenens manu veritate.*

higher way: a relationship rooted not in necessity, but in freedom, friendship and love. Such a relationship was not something that God could just create by imposition; it was something that had to grow between creatures and God historically. In the nature of the case, God had to bring this about in a specific way, one that was bound up with freedom and history.

Perhaps a simple image can clarify what is at stake here. It would be impossible for people to *visit* a friend if the whole world were this friend's giant living room. Were that so, then everyone would inevitably be in this friend's living room all the time. Visits as such would be impossible. You can only have visitors if your living room is a particular space on the earth: one part of the whole, not the whole itself. When there is a specific space like this, people can come to it, depart from it, and even avoid it completely. It is only because people have definite and bounded spaces as their living rooms that others can *visit* them, of their own free will.

If God wants a relationship with us that is free rather than inescapable, God must approach us in such a way as to separate out particular things from the rest of reality. That is why He gave sacred times (the Sabbath in the rhythm of working days), sacred places (the temple), consecrated persons (priests and prophets), sacred rituals, a holy book (the Bible). There is no compulsion on anyone to seek out these particular holy realities, and therefore those who do are taking on a relationship to God that is freely willed.

If God wants to invite us to Himself, He must come to us in a sacramental way. A sacramental reality is something particular that is set apart from everything else and consecrated—but consecrated precisely with a view to everything else, with a view to the whole. The consecrated reality is intended as a source of blessing for all, or at least for all who wish to seek out this sacrament.

God's first act of election, God's first act of separating off something special from the general run, was the election of Abraham. In Genesis 1-11, God acts as creator of the whole world, of the whole of humanity, of all nations. But in Genesis 12, God lays hold of just one human being or one family, out of the whole range, and says: 'you will be a blessing ... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12:2-3).

Abraham is separated out. He is chosen to enter into a special relationship with God, and consecrated.<sup>5</sup> But from the outset, the intention is universal in its scope. Right from the election of Abraham and his descendants, in other words right from the election of the people of Israel, God's plan includes the whole human race. But it is nevertheless in freedom that God wills to draw humanity; and his sacrament for this purpose is Israel, the chosen people. In the



The Woman is Given Wings

course of the book of Genesis, God several times repeats this to Isaac and Jacob: 'all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring' (Genesis 26:4). At the foot of Mount Sinai, God tells Moses and the Israelites: 'Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:5-6).

The Mosaic *Torah* thus makes it repeatedly clear that Israel's election has a universal purpose. Israel is to be for God a sacrament through which God one day wishes to reveal Himself to all people. But the *Torah* does not say how this is to happen. It does not tell us how the heathen peoples, those who are outside Israel, are eventually to enter into Abraham's blessing. It is the prophets who spell it out, especially Isaiah, Micah and Zechariah. If one were to summarise the

<sup>5</sup> God links all other people's relationships with God with their relationship to Abraham and his children: 'I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse'.

prophetic books of the Old Testament in one simple statement, it would go as follows: Israel has been justly punished for its sins and infidelities by God, acting through the Assyrians, Babylonians and other heathen peoples. But God will bring about a change. God will restore Israel in the sight of all peoples, and then it will become clear to those peoples that only the God of Israel is the true God—not the gods of the Egyptians, the Babylonians and the other peoples. Then men and women of all races will come on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, in order to be converted to the God of Israel who alone is the true God.<sup>6</sup>

With this the prophets are describing the fulfilment of Abraham's promise. Indeed, through him and his descendants all the peoples of the earth will find blessing. How? Through the pilgrimage of the nations. Once God's self-revelation has been accomplished for all peoples through his dealings with Israel, then these peoples will turn to Israel as a source from which to learn true religion.

### ***The Gathering of Israel***

Jesus stands completely within this prophetic tradition. He knows that the Messiah is for the people of Israel, and that the Messiah's first task is to gather Israel and restore its twelve tribes. But when this is accomplished, then the other nations will begin their pilgrimage to Sion. Even before Jesus' birth, the angel had told Joseph: 'you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:21). 'His people': in other words, Israel. Matthew makes it quite clear at the outset of his Gospel that Jesus has been sent to Israel. Jesus is to renew Israel; then the renewed Israel is to draw the other people. Later, above Jesus' cross, it will say 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews', for so he was. And to his own disciples he will say, 'Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 10:5-6). And he himself resists the pagan Syro-Phoenician woman whose child is sick. She thinks she can gain something from the Israelite miracle-worker. But Jesus once more emphasizes that he has been sent only to the children of Israel; the pagans, those outside Israel, are not his concern. So we read:

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 2: 1-5, 60; Micah 4: 1-3; Zechariah 8: 23, 14: 17; Malachi 1: 11.



Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs'. (Mark 7:26-27)

Jesus is sent to the children of Israel, not to the pagans. Jesus' mission is to restore Israel, and gather it together from its scattered diaspora. Then this renewed Israel will act as a magnet and attract the Gentile peoples. But Jesus comes to realise that his mission is not being accepted by Israel. Shortly before he dies, he weeps, and says in lament:

'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' (Matthew 23:27)

Jesus did not succeed in restoring Israel. After his death, the disciples on the road to Emmaus can complain, 'we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel' (Luke 24:21). It seems that God's original plan, the plan for which He had chosen Abraham, had failed. God cannot provoke the pilgrimage of the nations to Sion if Sion herself does not accept the Messiah.

How, then, can the nations enter into the blessing of Abraham if Abraham's descendants have failed to act as a sacramental instrument? It would seem that God must now dismiss Israel in order to create for Himself another approach to the pagan peoples, revoke the oath sworn to Abraham, and annul the covenant made with Israel, so as to reveal Himself to the nations in a way that bypasses Abraham and Israel. In theory, there is no reason why God cannot do this. In theory, God could say: 'Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, the prophets, Jesus—it was all a waste of time. I need to acquire the other peoples for Myself without Israel.' With this, a thousand years of salvation history would just vanish. In theory—to repeat—God might have done this. But in fact God does not revoke the covenant with Israel after Jesus is put to death. God may flare up against Israel in passionate anger, but stops short at rejecting Israel:

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. (Hosea 11:8)

Israel refused the offer of renewal through Jesus, and yet God cannot reject Israel. What, then, can God do now? How can the pilgrimage of the peoples to Jerusalem, the incorporation of the nations into the chosen people of God, take place, if Jerusalem itself has not followed God's design?

If God does not want to reject His people for putting to death the Messiah, He has to save His project by intervening in an act of new creation, of a kind hitherto unknown. God has to arise and enthrone the Messiah. God has to renew Jesus' kingship and his kingdom. God has to renew the election of Israel—if not for Israel's obedience, which failed, so at least for its king's vicarious obedience. God did act. He raised the king. But was he renewing the election of Israel or repudiating it?

### ***The Holy Remnant***

We have arrived now at what for Paul is a central problem. Paul travels throughout the then known world preaching to the Gentiles. Greeks, Celts<sup>7</sup> and Romans, whole hosts of pagans from among the Gentiles, are converted to the God of Israel. The pilgrimage of the nations prophesied by Isaiah is indeed well under way. But how? It cannot just be bypassing Israel. In Christ Jesus it is 'the blessing of Abraham' that comes to the Gentiles (Galatians 3:14). It is with this puzzle that Paul struggles: 'is the reality for which I am working so hard really the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham, really the pilgrimage of the Gentiles to *Jerusalem*?'<sup>8</sup> Only through the mediation of Abraham's children can the nations come to the true God.

Paul is convinced that God cannot do without Israel if He wants to convert the Gentiles. Paul's solution is to suggest that God has created for Himself a *holy remnant* from out of Israel, a remnant that has indeed accepted the Messiah:

I ask, then, has God rejected His people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of

<sup>7</sup> The Galatians are ethnically Celtic.

<sup>8</sup> See Romans 11:13: 'Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry'; and Romans 15:16: '... the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit'.

Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? 'Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.' But what is the divine reply to him? 'I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.' So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. (Romans 11: 1-5)

God cannot just do without Israel if He wants to reveal Himself to the nations, unless He revokes the oath to Abraham. But what can He do if Israel refuses to let itself be renewed by the Messiah? God needs Israel. But this does not mean that God needs the whole of Israel; a holy remnant of Israel will suffice. It is to this remnant that the nations can make their pilgrimage; it is this remnant whom the Gentiles can join in order to make up the people of God from both Jews and Gentiles. All that there has to be is a small number of Abraham's children available that can form a nucleus for this extended people of God. Paul points to his own case. Obviously God is working the salvation of the nations through Israelites, and through no one else. Paul himself is, after all, also an Israelite. It is not the case that Sion is playing no role at all. The nations' pilgrimage does have a destination. There is a remnant of Israel.

### ***The Daughter of Sion***

In the New Testament, there are two symbols of the Israelite core that remains absolutely indispensable for the future Church that is to encompass all nations. The first symbol is that of the twelve apostles. In them the gathering of Israel begins to take place, and to this beginning the nations can attach themselves. They represent the twelve tribes at the centre of the Church. When we say that the Church is apostolic, we are also saying that the Church is at its heart abidingly Israelite. The believers from all the other races are gathered round this Israelite nucleus.

The other symbol of this indispensable holy remnant of Israel, from which the Church begins and around which the Church gathers, is the Messiah's own mother. For the mission of the Messiah, God needs to find an answer within Israel. God cannot send the Archangel Gabriel to just any race in the world; God needs the co-operation of God's own chosen people. And the first 'yes' from within Israel to the project of

the Messiah, even before that of the twelve apostles, was the 'yes' given by Mary. In that this daughter of Abraham, Mary, was ready to accept and receive the Messiah, God found in Sion the means that would enable Him to draw the nations to Himself and to incorporate them around the Israelite centre.

Among the New Testament writers, it is Luke and John above all who present Mary in these terms. In the infancy narrative at the beginning of his Gospel, Luke sketches Mary and Joseph as representatives of the true Israel: poor, simple, but totally faithful to strict observance.<sup>9</sup> As Mary's son, Jesus is a *ben-Jisrael*, a son of this true Israel. After the Ascension, Luke also sets Mary at the centre of the apostles (Acts 1:14). Along with the Twelve, Mary is the centre, the heart of the Church, because together Mary and the Twelve form the remnant of Israel, a remnant that has become messianic, Christian in the root sense. In Acts, we see first diaspora Jews at Pentecost coming on pilgrimage to Sion, to this holy remnant of Abraham's children. Then Gentiles follow.

For his part, John presents Mary in his Gospel as a representative of Sion, impatiently waiting for the hour when the Son of Man will be revealed. At the marriage feast of Cana, which comes at the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus retorts to this impatient female figure, 'Woman, what concern is that to you ...? My hour has not yet come.' (John 2:4) But at the end of the Gospel, the hour has indeed come. Now Jesus speaks to 'the woman' again, and says, 'Woman, here is your son' (John 19:26). All future disciples need to join themselves to this 'woman', this daughter of Abraham, if they want to stand beneath Jesus' cross.

Finally, the visionary who wrote the book of Revelation presents Israel as the woman with the twelve stars. The mother of Jesus is not the only embodiment of this symbol, but she is certainly the richest: it was through her that Jesus became a *ben-Jisrael*. She represents the twelve-tribe people, because she is the woman through whom Israel receives, conceives, and brings forth the Messiah. Within the New Testament itself, she embodies the holy remnant; she is the Daughter of Sion, the central symbol for Israel. Already in the New Testament,

<sup>9</sup> See the references to 'the law of the Lord' in the story of the Presentation in the Temple: Luke 2:22-24, 39, 41.



Mary and John at the Foot of the Cross,  
*from the Nuremberg Chronicle, 1493*

she has become the beginning of the Church, and its abiding Jewish core.

Here it is that we find the central significance of Mary for the Christian faith. For the scriptures, to be a Christian, to believe in Jesus as Israel's Messiah, is to enter into Abraham's blessing (see Galatians 3:14), and so it remains for all time. To be a Christian means to attach oneself to the holy, messianic remnant of Abraham's children. To be a Christian means to attach oneself to Mary, the Daughter of Sion.

### ***The Israelite Heart of the Church***

When Luke and John make Mary into a symbol expressing the holy remnant, they are not just writing a historical narrative, but developing a genuine theology of Mary. Both Eastern and Western Christianity have found it not only defensible but also necessary to follow these two evangelists' lead, and to develop their understanding of the Church by reflecting on Mary. The dogmas of Mary's immaculate conception and

of her bodily assumption into heaven are not so much about privileges that are personal to her as Jesus' mother, but rather about the fact that God's saving action for the Church has really succeeded in the Church. The Church is immaculate—not in us, but in Mary, the person at its heart. The Church cannot permanently succumb to death—perhaps it can within its individual believers, but not at its centre as represented by Mary.

Mary is for all time the abiding centre of the Church because she is the first Israelite, the first child of Abraham, to have accepted the Messiah. In her, Israel's restoration has already begun, successfully. Through her faith, the old covenant passes over into the new. She belongs to the old covenant people; around her gathers the new covenant people. Mary is the heart of the Church because she represents within it Abraham and his descendants. And when Gentiles attach themselves to Mary, Abraham's daughter, the Church becomes the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham, as Mary herself sings in the *Magnificat*:

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham  
and to his descendants for ever. (Luke 1:54-55)

Mary, the daughter of Sion, is standing for these descendants of Abraham. Thus she becomes the abiding Israelite heart of the Church catholic, the Church embracing all peoples.

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