

History and Beliefs Regarding Mary, the Mother of Jesus

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Mary (Aramaic, Hebrew: Maryām, Miriam; Arabic: Maryam), commonly referred to as "Saint Mary", "Mother Mary", the "Virgin Mary", the "Blessed Virgin Mary", or "Mary, Mother of Jesus", was a Jewish woman of Nazareth in Galilee. She is identified in the New Testament and in Islam as the mother of Jesus through divine action of the Holy Spirit [Matthew 1:16, 18-25] [Luke 1:26-56, 2:1-7].

The New Testament tells little of Mary's early history. The New Testament begins its account of Mary's life with the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and announced her divine selection to be mother of Jesus and requested her consent. She resided at Nazareth in Galilee, presumably with her parents and during her betrothal-the first stage of a Jewish marriage. The canonical gospels of Matthew and Luke describe Mary as a virgin (Greek παρθένος, parthénos). Both Christians and Muslims believe that she conceived her son miraculously by the intervention of the Holy Spirit. This took place when she was already betrothed to Saint Joseph and was awaiting the concluding rite of marriage, the formal home-taking ceremony.

Since the angel Gabriel had told Mary [Luke 1:19] that Elizabeth, having previously been barren, was now miraculously pregnant, Mary hurried to visit Elizabeth, who was living with her husband Zechariah in a city of Judah "in the hill country"[Luke 1:39]. Once Mary arrived at the house and greeted Elizabeth, Elizabeth proclaimed Mary as "the mother of [her] Lord", and Mary recited a song of thanksgiving commonly known as the Magnificat from its first word in Latin [Luke 1:46-56]. Mary was a relative of Elizabeth, wife of the priest Zechariah of the priestly division of Abijah, who was herself part of the lineage of Aaron and so of the tribe of Levi [Luke 1:5, 1:36]. In spite of this, some speculate that Mary, like Joseph to whom she was betrothed, was of the House of David and so of the tribe of Judah, and that the genealogy presented in Luke was hers, while Joseph's is given in Matthew.

After three months, Mary returned to her house [Luke 1:56-57] When Joseph was told of her conception in a dream by "an angel of the Lord", he was surprised; but the angel told him to be unafraid and take her as his wife, which Joseph did, thereby formally completing the wedding rites [Matthew 1:18-25]. Shortly after, according to the Gospel of Luke, a decree of the Roman emperor Augustus required that Joseph and Mary should proceed to Bethlehem for a census. While they were there, Mary gave birth to Jesus; but because there was no place for them in the inn, she had to use a manger as a cradle [Luke 2:1ff].

After eight days, the boy was circumcised according to Jewish law. He was named Jesus in accordance with the instructions that the "angel of the Lord" had given to Joseph after the Annunciation to Mary [Matthew 1:21, Luke 1:31]. These customary ceremonies were followed by Jesus' presentation to the Lord at the Temple in Jerusalem in accordance with the law for firstborn males, where they encountered the Prophet Simeon and Prophetess Anna, who "came up to them, gave thanks to God, and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" [Luke 2:38]. These events were followed by the visit of the Magi, the family's flight into Egypt, their return after the death of King Herod the Great about 2 or 1 BC and taking up residence in Nazareth [Matthew 2].

Mary in the life of Jesus. The Bible records Mary's role in key events of the life of Jesus from his conception to his Ascension. Mary is involved in the only event in Jesus' adolescent life that is recorded in the New Testament. At the age of twelve Jesus, having become separated from his parents on their return journey from the Passover celebration in Jerusalem, she found him among the teachers in the temple [Luke 2:41-52] and asked for an account of his actions.

After Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist and his temptations by the devil in the desert, Mary was present when, at her intercession, Jesus worked his first public miracle during the marriage in Cana by turning water into wine [John 2:1-11]. Subsequently, Mary is present along with James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas, called Jesus' brothers, and unnamed "sisters" at other events in the life of Jesus [Matthew 1:24-25, 12:46, 13:54-56, 27:56; Mark 3:31, 6:3, 15:40, 16:1; John 2:12, 7:3-5; Galatians 1:19; Acts 1:14]. These passages have been used to challenge the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, however both Catholic and Orthodox churches interpret the words commonly translated "brother" and "sister" as actually meaning close relatives.

Mary is also depicted as being present during the crucifixion standing near "the disciple whom Jesus loved" along with Mary of Clopas and Mary Magdalene [John 19:25-26]. Matthew (27:56) adds "the mother of the sons of Zebedee", presumably the Salome mentioned in Mark 15:40 to this group.

Mary in the early Church. In Acts 1:26, especially v. 14, Mary is the only person to be mentioned by name other than the twelve apostles and the candidates of about 120 people gathered in the Upper Room on the occasion of the election of Matthias to the vacancy of Judas. (Although the author of Acts states that "the women", who must have been known the reader, and Jesus' brothers were there as well, their names are not given.) From this time, she disappears from the biblical accounts. The House of the Virgin Mary near Ephesus in Turkey is traditionally considered the place where Mary lived until her assumption. The Gospel of John states that Mary went to live with the Disciple whom Jesus loved, [John 19:27] identified as John the Evangelist. Early writings suggest that Mary lived in Jerusalem for several years after Pentecost, but moved with the Apostle John to Ephesus in the year 43 during the persecution initiated by King Herod against the young Church of Christ (Acts 12:1-3).

Apocryphal writings tell of her subsequent death and bodily assumption into heaven, but these are not recorded in scripture. According to Sacred Tradition, Mary died surrounded by the apostles (in either Jerusalem or Ephesus) between three days and 24 years after Christ's ascension. The Eastern Orthodox Church teaches that many of the apostles assembled and were present when Mary died and was carried to her final resting place in the family tomb of her parents. Early followers of Jesus kept vigil at the gravesite, praying and singing, as many came from great distances to honor her. When the apostles later opened her tomb, they found it to be empty and they concluded that she had been assumed into Heaven. Although the Orthodox churches maintain that Mary died (“fell asleep in the Lord”) as any other human, the Roman Catholic Church does not teach that she necessarily died before her assumption. However, belief in the corporeal assumption of Mary is universal to Catholicism, in Eastern and Western Catholic Churches, as well as the Eastern Orthodox Church, Coptic Churches, and parts of the Anglican Communion and Continuing Anglican Churches.

Christian devotion to Mary. There is significant diversity in the Marian beliefs and devotional practices of major Christian traditions. Catholics refer to her as Our Lady and venerate her as the Queen of Heaven and Mother of the Church; Eastern Orthodox Christians refer to her by the title *Theotokos*, Birthgiver of God, but most Protestants do not share these expressions.

Christian devotion to Mary goes back to the 2nd century and predates the emergence of a specific Marian liturgical system in the 5th century, following the First Council of Ephesus in 431. The Council itself was held at a church in Ephesus which had been dedicated to Mary about a hundred years before. In Egypt the veneration of Mary had started in the 3rd century and the term *Theotokos* was used by Origen, the Alexandrian Father of the Church.

The earliest known Marian prayer (the [*Sub tuum praesidium*](#), or *Beneath Thy Protection*) is from the 3rd century (perhaps 270). Its text was rediscovered in 1917 on a papyrus in Egypt. Following the Edict of Milan in 313, by the 5th century artistic images of Mary began to appear in public and larger churches were being dedicated to Mary, e.g. S. Maria Maggiore in Rome.

Over the centuries, devotion and veneration to Mary has varied greatly among Christian traditions. Christians of the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodox Church, and the Anglican Communion believe that Mary, as mother of Jesus, is the Mother of God (Μήτηρ Θεοῦ) and the *Theotokos*, literally *Birthgiver of God*. Mary has been an object of veneration in Christianity since the Apostolic Age. Throughout the ages she has been a favorite subject in Christian art, music, and literature. Some of the most common icons in Orthodoxy and paintings in Roman Catholic churches are various depictions of Mother and Child. For example, while not recorded in the Gospel accounts, the depiction of Mary cradling the dead body of her Son is a common motif in art; most famous of these is the [*Pietà*](#) of Michelangelo.

Veneration of Mary. While Protestants show scant attention to Marian prayers or devotions, of all the saints whom the Orthodox and Catholics venerate, the most honored is Mary, who is considered "more honorable than the Cherubim and more glorious than the Seraphim."

Although the Catholics and the Orthodox may honor and venerate Mary, they do not view her as divine, nor do they worship her. Catholics view Mary as subordinate to Christ, but uniquely so, in that she is seen as above all other creatures. Similarly Theologian Sergei Bulgakov wrote that although the Orthodox view Mary as "superior to all created beings" and "ceaselessly pray for her intercession" she is not considered a "substitute for the One Mediator" who is Christ. "Let Mary be in honor, but let worship be given to the Lord" he wrote. Similarly, Catholics do not worship Mary, but venerate her. The Anglican position towards Mary is in general more conciliatory than that of Protestants at large. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury wrote in [*The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with the Icons of Christ*](#): "It is not only that we cannot understand Mary without seeing her as pointing to Christ; we cannot understand Christ without seeing his attention to Mary".

Devotions, titles, and veneration have arisen from reported miracles, special appeals or occasions for calling on Mary, e.g. Our Lady of Ransom who protects captives, and the Iveron Mother of God, who appeared to a monk in a dream with the message, "... I will overshadow you, both in this life and in the age to come. As long as you see my icon in the monastery, the grace and mercy of my Son shall never be lacking!" Our Lady of Lourdes is associated with a healing spring in Lourdes, France, as is Our Lady of Good Health in Vailankanni, India, and Mary is named for many other places of healing and protection around the world.

Devotions to artistic depictions of Mary vary among Christian traditions. Both Roman Catholics and the Orthodox venerate images and icons of Mary, given that the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 permitted their veneration by Catholics with the understanding that those who venerate the image are venerating the reality of the person it represents, and the 842 Synod of Constantinople established the same for the Orthodox. The Orthodox, however, only pray to and venerate flat, two-dimensional icons and not three-dimensional statues.

Some titles for Mary have a Biblical basis, for instance the title Queen Mother has been given to Mary since she was the mother of Jesus, who was sometimes referred to as the "King of Kings" due to his lineage of King David. The biblical basis for the term Queen can be seen in the Gospel of Luke 1:32 and the Book of Isaiah 9:6, and Queen Mother from 1 Kings 2:19-20 and Jeremiah 13:18-19.

Other titles of honor for Mary or reflections of her role as intercessor are used by some Christian traditions such as the Eastern Orthodox or Catholics, but not others, e.g. the Protestants. Common titles for Mary include Mother of God (Theotokos), The Blessed Virgin Mary (also abbreviated to "BVM"), Our Lady (Notre Dame, Nuestra Señora, Nossa Senhora) and the Queen of Heaven (Regina Caeli).

Mary is referred to by the Eastern Orthodox Church, Oriental Orthodoxy, the Anglican Church, and all Eastern Catholic Churches as Theotokos, a title recognized at the Third Ecumenical Council held at Ephesus in 431. The Council stated that the Church Fathers "did not hesitate to speak of the holy Virgin as the Mother of God".

The three main titles for Mary used by the Orthodox are Theotokos, i.e., Mother of God (Greek Θεοτόκος), Aei parthenos, i.e. Ever Virgin (Greek ἀειπαρθένος), as confirmed in the Fifth Ecumenical Council 553, and Panagia, i.e., All Holy (Greek Παναγία). Theotokos (and its Latin equivalents, "Deipara" and "Dei genetrix") literally means "Godbearer". The equivalent phrase "Mater Dei", (Mother of God) is more common in Latin and so also in the other languages used in the Western Catholic Church, but this same phrase in Greek (Μήτηρ Θεοῦ), in the abbreviated form of the first and last letter of the two words (MP ΘΥ), is the indication attached to her image in Byzantine icons. A large number of additional titles for Mary are used by Roman Catholics, and these titles have in turn given rise to many artistic depictions and hymns.

Feasts of Mary. The earliest feasts that relate to Mary grew out of the cycle of feasts that celebrated the Nativity of Jesus. Given that according to the Gospel of Luke (Luke 2:22-40), forty days after the birth of Jesus, along with the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple Mary was purified according to Jewish customs, the Feast of the Purification began to be celebrated by the 5th century, and became the "Meeting of the Lord in the Temple" in Eastern Orthodoxy.

In the 7th and 8th centuries four more Marian feasts were established in the Eastern Church. The four Roman Marian feasts of Purification (also called the Presentation, or Meeting of the Lord in the Temple), Annunciation, Assumption and Nativity of Mary were gradually and sporadically introduced into England by the 11th century.

Over time, the number and nature of feasts (and the associated Titles of Mary) and the venerative practices that accompany them have varied a great deal among diverse Christian traditions. Overall, there are significantly more titles, feasts and Marian venerations among Roman Catholics than any other Christian traditions. Some such feasts relate to specific events, e.g. the Feast of Our Lady of Victory was based on the 1571 victory of the Papal States in the Battle of Lepanto.

Differences in feasts may also originate from doctrinal issues - the Feast of the Assumption is such an example. Given that there is no agreement among all Christians on the circumstances of the death, Dormition or Assumption of Mary, the feast of assumption is celebrated among some denominations and not others. While the Catholic Church celebrates the Feast of the Assumption on August 15, some Eastern Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox celebrate it as Dormition (the "falling asleep in the Lord") of the Theotokos. The Eastern Orthodox celebrate it as one of their 12 Great Feasts. Protestants do not celebrate this, or any other Marian feasts.

Christian Doctrines regarding Mary. There is significant diversity in the Marian doctrines accepted by various Christian churches. The key Marian doctrines held in Christianity can be briefly outlined as follows:

- * Mother of God: holds that Mary, as mother of Jesus is therefore Theotokos (God-bearer), or Mother of God.
- * Virgin birth of Jesus: both Christians and Muslims hold to the belief that Mary miraculously conceived Jesus by action of the Holy Spirit while remaining a virgin.
- * All-holy: both Christians and Muslims maintain that Mary remained sinless, pure, and submissive to God in all things, absorbed in prayers of praise and invocation for the welfare of all, a lover of virtue, reading, and work (St. Ambrose, d. 397).
- * Dormition: the Orthodox understanding of the Assumption (“falling asleep in the Lord”).
- * Assumption: the doctrine which states that Mary was taken bodily into Heaven either at her death (Eastern Church belief) or before her death (Roman Catholic belief).
- * Immaculate Conception: states that Mary herself was conceived without original sin (a belief held by Catholics only; most Eastern Orthodox do not accept this doctrine due to differences in the concept of original sin).
- * Perpetual Virginity: holds that Mary remained a virgin all her life, even after the act of giving birth to Jesus.