

Mary: Icon of Grace

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ABSTRACT

This article's focus is the way a theological appreciation of Mary can enrich Reformed theology. I will argue that it can do so in the following three ways: (1) Mary is a prime example of faith, an ideal servant of the Lord, and in a sense, the mother of all believers; (2) Mary reminds us of God's faithfulness to the Jewish people, and wards off gnostic heresies; (3) Mary is a symbol of Christianity that has often been misused, but can be put to good use, and reflection on Mary helps to steer clear of one-sided approaches of the position of women and furthers Reformed reflection on gender. The discussion of each of these aspects is based on exegesis of a passage of Scripture and considers an aspect of the theological tradition.

Keywords: Mary, Mariology, Reformed Theology.



Introduction

At first sight, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is not a theme one would expect in a journal devoted to Reformed theology. The devotion to Mary is a hallmark of Roman-Catholic theology, and Reformed theologians of the past five centuries have energetically opposed this devotion as unbiblical, unwarranted, or even idolatrous. As a Reformed theologian, reflection on the theological position of Mary let alone a full-blown Mariology, was previously not on my radar. Still, I published a monograph on Mary last year. In this article, I will give an overview of the main argument of this book, which has only been published in Dutch.¹ I will argue that Mary deserves a larger place in Reformed theology than she has hitherto had, because this is Biblically warranted, and is in line with the tradition of the magisterial Reformers, most notably Luther. Also, I will explore how reflection on Mary can help in ongoing theological debates concerning faith, the church, and contemporary issues such as the debate on gender and theology. To be frank, my intentions are thoroughly ecumenical while staying faithful to the Reformed tradition, within the boundaries of Reformed confessions and above all, Scripture.

Example of Faith

Gelassenheit (Resignation)

The Gospel of Luke devotes far more attention to Mary than any of the other Gospels. The annunciation, Mary's visitation of Elisabeth, and the presentation in the temple are exclusively found in Luke.² In the first chapters of his Gospel, he sets a stage in which righteous figures that remind of the Old Testament, such as Zechariah and Elisabeth, function. Against this background, Mary's faith stands out. While Zechariah was privileged in many ways, she was not: she was not a man, but a woman; not old, but young; not living in Jerusalem, but in peripheral Nazareth. Zechariah even was a priest, and the day he receives the message of the angel was the most special day of his life: he entered the temple to perform the olfactory sacrifice. If someone would be able to believe an incredible message by an angel, it should be Zechariah. But it shows that he is unable to believe the message that his wife shall bear a child, John, who will go on before the Lord in the spirit of Elijah (Luke 1:11–17).

By contrast, Mary hears a message which is even more unlikely and confusing. She will give birth to the Redeemer. She voices no objection or doubt as Zechariah did, but when she asks how this birth will take place, she receives an answer that can only puzzle her more: "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:35). Still, she accepts it: "'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.'" (Luke 1:38). God does the unthinkable and the impossible.

¹ Arnold Huijgen, *Maria: Icoon van genade* (Utrecht: KokBoekencentrum, 2021). The book was awarded Theological Book of the Year in the Netherlands and has stimulated discussion on Mary in various ecumenical forms.

² Luke 1–2.

Not the angel's annunciation, but Mary's answer is the high point of the narrative. It is a submission to the will of God, comparable to the way her Son taught his disciples to pray: "Your will be done" (Luk. 11:2), and to his prayer in Gethsemane: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." (Luke 22:42). The evangelist Luke himself describes his faith in similar terms in the book of Acts. With others, he had tried to withhold Paul from a journey to Jerusalem, where he would be captured. "When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."" (Acts 21:14). This prayer means giving space and time to God, to let Him act.³ This characterises Mary's faith.

The aspect of surrender and resignation in Mary's faith is highlighted by the Reformer Martin Luther. He wrote a commentary on Mary's song, the so-called *Magnificat*, in the crucial years 1520 and 1521.⁴ Luther burnt the papal bull *Exsurge Domine* and the books of church law on December 10, 1520. This implied the definitive breach between him and the church of Rome. But his farewell to Rome did not mean that he lost interest in Mary. On the contrary, he started writing a commentary on Mary's song and had to interrupt this work because he had to appear at the *Reichstag* in Augsburg. After this crucial event, he finished his commentary. Remarkably, Luther still advocates invoking Mary: "We should invoke Mary, that God would give and do through her whatever we pray, in a similar way the other saints can be called upon."⁵ He is obviously still part of the late medieval sphere in which saints can be invoked for many reasons. Of course, Luther underlines that it is God who does all things, and he denies that believers should pray to Mary herself, or honor her without reference to God: "She does not want you to come to her, but that you come through her to God."⁶ Still, it is remarkable that Luther gives Mary a place that only a century later would be unthinkable for most of his heirs.

In the spirituality of the Middle Ages, humility was an important virtue. The common idea was that Mary's humility was such that she attracted God's grace by it, and therefore her humility became an important abutment under the devotion of Mary.⁷ But Luther and Erasmus interpreted the Latin *quia respexit humilitatem* differently, based on the Greek text. The word *tapeinoosis* indicates a lowly social state, not an inner virtue.⁸ While Erasmus did not part from medieval humility theology, Luther did. He does regard Mary as humble, but "true humility does not know that it is humble,"⁹ for only God knows the truly humble. Luther radicalises Mary's humility: as long as one can find any trace of humility in oneself, one is not yet truly humble. So, the medieval striving for humility is exactly the wrong approach.

3 Cf. Robert W. Jenson, 'A Space for God', in *Mary: Mother of God*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 49–57.

4 Martin Luther, *Das Magnificat verdeutschet Und ausgelegt*, 1521, WA 7:538–604.

5 Luther, WA 7:574.

6 Luther, WA 7:569.

7 Christoph Burger, "Hij heeft omgezien naar den lagen staat zijner dienstvaagd": Gerson, Erasmus, Luther, Zwingli en Calvijn over Lukas 1:48', in *Sola Gratia: Bron voor de Reformatie en uitdaging voor nu. Opstellen aangeboden aan Dr. W. Balke*, ed. A. van de Beek and W. M. van Laar (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2004), 11–13.

8 Desiderius Erasmus, *Des. Erasmi Roterodami in Novvum Testamentvm ab eodem denuo recognitum, annotationes, ingenti nuper accessione per autorem locupletatae* (Basel: Froben, 1519), 119.

9 Luther, *Das Magnificat*, WA 7:562.

On the background of Luther's explanation of the Magnificat, motives from the medieval mystic author Meister Eckhart resound.¹⁰ Particularly his idea of *Gelassenheit* (resignation) influenced Luther. For Eckhart, *Gelassenheit* not only means actively giving up things (such as property), or mere passive resignation, but it is passivity in an active and positive sense: giving space, and relying on God. Ultimately, *Gelassenheit* means letting God be God, letting Him perform his work.¹¹ Luther uses this language to characterize Mary in her nothingness and poverty. She is despised, lowly and small. As such, she is an apt object of God's grace. For Luther does not simply replace the medieval notion of humility by *Gelassenheit* as a virtue. Not the human virtue, but God's grace is decisive. God has looked upon the humble state of Mary (Luke 1:48). God's looking upon Mary, Luther notes, is creative, and God can best create out of nothing.¹² Therefore, God lovingly prefers to look upon Mary's nothingness in the world rather than on any other woman or man. Luther refers to Psalm 113:5–6, "Who is like the Lord our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?"¹³ It makes no sense for God to look up, for none is higher than He. Also, looking aside leads to nothing, because none is comparable to the Most High. Therefore, when God looks, He needs to look down, in the deep. Paradoxically, "The deeper someone is below God, the better He can see that person."¹⁴ God's gaze creatively makes Mary, who is nothing in herself, to be the mother of Christ.

Humans generally look up, to people higher than themselves, for favors or for ideas to come higher up themselves.¹⁵ People avert their gazes from the lowly, the poor, and the weak. But God looks differently, and his look of grace is the secret of Mary's song. "It is like a king stretching out his hand to reach a beggar. Then the nothingness of the beggar is not praiseworthy, but the grace and goodness of the sovereign."¹⁶ While maintaining a high view of Mary, Luther has put medieval Mariology upside down, because the focal point is no longer human humility as virtue, but God's creative grace that is most apt for people without any positive qualification.

God's Servant

Mary declares herself to be "the Lord's servant" (Luke 1:38). This places Mary in line with the Old Testament prophets who were called to communicate God's message. This is an aspect that is easily forgotten in light of the many images of Mary as a girl and as a mother: her song is a prophetic message. The following aspects deserve to be considered.

10 See Volker Leppin, *Die fremde Reformation: Luthers mystische Wurzeln* (München: C.H. Beck, 2016); Volker Leppin, 'Luther's Roots in Monastic-Mystical Piety', in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and L'ubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 49–61.

11 Gerard Visser, *Gelatenheid: Gemoed en hart bij Meister Eckhart: Beschouwd in het Licht van Aristoteles' leer van het affectieve* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2018); Udo Kern, 'Der "Arme" bei Meister Eckhart', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 29, no. 1 (1987): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1515/nzst.1987.29.1-3.1>.

12 Cf. Edgar Thaidigmann, 'Gottes schöpferisches Sehen: Elemente einer theologischen Sehschule im Anschluß an Luthers Auslegung des Magnificat', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 29, no. 1 (1987): 19–39, <https://doi.org/10.1515/nzst.1987.29.1-3.19>.

13 Luther, *Das Magnificat*, WA 7:547.

14 Luther, WA 7:547.

15 Luther, WA 7:547.

16 Luther, WA 7:561.

First, Mary is addressed by the angel as “highly favored” (Luke 1:28), which in the Vulgate was translated as *gratia plena*, full of grace. The Greek word does not indicate, however, that Mary herself was full of grace, but that she was on the receiving end of God’s grace.¹⁷ This address is a rather literal translation of the Hebrew name Hannah, the mother of Samuel. This might have been a superficial coincidence, if not Mary’s song sounded like a revised version of Hannah’s Song (1 Sam. 2). God’s looking upon his people, throwing down the proud and exalting the humble is the theme of both songs. The entire context of the first books of Samuel resounds, in which God begins a new era which culminates in the ultimate king David. Under the New Testament, the new David emerges.

Second, Mary uses the perfect present tense in her song, which also indicates the prophetic character of the song. That she sings that “the Mighty One has done great things” (Luke 1:49), is not merely a reference to the past, although this song certainly connects to the mighty deeds of God under the Old Testament, most notably the exodus and the return from exile. But in the Old Testament, prophets also use the perfect present to refer to God’s deeds in the near future.¹⁸ This is called the prophetic perfect: the new situation is announced and inaugurated by the very prophecy expressed. Also, the recurring word in Mary’s song, which connects it with Zechariah’s, is *eleos*, mercy, a reference to the Hebrew *chèsèd* or covenant loyalty, which is central to the prophetic message.¹⁹

Third, the revolutionary tones in Mary’s song should not be overlooked. The mighty are taken from their thrones and the humble are exalted: that is a complete reversal of the societal order. Meanwhile, Mary’s song does not simply mean that the rich take the place of the poor and vice versa: a completely new society breaks forth. Ultimately, this song is about the delivery of those who are oppressed.

In the imagery of Mary, the political and somewhat militant overtones of her song have been less received than the devout and humble Mary. But Luke does hint at this, also when Elisabeth greets Mary as “blessed among women” (Luke 1:28). This too is a reference to Israel’s scriptures. Two other women are called by that title, and both exert violence against the oppressor. Deborah praises Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite as “Most blessed of women” (Judges 5:24), because she drove the tent peg through the skull of Sisera, the enemy commander. Achior praises Judith as blessed among women when he sees the head of the enemy Holofernes that Judith had cut off.²⁰ So, when Mary is called “blessed among women” this not merely refers to her pregnancy, but it also pictures her as a warrior against those who threaten the people of God. Note that by calling herself “servant of the Lord” (Luke 1:38), Mary appropriates the title of honor that belongs to Israel (and probably to the Messiah) in the book of Isaiah.²¹

17 See James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 45.

18 See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 154–55.

19 Luke 1:50, 54, 58, 72, 78.

20 Judith 14:6; cf. 13:23; 15:11.

21 Cf. Isa. 42, 49, 50, 52. See Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 66–67.

Exemplary Faith—And Devotion?

The evangelist Luke pictures Mary as an exemplary believer. The final time he refers to her, Mary is found among the apostles, prayerfully waiting for the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14). Luther emphasises the exemplary character of Mary's faith and song. She sang with the intention that we shall sing after her.²² By singing this song, believers identify with those who have nothing and are completely dependent on God. Luther rejected the Roman-Catholic practice of singing the Magnificat once every day (in the evening), because he thought that this song should be sung at least *twice* a day.²³ Moreover, Luther advocates the celebration of Marian feasts, since they serve to commemorate God's grace. Luther distinguishes, however, between feasts that are based in Scripture (such as the annunciation on March 25, the visitation to Elisabeth on May 31, and the presentation of Christ in the temple on February 2), and those that are not, such as the Marian assumption on August 15, the immaculate conception on December 8, or the presentation of Mary in the temple on November 21.

While not all magisterial Reformers shared Luther's enthusiasm for Marian feasts, most gave more attention to Mary than present-day Protestants. Both Zwingli and Bullinger published extensive tracts in which they defended that Mary would have remained a virgin forever after doubts had arisen in Zurich concerning their stance. Calvin does not explicitly teach this, but he also does not deny it. He only notes that Scripture does not reveal to us what happened between Joseph and Mary after the birth of Jesus.²⁴ But he prefers to refer to Mary as "the holy virgin".²⁵

Among protestants, it will be uncontroversial that Mary is an example of faith, particularly of the faith as Luther pictured it, completely dependent on God's grace. The Reformed scholastic Francis Turretin also has no problem calling Mary "the Mother of God."²⁶ A more complicated matter is the question of whether the devotion of Mary can (or even: should) have a place among protestant believers. Calling upon saints, as Martin Luther advised, could readily be dismissed by referring to the Belgic Confession, article 26:

If then we should seek for another Mediator [than Christ], who would be well affected towards us, whom could we find, who loved us more than he, who laid down his life for us, even when we were his enemies? And if we seek for one who hath power and majesty, who is there that has so much of both as he who sits at the right hand of his Father, and who hath all power in heaven and on earth? And who will sooner be heard than the own well beloved Son of God? Therefore it was only through distrust that this practice of dishonoring, instead of honoring the saints, was introduced, doing that, which they never have done, nor required, but have on the contrary steadfastly rejected according to their bounden duty, as appears by their writings.

22 Luther, *Das Magnificat*, WA 7:553.

23 Martin Luther, *Predigt am Tage Maria Heimsuchung, Nachmittags* (2 July 1531), 1531, WA 31/1:566.

24 John Calvin, 'Commentary Matthew 1:25', in *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss (Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1863–1900), 45:70.

25 John Calvin, 'Commentary Luke 1:34', in *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss (Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1863–1900), 45:29.

26 Francis Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae: Pars secunda* (Genève: Samuel de Tournes, 1688), XIII Q. 5, 18 (p. 366).

Still, the Dutch Reformed theologian Bram van de Beek has argued that a request can be made to Mary to pray for us, just like one can ask contemporary believers to pray. The fact that Mary is no longer among us, is no decisive objection for van de Beek, because for Christians the separation of physical death is less relevant than the unity through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.²⁷ The American Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson even thinks that the church is obliged to pray to Mary because as a prophet she not only communicates God's words to humans but also human words to God. Mary's intercession would continue and would be vital for the life of the church.²⁸

The proposals by van de Beek and particularly by Jenson are problematic. When the New Testament refers to "saints", this term is primarily aimed at the living believers, not at the deceased.²⁹ Calvin rightly remarks: "Scripture often urges us to do our duty by one another [by praying for one another], but has not one syllable of the dead."³⁰ Still, there is a distinction between honoring and revering Mary on the one hand and worshipping God on the other hand. This important distinction in the Eastern theology of icons and in the Western theology of images is rejected by John Calvin, who regards it as a play of words.

For just as an adulterer of a homicide cannot escape guilt by dubbing his crime with some other name, so it is absurd for them to be absolved by the subtle device of a name if they differ in no respect from idolaters whom they themselves are compelled to condemn.³¹

This is an unfriendly and biased evaluation. Honoring and worshipping are clearly not the same thing. Whoever honors his father and his mother, as the Decalogue commands, does not worship them. And honor is due to some persons more than others: to parents, but also to Christian leaders, who spoke the word of God to the congregation. According to Hebrews 13:7, they deserve to be remembered and to be imitated. In some Dutch Reformed circles, pictures of previous pastors are displayed prominently in church council chambers. If that is legitimate, it is unclear why an image of Mary or of any of the other saints could not function as a reminder of the grace of God bestowed upon them, to be honored; not to be worshipped.

Mary is to be honored as the first New Testament believer: she was the first to hear the Gospel and believe it. Her faith is an example, her unworthiness an encouragement, and her song an incentive for servanthood. Thus, she does not eclipse God's grace but serves as an icon of God's grace. In the Eastern-Orthodox tradition, icons are not merely pictures or images, they are windows that give a view of who God is. In this sense, Mary is an icon of grace.³²

²⁷ A. van de Beek, *Lichaam en Geest van Christus: De theologie van de kerk en de Heilige Geest* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2012), 174–76.

²⁸ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Works of God*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 202–4.

²⁹ Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; cf. 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2.

³⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles and John T. McNeill (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 3.20.27.

³¹ Calvin, 1.11.11.

³² Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 32.

Jewish Girl

When Mary is discussed in protestant circles, the virgin birth is often the focal point, since American evangelicals have highlighted this doctrine as the litmus test for orthodoxy, because it is the first doctrine most liberal theologians criticise as being unacceptable for the modern mind. It is useful to look behind these modern discussions and turn to the Biblical data.

The Sign of the Virgin

The New Testament relates far less about the virgin birth than about Jesus' cross or resurrection. Only Matthew and Luke mention it; Matthew does so most extensively. Writing for an audience of Jews and pagans, Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy under the header of Jesus "Son of David, Son of Abraham."³³ The name of David was the focal point of messianic and political expectations among Israel, whereas Abraham was regarded as not only the father of the Jewish people but also of the proselytes.³⁴ Further on in his Gospel, Matthew emphasises that the Jews should not boast in their lineage from Abraham, because "out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." (Mat. 3:9). In the genealogy, Matthew mentions four women, which was highly unusual: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and "Uriah's wife," that is Bathsheba.³⁵ Each of these women found themselves in extraordinary situations, particularly in the sexual sphere, in which a remarkable initiative resulted in a breakthrough. Tamar took the initiative to seduce her father-in-law Judah, Rahab was a prostitute from Jericho who chose to help the spies, Ruth threw herself in Boaz's arms. Bathsheba is the only one of whom no special initiative is mentioned, but she is called "Uriah's wife." Uriah took the remarkable initiative to refuse to sleep with his wife, because of the situation of his comrades. This resulted in his death because king David had him killed. Matthew's message is clear: God has often liberated Israel by the unorthodox means of female agency.

Matthew's genealogy leads up to Joseph, not to Mary. Unlike Luke's Gospel, Matthew's Gospel does not mention a single word Mary said. Joseph is clearly the person of interest: the angel appears to him in a dream, and he is one taking "the child and his mother" (Mat. 2:14, 21) with him. Joseph is important for Matthew because he is the descendant of David. It is debated whether Mary was also from the tribe of Judah, but that is unlikely since her relative Elisabeth was from the tribe of Levi (since she was married to a priest). Anyhow, Mary's lineage is as unimportant for Matthew not to be mentioned. What matters, is the fact that Joseph gives the child his name, which was an important legal act, acknowledging Jesus as his son, thus making Jesus a son of David, from the tribe of Judah.³⁶ Not the

33 Matthew 1:1. My translation. The Greek does not have the definite article, thus giving the impression of a header. Matthews primary audience is Jewish: Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Zürich: Benziger, 1985), 62.

34 Luz, 94–95.

35 For an extensive discussion of possible exegeses, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 71–74; Raymond E. Brown and Paul John Achtemeier, eds., *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 77–83.

36 See David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 67.

biological descent is decisive, but the legal recognition by Joseph.

The virgin birth fits within the context of Jesus as the son of David, in a line of women who were used to liberate Israel. So-called fulfilment citations are Matthew's speciality. Time and again he introduces a quote from the Old Testament with the words "so that might be fulfilled."³⁷ The first fulfilment citation is about Mary's pregnancy: "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Immanuel, which means, 'God is with us'" (Mt 1:22–23). This quotation from Isaiah 7:14 is unique; it is not quoted anywhere else in the New Testament. Nor is there any indication that Isaiah 7 was interpreted messianically in Matthew's day. Matthew, the gospel writer, reads the Old Testament creatively and innovatively here.

As is often the case in Jewish interpretation, the context of the citation plays an important role. In Isaiah 7, the prophet is sent to king Ahaz of Judah, while Jerusalem is under siege by the combined armies of Aram and the sister state of Israel. Isaiah delivers the message that Ahaz should not be intimidated, for God will deliver him: he may ask for a sign as proof. Ahaz refuses to ask for a sign: an expression of unbelief. Isaiah prophesies that a sign will be given: "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel" (Isa 7:14). This boy "shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted" (Isa 7:15–16). The Hebrew text only mentions a young woman, not a virgin. The Septuagint translates with *parthenos* (virgin), but even if that translation is followed, no virgin birth is intended: while the woman may be a virgin at the time of the prophecy, that will be over once she will bear a child. The focus of the prophecy is not on the pregnancy, but on the special name "Immanuel" and on the child growing up.³⁸

Matthew uses this material to emphasise continuity and to highlight an even greater sign. The continuity lies in God's continuing care for Israel, even under the darkest circumstances. When God could liberate Judah from vicious attacks, he can save Israel from the Roman empire. But the sign is even more remarkable than in Isaiah's days: a virgin will conceive a child: that is completely unheard of. This is the high point after the irregularities in the sexual relations of the preceding four women in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. The liberator of Israel always comes through impossibilities. This was the case with Moses and Samuel, and before when the mothers of Israel Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel all were barren at first. But the virgin birth trumps all wonderful liberations from the Old Testament.

Since the virgin birth is a sign of God's faithfulness to Israel and his liberating force, it should not be understood as a devaluation of the sexual life. A negative approach of the sexual life would not fit Matthew's Jewish context, since the Song of Songs in the Old Testament freely and joyously expresses the sexual life as part of the good life before God.

³⁷ See Turner, 17–25 for an overview.

³⁸ See Willem A. M. Beuken, *Jesaja 1–12*, Herder Theologischer Kommentar Zum Alten Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 2003), 202–5.

Moreover, if Matthew would have wanted to downplay sexuality, he could easily have left Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba out of the genealogy, but he emphatically includes them. The virgin birth is about covenant faithfulness, not about sexuality as such. As a sign, it shows that not only the male sexual contribution is excluded, but that the human as such is excluded: God is acting here.

Historical Developments

An apocryphal document from the end of the second century put its mark on the perception of Mary in the early church. The so-called “Gospel of James” begins with the story of Joachim and Anna, who suffered from childlessness, but who will become Mary’s parents.³⁹ An angel announces to Anna that she will become the mother of a child who will become known throughout the world: Mary. Mary grows up in the temple. When she is twelve years old, she has to leave the temple to prevent it from being desecrated when she menstruates. The priests in the temple pray for wisdom; what to do with her? An angel commands them to bring together all the old widowers in Jerusalem and to give each a staff. From the staff of the old widower Joseph a dove appears. Thus it becomes clear that he should marry Mary, although he objects that he already has sons. The latter fact helped in the interpretation of Jesus’ brothers in the gospel: these were apparently not Mary’s children, so it is possible that Mary has always remained a virgin. This continued virginity is closely associated with purity in the Gospel of James. Already at Mary’s birth, the room where she is born becomes a kind of sanctuary where nothing unclean is allowed to enter. Joseph therefore functions more as a guardian of Mary’s purity than as a husband.

In the later history of the early church, Mary’s virginity became ever more important. Clement of Alexandria considered Jesus’ brothers to be children of Joseph’s first marriage. His successor, Origen, went a step further by denying that Jesus ever had brothers or sisters. He defended the dignity of Mary, who remained a virgin to the end.⁴⁰ Just as Jesus was first among men in chastity and purity, Mary was first among women. With that, the ascetic ideal of virginity came to the fore. Ephrem the Syrian (306–373) even taught how Mary’s hymen would have restored after Jesus’ birth.⁴¹ He compared the course of events to the way a pearl comes out of an oyster, after which the oyster closes.

Ambrose of Milan set the tone for the western church. He used the image of the pure, virtuous and dignified Mary to bring about a social revolution. He pointed men and women in the direction of a cloistered life and celibacy. They could imitate Mary by withdrawing from productive life, from political responsibility, and from leading a family life. This idea was particularly attractive to women of higher social circles because married social life was especially taxing for them.⁴²

³⁹ See Richard Bauckham, ‘The Origins and Growth of Western Mariology’, in *Chosen by God: Mary in Evangelical Perspective*, ed. David F. Wright (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1989), 142–43; Georg Söll, *Mariologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1978), 25–26.

⁴⁰ Söll, *Mariologie*, 45.

⁴¹ Söll, 54.

⁴² Mary Rubin, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 26–27.

Church father Jerome strongly resisted Helvidius and Jovinian who denied that Mary would have remained a virgin after Jesus' birth.⁴³ Jerome was sure: Joseph only guarded Mary; they never lived together as man and wife. Augustine agreed with this but nevertheless mentioned Mary as an example of a married woman in his *Of the Good of Marriage* written in 401, the same year he also wrote *Of Holy Virginity*. With this, the paradox was complete: the virgin mother had become the ideal for women and the non-consummated marriage of Mary and Joseph formed the model for Christian marriage.⁴⁴ This undervaluation of the body in favor of the spiritual would continue to mark the Western tradition.

When we take a broader view, the trends in the early church are clear. Gradually, the New Testament emphasis on the Jewish background of the sign of Immanuel faded into the background. On the other hand, Mary's virginity, associated with purity and holiness, became gradually more prominent, even though this emphasis is much less strong in the Bible. Thus the emphasis on God's faithfulness to Israel was gradually replaced by an ideal of purity. In the second century, the virginal birth still centered on the true divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, but in the centuries that followed, attention shifted to Mary as the supreme example. This development was accompanied by an extension of Mary's virginity; not only at conception, but also at the birth, and even permanently, she would have remained a virgin. This dynamic led Ambrose and Augustine in two separate directions: on the one hand to celibacy and monasticism and, on the other hand, to a marriage ideal in which sexual intimacy is second class. Sexuality and physicality were valued lower than spiritual communion.

The Lasting Importance of Israel

From the beginning of church history, the defence of the virgin birth has been interwoven with anti-Jewish sentiments. This already started in Justinus Martyr's dialogue with the Jew Trypho. The evangelist Matthew cannot be blamed for the anti-Jewish sentiments. In fact, he attempts to reach out to the Jews and encourage Jewish Christians. In retrospect, it is shocking how the Christian church has long been able to overlook God's faithfulness to Israel. That there is now a much greater awareness of this is, of course, due to the horrors of the Shoah in the Second World War. Meanwhile, the New Testament itself often mentions God's faithfulness to Israel. That is not only the case for the gospel of Matthew, which was primarily written for Jewish believers, and for Luke, who sketches broad connections in the history of salvation. For Paul, too, first sought out the synagogue wherever he came to preach the gospel.

God's history with Israel culminates in Mary.⁴⁵ It was God's purpose that in Abraham's descendants all generations of the earth would be blessed. Because of weakness and sin on the part of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel this did not come to pass. God did live amidst

⁴³ Rubin, 30.

⁴⁴ Rubin, 32.

⁴⁵ Gerhard Lohfink and Ludwig Weimer, *Maria – Nicht ohne Israel: Eine neue Sicht der Lehre von der unbefleckten Empfängnis* (Freiburg: Herder, 2012), 45–46.

the Israelites but that dwelling was temporary, invisible, and non-incarnate. (or “not in the flesh”). Moreover, God could not continue to dwell among the people because of their sins. Eventually, the temple was even destroyed. However, in Mary’s womb, God takes on the human flesh in a definitive way. He enters reality more deeply than ever before, with skin and hair, with flesh and blood. In Mary, God begins to occupy time and space in our human existence. The Word became flesh. The virgin birth is the highlight of God’s faithfulness, which he had also shown to Israel before.

Re-thinking the doctrine of the virgin birth in the light of Mary as a Jewish young woman gives Israel the place that it should have from a Biblical point of view. A mosaic of the Basilica Santa Sabina in Rome shows the church of the circumcision on the left and the church of the gentiles on the right, depicted as two women who look alike as two peas in a pod. In the fifth century, the realisation was apparently still alive in Rome that the *ecclesia ex circumcissione* (the church of the circumcision) and the *ecclesia ex gentibus* (the church from the gentiles) cannot exist without each other.⁴⁶ That is in line with the objective of Matthew’s gospel: the son of David, the king of the Jews, is the son of Abraham who brings blessing to “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3). Thus he is the Son of God. The church of the circumcision and the church of the Gentiles stand next to each other. This also means that the church remains bound to the Old Testament, including its offensive particularity. Only when God’s promises to Israel are fulfilled may we say that the world has been redeemed. Mary reminds of the lasting importance of Israel.

The Ultimate Woman

Mary is a woman, of course. As such, she has been subject to stereotypes and one-sided approaches. This may well be the reason why the martial sides of Mary as “blessed among women” have been downplayed. There is more, and clearer, evidence of the fact that Mary has been used to mould a picture of womanhood (and manhood). I will elaborate on the parallel that has been drawn between Mary and Eve, after which an alternative approach of Mary as a woman for all seasons is presented.

Mary and Eve

The connection between Mary and Eve is nowhere found in the Bible. In a group of apocryphal Jewish writings, there are indications how Eve gradually become seen as primarily responsible for sin, and as representative of all women in the world.⁴⁷ The apocryphal *Apocalypse of Moses* relates how Eve in Paradise was led to sin because Adam was absent for a little while and she was tempted to sin.⁴⁸ The text *Vita Adae et Evae* (The Life of Adam and Eve) continues that story by sketching how Adam and Eve could not

⁴⁶ See Geri Parly, ‘The Origins of Marian Art: The Evolution of Marian Imagery in the Western Church until AD 431’, in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (London: Continuum, 2007), 125–27.

⁴⁷ See the introduction M. D. Johnson, ‘Life of Adam and Eve’, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. Vol. 2: Expansions of the ‘Old Testament’ and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms, and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo–Hellenistic Works*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 249–57.

⁴⁸ *Apc Mos.* 7.2; Johannes Tromp, *The Life of Adam and Eve in Greek: A Critical Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 128.

find proper food outside of Paradise. They only find food for animals, but nothing proper for humans. Adam proposes to repent: he will stand in the middle of the river Jordan for forty days, and Eve will do the same in the Tigris for 37 days. Satan is of course unhappy with this turn of events, and after 18 days he changes himself into an angel of light, goes to Eve and assures her that her prayers have been heard and that she can come out of the water. The devil then takes Eve to Adam, who exclaims: "Eve, Eve, what remains now of the work of your repentance?"⁴⁹ Eve has sinned again, and although Adam scolds Satan and remains standing for the entire forty days, the entrance to Paradise remains barred because Eve sinned again. This apocryphal story is remarkable since in the Bible, Adam is primarily responsible for sin, which shows in the fact that God addresses him first. He was not absent when Eve ate from the fruit: in the Hebrew text it is clear that Adam was standing more or less next to her.

Gradually, Church Fathers incriminate Eve further, also by contrasting her with the obedient Mary. Irenaeus is the first to use the Eve-Mary typology in a systematic way to refute the gnostics: this typology underlines the importance of materiality and of the Old Testament. The "knot" of Eve's disobedience is untied by Mary's obedience: "What the virgin Eve had tied because of unbelief, Mary has untied by faith."⁵⁰ This is Irenaeus' famous idea of recapitulation: Adam is recapitulated in Christ, as Eve is recapitulated in Mary. Tertullian, in a book on the appearance of women, addresses all women on the very first page: "Do you not realize that you are Eve? [...] You are the entryway for the devil."⁵¹ By comparison with Mary, all women are considered more prone to evil than men. Meanwhile, in the fourth century, mariological typologies are combined with ecclesiological ones, resulting in an ever higher view of Mary, and a lower view of all women. For Ephrem the Syrian, Eve is the paragon of vice; her laxity is opposed to Mary's exemplary attitude.⁵² But no fourth-century theologian refers more to the parallel between Eve and Mary than Ambrose. He emphasises how remarkable it is that a woman is used by God, a privilege for the weaker sex. The fact that Mary shows strength is an incentive for all women to put of the "female works (*muliebra opera*)" and to resist weakness.⁵³

Feminist theologian Marina Warner has criticised the traditional image of Mary in contrast to Eve.⁵⁴ She notes that women are regarded as more guilty than men, and that an ideal is upheld that is per definition unattainable: to be both the ideal chaste virgin and the ideal caring mother. According to Warner, Mary has become a myth in which Western misogyny shows and which presents a cultural image of womanhood as the natural situation of things. Serenity, modesty, beauty and humility then seem the natural quality of women. In fact, this myth would suppress women.

49 *Vita Adae et Evae* 4.3; 10.3–4; Johnson, 'Life of Adam and Eve', 258, 260.

50 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.22.4.

51 Tertullian, *De Cultu Feminarum*, 1.1-2.

52 Ephrem the Syrian, *De nativitate*, 22.31. See Markus Hofman, *Maria, die neue Eva: Geschichtlicher Ursprung einer Typologie mit theologischem Potential* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2011), 369.

53 Ambrose of Milan, *Expositio Evangelii Secundam Lucam* 2:28.

54 Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 341–44.

Of course, the entire debate on gender cannot be solved in a single article, but there are two aspects of Mary that can help to find a more balanced view on women and men than the Western tradition has generally offered. The parallel between Eve and Mary is not Biblical, and it has served to make women more responsible for sin than men, which is clearly unbiblical. But two aspects may help.

First of all, Irenaeus' anti-gnostic argumentation concerning Mary is still valid, albeit in a new key. In a world in which gender and sexuality are increasingly regarded as matters of choice, Mary's womanhood shows that sexuality is based in reality. Once again, the materiality and sexuality of humanity deserve to be highlighted against the idea that these do not matter and that only the decisions of the mind are important. This is, in fact, a gnostic way of thinking. On the other hand, there is more than mere biological reality. If one would think that one's role in life is dictated by the realities of biological sex, a look on Mary can help: the virgin birth transcends the possibilities of biology, and God's word sets Mary free from the limitations of her lowly state to become the mother of Christ, to be praised by all generations.

Conclusion

There are at least five reasons to devote attention to Mary in Reformed theology:

- 1) History. For most of church history, also that of those who now identify as protestants, Mary has been very important for the theology and spirituality of the Christian church.
- 2) Example of faith. Mary is the example of faith presented by the evangelist Luke. Her faith is not based on her virtuous humility but on God's boundless grace. As first New Testament believer, she is, in a sense, the mother of all believers. She deserves respect and honor, not to eclipse God's grace, but as the icon of grace, she offers a window into God's grace. Her example is an encouragement for all believers, particularly those in situations of need and loss.
- 3) Israel. Mary personifies the inseparable connection between the church and Israel. As the daughter of Israel, she is the mother of Christ and the sister of all Christians. Over the course of church history, the church has failed to recognise God's ongoing faithfulness to Israel and has sinned by marginalising and even persecuting the Jewish people. This correlates with the Western underestimation of corporeality and particularly sexuality. When the virgin birth is once again understood as Matthew intended it, namely as the expression of God's faithfulness to Israel, the excessive attention to virginity can wane.
- 4) Women and men. In the course of history, women have often been stereotyped, whereas God invited a young woman to become the mother of the Redeemer. While ideas of womanhood were oriented on Mary, the resulting focus on virginity and motherhood were one-sided at best. Rather, Mary can help to steer clear between the two opposite extremes of gnostic denial of (sexual) reality and the tendency to identify biological realities with the will of God.
- 5) Mary herself. Calvin's denial of the difference between honor and worship was an

overstatement. There is ample reason to honor Mary, not independently, in herself, but because the Mighty One has great things for her, and all generations will call her blessed (Luke 1:48).

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