

Mary, the Mother of God

Recently, *ET&N* was given the opportunity to interview the Mary, the mother of Jesus, at her home in Ephesus. We will not relate how this was accomplished (it's a mystery), but obviously we couldn't pass it up. We present excerpts from that interview here in honor of Mothers' Day.

Then

We met Mary in a small home on the eastern face of Mount Koressos in the small community of disciples led by the Apostle John. She had met with Priscilla, the wife of Aquila, a few days earlier and learned of their flight from Rome three years earlier after the Great Fire, so we calculated the year to be A.D. 67. We thought it would be rude to ask her age, but since she told us she had been 15 years old when Jesus was born, and most scholars date His birth to about 6 B.C., Mary would have been approximately 87 years old. She was bed-ridden, but her mind was still very sharp. She asked us to sit on the edge of her bed for the interview so she could see us better.

ET&N: *Have you heard the legends about you that are springing up?*

Mary: Legends? I'm not dead yet, you know!

ET&N: *Of course not. I didn't mean to suggest that, but we've heard some fantastic stories, particularly about your birth and childhood.*

Mary: (Sighing) Yes, John tells me that some are suggesting that I, like my Son, was conceived by the Holy Spirit. That's not only silly, to me it's blasphemy! And if it were true, my parents forgot to tell me about it.

ET&N: *What can you tell us about your parents? We've heard that they were quite old when you were born and have been compared to Abraham and Sarah.*

Mary: That much is partially true. My mother, Anna, believed she was barren for many years before I was born. She always called me her "miracle child," but she meant that figuratively, not literally. My father Joachim loved my mother with all his heart, but he was embarrassed by his childlessness. He was a successful merchant and when he was 50 years old, he went to the Temple to offer his gifts to the Lord, taking a double portion. But one of the priests moved him to the back of the line because he had no seed, so he decided to beg God for a child. He and my mother had prayed for a child many times before, but this time my father decided to go off in the desert to fast and pray until he got an answer. Apparently, he neglected to tell my mother about his plan, though, and when he had been gone for a week, she thought he must have been killed. It was a terrible time for her, believing herself to be barren and now widowed. Father returned after a long time, and mother told me she scolded him strongly until he told her that God had told him they would finally have a child. Mother was skeptical, but it was impossible for her to shake Father's confidence. What makes the

Holy Spirit stories so silly is that my mother told me Father was so enthusiastic that he came to her every night for the next three months. She told me they were both exhausted and perhaps about to give up when she felt a quickening in her womb and realized she was pregnant.

ET&N: So you were their first-born. Did they have other children after you?

Mary: (she giggles) No, I think they were too tired after trying so hard for me. No, I grew up an only child. Since I was first-born, they offered me to the Lord, but the priests accepted my father's substantial offering instead.

ET&N: What was your childhood like?

Mary: It was no different than most girls, I suppose. My mother and I were inseparable, and she taught me everything I needed to know to be a good wife. But she died when I was only nine, and my father didn't quite know what to do with a young girl other than to find her a husband, so after a couple of years, he offered me to a widowed carpenter he knew.

ET&N: Joseph? Tell us about him.

Mary: He was a wonderful man and a conscientious father. He had two sons, Joseph and Simon, and a daughter, Leah, by his first wife. All three were married with children of their own, and had left Galilee. Joseph was more than 30 years older than I was, so he was often as much a father to me as a husband, particularly after my own father died shortly after our betrothal.

ET&N: Did you and Joseph have other children after Jesus.

Mary: Yes, three. A girl we named Anna after my mother and two sons, James and Jude.

ET&N: There are those who suggest you have remained a virgin your entire life.

Mary: So they must think James, Jude and Anna were immaculate conceptions like Jesus.

ET&N: No, they claim they were Joseph's children before you were married.

Mary: No, they are my children. I assure you that I am no virgin. My marriage to Joseph, while much too short, was happy and fulfilling in every way. And when I think about such stories, they anger me because they suggest I dishonored my husband by failing to be a proper wife. For a time after Jesus was born, Joseph stayed away from me until I finally said something. He said he felt it would be strange to have relations with someone who had been impregnated by the Holy Spirit. I had to make it clear to him.

ET&N: What was it like—when the Holy Spirit came over you?

Mary: There is nothing to describe it. I only felt an overwhelming love, then a vague stirring in my womb. I knew I was pregnant but after a few weeks, I began to wonder if I'd imagined the whole thing. But when I started to show, it became real again, and I began to recognize how dangerous my situation could become. My

cousin Elizabeth helped a lot during that time. Through her, God helped me overcome my fear.

ET&N: *When the angel first told you what was going to happen to you, did you think about saying no?*

Mary: Saying no? I had given my life to God, promised him my complete devotion. How could I say no? No, it never occurred to me. I suppose if I hadn't gotten close to God before, I would have had lots of questions, but do you really think you can say no to God about such a thing? To be chosen by him to bring his Son into the world? The only thought I had was how unworthy I saw of such an honor.

ET&N: *You mentioned your marriage was too short. When did Joseph die?*

Mary: It was shortly after Jude was born, when Jesus was 13. He complained of a pain in his ear late one afternoon, developed a terrible fever that night, and died before dawn. It all happened so quickly that the children didn't even know he was sick, and they were all distraught, particularly Jesus. He disappeared for several hours and later told me he prayed for Joseph to be restored. When he returned, he announced that he would take care of me. He had been learning carpentry from Joseph since he was six, and he took over the business immediately.

ET&N: *What was he like as a young child?*

Mary: Perfect, but then I suppose every mother thinks her child is perfect, particularly her first-born. But because I also had other children, I have a basis for comparison. He was just never any trouble whatsoever. He always did what he was asked. He shared anything he had. He never fought with other children—something James, and particularly Jude, did a lot of. He was always looking for ways to help Joseph or me. And after Joseph died, he was a perfect head of the house and provider, even though I could tell his heart was calling him to his ministry. Every once in a while, I'd catch him looking off toward the desert with a longing look in his eyes. I often suspected he wanted to start his ministry sooner, but didn't to care for me and his brothers and sister. But he always denied it when I'd ask. He'd just say the time had not yet come.

ET&N: *What did he say when the time finally came?*

Mary: Just that - it was time.

ET&N: *How much had he told you about what was to come?*

Mary: Very little. Only that there would be many who would not understand him and would seek to destroy him. I was frightened for him and asked him if this was really necessary. He looked very sad and just nodded. Then he took me in his arms and held me for the longest time. Neither of us said anything. When he finally let go, I asked if he'd ever come home again. He said he had to prepare a new home - for everyone who would be his disciple. He never again slept in his home, but he made sure to spend some time with me every time he was in the area. And when I didn't see him for a while, I went out to find him.

ET&N: *I know this may be an odd question, but what do you regret most about Jesus? What do you most wish he had been able to do that he couldn't?*

Mary: That's not so odd. I suppose every mother prays for everything for her children and is sad when it doesn't always happen. Jesus died so young, and he just didn't have time to experience some things. I suppose, since I had a loving husband and children, I most regret that he never married or had a family. I know it would have been impossible - and cruel to them - given what he knew lay ahead, but I've always been sad that he never had the joy of being a parent.

ET&N: *There are those who claim he had a very close relationship with Mary Magdalene. A few even suggest they were married.*

Mary: If he ever had married, it certainly would have been Mary. No one, not ever Peter or John, was as devoted to him. She and I had a special bond too, because we shared a great love for the same man - a different kind of love in some ways, I suppose.

ET&N: *We've heard some say that the other disciples, even the twelve, were jealous of Jesus' relationship with Mary. That he loved her more than any of them.*

Mary: Nonsense! Jesus loved everyone equally. He was incapable of showing any favoritism to anyone. Once, in fact, Mary complained to me that she wished Jesus would be more expressive with her, that he would give her more love. I told her that Jesus gave all his love to everyone, and she should not ask for more. She was ashamed, but I told her that her feelings were natural and nothing to be ashamed of.

ET&N: *I know it must be painful but are you able to talk about Jesus' crucifixion?*

Mary: No, I do not wish to relive such cruelty and disappointment.

ET&N: *Disappointment?*

Mary: That the men abandoned him, except for John. They have atoned for it many times over - most of them even giving their lives, but still... [Long pause] I know the threat to them was much greater than to the women. The Romans could not conceive of a woman being any danger, and if they could have rounded up the disciples, they probably would have nailed them all to crosses. They took such pleasure in causing pain. All the women gathered around John on the hillside so he'd appear to be one of us.

ET&N: *Before he died, Jesus gave John responsibility for you... "Behold your mother," I think he said. Why did he do that when you had other children living at the time?*

Mary: I always thought he was giving me responsibility to be John's mother. His had died, and Jesus knew how disconsolate John would be over his execution. I never considered that Jesus had given him responsibility for me, although he has been wonderful since we left Jerusalem. James was executed by the Sanhedrin, and Jude has been a traveling evangelist for years. Without John, I would have spent my last years alone.

ET&N: *Our time together is almost over. Let me ask you one more thing. The time will come when people will worship you. They will pray for your intercession. They will see images of you in trees, fence posts, windows, caves, and so on. They will claim these images have miraculous healing powers. What would you say to them?*

Mary: If you went to someone's house, and they served you a fine wine, would it make any sense to praise the vessel that contained the wine? I am nothing but a simple vessel. People must focus on the wine, or better yet, the wine-maker. At my age, I appreciate respect, but to worship me denigrates Jesus. I was not scourged and crucified. I did not rise from the dead. When I die very soon now, my bones will remain in the grave. My only hope is him.

Now

2000 years later, the fascination with Mary continues, particularly after her sensitive portrayal in Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ. She is the subject of countless works of art, endless legends, and according to Google, 807,000 website. The Bible tells us nothing of Mary after Jesus' ascension, but there are two contradictory traditions—one that she remained in Jerusalem, the other that she accompanied John to Ephesus before A.D. 70.

Certainly, Mary occupies an extraordinary and unique place in history and in God's plan for mankind. No one else bore God's incarnate Son. But the legends that she was born by immaculate conception, was sinless, remained a virgin all her life, and experienced a bodily resurrection strike me as blasphemous because they ascribe to Mary the same attributes as Jesus. If true, Mary would be proof that human beings did not require the sacrifice of Jesus to be saved. Her humble acceptance of the will of God, recorded in Luke 1:38 ("Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word."), is ample evidence of her faith and piety, but the Bible contains no hint that Mary might have intercessory power with the Father. Prayer to or through her or anyone other than Jesus is futile.

Some traditions hold that she was the first to believe in Jesus' resurrection, but the Gospel accounts suggest otherwise. The first to encounter the risen Jesus were Mary Magdalene and Mary, wife of Clopas and mother of James and Joseph, who immediately worshipped him (Matthew 28:9). It is certain that Jesus would have appeared quickly to His grieving mother, but she was not first.

That said, Mary deserves not our worship, but certainly our homage. The miraculous thing about Mary is that she was an ordinary Jewish girl who responded in faith to God's call, just as ordinary fishermen did. Her life became extraordinary through the actions of the Father, not through any of her own. But she responded to God's will, and bore, nursed, fed, taught, comforted, and loved the Son of God for some 30 years before He began His ministry. And she remained devoted to Him throughout His life, even being one of the few who was present at His crucifixion.

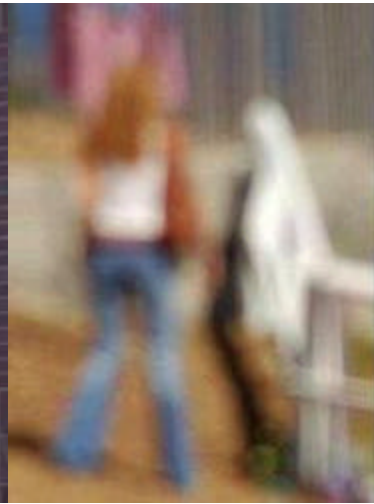
Through the ages, many have believed they have witnessed appearances of Mary and that they are frequently accompanied by miracles, particularly healing. For myself, I offer no explanation for such apparitions and the events except that say to perhaps they are evidence of the power of even misplaced faith. Below are five photographs of alleged Mary appearances. None of these were confirmed by the Roman Catholic Church.



A tree in California



A hospital in Massachusetts



A fencepost in Australia



A building in Florida



Clouds in Venezuela

All this aside, Mary's story is both unique and ordinary. The uniqueness lies in God's actions, the ordinary lies in the heart of a mother. Millions of similar women have borne and nurtured their children, sometimes like Timothy's mother Eunice becoming the source of their faith in God. Yes, Mary deserves our homage, but so too do countless other mothers who have planted the seeds of faith and, without expecting anything in return, served their children with joy and humility. Mary and Jesus were God's one-time miracle. All the other mothers and children are God's everyday miracle.

Happy Mothers Day!!

Discussion

At least one subscriber took exception to my *fictional* interview with Mary:

I subscribe to and read Ekklesia--and usually enjoy the articles. However, I was totally shocked at your "Mary" issue! I felt IT to be blasphemous! For you to insinuate that you had some type of "mysterious story" about Mary is certainly out of place in my opinion for someone who is a member of the Lord's church! It seems to me that what you said, and this imaginary story you wrote about things Mary would say is almost as bad as the catholics worshipping Mary and asking

her to intercede for them! Sorry, but I feel you were way off base with this one. I would never dare to write such a preposterous "story" about the mother of our Lord Jesus.

DS: I'll readily admit that I was really taken aback by this response. People have written about Mary and other biblical characters since at least the second century, capturing legends and imagining stories. As far as the story being blasphemous, the last time I checked "blasphemy" means to insult or show contempt for God. Unless Mary is to be considered a god(dess), I'm not really sure how the story could be blasphemous. And as far as the "mystery" of the interview is concerned, I just didn't want to make up a long-winded explanation for how a modern writer could interview Mary (stepping into a time machine or something like that).

The story was a combination of the Biblical accounts and some legendary ones, knowing that there is always a kernel of truth in legends. I wonder if I would have gotten a note like this if the story had been about Joseph! Even those of us who don't worship Mary seem to be rather sensitive about her.

At any rate, I'm sorry I offended this reader and any others. That certainly was not my intent.

I discussed this with my good friend Terry, and he wrote this to me later:

If you think of the pattern you have laid with Ekklesia, I can understand why people were surprised by the fictional story. The writing has always been evidence based. This was not and you did not forewarn them that it was coming. I enjoyed it because I have had the privilege of reading your other works. Many Ekklesia readers may not have had that privilege.

You did a great job with the story. I would suggest that you ease them into it if you do something like this again. Tell them what you are doing first. You are such a good writer that from their perspective, and mine, you could almost have told a similar story using only evidence based information.

DS: Terry was right—at least about forewarning subscribers. I mentioned that the interview would be fictional at the end of the previous edition, but I should have said something in the introduction to the "Mary" issue.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: The Eucharist (May 18)

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