

# THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AN ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE

## LECTURE ONE: MARY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The long tenure of Pope John Paul II has been marked with a dominant theme -- ecumenism. No Pope in history has taken such positive steps toward dialogue with our separated Christian brethren and with the major non-Christian religions of the world.

This dialogue has taken such startling steps as fervent apologies for certain acts of Catholics toward other Christians and members of other religions; plus the encyclical *Ut Unam Sint*, addressed to the leaders of Protestant churches, frankly stating that the role of the Pope is the major stumbling block toward Christian unity and that he welcomed suggestions from these church leaders as to how the papacy would have to be modified to function in a united Christendom.

Pope John Paul II has also called on all Catholics to do whatever they can to promote the ecumenical movement. Catholics are called to examine their attitudes toward non-Catholics and to inform themselves so that they might better represent the traditions of the Catholic Church to those outside the Church.

It is the purpose of these three lectures to explore some of the fundamental structures of the Catholic tradition concerning the Blessed Virgin Mary in order that we might better understand our beliefs and be able to explain them well to others. Historically, there have been a great number of misunderstandings by Protestants concerning the role of Mary in Catholic theology and prayer life. These misunderstandings are often evident in the casual conversations that Catholics have with non-Catholics. Therefore, if we lay Catholics are to contribute to the ecumenical movement, a fuller knowledge of Mary and her place in the Church may help to correct some of the misunderstandings and enrich the lives of those who do not know Mary well. Then, perhaps, Mary can become a source of unity, rather than a source of division.

At the Second Vatican Council, John Paul II, then Bishop Karol Wojtyla, was instrumental in having Mary included in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (1964). In that document the Council declared that: "the Catholic Church, taught by the Holy Spirit, honors her with the affection of filial piety as a most loving mother" (no. 53) At the end of the third session in November of 1964, Pope Paul VI proclaimed Mary the be "Mother of the Church".

In Pope John Paul's encyclical, *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), he stressed the notion of *motherhood*. He noted that the Council of Ephesus in the 5th century declared Mary to be *theotokos* -- Mother of God. Since most Christians accept the early Councils, this notion of the "motherhood of Mary" could provide an ecumenical common ground for the exploration of the place of Mary in Christian theology and piety. Therefore, in the following lectures we will try to examine the proper role of Mary in the

theology and piety of the Catholic tradition through an examination of Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church.

## **Mary in the New Testament**

We will begin by examining NT passages which scholars have analyzed in reference to Mary and to consider them in their chronological order (data taken from Fr. Raymond Brown and texts from the RVS).

*Note:* One of the issues considered in this analysis of scripture is the virgin birth. Clearly, it is the official teaching and long held belief of the Catholic Church that Jesus was “born of the Virgin Mary” as stated in the Nicene Creed. Whether it can be “proven” from an analysis of the NT is one thing, but it can certainly be argued on theological grounds that the virgin birth is attested to by the ordinary magisterium (teaching authority) of the Church and professed in the Creed and is thus considered a matter of faith (dogma) for Catholics.

Most modern Catholic theologians would so argue, however, they would also point out that the virginal conception attested to in the NT is first and foremost a statement about Jesus, not about Mary, much less Mary’s biology. The virgin birth in NT terms is a statement about the person being born - Jesus, son of God - it is a way of saying that in the birth of this child, God is at work.

### **I. 54-55, Paul’s Letter to the Galatians 4:4; 4:28-29**

**Gal. 4:4** -- It is generally agreed that the letters of Paul were not intended to be a complete summary of early Christian thought and were not used as a “catechism” by Paul to instruct new converts to the faith. Rather, Paul’s letters *presumed* a fuller preaching of the Gospel and were often written to solve problems in various Christian communities or discuss specific theological points.

Mary is not mentioned by name in any of the Pauline writings. Some scholars conclude that in the early days of preaching it was certainly possible, especially in the Gentile missions, to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ without mentioning Mary. In fact, the Gospels themselves, except for the infancy narratives, show little interest in the early family life of Jesus and references to Mary are scant.

However, throughout the centuries, scholars have looked for any possible reference to Mary and her attributes (virgin, mother of God) that might appear in the NT, including the letters of Paul who represents some of the earliest preaching of the apostolic Church.

The context of Gal. 4:4 is Paul’s teaching that under the Old Law men and women had an inferior position, no better than a slave (4:1-2), but now through Jesus God has redeemed those under the Law and made them adoptive sons (4:5). Paul describes how this took place:

But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a

woman, born under the law (4:4)

While the reference “his Son” may be debated as referring to the preexistence and/or divinity of Jesus and thus of Mary as the “mother of God” (*theotokos*), the phrases “born of a woman” and “born under the law” refer to His humanity.

Earlier scholarship had seen the phrase “born of a woman”, without any reference to a father, as supportive of the doctrine of the virgin birth. However, most agree that this was not Paul’s intention. Paul’s focus is on the humanity of Jesus. As stated above, Paul never mentions Mary by name in any of his Letters.

Moreover, the phrase “born of a woman” is a standard Jewish phrase to designate one’s human condition. The same phrase is used of John the Baptist (Mt.11:11, Lk 7:28). Paul never mentions the notion of a “virginal conception” and 4:4 neither argues for or against the concept. Certainly this is an indirect reference to Mary, but with the implication that Jesus is truly human, born of a human mother.

**Gal. 4:28-29** - The context here is an allegorical interpretation of the birth of Isaac and the story of Hagar and Sarah (Gen. 21:1-14). Paul’s claim here is that just as Ishmael, *born of the flesh*, persecuted (not found in Genesis) Isaac, *born of the Spirit* (not found in Genesis), so now those who are troubling his Christian communities (Jews and Judaizers) are *born of the flesh*, (the Old Covenant), while those of the Christian communities are *born of the Spirit* (the New Covenant).

It would take too much time to consider the entire context, but Paul’s introduction of the notion that Isaac and Jesus were born “of the Spirit” (a term not found in the Genesis account) is judged by most scholars *not* to be a reference to the doctrine of the virgin birth, either of Isaac or of Jesus.

## **II. 68-70, The Gospel of Mark**

Mark is generally considered the first of the Synoptic Gospels. Some ten years later, Matthew and Luke used Mark, together with another source called “Q”, to write their own Gospels.

Of the three Synoptic Gospels, Mark is considered the least supportive of Mary. When Protestant scholars react to real or perceived excesses in Catholic Marian theology or devotion, they usually point to Mark as a corrective.

The first thing we encounter in Mark is the fact that there is no Infancy Narrative. Since Mark is the earliest Gospel it is possible that, during the 60’s, the Christian community in Rome had no knowledge of traditions about the birth of Jesus.

Mark begins with a statement declaring that Jesus is Son of God and then immediately plunges into the story of John the Baptist. In fact, if we only had the Gospel of Mark we would never have known the name of Joseph. The one scene (3:31-35) that includes Mary (not by name) is not an easy scene, as we shall see.

**Mk. 3:20-22** -Before examining 3: 31-35, we need to look at the “context”. In 3:20-22 we read:

and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they said “He is beside himself.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He is possessed by Be-elzebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out the demons”.

It is the interpretation of some that “his family” possibly included Mary or that, if Mary understood her son better, she did not have much influence over “the family” or did not discourage them. The inclusion of Mary is highly unlikely. While Jn.7:4 states that the brothers of Jesus did not believe in Him, there is no text that says His mother did not believe in him -- just the opposite as we shall see, especially in the Gospels of Luke and John.

An earlier edition of the Revised Standard Version (pre 1973) used the phrase “his friends” instead of “his family”. The actual Greek term *hoi par'autou*, is ambiguous. It can also be translated as “his own” (Brown) or could simply indicate those who were customarily around him.

The most likely interpretation (Brown) is that “his family” or “his own” refers to the relatives of Jesus in Nazareth who have heard what Jesus was doing at Capernaum and have set out to seize him.

The fact that the family is portrayed by Mark as misunderstanding Jesus is not so surprising, because Mark always shows the apostles as misunderstanding Jesus and indeed the first person in the entire Gospel of Mark to recognize Jesus for who really He is - Son of God - is the Gentile centurion at the foot of the cross. Neither the family nor the apostles come off with good marks. While Mary need not be included in “his family” in this scene, Mark does not portray Mary as a positive force correcting “his family”.

**Mk. 3:31-35** - This is the one scene in Mark where the “mother” of Jesus is named as a participant:

And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.”

The essence of this scene is repeated in Matthew and Luke. The point which Jesus is making is that the family that is called into being by His proclamation of the Kingdom of God - the “eschatological family”- consists of those who do the will of God. In this sense, the true family of Jesus are those who accept the message of the Kingdom of God - those who hear the Word of God and do it. This eschatological family is constituted by

doing the will of God, not by physical, natural family relationships. This certainly does not exclude the physical family, but the physical family must also do the will of God to be included. Jesus' intention is to define the eschatological family, not to exclude the physical family. Certainly He does not intend to exclude His mother.

This point is made again in Mk. 10:29-30 where those who leave "family" for the sake of the Gospel will receive eternal life. Also in Lk. 11:27-28, when a woman, in reference to His physical family, says: "blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!", Jesus replies, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

**Mk. 6:1-6** - In this passage we have reference to Mary in the context of the teachings of Jesus being rejected and His authority to teach questioned on the basis of His lowly social status (a carpenter) and the fact that they knew his family - Mary and His brothers and sisters:

He went away from there and came to his own country; and his disciples followed him. And on the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue; and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house". And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief.

In this scene Jesus comes home to Nazareth and is rejected by "many who heard him". The fact that He is called "son of Mary" was interpreted in an earlier time as a reference to His virginal conception. This is now considered unlikely. In the Jewish context "son of Mary" may well be an insult, since Jews were customarily known by their father's name - - Son of Joseph -- a term which will be used in Lk. 4:22 and Jn. 6:42. Perhaps the description "son of Mary" is used simply because Joseph is dead. Most scholars agree that there is no profound Marian significance, one way or another, in the term "son of Mary".

What is noteworthy here is the reference to "kin", meaning relatives, a term which could quite possibly include one's mother -- it is not necessary that it would include one's mother, but it could. Mk. is the only Gospel that includes "kin" in this scene, Mt. and Lk. do not use the term.

In summary, from a reading of Mark we can say that the author reported that the townspeople, which included the relatives of Jesus, were known to have misunderstood Him and rejected His teachings. There must be some historical truth to this uncomfortable fact and it was probably well known or Mark certainly would not have included it in his Gospel.

While it is true that in Mark's Gospel there are no positive statements about Mary and no indication that she was actively engaged in His ministry, there is no reason to necessarily conclude that Mary was among those seen by Mark as misunderstanding her Son or was opposed in any way to His ministry.

### **III. 80-85, The Gospel of Matthew**

At the time of the writing of the Gospel of Matthew (a title given somewhere in the 2nd century), Mark's Gospel had been in circulation some ten years. Most scholars agree that it provided a basis for Matthew's Gospel.

Mt. is written for a mixed Jew/Gentile convert audience, at first made up primarily of Jewish converts, but by the time of the writing of the Gospel the church community was probably predominantly Gentile. This explains Mt.'s major theme aimed at both Jewish and Gentile converts: *Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish hopes, the Jews rejected Jesus and the Gentiles acknowledged Him*. For example, in the Infancy Narrative, both Herod and the Magi recognize Jesus as the "Christ", however Herod (representing the Jews) rejects Him and tries to kill Him, while the Magi (representing the Gentiles) accept Him and offer kingly gifts.

In treating of Mary in the public ministry of Jesus, Mt. relates the same scenes found in Mk. without adding any new ones of his own. However, Mt. shows a more positive attitude toward Mary than Mark and his Infancy Narrative attests to the virgin birth and a positive role for Mary in the birth of Jesus.

**Mt. 1:1-17** - This section contains a genealogy. The focus of this genealogy is on Jesus -- who He was in relationship to Jewish history and expectations. Jesus is of the house of David because Joseph is a "son of David". However, there are some important implications here for Mary -- her role in the divine plan of salvation and as the mother of Jesus.

In the genealogy, 1:1-17, there are two unusual items 1) There are four women from the Old Testament mentioned. This is unusual, because typically women do not appear in first century Jewish genealogies. Why are they there? There are many opinions, but the most likely (Brown) is that each of these women (Bathsheba, Tamar, Rahab and Ruth) was involved in an *irregular* marriage arrangement, nevertheless, *each proved to be vehicles of God's messianic plan*. So too with Mary.

2) The second unusual item is that at the end of the genealogy the pattern of "A the father of B" and "B the father of C" is broken in verse 16: "And Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ." Scholars see this exception as emphasizing the fact that Joseph was not the father of Jesus and thus supporting the later implications of a virgin birth by the power of the Holy Spirit (18:20; 25).

**Mt. 1:18-2:23** - This section is the famous Matthean Infancy Narrative. In contrast to Luke, as we shall see, Joseph plays the major role. Of course, Mary is an important figure for Mt., but not a dominant one as will be the case in Lk.

As we saw in the genealogy, Joseph is *not* described as begetting Jesus, for the reader is told that in a dream it is revealed to Joseph that his pregnant espoused wife has conceived of a son by the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph is told to take Mary as his wife (the second step in a two step marriage ritual) and to call the child Jesus.

Mt. then states that all of this is to fulfill the words of the prophet (Isaiah 7:14) that “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son...”. The Hebrew word in this passage is ‘*alma*’ which means “young woman”. In the Greek translation of the OT, (the Septuagint), the Hebrew word ‘*alma*’ was translated *parthenos* which means “virgin”.

Since the evangelist probably knew both versions, scholars assume that he chose “virgin” deliberately to support his conviction of the virginal conception. Nevertheless, most scholars agree that Isa. 7:14, as it was written, refers to a “young girl” (virginity not an issue) of Isaiah’s his own time and was not intended to foretell the virgin birth of a future Messiah, nevertheless this prophesy was reinterpreted by Mt. to support his theological point of the virgin birth.

Thus Matthew is testifying that Mary conceived as a virgin by “the Holy Spirit” and remained a virgin “until she had borne a son” (vs. 25). Mt. makes no statement one way or another about Mary’s virginity after the birth of Jesus. Mary’s personal attitudes are never discussed, but she, like the four OT women in the genealogy, is depicted as a vehicle of the Spirit in God’s plan of salvation.

**Mt. 12:46-50** - As we noted earlier, Mt. is dependent on Mk. for a good deal of his material. Chapter 12:46-50 is a parallel of Mk.3:31-35. But Mt. *makes no mention of the “context” passage in Mk. 3:20-22* which describes the family of Jesus going out to seize Him because He was “beside himself”. This “context scene” of Mk. would not make sense in Mt.’s theology, because in the Infancy Narrative Mary knew her son was conceived by the Holy Spirit, she knew of an angelic message that He would save His people from sin and she had seen how He was protected by God from Herod.

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.

Nevertheless, here in this passage the issue is still the same as in Mk.: that the real family that Jesus will constitute is the “eschatological family”, i.e., those who “do the will of my Father in heaven” -- in this case his disciples. This family is not constituted simply by

physical ties. However, in leaving out Mk.'s "context scene" the tone in Mt. is less sharp and there is no hint that Mary misunderstood her Son.

**Mt. 13:53-58** - This passage is parallel to Mk. 6:1-6 - expressing that "a prophet is not without honor" theme.

And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, and coming to his own country he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this? And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house". And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief.

This passage is obviously essentially the same as Mk. 6:1-6 with one important exception. Mk. speaks of a prophet not without honor "except in his own country, and among his *own kin*, and in his own house". As we noted above, the term "kin" means relatives and could well be interpreted to include his mother, Mary. This parallel phrase in Mt. however leaves out the term "kin" thus excluding any thought that Mary would not "honor" him. Again the reasons are clear from Mary's understanding of Jesus from his birth as portrayed in Mt.'s Infancy Narrative.

Some Protestant scholars have argued in the past that Mt. designating Jesus as the "carpenter's son", rather than just "a carpenter" as is Mk. might cast some doubt on the virgin birth. But most scholars, Protestant and Catholic, now say that this designation of the carpenter (Joseph) as his father is to link up Jesus with the messianic line of David, rather than being a comment on how Jesus was conceived. (incidentally, without this designation of "carpenter's son" we would have never known Joseph's occupation)

#### **IV. The Gospel of Luke**

The Gospel of Luke contains the most positive image of Mary. Mary is a central and most important figure in Lk.'s long Infancy Narrative. For Lk. Mary is the first Christian disciple, the first member of the "eschatological family". She is the disciple *par excellence* for through the angelic messenger she is the first to hear the word of God and accept it -- "let it be done to me according to your word". Hearing the word and accepting it is the criterion set out by Jesus for membership in the "eschatological family".

In an earlier time when the Gospels were considered pure history, it was concluded that Mary must be the "eyewitness" who reported to Luke many of the scenes in the Infancy Narrative, i.e., the annunciation, visitation to Elizabeth, etc.. However, modern scholarship sees Luke's Infancy Narrative more as a literary attempt to link up the story of Jesus with OT themes than with an attempt to retell historical facts.

**Lk. 1:26-38** - This passage, which tells of the angel Gabriel being sent to Nazareth, is the first mention of Mary in Lk.. In Catholic tradition it is known as the “Annunciation”, commemorated in the first Joyful Mystery of the Rosary.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God and behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end. And Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have no husband?” And the angel said to her, “the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.

And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.” And Mary said, “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

This scene has been the focus of more Marian thought and reflection than any other reference to Mary in the NT. There is no question that it is the most important NT reference to Mary because the essence of the Gospel message about Jesus is placed on the angel’s lips (see Romans 1:1-4) and is accepted by Mary. From Lk.’s perspective this makes her the first disciple, the first to hear the word of God and accept it. This is the basis for inclusion in the “eschatological family” as we have seen in Mk. and Mt. and will again be mentioned in Lk.. This same theme will be important in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, where Mary is seen as the first member of the Church.

Having said all this, it must also be said that for Lk. this passage is first of all Christological. The primary focus of Lk. is on Jesus and to proclaim who Jesus is -- Son of God and Messiah from the line of David. And this realization of who Jesus is no doubt is a reflection of a post-resurrectional understanding of the early Church that has been carried back to the moment of His conception.

There is no indication that during her lifetime Mary understood Jesus as “Son of God” in the post-resurrectional sense. In fact, according to Mk. even the apostles did not understand Jesus as “Son of God”, in the sense of His divinity, until after the resurrection.

The first person to call Jesus “Son of God” in Mark’s Gospel was the gentile centurion at the foot of the cross.

Also, conception by the power of the Holy Spirit is for Lk. more of a statement about Jesus than Mary. John the Baptist has already had a “miraculous” birth -- God had intervened for the barren couple. Therefore, the conception of Jesus, who will be seen a greater than John, must, if you will, be “more miraculous”. It is sometimes a biblical practice (also in other ancient religions) to describe the birth of important people by positing an unusual birth, i.e., the birth of Isaac. Again, the major focus of the Gospels is on Jesus. However, Mary plays an important role as a willing vehicle for God’s purposes through her act of faith.

The message of the angel that the “Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the power of the Most High will overshadow you” has two implications. First, Jesus will be called “Son of God” and secondly, Mary will conceive by the Holy Spirit thus no doubt agreeing with Mt. that Mary conceived as a virgin. Joseph is not even mentioned in this scene, in stark contrast to Mt. where he is a central figure.

The translation we have been using here is the pre-1973 RSV. In an older Catholic tradition, the Douay version was used and the phrase containing the angel’s salutation to Mary in vs. 28, was translated “Hail, full of grace” rather than the RSV “Hail, O favored one”. The phrase “full of grace” was used in later Marian reflection (and in the Hail Mary of the rosary) to support the teachings of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Whatever can be said for this, these two Marian doctrines are clearly beyond any thought that the author of Lk. may have had.

**Lk. 39-56** - These verses describe Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, known in the Catholic tradition as “The Visitation” -- the second Joyful Mystery of the Rosary. In this scene there are three major items of note: First, the greeting to Mary placed on the lips of Elizabeth: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” (vs.42) has also become part of the “Hail Mary” prayer of the Rosary and here Lk. portrays Mary as “blessed”. Other OT women had been called “blessed” (Jael, Judg. 5:24 and Judith, Jdt.13:18) because they played a role in God’s plan of salvation, so too Mary.

Second, in vs. 45 Mary is blessed because she believed. So Mary’s faith in God’s plan for her, not just her physical motherhood is cause for calling her “blessed”. Again she is the first disciple because she has heard the word of God and responded in faith.

Third, in verses 46-55 we have the hymn or poem which we call the Magnificat. There is much scholarly discussion about this passage, but it certainly continues the theme of Mary’s blessedness coming from her role as a disciple. The Magnificat foreshadows Lk.’s theme in the Beatitudes -- the proud are scattered, the mighty put down, the hungry filled, the rich sent away empty. Thus Mary is again portrayed as a disciple because she proclaims the Gospel message of Jesus, thus she qualifies for the “eschatological family”.

**Lk. 2:1-20** - This passage contains the Lucan Nativity scene. The focus again is on Jesus, but in 2:5-7 Lk. states: "...to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son...."

Unlike in Mt. where Joseph has already taken the second step in the marriage ritual and has taken Mary as his wife (Mt. 1:24), Lk. makes no mention of Joseph taking the second step in the marriage ritual. There has been much scholarly discussion about this point, but at least it is testimony to Lk.'s affirmation of the virginal conception of Jesus.

The term "first born" speaks to the privileges and obligations of the first born under Jewish law and has no implications one way or another about whether or not Mary had other children.

Also in verse 19 Lk. makes this statement: "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart". This idea of "keeping these things in her heart" is repeated in vs. 51. Many scholars see this as another testimony to Mary as the good disciple. For in Lk. 8:11-15, Lk. relates a parable of Jesus about the "good seed" and in vs. 15 the parable ends describing the seed that fell on good soil: "And as for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience." This links up with Mary holding "all these things in her heart" and puts her in a class with those disciples who Jesus describes as falling on good soil and bringing forth fruit with patience. Again, Mary qualifies for the "eschatological family".

**Lk. 2:34-35** - These verses follow Simeon's famous prayer, known by its Latin name as the *Nunc Dimittis*. Simeon addresses Mary with these words: "...and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against and a sword will pierce through your own soul also, that the thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed'".

For years Catholic Marian piety has interpreted the "sword" piercing the heart of Mary as referring to the suffering and death of her son Jesus and with Mary in anguish at the foot of the cross. However Lk. does not indicate that Mary was at the foot of the cross, he reports some women who stood at a distance, but none of these is Mary. Mary at the foot of the cross is found only in John.

Therefore, most scholars think that this phrase refers again to the notion of discipleship. The "sword" is a sword of discerning judgment separating those who believe and those who do not (the rise and fall of many). Here again Mary must pass the test for discipleship. She too must hear His words and witness His apparent failure in His suffering and death and then make the decision all disciples must make -- whether or not to believe in Jesus and follow Him. Later in Acts 1:12-14, Lk. has Mary, after the ascension, praying in the company of the apostles and other women. Mary is truly a disciple.

**Lk. 2:41-52** - In this scene Jesus has been lost for three days and is finally found astounding the teachers in the Temple with His knowledge. When Mary, a little upset,

questions Him: “Son why have you treated us so?”, Jesus replies that He must be about His Father’s business. Here, perhaps, hinting that He will pay more attention in the future to His mission of doing the Father’s will, than to His physical family. This sets the stage for His later remarks that the “eschatological family” is not defined by physical relationships, but by doing the will of the Father.

Again in vs. 51 we have reference to Mary keeping “these things in her heart”, a criterion for a good disciple. (see Lk. 2:1-20 above)

**Lk. 3:23-25** - This passage is the beginning of a genealogy that stretches back to Adam and is seen as an indirect reference to the virginity of Mary. It reads: “Jesus, when he began his ministry, was about thirty years of age, being the son (as was supposed) of Joseph”. Scholars wonder if this parenthetical expression was added by Lk. to highlight that Joseph was not the natural father of Jesus in contrast to the other fathers in the genealogy.

**Lk. 4:16-30** - Here we have another version of the rejection scene which we found in Mk. 6:16 and Mt. 13:53-58, with Jesus teaching, the hometown crowd pointing out his lowly background and finally rejecting Him. Here in Lk. the rejection of His hometown people is so violent that they sought to throw Him off the “brow of a hill” (4:29).

However, in Lk. there are some important differences. In vs. 24 Lk. reports the saying of Jesus found in Mk. and Mt. that “...no prophet is acceptable in his own country”. However, while Lk. says the prophet is not accepted in his own country, he leaves out Mk.’s inclusion of “kin” (relatives) and “in his own house” in those that reject Jesus. Mt., as we noted, had left out the inclusion of “kin”, but had included “in his own house” among those who did not accept Jesus. Therefore, we see that Mk. is most critical of the relatives of Jesus, Mt. less so and Lk. does not mention them at all.

Given all this, Lk. keeps Mary from any inclusion, even indirect, among those who are rejecting Jesus. While there is no positive note about Mary in this scene, there are certainly no negative implications.

**Lk. 8:19-21** - Here again we have Jesus describing who belongs to the “eschatological family” which He is constituting by His preaching of the Kingdom of God (Heaven). As we have seen, the context and the passage included in Mk. 3:20-35 was negative. The context was Jesus at home being seized by his friends who thought He was “beside himself” and then in the passage, Jesus says “Who are my mother and brothers?” and then goes on to define the “eschatological family” (those who do the will of God) as His brother and sister and mother, in contrast to his physical family.

Mt. 12:46-50 did not contain a negative “context” scene, but essentially preserves Mk.’s passage. Lk.’s “context” (8:11-17) is positive, it includes the parable of the seed that falls on good soil and they are those “who hearing the word, hold it fast in a honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience”. We saw that Lk. linked this with Mary who also heard the word and held it in her heart. So the context is positive in contrast to

Mk.'s negative context.

Lk.'s parallel passage to Mk. and Mt. reads:

Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him for the crowd. And he was told, "your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you." But he said to them " My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

Notice that Lk. leaves out the phrase "Who are my mother and brothers?" which is found in both Mk. and Mt.. He also explains that His mother and brothers cannot reach him because of the crowd. More importantly in this passage Jesus makes no distinction between his physical family (outside) and His eschatological family (inside), but rather has a simple word of praise that His mother and brothers hear the word of God and do it. Thus Mary and the family are disciples, supporting Lk.'s theme of Mary as the first disciple.

**Lk. 11-27-28** - This passage has no parallels in the other Gospels.

As he said this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that nursed you!" But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!"

Here the woman says that the mother of Jesus is blessed because she is His physical mother. Jesus, without denying this, says that the real blessing comes from hearing the word of God and keeping it. Again, the Lucan theme of discipleship and stressing that the physical family, in this case Mary, must also meet a criterion of discipleship, which, of course, she does as Lk. has been at pains to point out in a number of ways as noted above.

**Acts 1:14** - Most scholars would agree that if Luke had his way, his Gospel and Acts would constitute a continuum. We shall treat them so here.

All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

This passage continues Lk.'s theme of the discipleship of Mary. She is found here, after the ascension of Jesus, with the Eleven assembled for prayer. Couple this scene with the portrayal of Mary in Lk.'s Infancy Narrative as the first to "hear the word of God and do it" and the result is Mary recognized as the first disciple.

The group mentioned within the context of this passage -- the Eleven, the women, Mary and the brothers -- is the first "assembly of believers" (the church) after the death, resurrection and ascension, but before Pentecost. Each member of this group is a witness to some part of the life of Jesus so that, taken as a whole, they provide a witness to His entire life. Let examine each:

Mary - she is the unique witness to His special conception, His birth and family life until his public ministry. She is not mentioned as active in His ministry and Lk. does not place her at the foot of the cross or at the empty tomb.

The Eleven - Peter, in Acts. 1:21-22, speaks of them as "...the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us...."

These then can give witness to the public ministry of Jesus. They are also probably included in the "acquaintances" who with the "women" stood at a distance at the crucifixion (Lk. 23:49). They did not witness the burial of Jesus nor were they present at the empty tomb.

The women - These are the witness to the death, burial and present at the empty tomb.

The brothers - They could also represent his relatives who knew him throughout his life. (We shall discuss the connotation of the term "brother" in a separate place below)

Thus this "group", the first assembly contain those who can to said to give witness to the entire life of Jesus and they remain his disciples. And while Lk. never mentions Mary again in the Acts, he still leaves us the most positive portrait of Mary in the NT.

## **V. The Gospel of John**

Like the Gospel of Luke, the Gospel of John presents a positive portrait of Mary, although she is never mentioned by name. John does not contain an Infancy Narrative, but the famous Prologue traces Jesus, now identified as The Word, back to His preexistence with God. The Word becomes flesh without any reference to the circumstances of His conception or birth.

**Jn. 1:45** - Here Jesus is described by Philip as "son of Joseph". This would be a typical designation of a first century Jew and has no implications concerning the doctrine of the virgin birth. This is the only mention of Joseph in the entire Gospel.

**Jn. 2:1-11** - This is the famous scene of the wedding feast of Cana.

On the third day there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; Jesus also was invited to the marriage, with his disciples. When the wine failed, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "O woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "do whatever he tells you."

We know the rest of the scene - mother gets her way. Here we see Mary initially getting a rebuff from Jesus and then is granted her request. This same scenario is found again in

4:46-50 where an official begs Jesus to heal his son. Jesus first rebuffs him, then heals his son. These rather odd scenarios are best understood as part of the larger picture of Jesus which John portrays throughout his Gospel. Jesus is in charge. You do not tell Jesus what to do. Jesus reads the minds of people - He knows what is in their hearts. He is not fearful or sorrowful at His own death. Those who come to take Him away for crucifixion are thrown to the ground by His voice. No one takes His life, He lays down His life and He takes it up again. This is a Jesus who is totally in charge.

This is another example of the theme that the mission of Jesus is not tied to His physical family. It is not family and friends that dictate when His "hour had come". His mission has to do with the establishment of the "eschatological family", the family of disciples, rather than to establish a family along physical lines.

The fact that Jn. has Jesus referring to His mother as "woman" has caused some scholarly comment. A son addressing his mother as "woman" is not found in Hebrew or Greek culture. Thus, at first glance it may sound like a term of disrespect. However, this is clearly not Jn.'s meaning, because Jn. will have Jesus use the same term in the solemn scene at the foot of the cross -- "Woman, behold your son!" -- as He gives His mother over to the household of "the disciple whom he loved". So this term can hardly be taken as a sign of disrespect.

For another angle, later interpretations of the Church Fathers suggested that "woman" referred to Eve who is also called woman in Genesis 3 and that Mary is the new Eve, obedient as Eve was disobedient. However, this does not seem to be the intention of the evangelist.

The expression, "what have you to do with me" is an odd Semitic expression and while scholars are divided on Jn.'s meaning here it is probably something to the effect that Jesus is indicating that "wonder-working" will not define His mission. He comes to preach and inaugurate the Kingdom of God, not to imitate cheap magicians. Again, for Jn., Jesus is in charge. No one defines His mission except the Father and He will say "the Father and I are one". Again, there is no intended disrespect of Mary in this remark.

**Jn. 2:12** - This is the last direct reference to Mary before the scene at the foot of the cross. It takes place immediately after the wedding at Cana.

After this he went down to Capernaum, with his mother and his brothers and his disciples; and there they stayed for a few days.

We shall consider later the issue of the "brothers and sisters" of Jesus, but we can note here that the brothers and the disciples are separated. Later in Ch. 7:5, Jn. comments: "even his brothers did not believe in him". So at least for now to be a brother of Jesus does not necessarily mean that one is also a disciple. Again, the physical relationship will not be decisive.

**Jn. 6:42** - The context of this passage (vs. 35-40) is Jesus speaking of Himself as the

bread of life and that He had come down from heaven (pre-existence). Some of His listeners object:

The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, "I am the bread which came down from heaven." They said, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, "I have come down from Heaven".

This passage has been used as proof that Jn. believed in the virginal conception and also proof that Jn. did not believe in the virginal conception. In fact, it is proof of neither. Jn. never treats of the issue of the virginal conception. Jn. speaks in the Prologue and elsewhere of the pre-existence of Jesus as the Word who became flesh. Thus the divine sonship of Jesus is established by His pre-existence and oneness with the Father, rather than by the fact of a virginal birth. The fact that Jesus is referred to as "son of Joseph" is simply the normal way of identifying Jesus - Jesus bar-Joseph.

Some scholars even doubt that Jn. knew of the virginal birth tradition found in Mt. and Lk.. That Jn. knew little of the family life might also be evident by the odd reference in this passage that the Jews speak of Jesus whose "father and mother we know?". From the total absence of Joseph from the public life of Jesus, even in Jn., most scholars conclude that this indicated Joseph was dead. In any event, the focus of Jn.'s christology concerning the origin of Jesus is neither His family line nor the virginal conception, but His pre-existence in the God-head..

**Jn. 7:2-5** - This passage again brings up the dichotomy between family and disciples and the corresponding lack of faith on the part of the "family".

Now the Jew's feast of Tabernacles was at hand. So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works you are doing. For no man works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things show yourself to the world." For even his brothers did not believe in him.

Here the brothers seem to speak of the disciples as another distinct group from themselves. The brothers do not identify themselves as disciples and Jn. notes in v. 5 that "even his brothers did not believe in him". Some scholars have gone so far as to connect Mary with the brothers as "family" and thus suggest Mary's unbelief in her Son. This is clearly not the case for Jn. For we shall see in Jn. 19 that Mary is part of the household of the "beloved disciple" and James the brother of the Lord takes on the leadership of the Christian community in Jerusalem after the resurrection.

Was there some unbelief in the relatives of Jesus during His ministry? Probably, or it would not have been mentioned by the Gospel writers. Did this unbelief included Mary? No, there is no such indication, in fact, she is identified as a member of the "eschatological family" in a number of places, in other words she is both mother and disciple.

Did the brothers continue in their unbelief? It seem not, for as we saw in Act 1:14, the brothers, with Mary, are found with the Eleven gathered in prayer after the resurrection. This certainly identifies Mary and the brothers as disciples. And as mentioned above James, the brother of the Lord, takes on the leadership role of the Church in Jerusalem.

**Jn. 8:39-42** - This passage, with its reference to “fornication” has been cited to support an early Jewish charge that Jesus’ birth was illegitimate. At the other extreme some have held that this “hint” of an unusual birth is Jn.’s support for a virginal conception. Neither interpretation seems probable.

... “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “if you were Abraham’s children, you would do what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this is not what Abraham did. You do what your father did”

They said to him, “ We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God”. Jesus said to them, If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.

When the opponents of Jesus say that they were “not born of fornication”, the focus of this claim is that they are truly the “family” of God and loyal sons of Abraham. However, some have suggested that there is also here a hint or a subtle implication that Jesus was born of fornication? If this was so, the later Jewish claim would be that Jesus was a bastard, while the Christian would say that their ignorance of the “unusual” birth circumstances would be corrected by the fact of a virginal conception.

Most scholars conclude that there is no such second meaning or subtle reference to Jesus in the “fornication” phrase and thus that both conclusions based on this inference are not supported by the text.

**Jn. 19: 25-27** - This is perhaps the most significant passage in the NT in terms of Mary and her place among the “eschatological family” of disciples. In Chapters 13 - 19 Jesus is speaking words of comfort and instruction to those closest to Him, his disciples. That Mary is included here as a disciple within the context of these discourses is significant for the way that Jn. pictures Mary. Here is the central passage:

...but standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, “Woman, behold your son!” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold your mother!” And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home.

The two major characters in this scene are the “beloved disciple” and Mary although she is not identified by name, but by her physical relationship to Jesus. The speculation

about the identity of the “beloved disciple” could and does fill volumes. In the final analysis, the best guess is that he was a disciple, considered by the evangelist to be a companion of Jesus, but not one of the apostles. Some speculate that he was the founder of the Johannine community from which the Gospel of John originated.

In any event, he was a special figure for the Johannine community. For them he was the object of Jesus’ special love and in the Johannine literature he holds a “higher” place than Peter. He is also the model disciple who understands Jesus and never denies Him as Peter does or betrays Him as Judas or deserts Him as the apostles do at the crucifixion. Whether he is founder or not of the Johannine community, the community uses his eyewitness status and special understanding as a foundation for their particular theological perspective, a perspective which in many ways is different from the Synoptics.

As for Mary, she is identified as “his mother” and addressed by Jesus as “woman” as in the scene at the wedding feast of Cana. Which as noted above has no pejorative meaning.

However, the two unnamed figures do represent disciples and family and here, as Jesus dies and completes His earthly mission, He leaves behind this “eschatological family”, the first Christian community - family and disciples are finally united in the beloved disciple and Mary. And furthermore, Mary now takes on the role of mother to the beloved disciple, thus in later Christian reflection Mary becomes Mother of the Church.

There is another possibility concerning Jn.’s reason for including this scene. This possibility is discussed by Raymond Brown in one of his lectures. He speculates that in any religious movement there is always danger of a separation into two divergent groups -- those who follow the disciples of the founder and those who follow the family of the founder. Brown give examples of this taking place in Islam and among the Mormons. He thus suggests that presenting Jesus on the cross as joining family and disciples is meant to convey that being faithful to Jesus means that the disciples and the family must stay united.

Certainly this unity was threatened in the conflict with the Gentile Churches of Paul and the Church of Jerusalem with James, the brother of the Lord, as leader. But in this case, perhaps at the end of the century when this Gospel was being composed, there was some conflict between the Johannine community founded on the teaching of the beloved disciple, and the Church in Jerusalem with James as leader and with strong Jewish traditions.

Brown offers an additional speculation. He argues that there is some evidence that the Johannine community had a significant number of Samaritan converts. And since the Samaritans had never viewed the Jerusalem Jews with much respect, perhaps this explains why the Gospel of Jn. makes so many pejorative references to “the Jews”, so much so that later tradition could complain that John’s Gospel was anti-Semitic. This would also explain why John’s Gospel shows little respect for the “brothers” of Jesus during His ministry and accused them of “unbelief” as noted above.

All of this is scholarly speculation on Brown's part, but it is an interesting thesis. In any event, Jn. ends his Gospel with a very positive picture of Mary as a disciple and a most important figure, equal to the beloved disciple -- for Jn. that is saying a great deal.

## **VI The Book of Revelation (The Apocalypse)**

This book was composed somewhere between 92-96 AD by an unknown author named John. He has been described as a Jewish/Christian prophet and is not to be confused with John son of Zebedee, nor the author of the Gospel of John, nor of the Johannine Epistles. He wrote to "seven churches" in the western part of Asia Minor during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian.

The words revelation and apocalypse are both English terms used to translate the Greek word *apokalypsis* which means "unveiling", not revelation in the technical theological sense. Because of the unusual style of apocalypse the term has come to designate an entire genre of biblical literature. Apocalyptic literature has no comparable literary form in modern literature.

Apocalyptic literature shows up in the last two centuries before Jesus and in the early Christian centuries. It has two prominent characteristics: 1) the context involves a "seer" who receives a revelation in a dream or through an angel. The revelation includes visions of happenings in heaven and on earth, both in the present and in the future or at the end of time. 2) An extravagant use of symbols - animals, monsters, trumpets and various symbolic numbers - seven and twelve.

Apocalyptic literature also has an atmosphere of persecution and difficult times. All human hope to a solution is gone. Hope in a human solution is replaced with an anticipation that God, through divine intervention, will bring immanent deliverance. In this context the forces of good and evil (often in the person of Satan) confront each other and according to a predetermined divine plan, usually found in a book written in symbolic code, at the end of time good will triumph over evil.

Raymond Brown makes this observation about the Book of Revelation:

Rev is widely popular for the wrong reasons, for a great number of people read it as a guide to how the world will end, assuming that the author was given by Christ detailed knowledge of the future that he communicated in coded symbols. For example, preachers have identified the Beast from the Earth whose number is 666 as Hitler, Stalin, the Pope, and Saddam Hussein, and have related events in Rev to the Communist Revolution, the atom bomb, the creation of the State of Israel, the Gulf War, etc. The 19th and the 20th centuries have seen many interpreters of prophecy who used calculations from Rev to predict the exact date of the end of the world. Up to the moment all have been wrong! (Intro. to the NT, p. 773)

Throughout history the interpretations of Rev have been many and varied. Most scholars today see Rev as a message of hope to Christians of the last first century who were suffering persecution from Jews and/or Romans. There was no intent to predict events in the distant future, however there are contained in Rev some timeless Christian teachings, especially the hope that in the end good will triumph over evil.

One analysis is that the first three chapters are introductory and Chapter 4 begins Part I which describes God's past judgment on the Jews who rejected Jesus and persecuted the Church. Chapter 12 (our focus) begins Part II which describes God's judgment on Rome and the coming end of the world.

**Rev. Ch. 12** - The image of the "woman" contained in this Chapter has been often interpreted in medieval and modern Christian piety, art, poetry and song as the Blessed Virgin Mary. However, the first mariological interpretation of the woman of Ch.12 did not appear until the 4th century and did not represent a majority interpretation. The difficulties and the possibilities of interpreting the woman as Mary will be discussed below.

First, the text.

(Because of the length of the text it will not be reproduced here.) The Ch. is divided into three sections: 1) Vs. 1-6 - staged in heaven, it speaks of the woman, the dragon and the woman's child; 2) Vs. 7-12 - describes a war between the angel Michael and the dragon, beginning in heaven and coming down to earth; 3) Vs. 13-17 - staged on earth and involving the dragon, the woman and her child.

Section 1 - Most scholars agree that the woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars, is most likely a personification of the OT people of God, Israel. The sun, moon and the twelve stars of her crown recall the dream of Joseph in Gen. 37:9, the stars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. The birth pangs of the woman are the troubled times referred to in OT tradition as introducing the messianic age. The Christian imagery then switches to the NT and has the woman, after the birth of the messianic child, become the Church who goes into the wilderness, much like the OT people who wandered in the desert where they were protected and nourished by God.

The dragon harkens back to the serpent in Genesis and is further interpreted as Satan. This suggests the Eve/serpent struggle.

Section II - This section does not contain reference to the woman.

Section III - Here the woman was given help to flee into the wilderness to escape the dragon, a repeat of Section one.

If Israel and the Church are the primary interpretation of the woman, is Mary a secondary interpretation? Scholars are divided. Those who hold Mary to be included is some way in the author's imagery point to the obvious fact that the woman who gave birth to the

child (messiah) was certainly Mary. Those who would add a word of caution here observe that while the adversary of the woman, the serpent, is identified by name as Satan, Mary is not named as the woman. Furthermore, the birth scene has the child immediately “caught up to God” and this does not follow the historical career of Jesus. On the other hand, the Gospel of John has Jesus defeating Satan at the hour of His death after which He is taken up to heaven.

After all is said and done, the secondary intention of the author to speak of Mary is not clear. Certainly later Christianity would use this rich imagery to depict Mary. This technique is common in the NT usage of the OT. For example, the girl (virgin) in Isaiah 7:14 was intended by the author to refer to a girl of his own time, the child was not the Messiah, much less Jesus, but Matthew would use this phrase to build up his mosaic of OT references to help his readers come to an understanding of Jesus.

**The Virginity of Mary** - Catholics who have a special devotion of Mary are often concerned about what they hear from time to time in the public media about what modern biblical scholars are saying about the virgin birth. Therefore, we need to give this issue some special attention.

There is also the question of the perpetual virginity of Mary. As Catholic mariology developed over the centuries, the term or title “Ever Virgin” was applied to Mary in hymns and prayers. Marian theologians posited the virginity of Mary before, during and after the birth of Jesus. While our Protestant friends may agree with the modern scholars that the NT teaches the virginal conception of Jesus, they feel that the NT references to the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus, could well cast doubt on the perpetual virginity of Mary.

The brothers and sisters - In our earlier quote from Mk. 6:3 we noted those who questioned the wisdom of Jesus referred to his humble background as a carpenter and noted that they knew His family, His mother Mary, His brothers, James, Joses (Joseph), Judas and Simon, and His sisters who were present.

A straightforward reading of the Greek text, and certainly of the English translation, would naturally lead the reader to the simple conclusion that Jesus had brothers and sisters -- it says so in the inspired text. There may be the question of who came first. If you support the virginal conception, then Jesus must be first. If virginal conception is not an issue with you, then it does not matter. However, if you are committed to the Catholic Marian tradition that developed over the centuries that Mary was “Ever Virgin” - before, during and after the birth of Jesus - then you have the burden of explaining these references to the “brothers and sisters” of Jesus found in the NT.

One early Catholic solution was to suggest that these were children of Joseph by another marriage. The fact that they are mentioned several times as being with Mary is explained by further suggesting that they are step-children taking care of their step-mother after the death of their father Joseph. Conceptually possible, but no hint of that in the NT. This

explanation, however, is found in a 2nd century apocryphal document known as “Birth of Mary: Revelation of James”, (named the *Protevangelium of James* in the 16th century), where Joseph is portrayed as an aged widower with children.

The most common Catholic explanation centers around the meaning of the Greek word for brother - *adelphos*. *Adelphos* would normally connote a “blood brother”, literally “son of the same mother” or “of (from) the same womb”. This is the straightforward meaning. However, in both the OT and the NT it can and does often have other meanings. Jesus Himself, in describing His “eschatological family”, referred to His disciples as His “brothers and sisters” (Mk. 3:31-35; Mt. 12:46-50; Lk. 8:19-24). And St. Paul in Rm. 9:3 speaks of “brothers” as kinsmen. So the NT use of the terms *adelphos* (brother) and *adelphē* (sister) is not always meant to connote blood relationships. Thus these Greek words for brother and sister can and do sometimes have a broader meaning of “kin”, “cousin”, “relative” or fellow member of a community such as the term was used at the time of Jesus in the Essene community at Qumran.

And so, at least linguistically, the door is left open to the Catholic position that Mary was Ever Virgin. While the NT does not affirm this position, neither does its language deny its possibility.

In Summary -- In the final analysis we can say this much: The NT evidence does not force us to say that the brother and sisters of Jesus mentioned in texts are without doubt blood brothers and sisters. In fact, the continued virginity of Mary after the birth of Jesus is not actually a NT issue. The virginal conception attested to in the Infancy Narratives of Mt. and Lk. is not an issue in itself, these narratives have a single focus -- Jesus the Christ.

They are intended to tell us “who Jesus was” and not to focus on the biological integrity of Mary. The NT is not interested in biology as such, but in theology and especially christology. The strictly biological issue of the perpetual virginity of Mary - before, during and after - was an issue raised later in Church history as the Church focused more directly on Mary. Mariology developed after NT times, the focus of the NT is christology.

In all these “Catholic” explanations, Protestants ask whether Catholics 1) started with the NT and concluded to the perpetual virginity of Mary or 2) that they started with the notion of perpetual virginity and then tried to explain in some acceptable way those references in the NT that seemed to militate against this preconceived view.

I think that the process described in number 2 is basically what happened. This fact does not make the whole matter problematic. This is more of a problem for Protestants because of their historical use of the Bible as the major authority, if not the only, authoritative referent for exploring theological truth.

This is not such a problem for Catholics, who traditionally stress the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the developing traditions of the Church, with these traditions playing a

significant authoritative role in Catholic theology. In fact, it is stressed that the NT itself is a product of Christian tradition. The place of tradition in the development of doctrine will become quite clear when we deal with the Catholic doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption, which have no direct biblical referent.

However, the Bible is for Catholics a fundamental datum for all theological discussion and neither popes nor councils can contradict its message. However, there is always the temptation (not always resisted) to “interpret ambiguous (biblical) evidence to favor positions already taken.” (Brown) Catholics must always be open to doctrinal development and to the voice of the Spirit calling us to pursue new understandings of the mysteries of our faith through the study of the Word of God contained in the Scriptures.

A final word. It is not the virgin birth that guarantees the stature of Jesus; on the contrary, it is the stature of Jesus that makes the virgin birth credible. The really improbable thing is not that the Son of God in taking flesh should be born of a virgin; it is rather that the Son of God should take flesh at all.

Jesus is the Alpha and Omega of the NT witness found in the Gospels and Letters of the early Church. All other persons or groups of persons pale into insignificance next to Jesus. The characters of the NT - family, friends, apostles, disciples, even His mother - are all judged by the same criterion - “to hear the word and do it.” The family of Jesus is the eschatological family of faith, with Mary its first and model disciple.

Thus, *from the NT witness taken by itself*, we see a union of historical probability and theological propriety, a joining of Christian tradition and spiritual fittingness, which commends the virgin birth to the belief of Christians.

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