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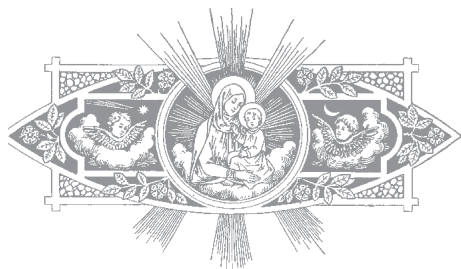
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Introduction



A scant number of Gospel verses refer directly to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, but Christian reflection on her role and meaning in Christian belief and piety has filled volumes. One contemporary study center devoted to Mary boasts a library of over 100,000 pamphlets and books and an untold number of images. This written record gathers in a much larger unwritten tradition spanning the last twenty centuries and the majority of the globe. An ongoing popular tradition of devotion to Mary keeps renewing itself in an amazing variety of forms through the centuries. Young people give the Virgin of Guadalupe a prime place among their tattoos. A young man has no rosary beads but creates a rap rhythm to pray his story while tracking the traditional patterns of prayers.

This book has the modest goal of presenting a readable overview that clarifies the main points of Christian tradition about Mary by tracing the historical background leading up to the present day. We will also be tying tradition to contemporary concerns, because the Marian tradition is wondrously flexible. The words that Vatican II used to express the outlook of the “Church in the Modern World” toward the human family could truly be applied to the way that Christian believers have experienced Mary—“The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the [people] of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ [and Mother of God] as well.” These words express succinctly the way that Christians have experienced Mary and have responded to her.

Ways of thinking about Mary, known as Mariology, have often been talked about in terms of a “high” Mariology and a “low” Mariology. Each represents a helpful angle of vision on a multifaceted tradition. When we think about Mary in terms of what is unique about her—her special privileges and experiences—we are expressing a high Mariology. When we speak of Mary in terms of the characteristics that she shares with the rest of humanity, we are operating from a low Mariology. Neither approach has more truth or is more respectful than the other. In fact, we need both of them together to navigate a very complex subject without losing track of important realities. The Church has valued and honored both approaches. When the early Church ar-

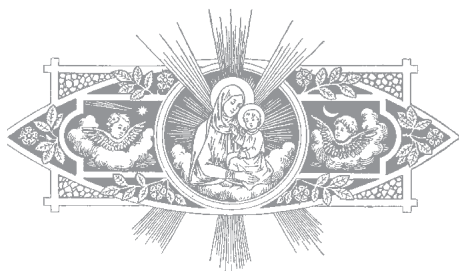
gued about the best way to understand the nature of Christ, the humanity of his mother was integral to their conviction that he was fully human. Meditation on Mary's privileges has been a way to honor the courage she showed in agreeing to be the Mother of Jesus with all the unknown demands that might entail.

Much of what is written here is written from the point of view of Roman Catholic Christians. The foundational beliefs about Mary, however, were established before there was any division of Orthodox or Roman Catholic. This is also true about Christians who follow various movements that developed from the Reformation. That said, Orthodox and Roman Catholics have been more comfortable with high Mariology than the Reformation traditions have been. This is especially true of the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and Assumption that have a long history of tradition but are less directly tied to Scripture.

We will begin each chapter by gathering up some mental equipment for the path ahead. These are background ideas that will help to illuminate the material in that chapter. Each chapter ends with reflection questions and suggestions for further reading.

CHAPTER 1

Mary in the Scriptures



The actual biblical texts referring to Mary are few in number but rich in content. They have played a powerful and varied role in the life of the Christian church, particularly in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Over the centuries of meditation on Mary, Christians have turned to these texts for many purposes—to mine them for poetic images and honorific titles, to call on them as supports for doctrinal pronouncements (especially about the nature of Jesus), to ground expectations of ideal female virtue, to voice public prayer, to sustain private devotion, and to provide companionship in the endurance of deep suffering to name but a few.

In this chapter, we will look at contemporary interpreta-

tions of scriptural references to Mary. We will also explore briefly some of the early Christian texts that were not accepted into the official Scriptures, which form the basis for a number of familiar popular stories that “fill in the blanks” of the biblical account. Before taking up the texts themselves, we first need to consider some of the ways that contemporary biblical scholars approach the interpretation of texts.

TOOLS FOR INTERPRETING THE TEXTS

When we look to the biblical witness for an understanding of Mary, we are participating in a much larger project because we take our place among those who need to know how a written text conveys its message. Four insights to understanding biblical texts help us grasp the biblical witness to Mary.

Historical-critical Method

This first approach is generally traced to the eighteenth century. At that time, scholars began to think of the biblical text as a historically situated text that could be explored using studies similar to those for other ancient texts. Here are just a few of the guiding questions we can apply as we consider what Scripture tells us about Mary:

- How was this text developed; what was the history of its production and editing?

- What kinds of literary forms (poetry, genealogy, story, history) are employed, and what do we know about how these forms of writing convey their message?
- Are the written forms preceded by a stage in which the community passed along its convictions, laws, poems, stories, or history orally?
- What were neighboring peoples thinking at this time in history?
- How do the ideas of neighboring peoples compare with the biblical world view?

Despite the fact that some scholars used these methods to deny any religious importance to the Scriptures, many faith communities, including Roman Catholicism, view this approach as acceptable and fruitful. (See *Dei Verbum*, 12.)

Cultural Anthropology

In the last third of the twentieth century, scholars have begun to pay more attention to the ways of thinking, valuing, and ordering life found among the peoples that produced the biblical texts. Such ways of thinking, valuing, and ordering life make up what we can call the culture—the way of life—of a people. When groups of people do not share the same culture, there is naturally some amount of disconnect in the ways they interpret and understand life. Such is the situation that creates a distance between contemporary people of a particular culture and the biblical peoples who

gave birth to the Scriptures. This distance requires careful attention if we are to come to any accurate sense of what the biblical authors were trying to communicate. Cultural anthropology is the branch of study that addresses these issues, and the insights of these scholars have helped us become more aware of the worldview of the biblical traditions and how careful we must be about the assumptions we make when we slip into imagining that their understandings of life are identical to ours. Attention to the culture in which Mary lived her life can greatly enrich our understanding of her experience and meaning.

Reader Response

Still more recently (1970s), those who study written texts have begun to attend more closely to what the reader brings to his/her interpretation of a text. Similarly, biblical scholars have noted that readers understand the characters in Scripture stories through the information given in the text and their own experience of the world. The combination of the biblical text and lived experience form a complex, composite character that goes beyond the text and has diverse meanings in different cultural contexts.

The question that scholars have raised is whether the author embeds a meaning in the text, a meaning that remains there—timelessly available. An alternative view of written texts theorizes that the meaning is more like a meeting of the author's efforts and the understandings and expectations brought by the reader to the text.