

The Real Mary

WHY EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS
CAN EMBRACE THE MOTHER OF JESUS

SCOT MCKNIGHT



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The Real Mary: Why Evangelical Christians Can Embrace the Mother of Jesus

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CONTENTS

Part 1

The Real Mary of the Gospels

1. *Why a book about the real Mary?* 5
2. *"May it be"* WOMAN OF FAITH 9
3. *"He has brought down rulers"* WOMAN OF JUSTICE 17
4. *"And pondered them in her heart"* WOMAN OF DANGER 25
5. *"Where is the one who has been born king?"*
WOMAN OF WITNESS 33
6. *"A sword will pierce your own soul"*
WOMAN OF SORROW 43
7. *"In my Father's house"* WOMAN OF WONDER 50
8. *"Do whatever he tells you"* WOMAN OF SURRENDER 58
9. *"Who are my mother and my brothers?"*
WOMAN OF AMBIVALENCE 68
10. *"Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother"*
WOMAN OF FAITHFULNESS 82

Part 2

The Ongoing Life of Mary in the Church

- 11 *"Along with the women and Mary, mother of Jesus"*
WOMAN OF INFLUENCE 93

12. <i>Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Mary</i>	
WOMAN OF CONTROVERSY 1	104

13. <i>Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Mary</i>	
WOMAN OF CONTROVERSY 2	116

Part 3
Embracing the Real Mary

14. <i>"All generations will call me blessed"</i>	
WOMAN TO REMEMBER	128

APPENDIX 1: Old Testament Parallels in the Magnificat	135
---	-----

APPENDIX 2: Suggestions for Reflecting on Mary	138
--	-----

Bibliography	147
--------------	-----

Sources	148
---------	-----

After Words	151
-------------	-----

1

Why a Book about the Real Mary?

"Why are you—a Protestant—writing a book about Mary?" I've been asked this question many times. In fact, one person asked me the following question: "Wasn't Mary a Roman Catholic?" (No kidding.)

Why write a book for Protestants about Mary? Here's why:

Because the story about the real Mary has never been told. The Mary of the Bible has been hijacked by theological controversies whereby she has become a Rorschach inkblot in which theologians find whatever they *wish* to find. In the midst of this controversy, the real Mary has been left behind. It is time to let her story be told again. Over the past ten years I have read

shelves of books and articles about Mary, and I have discovered that almost no one is interested in what the real Mary was like in her day. *The Real Mary* attempts to fill in that gap and underscore the real Mary.

Why a book about Mary?

Because while Mary's story is that of an ordinary woman, it is also the story of a woman with an extraordinary vocation (being mother to the Messiah) who learned to follow this Messiah Jesus through the ordinary struggles all humans face. In this sense, Mary represents each of us—both you and me—in our call to follow Jesus.

Why a book about Mary?

Because for years the view of Mary in the Church has been unreal. Mary has become for many little more than a compliant "resting womb" for God, and she has become a stereotype of passivity in the face of challenge, of self-sacrifice at the expense of one's soul care, and of quietude to the point of hiding in the shadows of others. Nora O. Lozana-Diaz, a professor at the Hispanic Baptist Theological College, traces the influence of what she calls *marianismo* on Latin culture and claims this false view of Mary (*marianismo*) oppresses women instead of challenging them to live with courage before God—as Mary herself did! If a false view damages all of us, a more accurate view can encourage all of us, women and men.

Why write a book about Mary?

Because she was the mother of Jesus, and being the mother of Jesus ought to matter to each of us.

Because the Magnificat, her song in Luke's first chapter, is the *Magna Carta* of early Christian songs and a mosaic of what God

would do when Jesus, the Messiah, came: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant." And these are just the opening lines of her song.

Why write a book about Mary?

Because the developments about Mary in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions have generated "reaction formation." Many of us Protestants have reacted against Mary so much we have been formed now in such a way that Mary has been pushed entirely off the stage. Most of us know far more about what we *don't* believe about Mary—that she wasn't immaculately conceived, that she had other children with Joseph and wasn't perpetually virgin, etc.—than what we *do* believe about Mary.

Why write a book about Mary?

Because a book about Mary for evangelicals that focuses on the real Mary, so far as I know, has never been written. Other books have engaged in polemics about the immaculate conception, her perpetual virginity, devotion to Mary, and other so-called Marian dogmas. But, to my knowledge, no one has written a book about the life and character of Mary helping us develop a positive, Protestant view of Mary. Allow me to say this more forcibly: We are Protestants; we believe in the Bible; Mary is in the Bible; we need to believe what the Bible says about Mary. *The Real Mary* is designed to speak to our tradition.

Why write a book about Mary?

Because the Cold War between Protestants and Roman Catholics over Mary has ended. There are many reasons for this, some political, some social, some theological, and some

global, but evangelical Presbyterian pastor Mark Roberts of Irvine, California, thinks at least one reason the Cold War has ended is the song "Mary Did You Know?" Written decades ago by Mary Lowry and now recorded by more than thirty Christian artists, this song leads us back to the kind of Mary—the real Mary—that Protestants can embrace.

I have one final answer to the question "Why write a book about Mary?"

Because the real Mary always leads us to Jesus. When we discover the real Mary, the one who lived in first-century Galilee with Joseph, who I believe nurtured other children, and who struggled at times herself, we also discover someone we can embrace because Mary embraced her son as we are called to do. When you find the real Mary of Scripture, the Mary of the first century, you'll discover that she'll be talking about Jesus and pointing us all to Jesus.

2

"May it be"

WOMAN OF FAITH

The first Christmas was full of surprises. Mary was a young, poor, Jewish woman from an obscure Jewish village called Nazareth when the angel Gabriel startled her. Perhaps she was sleeping and the news came in a dream; perhaps she was in a room praying all alone; perhaps she was meditating by a stream of water. Somewhere, somehow, the angel appeared and brought out from under his wings a special envelope with the heavenly news that Mary had been chosen by God to be the mother of a son.

Gabriel informed her that her son was not going to be just any son, like a Jacob or a Reuben or a Benjamin. No, her son

would be the Son of the Most High, the Davidic king of Israel, the long-awaited Messiah. And even more surprising to Mary was that she would conceive miraculously: God's powerful Spirit, that Spirit who brooded over the waters on Earth's Opening Day, would brood over her and create a miracle in her womb.

An angel for a visitor, news that she'd have a baby son, and the word that her son would be the Messiah: Surely, Mary was surprised. *But the biggest surprise was that Mary consented to God's plan.* After Gabriel read to her God's good news, Mary consented with the simple spoken words "may it be" (Luke 1:38).

We have two things working against us as Protestants when it comes to understanding statements like "may it be" by Mary: We have not only generally ignored her, but we have also stereotyped Mary as a Christmas figure. Let's look again at the events that led up to that first Christmas, for in so doing not only will we see the wonder of her statement but also we will find standing there the real Mary.

However surprising and joyous that day must have been, when Mary whispered "may it be" to the angel Gabriel, the inner seams of Mary's life were ripped apart. We need to remember that Mary's "may it be" to Gabriel occurred months before her "I do" to Joseph. On that day Mary heard the strange news from God that she would conceive out of wedlock as part of God's plan. For an engaged Jewish woman, the news itself would have been a great surprise; that's not how God or Jewish law worked. And it's not how society worked either.

To be a Jewish woman and pregnant before marriage meant that many would question the integrity of her "I do" to Joseph.

Sooner or later, the wagging tongues would have been claiming that they'd eventually find out who had been with Mary. That was Mary's real world.

In that same real world, Mary's "may it be" was an act of courageous faith. We take Mary's act of consenting to the angel's words for granted. We need to consider her context—what it would have been like for a first-century teenage Jewish woman to trust God and what it would have been like to tell this conception story first to her family and then to Joseph and then to others in public. And when we consider this context, we will come into touch with Mary's real faith. We can romanticize her faith and we can idealize her example and we can stiffen her up by standing her up in a Christmas crèche, but we can't get away from the stubborn reality that a young woman pregnant before marriage would have a questionable and spreading reputation—however false the accusations.

Mary's faith in a Torah world

Mary knew what the facts about her life would point toward and she knew the sort of things that would be said about her on street corners in backwater Nazareth.

Mary was *young*. Most sources suggest she was about thirteen, though some would raise her age to sixteen. Mary was also *engaged*. It would be some months before she and Joseph had their wedding ceremony. Even though only engaged, they were legally husband and wife except for sexual relations. In Mary's Torah world, from the moment of betrothal and not from the moment of the wedding ceremony (as is the case in the Western

world), Joseph and Mary were considered husband and wife. She was young and she was engaged, but the hard fact for Mary was that she was already pregnant.

Mary was *pregnant*, and because it is clear from every reading of the Gospels that Joseph knew that he was not the father, her status was also immediately clear: She would have been labeled an adulteress, as she made no claim to having been forcibly violated.

Joseph, now her husband according to the Torah, was not the father; there must have been another man, adding up to a legal accusation of *adultery*. Once again according to the Torah, because Joseph and Mary were legally husband and wife, any sexual behavior on Mary's part outside that relationship would have been considered adultery (rather than fornication—in which case another law applied).

The Torah, which regulated Mary's society and her own life, stated this about adultery: *death by stoning for adultery*. Here are the words from Deuteronomy 22:23–24:

If a man happens to meet in a town a virgin pledged to be married and he sleeps with her, you shall take both of them to the gate of that town and stone them to death—the young woman because she was in a town and did not scream for help, and the man because he violated another man's wife. You must purge the evil from among you.

Because life is frequently complex, there were issues and evidence to consider for those whose task it was to administer such laws: How do you know if the woman really is guilty of adultery? What if she claimed she had been raped? What if

her husband had brought false charges against her? What if the young woman denied any wrongdoing? In the midst of all the village gossip, there was a practical, legal question: How to determine if a woman was guilty of adultery in disputable cases?

The law of "bitter waters" was designed for disputable cases. According to the fifth chapter of Numbers, a suspected adulteress (*sotah*) was brought before the priest, required to let her hair hang down and under oath asked to drink the bitter waters: a mixture of dust, holy water, and the ink of the priest's written curse. The oath involved these words: "may the LORD cause you to become a curse among your people when he makes your womb to miscarry and your abdomen swell." If the woman was guilty, she would become sick. If she didn't become sick, she was acquitted.

Whatever we might think today, this law was implemented in the ancient world. And by the first century this legal procedure of drinking bitter waters sometimes became a public display of justice and other times outright family revenge. In the first century, so far as we can tell from later rabbinic sources, the *sotah*, or suspected adulteress, was brought into the court in Jerusalem to see if a confession could be extracted. If the *sotah*—suspected adulteress—maintained her innocence, which Mary would have maintained, she would have been taken to a conspicuous location (such as Nicanor's Gate) for public humiliation. She would have been required to drink the bitter waters, her clothes would have been torn enough to expose a breast, her hair would have been let down, and all her jewelry would have been removed. And passersby, especially women,

would have been encouraged to stare at the publicly shamed woman in order to make an object lesson of her.

That is the real world of a suspected adulteress. That is also the real world of Mary.

Mary's faith as "may it be"

What was it like for Mary to have said "may it be" in that sort of world? Here are the sorts of things that would have torn through Mary's mind the minute Gabriel explained to her this "good news." Instantaneously—because she grew up in a Torah world—Mary's mind would have connected her pregnancy to being a *sotah* (suspected adulteress) and to the public humiliation of a trial, and to how Joseph, her Torah-observant husband, would respond. We, as those who are familiar with the story, already know that Joseph never went forward with the "bitter waters" procedure, yet that is what *we* know. With the scent of the angel still in Mary's presence, she had little idea how Joseph might respond to her claim of a virginal conception. What were the chances that her Torah-observant husband would back down from insisting that legal procedures be followed? Slim.

There's more to what Mary instantaneously knew, and most of these things we have learned from Jewish sources at the time of Jesus. She knew that villagers would taunt and ostracize her son. He'd hear the accusation that he was an illegitimate child (in Hebrew, a *mamzer*) and that he would be prohibited from special assemblies (Deut. 23:2). She knew as well that Joseph's reputation as an observant Jew would have been called into question. As

we noted in the law about stoning the adulteress, she knew that he was legally required to divorce her. And one more mental connection for Mary was that a divorce could leave her stranded with the Messiah-to-be without a father. She knew that they were poor and that any legal settlement that came to her after the divorce would make life financially difficult. No sane, intelligent, pious young Jewish woman—and Mary was all these things and more—could avoid thinking these very things about herself, about Jesus, and about Joseph.

She must have wondered if there was an easier way.

Knowing what the Torah said, knowing how that law was interpreted, and knowing what her society would accuse her of, we are ready to be surprised (if not amazed) that Mary consented to Gabriel with the simple words “may it be” as recorded in Luke’s Gospel (1:38).

Why then, we ask, did Mary consent to this plan? Because she knew God. She knew from the pages of her people’s history that the God of Israel was a merciful God who would look after her. She knew the stories about other women who were threatened in Jewish history who were protected by God—women whose stories are found in the Bible, women like Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, women whom the evangelist Matthew singles out when he writes his genealogy that leads to Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. Because of Mary’s trust in God, and in spite of all these threatening thoughts of accusation and rebuke, Mary uttered those courageous words that changed history: “I am the Lord’s servant. *May it be* to me according to your word.”

Mary, in faith, consented to God's plan. Mary, in faith, began to carry a cross before Jesus was born. Mary began to suffer for the Messiah before the Messiah suffered.

Mary would never have a normal life again. Mary's family, Mary's friends, and Mary's Nazareth would never look at her the same again. If later evidence is any indication, very few would believe her story. I was stunned the first time I read these words about Mary from the great reformer Martin Luther:

How many came in contact with her, talked, and ate and drank with her, who perhaps despised her and counted her but a common, poor, and simple village maiden, and who, had they known, would have fled from her in terror?

Walking around Galilee was a young and special woman who seemed to be ready for the extraordinary vocation God had called her to perform. But surely we will ask: How was Mary so prepared? The answer to that question can be found by looking at Mary's Song, called the Magnificat, found in Luke 1:46–55. When we listen carefully to that song of Mary's, we'll understand both why she was ready and also why we must contend that Mary was a woman of deep and courageous faith.