

Mary



**A gospel witness to
transfiguration and
liberation**

Andrew Jones

Foreword by Kathy Galloway

CONTAINS GROUP MATERIAL

Mary

Text copyright © Andrew Jones 2014
The author asserts the moral right
to be identified as the author of this work

**Published by
The Bible Reading Fellowship**

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon, OX14 3FE
United Kingdom
Tel: +44 (0)1865 319700
Email: enquiries@brf.org.uk
Website: www.brf.org.uk
BRF is a Registered Charity

ISBN 978 1 84101 651 1
First published 2014
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
All rights reserved

Acknowledgments

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are taken from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicised Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, are used by permission. All rights reserved.

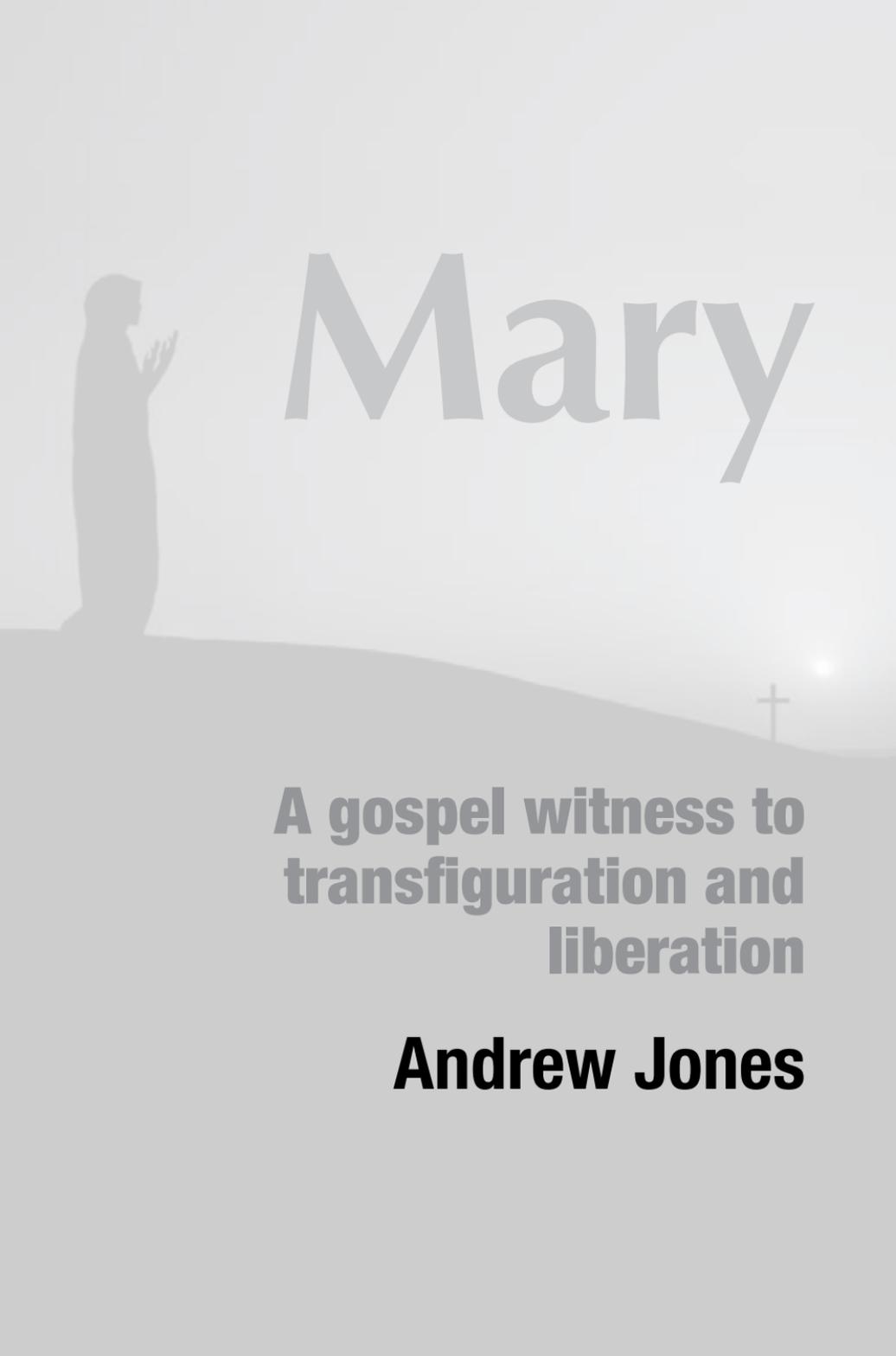
Extracts from the Authorised Version of the Bible (The King James Bible), the rights in which are vested in the Crown, are reproduced by permission of the Crown's patentee, Cambridge University Press.

Cover image: Wong Yu Liang/Shutterstock

Every effort has been made to trace and contact copyright owners for material used in this resource. We apologise for any inadvertent omissions or errors, and would ask those concerned to contact us so that full acknowledgment can be made in the future.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A minimalist, grayscale illustration of a person in profile, standing on a rounded hill and praying with hands raised. In the background, a simple cross is visible on the horizon under a bright, hazy sky. The overall mood is contemplative and spiritual.

Mary

**A gospel witness to
transfiguration and
liberation**

Andrew Jones

To my nieces, Gwenllian, Lowri and Yasmin, just embarking on the adventure of life—go joyfully and faithfully.

Acknowledgements

A number of people have journeyed with me while I have been writing this book. I would like to thank those with whom I worship week by week in the Bro Enlli Ministry Area and the Archdeaconry of Meirionnydd. They have listened patiently to me as I have tested and explored many of my ideas about Mary, and several of them have challenged some of my opinions. Such patience and challenge have been a significant impetus. Also I thank my colleagues in the Diocese of Bangor and especially the Bishop's Council with whom I share ministry—Bishop Andy John, Sion Rhys Evans, Sue Jones, Paul Davies and Mike West. They have teased me endlessly about my preoccupation with Mary but such teasing kept me digging more and more into her story. I have also valued my conversations about the possibilities of the human Mary with Fraser Paterson and with two of my aunts, Lowri Hulse and Gwennie Johnson. I am again grateful to Naomi Starkey and BRF for the original invitation to embark on what has been a fascinating journey of discovery.

Contents

Foreword	6
Introduction	7
Part 1: Threshold of transfiguration	13
Chapter 1: Songs and cries of Hebrew children	21
Chapter 2: New Testament variations on Mary	39
Part 2: Liberating signs of the kingdom of God.....	55
Chapter 3: Divinely chosen, kingdom worker	65
Chapter 4: Virgin mother, profoundly human.....	83
Part 3: Bearer of the incarnation, witness to the resurrection	99
Chapter 5: Light shining from Nazareth	109
Chapter 6: Anguish at the foot of the cross	125
Part 4: Abiding voice of freedom.....	141
Chapter 7: Witnessing God's transfiguring power	151
Chapter 8: Challenges from Christ's final prayer in John	170
Afterword.....	187
Questions for group discussion and reflection	191
References	197

Foreword

Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been the object of human projection and idealisation and, throughout Christian history, people have made of her what suited them. For many women, Mary has been a symbol of oppression, of female passivity and subjugation, an impossible ideal of perfect motherhood and a denial of female sexuality. For others, she has been variously the Mary of the psyche, bearer of great burdens, Mary the feminine principle in humankind, Mary the object of devotion.

But when we go back to the Bible, is there a Mary we can meet with confidence? Andrew Jones invites us to encounter Mary, a flesh-and-blood woman who lived through extraordinary events, in the context of liberation, and to read hers as a story of transfiguration. She is representative of the *anawim*, the little people, the poor and marginalised who suffer and wait for liberation, and her 'yes' to God in the incarnation is a story of *theosis*, of a world radically changed by God's transfiguring grace, and of the possibility of human beings entering into the divine nature through that grace.

Mary's is the great New Testament song of liberation. In the Magnificat, she anticipates the nature of the glory and celebrates it. Mary is the prophet of the poor, announcing the transformed social order. The spiritual realm is embedded in economic and political reality, and so it still is today.

Kathy Galloway

Head of Christian Aid Scotland

Leader of the Iona Community 2002–09

Introduction

In some ways for me the idea of writing a book on Mary has actually grown out of some negative feelings. For a long time I have been generally unhappy that a key Gospel player occupies a kind of second division role in the life of some Christian traditions. Too often I have heard comments such as ‘Oh, she doesn’t belong to us’ or ‘We don’t worship Mary like they do; we worship Christ’ or ‘She served her purpose in bringing Christ into the world; she has no continuing ministry’. I can see the direction from which this kind of talk emerges and the historical influences that have come to bear on these ideas, but I have always been uncomfortable with them, even to the extent that I think they are essentially misguided. For many years I have felt uneasy about listening to comments that make Mary, the mother of Christ, a contentious figure.

In much the same way I have been uncomfortable with an oversimplistic approach to reading about Mary in the Gospels. It is as if some people feel the need to scratch around in order to salvage any kind of honourable feature of her character. By doing so, there is the risk of simply being content to say that Mary was humble, obedient and lowly. Surely there must be more to her than that! Humility, obedience and lowliness are clearly facets of Mary’s character and are supremely significant human attributes. To see more of these attributes would mean living in a much better world today. For me, Mary stands for all these and much more too, although for a long time I wasn’t sure what this ‘much more’ was.

For years I have also felt a kind of personal fascination with the figure of Mary. For a while I was unable to put this into coherent words—I simply felt drawn to her place in the Gospels. Gradually I realised that it was less a fascination and more a quest—a journey to discover who or what this woman really was.

So as I set out on this journey, I feel excited. In many ways I feel a sense of release that at last I now have the opportunity to combat some of the negativity around. My hope for this book is to show that Mary cannot be the private property of a few selected Christian traditions—she lies at the heart of what the gospel truly is for all believers. I also want to show that she was far more than a loving mother to a ‘gentle Jesus’, by looking at powerful and radical ways Mary witnesses to the grace of a life transfigured. The annunciation transfigured her; watching her son’s behaviour transfigured her; being presented to ‘another’ at the foot of the cross transfigured her and being with the other disciples after the resurrection transfigured her. The grace of transfiguration was not a private gift to those who accompanied Jesus up a high mountain. The ‘glimpse of the eternal’ that they caught that day was a promise that transfiguration was a gift to all people—and in her life Mary shows that to be true and freely given.

Then I want to explore the ways in which my initial fascination with what Mary was as a human being became a journey of discovery. I want to explore the ways in which so many people are drawn to Mary as a historical figure of human liberation. Here we encounter a woman, a confused woman who encountered God, a humiliated woman who came to terms with scorn, a young woman who coped with a steep learning curve, a frightened woman who took a risk, a mournful woman who discovered transfiguration. In a

sense she is presented almost as a figure of disgrace—young, pregnant, potentially rejected by Joseph, at the receiving end of her father’s wrath, even risking death by stoning.

One of the more interesting contemporary portrayals of the human Mary was in Tony Jordan’s production of the TV series *The Nativity*. I was drawn to the way in which he conveyed both the shepherds—particularly one called Thomas—and Mary. In a BBC news presentation in December 2010, he said, ‘The problem is that everyone that exists in the story of the nativity is a cardboard cut-out... Who were they? Why was it important for them to be there?’ These two questions will weave their way throughout my exploration of Mary: who was she? Why was it important for her to be there? I want to show that both the Gospel portrayal of Mary and our contemporary experience of Mary are anything but ‘cardboard cut-outs’.

Moving on an exciting journey

To map my way through this exciting journey, I have adopted a somewhat novel approach. I take as my overarching structure the Gospel experience of transfiguration, because of all the Gospel experiences, I feel that the events up that high mountain, recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, are one experience in the ministry of Jesus of which people today can more easily make sense. From the growing interest in relationship dynamics, lifestyle coaching and so on, people generally know what it’s like to be changed, to be transformed, to be altered, to be repaired and to move on in a new and transfigured way—it is about making peace with the past before it is too late. Throughout her life Mary moved in a way that shows she lived a life transfigured; her life was

one of startling interruptions, yet through her experience of transfiguration she was able to move on. It is at this point that we discover a vital resonance between Mary and so many people in our own day.

For Mary, as for many others throughout the ages, 'moving on' to live a life transfigured was an experience of liberation. In mapping my way through this journey, I use a way of reflecting theologically which is called the 'liberation method'. Essentially this way of 'doing' theology is based on two precepts. Firstly, it is based on firm biblical foundations. On the one hand, the Christian belief in the doctrine of the incarnation provides the basis for insisting that we must start our theologising from our own real situations within the life of this world. We must be incarnational in our approach. It is in this world that God has been at work and still is at work. History is the place of encounter between God and human beings; salvation comes to us within the boundaries of history. On the other hand, the Exodus story in the Old Testament portrays a God who liberated the oppressed and his great act of deliverance is an act of political human liberation. The Israelites were delivered from a state of actual political subjection and, as a result of their release, they eventually became a nation in their own right, a political entity. This act of liberation is all of a piece with the whole of God's activity throughout human history, because the original act of creation was itself an act of deliverance—deliverance from chaos. In the New Testament we find that the work of Christ also results in a new creation and is the supreme means of liberation. At the same time, this supreme act of deliverance is basically the continuation and culmination of the divine process of liberation stretching back to the very start of Genesis.

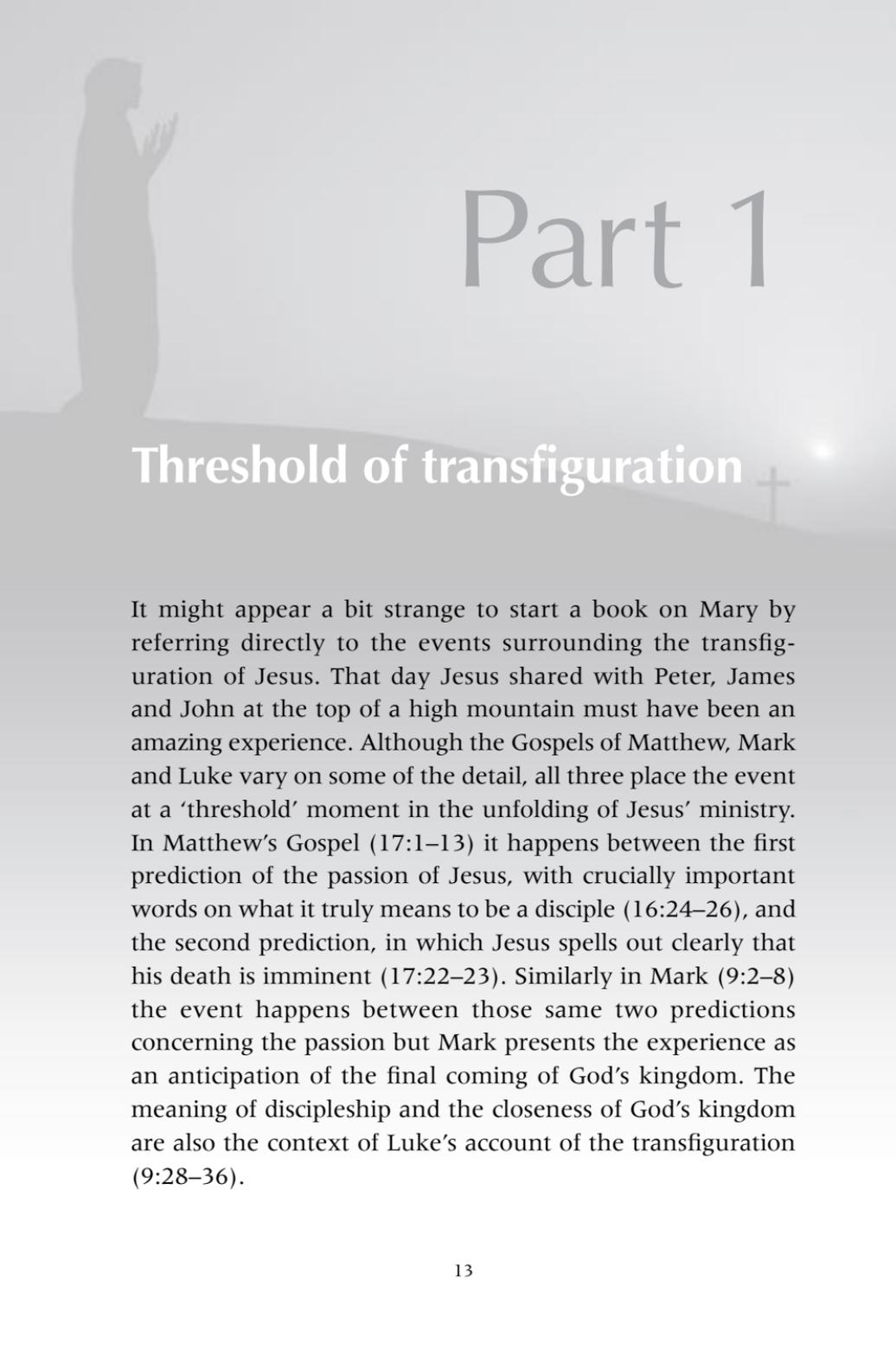
Set my people free

Secondly, this way of reflecting theologically is based firmly on the biblical witness that God wants to set his people free. The actual term 'liberation theology' has come into use to describe the response of various theologians to contemporary situations of oppression, prejudice and injustice. They insist that the theologian must begin thinking within his or her real life circumstances in the real world, just as the previously mentioned incarnational approach argues. They insist also that the theologian is committed to action as well as to thought, and that this commitment means taking sides with those who are struggling to free the oppressed. The liberation method of 'doing theology' is therefore primarily concerned with applying biblical insights and Christian traditions to real life situations, and provides doctrinal backing for those who seek a different and fairer world.

My study of Mary is thus rooted in a process of liberation which seeks to show how Mary's life is itself a story of liberation—and such liberation applies not only to her life but to ours too. And from liberation comes the real possibility of living transfigured lives. I want to recognise Mary as a human being first—a person who was both a centre of history and a revelation of the divine, as all humans potentially are. Having said this, I will not be setting up two competing histories—one 'divine' and one 'human'. My starting point means recognising one single human history—the scene of conflicts, of joys and of sorrows. The Word becomes flesh in human flesh, historical flesh marked by space and time, life and death, joy and sorrow, building and destroying. It means that we recognise Mary as a historical figure rather than making her an eternal, unchanging model. We must think of

her in dialogue with the time, space, culture, problems and actual people who related to her. It is life today that gives life to Mary's life yesterday.

Once I have explored these themes of transfiguration and liberation, my journey towards Mary will continue by exploring various parts of her life, considering how she, as a woman, revealed the real possibility of liberation and how she, as a woman, constantly sought a transfigured life. By exploring the biblical texts about her life, I will reflect on her as a woman standing on the threshold of a transfigured life. By exploring aspects of her human life—mother, partner, disciple—I will reflect on her as a woman emerging as a sign of the liberating kingdom of God. By exploring her life in Nazareth and her anguish at the foot of the cross, I will reflect on her as a woman bearing the incarnation and witnessing the resurrection. Finally, by exploring the ways her story challenges us to see Christ anew, I will show how this woman testifies to God's continuing power of transfiguration in our lives today.



Part 1

Threshold of transfiguration

It might appear a bit strange to start a book on Mary by referring directly to the events surrounding the transfiguration of Jesus. That day Jesus shared with Peter, James and John at the top of a high mountain must have been an amazing experience. Although the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke vary on some of the detail, all three place the event at a ‘threshold’ moment in the unfolding of Jesus’ ministry. In Matthew’s Gospel (17:1–13) it happens between the first prediction of the passion of Jesus, with crucially important words on what it truly means to be a disciple (16:24–26), and the second prediction, in which Jesus spells out clearly that his death is imminent (17:22–23). Similarly in Mark (9:2–8) the event happens between those same two predictions concerning the passion but Mark presents the experience as an anticipation of the final coming of God’s kingdom. The meaning of discipleship and the closeness of God’s kingdom are also the context of Luke’s account of the transfiguration (9:28–36).

This ‘threshold’ theme of the transfiguration also comes out in the way in which we as readers of the Gospels are encouraged to look back and to look forward. On the mountain, images and themes are used which force us to look back at the story as it has unfolded, but with a different kind of vision. The disciples had until that point fumbled around, failing to realise who Jesus was; now they were dazzled by the truth. It also points us forward—the same triad, Peter, James and John, will once again take centre-stage in Gethsemane. The transfiguration, then, is the pivot on which the whole life and ministry of Jesus turns. Interestingly, Mark points out that the significance of the transfiguration cannot be fully understood until after the resurrection (9:9). Luke suggests the same thing when he states that the conversation between Jesus, Moses and Elijah on the mountain was the ‘exodus’ that Jesus was about to accomplish in Jerusalem (9:31).

This threshold moment in the Gospel narratives, when ‘the penny began to drop’ for the disciples, comes mid-point in Jesus’ ministry—between a period of introducing the news of God’s kingdom and the final journey to the cross. For me the key to grasping the full meaning of the transfiguration is its connection with the cross. Peter, James and John caught a glimpse that day of the glory of God as it was unfolding before their eyes and as such it prepared them for making eventual sense of what lay ahead.

Looking God straight in the eye

The whole experience of transfiguration, then, points us to the intrinsic connection between suffering and glory, and how suffering can be transcended. Transfiguration always

prefigures resurrection and shows how life is lived in tension between the visible and the invisible, between anticipation and fulfilment. Again, it is significant that both Matthew and Mark show Jesus charging his disciples to tell no one what they had seen until after the Son of Man was raised from the dead. It is always only in the light of the resurrection that others will be able to draw close to him, to gaze upon him and to draw inspiration from his transfiguring power.

Many of the early Christian writers, building upon the events of the New Testament, highlighted the transfiguration as an experience that people generally could share in and understand. They argued that the transfiguration of Jesus would not be complete until, as a way of life, it was fully embraced by Christians seeking to live out the good news in their own era. One of the profoundest biblical insights about transfiguration is that, when we look at the transfigured Christ, we ourselves are changed—transfigured—in order to become the means by which others can come to share in this new way of living. Those early Christians who were writing about the transfiguration soon after the New Testament period were less keen to talk of it in terms of an event on a mountain in Palestine and more as an experience still freely available today.

Accordingly, Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130–c. 200) was right to say that, for him, the glory of God is always revealed in a human life being lived to the full, which in turn shows that human life in tune with the vision of God. Similarly, John of Damascene (c. 675–749) said, ‘Christ is transfigured not by putting on some quality he did not possess previously, nor by changing into something he never was before, but by revealing to his disciples what he truly was, in opening their eyes and in giving sight to those who were blind’ (*Liber de Haeresibus*, 80).

There is a tradition in the scriptures that human beings cannot look upon the face of God (see, for example, Genesis 32:30; Exodus 33:22–23; Judges 6:22). The transfiguration of Jesus turns this tradition on its head and actually enables humans to gaze upon the face of God, but always with the proviso that they do it in the knowledge that they themselves will be changed. Indeed, it may well be that this willingness to be changed becomes a kind of condition upon which we are able to look at God fully. In *The Dwelling of the Light* (Canterbury Press, 2003), a book on one of the icons of the transfiguration, Rowan Williams writes: ‘Looking at Jesus seriously changes things; if we do not want to be changed, it is better not to look too hard or too long.’ The transfiguration offers a glimpse of the inner dimension of the life of Jesus—the hidden glory—but it also offers a way for men and women to live with courage a life open to the heights and depths from which Jesus lived. Again, Rowan Williams writes: ‘Knowing that Christ is in the heart of darkness, we are called to go there with him—but if we have seen his glory on the mountain, we know at least that death cannot decide the boundaries of God’s life.’ To capture all of this, the Orthodox Church has a doctrine they call *theosis*, which affirms that human beings can actually be partakers of the divine nature. God became human, so that humans might become God; it is by the action of God that it is possible for these two mysteries to take place. It is by the action of God that these mysteries also enter time and space in Christ and in the life of all who belong to Christ.

Much non-biblical religious literature also captures the sense in which *theosis* makes it possible to enter into the transfigured life. Poets, for instance, can show the way in which the disciples on the mountain experienced a special

revelation about the nature of Christ—it was not that Christ himself changed in this moment. Rather, it was the disciples who were given the grace to see him anew. R.S. Thomas (1913–2000) alludes to the power of transfiguration in his sonnet ‘The Bright Field’. Although a poem referring specifically to the parable of the treasure hidden in a field and the pearl of great price (Matthew 13:44–46), his references to Moses and to a ‘brightness’ that seems transitory but is eternal, evoke the story of the transfiguration. The poem that I find particularly powerful in relation to all of this is the one by a Spanish poet Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936). In ‘The Christ of Velazquez’ he refers to the bright cloud that covered Jesus on the mountain as a metaphor for Christ himself.

*A white cloud you are, white as the one
that across the desert guided
the children of Israel...*

The American poet e.e. cummings (1894–1962) strikes a powerful note when he says that the world was transfigured for him when ‘the eyes of my eyes were opened’ and he thanks God for that moment of pure transfiguration. What a contrast to Peter’s situation on the mountain with Jesus! He too must have felt something like the euphoria expressed by cummings. However, Jesus did not allow his followers to rest in ecstatic bliss—they had to descend to the plain and deal with the other disciples’ botched attempt at healing (Matthew 17:14–21). As always in transfiguration the moment of vision is not given for its own sake, but it demands a response—in this case, of discipleship. The mountain top experience is not an exclusive affair nor a private spiritual high for the privileged few, but a converting experience for all those on

the plains who believe in his power to transform, to breathe new life into what is lifeless.

Mary in the human and divine the drama

Where does Mary fit? I'm convinced that Mary and the events surrounding the transfiguration are connected at two levels—a human one and the divine one. The first level places Mary in a very human place as a woman who was transformed and ultimately transfigured herself. Arguably, just like her son, Mary was troubled by contradictions in her understanding of the will of God. According to Luke, whose report quite possibly includes the original transfiguration tradition, Jesus resolved his difficulties in prayer and then his face shone. The glory that Peter, James and John saw (Luke 9:32) was perhaps the radiant joy that accompanies the resolution of a terrible perplexity. On at least two occasions Mary was also caught up in perplexity: first by the presence of an angel telling her about a strange and unexpected pregnancy (Luke 1:26–38), and second at the foot of the cross as she gazed into the eyes of her own suffering and dying son (John 19:25). The grace of transfiguration is seen in her as she comes to terms with both these times of baffling perplexity. At the annunciation, grace was revealed as she sang her hymn of exultation (Luke 1:46–55) and at the cross grace was revealed as her dying son presents her to John's care (John 19:25–27)—precious moments indeed. But notice that, as she is presented to John, Jesus uses the unusual term 'woman', suggesting maybe that the evangelist sees more in this act of presentation than merely the gesture of a dutiful son. With that word 'woman', this could be read as a declaration that Mary is the new Eve, the spiritual

mother of all God's faithful people. We will reflect more on this title later.

The second level at which Mary connects with the events of the transfiguration brings us to a divine place. The central affirmation of the Christian faith declares that God himself has entered into our human situation and in doing so has totally transfigured it. In the early Christian centuries this affirmation was expressed succinctly by Athanasius (Bishop of Alexandria in 328): 'God became man so that man might become God.' Such a statement necessarily implies that the Christian gospel can only fit into a radically transfigured world. It means a revolution not only of our idea of God but also of our idea of humanity and of the world in which we live. This brings us right back to the Orthodox understanding of the process of *theosis*—our gradually becoming partakers of the divine nature through God's transfiguring grace. As a process it is inseparably and necessarily bound up with the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ—both an event and an experience directly related to the life of Mary.

I'm quite certain that over the generations many of our misunderstandings concerning Jesus stem from an inadequate understanding of God. Corresponding to this inadequate vision of God stands an inadequate vision of our human nature. Such an inadequacy means that as men and women we have somehow lost our original vision that human beings were in fact created in order to achieve full union with God, to be capable to be the actual place of God's presence. Without this process of *theosis* there is a real danger that incarnation loses its meaning. For how can God enter into humanity unless human beings are made from the beginning to enter into God?

The explicit affirmation that we are made partakers of the divine nature occurs only once in the New Testament (2 Peter 1:4). But the Pauline teaching about our incorporation into Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit and John's teaching about the human/divine indwelling both affirm a relation of unlimited intimacy with God. Throughout the New Testament the human and divine indwelling implies a relationship of both union and communion which overthrows worldly ways of thinking about God's relationship with humanity and that we are miserable sinners, unworthy of his attention. It opens the way towards the wonder of our adoption into the life of God. If this is so for humanity generally, then Mary as the bearer of the incarnation—the one who at a particular moment in history responded positively to God, thus making it all happen—must surely occupy a central role in the process of *theosis* as well as the grace of transfiguration.

As we explore the scriptural portrayal of Mary as a woman liberated and transfigured, we can recognise her as one who offers hope and the opportunity of a life transfigured to those who, from whatever context, cry for freedom. We also need to recognise that this calls for a different and special way of reading the biblical texts. The written evidence for Mary's life must always make us wonder what was not recorded or never made it to the canonical collection of texts. What was lost and what was left out on purpose? A written text is always selective and the scriptures that speak about Mary are scarce, but from them and from a variety of early non-biblical material and traditions, each historical era has constructed a different image of Mary and her historical activity. Hence it is not possible to say that the only truth about Mary's life is in the little that we are told by the early Christian writers. What is not said is also important.

Chapter 1

Songs and cries of Hebrew children

In his book *Mary through the Centuries* (Yale University Press, 1996) the American theologian Jaroslav Pelikan reminds us of the way in which some biblical interpreters use the idea of the hiddenness of the New Testament in the Old and the Old Testament becoming visible in the New to highlight the unity of the whole of the Bible. For Christian interpreters it means moving comfortably from one Testament to another and, by so doing, highlighting that move from prophecy to fulfilment. For some people, a first reading of the Gospels is probably surprising as they are struck that so little is said about Mary, so this idea of being able to move from one Testament to another is helpful. In reality, in order to construct as big a picture of Mary as possible it is essential to move from Testament to Testament but we need to do even more than that. We need to be ready to move from the Testaments and useful non-scriptural texts into the Jewish world that Mary inherited and occupied. This is what I meant in the introduction by saying that it is in fact not possible to limit what we know about Mary to the little we are told by the early Christian writers. What is not told by them is also crucial. To grasp the real Mary, we need to journey into the world in which she lived as a daughter, a mother and a wife. It was a world saturated with religious enthusiasm and vitality, and the scriptures that she heard in the synagogue,

and the rituals and traditions she practised, are crucial to understanding Mary.

Hints of Mary in the Old Testament

And so it is that the Old Testament is my obvious starting point, where typology and allegory play an important role in revealing the full extent of prophecy in the Old being fulfilled in the New—and Mary's role in all of this. Starting in this way helps us to catch glimpses of Mary foreshadowed in the Old Testament. As God prepared the way for Christ throughout the Jewish tradition, so I think the same can be said for Mary. The Roman Catholic biblical scholar Raymond Brown makes the point strongly that the whole history of Israel prepared the way for both Jesus and his mother. He adds that many of the early Church Fathers both in the East and in the West also recognised this kind of foreshadowing (*Mary in the New Testament*, Fortress Press, 1978).

We already know that the Gospel writers were also eager to preserve this connection with the Old Testament—or rather for them, the scriptures (as at that time the New Testament was not written, but being brought to life). From the very beginning, the Christian tradition excitedly proclaimed that Jesus came from the line of David and the root of Jesse. Interestingly, this referred to Joseph rather than Mary—it was Joseph's genealogy, not Mary's, that Matthew and Luke were keen to preserve. However, as Jaroslav Pelikan states, it is those same two evangelists who emphasise Mary's virginity, and so for me the implication is that Jesus' supposed human father was actually less important than Mary. This stress on the lineage of David is in fact an affirmation of Jesus' continuity with the whole

history of Israel. If that is so, then Jesus' actual descent had to be through his only human parent, Mary—so in reality isn't she the one that stands in this line of David?

In this chapter I want to explore these Old Testament roots that parallel the life of Mary. I also want to take a sideways move from the Old Testament and journey into some aspects of the Jewish religious world during Mary's lifetime to create a context for her. Then in Chapter 2 I will explore the New Testament evidence.

God's little people

Some years ago I came across the writings of the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar—I think it was his name that first attracted me! One of his books drew my attention to the importance of the potentially ambiguous Hebrew word *anawim* which, roughly translated, could mean 'the little people' (literally, 'the oppressed ones'). What fascinated me was Balthasar's relating of this word to the Old Testament proclamation of the ultimate coming of the Messiah—a coming that would establish divine justice and God's grace on earth (*The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 7, T & T Clark, 1989). For the Jewish people at that time such a coming would have been recognised as an act of liberation dramatically affecting those with no rights, those who could not help themselves and the oppressed. By implication, then, this liberation would inevitably move 'the little people' on to centre stage. The prophets (particularly Amos and Isaiah) constantly bemoaned the poverty of the people they ministered to and condemned the governments of the day for shamelessly and openly exploiting the poverty of those people. For them it was a scandal of economics as well as a

marring of ethics and as such a serious scar on the relationship between God and his people.

Job, for instance, describes how the poor are naked and hungry at night, and he compares them to animals in the fields and vineyards scratching around for waste food thrown out by their thieving masters (Job 24:2–12). Similarly, the teachers in the wisdom tradition warn against turning away from the poor lest the rich suffer the same fate (Sirach 4:5). If God's justice is incarnated in his people, then there can be no place for hypocrisy on the part of the rich; there is an urgency about facing up honestly to poverty. The prophets also warn that God will take action on behalf of the poor and will eventually bring down the haughty and the proud—for them it is not a question of 'if' but of 'when'. In his ministry among the poor and the oppressed Zephaniah actually categorises poverty as a theological concept in the sense of being humble (Zephaniah 2:3). He tells the people to seek righteousness and humility because by doing so they will gain God's favour on the day of judgement (3:11–13). Here are the roots of God's preferring to side with the poor.

Jeremiah takes this a step further and, as one who knew persecution, ridicule and humiliation at first hand, he names himself a beggar and offers the people a visible sign of God's favour towards the poor and the oppressed (Jeremiah 20:7–18). Isaiah is certain that, although God dwells in the highest heaven, he is close to the humble and to the contrite (Isaiah 57:15; 66:2). Even in the deprivation and poverty of exile those who suffer become the recipients of God's mercy (40:2; 51:3,8; 53:11).

What emerges here is a prophetic portrayal of those who are physically poor and weak, and those who confess their spiritual poverty before God, as the recipients of God's favour

and righteousness—these are the true *anawim*. Several of the Psalms recognise this and some of the prayers of the *anawim* are preserved (Psalms 9; 10; 25; 34; 37)—prayers that link humiliation and poverty with victory and righteousness. These Psalms show that the *anawim* recognised God’s blessing upon them and that they held on to the hope of God’s ultimate salvation (Psalm 149:4–5). The lower the *anawim* bow before God, the higher they triumph over their oppressors, and in understanding this as a call to a life of grace, stripped of material possessions and given back to God, the *anawim* emerge as a distinct group. Bowing in humility become their hallmark (Psalm 40; Proverbs 15:33; 18:12; 22:4) and in doing so their hope remains that God will graciously respond to them. In turn, they respond with gratitude (Baruch 2:18).

***Anawim*—the roots of the family of Jesus**

For me, it is here that we begin to trace the roots of Jesus’ family and his whole outlook on life—his philosophy, if you like. These roots help us to begin making sense of Mary’s hymn of praise (Luke 1:46–55), the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5—7), even Jesus’ constant rebuke of Pharisaic hypocrisy (see, for example, Matthew 6; 23; Mark 7). It is in this *anawim* tradition that we can root the idea of the son of David emerging from a humble and ordinary family, thus bearing out the destiny of *anawim* suffering running through the Old Testament. This can also be taken a step further, because the *anawim* actually become the physical bearers of God’s presence—in their tribulations, particularly in exile, they stood as a ‘waiting people’. Receptively and patiently they waited for God’s word, and one of the enduring themes

of the Bible is that God prefers the company of those who are badly treated because he himself is constantly let down by those who make false and empty promises of faithfulness. God's children then are always a 'hidden people' in the same way as the *anawim* were hidden from all earthly glories but always remained receptive to God in and through their poverty and sufferings. Such suffering provides God with a ready access to his people and, knowing this to be true, the *anawim* remain particularly open to him and are constantly dependent upon his grace—and their response to him is always a 'yes'!

The Old Testament prophetic tradition is an almost constant commentary on a certain people's experience of being blessed and purified. The harsh bearing of suffering served as a form of purification and in turn established a new and radical spiritual experience. This is Mary's context—a humble virgin from downtown Nazareth becoming the locus of God's glory in the world. The ancient longings of the *anawim* and the promises of the prophets all converge in what God called Mary to become. The *anawim* waited patiently and in their sufferings praised God's word; Mary responded openly and in her purity bore God's Word. For me it goes further still: the true beauty of the *anawim* concept lies in the fact that they were real human beings—not angels, not saints, not special, but ordinary people living day-to-day lives of struggle and worry. Throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition—and especially as revealed in the Bible—the powerful spirit of God keeps pushing ordinary people to become open and vulnerable in order to provide fertile ground for his grace. Is it not arguably the case that one of the climaxes of the whole Gospel narrative is when an ordinary young girl from Nazareth is invited to embody

the destiny of God's children by saying 'yes' to him? Rowan Williams captures this powerfully in a sermon when he states that by saying 'yes' to God, Mary enabled a new human life, beginning in her body, to become 'a life in which God's Word is indeed set free, given space to work in the world and make it new... the child she brings forth is an embodiment of creative holiness, the Word made flesh' (*Open to Judgement*, DLT, 1994).

In Mary's 'yes' all the hopes of the *anawim*, which made God's eventual incarnation possible, come to a climax. And it is in this sense that Rowan Williams, in the same sermon, is able to regard Mary as the new ark of the covenant, carrying within herself the sign and seal of God's presence that through her was being returned to his children. The language used by Luke to describe Mary as the bearer of the incarnation is very reminiscent of that used to describe the carrying of the original ark of the covenant to Israel (11 Samuel 6). This is not the only occasion when Mary is seen as either fulfilling previous events or renewing particular experiences recorded in the Old Testament, and this is where typology and allegory come to play a part.

Restoring a lost promise

Over the generations the Church has used several titles to describe Mary. One of the more interesting of these titles was one used in the early days of the Church, describing Mary as the new Eve. Two prominent theologians working in Rome during the second century, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, used this title in direct reference to Mary. In doing so they inferred that just as the serpent had defeated Eve, so Mary defeats the devil by enabling the Son of God to enter

the world as both Lord and Saviour. In other words, what we have here is a counterbalance between the disobedience of Eve in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3) and the obedience of Mary when she said 'yes' to the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:38). Her 'yes' became crucial to the whole experience of the incarnation.

Roman Catholic teaching concerning Mary claims that Eve had been dealt a kind of double death by the serpent, that of sin and that of bodily corruption. The Catholic dogma of the immaculate conception states that Mary was exempt from sin and the dogma of the assumption exempts her from bodily corruption. It is by virtue of this double exemption that Mary is still referred to as the new Eve. Whatever we make of such dogmas, it is interesting that in such teaching the link between Mary and Eve is preserved.

However, as a title for Mary I find 'new Eve' interesting in a slightly different way, because what strikes me is the biblical contrast between Eve and Mary. As through Eve humanity experiences the beginnings of disobedience and crisis, at a moment when all seems lost and beyond hope, so through Mary a new way through despair is gifted. In Mary a lost promise is restored and through the message of an angel the process of disobedience that began with Eve is transfigured—it is more than simply a restoration. When transfiguration occurs, it is always more than what is humanly expected. More than restoring something, more than fulfilling something, it is always an experience of God taking us that one step further. In Mary's 'yes' we encounter a moment that changes the whole direction and significance of the oppression of the *anawim*. They expected liberation from physical slavery, but in Mary's 'yes', and in what happened as a result of her 'yes', humanity was taken a

step beyond what was ever thought possible. It is a moment in which eternity and time come together and it establishes complete human and divine reconciliation. In Mary's 'yes' all is potentially restored and regained—transfigured beyond all expectations so that hopelessness is completely reversed.

Two women give thanks for the gift of life

The processes of deciding which books were to make up the final version of the Old and New Testaments were complex. Archaeology and history have shown us that a number of other documents written at about the same time as those contained in the New Testament were left out. Several of these now make up what is known as the New Testament Apocrypha, and one of those books was the so-called Gospel of James (the *Protoevangelium*), which tells the story of Mary's early life in ways that actually resonate with the life of Christ in Luke's Gospel. And Mary's mother Anne in the Gospel of James is closely modelled on the figure of Hannah from the first book of Samuel.

The first book of Samuel opens with a portrayal of the classic oppressed woman who is barren and childless and scorned by her rival within the household—another typical example of the *anawim*. The overall thrust of the story is that Samuel is simply a gift from God to this oppressed woman, and his life is in turn given back to God as a thank-offering (see 1 Samuel 1). To an oppressed Israel under serious Philistine threat, the figure of Samuel is heavily laden with significant hopes for the future—hence the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1–10). Hannah exults in the Lord and rejoices in his salvation. God remains the central figure of her song—none is as holy, none is as protective, none is as hopeful as

God. Hannah, one of the *anawim*, is constantly faithful and characteristically grateful.

Luke tells us that, after the annunciation to Mary and during her pregnancy, she stayed for about three months with her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:56). One can almost feel the excitement between the two women but also their fear and awe—hence the song of Mary (Luke 1:46–55). Like Hannah a thousand years before, Mary exults in the Lord and rejoices in his salvation. Again, God is the central figure of her song. Hannah’s song was fulfilled in the ministry of Samuel; Mary’s song was fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus. Significantly, both Hannah and Mary are members of the *anawim* and in them prophecy and fulfilment come together.

Yet another woman’s song of triumph

The Book of Judges is concerned with the period between the death of Joshua and the rise of Saul. The death of Joshua signalled that the age dominated by Moses had finally come to an end. With the rise of Saul, the age of David and the kings begins to take shape. It is a transition that occurs at a time of great danger and uncertainty. Israel finds itself at a threshold but will need help to make the actual transition and to cross that threshold. Great questions are being asked: how do the followers of the old ways—the Canaanites—react to the innovators of the new ways—the Israelites? How will the Israelites interact with different groups of people? How will the people maintain their relationship with God? What will become of the *anawim*? These are just some of the questions that shape the Book of Judges.

Deborah, a judge and a prophetess, plays a significant role in this process of transition from the old to the new—

she was a woman of strength and a great leader. As a Judge she would have been both concerned with and responsible for seeking unity and reconciliation, and as such her moral authority was inspired by God. When her story opens, she is described as habitually seated under a tree between Bethel and Ramah, north of Jerusalem, where the people came to meet her. At the time the Israelites were suffering serious oppression at the hands of the Canaanites. Commanded by God, Deborah comes to the rescue and her song indicates the way in which her call for unity and faithfulness saved the day (Judges 5).

Again, there are significant similarities between the story of Deborah and the story of Mary—both were women, both said ‘yes’ to God, both sang a song of triumph, and both sang in actual places that were located geographically close to each other. However, what is particularly interesting is that both women found themselves doing God’s work at moments of significant transition—between the old and the new.

Mary’s world

One of the best ways to understand what the Old Testament truly means to a Jew is to be invited to a Jewish home on a Friday night to share in their celebration of the sabbath. For Jews the sabbath itself is ‘the Queen’ and the Friday evening celebration marks the arrival of ‘the Queen’ both into that home and into the lives of those who celebrate together. For Jews the home is regarded as a sanctuary—theologically as important even as the synagogue itself—and, as in a synagogue or a place of public worship, various household furnishings acquire religious significance. On the Friday evening the dining room table becomes the altar, the

normal white tablecloths become the drapes on which the sacred vessels and ornaments rest—candlesticks, carefully plaited bread and some wine. It is the woman, the mother, who makes the first move by lighting the candle and reciting a prayer to mark the start of the ceremonies. When this has happened, the father pronounces a blessing on the gathering using the words of Numbers 6:24–26 and, as soon as the celebration gets going, the man turns to the woman and ‘sings a song’, either literally or simply reciting the words. The song is the one that ends the book of Proverbs (31:10–31) in which wives and mothers and by implication women generally are revered in the biblical tradition. Is such reverence a true reflection of women at the time of Mary? What was a woman’s position in the home? What was it like for Mary, living and worshipping at that time? Was she in fact a member of the *anawim* simply by virtue of her gender?

Judaism at that time was full of rules and regulations. Then, as today, the mark of a good Jew was a willingness to follow these commandments—a typical Gentile mistake is to think that there are only ten of them! In fact, the traditional calculation states that there are 613 commandments—365 of them prohibitions and 248 positive commands. The study of these commandments has always been regarded as an integral part of Jewish life and education. Generally speaking, the main thrust of religious laws found in the Old Testament allowed very little space for female manoeuvring with hardly any independence and quite heavy male domination. Unmarried women remained the property of their fathers, a property that was passed to the husband upon marriage, although the world into which Mary was born had in fact improved in this respect.

Young girls over twelve were no longer considered to be property; they kept their income and could even choose husbands. Within the marriage relationship a good degree of security had been introduced by the time Mary was connected to Joseph. Husbands were legally obliged to respect and support their wives, and specific contracts were drawn up at the time of marriage. Such contracts were known as *ketubah*, and they were not simply evidence of marriage but an accurate record of the bride's rights in the event of the husband's death or his divorcing her. The *Mishnah* (the religious law transmitted orally to Moses and not recorded in the Bible), the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds (collections of additional ancient legal reports) and the *Tosefta* (additions to the *Mishnah*) all provide valuable information regarding the laws and regulations to do with marriage, and also what life was actually like for women.

By the time of Mary's pregnancy a man could easily divorce his wife but the opposite was not possible. Interestingly, though, if both husband and wife sought to divorce, then that was extremely straightforward—it only needed the presence of two witnesses and not even a court. A court case would certainly have been involved if either husband or wife contested the divorce, where the precise meaning of Deuteronomy 24:1–4 would have been debated. Such a debate can be detected in Matthew 19:1–12 when Jesus is challenged by the Pharisees to express his views on the law of Deuteronomy. Jesus seems to suggest that unfaithfulness is the only grounds for divorce. This helps us to understand Matthew 1:19 a little better, when, on hearing about Mary's pregnancy, Joseph does seem to consider divorce as an option—probably on the supposed basis that she had been unfaithful to him. At that time an engagement in Jewish law

was as binding as marriage but in an engagement the couple did not live in the same house. Quite possibly, Joseph's dilemma was whether to take the matter before a court, thus making the news public, or whether to secure a private divorce. The Gospels record that thoughts of divorce were short-lived for Joseph, and he decided to support Mary (see Matthew 1:19:–24).

One of the other major laws affecting women in Mary's situation was that of ritual uncleanness, during menstruation (Leviticus 15:19–24) and following childbirth (12:2–8). Such uncleanness meant that the woman concerned could not enter the temple or participate in certain acts of worship. However, remedies were at hand once the prescribed time of waiting had passed—seven days for menstruation and, following childbirth, seven days if the child was male and 14 if she was a girl. On the eighth day the boy was circumcised but the mother had to await a purification for a further 33 days. At the end of the waiting time she offered two sacrifices—a ram as a whole offering and a turtle dove as a sin offering.

The Gospel of Luke describes some of these rituals, and we read that Jesus was indeed circumcised on the eighth day (2:21) and, like all other Jewish boys at that time, he received his name at the same ceremony. Then when the time was right, Mary went to the temple to complete the process of her purification from uncleanness and offered the necessary sacrifices (v. 22). It seems that they were not particularly wealthy people because they gave two pigeons instead of the prescribed ram—an acceptable legal option for the *anawim*.

Less segregation

Today, public worship can take place in an orthodox Jewish synagogue only if at least ten adult Jewish males are present. Women do not qualify as part of this quorum. Furthermore, women are separated from men within the synagogue—women worship in an *ezrat nashim*, a balcony or a section set apart. A former teacher of mine in Jerusalem, whose work I have found particularly helpful in trying to reconstruct the kind of world Mary inhabited, is Shmuel Safrai. He has always been convinced that things could well have been considerably different (men and women were not segregated) in the synagogue in Nazareth in which Mary and Jesus worshipped (*The Land of Israel and its Sages in the Mishnaic and Talmudic Period*, United Kibbutz Publishing Co., 1983).

In the first century and earlier, it seems that women were quite possibly the equals of men as far as worship in the synagogue was concerned, and they visited it frequently. This is demonstrated by a verse in the book of Judges, where it is recorded that Deborah blesses Jael, who is described as ‘most blessed of women’ (5:24). From earliest times Jews have been extremely careful in their interpretation of the scriptures. Endless studies of words and phrases in order to achieve an accurate meaning have occupied Jewish scholars for generations and one such tradition of scholarship is contained in the Targums—translations of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament into Aramaic. There is one such Targum that translates Judges 5:24 to the effect that Jael was ‘like one of the women who attend the houses of study and she will be blessed’. It translates ‘tents’ as ‘house of study’ (in Hebrew the word is *Bet Midrash*), which is an equivalent expression for synagogue.

Similarly, in the Jerusalem Talmud the hypothetical question is raised: in a town in which all the residents are priests, when they spread their hands in the synagogue and give their priestly blessing, who responds 'Amen'? (The priests themselves are not permitted to give the response to their own blessing.) The answer is: 'the women and the children'. Women were therefore in attendance in the synagogue, otherwise how could they shout the Amen? In a different Talmud (Babylonian) the following teaching is found: a Jewish woman may set a pot on the stove and let a Gentile woman come and stir its contents until she returns from the synagogue. The implication here is that the synagogue was one of the places to which Jewish women normally went. In one of the minor tracts of the Soferim Talmud an interesting regulation is mentioned: although on sabbaths the people come early to the synagogue, on festivals they come later because they have food to prepare. The second 'they' refers to the female members of the congregations. It was the women who needed the early morning hours of holidays for preparation of food. Much of the preparation of the main holiday meal, eaten at midday after the family returned from the synagogue, was done before they left home. Lighting a fire to cook food, while not permitted on ordinary sabbaths, was permitted on festivals. Therefore, to accommodate the women, the synagogue service started later on festival days. If the women's participation in synagogue worship had been felt to be less vital than that of the men, there would have been no reason to delay the holiday service—the men could have conducted the service while the women were at home, preparing the meal.

The Gospels tell us that Mary and her child visited the temple (Luke 2:41–52) and we should also note that women

were allowed in every area of the temple precincts. The women's court, the outer court of the temple, was not reserved exclusively for women; in this court men and women mingled. Men had to pass through the women's court to reach the Israelites' court (men's court) and located in the women's court were various chambers, such as the Nazirites' Chamber, to which both men and women had access. Public assemblies took place in the women's court—it was there that the High Priest read the Torah before the people on the Day of Atonement, as stated in the Babylonian Talmud.

The outer court of the temple was called the women's court because normally women did not go beyond it into the more interior courts. Similarly, the Israelites' court was so named because normally non-priestly men did not go beyond it into the priests' court. However, like men, women offered their sacrifices at the altar in the priests' court, passing through the Israelites' court in order to do so. Women were actually segregated in the temple only during the water-drawing ceremony held on the Feast of Tabernacles, when dancing went on all night. Both the Babylonian Talmud and the Mishnah inform us that at this celebration, men watched from the women's court and women watched from specially erected galleries surrounding the women's court.

Religious opportunities for Mary were not as restricted as life for Jewish women at other times in history may have been. She would have had the space and the freedom to accompany her son in his spiritual nurture—and she could also have played her own part in that spiritual life. After all, she had conversed with an angel!

Theological underpinning

Two important words in this chapter have been ‘prophecy’ and ‘fulfilment’: the promises of the Old Testament prophets regarding the coming of God’s kingdom, a redeeming Messiah and better times were fulfilled in Christ. A significant term in relation to all this is ‘progressive revelation’. As we move from the Old Testament to the New, we find a progressive revelation of God’s working his purpose out, which is also at the heart of the life of Mary. Our exploration of only a few Old Testament and Jewish themes and events in this chapter shows that Mary did not simply appear at the right time and in the right place and vanish once her deed was done. God’s continuing creative and redeeming love was (and continues to be) revealed progressively and Mary plays a central role in that progression.

To purchase this book, visit www.brfonline.org.uk

ORDERFORM				
REF	TITLE	PRICE	QTY	TOTAL

POSTAGE AND PACKING CHARGES				
Order value	UK	Europe	Surface	Air Mail
Under £7.00	£1.25	£3.00	£3.50	£5.50
£7.01-£29.99	£2.25	£5.50	£6.50	£10.00
Over £30.00	FREE	prices on request		

Postage and packing	
Donation	
TOTAL	

Name _____ Account Number _____
 Address _____
 _____ Postcode _____
 Telephone Number _____
 Email _____

Payment by: Cheque Mastercard Visa Postal Order Maestro

Card no

Valid from Expires Issue no.

Security code* *Last 3 digits on the reverse of the card. Shaded boxes for
 ESSENTIAL IN ORDER TO PROCESS YOUR ORDER Maestro use only

Signature _____ Date _____

All orders must be accompanied by the appropriate payment.

Please send your completed order form to:

BRF, 15 The Chambers, Vineyard, Abingdon OX14 3FE

Tel. 01865 319700 / Fax. 01865 319701 Email: enquiries@brf.org.uk

Please send me further information about BRF publications.

Available from your local Christian bookshop.

BRF is a Registered Charity

Mary is arguably the first disciple, and this book explores the different ways she is presented in the Gospels and also in Christian spirituality through history, showing how her significance extends far beyond the Christmas story. As more than just a mother at the manger, Mary can be a pattern for our own discipleship. She is an enduring witness to the central importance of transfiguration and liberation as characteristics of the kingdom of God, which should also be visible in our lives as followers of Jesus today.

Andrew Jones is author of *Pilgrimage: The journey to remembering our story* (BRF, 2011) and Archdeacon of Meirionnydd in the Diocese of Bangor. He contributes to *New Daylight* and has led pilgrimages to sites associated with Mary in the UK and abroad.

Andrew Jones has performed a most helpful and illuminating service for Christians who are not sure what to make of Mary. Drawing on scholarship and deep wells of spirituality, he makes a wise and gentle case for the centrality of Mary to Christian faith and prayer. This is a book that will repay slow and thoughtful study and reflection.

Nicola Slee, Research Fellow at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, and author of *The Book of Mary* (SPCK, 2009)

Written with sensitivity and insight, Andrew Jones' account of Mary and her role in the life of the believer is a pleasure to read. Anchored in scripture yet sensitive to the wider role of Mary in the life of the Church, it deserves a wide audience.

Dr Peter Tyler, St Mary's University, Twickenham



978-1-84101-651-1

UK £8.99



9 781841 016511

Visit www.brfonline.org.uk for email updates, resources and information about BRF's wider ministry