Introduction

Finding Mary in the Worlds of the Text

With beautiful art, music, feast days, and prayers, every generation of Christians has honored Mary, the mother of Jesus. Because the child she bore is Emmanuel, God with us, this Jewish woman who lived in the first century is addressed with the profound title Mother of God. Her image adorns churches, schools, homes, and Christmas cribs, reminding people of the power and beauty of faith in Christ. The question before us today is this: How can our generation carry forward this rich, living tradition of honoring Mary? And what is the point of doing so? How can we, living in a multicultural church in the twenty-first century, appreciate Mary's significance for our life of faith and its practice?

This book traces one way. It proposes that we consider Mary as a woman of history, graced by the Spirit, who belongs now to the great “cloud of witnesses” whose lives challenge and inspire our own. It proposes that we connect with her as our companion in struggle, truly our sister in the communion of saints.

At the heart of this approach is a turn to scripture. There are more than a dozen stories in the New Testament where Mary appears, acts, or speaks. Reflecting the theology of the early church, these stories offer the possibility of retrieving her memory in a concrete way. Using contemporary methods
of biblical study, we get glimpses of the world beyond the biblical text—meaning the actual political, economic, religious, and cultural world that Miriam of Nazareth inhabited. We are also bathed in the world of the text, where her life is woven into the story of salvation coming from God in Jesus through the power of the Spirit. And we wrestle with the world ahead of the text, where, helped by this word of God, the faith community today strives to live faithfully and lovingly in our own time. These three worlds, behind, in, and in front of the scripture texts, interact to create a living memory of Mary that empowers the church. Together they form the framework for the reading of scripture in this book.

**Behind the Text:**

**The Woman of History**

Our knowledge about the actual history of this woman is quite limited. At a minimum, we know that Miriam—for such was her name in Hebrew—was a Jewish woman, married and a mother, who lived in Galilee in the decades before and after the year “A.D. 1,” by which the Western calendar now divides the eras. Thanks to contemporary scholarship, this small handful of facts opens a sizable window. Archaeological excavations, economic and sociological studies of the Roman empire, research on the role of women, and the study of ancient authors such as the Jewish historian Josephus, allow us to picture the world in which Miriam lived.

Start with her home in Nazareth, a small village in southern Galilee situated off the main road of commercial travel. Most of the hard remains that archaeology has uncovered here have to do with farming: olive presses, wine presses, cisterns for holding water, millstones for grinding grain, holes for storage jars. This indicates that the inhabitants, most likely numbering about three hundred to four hundred, were either peasants who worked their own land, tenant farmers who worked land belonging to others, or craftpersons who served their needs. Nothing that indicates wealth has been uncovered in Nazareth: no public paved roads or civic buildings, no inscriptions, no fresco decorations or mosaics, no luxury items such as perfume bottles or even simple glass.

The houses were small and clustered together. Each family occupied a domestic space or “house” of one or two small rooms built of native stone held together by a mortar of mud and smaller stones. Floors were made of packed earth. The roofs were thatched, constructed of thick bundles of reeds tied over beams of wood, most likely covered with packed mud for additional protection. Instead of standing alone, three or four of these small dwellings were clustered around a courtyard open to the sky. Surrounded by an outer stone wall, they formed a secure living space. The enclosed family rooms were used for sleep and sex, giving birth and dying, and taking shelter from the elements. In the unroofed, common courtyard, inhabitants of the domestic units, most likely an extended family or close kinship group, shared an oven, a cistern that held water, and a millstone for grinding grain—this was the kitchen where food was prepared and cooked in the open air. Domestic animals also lived here.

Alleyways or “streets” ran crookedly around the domestic enclosures in the village. One archaeologist, Jonathan Reed, notes that “none had channels for running water or sewage, which must have been tossed in the alleyways. Instead, the roads bend at the various clusters of houses, and were made of packed earth and dirt, dusty in the dry hot seasons and muddy in the short rainy seasons, but smelly throughout.” The people of the village shared larger food-preparation facil-
ties such as a threshing floor, olive presses, and wine presses. Living at a subsistence level, inhabitants by and large grew their own food, did their own building, and sewed their own clothes from cloth that they spun and wove, mostly woolen cloth from sheep.

Miriam of Nazareth spent most of her adult life in this hamlet, most likely as part of an extended family, first as a married woman with her husband, Joseph, and then as a widow. In Palestine at this time, as indeed for most of human history, young people entered into marriages arranged by their families. According to contemporary Roman law, the minimum age of marriage for girls was twelve, for boys fourteen. Jewish practices were comparable, so that marriage for a girl usually took place at or just before puberty, usually between the ages of twelve and thirteen. This not only allowed maximum use of her childbearing years but also served her father’s ability to guarantee her virginity, a heavy cultural and economic duty required by law.

According to Jewish custom, marriage was a process that took place in two stages. The first stage was the betrothal. This involved a formal exchange of the couple’s consent to marry, made in the presence of witnesses and accompanied by the payment of the bride price from the bride’s family to the groom. Unlike our culture’s practice of getting engaged, betrothal constituted a legally ratified marriage even though the girl would remain in her own home for about one more year. After betrothal the two persons were henceforth husband and wife. The man had legal rights over the young woman. Any infringement of his marital sexual rights could be punished as adultery. Their union could be broken up only if he initiated a formal procedure of divorce. Betrothal also gave the girl the status of a married woman for many purposes. She was called the man’s wife and could become his widow. The second stage occurred with the transfer of the young woman from her family home to her husband’s family home, a formal move accompanied with some ceremony. He now assumed responsibility for her financial support, and they began to have sexual relations. Both Matthew and Luke reflect these marriage customs when they depict Mary’s pregnancy beginning while she was betrothed to Joseph but “before they began to live together” (Matt 1:18), that is, before the second stage of their marriage took place. Knowing the baby wasn’t his, Joseph initially decided to divorce Miriam. This made legitimate use of one of the options open to him—but notice that he was going to divorce her, not break their engagement: they were legally married.

A historical picture of Mary’s Galilean household needs to account for the persons whom the gospels call Jesus’ brothers and sisters. Mentioned in every gospel, in the Acts of the Apostles, and in some of Paul’s letters, these family members were part of her world. The most extended entry comes in the scene where Jesus returns to his own village to teach in the synagogue on the sabbath. As Mark relates the event, many people of Nazareth took offense at him, wondering where he got all this wisdom. They said, “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 among us?” (Mark 6:3). Matthew adapts the Markan version slightly to focus on Jesus’ father’s trade and seems to expand the number of sisters, having the villagers say, “Is not this the son of the carpenter? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph, Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters here among us?” (Matt. 13:55-56).

Who are these four brothers and the multiple “all his sisters,” unfortunately not named? Three positions existed in the early church, which correspond roughly to positions taken by
Christian churches today. (1) The brothers and sisters are the children of Mary and Joseph, born after the birth of Jesus, making them siblings in the usual sense. Aware that the perpetual virginity of Mary after the birth of Jesus is not a question raised directly by the New Testament, Protestant thinkers since the Enlightenment have generally tended to assume that this is the case. In this scenario, Jesus would be the oldest in a family of at least seven children: a large family with a small income. (2) The brothers and sisters are Joseph’s children by a previous marriage. Appearing first in the apocryphal gospel of James in the mid-second century, this interpretation makes Mary their stepmother, with Jesus now the youngest of at least seven children. Widespread in the early church, this is still the favored explanation of Orthodox Christianity. (3) The brothers and sisters are actually Jesus’ cousins. First championed by Jerome in the fourth century, this view has been adopted by the Roman Catholic Church and remains the official teaching of the church. This position is supported by the fact that the Greek term for blood brother, adelphos, can also mean relative, or member of the same clan or interest group. Contemporary biblical scholars point out, however, that there is a perfectly good Greek word for cousins that does appear elsewhere in the New Testament. Furthermore, all other passages that use “brother” or “sister” to describe family relationships use the terms in the sense of shared parentage rather than “cousins.” Recall Zebedee’s sons John and his brother James, the sisters Martha and Mary, their brother Lazarus, and Andrew with his brother Peter. Prescinding from faith and on purely historical and linguistic grounds, exegete John Meier judges that in the case of New Testament language about Jesus’ relatives, “the most probable opinion is that the brothers and sisters of Jesus were true siblings.” Other scholars such as John McHugh, however, defend the opinion that these children were born to Joseph’s sister but brought up by Joseph after his brother-in-law died.

What is of interest here is the historical point that all three of the above interpretations, including the official Catholic “cousins” position, militate against Mary’s mothering a one-child family. The manner in which the cousins, or four brothers and all the sisters, appear in Jesus’ public life indicates relationships of long standing, leading scholars to think that these persons formed part of his family during his growing-up years. Even if these cousins did not live in the immediate household but perhaps shared a courtyard, their repeated presence yoked to the mother of Jesus in the gospels indicates a closeness of multiple children in this blended family. When these other children are taken into account, the romanticized picture of an ideal “holy family” composed of an old man, a young woman, and one perfect child needs to be revised.

In this setting, picturing this family’s religious world turns us to first-century Judaism. An observant Jewish household, the family of Miriam lived out their faith through daily observance of the covenant laws, in sabbath rest and prayer, gatherings at synagogue, and, occasionally, in festival pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem. Historically speaking, it is important to remember that Mary’s faith was not shaped by the devotion to Christ characteristic of later times once the gospels were written and doctrine developed. Nor is it adequate to say that Jewish belief and practice formed a mere “background” to her life. Loyal to the traditions of her ancestors, she inhabited this faith foursquare, bringing up her son Jesus in its beliefs and practices. To say that Mary lived and died a Jewish woman; that her religious gaze was focused on the God of Israel; that she shared the incipient christology of the early Jerusalem community rather than the high christol-
ogy of Chalcedon; that she should not be depicted as having the piety of a latter-day Catholic, is not to demean her relationship with Jesus. It simply allows the deeply Jewish roots of her life and piety to be pictured in their actual historical integrity.

Nazareth was one of about two hundred small Jewish villages in southern Galilee. A province within the vast world of the Roman empire, Galilee was run as what scholars call a traditional agrarian society. The strongest characteristic of this kind of society was imbalance in material goods, with the labor of the poor majority, who worked the land, producing riches that flowed toward the wealthy governing minority, with little or no recompense. On one side were the ruler, his court and administrators, the military, merchants, and priests, who together comprised ten percent of the population. There was no middle class. On the other side of the money chasm was the peasant class, whose work on the land was the fundamental engine of the production of wealth. These people were supported by an artisan group made up of carpenters, metal tool makers, and other laborers, who most likely also worked their own plots of land. We need to guard against romantic images of the carpenter’s shop. Being an artisan in a peasant society was much more economically precarious than being a skilled carpenter in an advanced, industrial market economy like our own.

At this time, Galilean villagers were triply taxed. In addition to the traditional tithe to support the temple and its priesthood in Jerusalem, they had to pay tribute to the Roman emperor, and yet more taxes to their local Jewish client-king, through whom Rome ruled by proxy (in Miriam’s lifetime a string of Herods, father, son, and grandson, held this post). These tax monies were skimmed off as a certain percentage of the villagers’ crops, flocks, or fish hauls.

The peasant communities worked intensely hard just to stay afloat, but the power of the governing class to extract payment ground them down. Drained of resources during these years, many fell into increasing indebtedness to the wealthy. As a result, they lost their land and became truly impoverished. The poverty and hunger in Galilee acted as a spawning ground for first-century revolts against the repressive Roman occupation and the taxation it engendered.

One incident not mentioned in the gospels but reported by Josephus illustrates this tension. Perched on a hill about four miles from Nazareth, the lovely city of Sepphoris was the administrative center in Galilee of the rule of King Herod the Great. He built it up and adorned it to be the tax collection headquarters for the whole region. When Herod died in 4 B.C., resentment exploded in revolt all over Palestine. Led by a peasant named Judas, a large band of desperate men attacked Sepphoris, raided the royal fortress, seized all the weapons stored there, and ransacked the city of all its goods. Facing widespread uproar, the Romans responded with brutal efficiency. In Jerusalem they crucified two thousand Jewish men outside the city walls. In Galilee they recaptured Sepphoris and, in Josephus’s succinct summary, “burned the city and enslaved its inhabitants.” Surrounding villages were leveled to punish the rebels among their inhabitants; people were sold into slavery. Historian Richard Horsley points out that, “In the villages around Sepphoris such as Nazareth, the people would have had vivid memories both of the outburst against Herod and the Romans, and of the destruction of their villages and the enslavement of their friends and relatives. . . . The mass enslavement and destruction would have left severe scars on the social body of the Galilean village communities for generations to come.”

Living in Nazareth at the time, Miriam would have been
around fifteen or sixteen years old, a young married woman with a new baby. She obviously survived the damage inflicted on her village by the rampaging Roman legions. Did she hide with other women in a cave in the Nazareth ridge as the tidal wave of violence went sweeping over? What terror, what loss from deaths, rapes, and looting had to be coped with? How much rebuilding absorbed their energy when psychically they were at a low ebb and materially they had so little to begin with? Sad to say, the wretched wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, reported in the press and shown on television, leave little work for our imagination. Watching village women in Vietnam, El Salvador, Bosnia, East Timor, Congo, Afghanistan, and elsewhere flee, hide, be injured, all the while trying to protect their children, makes this picture all too real.

Married to the local village carpenter, Miriam of Nazareth lived in a world of social stratification marked by great disparities in wealth and privilege. Her life is typical of that of countless women throughout the ages who experience civic powerlessness, poverty, and the suffering that results from low status and lack of formal education. The ability to read and write was a relatively rare skill in the Greco-Roman world, a skill restricted largely to scribes and an intellectual elite. The vast majority of ordinary people were functionally illiterate, and so, most likely, was Miriam. Her social location also indicates that her physical appearance was not blond-haired, blue-eyed, and svelte. Along with the women of her class and ethnic heritage, she would have had Semitic features and Mediterranean coloring of skin, hair, and eyes. Commenting on how the ruling classes of medieval Europe and the Renaissance who patronized art and literature had turned the mother of Jesus into a upper-class, fair gentlewoman like themselves, "Our Lady," the pioneering biblical scholar John L. McKenzie noted, "About Palestinian housewives they knew nothing. If they had, they would have found her like the maids of their palace kitchens or the peasant women of their domains." Miriam of Nazareth occupied the lower rung of the social and economic ladder, and her life was lived out in an economically poor, politically oppressed, Jewish peasant culture marked by exploitation and publicly violent events.

Using the spade of archaeology, the measuring tools of social science, and the quill of ancient authors, we can picture the concrete world in which Mary lived. This picture is of interest not simply for historical reasons but also for religious ones. It intrigues us as the locus of Mary’s encounter with God. It is precisely in this economic, political, and cultural setting, living out her Jewish faith as a peasant woman of the people, that Mary walked her journey of faith in response to the promptings of the Spirit. It is precisely such a woman, who counts for nothing on the stage of world empire, that God has done great things. It is precisely such a woman who sings joyfully that God her Savior is coming to overturn oppression in favor of the poor of the earth. As we read the biblical stories, the circumstances pictured above come forward not as mere historical background but as the warp and woof of the world in which the revelation of God took place.

In the Text:

Graced by the Spirit

The New Testament tells the story of salvation coming from God in Jesus through the power of the Spirit. As part of that story, it tells of individuals and groups who interacted with Jesus during his life, death, and resurrection. Miriam of Nazareth is one of these, receiving brief mention in each of
the gospels. Written from a faith perspective, these texts connect her life to the grand, overarching narrative of the coming of salvation into the world. While they take the historical setting of her life for granted, they bring the story of grace to the fore. In Luke’s view, for example, highly favored by God, blessed among women, called blessed by all generations, Mary heard the word of God and acted upon it. She is a woman graced by the Spirit.

The gospels never deny the humanity of Miriam of Nazareth or make it appear that she lived anything other than a regular human life with its joys and sufferings. In fact, during later controversies over the identity of Jesus Christ, the fact that his mother’s pregnancy shaped his flesh from her own body became a critical argument defending his own genuine humanity. In later centuries, as Christians offered honor to Mary, they sometimes tended to glorify her to the point where her really human, historical life slipped from view. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception in particular has had this effect, although this was not its intention. Declared in the nineteenth century, this doctrine holds that Mary herself was conceived without original sin. In the popular Catholic imagination, this seems to have effectively removed her from the human condition. She had, people say, special privileges that enabled her to cope with the troubles of life. Exempt from human passions, preserved from temptations, spared ambiguity when it came to decisions, always in full possession of her wits, clearly knowing God’s plan for herself and her son and more than willing to carry it out, she moved through life with unearthly ease. The one allowable exception is the sorrow she felt at the cross, but even here, it is said, she gladly sacrificed her son for the redemption of the world. In this interpretation, Mary’s conception without original sin dehu-

manizes her. She was perfect. Cocooned in a bubble, her humanity is bleached of blood and guts.

A way around this roadblock is found when we realize that being conceived without original sin does not mean being conceived in a vacuum. Rather, it means being uniquely blessed at the outset of life with the gift of grace. Let us think about this doctrine in the light of what sin and grace actually mean. They are opposites. Sin refers to the absence of God’s life, grace to its presence. Theology today has shifted from the medieval focus on created grace, an extrinsic gift often pictured as a spiritual substance, to the more basic reality of uncreated grace, which is the radically precious gift of God’s own self freely offered to persons. Uncreated grace is first and foremost God’s self-communication and presence to human beings. In grace the mystery of the living, gracious God becomes present as the Spirit dwelling at the heart of human existence. In biblical terms, “the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). The “singular grace” that Mary, according to the doctrinal definition, received at her conception refers to what the church affirms to be God’s self-gift, which is unfathomable. Put simply, Mary was enveloped from the beginning by the love of God. As one German name for the feast of the Immaculate Conception on December 8 puts it, this is “the feast of the be-gracing of Mary.” The point is, while this doctrine speaks in the language of the absence of sin, in essence it is all about the presence of grace.

Now, what is the effect of grace on a human life? Does it make a person more human or does it dehumanize us? Does it protect us from struggle or give us a way through? The German theologian Karl Rahner offers a mind-teasing axiom that reveals a powerful answer: “nearness to God and genuine
human autonomy grow in direct rather than inverse proportion." In other words, God and the integrity of a person’s human life are not in competition. Rather than diminish the wholeness of human life, grace enhances and fulfills it through union with the living God who is the goal of all creation including the human heart. Therefore, as Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff explains, “To say that she is immaculate does not mean that she did not suffer, that she was never troubled, or that she had no need for faith and hope. She was a daughter of earth, albeit blessed by heaven. She had human passions. Everything authentically human was present in her.”

In light of this understanding of grace, Mary’s original relationship to the Spirit creates her as a free, fully human being. She has to accomplish her life in the midst of the troubles of history, not angelically outside it. Plunged into the heart of the world, her life was a real human journey. She searched, she struggled, she had to compose her life as we all do. Thérèse of Lisieux pointed to this truth when she pondered why she loved Mary. It was not because the Mother of God received exceptional privileges, she wrote, blessings that would remove her from the ordinary condition, “ravishings, miracles, ecstasies,” and the like, but because she lived and suffered simply, like us, in the dark night of faith.

To profess that Mary is graced in a special way is to affirm, then, in view of her vocation to be the woman through whom God became a child of earth, that God’s personal self-communication in grace was given to this woman of the people from her beginning. Deep relationship to God did not erase her humanity. Firmly rooted in history, this first-century woman lived with all the limitations and difficulties that being human inevitably entails. Pope John Paul II’s repeated references to Mary’s own need for religious faith

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bear this out: her life was a pilgrimage of faith; she gave herself to God’s word in the “dim light of faith”; like Abraham she had to “hope against hope”; though the mother of Christ, she was in contact with the mystery of his truth only through a “veil,” having to be faithful even through the “night of faith.” In other words, even where it is most religiously crucial, she struggled through without extra advantages. Patricia Noone’s humorous comment is particularly apt: Mary did not have the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception framed and hanging on her kitchen wall, assuring her that she was sinless and free from error. Appreciating this historical slant, I would add that even if she did, it would not lift her feet off the ground. Understood as the living, self-communication of God’s Spirit to Mary at the outset of her life, the Immaculate Conception does not extract her from the challenges that come with life on this planet. Rather, in its peculiar, time-conditioned way, it fundamentally asserts the living God’s self-gift to this woman who is called to a special vocation in salvation history. In so doing, it signals that when it comes to God’s intent, grace is more original than sin.

Linking this understanding of the graced woman in the biblical texts with the historical woman behind the texts yields a powerful insight. It reveals that the light of God shines on persons who are regarded as insignificant in this world. Brazilian theologians Ivone Gembra and Maria Clara Bingemer point out that the Immaculata venerated on our altars is the same Miriam of Nazareth who was marginalized by the social structure of her time. To understand the doctrine aright, we cannot forget that it talks of God’s exalting a woman who lived in poverty and anonymity, like millions of poor people today. This Galilean villager bears within herself the confirmation of God’s preference for what is poor, small, and unprotected in this world. Adhering to this doctrine
means proclaiming that the woman who gave birth in a stable among animals, who shared a life of poverty, who stood at the foot of the cross as the mother of the condemned, has been chosen by God. This sparks hope in the poor and oppressed and in those who stand in solidarity with them that they too will share in the blessings of the incarnate God.  

**Ahead of the Text:**  
**Companion in the Communion of Saints**

The historical world behind the text and the religious world of the text both interact in the faith world ahead of the text, our own world here and now. This is where the Christian community of today endeavors to live faithfully and lovingly according to the gospel message. As part of this ongoing process, the church honors numerous holy people, including Mary, the mother of Jesus. The memory of her partnership with God can challenge, console, and create liberating energies for life in the church and the world. What is the dynamic basis of the connection between her past and our present? It is the relationship known as the communion of saints.

Down through the centuries, as the Holy Spirit graces person after person in land after land, they form together a grand company of women and men brushed with the fire of divine love, a community of redeemed sinners. This is a multigenerational community of graced persons alive at any moment that geographically encircles the globe. It also stretches historically backward and forward in time to include those who have died and now live in the embrace of God. This community is a most inclusive group. It crosses boundaries of language, culture, race, sex, class, sexual ori-entation, religion, and all other human differences, stretching into eternity. The inmost depth and outermost horizon of this community of holy people remains God’s Holy Spirit, who vivifies creation, weaves unifying connections, saves what is lost, and makes holy the world. This is the way to think about the communion of saints: it refers to the great and diverse multitude of people who are connected to God and one another through the Spirit’s gift of grace.

A rich metaphor in the biblical book of Wisdom introduces fresh vocabulary for this communion. All through this book the female figure of Wisdom (Sophia in the original Greek) operates as an image of God actively creating and saving the world. In one passage, Wisdom’s work is described this way:

> Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets.  
> (Wis. 7:27)

- To be a friend of God is to enter into a relationship of affection with God, freely, with trust; taking time to savor the relationship in prayer and contemplation; allowing divine presence to be the foundation of your life even when it is experienced as wrenching absence.
- To be a prophet is to raise your voice in criticism against injustice because, being God’s friend, you love the world in your heart the way God does; your imagination sees how it should flourish; when this collides with suffering, you are moved to console the oppressed and confront the powerful, thus creating possibilities for resistance and resurrection.
As a first-century Jewish woman of faith who responded full-heartedly to the Spirit, Mary is a friend of God and prophet who belongs in this company of grace. Living out her vocation in her own time and place, she is linked to all who respond to the gift of the Spirit in their own lives, in ways seen and unseen. In no way does this placement among the friends of God and prophets diminish her unique historic vocation to be the mother of the Messiah. But while honoring this pivotal relationship, it refocuses her significance for the community today in terms of her whole graced life lived before God.

Reading the biblical stories about Mary releases the power of her life into the world ahead of the text, especially if we relate to her as a companion. Traditionally, pious practices and preaching presented Mary and the other saints as patrons to our needs. We approached them primarily as intercessors before the throne of God. Being far from this distant throne, we ordinary people need more important persons to plead our cause and obtain blessings. We need friends in high places, so to speak. Because she is the Mother of the Lord, Mary is the most powerful intercessor of all, obtaining gifts that might otherwise be denied. This patron-client relationship is not found in the New Testament or in the early Christian centuries. It developed in the late Roman empire under the influence of the civil patronage system once the church had been officially established.

A very different pattern of relationship is found in the New Testament and the age of the early martyrs. This model promotes companionship in Christ between the living and the dead. The living members of the church understand themselves to be on a journey that the friends of God and prophets in heaven have already completed. The two become partners, companions, comrades, and co-disciples in the life of faith. Those who have died give their witness; those struggling to live faithfully on earth remember them; and both are encompassed by the saving grace of God. Here Mary and the saints in heaven stand not between God and those on earth, but alongside their sisters and brothers in the one Spirit-filled community. The letter to the Hebrews envisions it this way: these ancestors in the faith are a great “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1) who surround us with the encouragement of their lives. At one time they were down on the track running the race, but now they are up in the stands cheering us on. Surrounded by this cloud of witnesses, we cherish in very different circumstances what they cared enough to live and die for. As Augustine preached, “We marvel at them, they have compassion on us… Yet do we all serve one Lord, follow one teacher, attend one king. We are all joined to one head, journey to the same Jerusalem, follow after the one love.”

In the companionship relationship, one core practice that connects living persons with those who have died is the act of remembering. This is not a sentimental remembering that bathes the past in a rosy glow. Rather, it recalls the courage, suffering, wisdom, beauty, defeats, and victories of people who struggled before us in order to unlock what Augustine calls their “lessons of encouragement.” This is memory with the seed of the future in it. By bringing the witness of past lives forward into the present, it connects us with their unfinished agenda, shows that something more is possible, and bolsters our own commitment.

In a provocative turn of phrase, the German theologian Johannes Baptist Metz has called this kind of remembering dangerous. Why dangerous? Because it interrupts the present moment, which can be all-absorbing, and discloses that something more is possible. If the times are fat and comfort-
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able, it calls our present complacency into question, saying: there is more to life than the acquisition of things and the search for the latest entertainment. If the times are lean and tough, it calls our present affliction into question, saying: take heart; the powerful will not always win; God is in solidarity with you promising salvation. In situations of injustice, it challenges the status quo, saying: you can resist the course of things. By bringing "something more" into view, it reminds us of a future worth struggling for and sets our feet on the path of active discipleship. Remembering the saints this way creates a moral and social force that propels the church out of passivity into active engagement on behalf of all those in agony. It has a transforming power that energizes resistance and active love. In the light of their dangerous memory, we become partners in hope.

Remembering Miriam of Nazareth in this vein can be dangerous to both complacency and despair. Connecting her multifaceted story with our own releases transformative power in our lives. Hearing the word of God and keeping it, she actively partnered the divine work of repairing the world. While the precise circumstances of her actual life can never be repeated, the style and spirit of her life reverberate through the centuries to propel us forward in today's different cultural contexts. In solidarity with her in the one company of God's friends and prophets, we find strength to face up to our own encounters with the Spirit and to go forward with the best of our faithful wits. This impetus receives a critical edge when we remember Mary as poor, female, and endangered in a violent society. Then the vital memory of this woman of Spirit has the quality of "danger" insofar as it births wisdom, awakens resistance, and inspires active hope for a just and peaceful world in which poor people, women, indeed all human beings and the earth, can flourish as beloved of God.

Finding Mary

Crafting a Mosaic

Keeping the worlds behind, in, and ahead of the text in view, this book turns to scripture as a primary resource for the dangerous memory of Mary. Composed over many decades after Pentecost, the books of the New Testament bear the early church's witness to what God has done in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world. Rooted in history, these are profoundly theological writings. In a handful of brief episodes Miriam of Nazareth, identified either by her own name or as the mother of Jesus, speaks, takes action, or is described as an essential part of the action. Matthew and Luke place her primarily at the beginning of Jesus' life; John depicts her at the end by the cross; all four gospels have scenarios where she appears during the public ministry; Luke takes the further step of naming her among the women and men disciples of Jesus in the upper room before Pentecost. In probing these scenes for the memory of Mary they carry, this book employs two types of biblical scholarship as primary tools. The first, historical criticism, attempts to sort out literary genres and layers of composition of the texts, thereby clarifying original events from the religious explanations of the gospel writers. The second, feminist criticism, interprets texts through the eyes of women, seeking out what enhances or disparages women's human dignity.

1. Historical criticism holds a fairly solid though not undisputed consensus that the four canonical gospels came into being in three stages, starting with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth witnessed by his disciples, moving next to the oral preaching of the early church, and peaking with the actual writing of the gospels by the evangelists in view of the needs of their churches. While there is some
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dispute about chronology, a fairly broad agreement also exists that Mark wrote first in the seventies; a decade or so later Matthew and Luke adapted his work, adding sayings of Jesus from a common source (Q) along with their own diverse materials; and John composed last, toward the end of the first century, using his own original sources. Since most of the marian material appears in the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke, the literary genre of infancy narrative comes in for special attention. Obviously there were no apostolic eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus’ conception and birth, nor did these events enter into the early preaching of the church, which focused on the paschal mystery. The provenance of these infancy stories is a skein of small strands of oral tradition, colored by pigment from birth stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, which the evangelists wove into imaginative, theologically powerful scenes that proclaim the identity and mission of Jesus the Christ. Composing these narratives last, after the main body of their gospels had been written, but placing them first, Matthew and Luke in effect created christological overtures that sound all the themes that will show up later in their gospels.

One of the major achievements of modern biblical scholarship is the clarity with which it emphasizes that these gospels are all faith documents. All four gospels have as their purpose to announce the good news of salvation coming from God in Jesus through the power of the Spirit, and to bring this story to bear on the spiritual and practical needs of a particular community of believers. Their intent is not flat-out historical or biographical but missionary and community building: to provide the church with witness to God’s gracious mercy in Jesus and to provide guidance for walking in the “Way” according to the Spirit. Consequently, all the gospel writers read the post-resurrection situation back into the

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ministry and birth of Jesus, interpreting the traditions they received about his words and deeds in light of what they now knew to be the marvelous, God-given outcome of the story of his defeat. They chose certain memories, omitted others, paraphrased his words, and interpreted his healings, inclusive table companionship, and conflicts so as to grapple with the meaning of his identity and mission. Knowing that post-Easter faith in Jesus as Messiah, Lord, and Savior shaped the gospels’ presentations, as did the current challenges and conflicts faced by the different local churches which were the intended audience, biblical scholarship encourages an appreciative approach to their diversity. Rather than trying to harmonize their different theological perspectives, we need to understand that each one’s voice is important.

Traditional mariology achieved a synthesized view of Mary by harmonizing the diverse gospel texts into a smooth-running narrative of her life. New methods bring new results. Departing from centuries of literal exegesis, we now know that we cannot write a historical biography or psychological study of Mary. In place of such a unifying schema, we acknowledge and honor the fact that the gospels have distinctly different views about Mary because of the evangelists’ diverse theologies. Drawing on these various gospel portraits, consequently, does not produce material for a complete biography but gives different glimpses, snapshots, vignettes, or brief portrayals of incidents in her life in scenes that are part of each gospel’s testimony of faith in God.

2. The field of feminist interpretation, working with these standard biblical methods, raises the further, critical question of gender bias in both composition and interpretation of texts. The gospels, while part of inspired scripture in the church, are also marked by the sin of the society in which they were crafted, including acceptance of slavery, violence, and
patriarchy. They were written by educated men who apparently did not suffer directly from these abuses and whose work tends to erase the experience of those who did. Recall the classic statement in Matthew’s account of Jesus feeding the multitudes. The story concludes: “And those who ate were about five thousand men, not counting women and children” (Matt. 14:21). Surely this is not because their appetites were so small as to be unworthy of mention, but because their persons were unimportant. In the worldview of the ruling men, such persons literally did not count. This pattern holds true throughout the Bible. The presence and creative activity of women are consistently omitted, played down, or criticized by the patriarchal orientation of the authors. We read these texts, furthermore, through a history of translation, commentary, and preaching shaped by the clerical culture of the church that has given rise to various interpretations that are oppressive to women but which women resist today, including the picture of Mary as a passive, silent, obedient handmaid.

To free up the word of God, a wide variety of methods come into play. Making the strategic move of placing women’s personal and political experience at the center of attention, these methods suspect, critically evaluate, correct, historically reconstruct, and creatively imagine the silenced, marginalized women buried in the text along with the prejudicial theories that put them there. They aim to uncover possibilities for changing relations of domination inscribed in the text and in everyday life, being particularly accountable to women who struggle at the bottom of the pyramid of discrimination. Like the woman of the gospel looking for her lost coin, these methods search diligently “for submerged meanings, lost voices, and authorizing visions” that will inspire religious imagination for a different, more mutual future for women and men together.

Using these methods opens up new readings of the stories of Mary in scripture. I suggest that the work of crafting a mosaic provides a useful metaphor for the work that lies ahead. Unlike a coherent sweep of line that shapes a traditional painting, a mosaic is made up of small fragments of colored stone or marble, called tesserae in the language of art. Each sliver alone is no more than a spot of color. Working according to a pattern, artists inlay these chips in plaster or cement. Assembled together they display a picture or an intelligent design, ever more clearly the farther back you stand. But it is always possible to move in again and see the individual bits of stone.

Like chips of a great mosaic, the marian texts of scripture are distinct images that do not form a complete picture on their own. They are glued into the story of Jesus Christ, which itself presumes the whole biblical sweep of God’s gracious history with the world. We study these tesserae, these individual theological memories of Mary, as flashes of color that form part of the texture of the story of the living God’s engagement with the history of the world. Allowing the three worlds of the text to interact, we shape a living memory of Miriam of Nazareth. Closer up, assembled together, the individual biblical stories form an image of a woman of Spirit. Honed by the historical background of Galilean Judaism and interpreted by women’s experiences of the Spirit of God in different global locations, this mosaic delivers a glimpse of an actual woman, a first-century member of an oppressed peasant society, who partnered God in the great work of redemption.

To sum up: scripture provides us with a mosaic of Mary, the historical, graced, human woman, that allows us to
remember her as our companion in the company of friends of God and prophets. Entirely particular, lived out within the constraints of first-century patriarchal society, her life with its concrete details in no way functions as culturally normative for women’s lives today, lives racing along in a world she never dreamed of. But the dangerous memory of her partnership with God through the power of the Spirit can create liberating energies for the life of discipleship today. In all her difference, Miriam of Nazareth abides in the circle of disciples as our sister, a poor woman of the people to whom God has done great things; a God-bearer who had divinity dancing under her heart in developing human flesh; a young Jewish woman vulnerable to violence in a patriarchal setting; a friend of God who made her own difficult choices with courage; a prophet whose word announced the awesome reversals God’s coming will bring about in this world; a married woman who toiled hard with her husband to provide for their family; a woman with a questioning mind who pondered what God was doing in the midst of her life; the mother of the itinerant preacher Jesus terribly worried about his ministry; a middle-aged woman whose agonized grief over the public execution of her firstborn connects her with legions of bereaved women; an elder in the budding community of the early church. She kept faith. We remember her. We connect her Spirit-filled story with our own amid the drama of the human race in its history of suffering and hope. We thereby find courage to carry forward God’s dream for the world. The dangerous memory of Mary crafts a theology capable of promoting action on behalf of global justice and peace, particularly empowering to the flourishing of women, coherent with elements of biblical, classical, and conciliar church teaching, and productive of religious meaning for our time.

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