

Is Mary Worthy Of Worship?

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A major area of doctrine that sets Roman Catholicism apart from the rest of this world's Christianity is its view of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Many weighty schools of thought and doctrine center on the person and function of Mary, and if one examines Roman Catholicism to any degree, the importance Catholics place on the mother of our Savior becomes readily apparent.

These beliefs are not just intellectual. They have led to applications and manifestations that literally fill volumes. For example, when a Catholic prays the rosary, the "Hail Mary" is said *nine times* as often as the Lord's Prayer. Every Catholic church boasts a statue of Mary, if not an outright shrine, and the graven images of Mary often have more prominence than those of Christ.

This emphasis on Mary caused Mark Twain to observe in *The Innocents Abroad, Volume II*:

In all seriousness—without meaning to be frivolous—without meaning to be irreverent, and more than all, without meaning to be blasphemous—I state as my simple deduction from the things I have seen and the things I have heard, that the Holy Personages rank thus in Rome:

First—"The Mother of God"—otherwise the Virgin Mary.

Second—The Deity.

Third—Peter.

Fourth—Some twelve or fifteen canonized Popes and martyrs.

Fifth—Jesus Christ the Saviour—(but always as an infant in arms).

I may be wrong in this—my judgment errs often, just as is the case with other men's—but it *is* my judgment, be it good or bad.

Just here I will mention something that seems curious to me. There are no "Christ's Churches" in Rome, and no "Churches of the Holy Ghost," that I can discover. There are some four hundred churches, but about a fourth of them seem to be named for the Madonna and St. Peter. There are so many named for Mary that they have to be distinguished by all sorts of affixes, if I understand the matter rightly.

Sources of Doctrine

This past summer, as Pope John Paul II focused his efforts on reviving Catholicism in Europe, he made numerous statements entrusting the future of Europe to Mary. According to the ZENIT News Agency, he "placed Europe in Mary's hands," so that it will "become a symphony of nations committed to building together the civilization of love and peace." In the church of God, we put things in God's hands. Catholics put things into *Mary's* hands.

In October 2002, an item of controversy that reappeared in the Vatican—as it does on a regular basis—was the part that Mary plays in salvation and redemption. Large numbers of Catholic scholars, theologians, and clergy—including Pope John Paul II—are pushing for Mary to be officially recognized as "Co-Redemptrix," meaning she is a vital part of a Catholic's redemption, although supporters are quick to point out that they never put her on exactly the same level as Jesus Christ.

In God's church, our sole source of doctrinal teaching is the Bible, the inspired Word of God. For Catholics, though, the Bible is only *one* of the sources of dogma and doctrine—and, of course, they even have their own Bible, which allows them even more liberality when they look for scriptural backing. Another source and foundation of Catholic doctrine is church tradition. This means that if a certain person who meets their qualifications makes a statement, that statement can then be used as a doctrinal reference, just as we would use a scriptural reference. Every so often, one will hear about the Catholic Church canonizing or beatifying someone. In practical terms, this means the new saint is suddenly an authority, and church scholars can now use his or her writings to "prove" their doctrines.

The third source of doctrinal material for Catholics comes from "divine revelation." This can include statements by a Pope when he is speaking *ex-cathedra*—at which time his words are considered to be infallible—and it can also come from a vision or dream. Very often, church tradition and the associated "divine revelation" outweigh any scriptural basis. The doctrines concerning Mary are prime examples of this.

For instance, Catholics believe in the "Immaculate Conception" of Mary. This *major* doctrine states that Mary was conceived and born normally, but at the instant when her soul was fused to her flesh, she was protected and exempted from the stain of "original sin." The reasoning is that, for Jesus to be untouched by original sin, his mother, the one who conceived and bore Him, had to be "immaculate" as well.

In the *Catholic Encyclopedia* article on "Immaculate Conception," the writer admits this cannot be found in the Bible. Under the heading "Proof from Scripture," the article says, "*No direct or categorical and stringent proof* of the dogma can be brought forward from Scripture. But the first scriptural passage which contains the promise of the redemption, *mentions also* the Mother of the Redeemer" (emphasis ours). The rest of the article then explores the "Proof from Tradition" and the "Proof from Reason." In essence, it says that this doctrine lacks scriptural backing, but it has plenty from church tradition and human wisdom. Since Catholics cannot find, or will not acknowledge, any scriptures that disprove it, then it is settled as official doctrine.

The *Catholic Encyclopedia's* article on "The Blessed Virgin Mary" also never explicitly gives a reason why Mary should be venerated as she is. The best it can do is to say that there is evidence that the early Catholic Church (AD 150-400) venerated her. This grudging admission becomes important later.

Worthy of Worship?

The sole scriptural reference that even remotely suggests that Mary *might* be worthy of worship can be found in Luke 1:26-30:

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

While the angel gives Mary a number of high compliments, nothing indicates that she is worthy of worship, let alone being an intercessor between Jesus Christ and His followers, a Co-Redemptrix, sinless for her entire life, or given any other honor aside from being God's chosen vessel for the purpose of the Son of God being made flesh and blood. This is not to denigrate that role in the least, because truly it is a great honor, but God has throughout the ages chosen various people to fill different roles according to His will and purpose—and none of them are shown to be worthy of worship.

In verse 28, Gabriel tells Mary in his salutation that she is "highly favored," and in verse 30, that she "has found favor with God." The Greek word translated *highly favored* means "to grace," "to endue with special honor," or "to be accepted." The only other place it is used is Ephesians 1:6, where Paul says to the church at Ephesus and to the body of Christ generally, ". . . to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He *made us accepted* in the Beloved." From this example, we can see that being "highly favored" is not synonymous with being worthy of worship. Everyone in the body of Christ is *highly favored* because God has accepted us through the justification brought about by Christ's sacrifice.

In verse 30, Gabriel tells Mary that she has *found favor with God*. "Favor" is the Greek word *charis*, which means "graciousness of manner or action." It indicates favor on the part of the giver and thankfulness on the part of the receiver. It is most often translated "grace" in the New Testament. Gabriel tells Mary that she is the recipient of *charis*, of grace and favor by God—the emphasis is on what *God* is doing. The type of grace bestowed on Mary is implied to be sweetness, charm, loveliness, joy, and delight. Again, we see nothing in this verse to give any indication that Mary should be worshipped. She simply received God's favor by being chosen to fulfill this role.

Blessed Among Women

Mary's cousin Elizabeth is inspired to recognize that Mary's baby is not just an ordinary baby, and she calls both Mary and her unborn Son "blessed":

And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, "*Blessed* are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Luke 1:41-42)

Blessed literally means "to speak well of." It signifies celebrating with praises and invoking blessings upon a person. The New Testament uses it frequently, sometimes in relation to Christ, but often in relation to inanimate objects such as fish and loaves of bread. The *Amplified Bible* translates it as "favored of God." Again, nothing in the wording indicates that Mary is worthy of worship.

Mary is not the only woman to be given the title of "blessed" in the Bible. In the Song of Deborah, Jael—the woman who invited the fleeing Sisera into her tent, encouraged him to sleep, and then drove a tent peg through his skull—is accorded this same honor: "*Most blessed* among women is Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite; *blessed* is she among women in tents" (Judges 5:24). Here, she is

lauded as "blessed"—even "most blessed"—but there is no record of a shrine dedicated to her or of anybody worshipping her. She is simply recognized with a very honorable mention for the part she played in carrying out God's plan.

During Christ's ministry, a woman tries to draw special attention to Jesus' mother, and Christ puts things in the proper perspective for us:

And it happened, as He spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!" But He said, "More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:27-28)

Jesus agrees that, even though his mother was "happy and to be envied," as the *Amplified Bible* puts it, even more blessed is anyone who *hears* God's Word and *obeys* it. He acknowledges that, yes, His mother was a *fine lady*—but anyone focusing on the personage of Mary was really missing the point. Christ was interested in the attitude and conduct of people, not their veneration of any human being!

We see a similar phenomenon within mainstream Christianity. Protestants tend to twist the gospel into simply a message about the person of Jesus Christ, and they like to gloss over the message that He actually spoke: "Repent [hear and obey], so you can be in alignment with the soon-coming Kingdom of God!" (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15). They are so in love with the personality that they cannot hear what He says.

In addition to receiving a unique calling and favor by God, Mary was blessed in other ways. Evidence from the few Scriptural references to her shows that she was poor in spirit, meek, merciful, and pure in heart, and so, according to the Beatitudes of Matthew 5, she was blessed. She was undoubtedly persecuted for righteousness sake because she gave birth to what the world believed to be an illegitimate child. More than three decades afterward, there was still remembrance of Mary being pregnant without being married, when the Pharisees snidely remarked that *they* were not born of fornication—implying that Christ was (John 8:41). If the people did not believe that Christ was the Son of God—even after seeing Him live a perfect life and perform many miracles—it is unlikely they would have had any reason to believe that Mary was a virgin when she bore Him. She was persecuted and stigmatized because she accepted a responsibility that was anathema to those around her. She knew the truth, Joseph knew the truth, and of course, God knew the truth, and that was enough for Mary. It appears she endured the circumstance without complaining, and so was blessed.

Pagan Origins

The references to Mary in Luke 1 are the core scriptures that Catholic scholars use to try to prove that Mary is worthy of our worship. It is evident that the verses say little more than that Mary was given grace and favor by God, as we all have. They simply cannot be used as a starting point for establishing a doctrine of worship.

Aside from the little that the Bible says about Mary, there are other significant biblical principles that directly contradict a doctrine of Mary-worship. We could also examine a whole host of scriptures relating to human death and resurrection to show that Mary is in the same condition as the rest of the dead in Christ—awaiting the resurrection, without consciousness, and not in heaven (Psalm 146:3-4; Ecclesiastes 9:5; Job 14:12; John 3:13; Acts 2:29-34; I Corinthians 15:12-55). We could look at a vast array of scriptures that show that Mary-worship is indeed idolatry, because only God the Father

and Jesus Christ are worthy of our worship (Exodus 34:14; Matthew 4:10). We could delve into the singular role that Jesus Christ plays as Mediator of the New Covenant—a role in which He does not need any help (Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). These are not difficult concepts. Nevertheless, there is a vital lesson to be learned from this obviously erroneous doctrine.

The veneration of Mary, like many pagan practices, has its origin in the heathen religious system created by Nimrod and Semiramis, and more specifically, from the worship of the "Mother and Child." Through the millennia, the symbol of the "Mother and Child" has been endlessly repeated; one can find evidence of Mother-and-Child worship in all of the nations in ancient times. Though her characteristics varied from culture to culture, the common element is that the Mother was the Queen of Heaven, and she bore fruit even though a virgin.

In China, Semiramis became known as the "Holy Mother." The Germans named her "Hertha." The Scandinavians called her "Disa." Among the Druids, the "Vigo-Paritura" was worshipped as the "Mother of God." To the Greeks, she was "Aphrodite." To the Romans she was known as "Venus," and her son was "Jupiter." The Canaanites, and sometimes even the Israelites, worshipped "Ashtoreth" (Judges 2:13; 10:6; I Samuel 7:3-4; 12:10; I Kings 11:5, 33; II Kings 23:13), who was also known as "the queen of heaven" (Jeremiah 7:18). In Ephesus, the Great Mother was known as "Diana." T.W. Doane in his book *Bible Myths* sums it up this way: "Thus we see that the Virgin and child were worshipped in pagan times from China to Britain . . . and even in Mexico the 'Mother and child' were worshipped."

This false worship, having spread from Babylon to the various nations, finally became established at Rome and throughout the Roman Empire. James George Frazer in his *The Golden Bough* observes:

The worship of the Great Mother . . . was very popular under the Roman Empire. Inscriptions prove that the [Mother and the Child] received divine honors . . . not only in Italy and especially at Rome, but also in the provinces, particularly in Africa, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, and Bulgaria. (vol. 1, p. 356)

One of the repeated patterns of the Roman church is *syncretism*, bringing pagan beliefs and practices into the church to keep certain groups happy. This is the same mechanism by which Christmas, Easter, Sunday-worship, and the pagan trinity-god were brought into the Roman church—and which most of mainstream Christianity has accepted without question. The church allowed the pagans within it to continue their practices—in this case, the worship of the Great Mother—only in a slightly different form and with a new name. Many pagans had been drawn to Christianity, but so strong in their mind was the adoration for the Mother-goddess, that they did not want to forsake her. Compromising church leaders saw that, if they could find some similarity in Christianity with the Mother-goddess worship of the pagans, they could increase their numbers by bringing many pagans into their fold. Of course, Mary fit the bill perfectly. So the pagans were allowed to continue their prayers and devotion to the Mother-goddess, but her name was changed to Mary. In this way, the pagan worship of the Mother was given the appearance of Christianity, and the course was set.

We saw earlier that Scripture cannot be used as a starting place for attempting to prove that Mary is worthy of worship. The true beginning for this practice lies with Semiramis and the Babylonian system begun by Nimrod. When the *Catholic Encyclopedia* presents as proof the historical fact that early Catholics venerated and worshipped Mary, it conveniently leaves out the fact that this adoration started in paganism and was shifted to the personage of the mother of Christ. Once the Roman Church adopted this practice, support had to be found for it, so it "interpreted" Scripture in a way that

would lend credence to this practice. However, in these explanations it is apparent that Catholics start with a conclusion and then attempt to find support for it. These *Catholic Encyclopedia* entries are excellent examples of this.

Even though the worship of Mary will likely never be introduced as doctrine in the church of God, there is still an important object lesson here: Each of us has his own preferences, perspective, inclinations, and weaknesses. These things accompany us when we study the Bible. There are things we would *like* the Bible to say, based on our experiences, perspective, and particular circumstance. Just as the Catholics created a number of major doctrines out of nothing but pagan tradition, so there is also the potential for us to start with a conclusion or a thought of what makes the most sense *to us*, and then interpret or even *twist* the Scriptures to fit our worldview.

The pagans brought their inclinations and preferences of the Mother-goddess into the Roman Catholic Church, and the church officials then sanctified the paganism. This can happen to us, too, if we do not seek the "whole counsel of God" first, and then draw our conclusions later. This can happen to us if we are not careful to "prove all things, and hold fast to that which is good" (I Thessalonians 5:21).

It is a great irony that it was Augustine, the renowned Catholic theologian, who said, "If you believe what you like in the Gospel and reject what you do not like, it is not the Gospel you believe, *but yourself*" (emphasis ours).

Nearing the end of his life, Peter warns of twisting Scripture and of following those who do:

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and *unstable people twist to their own destruction*, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked. (II Peter 3:14-17)

The false doctrine of Mother-goddess worship is propped up by scriptures that have been twisted—and those who have done this have done so to their own destruction, because they have led millions upon millions of people into idolatry. Peter's warning applies to us, too. It is prudent, then, when we are studying, to at all times recognize our limitations, our biases, and our inclinations, so we can see biblical truth without interference from a faulty lens.