Some of us recall the blond, blue-eyed statues of Mary that peered down on us in Catholic school classrooms, statues we crowned each May to the tune of “Bring Flowers of the Fairest . . .” Some of us prized holy cards picturing a Nordic virgin bowed in humility before a saluting angel. These visual representations underscored for us the Western European image of the mother of Jesus that dominated Christian spirituality for centuries. Whatever became of the Jewish girl who agreed to become the mother of Jesus?

After Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, Mary was depicted as an empress dressed in imperial robes. In Greek philosophical terms, the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE declared Mary the Theotokos (God-bearer)—the “Mother of God.” Icons of the patristic era portray Mary decked in fine garb, holding the man-God, a child-king in her lap, presiding over heaven and earth (Fitzgerald, 83–87).

In the medieval period, Christianity became immersed in a feudal world of lords and vassals. The code of chivalry portrayed “the lady” as one put on a pedestal and worshiped from afar. “The lady” was transformed into Mary as “Our Lady”—Notre Dame. Mary became The Lady par excellence of the feudal era. Jesus seemed less accessible; Mary emerged as the great intercessor for humanity. Cathedrals and shrines were erected in her honor. Three times a day bells rang over cities, towns, and fields. Lords and peasants alike paused to recite the Angelus: “The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, and she conceived of the Holy Spirit.” The Memorare prayer seeking Mary’s aid and the rosary—“the poor person’s psalter”—became common prayers. Christians petitioned Mary for good crops, health, wealth, a spouse, or safety in childbirth. People fervently believed that Mary was their patroness and protector (Pelikan et al.).

The Renaissance brought a new appreciation of humanism. The vision of the

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human person became more earthbound, as did images of Mary. The full-figured Madonna of artists like Raphael and Botticelli depicted Mary with her child, sometimes nursing him at her breast. All were very human and serene, as can be seen in the remarkable painting of Leonardo da Vinci titled *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*, 1508–10 (Norris).

Mary became a figure of discord in the Reformation. Protestants believed that she had been “divinized” in the Catholic tradition. In recent years, Protestant scholars have been reexamining Mary as Jesus’ first disciple (Gaventa, ix, 1–18; Gaventa and Rigby). However, in the Reformation and the age of Absolutism and Enlightenment, when kings and queens were either in the ascendancy or being toppled from their thrones, royalty was still seen as authority. Catholics continued to look to Christ as King and Mary as Queen.

In the nineteenth century a conviction of the superiority of the Nordic people, flowing out of a pseudo-science sparked by Darwinian thought, produced an Aryan Mary. Illustrations of Mary on Christmas cards still portray her as a Nordic virgin. Yet every culture has its own vision of Mary and has pictured her as part of it.

Who is “the real Mary”—the historical woman who lived, worked, prayed, and played in first-century Palestine? The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Holy Land in the 1940s, written mostly in the pre-Christian era, brought Jewish and Christian scholars together to study Judaism in the first century CE as well as the origins of Christianity. These and other documents gave us new lenses with which to understand the life of people in Palestine at the time of Jesus and Mary. New approaches to Scripture scholarship enhanced the Jewish-Christian dialogue that resulted from Vatican II was a catalyst, I believe, for rediscovering the Jewishness of Mary (Athans, 19).

Biblical scholars admit that Mary is not mentioned frequently in the New Testament. The infancy narratives and other descriptions of Mary are reflections of the early Christian communities on Mary’s role in the life of Jesus and the early church. Still, these passages remind us that Mary (in Hebrew, *Miriam*), was understood as a Jewish woman of strength and courage (Johnson).

Mary was not afraid to ask questions! When the angel approached Mary to tell her that she was to conceive and bear a child, she did not automatically respond but asked the question: “How can this be . . . ?” (Luke 1:34).

Mary was a person of generosity and joy! Her visit to Elizabeth at Ein Karem exhibits her initiative in traveling to help an elderly relative and exhilaration at their meeting (Luke 1:39–56).

Mary—a refugee—did not stay in an abusive situation. When Herod was searching to destroy her child, Mary fled with Joseph to Egypt to protect her son (Matt 2:13–15).

Mary had clear expectations of Jesus. When he stayed behind in the Temple, she was not afraid to challenge him: “Where have you been? Your father and I have sought you sorrowing” (Luke 2:42–51). She could agonize with a parent who loses a child.

Mary understood the importance of hospitality. She wanted to save a bride and groom from embarrassment. At the marriage at Cana, Jesus’ first response to Mary’s request was not positive. However, she told the waiters: “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:1–11). She was persistent.

Mary was Jesus’ first disciple. When a woman from the crowd called out: “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you,” Jesus replied, “Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it” (Luke 11:27–28). Scholars tell us
that this was to declare that, as wonderful as physical birth is, Mary’s fidelity to God’s Word is what really made her great.

Mary was a woman of faith. She was with Jesus at the foot of the cross (John 19:25). Today we might think of a mother walking with her son to the death chamber! Who can forget the Pietà of Michelangelo, the marble sculpture of Mary holding the dead body of Jesus on her lap? Mary was faithful to Jesus in life and death.

Mary was a woman of hope. After the resurrection, Mary is described as being with the apostles in the Upper Room as they awaited the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:14).

What was Mary really like in her later years? How did she grow old? Did she have grey hair? We do not know, but we may have some clues. Mary was a faithful, prayerful, observant Jewish woman. Although she was probably illiterate, she very likely knew many of the psalms and other Hebrew prayers by heart. When the author of Luke has Mary proclaim with joy during her visit to Elizabeth, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior,” the words are almost verbatim from the canticle of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10). It not only praises God but, with a Jewish view of justice—redressing the imbalances in society—asks that God fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty (cf. 1 Sam 1:5; Luke 1:53).

Mary would have known the Shema (“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one”; Deut 6:4), the watchwords of the Jewish faith. She would probably have begun each meal with a blessing, like Jews recite today, “Blessed are You, Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who has given us the bread from the earth.”

Although it is impossible to know specifics, Joseph and Jesus, when he was of age, and Mary (although women were not always required) would very likely have fasted and prayed all day on Yom Kippur according to Leviticus 16:29-31. They would have participated in rites of Jewish ritual purification: witness Mary and Joseph presenting Jesus in the Temple according to Jewish Law (Luke 2:22-35). Mary would have gone to the mikvah (ritual bath) with the other women for the monthly purification. A Jewish view of life is holistic. In Judaism there is a bracha (blessing) for everything. How could Mary have lived otherwise? The challenge to the Jew has always been to “Choose life!” (Deut 30:19), a challenge Mary accepted. According to Jewish scholar David Flusser, “Mary is a certain link between Jesus and the Jewish people.” He adds: “Mary also belongs to the countless Jewish mothers who lament their cruelly murdered children” (Flusser, 12).

Too often we have transferred our prayer patterns to Mary instead of inquiring how she might have prayed. (Witness the cartoon of Mary praying the rosary in Nazareth while waiting for the visit from the archangel Gabriel!) Mary is not a figurine in a Christmas crèche or a picture on a holiday card. She was a woman who experienced joy and pain, discouragement and hope, a woman whose courage and insight—born out of her own Jewish religious tradition—were a source of strength and encouragement for the disciples in the early church. Taking advantage of recent scholarship, we can discover Mary’s Jewishness by exploring more intimately her life of Jewish prayer.
References


