

## A Biblical Primer on Mary in the New Testament: Luke the Marian Gospel

### Introduction

A classic place to start for puzzles concerning Mary is the seemingly disparaging and classically contested passage of what I will designate the *Marian Gospel* of Luke:

English Translation Luke 11:27–28:	Critical Text:
As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, “ <b>Blessed</b> is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.” He replied, “ <b>Blessed</b> rather are those <b>who hear the word</b> of God and keep it.”	Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν τῷ λέγειν αὐτὸν ταῦτα ἐπάρασά τις φωνὴν γυνή ἐκ τοῦ ὄχλου εἶπεν αὐτῷ· <b>Μακαρία</b> ἡ κοιλία ἡ βαστάσασά σε καὶ μαστοὶ οὓς ἐθήλασας· αὐτὸς δὲ εἶπεν· Μενοῦν <b>μακάριοι οἱ ἀκούοντες τὸν λόγον</b> τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ φυλάσσοντες.

This passage, to our English-speaking experience, appears to slight Mary and leads to the understandable question why a Bible-reverencing Christian would give Mary honor without reserve. After all, sometimes –though she is elsewhere praised– does not Jesus appears to want distance himself from her maternity?

As usual, we lack the Bible’s framework or context, i.e., a first-century historical perspective if you will, for making sense of this passage, especially when we don’t listen to and speak Greek as a living language. In fact, the Christian Bible-compilers put together for Sunday services their Scripture selections around the year 600 AD. The lectionaries, or blessed biblical readings, were used for shouting and singing aloud at services the Scriptures. Occasionally, the compiler throws us for a loop though: The lectionary compiler doesn’t always give us a continuous chapter and verse reading day-by-day. The most important interpretation of the passage above is hinted at by its Greek-speaking compiler in the Byzantine lectionary. For now, suffice it to say that for the feast commemoration the entry of the child Mary into the temple (November 21), we find the key to uncovering who these plural “people” are who hear the word of God and keep it, just as the Lukan Gospel pericope has Jesus exhorting everybody to do the same. Before we touch on the Gospel reading for the ancient feast, we should turn to Luke who tells us at the beginning of his Gospel (Luke 1:1–3):

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things [...] as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of **the word** (ὁπηρεῖται **τοῦ λόγου**) [...] I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account [...] so that you may know the security of **the words** regarding which you were catechized (ἵνα ἐπιγνῶς περὶ ὧν κατηχήθης **λόγων** τὴν ἀσφάλειαν).

Clearly, we are supposed to draw from this, late in the first century, that somebody was a witness to Mary’s pregnancy, birth, and some facts about Jesus’s infancy. We also notice that Christians

are supposed to be “servants of **the word**” as people “catechized in **the word**.” Obviously, Mary alone would have been present for the first event of the Annunciation, while the latter two events were unlikely to have been related to Luke by the presumably much older Joseph, presumably dead by the time of Jesus’s crucifixion. This already portends a “Marian” angle to Luke’s storytelling of the Gospel. As we shall find out, it likely became prudent to include Mary in Luke’s rather late Gospel (in comparison to Matthew and Mark) only after – from what we can see in both the Bible and earliest first- and second-century Christian historians – the Apostles had finally wrested control of the Palestinian Christian Church from Jesus’s relatives who were constantly a source of tension, not only for Jesus, but for the rest of the Church. They were enshrined in Church history (and this squares with the Evangelists designating them to be troublemakers) as people trying to capitalize on their genetic bloodline as their claim to church leadership instead of the charisms of the spirit and the apostolic succession, whereby Jesus personally chose persons to represent him after his Ascension. Of course, only a minority of these were his blood relations. Now, Luke’s story is similar to an earlier one we find in Mark. While it might be tempting *to assume* that Luke gives an expanded version of Mark’s story, it is also plausible that Jesus’s close and extended family were anything from excited to ambitious to follow him around on more than one occasion, whether to be saved or to capitalize on the Jesus-celebrity as their blood relation. Mark (3:31–34) recounts:

Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

This is very close to Luke’s point that to be blessed is not principally or morally a matter of biological conceiving or physical lactating but of responding to a call or to knowledge of what God wants someone to do. Still, Jesus leaves us with the potential impression that he’s not excited to see a crowd of people identified first with his mom then with his relatives. Luke seems to build on this or know of another instance where this happened. In fact, the latest Gospel, closest to the time when Church historians tell us that Jesus’s blood relatives were trying to take over the Jerusalem church by authority of their DNA, we read (John 7:5): “For even his own brothers did not believe in him.” So, the Gospel writers from Mark to John seem to want to emphasize the dishonorable moments (even if they don’t totally ignore the honorable cousins and familiars of Jesus) of the biological family; as Eusebius reminds us around 300 AD (citing historians who lived in the second century) there was a constant tension whereby the relatives of Jesus tried to ride on his coattails in the 30s AD either surviving, or raising their own family members, always to seek positions of honor, causing trouble for the Apostles and the Evangelists who wanted to convey that real heroes of the Church were equally outside of blood relations of Jesus (not family members with charisms and personally appointed by Jesus among his family to

be Apostles).<sup>1</sup> *Now we have the first century mindset!* We can understand that a tension continued until the first destruction of Jerusalem AD 70 and even into the second destruction of the Jewish nation around 132 AD at the Bar Kochba rebellion. Only after this time do preoccupations about Jesus's blood relatives trying to cash in on Jesus's stardom finally come to a tragic end by death, enslavement, or exile from the Jerusalem Church by pagan Roman oppression and violence (as also reported by Eusebius).

## 1. Mary, the First in Luke's Gospel to Hear the Word of God and Keep It

One of Luke's prophecy fulfillments is to show the relation between the antetypes or imperfect historical anticipations of Jesus and Mary; namely, Abraham and Sarah and how their New Testament realities fulfill perfectly prophecy of Abraham having a child who will be called "Wonderful" (Genesis 18:14), something even greater than the child to be born to Sarah.

Abraham is the first figure to undergo the pattern of the Annunciation in the history of salvation as a preparation for the real thing. This "lesser" Annunciation in Genesis 18 is pretty straight forward: (1.) Abraham is at his tent, (2.) He looks up, (3.) He sees a vision of three men who are one God by name, (4.) he falls down and he washes their feet and afterwards provides them with a meal under the shadow of the oak of Mamre, (5.) at that moment he's announced that he'll have a child of promise whom he understands is in some way related to Isaac but the prophecy keeps things wide open so that only a final child called "Wonderful" will fulfill the typological Annunciation. Sarah, too, gets the chance to appropriately respond at her announcement or Annunciation at a tent, by the angels, about a child of promise, but is rebuked for being in some way less than credulous. As such, we get the impression that the double Annunciation didn't go as well as it could have and that Sarah missed out on something.

Next, in Luke 1, we see that Zechariah, like Sarah has an Annunciation and instead of immediately answering with faith, he answers with something less than puzzled trusting faith, but rather full-fledged doubt. His rebuke is to be denied the ability to speak at the announcement or Annunciation of the Precursor of the child named "Wonderful." The all-important point here finally is manifest, the angel accused him, not unlike Sarah (Luke 1:20): "You didn't believe in my **word(s)** (οὐκ ἐπίστευσας **τοῖς λόγοις** μου)." The first person to whom the word or words of the Lord in Luke's Gospel came and were heard is by someone who does *not* keep them!

Luke expects us, when getting to the Gospel (11:28), to already apply the answer key for the question: "Who are the ones who hear the word and keep it?" After all, the reader wants to be blessed like them! Well, we must read on to find out even more: Next, we turn to Mary. The angel tells her (using the Septuagint reading of Genesis 18:14), that a child called "Wonderful" will be born with the name of Jesus and that she is to be the Mother by a miraculous Sarah-like conception but of an even more impossible manner; the manner predicted in Judges 12 and Isaiah 7:14; namely of both a Nazarite and of a virgin (from her youth with a perpetual Nazarite

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<sup>1</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, book I, chapter 7, paragraphs 11–14 (<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250101.htm>).

vow common to the New Testament period); she will bear the one called Wonderful. Like Abraham, a shadow – or rather overshadowing – will mark the place where Mary meets the Trinity of persons, but this overshadowing is predicted to happen by Gabriel *inside* Mary’s womb, unlike Sarah whose encounter with overshadowing was *outside*. What is the response of Mary? It is a puzzled but faithful “yes,” which is found pleasing to God. The key is as follows: “She was disturbed by **the word** and **reasoned** about what kind of greeting this could be (ἡ δὲ ἐπὶ τῷ λόγῳ διαταράχθη καὶ διελογίζετο ποταπὸς εἴη ὁ ἀσπασμὸς οὗτος).” She heard the word of the Lord and kept it! As such she was inspired to sing her own praises, prophetically honored by Elizabeth in the presence of the embryonic Christ, and finally at Jesus’s birth, gave her breasts for him to suck as the baby Jesus, which leads to this phrase of our Gospeler Luke: “Mary guarded all these reports (namely what the angels **spoke/worded** (**λεγόντων**) [ἀγγέλων]), storing them up in her heart (Μαρία πάντα συνετήρει τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα συμβάλλουσα ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς).<sup>2</sup> When the prophetess Elizabeth recounts by the Holy Spirit what happened at the Annunciation, Elizabeth utters: “**Blessed** is she who believed (**μακαρία** ἡ πιστεύσασα)” (Luke 1:45).

The obvious conclusion that Jesus in Luke wants us to draw is that, rather (μενοῦνγε)<sup>3</sup> than being blessed for a series of biological praises, Mary should rather (μενοῦν) be declared blessed as the first who heard the word, who then believed unlike Sarah and Zechariah. It was Mary’s antecedent righteousness (unlike Abraham), being “full of grace” even before seeing an angel of the Lord, that ensured that she would make the best of all possible responses: “Hearing the word of God and keeping it.” How did she become blessed? She became the Mother of Jesus, the Mother of the Savior, the Mother of the God-man Jesus Christ! If we take Luke to be expanding our information about Mark’s Gospel (adding on some more recorded conversations), then we are even led to believe that anybody who hears Jesus and responds to the will of God, will be honored in the same manner as Mary; namely, they will have a share in the graces she experienced as one full of grace.<sup>4</sup> We tend to identify this with justification or being in a state of righteousness, justice, and friendship with God. These conclusions merely fall in line with a

<sup>2</sup> This insight is explicitly in Augustine of Hippo, *Of Holy Virginity*, in P. Schaff (Ed.), C. L. Cornish (Trans.), *St. Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company 1887), 3:418:

**Mary is more blessed in receiving the faith of Christ** (Luke 1:46), than in conceiving the flesh of Christ (Luke 1:35). For to a certain one who said, “Blessed is the womb, which bare Thee” (Luke 11:27) He Himself made answer, “Yea, rather, blessed are they who hear the Word of God, and keep it” (Luke 11:28). Lastly, to His brethren, that is, His kindred after the flesh, who believed not in Him (John 7:5), what profit was there in that being of kin? Thus also her nearness as a Mother would have been of no profit to Mary, **had she not borne Christ in her heart** (Luke 2:19) **after a more blessed manner than in her flesh.**

<sup>3</sup> The Byzantine Text-Form in the Evangelium or Lectionary preserves the reading μενοῦνγε.

<sup>4</sup> John Chrysostom, who was not overly ready to exaggerate Mary’s holiness, gives this interpretation, as can be found in Thomas Aquinas’s, *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels*, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers: St. Luke, ed. J. H. Newman (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843), 3:409:

In this answer He sought not to disown His mother, but to shew that His birth would have profited her nothing, **had she not been really fruitful in works and faith.** But if it profited Mary nothing that Christ derived His birth from her, without the inward virtue of her heart, much less will it avail us to have a virtuous father, brother, or son, while we ourselves are strangers to virtue. (*Homily 44: on Matthew*)

similarly close patristic reading of the vocabulary and evidence by the polyglot scholar the Venerable Bede:

But the woman pronounces blessed not only her who was thought worthy to give birth from her body to the **Word** of God, but those also who have desired by **the hearing** of faith spiritually to conceive the same **Word**, and by diligence in good works, either in their own or the hearts of their neighbors, to bring it forth and nourish it; for it follows, *But he said, Yea rather, **blessed** are they that hear the word of God, and keep it.*<sup>5</sup>

But she was the mother of God, and therefore indeed **blessed**, in that she was made the temporal minister of the Word becoming incarnate; yet therefore much more blessed that she remained the eternal keeper of the same ever to be beloved **Word**. But this expression startles the wise men of the Jews, who sought not **to hear** and keep the word of God, but to deny and blaspheme it.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The Byzantine Lectionary and the Identity of the Second Person to Hear the Word of God and Keep It

At this point, haven't I proved my point in spades? Isn't it more than obvious that Luke's Jesus was actually complimenting Mary by means of wordplays on "the word" and "keeping it"? Actually, we have one more step to make. The Byzantine or Eastern Roman empire used Greek in its church services and the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic churches of the Greek world still use the very same lectionary texts that started to get solidified around 600 AD. But the Annunciation feast had likely been around since 448 AD in Constantinople (instituted by Archbishop Flavian) and was officially made a Church holiday on 25 March 560 by Emperor Justinian I. Because two other Marian feasts, to mention the most ancient ones, already read from large portions of Luke 1-2, the compiler of the post-sixth century edition of the lectionary at the capital of the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Church (Constantinople) likely had to figure out a new Gospel selection to pick for the newer feast of the entry of the child Mary into the temple. Hence, by making the same attentive reading of Luke's Gospel, notice what the compiler of the service book does for the Mary-Gospel on November 21<sup>st</sup>; it's quite strange! The compiler gave selections weirdly as follows: Luke 10:38-42:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and **heard** his **word** (**ἤκουεν τὸν λόγον**). But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha,"

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<sup>5</sup> See Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 3:408–409.

<sup>6</sup> See Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, 3:409.

the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

Now the compiler jumps forward in the Evangeliary or lectionary-Gospel book to 11:27,28:

As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, “*Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you.*” He replied, “Blessed rather are those **who hear the word** (οἱ ἀκούοντες τὸν λόγον) of God and keep it.”<sup>7</sup>

Ah! We’ve now come full circle; the other major person named in honor of Mary (viz., Mary Magdela) also heard the word of God and kept it undistracted! Like Mark’s Gospel, she uses her “will” or “chooses” to be listening to Jesus’s word. If all the good Mary Gospel-passages were already taken by the lectionary, could not this Medieval Mary-feastday best choose this passage to fill out Luke’s Marian Gospel exhortation by reading about Mary II or Mary Magdalen – imitating Mary I or Mary, Mother of the God-man Jesus? However, a last puzzle remains: Luke is a bit of an “Atticizer” or a bit of a Greek grammarian...This means that we might expect a really clever Luke to be speaking about the two believing women earlier in his Gospel by writing: “Blessed (μακαρίαί) are the **lady-hearers** (αἱ ἀκούουσαι) of the word of God who obey it.” But this isn’t Jesus’s point here, is it? His point is that Mary, mother of Jesus, is the first of many disciples (e.g., Mary II) and that everybody (including men) at today’s meeting with Jesus has the vocation to be a mini-Mary and receive her blessing of justification (oh, and Luke also gets his chance to get in an extra jab against those pesky DNA-fortune hunters still trying to run the church of Christ based upon their ancestry.com profile)!<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusions

Luke opens his entire Gospel hoping that any reader will key in on “**the word**” and “**the words**” to which a Christian is called to be the servant. Immediately following, Mary’s dignity and vocation are unsurprisingly at the center of Luke’s *Marian* Gospel, as the first servant of **the word** who holds at her Annunciation **the word** in her heart and chose the word in an act of will: “Let it be done to me” in her heart. Elizabeth, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, prophetically recounts that this moment resulted in: “blessed is she who believed (μακαρία ἡ

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<sup>7</sup> If Luke wanted to speak about the *earlier women alone*, he would have wrote: “μακαρίαί ... αἱ ἀκούουσαι (blessed are the ladies *who heard*...)”

<sup>8</sup> The application of this verse to all men and women is an insight noticed as early as Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Tatian’s Diatesseron* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 3:195:

“Blessed is the womb that bore you.” He took blessedness from the one who bore him and gave it to those who were worshipping him. It was with Mary for a certain time, but it would be with those who worshiped him for eternity. “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it.”

πιστεύασα)” (Luke 1:45). Mary’s merit was not in physical conception, *rather* (μενοῦν) *blessed is she who heard the word and believed!* Mary proves to be the very key to understanding Luke’s wordplays, then Mary II’s vocation to the word by wordplay (though *not* explicitly “**blessed**” like Mary), and finally even we are extended the Christian vocation to be mini-Marys in Christ by responding in will to our knowledge of **the word** of God by faith or believing. The only people Luke wants to exclude from Jesus’s happy place are his bossy relatives who try to capitalize over and against the Apostles in virtue of the bloodline known as their bloodline, as if church leadership were a birthright to tyrannize the early Church without either the charisms of the Spirit, or the personal election by Jesus. to lead his church.