A Triad of Storytelling about the Biblical Mary

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A TRIAD OF STORYTELLING ABOUT THE BIBLICAL MARY

Bertrand Buby, S.M.*

Introduction

This project and program of the Mariological Society of America, "Telling Mary's Story," is a creative and profitable one for all who have an interest in Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus. The sequence of topics, carefully chosen, offers to listeners and readers a worthwhile treasure coming from researchers who endeavor to make Mary better known, loved, and served. Thousands of such stories about the mother of Jesus have been told. Did not the final redactor of the Fourth Gospel say about Jesus what could easily apply to Mary? "There still are many other things that Jesus did, yet if they were written about in detail, I doubt there would be room enough in the entire world to hold the books to retain them" (John 21:25).

The starting point for many researched presentations and books on Mary is the mosaic of texts offered in the New Testament where she is seen in relationship to Jesus. As Marian scholars we base ourselves on the principle that Scripture is the soul of Marian theology. Exegetes and theologians frequently affirm there are few passages in the Scriptures that refer to Mary. Yet, whenever these authors decide to write about Mary they produce a rather substantial paper, article, or even a book or two! Once the reading of the Scriptures takes place and focuses on Mary we see that the expression nunquam satis de Maria happens. What the final redactor of John says about Jesus is mirrored in what is said about Mary! This is evidenced

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in the great Marian Centers of the academic world: the Marianum and the Marian Library's own International Marian Research Institute. Mariological societies produce new works each year on the person of Mary even from the sparse references to her in the Scriptures! This present 60th annual program of the Mariological Society of America is a splendid example of this and will open for all of us new stories of Mary which ultimately are based on the New Testament Scriptures and even on the entire Bible.¹

This presentation is based on two books by women who have recently written about Mary and my own biblical reflections based on texts in which Mary is mentioned and celebrated in the liturgy. Each writer takes a different approach in drawing up the story of Mary, but all three base themselves on New Testament references to Mary. This is not to say that we have a trilogy, rather what is presented is a triad of interpretations that give us some new insights in the already 2000 years of stories about the mother of Jesus.

The three persons, in order of presentation, are Sister Elizabeth Ann Johnson of Fordham University, Dr. Beverly Roberts Gaventa of Princeton University, and my own faith reflections on Mary's story based on the Scriptures. All three are firmly convinced that the New Testament almost exclusively is about Jesus Christ; it is primarily Christological. Mary has to be seen within this all-pervading emphasis of the New Testament; she is not to be separated from her son, as Benedict Viviano says so succinctly in one of the few mariological references in the New Jerome Biblical Commentary: Verse 11 of Matthew reads "the child with Mary his mother: The magi offer a model of sound mariology as worshipers of Christ in a Marian context."² To my knowledge this is the only use of the word mariology in the whole NJBC.


All three take the chronological approach in presenting the shorter stories of Mary from each of the evangelists and then synthesize them in the progressive unfolding of who Mary is in the New Testament. They follow the order of Mark (circa 70 A.D.), Matthew (circa 80 A.D.), Luke (circa 85 A.D.), and John (circa 90 A.D.). Paul may be mentioned incidentally in their works because of Galatians 4:4-5 and, lastly, the writer of Revelation for the image of the woman clothed with the sun in chapter twelve.

Since all three are interested in the story of Mary, characterization has been observed even though it is difficult to say there is a fully developed characterization of Mary as a full or rounded character. Perhaps, only Peter would merit such a rounded-out characterization in the New Testament or Paul, since we do have his personal writings and a long narrative presentation of him in the Acts of the Apostles. However, both Peter and Mary have merited to be studied by ecumenical-minded exegesis in their works Mary in the New Testament and Peter in the New Testament, books dealing with them in a chronological trajectory of involvement and interaction with Jesus. One of the triadic scholars, Beverly Gaventa, gives us the following helpful statement of Ernst Haenchen who notes about John’s Gospel: “Jesus savors the proximity of those close to him.” We can say this statement helps storytellers be mindful of those who come into contact with Jesus and have a relationship with Jesus—as flat characters, rounded ones, or stock characters.

As we proceed to look at these storytellers of Mary, we will discover that it is an adventure story beyond all telling, even though this entire mariological program makes an effort to do so.

A. The Worlds of the Texts

A helpful framework for discovering how to look at biblical texts is that of the “worlds of the texts.” Each author represents
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a different "world of the text" which helps us appreciate what
the other presenters address in the wide range of stories about
Mary. As a preface to the evaluation and analysis of these pre-
sentations, the following description of the "worlds of the text"
will be helpful for us.

There are four worlds of the text which reflect the methods
and objectives of each storyteller or interpreter of the narra-
tives that are the result of research or creative works looking
at the life of Mary. These worlds are easily applied to texts in-
dependent of the Bible. Thus everyone who writes or speaks is
in some way using one or several of these worlds. The point of
view and methodology for each research and presentation are
seen within the favored world or worlds of the text used by the
writer or presenter.

First, is the world behind the text: This is in the biblical world
of exegesis which is the interpretation based on the best criti-
cal text; its objective is to stay as close to the original meaning
scientifically as possible. This method is favored in the latest
document from the Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Inter-
pretation of the Bible in the Church. It enables the reader to
know what the text meant philologically in its original formu-
lation by the writer. It is interested in the history behind the
text, the writer's social location and intention. David Barr
writes, "The great strength of this historical method in all areas
of study has been to free us from the tyranny of the present sit-
uation by showing us the past."5 The example of such a pre-
sentation of Mary is seen in the ecumenical study called Mary
in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protes-
tant and Roman Catholic Scholars (sponsored by the United

Secondly, there is the world within the text: This looks at the
literary skills, techniques, and styles of the authors who have
something to say about Mary. The Gospels are seen within a
narrative context and style. Within them are such literary types
as parables, similes, connective themes, paradoxes, and imagery.
A study in this world of the text involves determining how the

5 Barr, New Testament Story, 8.
text is put together or its rhetoric. The writer's ethos and point of view are also observed.

Thirdly, there is the world in front of the text: This refers to the way the text stimulates the commentator in the light of our contemporary culture and the challenges and concerns we face when reading the text. We are always influenced by our own culture and background when we read the inspired texts of the New Testament. There is, moreover, the long history of many interpretations of the text which we know of and accept in many cases. Readers, theologians, pastors, and commentators read and interpret the text in the light of today's problems. We see within this world those who critique both our own society and the culture of the biblical text. There is always this need to make the text relevant to our time and our own concerns. This makes this world in front of the text so important for challenging ourselves and our own cultural biases or those of the biblical world. However, this world of the text needs to utilize the other two worlds in order for it to make sense.

Finally, there are the worlds of the text itself. The New Testament is available to anyone who takes the time to read it. A skeptic, a believer, a poet, and a searcher are all able to read this book and understand what they can of it and give it an entirely new meaning. Even cartoonists delve into these worlds of the text of the Bible. David Barr has this important insight, “The New Critics, as they called themselves, argued that works of literature are autonomous and independent: once an author sends a poem out into the world the author loses all control over it. The whole meaning of the poem is found in the poem, according to these critics.” The three story tellers of this presentation are not part of this New Critic world of the text.

These "worlds of the text" are preliminary to what is presented in the choice of the triad of contemporary writers who create their storytelling about Mary. First, Elizabeth Ann Johnson’s book Truly Our Sister offers a theological look at the texts both from the world in front of the text and the world behind the text.

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Next is the presentation of Mary in Beverly Gaventa's work entitled *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*. It is almost exclusively a scholarly research into the *world within the text*. This gives further development of what has already been established by the *world behind the text*. The results are quite compelling and well founded.

Finally, my own study of the same texts proceeds from what is called for by the recent Synod of Bishops in Rome where the Divine Revelation of the Word is emphasized. The texts on Mary are presented within the context of the Catholic faith or what may be called a *hermeneutic of faith*. This is similar to what happens when one meditates and ponders over the text in *lectio divina*.

**B. First Story Teller: Elizabeth Ann Johnson**

Johnson's book on Mary needs to be seen within the context of her first book called the *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints*. Through the framework of this first book we are led to her story-telling of Mary seen within the Communion of Saints. Johnson's story of Mary is entitled *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (2003). She introduces her approach to "the theology of Mary, historically the mother of Jesus, called in faith the Theotokos or God-bearer' envisioning "her as a concrete woman of our history who walked with the Spirit." She continues, "Here I explore the intellectual, practical, and spiritual understandings that result when we place Miriam of Nazareth in that blessed company."8

Johnson develops her story of Mary in five steps. It is specifically, and only, her fifth step which looks at thirteen New Testament passages in which Mary appears. The point of her departure is the global consciousness of women's voices today; secondly, she analyzes two types of androcentric Marian theology that form the chief alternative to women's liberating

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approach and judges them paths to be avoided; thirdly, she explores the proposal of her book and the precedents for it in ancient and recent Church teaching. In part four she pictures the world Mary inhabited, including political, economic, religious, and cultural conditions that impinged on her life. This prepares us for the fifth and final part comprised of a close reading of the thirteen passages in which Mary appears. Since there is need to limit this presentation, I will look at Johnson's story of Mary as seen in Mark and Matthew. Within Johnson's fifth step, the passages of Mark and Matthew are carefully interpreted from a study of the leading exegetes plus her own careful use of the anthropological approach so fully described in step four, where the world of Mary's time is seen with awareness of the various influences that impinged on her life in the first century. Finally, from her own social location, Elizabeth Johnson speaks from a feminist theological view (the world in front of the text) on issues dealing with justice, liberation of women, and compassion. This is evident in the New Testament passages that she interprets.

Her story is not a symbolic presentation of Mary but one based on the historical framework of what the Scriptures say about Mary (world behind the text). Her purpose is clearly expressed with this statement, "Stepping back and viewing the mosaic as a whole, the last chapter situates Mary in the whole cloud of witnesses who accompany the church on its following of Jesus, ending with her own revolutionary prayer, the Magnificat."9 Having been involved for many years in ecumenical dialogue, Elizabeth Ann Johnson is sensitive to other scholars who are not Catholic but study Mary. She also affirms the spirit and great value of Vatican II while paying attention to Chapter Eight of Lumen Gentium for the development of her theology of Mary. Her criticism of past mariological approaches is clear, honest, and well balanced.

Elizabeth Ann Johnson, our first storyteller of Mary, bases her book on the references in the New Testament. Part 5 reflects what is of interest in this presentation. Johnson entitles the chapter of interest here "The Dangerous Memory of Mary:

9 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, xvi.
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A Mosaic." She interprets chronologically the thirteen passages of the New Testament that offer us the story of Mary. The book thus offers the readers a new look at these texts seen from the perspective of a woman who believes in the role of Mary in the life of Jesus and the Church.

Johnson uses a hermeneutic of faith seen in the theme and doctrine of the Communion of Saints which was presented in her book entitled, *Friends of God and Prophets.* To appreciate her study of this doctrine, it is necessary to read both her first volume and also her last one, *Truly Our Sister.* Her passionate presentation of Mary from the two worlds she has presented in this latter work is aimed at presenting Mary as a courageous and intelligent woman of the Spirit who is among those heroic people of saints, prophets, and wisdom persons who form the Body of Christ as the Community of Saints. She tells us that Mary “walking by faith, not by sight, . . . composes her life as a friend of God and a prophet, one who actively partners the divine work of repairing the world." This definitely is an active hermeneutic of faith which is meant to help us in today’s world of globalization, cultural differences, together with fears of more violence, wars, atheism, financial crises, joblessness, and crimes against women, children, and the poor.

Johnson sees the story of Mary as having its foundation in the Scriptures and thus offering us an avenue of faith and hope despite the many problems we face. These narratives that involve Mary in relationship with Jesus are the primary sources for what will follow in the other stories of Mary throughout the centuries. Johnson says, “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.” These stories are the life-like touchstones that make Mary come alive in our daily lives as we read these thirteen segments about her. Johnson’s story telling is done in a pleasant literary style with practical application to today’s needs, as well as, with womanly wisdom and wit,


offered with a courageous challenge. This helps us develop our own faith commitment to the mission of Jesus, Mary’s son.

The author summarizes the biblical approach of the world behind the text through her use of the Historical Truth of the Gospels in order to assist the reader’s appreciation of the context of the written Gospels which focus primarily on Jesus and the Paschal Mysteries. This serves as a lens for unraveling the words of Jesus and the episodes of his life here on earth in the first century of our era. We are led to appreciate the diversity of the individual narratives of each evangelist and experience what their communities of faith passed on to us through the Scriptures. Johnson writes, “Rather than trying to harmonize their different theological perspectives, let alone concrete points of narrative, we need to understand that each evangelist’s voice is important.”12 Johnson affirms that what we have in the Gospels is a faith interpretation in the light of Christ’s resurrection.

Summarizing this, Johnson says, “The story of Mary of Nazareth is one such story. Even though Luke presents her in a positive fashion in his infancy narrative, she subsequently sinks into silence along with the rest of the women in the gospel and Acts. If we are to seek out the liberating power of her memory in alliance with women’s struggle for true human dignity, we need to connect her with other women then and now and tell her story subversively.” She continues, “Like chips of a great mosaic, the marian texts of scripture are discrete images that do not form a complete picture of their own. They are glued into the story of Jesus.”13

To get more into the story of Mary, this essay will focuses on Johnson’s presentation of Mark and Matthew. After these have been presented we move to Gaventa’s world within the text as seen in Luke-Acts and John. In a sense, we are looking at the short stories of the four Gospels offered by these two authors. Both develop them through a chronological presentation. Thus, vignettes can be seen eventually in a canonical or overall

12 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, 211.
13 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, 216.
context while still maintaining a focus for each of the individuals writing about Mary. Both Johnson and Gaventa are aware of the creative imagination necessary to make the story of Mary interesting and dynamic, and they do so with their own skills in research, reflection, and practical application. Johnson states that the imaginative interpretive methods are most favorable to reflecting and writing about Mary: “Imaginative interpretive methods use midrash, story-telling, song, dance, and prayer to bring out the emancipating potential of the text in dialogue with the emotions of the interpreters.”


Johnson uses a contextual reading of these two texts entitling them “Outside.” Mark 3:20-21 and 3:31-35 are the framework for Mark's story, the first ever to be written in a Gospel. Tension is apparent in these two texts and Jesus’ rejection of those who are seeking him, repudiating their claim, and disowning them. Jesus asks who are they? Johnson comments, “As Mark structures it, the scene draws a strong contrast between Jesus’ biological family and a new kind of inclusive community, the eschatological family called into being by shared commitment to doing the will of God.”

There is the interpretive key for this first short story which is easily applied to the call of discipleship. Jesus has his family standing outside. They are his blood relatives, but he clearly distances himself from his blood family. Those listening are his true family and disciples, and they are inside.

Johnson sees Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a foil here. Mary is someone who makes someone else seem better by comparison or contrast. “By contrast, the mother of Jesus here is a foil for authentic discipleship.” Our writer uses information from the ecumenical study Mary in the New Testament to strengthen her point about tension and misunderstanding of Jesus by Mary and his extended family. However, she also

14 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, 212-213.
15 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, 217.
16 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, 218.
makes clear that this perspective in Mark differs from that of Matthew and Luke. Johnson sees Mary as a courageous woman of Israel who is a mother aware that Roman intervention as well as religious opposition mounts against her son; she is a fully integrated woman who seeks the well-being of the son she loves.

Her presentation is clear and accurate. Johnson uses all of the insights gained from various methods of interpretation to create a magnificent short story of contrasts, tensions, higher teaching, and a surprising plot based on an historical event. Mark's silhouette of Mary connects her with her son in the political and religious environment that surrounds them. Mark's story starts in Galilee where Jesus was brought up by Mary and where he learned to speak and probably to read. The story seems true to the background painted by Mark who is said to be a follower of the preaching of Peter, who likewise was from Galilee. Finally, we know that it is Mark who first gives us the name of Jesus' mother, Mary.

2. In the Company of the Unconventional Foremothers (Matthew 1:1-17)

Johnson achieves a remarkable synthesis on the Infancy Narrative of Matthew, while using the results of the methods she outlined in her first short story about Mary in Mark. She breaks the story of Matthew into four parts:

1. Matthew 1:1-17: In the Company of the Unconventional Foremothers

For the first chapter our story-teller relies on the work of Raymond E. Brown's Birth of the Messiah and on Elaine Wainwright's Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel according to Matthew, and the ecumenical study Mary in the New Testament. She succinctly weaves the story in a narrative mode which is faithful to the texts of the Scripture; she demonstrates her theological acumen with the golden thread of faith. The stories of the four women who precede Mary in the
genealogy are the kernel for the action of the power and wisdom of God as it unfolds in the descent from Abraham to David to Joseph in the mystical number of fourteen (symbolic of David’s name in Hebrew). While maintaining her own social location as a proponent of the hermeneutic of feminist theology and working with *the world in front of the text* she states, “The fact that these foremothers, whether widowed, unmarried, prostitute, or separated from a spouse, exist independently outside traditional domestic arrangements makes them ‘dangerous to the patriarchal system.’ As they act, their stories encode aspects of women’s power. And ‘God’s messianic plan enfolds in and through such power.’ Jesus is as much the son of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba as he is of Abraham and David.”

Johnson ends this first part of her treatment of Matthew 1 with a summary related to her title for the chapter: “Outside patriarchal expectations, looked upon askance by others, in danger for her life, her participation in the birth of Jesus is acclaimed as holy. Her female power is subversively linked to divine power and presence. In company with the four unorthodox women who act in the genealogy, she stands in solidarity with others in tragic or impoverished situations. Her memory bears the revolutionary gospel assurance that the God of Israel, the God revealed in Jesus, God’s own Spirit, is with them.”


Johnson presents a brilliant synthesis of the ways in which this key passage about Mary’s pregnancy is interpreted. It is a worthwhile and rewarding summary to read this story of Mary because of the many and varied opinions from commentators who have interpreted this passage. Again, Johnson guides us through the revelatory word with a spirit of faith that gives the reader assurance in what Catholic Tradition holds sacred. This story is presented with nuances, subtleness, and challenges to believers who seek an understanding of their faith.

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Matthew’s story of Mary is one of the most intricate and complicated in its composition. It is a key to the identity of Jesus as from the line of David in which the messianic promise resides. Johnson helps us to see the many “stories” that have been told about Mary through this text. She observes, “The ‘kernel’ within the narrative is the female situation of Mary’s conception of Jesus through the Spirit without reference to male begetting and the birth of the Messiah in these anomalous circumstances.”

God’s Spirit moves amidst the threatening situation to bring about the birth of the Messiah. This story of the origins of Jesus and his lineage had a prior oral tradition that was known to both Matthew and Luke. We learn to read and appreciate these differences in which the stories of Jesus began. Johnson helps the ordinary reader to know of the various interpretations surrounding the density of this mystery of the birth of Jesus. Johnson offsets the unequal quality and weight of those who questioned Jesus’ divinity in the past, like the Ebionites, and those among modern scholars. She cites Luise Schottroff who, commenting on Jane Schaberg’s thesis entitled “The Illegitimacy of Jesus,” states that “measured against the texts, I find Schaberg’s thesis fails to fit.”

Vatican II in Dei Verbum teaches that our faith requires us to believe “not every literal detail, but what God wanted placed in the Scriptures ‘for the sake of our salvation’.” Johnson asserts in consonance with Dei Verbum, “Their point is not to teach scientifically controlled history but to proclaim the good news of salvation coming from God through Jesus in the power of the Spirit and to evoke our life-defining response. In composing his birth narrative Matthew had this purpose clearly in mind. Despite the ambiguity of its history, the theological significance of this narrative of socially irregular pregnancy is the heart of the matter.”

“Begetting through the Holy Spirit, then, is first of all a theological way of describing divine sonship. Jesus is from God. This being the key to the text, scholars are virtually unanimous in ruling out any interpretation that would

19 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, 226.
20 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, 229.
21 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, 223.
have the Spirit acting as a male sexual partner to Mary." Johnson demonstrates her theology of Mary as she continues to reflect on the texts of Matthew's first chapter: "Ontologically Jesus' origin lies in God the Most High. His existence has its foundation in God. He is born wholly of grace, wholly of promise, God's gracious gift to humankind. The novum of his approach lies in the incomprehensible depths of the mercy of God. That this requires the human cooperation in different ways of a poor Galilean couple at first vastly troubled by the gift does not diminish the power of divine initiative that blesses the world with a new act of creation by the Creator Spirit."

"A begetting by the divine power through the Holy Spirit always remains analogous to human begetting and needs to be understood by appreciating the myriad ways Spirit-Sophia works in the world. In this light, the gospel story of the conception of the Messiah by the Holy Spirit places Mary with the life-giving powers of her body at the heart of Sophia-God's approach to the world. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, the Messiah was born of the virgin Mary." In the final pages of this story from Matthew, Johnson returns to her reading through the world in front of the text; that is, through advocacy hermeneutics which present Mary as "free, independent, unsubordinated, unexploited, a woman never subdued." In summary her telling of Mary's story in Matthew is one of the most clarifying syntheses on the mystery of Mary's virginity while never departing from the faith interpretation within the Tradition. Johnson tells the rest of the thirteen passages with fidelity to the text in its historical setting while enlivening it for the modern issues it raises in the mind of the writer and the readers; finally, in a word, Mary's story is told again with the golden thread of a hermeneutic of faith.

22 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, 234.
23 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, 235.
24 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, 237.
25 Johnson, Truly Our Sister, 239 (freely citing Jane Schaberg, Illegitimacy of Jesus, 10, 198).
C. The Second Story Teller of Mary: Beverly Roberts Gaventa’s *Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*

Our second story teller works almost entirely with the *world within the text* of the New Testament about Mary. It is a presentation of Mary that leads us into the literary *via pulchritudinis*. She states her purpose:

Although many previous studies of Mary contain insights of a literary nature, and I have benefitted greatly from those, I am not aware of a study that does what I intend. I am interested in the ways in which these writers portray Mary as a literary character and the roles she plays in these narratives. Rather than looking "behind" or "beyond" the text, I am concerned with the text itself, the way it works, the world it creates. The “glimpses” of Mary I seek, therefore, are primarily literary rather than theological or historical.26

This is an accurate description of someone who writes and researches the *world within the text.* Many scholars sense that the “*world behind the text*” has been thoroughly studied for over 150 years except for grammatical and lexicographical details. We have much of what can be said about Mary in the work produced in 1978 by an ecumenical group of exegetes. They entitled the work *Mary in the New Testament.* Gaventa goes on to remark, “in the rush to read behind the narratives for their historical value, scholars have often slighted the story in and of itself.”27 Gaventa does not mean to produce a life of Mary or a novel about her. Rather, as a scholar she uses the discoveries of exegesis to make her characterization more convincing. Mary’s role is to be seen then within the literary makeup of the texts, especially in Matthew, Luke, and John’s Gospels. Since we have seen how Elizabeth Ann Johnson makes use of the “*world behind the text*” and the “*world in front of the text*” in Mark and Matthew, here only the observations that Gaventa makes about Mary through Luke-Acts and John’s Gospel will be sketched. A character study of Mary and her role within the circle of those who had contact with Jesus are now

the objective. The person or character of Mary is discovered through her role, her speech, limited as it is, and through her actions and the description within the texts of Luke and John. Both evangelists, together with the communities for whom they were writing, had an interest in Mary and her role within the life of Jesus. Of course, Jesus is the only completely full rounded character within the Gospels; all others are primarily seen in their relationship to him, whether friendly or hostile.


For Gaventa characterization means something as part of a configuration of meaning that the work has as a whole. Thus both the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are parts of the story. Characters other than Jesus exist to serve the goal of Jesus, the main character of the New Testament. Mary will be known within this story of Jesus as a character with a role that develops and emerges, showing us who she is in relationship to Jesus.

In Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus we have an example of Gaventa working within the scope of the bigger framework of the whole story. Thus we are led to see how this literary approach differs from an exegetical historical-critical method. Gaventa gives an example from the last pericope in the second chapter of Luke called the finding of the child Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:41-52). Most exegetes would separate this pericope from the rest of the Infancy Narrative of Luke 1:5-2:40. Gaventa, however, asks why does Mary’s response differ in Luke 1:38 and Luke 2:48,50? This suggests there is a connection and that by separating this pericope from the earlier response of Mary we lose Luke’s perspective. Gaventa says, “I shall be concerned with the difference between Mary’s response to the angel Gabriel in 1:38 and her apparent lack of understanding in Luke 2:48,50.”

She already stated in her first chapter that the following questions govern our characterization of Mary: What does Mary say and do? How do other characters speak to and about her? How is Mary described in

28 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 23.
comparison and contrast with other characters? In what ways, if any, does Mary change as the narrative develops? What role does Mary play in the development of the plot? What place does Mary have in the “governing principle” of the work itself? In the light of these questions within her literary skills, Gaventa affirms, "we seek to understand the characterization of Mary in four early Christian narratives, her place in those stories."  

Mary is characterized through this study of Luke’s narrative as disciple, prophet, and mother. These roles of Mary are progressively developed as the story continues. In Gaventa’s opening sentence she tells the reader how different the terrain of Luke is from that of Matthew even though both use the genre of an Infancy Narrative. Always keeping in mind the above questions which she asks of the text, she tells us that Mary has the trait of appearing and disappearing “from the stage in Luke’s direction and without explanation.”  

Thus Gaventa is faithful to the complete text of Luke in the Infancy Narrative and includes the finding in the temple as part of this narrative thus in bold letters she calls it the Birth Narrative (Luke 1:5-2:52). She is confronting the exegetes like Haenchen and Brown who do not follow this same method of literary composition. Haenchen even drops the whole of the Infancy Narrative, while Brown does not include Luke 2:41-52 as part of it. Brown states, “the story of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Jerusalem temple circulated independently and was added at a late stage in Luke’s composition.” She calls this viewpoint an “‘archaeological’ approach to the text, digging through the historical layers to determine what traditions are earliest.”  

Her conclusion is crisp in its criticism: “When issues of history dominate the discussion, the fulcrum of discussion regarding Mary in Luke-Acts becomes the statement in [Luke] 1:38, ‘Here I am, the servant of the Lord.’ That is because the final scene in the birth narrative, 2:41-52, is regarded as almost an intrusion that does not belong. If we are reading from beginning to end, however, the question becomes what it means that the story begins

29 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 23.
30 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 49.
31 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 50.
with the ‘servant of the Lord’ and ends with Mary’s question to Jesus in 2:48 and the narrator’s concluding remarks about Mary’s brooding and Jesus’ growth.”

Since the author is both an exegete and a literary critic she acknowledges what other exegetes have done in pointing out the sources and allusions from the Old Testament as well as the parallels in the annunciation accounts of Zechariah and Mary. However, through her literary analysis she makes the statement that “the annunciation to Mary at virtually every point surpasses that to Zechariah. All of the down-to-earth information that we learn about Mary appears in the description: “to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.”

Luke’s identifying Mary as parthenos (virgin) emphasizes the role of Mary as a young person who contrasts with Elizabeth. “She [Mary] does not fit the pattern of the barren women of the Old Testament, and she makes no request of God for the gift of the child.” When Gabriel addresses Mary as the favored one, Gabriel must be regarded as a reliable character who makes an announcement about Mary. We are led to wonder what about Mary makes her favored with God. “Instead, Mary finds herself addressed: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” The initial word of greeting is tantamount to the ordinary salutation “Hello” or “Good morning,” but what follows shapes the story that lies ahead: “favored one! The Lord is with you.” Here what must be regarded as a reliable character makes an announcement about Mary; she is favored with God; the Lord is with her. In and of itself the announcement reveals little, but it does cause the reader to wonder what it is about her that makes her favored with God. The announcement also serves to introduce the statement that will follow in verses 30-33. “Gabriel’s annunciation asserts that what cannot happen indeed will happen. God is doing that which is impossible.”

“This one is virtually a miracle of creation.”

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34 Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses*, 52.

https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol60/iss1/17
A striking point in Gaventa’s continued comments on the annunciation contrasts with what many theologians or exegetes would say about her translation of *doule*. Gaventa emphasizes that here it means “slave” not servant. Gaventa affirms:

The difficulty with applying the title “slave of the Lord” to Mary arises because many generations of Christians have seen Mary as a model or example for all women and have distorted her slavery to the Lord to mean the subjugation of all women in general to all men in general. That misinterpretation of the text, however, does not give us a license to make the text into what it is not. The title “slave of the Lord” indicates the authority of God in human salvation and says nothing about the authority of men and women in relation to one another. Quite to the contrary, if Mary is God’s slave, then she cannot at the same time be the slave of human beings.37

In the scene of the Visitation the contrasts between Mary and the aging and barren Elizabeth are demonstrated. Perhaps a new insight is seen in Gaventa’s explanation of the graced favor Mary has that Elizabeth acknowledges: “Elizabeth’s closing words praise Mary for her confidence in the promise that has been made to her. Taken together with Mary’s consent to the words of Gabriel, these closing words offer our only insight into why Mary may be said to have “found favor” with God. Or better, since the declaration of Mary’s favor with God precedes her act of consent, these words characterize Mary’s response to the favor bestowed upon her.”38

In Mary’s Magnificat, not Elizabeth’s (as some minor manuscripts attest), Luke is using a pastiche of Old Testament texts. Gaventa sees in the literary context of Luke, “it is Mary who gives voice to these words. Her situation interprets the Magnificat, and the Magnificat in turn reveals something of who Luke understands her to be.”39 This is where the prophetic voice of Mary is seen. This is within God’s salvific plan. “It is not Jesus who introduces that motif (prophecy) in the Gospel of Luke but Mary who sees herself a specific instance of God’s salvation to the poor and the humble.”40

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The closing verses of the Magnificat—verses 54-55—enable the reader to see Mary speaking with and for Israel within the context of God's covenant faithfulness with Israel. This interpretation is close to the exegetical *world-behind the text* which has Mary as "representative" or corporate personality or even "personification" of Israel. Mary has moved from the object of Elizabeth's praise to becoming the interpreter of the Gospel. Gaventa then concludes that "while Mary functions prophetically in the Magnificat, Luke reserves the reference to the Spirit for its decisive appearance at Pentecost" [Acts 1:14; 2:1-4].

Throughout her masterful work, Gaventa gives us glimpses of Mary using her own translation from the Koine Greek of Luke. The literary connections thus become apparent by staying within the confines of Luke himself rather than excavating or reconstructing the narrative. The meaning flows from Luke's composition. Gaventa pays attention to the use of verbs. She says, "Apart from the introductory notice regarding the time of Mary's delivery, and the closing notice about place, three active verbs describe the events, each of which has Mary as its subject and the babe as its object. Here Mary acts alone. No word of bystanders interrupts this event. Even Joseph remains hidden from the narrator's vision."42

The practical act of swaddling the child Jesus is seen as Mary's "nurturing care associated with loving parenthood. Placing him in a manger, an object otherwise used for the feeding of animals, signals that Mary and Jesus alike have no place."43 These are the narrative tensions Luke provides for his readers. "By means of this unclarity, Luke interjects a bit of narrative tension, both about who Jesus is and about where Mary's pondering will lead."44

In the Simeon and Anna narrative Gaventa observes: "Only here does Luke refer to Mary both by name and by reference to her relationship with Jesus. Her name will not appear again

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Continuing her comments on Simeon’s second oracle, spoken directly to Mary, Gaventa says, “the oracle hints that even being a member of Jesus’ own family does not shield Mary from the discrimination that lies ahead. ... this particular oracle with its vivid image of the sword piercing Mary, also at least hints at the pain the death of Jesus will cause her.”

Thus Mary is truly a *mater dolorosa*, even though Luke does not have Mary near the Cross nor at a distance from it with the other women.

As we move into the last scene of chapter two of Luke, Gaventa insists that this last episode of Jesus in the temple and the searching of his parents belongs intentionally to the Infancy Narrative. Thus Luke continues to develop the emerging character of Mary which started in Luke 1:26. As mentioned above, Gaventa disagrees with those who work exclusively with *the world behind the text* which she sees here as an archaeological digging into the text that tries to uncover the layers of tradition and text behind this concluding episode in the early life of Jesus. Rather, from Gaventa’s literary point of view, the reader discovers Mary as an acting person who enhances “the narrative tension introduced with Mary’s ‘pondering’ in 2:19 and with the oracle about a sword piercing Mary in 2:35.” Here the parents dominate the early part of the pericope. Gaventa points out that thirteen verbs have the parents as their subject, for the actions of Mary and Joseph “constitute the movement in this episode.”

Luke continues to have Mary speak and is the only evangelist who does this except for Mary’s statements in John, “They have no more wine” and “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:3,5). In our episode, it is Mary who questions Jesus’ remaining in the temple: “Child, why did you act this way to us? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you in anguish” (Gaventa’s translation). This question plays an interesting

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role in the birth narrative as a whole. Gaventa emphasizes the word for anguish (odynoun = being very emotionally upset). We thereby understand how completely Mary is a mother. "It is the real and present terror of parents who do not know where their child is. . . . Mary's comment to Jesus once again portrays her role of mother, a mother whose search is accompanied by nothing less than anguish."\(^{50}\) Tension is present and clearly observed in this scene:

While the Greek leaves it unclear whether Jesus refers to his father's "business" or "things" or "house," he does distinguish himself from his 'parents' by invoking his obligation to his "father." And the question he asks in no way responds to Mary's concern. Indeed, it may be understood as a rejection of her question, perhaps even of her prerogative to ask a question. The narrator's comment that "they did not understand what he said to them" only reinforces the wedge this episode drives between Jesus and Mary (and Joseph). Like other episodes in the birth narrative, this one concludes with a notice about going away (cf. 1:23,38,56; 2:20,39). Jesus leaves Jerusalem and returns to Nazareth with his parents. The additional note that Jesus was obedient or submissive to them serves to alleviate, for the time being, the tension introduced by Mary's rebuke.\(^{51}\)

The following longer citation is added to further explain the mystery of Mary's "pondering" over these things in her heart:

By contrast, the narrator's first concluding comment concerns Mary and provides not a "conclusion" at all, but instead an element of inconclusion: "His mother kept all these things in her heart" (author's translation). Since the return home brings to an end the temple scene, "all these things" refers not only to what happened there but may include everything that has occurred since the announcement of Gabriel. And, unless we take this to be a very pedestrian comment about the way in which tradition concerning Jesus' birth arose (i.e., Mary remembered these things and passed them on to the archivist), then the comment reflects the unfinished nature of what Mary has witnessed. Just as Joseph's story is only beginning when Jacob is said to keep these things in his heart (Gen. 37:11), Mary's act is not one of mere memory but of reflection and anticipation. . . . Where will she stand in relationship to the child whose birth she accepted?\(^{52}\)

\(^{50}\) Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses*, 68.


\(^{52}\) Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses*, 69.
There are two other implicit references to Mary in Luke: Luke 8:19-21 and Luke 11:27-28. The first is a parallel to Mark 3:31-35 and Matthew 12:46-50. Gaventa states that Luke softens the implied rejection of Jesus’ natural family and his relation to Mary. “Luke does not present this incident as a rejection of Mary, but he also does not portray her as the ideal disciple. What this incident does do is raise a question about Mary’s position vis-à-vis Jesus. Is she an insider or an outsider? The narrative tension that Luke introduces in the birth narrative re-emerges, not yet to be resolved.” Gaventa ends her comments on Luke 8:19-21 by quickly rehearsing the meaning of the phrase “brothers and sisters” of Jesus. She is sensitive to the Christian readers who embrace and believe in the perpetual virginity of Mary (aeparthenos).

The other implicit reference to Mary during the active ministry of Jesus is Luke 11:27-28. This declaration by an unknown woman blessing Mary does not resolve the ambiguity of the last two mentions of Mary in the Gospel of Luke. Here Gaventa summarizes her literary comments saying: “Mary herself comes into view only as the recipient of God’s gracious blessing.”

Mindful that Luke does continue his characterization of Mary in the Acts of the Apostles, our reflection from a literary point of view concludes where we see her gathered in the upper room with the apostles who are named, the community of believers of relatives and friends of Jesus, and many women. It is only Mary who is named among the women. Luke, besides being a reliable author, is an inspired evangelist who understands Mary’s relationship to the Holy Spirit and the event that will constitute the life in the Spirit through the Church. Gaventa comments in this way: “With this brief reference to Mary, Luke resolves the tension regarding Mary that he introduced in the birth narrative. Neither the “sword” that threatened her nor her own inability to understand Jesus prevented her from becoming one of those gathered in the upper room. That these are the ones who are faithful to the “word of God”

53 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 71.
54 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 71.
there can scarcely be a doubt. Mary, who begins Luke’s story as a disciple (Luke 1:38), appears here also as a disciple. Nevertheless, as Luke portrays here the gathering and strengthening of the central members of the community, it is essential that he include Mary among that number, for she is the only figure who is present both in the prologue to the gospel and in the prologue to the church. Especially in view of Jesus’ ascension in Acts 1:9-11, and therefore his absence from the community, Mary’s presence connects this story with all that has preceded.”


Gaventa connects two scenes from the Fourth Gospel through her literary analysis—reading the text within the world of the text—Cana (John 2:1-12) and Calvary (John 19:25-27). They belong together “as the web of connections suggests: the presence of Jesus’ mother at these and only these points in the narrative, the anticipation (in chapter 2) and culmination (in chapter 19) of Jesus’ “hour,” and the references to wine, first the wine of the wedding and then the wine given to Jesus on the cross.” Two motifs emerge in these scenes: Jesus is the “bearer of unimaginably great gifts to human beings” and “ultimately gives himself.”

Mary’s role in this Gospel is that of being the mother of Jesus. This is a constant within John when it comes to Mary’s association with Jesus. “She remains unnamed because what makes her important is nothing other than the fact she is Jesus’ mother.” In being unnamed she receives the same treatment as the Beloved Disciple who remains unnamed though both Mary and he are intimately related to Jesus during the last scene of the “hour” of Jesus. “John’s is a story solely about Jesus.”

The structure and order of John’s Gospel hinges on the key verse in the Prologue: “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s

55 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 72.
56 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 96.
57 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 96.
58 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 96.
59 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 97.
only son, full of grace and truth." It is Mary who “serves to ensure the humanity of Jesus, but that humanity inevitably plays a subsidiary role in the gospel of glory.”

John’s characterization of Mary thus is seen at these two scenes of Cana and Calvary. Although there is a theological implication of Mary in John 1:14, this is not emphasized until the conclusion of Gaventa’s glimpses of Mary. She then sees this verse as the keystone to the ordering of the whole Gospel. Other references to Mary in John’s gospel are very indirect but, they too are helpful in providing background to her characterization derived from the two principal scenes. The texts of these indirect mentions are John 1:45; 6:42; 8:41.

What is important is that Mary can be seen through this method to assure the reader of the real humanity of Jesus because he has Mary as his mother. “That is, ‘the mother of Jesus’ underscores the fact—the paradox—that the Johannine Jesus, who comes ‘from above,’ is at the same time a human being whose earthly father and mother and brothers and geographical origin are known.” She is referring to the indirect references noted above.

a. Cana (John 2:1-12)

There are a variety of interpretations, especially by Catholic scholars, on the Cana narrative. Focusing on this new look at the scene, here is what our author has to say about the changing of the water into wine:

The stage for the miracle is set by what is, on any reading, an awkward exchange between Jesus and his mother. The narrator does not directly describe the miracle itself but forces us to infer it from the action that takes place. And, unlike most of Jesus’ miracles, the bystanders do not respond with awe or amazement to an action of Jesus; instead, the steward greets with some astonishment what he takes to be the action of the bridegroom. Only in the light of the whole of John’s Gospel can some features of this story be understood—and some will remain unexplained—for the story hints at events that lie ahead rather than prosaically announcing a program that will mechanically unfold.

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60 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 97.
61 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 80.
62 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 81.
Gaventa then takes us back into the first chapter. We become aware that Mary’s name is never given in this Gospel, but Joseph’s is (John 1:45). Important information comes from the first chapter about the human origins of Jesus and his identity. We learn he is named “son of Joseph,” “man,” “Son of God,” “rabbi,” and “messiah.” John the Baptist will associate him with the “Lamb of God”—an image seen in Isaiah as well as in the Exodus for the Passover. These are similar to a litany of messianic characterizations through the titles given to Jesus who is the son of Mary. Our writer says, “Given the reference to Jesus’ father and hometown, and the reference to Jesus’ brothers in 2:12, the appearance of Jesus’ mother in 2:1 is not as abrupt as it might at first glance appear. It occurs, in fact, within a small network of references to Jesus’ relatives and his home. The Logos is not a disembodied spirit, after all, but has family and location just as does any other flesh-and-blood human being. Jesus is simultaneously God’s only son and the son of Mary and Joseph.”

Returning to the first of Jesus’ signs (a miracle), Gaventa has this great insight: “Only when read in the context of Jesus’ response in verse 4 do the words of his mother take on the coloration of a request for intervention, but the change between verse 3 and verse 4 is significant.” Here the importance of tension in any classical narrative is seen. Tension makes a story captivating and thought-provoking. The author shows how verse 4 does create this tension. She gives us seven different English translations that illustrate the tension and ambiguities presented by Jesus’ question and comment. Here we turn to the conundrum of ti emoi kai soi, gynai: literally, word-for-word in the Greek, this says “What is to me and to you, woman?” Gaventa comments, “Interpreters therefore inevitably employ their perception about the whole story in order to translate the verse.” She therefore demonstrates the inadequacy of the seven English translations to capture the nuance of the Greek phrase. Her twofold conclusion is “(1) The narrator

63 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 82.
64 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 83.
65 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 84.
continues to associate Jesus with his mother, with no indication that this incident has severed or altered their relationship (2:12; 6:42; 19:25), and (2) the address “woman” nowhere else carries a hostile tone (see, e.g., 4:21; 20:15). Later she states, “The ambiguity is meaningful and moves the story forward. Because neither the question nor the address has a meaning that is immediately clear, readers are invited to look further, to give attention to what follows.” Here the importance of Jesus’ saying “My hour has not come” is commented upon for it opens the reader to something in the future: “Only as the story progresses will the nature of Jesus’ hour as the hour of his crucifixion be revealed (see, e.g., 12:23,27; 13:1; 16:2; 17:1). One must have read or heard all of the Gospel to understand the early hints about the rejections of Jesus.” Mary is necessary to set the stage and to anticipate the last mention of the hour of Jesus in 19:25-27. It is significant that the reader recall that in both scenes “the mother of Jesus was there.”

Despite the ambiguity, the extravagance of the miracle, and the multiple symbols, our author reminds us that the story’s importance “goes well beyond its symbolic or allegorical application. The story is proleptic; it anticipates the gifts of God that Jesus will bring, the hour of Jesus’ revelation, and the need for decision about Jesus.” Mary therefore has a role and function in setting the scene for the first of seven signs; she connects the first mention of Jesus’ hour with the hour of Calvary as well, and she assures us of the humanity of Jesus, offsetting any docetic interpretation of the Fourth Gospel.

b. Standing near the Cross (John 19:25-27)

Gaventa sees this scene as the central episode at what takes place on Calvary. It is “brief and puzzling.” Multiple interpretations have been given to this pericope stretching back even to patristic times. Our author gives some excellent insights into what is happening; this is her skill as a literary specialist on the

66 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 85.
67 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 86.
68 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 87.
69 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 89.
70 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 89.
texts dealing with Mary in the Gospels. First she relates the scene where the Roman soldiers divide the clothing of Jesus among themselves (19:23-25a). Though not stating clearly the same connection with the death of Jesus in 19:28-31, there is the possibility that this too may shed light on the literary skills and techniques of the final redactor of John's Gospel. This may be seen in the use of the Greek expression *meta touto* which, as a conjunction, completes all that has happened in the scene with Mary and the Beloved Disciple standing at the foot of the cross. Jesus knew then that all was accomplished in his historical and salvific life.

Scholars retain some of the earlier patristic interpretation of this scene seeing it only as a sign of Jesus' filial piety; this is primarily an emotional scene for them. Catholic scholars tend to see it merely as a symbolic scene with multivalent interpretations. Suggestions about the exact nature of the symbolism vary widely according to Gaventa. Among these symbolic meanings attached to Mary primarily is the unity of the church, or with Mary becoming the mother of the faithful and the Beloved Disciple, the ideal convert. Still others see in Mary the synagogue and in the disciple whom Jesus loved the church. "Having been denied a role at Cana, during the ministry of Jesus, she now emerges at Jesus' hour to 'bring forth Christian children in the image of her son.'"71 We are led to ask why does John name some persons standing near the cross and not name the others? Are the unnamed women there and the Beloved Disciple merely symbolic figures offered to the reader? There are several Catholic exegetes who deny the historical perspective of Mary actually being at the foot of the cross with the disciple. Gaventa tests this interpretation: "The correlation between named and unrepresentative, unnamed and representative, simply does not hold."72 She sees a false dichotomy in such diverse classifications of persons here at the cross; rather it is a "both ... and" type of approach that gives us more the fullness of the interpretation of the passage. Her conclusion is sharp and pointed: "I contend that it can, and that the

primary function of this scene is to complete the crucifixion’s separation of Jesus from all that belongs to his earthly life.”

Thus Jesus is definitively separating himself from Mary as his human mother. He has given up all that once belonged to him in order to return to God’s bosom as the Word who had come down to earth by means of Mary. The Christology of John’s Gospel has come full circle.

Gaventa then relates the scene to that of the soldiers who cast lots for Jesus’ clothing. There are many correlative parallels of differences that Gaventa points out: four soldiers, four women; the men are not near the cross and they are hostile; the women are near the cross and are intimately united to Jesus in their love, witness, and mourning. The soldiers, of course, are male; the women are not. The former are outsiders; the women are insiders to the story, bonded to the Beloved Disciple in their fidelity and witness to what is happening as Jesus is lifted up and dying on the cross. The evangelist shows the connection by the use of the connecting particles in Greek. These are the connecting particles of men and de which help us see the intention and motivation of the inspired writer. In English they are translated correctly into “on the one hand” and “on the other hand.” We see this happening in John 10:41; 16:9-10, 22; and 20:30-31. Gaventa states, “The soldiers make four parts of Jesus’ garments, so that each soldier receives a part. Counterbalancing this careful numerical note appear the four women in verse 25. As contradictory as the two groups are, these scenes belong together within the narrative and must be understood in light of each other.”

There may be more than an allusion in the evangelist’s use of Psalm 22:18 and verses 9-11. This may indicate the fulfillment of the Scriptures as the motivational insight of the inspired writer. Gaventa then returns to the four women present at the cross: two unnamed and two named. Mary the mother of Jesus is unnamed, together with her sister [Gaventa sees that her sister would not be given the same name as the mother of Jesus], while Mary the wife of Clopas [Alphaeus?] and Mary Magdalene are named. Here the
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designation is not symbolic. “She is Jesus’ mother and, as such, she connects him with human life.”75 All four women are witnesses to the reality of the death of Jesus. This keeps us from having any docetic interpretation in Jesus’ death. “One of them, Mary Magdalene, will later become a witness to the resurrection as she stands at Jesus’ tomb (20:11).”76

Here is another remarkable insight and interpretation from our author, “Of the four women who are present, the narrator refers only to Jesus’ mother as being observed by him. And verse 26 reveals that the four women are not alone, as the Beloved Disciple is “standing beside her [the mother of Jesus].”77 What about the Beloved Disciple? He is seen entering the narrative in the Book of Glory at chapter 13:23-25. Our literary story-teller sums up the role of the Beloved Disciple: “The presence of the Beloved Disciple seems to mark every turning point in this second half of the Gospel.”78 In this final scene at the foot of the cross, Jesus, however, first addresses his mother as “Woman.” This gives us the link to her presence at the wedding feast of Cana where she is also addressed as “Woman.” She helps give the story a glimpse into the “hour” of Jesus which comes to be understood as the Paschal Mysteries.

Who is the son of Mary? At first, it seems it is Jesus. That is true from an earthly point of view of the motherhood of Mary. Gaventa, however, notices this: “Only with verse 27 does the narrator make it clear that the son to be looked upon is now the Beloved Disciple rather than Jesus. Jesus transfers that title from himself to his disciple by virtue of this direction.”79 We agree with Gaventa that this gesture is not one merely of filial piety or taking care of his mother through the Beloved Disciple. This is a revelatory event as we have seen with the use of “‘Behold,’ then an act of seeing, and finally a statement.”80 Gaventa continues to elucidate its meaning, “From this point

75 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 93.
76 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 93.
77 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 93.
78 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 93.
79 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 93.
on in John’s story, Jesus has no mother.”81 Jesus is now alone when he “states his thirst in order to fulfill the scripture ... He drinks the wine that is offered and pronounces his own death.”82 Now the three scenes of verses 23-25a, 25b-27, and 28-30 are connected. “By connecting together these three brief scenes, the narrator depicts the separation of Jesus from his earthly existence.... When she [Mary] and the Beloved Disciple are given to one another and depart from the scene, Jesus’ connections to earthly existence likewise depart from John’s Gospel. Her role in this incident, then, has to do with Jesus’ separation from his own earthly life.”83 Gaventa concludes, “No longer the son of this woman, he may depart to be with his heavenly Father. In other words, as we saw in the Cana scene, the symbolism inheres in the scene as a whole rather than in some quasi-allegorical interpretation of the characters.”84

D. A Third Story Teller (Author of This Article) from the Perspective of a Faith Interpretation (Mark 3:31-35; Matthew 1:1-17; 18-25; Luke 1:26-38; John 19:25-28)

This story of Mary is presented from a faith viewpoint based on the scriptural texts used within the context of the Liturgy of the Word. The motif for this type of interpretation is to present Mary within the context of the Catholic faith and with the intent to help the listeners grow in their knowledge of faith. The writer works from a desire to make Mary better known, loved, and served. Since the Scriptures are the soul of Marian theology, a hermeneutic of faith similar to lectio divina is the world of the text. The author makes use of the world behind the text, the world within the text, and the world in front of the text. He is not a “new critic” of the worlds of the text but only of those that know the text and what its primary meaning is.

1. The Silhouette of a Jewish Mother, Mary of Nazareth, the Mother of Jesus (Mark 3:31-35)

This passage is seen by most commentators as a negative image of Mary. This is especially true for those who work with

81 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 94.
82 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 94.
83 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 94-95.
84 Gaventa, Mary: Glimpses, 95.
the world-behind-the text or the historical-critical method so important to exegesis. From a point-of-view of faith and that of a Marian devotee, scriptural texts are the lectio divina on those days when they are read in the Liturgy of the Word. This first passage, from Mark, is read in the third week in ordinary time (Mark 3:31-35, lectionary # 318).

All are included in God’s plan of salvation. We see, as Christians, that this inclusiveness and universalism in salvation takes place through the perfect High Priest Jesus. Mark calls him the “Son of Mary,” thus continuing, in this first written Gospel, a theme that only God is the Father of Jesus. His only earthly parent is Mary; he is known as her son. Jesus has his purpose and mission directly from God (Abba, only in Mark). We see that the Epistle to the Hebrews (10:9) and this selection from Mark bring out Jesus’ call to do God’s will: “Behold, I come to do your will, O God.”

Inclusiveness and universality are difficult to accomplish. They imply unity amidst diversity. It is Jesus who helps us find the way to understand the fundamental reason for these goals which are clearly seen in salvation history. These magnanimous gifts stem from God creating men and women as equals; they are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27). Jesus, in his ministry of teaching, healing, and preaching, centers on God alone and helps us to realize we need to put our priorities within such a perspective as believers and followers of Jesus, the son of God, become son of Mary for our salvation. God is the point of departure and the point of return. God is to be first in our hearts and minds, then other persons, things, and creation are to be in their proper order within our lives.

Mark’s Gospel is the first to give us an appearance of Mary. The scene, together with the fact that Mark gives us her name for the first time in chapter 6:3, is very important for us in learning how to understand Jesus’ passion for doing God’s will and cooperating with Mary, as we see him becoming obedient to her after the finding in the Temple in Luke’s Gospel. She had to be in tune with God for Jesus to be obedient. But that is another story about Jesus and Mary. Here in Mark 3:31-35, we see Jesus as a mature man who sets in order what doing God’s will is all about. He is called to summon all others to do the same. His natural relationship with his mother is not the top
priority; it is doing the will of God in all the circumstances and opportunities in his life. She, of course, has learned and will continue to learn what this means and how her relationship with him will be seen in the light of what God will call her to experience in her life with Jesus. Through our devotion to her we know that she will be a leading person for us in doing the will of God. It is not due to her being the human mother of Jesus by nature, but, as one who will unite herself to him by doing the will of God through grace. She conceived him first by faith, in response to the call of God, and then by nature to truly be his mother. As such, she always wanted to protect her son. This scene seems to indicate her strength as a Galilean Jewish mother, from what we know about the context of the conflict already indicated by Mark at the beginning of this chapter. She will learn and understand that even though Jesus is her flesh and blood, this is not how she will be related to him as life moves on for her. Jesus tells us that all peoples—no matter what race, color, or nation—are called to become a brother, a sister, and a mother to him by doing God’s will. Diversity, thus, is brought into unity and is a universal summons by Jesus. This happens when we too say, “I come to do Your will, O God!” Jesus emphasizes what the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews also encourages for us: that we do as Jesus has done. Jesus, then, not only says this to those who were inside the house with him, but also includes those who are approaching where he is. We all then hear, “These are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God’s will is brother and sister and mother to me.”

2. The Genealogy of the Messiah, Son of Joseph of the Tribe of Judah (Matthew 1:1-25)

The first chapter of Matthew introduces Mary as one of the five women mentioned in the genealogy. On two consecutive days in Advent this first chapter is read, thus giving us the two pericopes that mention Mary in relationship with Joseph, her spouse. These readings help us to prepare for the birth of the Messiah and his fulfillment of the Prophets. Read or listened to in the light of our Christian faith, these verses are an assuring sign of hope and joy.
In Genesis, genealogies appear for the first time. These help Matthew and Luke as they reflect on the origins of the Messiah from the Davidic line. Matthew does this from a descending genealogy, starting with Abraham, the first believer. Luke gives us an ascending genealogy, leading us back to the first human, Adam. Both are constructions. Their principal source is Genesis and those narratives that are connected to the four women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy. Matthew is demonstrating in a first-century manner the legitimacy of Jesus' messianic claims. The listing is more the work of the evangelist than coming from Jesus himself.

Matthew is an orderly inspired writer who has a fondness for numbers. He breaks his genealogy into three sets of fourteen generations, probably using that number to indicate the equivalent symbolic enumeration for the Hebrew name David. It is important that we read or listen carefully to the first line of each evangelist. Matthew is showing us the Jewish origins of Jesus through mentioning David (Messiah) and all other nations through the person of Abraham, the Father in faith for all monotheistic believers (Matt. 1:1). This first chapter focuses both on the origins of Jesus and upon his virginal conception, presented through the dream of Joseph his legal father and the assurance the angel gave to Joseph about Mary's virginal motherhood (1:18-25). It is Matthew who gives us the belief in the Virgin Birth for the first time. The first seventeen lines are patriarchal and monarchical and lead up to Jesus' birth from Mary alone. Verse 16 is especially important, for it is the first source for Mary's virginal-motherhood: "Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary. It was of her that Jesus who is called the Messiah was born."

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary are the five women who are included in the birth record, giving us evidence of God working through miraculous ways in the birth of their progeny, culminating in the birth of the Messiah from Mary. Despite their difficulties each of these women cooperated in the plan of God for the messianic promise made to David. This leads us to understand Mary's unique status within God's plan for Jesus' coming into the world. It is she who is the summit of the lineage of these women. Joseph completes the legal adoption of
Mary's son, thus legitimizing both his birth and its place in the messianic line, for he is of the house of David. Mary is the mother of the Messiah. She will give herself entirely to the plan of God in salvation history. If we follow her and listen to her we will come to know the full meaning of Christ's birth, which we call Christmas.

Matthew's reflection now turns to Joseph, the spouse of Mary. This pericope (Matthew 1:18-25) is one of the pearls of great price in the Gospels. It is the earliest source for the thin information we have about Joseph who is a righteous person, a tsadiq. Through the text we learn of his cooperation with God's plan received through a dream that tells him not to fear taking Mary as his wife. It is he who gives the name Jesus to the one who will be born. The name Jesus in popular parlance has the meaning of "savior." Since Joseph is from the Davidic lineage and the tribe of Judah, his adopted son now has a legitimate claim to the messianic line.

Joseph is our Advent saint who helps us experience the hopes and joys of the season. He is reflected in the "O Antiphon": "O Wisdom, O holy word of God, you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care. Come and show your people the way to salvation." Like Joseph, we take Mary into the home of our hearts and patiently wait for the birth of the Messiah, Jesus. We recall this first chapter of Matthew and ponder it over as we read from Isaiah 7:14: "Behold! The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son and they shall call him Emmanuel, 'God with us.'"

3. The Annunciation of Our Lord, the Solemnity of March 25 (Luke 1:26-38)

Celebrating the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord is a welcome liturgical event during Lent. We have an opportunity to meditate, pray, and think about Mary, the mother of Jesus. The Annunciation is the centerpiece of the Marian mosaic that we see in the texts of the New Testament wherever she is mentioned, directly or indirectly. Elizabeth Ann Johnson groups the texts into thirteen such pieces of the mosaic; the Annunciation is the keystone piece upon which solid and balanced Marian theology is based. As we have learned, the
Scriptures are the soul of Marian theology. This is in the spirit of both Chapter 8 of Vatican II’s *Lumen Gentium* and “The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation,” a Letter from the Congregation for Catholic Education, issued March 25, 1988.

Mary’s true characterization is seen within this narrative given to us by St. Luke. She responds with great intelligence and dialogues with the Angel Gabriel. She commits herself to God and to the mission in life to which she is called. Thus the story is more than an annunciation account that parallels several in the Old Testament and one to Zechariah in the same Gospel; this annunciation is also a vocation story. A new name is given to Mary by the Angel; she is *kecharitomene*, that is, blessed already and favored with God’s graces even before she gives her consent to be the mother of the Messiah. As a young woman she displays great courage; she is willing to risk, to adapt, and to change her own personal plans in her engagement to Joseph, her intended spouse. Through her questions, her listening, and her responses to God’s messenger, she demonstrates her wisdom. Mary is the right person to be asked to have this special role in the humanity of God’s son who is the Word of God, who would become flesh and dwell among her people (cf. John 1:14).

Luke is the omniscient author of this mosaic of Mary. He already knows the full story of Jesus as well as that of his mother Mary. He writes and describes this scene in the light of Jesus’ resurrection where, as Lord, he triumphed over all sin, over the evil one, and death. Luke, like Matthew, has given us the name of her son. She is to name him Jesus, a popular name that symbolizes salvation. Of course, all of the Gospels are written in retrospect after the resurrection of Jesus. Luke, as an omniscient and totally trusted and inspired evangelist, tells us about this unique woman who is virgin and will be mother without losing her virginity by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. This does not take away from Mary’s pristine and primordial willful consent to God’s plan for her. She is fully aware of her choice and is in no way coerced into making it. Her reply, “Let it be done to me according to your word,” is an emphatic, joyful, wholehearted, and a full voiced “yes” to God.
In Luke's story of Mary we learn to listen to how Mary speaks and voices her prophetic message in the Magnificat, her personal song and psalm. Elizabeth declares her blessed for having believed and thus we see another piece of the mosaic. Each piece helps us interpret the first and centerpiece event, the Annunciation. We celebrate these spoken pieces in praying the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary. Mary has been formed in her faith as an Israelite through the Sacred Scriptures of her people. She echoes all parts of her Scriptures: the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings in her own song of joy and humility. On the feast of the Annunciation of the Lord, the liturgy uses the following verse before the proclamation of Luke's Gospel: "The Word of God became man and lived among us and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14). Therein is contained the mystery of love and fidelity to her role in God's plan within the history of salvation.


John's Gospel is the Gospel of faith and love. These themes are seen in the division of the Fourth Gospel into two parts: The Book of Signs seen in chapters 1-12; the Book of Glory seen in chapters 13-21. The Book of Signs is dedicated to asking the readers to put their total trust in Jesus through their faith commitment to him as a person who is both the Word of God from eternity and the son of Mary in his life on earth. Both the "Book of Signs" and the "Book of Glory" contain a scene that has Mary present; the first is at Cana (2:1-12) where, at a wedding feast, the first of Jesus' seven signs is introduced. Then, at Calvary, Mary stands as the mother of Jesus at the foot of the cross with the devoted women and the Beloved Disciple. The first incident of Mary's calling Jesus' attention to the lack of wine at the wedding feast is certainly a scene that calls for faith in Jesus. His disciples are led to believe in Jesus through this his first sign—through the request of Mary, her drawing his attention to the lack of wine.

Mary is always understood as the mother of Jesus throughout the two scenes. The special meaning of "Woman" is the only other title given to her both here and in chapter nineteen.
We see the motif and call to decide to believe in Jesus in John 2:11: “Jesus performed the first of his signs at Cana in Galilee. Thus did he reveal his glory, and his disciples believed in him.” The “hour” of Jesus is known to us in the theology of John as the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus or the Paschal Mysteries. His hour is thus foreshadowed and proleptically introduced into the story in which Mary is involved. Her most important words and only the second of them is “Do whatever he tells you.” These words are an excellent example of how the Marian thrust is a balanced one and in no way maximalist or minimalist within this Gospel. We can easily surmise that the mother of Jesus is among the believers, since she goes down to Capernaum with his disciples and his brothers, as we read in verse 12.

In the scene at the foot of the cross, Mary is once again there as the mother of Jesus. She is joined with the Beloved Disciple, the only faithful disciple who stands at the foot of the cross with her. The last previous mention of the Beloved Disciple is in John 18:15-16, where he brought Peter into the court of the High Priest. He will be next mentioned as a witness to all of the events involving the suffering and death of Jesus (John 19:35). The language and characterization of both Mary and the Beloved Disciple are thoroughly Johannine.

Whenever the word “behold” is followed by a verb of seeing in this Gospel, a prophetic announcement usually follows. When Jesus sees his mother and the Beloved Disciple he gives her priority in the intimate entrustment which he confers on them. John last mentioned Mary at the Cana scene. Her response, “Do whatever he tells you,” and the fact that Jesus does change the water into wine is favorable to her having a positive and influential relationship to her son. Here, at the cross, the ambiguity about the relatives of Jesus does not apply to Mary. She stands, with the other three women mentioned, as the first among those devoted to Jesus in his dying moments. She now is about to be entrusted by Jesus to a close intimate relationship with the Beloved Disciple.

The scenes of Cana and Calvary are similar to bookends. Jesus addresses his mother as “woman” in both accounts, and, now in his “hour” (meaning again his passion, death, and
resurrection), she is intimately connected with him as is the Beloved Disciple. Jesus words are revelatory and are his last testament to both of them. The "Behold" or "Look" is John's way of indicating revelatory proclamations. The importance of what is revealed is sealed with verse 28: "After this, when Jesus knew that all was finished, he said, 'I thirst.'"

Raymond E. Brown emphasizes the relationship of the mother of Jesus with the Beloved Disciple as being more than the concerns of a natural family. He states, "To interpret the relationship between the Johannine Jesus and his mother in terms of filial care is both to reduce Johannine thought to the level of the flesh and to ignore the distancing from the concerns of natural family that took place at Cana in John 2:4."85 (Contemporary exegetes see the entrustment on a deeper theological level. This is apparent in second-century exegesis in Justin Martyr and Irenaeus who see the "Woman," Mary, as the New Eve. Harkening back to Genesis 3:15, the woman is conqueror of the serpent. The woman clothed with the sun in Revelation 12 is the mother of the Messiah. It is she who has other offspring who keep the commandments of God and who stand by her in the war waged against Satan.

We can see through the two scenes that she is a model for the call to discipleship. At Calvary, Jesus entrusts his call to discipleship to the two faithful persons who have accompanied him from birth (Mary) through his active ministry (the Beloved Disciple). Both are present and standing as Jesus dies on the cross. They thus become the community of Jesus who are to continue his mission: doing the will of God through an absolute commitment of trust (faith) and with the love he taught them. Now all is finished!