

2-14-1977

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Recommended Citation

Reese, James M. (1977) "The Historical Image of Mary in the New Testament," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 28, Article 8, Pages 27-44.

Available at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol28/iss1/8

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THE HISTORICAL IMAGE OF MARY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

To approach this topic it is well to orient ourselves, because there is a question of interpretation involved. The term history means different things to different people. And the New Testament writings flowed out of a variety of traditions. On what level are we to face this topic? I think that a good place to start is with the analysis of speech event given by one of the great linguists of modern times, Roman Jakobson.¹

For Jakobson, every speech event embraces six elements, underlined in the following summary. A *sender* conveys a *message* to a *receiver* with whom he is in *contact* by means of a *code*, and all of this takes place within a *context*. The message is obviously important, but so are all the other elements. This is a warning against reducing speech event to message. Such reductionism is distortion. A message can be fully understood only within the total context. The situation of the persons involved, their relationships, the kind of contact that they want to foster or weaken interact with the message.

Each of these six elements can operate in a variety of ways and on different levels. For example, the sender may want to inform or persuade or warn or urge or dissuade, or some combination of these. The message may be encouraging or pleasing or shocking or deceptive; it doesn't have to be limited to true or false. It may be simply to keep communication open—the so-called phatic communion. The persons involved may be working out of the same ideas and so using common points of reference. In this case, they can omit many details.

On the other hand, the communicators may be at odds; they

¹ Roman Jakobson, *Linguistics and Poetics*, in Tomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language* (New York: Wiley, 1960) 350-377.

may disagree about goals, means, motives, the very meaning of words. If so, the communication is going to proceed slowly, and much of the dialog will probably be about the code itself, whether certain terms are appropriate.

Why do I bring up what may appear quite extraneous to understanding the New Testament? Because interpretation of Scripture is not an easy task, and it is important in doing it to take advantage of all the helps that students of language are developing to enter into the richness of this language event. The quest for the historical image of Mary in the New Testament is really a hermeneutical problem. How can we determine how much these authors allow us to see of the historical reality of the Mother of Jesus? What Marie Isaacs wrote of Luke's infancy narrative can be applied to all the writings about Mary in the New Testament, "Luke's motive is not primarily to satisfy the need for biographical data about the events of the nativity, but to provide theological insight into their significance."²

At this writing an ecumenical group is in the process of preparing a work on Mary in the New Testament, a companion to the successful study *Peter in the New Testament*. One of the editors of both studies is Raymond E. Brown, S.S., who has already published an article entitled *The Meaning of Modern New Testament Studies for an Ecumenical Understanding of Mary*. He concludes that Mary is consistently symbolic in character and, consequently, "the New Testament does not give us much knowledge of Mary as a historical character."³

What then can we hope to achieve in this paper? The purpose of this study will be to use some of the insights of contemporary language studies to analyze passages in the New Testament referring to Mary in the hope of attaining more

² Marie E. Isaacs, *Mary in the Lucan Infancy Narrative*, in *The Way*, Supplement no. 25: *God and Mary* (summer 1975) 84-85.

³ Raymond E. Brown, *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church* (Glen Rock, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1975) 105.

specific understanding of Mary in her historical role. Attention to aspects of language other than the imparting of information will show that references to Mary in the New Testament offer more on her historical image than many commentators concede.

We are involved in an interpretation, that is, in the method of finding meaning in a text. The New Testament writers did not use the term "history," and they did not work out of categories of modern scientific history. Modern critical historiography stresses immediate causes and verifiable influences. It now uses data of behavioral sciences to elaborate on forces at work in a civilization. The critical historian wants a certain neutrality to retain objectivity.

But behavioral sciences themselves reveal how deceptive the quest for pure neutrality is. All persons are subject to ongoing conscious and unconscious influences that enter into every statement and judgment. In the light of this reality, Walter Wink has called into question the so-called objectivity of critical biblical studies. His opening sentence states his thesis boldly, "Historical biblical criticism is bankrupt."⁴ Wink reminds us that the biblical writers were not neutral observers but committed witnesses to faith. They rejected the reducing of reality to human horizons.

The recognition of the complexity of reality, the different levels of being and the diverse elements involved in a speech event must be considered in dealing with the historical image of Mary in the New Testament. With these factors in mind, we can now turn to the texts relating to Mary in the New Testament.

In the common synoptic tradition—omitting both John and the infancy narratives—only three scenes deal in any way with Mary.

(1) The first scene, the only one in which Mary is actually involved, takes place in the context of a controversy (*Mk.*

⁴ Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973) 1.

3:31-35; *Mt.* 12:46-50; *Lk.* 8:19-21).⁵ The mother and brothers of Jesus are seeking Jesus but cannot get to Him because of the crowd. Word is passed into Him that they want Him. Jesus replies with a statement about His real brothers and sisters.

An interesting aspect of this scene in terms of the historical image of Mary in the New Testament is the difference in the answer of Jesus in Luke's Gospel. In both Mark and Matthew Jesus identifies the crowd listening to Him as His mother and brothers. Luke shortens the dialog, probably because of its similarity to his scene of the finding in the Temple, in accordance with his practice of avoiding repetition. Jesus then explains what is true relationship to Himself. In the first two gospels, the "brother and sister and mother" of Jesus are those who do the will of God (*Mk.* 3:35) or the will of the heavenly Father (*Mt.* 12:50). In Luke's account, Jesus responds, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear and do the word of God" (*Lk.* 8:21).

(2) In the second case (*Mk.* 6:3; *Mt.* 13:55), she does not appear, but the home-town audience is amazed at the teaching of Jesus. They ask how Jesus possesses such wisdom. They reject the possibility it can result from His family background with the rhetorical question, "Isn't his mother's name Mary?" They are acquainted with her and know that she is simply one of them, an uneducated peasant. Obviously she cannot be the cause of His greatness.

Despite the difference in actual wording, the thrust in all three gospels is to shift the basis of relationship to Jesus from a physical to a spiritual level and root it in obedience to God's plan. In itself, this tells us little about the sentiments of Mary. There is neither praise nor blame. It is not correct to call these

⁵ The saying is found also in the *Coptic Gospel of Thomas* no. 99. It is possible that at one stage of tradition this scene was linked to *Mk.* 3:20-21, and Mary was included in the phrase, "those around Jesus." But in the present text of *Mark* this identification is not certain.

scenes negative toward Mary; rather they are noncommittal. They make one point, however: her physical relationship to Jesus offers her no privileged role in the community.

(3) *Lk.* 11:27-28 contains a reference to Mary in the cry of a woman impressed by the career of Jesus. She praises the one who had the privilege of bearing and nursing Jesus. He replies that the truly blessed are those who hear and keep God's word. In itself, this does not seem to advance our knowledge of Mary, but read in connection with her activity of pondering the events of the infancy of Jesus in her heart (*Lk.* 2:19,51), the answer of Jesus points to the response of Mary to her special place in the life of Jesus. In this sense R. Laurentin summarizes Luke's intention when he writes, "Jesus' intention is simply to make unequivocally clear the difference between the plan of the flesh and the plan of faith. Luke gave especially sharp witness to this lesson (*Lk.* 12:51-53 and *Mt.* 10:35; see *Lk.* 14:26 and *Mt.* 10:37)."⁶

On the basis of the synoptic tradition alone, the historical image of Mary is extremely meager. We can agree with M. Isaacs that the evangelists were not warning against undue reverence for Mary and that, "In none of the synoptic gospels does Mary have a role to play in the ministry of Jesus."⁷ These short scenes cut off any privileged role for Mary or any other relative of Jesus on purely physical grounds.

To make any positive contribution to the topic we must turn to the remaining parts of the New Testament: Acts of the Apostles, the infancy narrative of Luke, and two scenes from the Gospel of John. It is true that Mary is mentioned in the infancy narrative of Matthew, but the account centers on Joseph. Mary appears primarily in relation to the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies rather than for any historical data about herself.

⁶ René Laurentin, *Jésus au temple. Mystère de Paques et foi de Marie en Luc 2*, 48-50 (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1966) 124.

⁷ Mary E. Isaacs, *op. cit.*, 84.

For understanding these tests I think that Acts 1:14 is crucial. It is a brief note on the primitive community after the Ascension. "These (the eleven apostles) were all devoted to prayer with one mind along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers." This verse embodies the historical tradition of Mary's presence among the apostles from the earliest period. Surely it was this tradition that was searching for interpretation. Jesus had not elevated her to perform any particular function after His death any more than He had associated her with His earthly ministry. Just what is her status in the community?

LUKE'S INFANCY NARRATIVE

Mary was a presence in the apostolic Church. Her influence was felt. But what was its basis? Jesus had rejected mere physical relationship. It was left to the reflection of the community to find the basis. And this is the reflection that we find in Luke and John. For Luke's infancy narratives I rely on the work of R. Laurentin.⁸ After his study on the structure and theology of this part of Luke's Gospel, he returned to a more detailed study of the scene of the child Jesus being found by His parent in the Temple.

What emerges from Luke's presentation of this event is a dramatization of the separation of Jesus from His human parents. When Mary asks Jesus why He has stayed behind without telling her or His father Joseph, Jesus answers by a strong affirmation of God as His Father. He was impelled to remain in His Father's house because He must do God's will alone. Luke adds the comment that Mary did not understand what Jesus was referring to. Yet she was willing to learn because she "kept all of these words in her heart" (*Lk.* 2:51).

Luke's way of having Jesus pose the question indicates that

⁸ In addition to the work cited in note 6, see R. Laurentin, *Structure et théologie de Lc 1-2* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1957).

Mary had a special understanding of the role of Jesus. The question in the Greek text implies the answer, "Yes: I knew that you had to take this course of action." Whether Luke wants us to see this text as referring to the past or to the future is disputed. Laurentin affirms that Jesus here presupposes a special knowledge of the Incarnation on the part of Mary. At this time, by asserting His independence from the control of Mary and Joseph, Jesus was also instructing them about their responsibility to submit to God's will also. His question is an invitation to them "to pass from one level of understanding to another by reflecting on what they already know, that is, what was given by faith."⁹

M. Isaacs, on the other hand, sees this scene as introductory to the public ministry of Jesus, as a "bridge" to the adult ministry. As a result, "Mary's lack of understanding is not primarily with regard to the events of the nativity which have just taken place, but has a forward reference—to the significance of the ministry which is about to begin."¹⁰ In either case, Luke makes clear that Mary is being called to go beyond her present relationship and to enter into the growth process that is an integral part of faith.

This scene moves beyond the noncommittal position about Mary of the ministry scenes, and helps to explain them. To enter into the realm of faith and identification with the mission of Jesus, even Mary had to leave the realm of flesh. Luke shows that Mary began the journey of faith by personal prayer, by trust in the vision of her son, and by becoming His disciple. Luke thus envisions Mary as a person who was open to God's breaking into her life and who responded by obedient faith. The focus remains on Jesus. This scene reveals Him as transcendent Son of God. The inclusion of Mary is Luke's way of rooting her historical role in response to God's revelation. Human destiny is in the plan of God. God reveals Himself for

⁹ Laurentin, *Jésus au temple*, 38.

¹⁰ Isaacs, *op. cit.*, 87.

us and for our salvation. Faith is not escape from history but the affirmation that human destiny is not confined to one's personal history but a gift of the saving God.

Luke's infancy narrative, of course, instructs us about many aspects of the role that Mary plays in God's plan. But to go into that involves us in the theology of Luke and his use of the symbolism of the Old Testament. And so we must turn now to the final writer of the New Testament who can shed more light upon the historical image of Mary in the apostolic Church. This is John, who devotes two scenes to Mary at crucial points in the life of Jesus.

THE MOTHER OF JESUS IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

The striking omission of the personal name of Mary in the Gospel of John and his referring to her by the title "mother of Jesus" continues the trend of the synoptics to deal with Mary purely in terms of Jesus and His mission. Her personal history is significant only as the arena of God's activity. The two must not be isolated. No element of human existence falls outside of God's concern, and every dimension of human life takes on new reality in Jesus.

Mary has a role in the Cana marriage narrative which John presents as the first sign performed by Jesus. Much has been written about this scene, which is rich in themes John develops in his gospel.¹¹ Before investigating its contribution to the historical image of Mary, it is important to keep in mind the difference between the way the narrative unfolds and the reliability of its use for completing the historical image of Mary. To refer to the schema of Jacobson described above, the message depends upon the context in which it is delivered. John supplies his readers with the general context of his message when he writes that what he has put down is only a small part of all

¹¹ See J. P. Michaud, *Le Signe de Cana* (Montréal, 1963) for an extensive bibliography.

that Jesus did. What he has written is offered "that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Anointed, the Son of God, and in believing have life in his name" (Jn. 20:31).

John's Gospel, then, is not merely informational but performative in the sense that J. L. Austin used the term. He means to do something, to communicate the very power of Christ's signs. Just as the actual signs of Jesus brought life to His disciples, so this literary presentation of this will do the same. What role does history play in this performance? What is the relationship between historical fact and faith?

J. R. Skeets has addressed himself to this question in relation to the Virginal birth of Jesus. He points out:

Our faith is not only the affirmation of a truth, but of the fact that the truth has come to us in and through a spatio-temporal process of revelation. History, therefore, belongs to the truths of faith as the medium through which and in which revelation takes place. Christian faith is not only an affirmation of *what* is true in God's revelation, but faith in the *way* that we come to the truth, namely, through God's free communication of himself through persons and events of history.¹²

Skeets goes on to point out that faith "does not create evidence. Rather it empowers one to see evidence."¹³

Applied to Cana, we can say that the message of the scene falls within the domain of fact. This does not mean that John is simply transcribing conversations. We shall see that he used a different method. But it does mean that John does want to relate events that brought us to new life. When we read the Cana passage, an observation of Laurentin helps us to deal with John's method. He points out that the same group of themes that appeared in Luke's infancy narrative ap-

¹² J. R. Skeets, *Virginal Conception—Fact and Faith*, in *Chicago Studies* 14 (Fall 1973) 286.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 293.

pears also at Cana, namely, that God is the Father of Jesus; that His will takes precedence over family ties, and that Jesus has the duty to separate Himself from family ties and pursue His Father's will.¹⁴

One of the secondary purposes of the Cana incident is to indicate how the activity of Mary responds to this divine will in its historical unfolding. But once more it is helpful to remind ourselves that John presents his gospel in the form of a drama. For some appreciation of his use of dialog material the remark of John McHugh about the writings of the historians Thucydides and Livy is helpful. McHugh remarks that we must distinguish between reporting events that happened and reporting events exactly as they happened. Both of these methods are valid ways of dealing with history. "What can be deduced from the speeches both in Thucydides and in Livy is that in ancient times interpretation was respected as a most important part of truly historical writing."¹⁵

True to his goal of dealing with the signs that Jesus performed as a means of deepening faith, John chooses those that he can present in dramatic form in a way that communicates the mystery of redemptive Incarnation. He translates events that took place rather than narrate how they took place. For example, *John* 2:2 says that the disciples of Jesus were invited to the marriage. Yet, in the previous section John has just described how Jesus recruited these men while He was in Judea. He did not have disciples when He left Galilee. Obviously the family at Cana could not have invited those men.

John is arranging the event to highlight the sign that Jesus will work. The setting, the kind of sign, the persons involved—all of these will play a part in the revelation that leads to faith. The fact that he gives such a large role to Mary shows that he wants to teach something about her relationship to the

¹⁴ Laurentin, *op. cit.*, 124.

¹⁵ John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1975) 127.

mission of Jesus and the manifestation of His glory. Just as the scene of the finding of Jesus in the Temple was a hinge for Luke, so this scene acts as a turning point in John—the first sign. Barnabas Lindars has suggested that the basis of the Cana incident was a story that took place before the public life of Jesus, perhaps even a childhood story. Working with this popular story, much like those in apocryphal gospels written to satisfy biographical curiosity, John enriched it with theological insight and used it as the first sign of Jesus.¹⁶ John's personal comment at the end of the story justifies his approach. He wants to show that Jesus aroused faith in His disciples by revealing His glory (*Jn.* 2:11).

What is to be noted here is that John does not say that the sign led Mary to believe. On the contrary, the whole thrust of the narrative is that she believed in Jesus even before He worked the sign and she encouraged the waiters to trust in Him. The crucial verses for understanding the historical image of Mary are those devoted to the interchange between Jesus and His mother. Mary is pictured as being present at the wedding from the start, before the arrival of Jesus.

The story unfolds after the manner of a classical drama with only two speaking characters on stage at one time. This technique appears in other scenes in John, who makes it the vehicle for revelation. Some commentators miss this technique and approach the dialog as if it were the record of a historical conversation. The real purpose of this dialog is to portray a shift of relationship between Jesus and Mary. To grasp the exact nature of the shift, we must understand that John starts off on one level and then moves into a second level.

(1) *The first level.* The wedding starts off as an ordinary village wedding, a homey scene of a family that has prepared carefully for this great day, saving up provisions and managing them so that the event will be a great success. But then an

¹⁶ Barnabas Lindars, *Two Parables in John*, in *New Testament Studies* 16 (1969-70) 318-329.

unexpected turn of events occurs. This is clearer if we accept the longer reading of verse 3, found in the original reading of the Sinaiticus manuscript and in the Old Latin, and accepted by the Bible of Jerusalem and J. N. Sanders,¹⁷ "They had no wine because the wine for the marriage had given out. Then the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.'"

We get the picture of Jesus arriving just about when the feast is about to break up. What must have been completely unnerving for the family is that He arrives with a group of five husky companions hungry from their long walk from Judea. The whole scene is quite earthy. He has created a minor crisis. Mary, who has been with the family all the time, senses this immediately and takes control. She will save the hosts from embarrassment by getting Jesus to leave. Acting on her natural authority as His mother, she approaches Jesus and hints that He should leave by telling Him the situation, "They have no wine." She knows that this will be enough. Up to this point the activity is all within the realm of earthly horizons and Mary appears as a dutiful mother.

(2) *The second level.* The unexpected response of Jesus suddenly turns this quiet village wedding into the scene of divine activity. With His response Jesus suddenly takes over and transforms the scene into a cosmic drama. The literary vehicle effecting this transformation is a double question, a technique found again in the dialog with Nicodemus (*John* 3:4). We must look at these questions carefully to find how they operate. The word-for-word translation of the first question is, "What to me and to thee, woman?" This question is found several times in the Old Testament at moments of crisis to call a dialog partner into a reappraisal of the relationship. In the words of St. Francis de Sales, it is language that only love can understand.¹⁸ In modern linguistic terminology it is

¹⁷ J. N. Sanders, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 107.

¹⁸ St. Francis de Sales, *Collected Sermons*, no. 34, *Oeuvres*, 10 (Annecy

a performative message, stirring up the hearer to act. The title of address indicates the basis upon which she is to act. On the first level Mary was acting out of her authority as mother. But by the title he uses, Jesus tells her to act as "woman." What does this mean? Using the context of John's Gospel and the opening words "in the beginning," taken from the opening of the creation story in the Book of Genesis, we can read this title in terms of the theme of the new creation. Jesus assumes the role of the new Adam, and Mary is Eve, His helpmate. Jesus is reversing roles. He is calling her to enter a new relationship with Him in the work of redemptive Incarnation.

The invitation to act comes in the form of the second question addressed to her by Jesus. "Hasn't my hour come?" Again the question is a way of arousing the hearer to act and retains all the openness of a loving appeal, as has been explained carefully by A. Vanhoye.¹⁹ Mary had assumed that Jesus was still subject to her. Jesus points out that the situation has changed. The Father has intervened and is calling Him to His hour. Jesus must break away from the ties of His human family and reveal the glory of the heavenly Father.

John indicates the total response of Mary to her new role. She grasps the change and obeys completely. There is a change of scene. The characters are Mary and the waiters. She says to them, "Do whatever he tells you." Again, this is not some trivial sentence but a quote from an important scene in the Book of Genesis. Mary uses the very words that the pharaoh of Egypt used to the starving Egyptians during the famine. They are to go to Joseph and find salvation in obeying his orders. Here Mary's role ends; she prepares for the saving intervention of Jesus.

His revelation at Cana goes beyond the subject of this paper. But the verses dealing with Mary indicate that John is present-

Edition) 1-17.

¹⁹ A. Vanhoye, *Interrogation johannique et exégèse de Cana* (JN 2, 4), in *Biblica* 55 (1974) 157-167.

ing a picture of her historical relationship to Jesus. Or, more accurately, he is painting the transition from one bond to a deeper one. Her privilege as mother of Jesus simply provided the occasion to practice the living faith that alone is the door to salvation.

The historical image of Mary as seen by the fourth evangelist shines through the Cana narrative even though it is presented in dramatic form. John sees Mary as going through a historical transformation in her relationship to Jesus through her acceptance of the challenge He put before her. That challenge flowed out of His own consciousness of His responsibility as Son of God and His desire for her to recognize and bear witness to it. What Laurentin said of Luke's "third dimension" in his infancy narrative can also be applied to John's method. "And so there is a loyal and true historical tenor, but is it not a question of 'history' in the modern sense?"²⁰

For John, what specifies the historical existence of Mary is her willingness to let her life be governed by the new relationship to which her Son calls. She is a woman of faith. John is not directly interested in the circumstances in which Mary became aware of this invitation but in the reality of her choice. In choosing to live by faith in Jesus, Mary becomes model for the process of salvation. A. Vanhoye captures the implications of revelation as a call to faith as it comes through in John's use of the question technique. "Especially for John, a question is a question and leaves open different possibilities for response, expected and unexpected, superficial and profound."²¹

The "yes" answer is called for and expected in the immediate context of Jesus' question, "Hasn't my hour come?" Mary speaks that "yes" and her faith paves the way for this manifestation of His glory. And yet this moment, this sign at Cana, does not exhaust that glory. This is only the first step in a long journey of growing faith. John places in contrast the be-

²⁰ Laurentin, *op. cit.*, 83.

²¹ A. Vanhoye, *art. cit.*, 161.

ginning of the journey, when Mary is linked to Jesus by her physical role and the saving "hour" of Jesus that is the manifestation of the Father's will. Vanhoye warns against "psychologizing" the Cana scene and trying to analyze emotions. John writes on another level, to portray Jesus as Messiah. In making this presentation, he must "break the ordinary course of events and impose on them a new orientation."²² Mary's influence must change. She undergoes "a sort of conversion,"²³ advancing to a new horizon out of which all decisions are to be made.

The importance of this transition points to the historical dimension of all faith, not only that of Mary. Through her actual choice she became the guide for every conversion to faith, without which there is no salvation. Only those who lose their lives find them in Christ. Cana thus represents both historical and theological continuity with the portrait of Mary in the synoptic tradition. It adds one important historical detail, namely, to indicate that Mary accepted the invitation to play a role in the unfolding of Jesus' messianic mission. As such it serves as a bridge to the final appearance of Mary in the gospels, her place at the cross of Jesus.

This paper is not meant to deal with theological elaborations of the scene of Mary on Calvary, which has been treated by other writers.²⁴ Does John wish the scene to provide any information of a historical nature? Vanhoye finds a significant addition. John wishes to show that the dying Jesus established a new relationship between Mary and His new status. "Up

²² Vanhoye, *ibid.*, 164.

²³ Vanhoye, *ibid.*, 165.

²⁴ For example, A. Feuillet has three articles on the scene as the basis of the spiritual motherhood of Mary in *Biblica* 47 (1966), and the theology is elaborated by Max Zerwick, *The Hour of the Mother—John 19:25-27*, in *The Bible Today Reader* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1973) 329-336. For a more comprehensive survey of the whole range of Marian theology, see Eamon R. Carroll, *Theology on the Virgin Mary*, in *Theological Studies* 37 (1976) 253-289.

to this point she was the mother from whom he came forth. Now it is rather she who comes forth from him."²⁵ But again, is this insight based on historical fact? There are two difficulties: first, the careful artistic structure of the crucifixion scene in the Gospel of John seems to militate against seeing this as a description of the unfolding of historical events. Second, the presence of Mary is contrary to indications in the synoptic gospels. It looks like an instance of what Donald Senior said in connection with the accounts of miracles in the synoptic gospels. "Many details and even some entire incidents recorded by the Gospels may have been inflated or even added as the Gospel tradition developed."²⁶

At least this much is certain: this scene does relate to the historical information in the synoptic tradition that portrays Mary as one called to respond in faith. Notwithstanding her unique privilege as mother of Jesus, Mary must center her life on Him and on obedience to His mission. She becomes the perpetual reminder that salvation comes through faith. The New Testament never puts Mary at the center of the stage. Her presence at critical turning points in the life of Jesus calls attention to the personal involvement demanded by the proclamation of the Good News. John's repetition of this message at this climactic hour of Jesus says once again that history is not a separate category from revelation. God's plan of revelation unfolds historically. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the disciples of Jesus were able to understand what God had done in and through Mary, and to integrate that into an understanding of their own destiny.

CONCLUSION

If we simply count the number of times that Mary appears in the gospels, we can say with Dorothy Donnelly that we have

²⁵ A. Vanhoye, *art. cit.*, 166.

²⁶ Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait* (Dayton: Pflaum, 1975) 119.

only "thin historical material" that cannot bear the weight of being "adapted to fit any and every current spiritual, ascetical, and theological development in the Church."²⁷ Yet, quantity is not the ultimate criterion of importance. Matthew gives Jesus the title of Emmanuel only in 1:23, and yet his whole gospel leads to the affirmation that Jesus is "God with us" until the end of time (*Mt.* 28:16-20).

Mary appears infrequently, but she appears at key moments, at hinge scenes, at decisive moments in the messianic mission of Jesus, the unique Savior: at His Incarnation, His birth, His moment of adulthood, the launching of His messianic work, at the peak of His popularity, at His saving death, and as the apostles wait for the coming of the Spirit.

The composite is important for understanding her. On the one hand, even the most exalted physical relationship cannot save, for all is grace. On the other hand, we must respond totally as she did to God's will in Christ. "For us today, she is again symbol, but could we try this time to get it a little closer to the historical groundings that show her as a lady who believed past all hope. . . ?"²⁸

To summarize, then: the historical image of Mary in the New Testament is that of a loyal mother who constantly teaches the Church that we are justified only by faith.²⁹

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²⁷Dorothy H. Donnelly, *Mary, Model of Personal Spirituality*, in *New Catholic World* 219 (March/April 1976) 67.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 68.

²⁹A point that is not part of our topic but which flows from it and speaks to a contemporary doctrinal question occurred to me as I was writing this paper. The question is why Mary was not a priest. And in relation to the ordination of women, the point is often made that if women could be priests, Jesus would have given this role to Mary. If the thesis of this paper is valid, namely, that the historical image of Mary in the

New Testament was to be model of faith, universal model of salvation through faith, then her universality would bar her from being called to a specialized ministry that would tend to offer her as model for only one segment of the Church. Mary's sex is not what bars her from the priesthood.