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## Reflections on the New Testament Images of Mary

Bertrand Buby

*University of Dayton*, [bbuby1@udayton.edu](mailto:bbuby1@udayton.edu)

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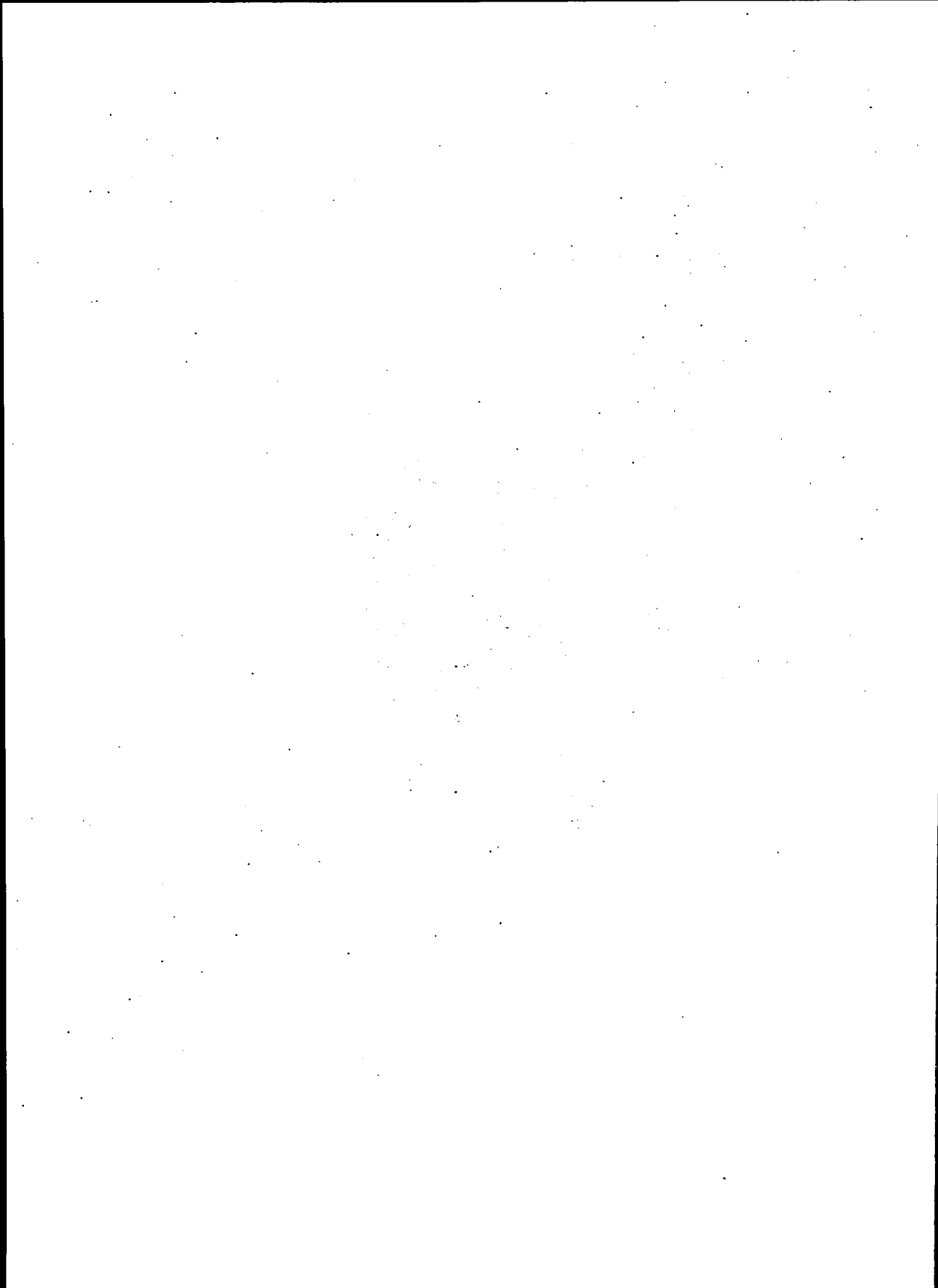
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# I. SCRIPTURE AND EXEGESIS





# REFLECTIONS ON THE NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES OF MARY

BERTRAND A. BUBY, DAYTON, OH

## INTRODUCTION

In 1988, the International Commission on English in the Liturgy prepared a *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*.<sup>1</sup> One of the masses is entitled "The Blessed Virgin Mary, Image and Mother of the Church."<sup>2</sup> The prayers and the Preface for this mass are based upon the following scriptural passages: Luke 1:26-38, Acts 1:14, John 12:25-27, and Revelation 12 (implicit). The appropriateness of these texts for illustrating a particular image of Mary led to a consideration of the other N.T. references to Mary and to their use for other images of Mary which could be used in the liturgical celebration of feasts and votive masses in her honor.

This article will take the chronological sequence of the writings which touch upon the person of Mary either implicitly or explicitly. The order followed for uncovering these biblical images of Mary is Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. Such a trajectory, illustrating the role of Mary in the New Testament, has been taken up by six recent books.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this article is to offer scriptural background for the images of Mary suggested in the above-mentioned work of the I.C.E.L.

As the images of Mary develop chronologically in the N.T., her roles—as mother of Jesus, woman, faithful disciple, and model of the Church at prayer—will become

<sup>1</sup> *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (2 vols. in 1; New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1988); hereafter cited as *CMBVM*.

<sup>2</sup> *CMBVM*, pp. 39-42.

<sup>3</sup> The books in chronological order are: 1) J. McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1975); 2) R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, J. A. Fitzmyer, J. Reumann, eds., *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); 3) B. Buby, *Mary, the Faithful Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985); 4) W. Brennan, *Mary: Servant, Mother, Woman* (Rome: Città Nuova Press, 1986); 5) J. A. Grassi, *Mary, Mother and Disciple* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier Inc., 1988); 6) F. J. Moloney, *Mary, Woman and Mother* (Melbourne Diocese, 1989).

evident. She is a courageous Jewish woman and mother who emerges as a leader in a totally male-dominated culture. She is a strong individual who follows her son Jesus in a manner that compared with and surpassed that of the male disciples of Jesus.

Each writer and evangelist offers us a different perspective and various images of Mary. In fact, the evangelists offer four different representations of her discipleship. They delineate her image according to the theological and evangelical purposes necessary for the respective readers and believers within their communities.

The following then are thumbnail sketches of Mary, drawn from the writings of the five writers who mention her in the N.T.

### 1. PAUL'S SUBLIMINAL IMAGES OF MARY: THE JEWISH WOMAN

St. Paul gives us the first shadow-like images of Mary within three of his epistles. These letters (Galatians, Romans, and Philippians) present a subconscious archetype of a woman involved in the history of salvation begun by Jesus Christ, who was born in our likeness because of his birth to this Jewish woman. Paul's obscure references to this woman (Mary) initiate the more specific and developed images of Mary found in the Gospels. Through these later writers we will see a growing fondness for this woman who gives birth to the Messiah, called Emmanuel ("God with us") in Matthew's Gospel.

There are only eight lines in Paul which enable us to reflect on this shadow-image of Mary. These verses describe the background for Jesus' birth in the light of Judaism. Jesus is the Messiah who is born into the lineage of David, through the natural process of birth from a woman whom Paul never names (Galatians 4:4 reads "born of a woman").

This emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus and his mother are important historical and biblical facts which enable us to place any further reflections on Mary or Jesus on the solid basis of their rootedness in the Jewish culture, religion, and tradition. Such a human birth imposes limitations as well as possibilities for the future, just as our own births contribute to our limits and potentials as humans. Here are the significant selections from Paul that give us the shadow-image of a Jewish woman who is the mother of the Messiah:

ROMANS 1:3-4: "This good news is about the Son of God who, according to the human nature he took, was a descendant of David; it is about Jesus Christ our Lord who, in the order of the Spirit, the Spirit of holiness that was in him, was proclaimed Son of God in all his power through his resurrection from the dead."

GALATIANS 4:4: "And ... when the appointed time came, God sent his son, born of a woman, born a subject to the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law and to enable them to be adopted as children of God."

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PHILIPPIANS 2:5-7: "In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus; his state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave and became as we are."

### 2. MARK'S IMAGE OF MARY: A SILHOUETTE OF A JEWISH MOTHER

Mark's Gospel is the earliest in traditions about Jesus and is the first written Gospel. He is the first evangelist who brings us the good news about Jesus of Nazareth. Writing in bold, clear, and descriptive patterns, Mark captures the freshness, newness and exuberant hope that the Gospel brings to those hearing it for the first time. What type of image of Mary does Mark give to the Christian reader?

In Mark we have a clear silhouette of a Jewish mother who is concerned about the activity of her son, Jesus. Most of the background for our assertions about Mary come from the context of Mark 3:31-35, within the larger context of the third chapter. Mary is very vigorous in her efforts to intervene in Jesus' life when it seems to be endangered.

In contrast to Paul, the image is no longer obscure, but more definite and precise and explicit. Mark has about the same number of lines dedicated to Mary, but they are explicit. Mark is also the first evangelist who gives us the name of the mother of Jesus, Mary. Here are the two paragraphs that mention Mary:

MARK 3:31-35: "Then his mother and brothers arrived, and standing outside, sent in a message asking for him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, 'Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you.' 'Who is my mother?' he answered, 'and who are my brothers?' Then, looking around at those sitting with him, he said, 'See! Here are my mother and brothers. For whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother.'"

MARK 6:1-6a: Once more in his Gospel, Mark takes up the relationship of Jesus to his hometown and his relatives:

He left that place and went back to his native place, followed by his disciples. When the sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue; many who heard him were astonished and said, "Where did he get all this?" and "What wisdom is this that has been given to him?" or "How does he work such miracles?" "Is he not the craftsman, Mary's son, brother to James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon? And are not his brothers and sisters here with us?" So they took offense at him. Jesus said to them, "A prophet is respected, except in his native place and among his relatives and family." He was unable to work any miracles there, except that he put his hands on a few sick people and healed them. He was greatly surprised by their want of faith.

We see from both of these passages a clear image of the mother of Jesus. We sense the freshness of the Galilean hills where Jesus was reared and where his first encoun-

ters with his people begin in his active ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing. Jesus is bringing his good news to his own countryside.

Mary follows her son closely and intently just as do those first disciples who are attracted to him. She, however, is concerned about his safety and about the family's reputation. As we have seen above, the strong motherly concern of Mary comes out in the first Markan recollection of her meeting Jesus during his active ministry.

Just as in Paul's letters, the image of Mary in Mark's Gospel is still somewhat clouded; she is literally on the periphery of the circle of those listeners who have followed the dynamic and charismatic Jesus who has a new and challenging message of hope for them. Mary is present on this occasion. She represents our own struggles in following Jesus and our own doubts which eventually strengthen our faith into a stronger commitment to Jesus. After this first encounter, we will no longer see Mary within Mark's Gospel. Chapter six has only an implicit reference to her, wherein Jesus is called the "son of Mary" and whereby Mark gives us her name for the first time in the history of the Christian tradition.

Mark challenges us when we feel that we have only begun to discover who Jesus is. We are struggling with prayer; we question our relationship to Jesus; and we do not understand the role of Mary in his life and ours. Through her presence we come to know we are brothers and sisters of Jesus whenever we listen and try to do the will of the Father. Mary apparently learned to do this as his mother who searched for him and found him; she listened to God and did God's will.

One last observation about the use of Mark's Gospel. Just as the early Church did not use these passages for feasts of Mary, neither does the *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. Only once is there a mention of Mark's Gospel.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. MATTHEW'S SKETCH OF MARY: VIRGIN AND MOTHER WITH HER CHILD

Matthew's Gospel is a Jewish-Christian gospel. He creates an Infancy Narrative, the first of its kind, in order to explain the origins and birth of the Messiah whom he alone calls Emmanuel, the Hebrew for "God is with us" (Mt. 1:23). Jesus' genealogy and earliest years are presented through the special *Midrash* or profound biblical reflection in the first two chapters of his Gospel. His reflections serve as a biblical meditation on the meaning of Jesus' messiahship, in the light of Hebraic messianic texts and prophecies. These first two chapters are the key towards understanding the rest of Matthew's twenty-six chapters. Matthew attempts to answer the probing questions of the faithful followers of Jesus in the second and third generation after

<sup>4</sup> *CMBVM*, General Introduction, p.9, no.9.

his death and resurrection. These faithful listeners of God's word wanted to know more about the beginnings of Jesus – his manner of birth, the location and purpose of such an outstanding birth.

Using the genealogies of the Hebrew Scriptures, Matthew demonstrates how Jesus is truly the descendant of David and is the promised Messiah. His profound presentation of Isaiah 7:14 – “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bring forth a son and call him Emmanuel” – underlines the genesis of Jesus as son of David and son of Abraham and fulfills the Christian understanding of this prophecy of Isaiah. Through such a development, the mother of Jesus is presented as that virgin in chapter one and as the spouse of Joseph and mother of the Holy Family in chapter two, hence, the image Virgin-Mother. Matthew is completing what Paul had begun in his letters, namely, the Jewishness of Jesus and his Mother, Mary. All that Paul hinted and all that Mark recorded about Mary are both taken up by Matthew, but he has developed and widened the tradition.

Matthew presents Jesus as the fulfillment of what he himself understood to be the purpose of the Hebrew Scriptures. He uses fulfillment texts more than any of the other three evangelists. His special emphasis on Jesus as Messiah continues not only in the Birth and Infancy Narrative, but also in his treatment of the active ministry and the death and resurrection of Jesus. Matthew is a superb teacher; he also presents Moses and Jesus as excellent teachers.

What does Matthew tell us in the sections of his Gospel where Mary is mentioned? First, through his genealogy Jesus is shown to be the Messiah, because he is the son of David and the son of Abraham; secondly, Joseph is the husband of Mary who is with child through the Holy Spirit and “of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah” (Mt. 1:16); thirdly, there are three sets of fourteen generations which help to explain how Jesus is of the royal line of David (The number “14” is equivalent in Hebrew to the name David). Fourthly, there are five women mentioned in the genealogy who show the surprising and unusual action of God among his people; they are Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. The first four women are extolled in later rabbinic writings as heroines and holy persons.

In the final lines of chapter one, Matthew gives us a good sketch of who Mary is in this Gospel:

Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, an upright man unwilling to expose her to the law, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when suddenly the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream and said to him: “Joseph, son of David, have no fear about taking Mary as your wife. It is by the Holy Spirit that she has conceived this child. She is to have a son and you are to name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.” All this happened to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son,



and they shall call him 'Emmanuel,' a name which means 'God is with us.'" When Joseph awoke he did as the angel of the Lord had directed him and received her into his home as his wife. He had no relations with her at any time before she bore a son, whom he named Jesus. (Mt. 1:18-25)

In chapter two, Matthew uses the phrase "the child with his mother" five times. He is developing the background of Jesus within the context of Jewish family life. His sketch is seen to be more intricate than the shadowy images and silhouette found in the writings of Paul and Mark about the relationship of Jesus and his mother. The holiness of Mary and Joseph, the blessedness of family life, the protectiveness of the righteous foster-father, and the continuous presence of God in the person of Jesus as Emmanuel flood our memories, hearts and imaginations as we ponder over the Infancy Narrative of Matthew.

Mary is portrayed as Virgin and Mother, and then as faithful disciple (cf. Mt. 12:46-50, 13:53-58). Matthew shows her as fulfilling her call not only by bearing Jesus but also by listening to the word of God. She does the will of God and follows Joseph and then Jesus, as she comes to understand the sufferings of her family and then of her son. Mary lived through and understood these experiences, and God protected her child through the constant and attentive care of Joseph, the just one, who likewise was a faithful disciple of the Lord.

#### 4. LUKE'S PORTRAIT OF MARY: THE BLESSED VIRGIN

St. Luke, the third evangelist, gives us the most information about Mary in the Christian Scriptures. In the Gospel of this compassionate and sensitive writer, Mary speaks for herself from the moment of her first appearance at the Annunciation; her active role continues throughout the Gospel and extends to the Acts of the Apostles, Luke's sequel volume (cf. Lk. 1:26-28 and Acts 1:14). In both writings, Mary cooperates personally with the Holy Spirit: first, in the conception and birth of Jesus, and, then, in the birth of the Church at Pentecost.

In both Matthew and Luke we have Infancy Narratives; likewise, we find the Beatitudes in both gospels. Mary seems to personify these demands of Jesus so much so that, in this Gospel of Luke, she is called blessed or happy. She is correctly entitled in the Christian tradition, the Blessed Virgin (cf. Lk. 1:45). Elizabeth proclaims her as "blessed among all women." These early scenes about Mary give us the beginnings of her place of praise and honor in the Catholic tradition and help believers to come to know, love and venerate her with sound biblical foundations.

In Matthew's initial chapter, Joseph was emphasized; in Luke's it is Mary who is center-stage. Mary is even more clearly seen as a disciple of Jesus in accomplishing the will of the Father. Any doubts about her response or her holiness that arose from early reflections are now absent from Mary in Luke's portrait.

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Since the material in Luke's Gospel is so extensive, it is best to limit our reflections on Mary to two principal themes, namely, prayer and her relationship to the Holy Spirit; both themes, of course, are connected in the Gospel of Luke.

Mary is a model of prayer. We see this in the literary structure and outline of Luke's Infancy Narrative which has been taken up in the devotional practice of reciting the rosary. The five joyful mysteries are a summary of most of chapter one: the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Birth of Jesus, the Presentation in the Temple and the Finding in the Temple.

Mary's first positive response in prayer occurs at the Annunciation. She says, "I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say" (Lk. 1:38). Her response to God's messenger, Gabriel, is "yes." Jesus, too, will respond completely to God throughout his life with a "yes" at Gethsemane, at Calvary, and on the mountain. Paul has a powerful insight into the response of Jesus (in 2 Cor. 2:18-20): "The Son of God, the Christ Jesus that we proclaimed among you . . . was never Yes and No: with him it was always Yes; and however many the promises God made, the Yes to them all is in him. That is why it is 'through him' that we answer Amen to the praise of God." Clearly Jesus, the son of Mary, is like his mother in this aspect of prayerful response to the will of God.

Mary's response starts from the first moment of Jesus' life within her and continues to his birth, presentation and finding in the Temple. In Luke's Gospel, we see her affirming God in her son's words and deeds (cf. Lk. 8:19-21; 11:27-28). She is the only person to follow him from his infancy through his youth and active ministry to his death and then to the experience of his resurrected self in the Church.

Luke's theme of prayer is also developed within his theology of discipleship. Mary, like the disciples, sometimes prays alone; she prays in community; she reflects upon and ponders over the events of God in her life (Lk. 2:19, 51). Mary prays within her tradition and among her people in the temple and most likely in the synagogues. In her Magnificat, we recognize a parallel to the psalms of praise or to the prayer of her ancestor in the faith, Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Mary, the blessed and happy one, is a woman of profound prayer.

Mary's relationship to the Holy Spirit is seen both in Luke's Gospel and in the Acts. It is through the action of the Holy Spirit that Jesus is conceived and born of the Virgin Mary (Lk. 1:31; 2:7). The Holy Spirit descends upon Mary while she is at prayer with the apostles and the community of believers in the upper-room at Pentecost. Through the Holy Spirit the Church is born. In Luke's Infancy Narrative almost everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah is under the influence of the Holy Spirit; Mary, who is center-stage, leads the way.

### 5. JOHN'S RENDERING OF MARY: AN IMAGE STATUESQUE AND THREE DIMENSIONAL

Just as each art form has its own beauty and purpose, so does each evangelist have a specific image of Mary which had been fashioned by the communitarian and theologian-

cal concerns of the writer. Some writers have greater depth; this is the case with the Fourth Evangelist, John. It seems that the three-dimensional quality of a statue, like that of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, captures what John does with the person of Mary in his Cana and Calvary accounts. John's Gospel is a dramatic one in which the skills of the author are seen through his parallelism in structure, through symbolism and through the profound contemplative reflection he gives us about the Person of Jesus. Mary is present in these two dramatic scenes as woman and "as a remembering mother and carrier of tradition."<sup>5</sup> The comparison with a statue is suggested by the chiasmatic structure of sign one (Jn. 2:1-12) and sign seven (Jn. 19:25-27). Both signs complete and accomplish the dimensional depth of Jesus' hour and Mary's relationship to her Son.

Since this Gospel is full of symbolism, it is more difficult to interpret; the depth of contemplative reflection on the purpose of Jesus' life and death is at the core of this writing. By comparing the scenes of Cana and Calvary, we are able to understand more of the meaning that John gave to Mary as a person intimately involved in the mystery of Jesus' life and death. The similarities in the two accounts are seen in the persons, themes, words, and symbols that are used. Calvary fulfills what was inaugurated at Cana. Here are the two accounts:

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had likewise been invited to the celebration. At a certain point the wine ran out and Jesus' mother told him, "They have no more wine." Jesus replied, "Woman, how does this concern of yours involve me? My hour has not yet come." His mother instructed those waiting on table, "Do whatever he tells you." As prescribed for Jewish ceremonial washings, there were at hand six stone water jars, each one holding fifteen to twenty-five gallons. "Fill those jars with water," Jesus ordered, at which they filled them to the brim. "Now," he said, "draw some out and take it to the waiter in charge." . . . The waiter in charge tasted the water made wine, without knowing where it had come from; only the waiters knew, since they had drawn the water. Then the waiter in charge called the groom over and remarked to him: "People usually serve the choice wine first; then when the guests have been drinking awhile, a lesser vintage. What you have done is keep the choice wine until now." Jesus performed this first of his signs at Cana in Galilee. Thus did he reveal his glory, and his disciples believed in him. After this he went down to Capernaum, along with his mother and brothers [and his disciples] but they stayed there only a few days. (Jn. 2:1-12)

<sup>5</sup> Grassi, *Mary, Mother and Disciple*, p. 88.

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This first sign is completed by the last and greatest sign, Jesus' death and exaltation on the Cross at Calvary. Here is the parallel account:

Near the cross of Jesus there stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. Seeing his mother there with the disciple whom he loved, Jesus said to his mother, "Woman, there is your son." In turn he said to the disciple, "There is your mother." From that hour onward, the disciple took her into his care. After that, Jesus realizing that everything was now finished, said to fulfill the Scripture, "I am thirsty." (Jn. 19:25-28)

Even a cursory reading of the two scenes enables us to see the similar themes and words: the mother of Jesus, woman, hour, disciples' presence, sign, glory, belief in Jesus, and the parallel of water-become-wine with the blood and water that flow immediately from Jesus' side upon his dying and breathing down his spirit on the beloved disciple and Mary (Jn. 19:34).

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the woman present at the first of Jesus' signs, the sign worked at Cana, just as she is present standing at the foot of the Cross at the last and greatest sign Jesus accomplished. This is the hour of fulfillment. In John's account the word "hour" almost always means the Passover Event of Jesus – that is, his suffering, death, exaltation upon the Cross, and his resurrection. Replacement is another theme in John's Gospel. At Cana, the six water jars of purification are replaced by wine in abundance. This, too, was a sign connected with the messianic time. Jesus on Calvary fulfills the promise of Cana by creating a new people in the persons of those at the foot of the Cross. They are the ones who receive his last breath and become Spirit-filled with the new life of Jesus. Mary at Cana is the woman who anticipates this hour of Jesus. Together with her son, Jesus, she, the promised Woman, defeats the hour of darkness through Jesus' victory over the Prince of Darkness (cf. Jn. 3:14-15; 12:31-32; Gen. 3:15). Even the disciple whom Jesus loved was present at Cana, too, but in a remote and hidden way; now at Calvary he is specifically mentioned, together with the mother of Jesus. The community of Jesus, the Church, is being created as Jesus gives the woman as mother to the disciple who believed and loved. Mary, who was so actively present at Cana, the first of Jesus' signs, now stands and receives from Jesus the new life in the Spirit. She is the new mother of the beloved disciple, the one who represents Jesus' community, the Church. At Cana she was the woman of Israel; now, at Calvary, she is the mother of the new community of those who believe in Jesus. Intimacy, love, and mutual giving and receiving converge at the foot of the Cross. The call to discipleship – which began in the initial chapter of John (Jn. 1:35-51) as a call to the new creation of God through Jesus, the Word and the Wisdom of God – reaches a level of personal commitment at Cana, through belief in Jesus who manifested his glory through water becoming wine. In the final sign at Calvary, Jesus' exaltation upon the Cross becomes the salvific event in the commitment of love given by the Spirit of Jesus, breathed upon his mother and the beloved disciple (cf. Jn. 7:37-39).

The convergence of such images, persons, symbols, and words in these two scenes gives their readers opportunity to discover a depth and dimension not present in the other writings we have looked to for images of Mary. Perhaps, just as the exquisite beauty and profundity of Michelangelo's *Pietà* surpass that of other forms of Marian art, so, too, does the imagery of the Fourth Gospel surpass the other gospels' images of Mary. Mary continues to teach all believers "to do whatever he [Jesus] tells you" (Jn. 2:5). Calvary is the culmination of Mary's personal journey of faith and love which consisted in doing whatever God told her to do. She was present at the beginning and end of Jesus' life and active mission, in order to model for all the faithful a journey of faith and love in the very Person of her son (*pisteuein eis Jesoun*).

#### CONCLUSION

Since the publication the *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary* employs most of the texts in the New Testament which refer to Mary, this particular article was written as an auxiliary study to the liturgical collection which finds several ways of expressing the power of the Blessed Virgin as an exemplar of Christian life.<sup>6</sup> It is in the masses for Ordinary Time that there are "eleven formularies for celebrations of the Mother of God under titles that are derived chiefly from Sacred Scripture or that express Mary's bond with the Church."<sup>7</sup> This article could be of use to those preparing homilies on the texts directly relating to Mary.

<sup>6</sup> *CMBVM*, General Introduction, p. 11, no. 15: "In doctrine and language deriving from the Fathers of the Church, the liturgy finds many ways to express the power of the Blessed Virgin as exemplar of the Christian life. Particular when the liturgy seeks to highlight her sanctity and to present her to the faithful as the devoted handmaid of the Father (see Luke 1:38; 2:48) and the perfect disciple of Christ, the liturgy calls her the *exemplar*. It calls her a *figure* when it seeks to indicate that her manner of life as virgin, spouse, and mother provides a portrait of the life of the Church and shows the path it must take in its journey of faith and its following of Christ. Finally, the liturgy refers to her as *image*, in order to make it clear that in the Blessed Virgin, who is already perfectly fashioned in the likeness of her Son, the Church 'joyfully contemplates, as in a flawless image, that which the Church itself desires and hopes wholly to be.'"

<sup>7</sup> *CMBVM*, General Introduction, pp. 12-13, no. 24.