



BRIDGES FOR PEACE

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Mary

A FIRST
CENTURY
JEWISH
WOMAN



MARY



A FIRST CENTURY JEWISH WOMAN

Unlike her husband Joseph, the historical record abounds with information about this enigmatic woman. Unfortunately, however, in studying that history, it is often difficult to separate fact from fiction. Hopefully, as we carefully examine the various teachings and traditions surrounding her life, we will be able to peel away the myth and discover the reality.

It is unfortunate that much of the teaching in the Church regarding Mary has removed her from her proper historical, cultural, and biblical context, in many cases creating an image of a royal Mary and robbing her of the humanity that was integral to God's purpose. Both she and her son Yeshua (Jesus) have been stripped of their Jewishness, resulting in a Church without roots that disgracefully mistreated the Jewish people for nearly two millennia. All Church doctrine aside, if we are to understand Mary and her place in God's plan, we have to begin at the beginning with a biblical foundation and a sound grasp of the Hebraic world in which she lived.

A RESPECTED POSITION

Any look at the everyday life of Mary must begin with a clarification regarding the role of women in traditional Judaism. That position was not nearly as lowly as many have understood; in fact, in many ways, the position of women in Jewish law that dates back to the biblical period was better than the position of women under American civil law as recently as a century ago. Those ancient ladies had the right to buy, sell, own property, and make their own contracts, rights which women in some Western countries did not have until the early- to mid-20th century.

From earliest biblical times, Jewish women have stood shoulder-to-shoulder with their male counterparts in times of feast and famine, peace and war, comfort and persecution. Miriam, for instance, is acknowledged as a co-deliverer with her brother Moses. Esther chose to risk her own life to save her people from annihilation. Ruth, though a convert, is one of the most respected people in the Bible. Seven of the 55 biblical prophets were women, and according to Jewish tradition, one of them, Huldah, played an exceptional role in Jewish history (2 Kings 22:14ff). Deborah was a wise judge, courageous leader and ferocious defender of Israel (Judges 4-5).

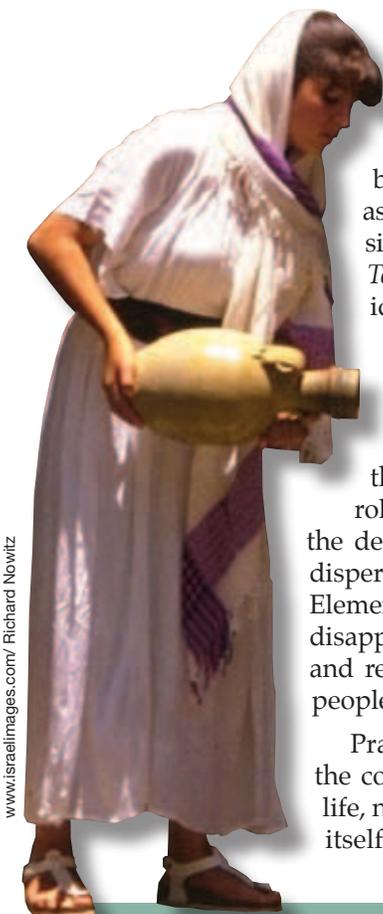
Respect has always been accorded women in Jewish tradition as part of their ethnic culture. Judaism maintains that both man and woman were created in the image of God, and accordingly, women were to be treated as equals. Even though Adam was created first, there is nothing in *Torah* that indicates that *first* means *better*. Women's obligations and responsibilities were different than men, but no less important and, in some instances, were of even greater magnitude for the long-term good of the community.

❖ AS KEEPERS OF THE HOME

Women were seen as keepers of the home, but recognizing the high level of importance placed on family in Judaism, that role must never be underestimated. From the most ancient of times the home was seen as the center of religious life. It was recognized as the fundamental building block of society, and the raising of children as members of a covenant community was the most significant responsibility that could be assumed. The *Torah* and the teachers of Israel made it clear that God's ideal was a dwelling filled with love and tranquility where children could learn to know and love Him. The sanctity of the home was not to be desecrated by violence, impatience, hypocrisy, or disrespect.

It was because of this foundation of sacredness that the home would move with relative ease into the role of *miqdash me'at* as a "small sanctuary" following the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 and the ensuing dispersion of the Jewish people throughout the world. Elements of temple worship that might otherwise have disappeared became home rituals, revered by God's people and recognized as the glue that would hold a dispersed people together.

Prayer, the study of *Torah*, and tending to the needs of the community, which had always been a part of Jewish family life, now became solely the purview of the home; the dinner table itself took the place of the altar. Although it had never been



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viewed as a place for serving food alone but also as a spiritual instrument set apart for the service of God, the role as “consecrated altar” took on deeper significance. Over it, songs of praise would be sung, the father would instruct the family in the words of *Torah*, the biblical festivals would be celebrated, and the religious values of love of God and respect for others would be inculcated.

Although Mary most likely would not have been alive to see the destruction of the Temple and the resulting changes to Judaism, her life as a first-century wife and mother, tending to the home she shared with Joseph and their family, would have helped to lay the groundwork for the transition of worship from temple to home.

❖ AS SPIRITUAL PARTNERS

The synagogue was an integral part of Jewish life several centuries before Mary became the keeper of her home. Traditionally, it has been viewed as the realm of the male. Some have mistakenly taught that women have been restricted from participating in that life, prohibited from performing certain religious tasks, or *mitzvot*, that are required of men.

The truth, however, is just the opposite, and the underlying principle is found in the creation story in Genesis 2. Here, we are told that God removed a “side” from Adam and “made” Eve. The Hebrew word is *banah*, and it means “to build.” God took the feminine side of Adam and used it to “build” Eve. This word comes from the same root as *binah*, which refers to intelligence and an intuitive knowledge of God. In other words, Jewish scholars say, women have been given an extra measure of *binah*, with the *Torah* painting a picture of woman as superior in the spiritual realm, one who has greater faith and power of discernment than her male partner. Therefore, men are required to take part in certain religious activities, while women are not excluded but exempt; men *have* to, but women only *need* to if they *want* to.

The sages say the history of the Jewish people proves their theory. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah were superior to the patriarchs in matters of prophesy and spiritual understanding. Their actions were sometimes unorthodox but were always prompted by *binah* and, therefore, were instrumental in building the Jewish nation. Further, they say, women did not participate in the idolatry regarding the golden calf, refusing to contribute their gold for its construction (see Exod. 32:2). The rabbis also teach that it is because of the righteousness of the women of Israel that the Messiah will come.

❖ AS STUDENTS OF “TORAH”

So we see that the world in which Mary lived was not nearly as hostile to women as some have suggested. Recent scholarship indicates that girls in the Second Temple Period may also have learned to read and to write and may well have studied *Torah*. Some rabbis believe that the educating of women was actually a part of Jewish life long before this period, citing the daughters of Zelophehad as examples of women who were well versed in the law. In Numbers 27, these women approached Moses at the entrance to the tabernacle where he and the tribal elders sat to instruct the people and to judge their disputes. Here they made the case for female inheritance. After bringing it to the Lord, Moses declared that they had “spoken what is right,” and their request is not only granted but becomes a part of the *mitzvot* that would govern the people of Israel for all time.

The sages have determined that this is one of only two times in the history of *Torah* that



a *mitzvah* is given via someone other than Moses himself. Consequently, these sisters are considered to be among the most righteous and wise women in the entire Bible. *Talmud* (rabbinic commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures) tractate Bava Batra states, “The daughters of Zelophehad were wise women, they were exegetes and they were virtuous.” Clearly, the *Talmud* says these women followed a line of reasoning based on *Torah* law and principle and came to a proper decision, their petition including a legal argument and its logical ruling. This could not have happened, they reason, if the daughters were uneducated and ignorant of the legal system Moses was revealing to the Jewish people.

Whether or not Mary studied *Torah*, we know she would have spent her early years learning from her mother, and perhaps her grandmother as well, how to be in covenant relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a relationship that was as important for her as for any man among the Children of Israel. Certainly her response to Elizabeth in Luke 1:46–55 reveals a heart of true discipleship, echoing the words of Moses and David before her.

MARY, THE GIRL

Further, we know she would have been trained in the mechanics of keeping her home, appreciating that the influence for God that she would wield over her family would have everlasting implications for the Jewish people. Although life for a first-century woman was physically difficult in many ways, the historical record tells us that they were a joyful, vibrant people, and Mary’s life would have been filled with laughter and love. Her response to the angel Gabriel is that of a young woman, perhaps only 13 years of age, who was well acquainted with her God and accustomed to faithful obedience.

In that first-century Jewish community, physical beauty was important to young women as it is today. However, unlike today’s emphasis on outward appearance, true beauty was inextricably tied to the inner woman. Mary would have known that it was impossible to be genuinely attractive without a pure heart and the inner peace that comes from covenant oneness with God.

Archaeology has shown us, however, that it was customary for women even then to try to improve on the physical gifts they received from the Lord! Even for women who were not well-to-do, beauty was important. Archaeological digs throughout Israel have revealed many cosmetic items including eye shadow sticks, powder boxes, and perfume vials. Carved hair combs and decorated hair nets were also common, and women of this period were renowned for their love of jewelry. Mary would have served her God joyfully, and one of the goals of her life would have been to be a Proverbs 31 woman, ready to be presented, beautiful both inside and out, to the one God would choose to be her partner for life.

Mary’s connection to her community would have been strong, recognizing that her actions as a woman, wife, and mother were not private matters. Rather, the whole community had a stake in her life, and as much as she supported that community, she also relied upon it for support, nourishment, and blessings. This is underscored, says Marvin Wilson in his book *Our Father Abraham*, by the Hebrew word for family which is *mishpaha*. This word does not just include the nuclear family of mother, father and children but implies an extended family, often including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins and even beyond. The strength and encouragement provided by the *mishpaha* and larger community was one of the hallmarks of Jewish survival.

Those responsible for Mary’s education would have made sure she understood that marriage and the ensuing sexual relationship were gifts from God and were good. *Torah*



Mary would have known that it was impossible to be genuinely attractive without a pure heart and the inner peace that comes from covenant oneness with God.

photo of jewelry from “Daily Life at the Time of Jesus”

taught her that God created man and woman in His image and declared that it was “very good.” She would have learned that marriage was so important, it was to come before even the study of *Torah* in a young man’s life. The rabbis decreed that if wedding and funeral processions happened to meet on the street, the wedding party was always to proceed first. Marriage is so esteemed in Jewish tradition, Wilson tells us, there is no Hebrew word for bachelor.

MARY, THE BRIDE

However, throughout the generations, there has been much speculation as to whether or not Mary and Joseph actually “got married” and if so, when. It is important to understand that in this period of history, the Jewish marriage occurred in two stages. The first, called *kiddushin*, was actually the betrothal. Here, friends and neighbors would have gathered to be witnesses, as Joseph met with Mary’s father to finalize the engagement and the couple shared a cup to seal it. From this moment on, the couple would have been considered married in the ritual sense and would have been referred to as husband and wife. Absolute commitment and fidelity were demanded, and this arrangement was only dissolvable through the actual process of divorce.

The second stage, called *nissu’in* and often accompanied by a week-long community celebration, was the consummation of the marriage, which took place when the bride was brought to the groom’s chamber, or *huppah* in ancient Hebrew. Although this meeting often involved physical consummation, all that was required was a “meeting alone.” Since the rules of *kiddushin* prevented the couple from being together without at least one chaperone, this first meeting by themselves was considered critically important. Once the second stage was complete, the couple were married in the legal sense and liable to the responsibilities and privileges of that state, including governmental regulations of property distribution and taxation.

Although some translations of the New Testament refer to Mary as Joseph’s “betrothed” as they head for Bethlehem (Luke 2:5), it is unlikely that she would have accompanied him if they were not married in the legal sense. There would have been no obligation for her to do so, and given her advanced stage of pregnancy, it would have made more sense for her to stay behind and give birth with the help of her mother.

Once the betrothal was sealed, Joseph would return to his home and begin to prepare for his wedding, which would traditionally take place one year later. His fields were to be established, work done, crops planted, and a room built on to his father’s house ready to receive Mary. Everything had to be in order so that all of his attention could be directed to his new bride.

His excitement had to have been deeply marred when, during this period of preparation, he received the news of Mary’s pregnancy. How devastating this must have been; one can only imagine the agony of heart that Joseph went through as he sought the Lord to determine how to handle what seemed like an impossibly horrendous situation. At the same time, how difficult it must have been for Mary to reveal this potentially deadly secret to Joseph. Since betrothal held the same legal substance as actual marriage, Joseph’s choices were few. But God Himself presented Joseph with an alternative that would save Mary’s life and change the future of mankind forever: “...do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife...” (Matt. 1:20).

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Since the New Testament is silent on the matter, we don't know for sure what sort of celebration marked Mary's marriage to Joseph. But we do know that a traditional wedding feast would have been a community affair. Invitations were not sent out; rather, it was considered a *mitzvah*, or holy obligation, for everyone in the village to attend the wedding. Every person was expected to comment on the radiant beauty of the bride and share in the responsibility for adding to her joy during the festival. The *Talmud* contains dozens of passages devoted to this topic, including a lengthy discussion of the types and lengths of dances. The custom of breaking a glass was actually instituted to bring a moment of sobriety to the outrageously joyful behaviour.

If the bride was poor and unable to acquire the necessary attire for the wedding and celebration, the community was required to supply her with what she needed. We don't know what the financial situation of Mary's father was. We do know, however, that she was part of a vibrant first-century Jewish community who would have embraced the responsibility of supporting the new family.

As Joseph dedicated himself to making preparation for the arrival of his bride, Mary would wait patiently for him to come for her. Her wedding garments would be prepared, and her maidens would be ready, attending her needs, even trimming lamps in case he arrived at her home in the night. Then, at last, Joseph's father would survey the work his son had done and give him the go-ahead to retrieve his bride from her parents' home.

Mary and her maidens would hear the sound of Joseph and his wedding party in the street. Quickly, Mary would be covered by her veil and escorted into the street to meet her bride-groom. With much noise and merrymaking, the party would proceed to Joseph's home where the wedding party would already be in progress. After their meeting alone, Mary and Joseph would join the celebration, and for seven days, they would share their joy with their *mishpaha*. Only in the quiet of the night could they whisper together of the incredible message Mary had received from the angel, wondering in amazement at what this would mean for the rest of their lives.

MARY, THE WOMAN

But what about Mary as a person? Scripture tells us very little about her personal details and leaves us to wonder in amazement at this very young woman who was chosen to give birth to Yeshua (Jesus), a miracle and a privilege no other human being in the history of mankind has experienced. She did not claim to understand it, but with a heart of great humility, she accepted it and worshipped God for it. "*Then Mary said, 'Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word'*" (Luke 1:38). If nothing else, she should be a model of surrendered obedience, obviously living her life to please God and not herself. The hallmark of such a person would have been unshakable faith.

She also had to be a woman of great courage. She faced trials and dangers unlike any before or after her. Her unexpected pregnancy could have led to her death, while the prospect of explaining this new development to Joseph, and to her parents, had to be daunting at best. Certainly they would have been disbelieving and horribly disappointed to begin with. Even though the truth was revealed to Joseph, we are not told if others in her community understood it. Perhaps the young couple had to endure gossip and judgmental stares from some who remained convinced of Mary's infidelity. Making the



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five to six-day trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem when she was near her time to deliver would also have taken enormous courage, as would the act of giving birth far from her home and her extended family. Soon after becoming a mother, she found herself a political refugee in a foreign country, again requiring tremendous faith and courage.

I suggest that God chose Mary because she was a person of extraordinary strength and obedience, a woman who would endure the great suffering required of the one who would be, as Christians believe, the mother of the Messiah. She would raise Him in the ways of *Torah*, love Him as every Jewish mother passionately loved her children, teach Him how to live in covenant relationship with God, and encourage Him as a member of His Jewish *mishpaha*. And as He “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52), her critical role would continue.

She remained steadfast with her son throughout His life and after His death and resurrection. She joined His disciples in the Upper Room to experience God’s next great gift to His fledgling body of believers. Through it all, she knew the great joy that comes with motherhood, but she also endured incomprehensible pain, as the New Testament tells us she saw her son hated, reviled, and crucified. Only a personal conviction of the righteousness of God and His love for His people that translated into unshakable, faithful obedience could have been the governing force for this remarkable woman. Perhaps her life could be best summed up in the instruction she gave to the servants at Cana: “Whatever He tells you to do, do it” (John 2:5).



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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

