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# The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament

JOHN WENHAM

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IT IS AN EVENT of uncommon interest to see a modern, orthodox Roman Catholic attempting to break the Catholic/Protestant deadlock by an entirely fresh attack on the most sensitive point at issue. John McHugh of Ushaw College has treated us to Mariology on the grand scale—more than 550 pages of lucid, unhurried discussion of the place of the Mother of Jesus in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup>

He refuses to fudge the issues, either by suggesting that the solemnly promulgated Marian dogmas are not an essential part of the Roman faith or by expecting Protestants to abandon their essential principle of *sola Scriptura*. He takes a third way, attempting to show that the dogmas are necessarily implied in Scripture and should therefore be acceptable to Protestants.

This is a formidable enough task, which is complicated by his undertaking to use 'the commonly accepted conventions of critical scholarship'. This means that he attempts to adhere to the theological content of the Infancy narratives, but feels no obligation to take the traditional Christian line with regard to their literary form. They are not to be taken as straight historical narratives; they have a core of historical fact, but the magnitude of that core has to be thrashed out in debate. He in fact accepts almost without discussion a date for St. Luke's Gospel of c. A.D. 70, not considering Harnack's weighty arguments for dating Acts c. A.D. 62. He does indeed believe that there is an historical core coming from Mary herself *via* the beloved disciple (to whose care the Lord had committed her), but much of the material is made up of Luke's own free compositions.

His thesis proper begins with a tenuous argument that the central motif in Luke's teaching about Mary implies that she personifies the eschatological Daughter of Zion of Zephaniah 3: 14-17 and Zechariah 9: 9, and that she embodies the whole corporate personality of Israel.

He deals interestingly (but not convincingly) with Joseph's resolve not to divorce Mary, suggesting that Joseph knew of Mary's concep-

tion by the Holy Spirit before the angel's message, and that his unwillingness to put her to shame sprang from a sense of unworthiness which made him fear to take this singularly favoured woman as his wife. After the angel's message he takes her to his home, though determined to maintain perpetual virginity. He then argues that Mary's 'since I know not a man' does not mean as Catholics have traditionally held that she had already made a vow of virginity. He believes that her determination to remain virgin dates from the Annunciation. The great value of Luke's narrative is to show that he *with the advantage of hindsight* believed Mary to have been destined to remain a virgin for ever.

With this precarious foundation established, four chapters are given to a discussion of the identity of the brothers of Jesus. The views of Helvidius, Epiphanius and Jerome having been dismissed, the author gives a new theory. He introduces yet another Mary, distinguishing between Matthew's 'other Mary', who is the mother of James and Joses, and John's 'Mary of Clopas', whom he believes to be the mother of Simeon. He equates 'the other Mary' with John's 'sister of Jesus' mother', and argues that *sister* here means *sister-in-law*, she being in fact the sister of Joseph and Clopas. This means that the so-called *brothers* are in fact *cousins*; they were known as brothers because 'the other Mary' (presumed widowed) and her sons joined the household of Joseph and the boys became his foster-sons. This is a modification of the Epiphanian view, 'brilliantly expounded' by J. B. Lightfoot in *The Epistle to the Galatians* of 1865. Strangely he makes no reference to J. B. Mayor's equally brilliant (Helvidian) refutation of Lightfoot in *The Epistle of St. James* of 1892. As one who has lived happily for many years with the view that Mary and Joseph lived a normal married life after the birth of Jesus and had a large family, I find this new view tortuous and incredible. Indeed, as I have tried to show in a recent article on 'The Relatives of Jesus',<sup>4</sup> one can discover a coherent and most interesting network of relationships among the early Christian leaders, providing one takes the Helvidian view and is careful not to identify brothers of Jesus with any of the apostles. Incidentally, McHugh's treatment of the crucial text, Matthew 1:25: he 'knew her not until she had borne a son', is quite inadequate.

It is absolutely right that an author should expose his own dogmatic presuppositions and allow them to play upon his attempts to interpret the text. If those presuppositions are correct, they will help him patiently to unravel his problems and to come to unforced answers. If, however, they are wrong, they will gradually tie him in tighter and tighter knots—the proper effect of which should be to make him question the presuppositions themselves. This section simply made me feel how weak the case for perpetual virginity is. Quite the reverse of being inspired by the supposedly heroic devotion of the young couple who were called to live together in love; but without intercourse, it

strikes me as a monstrous perversion of human nature to suppose any such thing.

A chapter is devoted to a lusty and attractive defence on internal grounds (against almost all the external evidence) of the reading at John 1:13, which makes Jesus the one who was born 'not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a husband, but of God'. Six chapters (which lean heavily on D. Edwards' *The Virgin Birth in History and Faith* and J. G. Machen's *The Virgin Birth of Christ*) are devoted to a fine defence of the virginal conception as an historical fact. The last section is devoted to Mary in the theology of John, in which it is maintained that for John the beloved disciple represents all the beloved disciples of Christ, and that in making Mary his mother he made her the mother of us all.

Such a bare summary of so rich and weighty a book could give quite the wrong impression. As far as the establishment of his thesis is concerned, I must judge it a failure, but it is a gallant and worthwhile failure, full of good things. Alas, it indicates that the ultimate rapprochement between Catholic and Protestant is even more difficult (even more a work which God alone can effect) than McHugh suggests. It is one thing to say that the doctrine of the Trinity is only implicit in the New Testament, yet is essential to the Christian faith, and quite another to say the same for the Marian dogmas. The one pervades the testament and is the key to the understanding of its doctrine of God, the other *at best* is founded on hints and subtleties.

Furthermore, this large book does not grapple with the greatest objection of all. Mary's immaculate conception and final incorruption would be natural deductions *if her sinlessness could be established*. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> the great question is: Does the New Testament, when it says 'all have sinned', mean 'all have sinned except Jesus' or 'all have sinned except Jesus and Mary'. That Jesus is excepted is stated repeatedly; that Mary is excepted there is no hint, in fact there are several indications to the contrary.

The debate goes on. To recover the apostolic faith we must allow the New Testament teaching in its natural sense to take hold of our minds. We must avoid the temptation to water it down (e.g. by taking a lower view of Scripture than Christ took—this means a critical handling of the commonly accepted conventions of critical scholarship) and we must avoid the temptation to read into it what is not there. We can be thankful for this honest contribution to the discussion. May it goad us to do better still.

<sup>1</sup> *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* by John McHugh (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1975), xlviii + 510 pp. £10.00.

<sup>2</sup> *Evangelical Quarterly*, 47 (1975), pp. 6-15.

<sup>3</sup> *The Churchman*, 86 (1972), pp. 27-38: 'The Blessed Virgin Mary—An Evangelical Point of View.'