

Women in the Gospels

Seeing Jesus from their perspective.

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Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Elizabeth and Anna

Introduction

Jesus entered a world that largely discriminated against women. It was a world full of double standards, one for men, the other for women. That included the Jewish people of that day. Women and slaves were dominated by the men in power, both in the Roman government and in Jewish practices.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John introduce us to women who met Jesus in the flesh. Jesus was not seeking to dominate women; he was seeking to set them free—free from their sins and free to be all that God created them to be.

Do you think women today are more likely to follow Jesus than men?

Mary the Mother of Jesus

Luke 1:26 – 38

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."

³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Background

Four hundred years have passed since the last prophet—the last voice from God for the people of Israel. It was a time with much strife and war for the Israelites, in and out of slavery and bondage. This was the weary world into which Mary was born. There's nothing impressive we know about Mary or her family.

Notice how the angel Gabriel begins: "*Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you*" (verse 28). Would you have felt "highly favored" if you had been in Mary's shoes? We know that "*Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be*" (verse 29).

Gabriel's message to her was stunning. All of Israel is waiting for a Messiah.

Isaiah 9:6-7a

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness...

Micah foretold a ruler who would be born in Bethlehem:

Micah 5:2: *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."*

"We're so accustomed to the claim that Jesus is the Son of God that it's hard for us to wrap our minds around how wild this message was. . . That he'd (Jesus) be the literal Son of God would've been shocking to first-century Jewish ears. Mary could have been ostracized, or even stoned to death, for getting pregnant outside marriage. Saying, 'Don't worry, the baby's father is the great I AM himself' would only have added blasphemy charges to her account. Yet Mary responded at once with obedient faith: "I am the Lord's servant" (*Jesus Through the Eyes of Women*, P. 30-31).

What is going through Mary's mind and heart after the angel left her? Did she tell anyone about Gabriel and what he told her? If so, what reaction would that have elicited?

What do we learn about God as we consider his choice of Mary to be the mother of Jesus?

"But just as it must have seemed quite inconceivable to Mary that God's promises from centuries before were coming true in her, if we're pinning our hopes on Jesus, however empty you or I might feel today, the truth is that we're unimaginably full of life and love" (*Jesus Through the Eyes of Women*, P. 32).

What did it cost Mary to be willing to do what God asked her to do?

Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth was pregnant:

Luke 1:36 – 37: *"Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail."*

Then Mary gets busy and makes some moves:

Luke 1:39-40: *At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.*

Who else would understand what Mary was experiencing except Elizabeth? Who would show her that God keeps his promises? None but Elizabeth.

Elizabeth

Luke 1:5 – 25

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. ⁷But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

⁸Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

¹¹Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. ¹⁴He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. ¹⁶He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

¹⁹The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the

day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.”

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”

Elizabeth was a woman of great faith and great humility. Her position in the culture was much higher than Mary’s. To be a woman who was righteous in the sight of God, who observed all the Lord’s commands and was blameless, puts Elizabeth in a very elite group.

Wouldn’t you have thought Elizabeth was a great candidate to bear the Son of God? But instead, she is chosen to bear John the Baptizer, the one who would prepare the world for the coming Messiah.

Interestingly, Elizabeth is the first person mentioned in the Gospels as experiencing a miracle.

Luke 1:24 – 25: *After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”*

Gabriel tells Zechariah that this son, who should be named John, would be “a joy and delight to you.” Have you ever thought about being the mother of John the Baptizer? Raising John the Baptizer must have been about as unusual as raising Jesus was for Mary.

He wore funny clothes and ate strange food. Why?

Matthew 3:4: *John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey.*

John’s camel-hair garment and leather belt was a sign that he understood himself to be fulfilling the mission of Elijah as prophesied in Malachi 4:5.

Malachi 4:5: *“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.*

2 Kings 1:7-8: *The king asked them, “What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?” They replied, “He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist.” The king said, “That was Elijah the Tishbite.”*

Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells us this story of Mary’s meeting with Elizabeth. Luke gives us much detail, including the incredible prophetic words of Elizabeth and Mary. They are godly women of great spiritual stature, and they are on the opposite ends of the cultural scale.

Luke 1:41 – 45

⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

No doubt the Holy Spirit informed Elizabeth that Mary would be the mother of the Messiah. Notice that Elizabeth exclaims *with a loud voice*! Consider Elizabeth’s response. She is the older, more experienced, more knowledgeable, more privileged woman. She is Mary’s social superior for sure. Mary is a teenager. Yet Elizabeth’s joy could not be contained.

Jesus changes everything! He did for Elizabeth and Mary; he does for you and me as well. Elizabeth’s shame has been removed—she bears a son—a prophet and a great man of God, called to fulfill the prophecies of old. Her words exalt her younger relative, Mary, because Elizabeth knows she’s in the presence of the Lord!

Consider these truths about Elizabeth:

- She waited through many years for an answer to prayer, enduring shame and disgrace, but she remained faithful to God through it all
- She gave God all the glory for the gift of her son
- She celebrated with Mary and her son and was grateful to God for including her in what he was doing.
- She raised her son to prepare the way for the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Mary's response to Elizabeth

Luke 1:46 – 56

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

"Mary delivers one of the longest and most powerful speeches made by anyone in the Gospels besides Jesus himself" (*Jesus Through the Eyes of Women*, P. 37).

Anna, the Prophetess

Luke 2:36 – 38

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

This is a woman in the story of the birth of Jesus who is usually overlooked, and yet in three brief verses, we learn so much about her.

Malachi 3:1: *"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to this temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.*

And indeed, the Lord came to his temple in the arms of Mary.

Anna was a worshiping, fasting, praying woman, and when she saw Mary and Joseph with Jesus, she prophesied in public—in the temple. I wonder what people who were in the temple that day thought about Anna's prophecy. Certainly, wasn't something that happened every day—a woman suddenly acknowledging baby Jesus and declaring him to be the one they've all been looking forward to. What an amazing scene; what an amazing woman.

References are from the book, *Jesus Through the Eyes of Women* by Rebecca McLaughlin