Redeeming Mary: The Historical Mary and Mary in the Tradition

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Abstract

The Reformed tradition has struggled to engage sufficiently with the history and theology of Mary, the mother of Jesus, mainly consigning her to the Roman Catholic tradition. Reformed scholarship must redeem Mary's contribution to the church by retrieving her biblical and historical narrative to address this deficit. Comparing the Mary of the historical record of the New Testament with the portrayal of her that developed into an inflated Marian vision in subsequent centuries reveals marked differences between them. Mary's historical and biblical story depicts her as a picture of faith, obedience, and God's grace shown to a woman needing redemption. This retrieval can contribute to apologetics and mission in contexts where Mary sits at the center of spiritual life.

Keywords

Mary, Theotokos*, Mariology, Roman Catholicism, apologetics, mission*

Since the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, scholars and leaders in the Reformed tradition have not interacted sufficiently with a theological vision of Mary as outlined in the New Testament. The Reformed tradition has viewed Mary's depiction, veneration, and spiritual practices associated

with her in the Roman Catholic tradition as overinflated and not representative of her historical depiction. However, while recognizing that her portrayal in the New Testament does not accord with the interpretation of Mary and the associated theology that developed, little has been done to retrieve a biblical vision of her narrative. Reformed scholarship appears to engage less with Mary than do the writers of the New Testament. This article will offer a comparison between Mary as represented in the historical record of the New Testament and the narrative that has developed about her throughout history, which resulted in an inflated view of the historical Mary. As the differences between the historical view of Mary and the exaggerated persona that developed subsequently are drawn out, crucial aspects of her narrative will be highlighted. She is a picture of faith in God's promises, obedience to God's word, and reception of God's grace. In sum, she was a woman in need of God's redemption. In this way, she is a model disciple and an everyday believer. Reexamining and redeeming her narrative contribute to apologetics and mission, especially in contexts where Mary is prominent in spiritual practices and faith.[1]

There have been some attempts to retrieve Mary in the broad Reformed tradition. Most recently, Arnold Huijgen has published a monograph on Mary in Dutch and offers a synopsis of the book in English in a recent article.[2] However, even Huijgen admits that "as a Reformed theologian, reflection on the theological position of Mary, let alone a full-blown Mariology, was previously not on my radar."[3] He argues that "Mary deserves a larger place in Reformed theology than she has hitherto had," situating his work in the context of Scripture and tradition, particularly the magisterial Reformers and, notably, Martin Luther.[4] Huijgen's scriptural examination is broadly thematic, so a more comprehensive account of Mary's narrative across the four Gospels is offered here. Two decades ago, Protestant scholars examined Mary's identity and what she teaches us about God and contemporary life in a collection of essays. These chapters centered on the themes of "encountering Mary," observing her from the Gospels, "living Mary," exploring her contemporary application, and "bearing Mary," addressing

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[1] This article adapts and develops Rachel Ciano, "Mary, the Mother of Jesus," in Rachel Ciano and Ian Maddock, *10 Dead Gals You Should Know* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2023), 15–38. It also borrows from a paper presented on similar themes: Rachel Ciano, "Redeeming Mary: Mary in History and Mission" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rome Scholars and Leaders Network, Rome, June 13, 2023), 1–20.

[2] Arnold Huijgen, *Maria: Icoon van genade* (Utrecht: Kok, 2021); Arnold Huijgen, "Mary: Icon of Grace," *Verbum Christi* 10.1 (2023): 2–16.

[3] Huijgen, "Mary," 2.

[4] Ibid.

how Reformed scholars and artists have engaged with her story.[5] The book's aim is stated at the outset: "The time has come for Protestants to join in the blessing of Mary" because "so fearful have we been of what seems to us excessive attention to Mary in Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions that Mary is virtually absent among us."[6] However, this work did not produce the desired effect, and Mary continues to be largely ignored in Reformed scholarship. The presence of several recent primers on Mary, including an evangelical understanding of her and responses to her depiction within Roman Catholicism, demonstrate that, for many within the Reformed tradition, she is still largely unfamiliar.[7] Another study is currently being conducted into evangelical interpretations of Mary.[8] However, these examples of research and examination are exceptions to the relative silence toward the history and theology of Mary in the Reformed tradition.

I. *The Historical Mary: Mary Receiving Redemption in the New Testament*

An examination of Mary in each Gospel begins to redeem her narrative. Her record here is not extensive; instead, the Gospels spotlight her son, the Son of God. This focus on Jesus accords with Mary's depiction as a disciple of her son; she desires the attention to be on him, not herself. Mary is not obscured or absent in the Gospel narratives, but neither is she the centerpiece. Mary appears in each of the four Gospels and in one brief mention in Acts. Among the Gospels, Matthew and Luke provide the most detail of Mary's life, especially as they both contain extended infancy narratives.

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[5] Beverly R. Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby, eds., *Blessed One: Protestant Perspectives on Mary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

[6] Beverly R. Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby, "Introduction," in ibid., 1.

[7] For example, Leonardo De Chirico, *A Christian's Pocket Guide to Mary: Mother of God?* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2017). This popular-level book is aimed at evangelicals who have little to no prior understanding of Mary or Mariology, especially the development in the Roman Catholic tradition. Similarly, Gregg Allison sets out Roman Catholic doctrine and practice in an accessible format; see Gregg Allison, *40 Questions about Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2021). Chapter 32, "How Does Catholicism Understand the Biblical Teaching about Mary?" and chapter 33, "What Are the Immaculate Conception and Bodily Assumption of Mary?" demonstrate that these issues need addressing in evangelical contexts, and even in Roman Catholic contexts, given the book's intended audience as stated in the introduction. Ibid., 9–10. This work distils Allison's more technical, earlier work. Gregg Allison, *Roman Catholic Doctrine and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

[8] See evangelical theologian Lauren Moore's doctoral work on "Marian Apparitions and the Catholic Church: A Phenomenological Study of Their Mutual Influence," due for completion May 2024 through the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, and the Union School of Theology, Wales.

However, Mary is also present in Mark and John, albeit in the context of Jesus's adult ministry. We can observe Mary's story through Jesus's life, particularly his birth and early years, as she becomes a disciple of her son, and in her presence at the cross and the empty tomb. In this way, she is a witness to and an integral part of Jesus's entire earthly life: his life *in utero*, birth, childhood, adolescence, adult ministry, death, and resurrection.

Matthew offers a vision of Mary as a woman who received God's grace and kindness despite social and religious stigmas. Matthew opens with the remarkable genealogy (*genesis*) of Jesus (Matt 1:1–17). This genealogy culminates in the momentous birth of Jesus and the beginning of the new era in which the Son of God enters human time and space. However, this family tree is marked by scandal. Matthew does not gloss over or omit the notorious people in the list but instead places them at the opening. The inclusion of women in the genealogy is remarkable enough; the presence of Gentile women, however, adds to the shocking nature of this list, pointing to God's intention to include Gentiles in salvation, and their status as social outcasts deemed dishonororable in their cultural and historical contexts further adds to this surprise. Jesus's earthly forebears included Tamar, who had sexual intercourse with her father-in-law, Rahab, renowned as a prostitute in her town of Jericho, and Ruth, the foreign Moabitess. Of note is Bathsheba, who is referred to only as another man's wife; the responsibility for the scandal falls more on David, yet Bathsheba bore the disgrace and horrific aftermath in the death of her husband and child and is here unnamed. Women with social and religious stigmas are clearly on display in Jesus's lineage, and Mary is the final woman in Jesus's extraordinary genealogy.

Mary did not deserve either the social shame or the unique position of her pregnancy with Jesus. Matthew indicates the potential disgrace of a child out of wedlock in Joseph's reaction to Mary's pregnancy: "Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to *public disgrace*, he had in mind to divorce her quietly" (Matt 1:19 2011 NIV, emphasis added). Beyond the social stigma, Mary's pregnancy was also a potentially dangerous situation for her (cf. Deut 22:23). This stigma and possible danger were not from Mary's insufficiency; however, neither was she deserving of the unique position in which God placed her. Mary was an ordinary Jewish girl inhabiting the Roman Empire in the first century. Matthew does not highlight any of Mary's personal qualities that make her fit for this task; instead, God's grace and kindness toward her bring her into the salvation narrative.

Luke is the most comprehensive of the Gospels in terms of its depiction of Mary; this is unsurprising, given Luke's extended infancy narrative and its

emphasis on people regarded as inconsequential in first-century Roman society. These lowly people included women, and it is noteworthy that the Magnificat features the reversal of situations for those in a "humble estate" and those who are "mighty," "rich," and "proud" (Luke 1:46–55). In Mary's surging poetic praise here, she refers to God as her Savior, pointing to the fact that she is a person in need of redemption (Luke 1:46). In Luke's two-volume narrative (Luke-Acts), Mary is named thirteen times, and she is referred to a further three times. Mary is depicted in Luke as an active rather than passive agent; Joseph usually stands in relation to Mary, not Mary to Joseph. For example, Joseph was Mary's fiancé, he accompanied her to Bethlehem, and he is named after Mary in Jesus's birth scene (Luke 2:5, 16). Simeon, though he blessed both Mary and Joseph, addressed Mary in his prophecy about Jesus (Luke 2:33–34). Although both Mary and Joseph find Jesus at the temple, it is Mary who speaks to Jesus on behalf of both of them (Luke 2:48). Thus, in Luke, Mary features in the narrative more than in other Gospels, and when she is mentioned, she is active, not passive.

In Luke, Mary is characterized and identified as "favored" and "blessed." The angel Gabriel told Mary twice that she was "favored" (Luke 1:28, 30). Elizabeth proclaimed twice that Mary was "blessed" (Luke 1:42, 45). Mary declares herself "blessed" in the Magnificat (Luke 1:48). Interestingly, when a woman in a crowd cried out to Jesus and called his mother "blessed" to have birthed and raised him (Luke 11:27), Jesus reshaped her understanding of blessedness and instead identified the "blessed" as "those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:28). In Jesus's reconfiguration of a "blessed" person, he stressed the blessedness that comes from listening to and heeding God's words rather than allegiances to his earthly family. This will become the dominant picture of blessedness in Luke's Gospel, where the "blessed" circle widened to include Jesus's spiritual family.

While the "blessed" group are those in Jesus's spiritual rather than earthly family, this did not exclude but instead included Mary. She was part of the early band of disciples who listened to and obeyed God's words, as demonstrated in her earliest recorded words in Luke. In response to Gabriel's announcement that she would conceive and give birth to a son, whom she was to name Jesus (Luke 1:30–33), Mary understandably asked, "How will this be … since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). Gabriel answered Mary that it would be through the Holy Spirit that this would take place, "For no word from God will ever fail" (Luke 1:35–37). This pronouncement elicited Mary's response: "I am the Lord's servant … may your word to me be fulfilled" (Luke 1:38). Thus, Mary's blessedness and favored status came from her believing and responding in faith to God's word, making her the

first person to hear and respond in faith to the gospel message of Jesus as Lord and Savior (cf. Luke 1:31–32). Mary became part of the community of people who listened and lived according to God's word, and thus God includes her in his spiritual family.

In Luke, Mary transitions from being Jesus's earthly mother, especially before his adulthood, to being his disciple. She is integral to his growth and development; Luke twice records that Jesus grew both physically and in wisdom, both times immediately after mentioning Mary (Luke 2:39–40, 51–52). After Jesus "grew and became strong" (Luke 2:40), Mary transitions to being cast as an "accessible exemplar" who is just like other believers, demonstrating the life of faith of all disciples of Jesus.[9] She is not merely an example for women; instead, she exemplifies faith for all those in the kingdom of God. Twice Luke records that Mary pondered the works of God and treasured pronouncements about Jesus. These occurrences act as bookends around the narrative of Jesus's childhood (Luke 2:19, 51). Mary is also embedded in the early church. The New Testament's last mention of Mary situates her in the early band of praying disciples in Jerusalem following Jesus's resurrection (Acts 1:14). Luke's portrait of Mary emphasizes her as an everyday disciple whose blessedness comes from meditating upon, heeding, and treasuring within her heart the words of God within his community.

While Luke portrays Mary positively as a model disciple, Mark's Gospel depicts her differently. In Mark, Mary does not always fully comprehend God's purposes. Sometimes she perceives, and at other times, she misses the point; sometimes she listens, and at other times, she is demanding and interfering (e.g., Mark 3:21). However, far from failing to provide a paradigm for Christian discipleship, she instead provides a picture of a disciple from an alternate angle, one who is *simul iustus et peccator*, at the same time justified and a sinner. When Mary asked for Jesus to align himself with his earthly family, Jesus redefined family as those who do God's will (Mark 3:31–34; cf. 3:21). At the close of Mark's Gospel, Mary is represented as fearful, trembling, and bewildered, along with the other women who had assembled at Jesus's tomb to anoint his body (Mark 16:1–8). The ending of Mark has prompted much scholarly debate over the years. However, if verse 8 is taken as the final verse of the earliest manuscripts, then the abrupt finish may raise in the reader a question regarding discipleship: "How will you, the reader, respond to the scene of the empty tomb?" In this

[9] The phrase "accessible exemplar" is borrowed from Joel Green; see Joel Green, "Blessed Is She Who Believed: Mary, Curious Exemplar in Luke's Narrative," in *Blessed One*, ed. Gaventa and Rigby, 10.

interpretation, Mary again encourages faith, albeit within a realistic, frail human framework. The fear and flight depicted in Mary and the other women (Mark 16:8) is an authentic picture of discipleship, which is not devoid of distress and even, on occasion, doubt and confusion.

In John, Mary also demonstrates discipleship, particularly in two critical narratives near the beginning and end of Jesus's ministry. At the wedding at Cana, Mary's statement to Jesus, "They have no more wine" (John 2:3), is simple enough. Still, it implies that Mary fully expects Jesus to do something about the situation. Jesus's response, "Why do you involve me? … My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4), is replete with the signification of his "hour" at the cross. Having instructed Jesus, Mary changes her posture to that of a disciple as she invites the waiters to heed his words: "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). After the water is turned into wine, the scene ends with a declaration that Jesus's first sign here was a revelation of his glory, which leads to the disciples putting their trust in him (John 2:11). Mary is named soon after as among the early band of people traveling with Jesus (John 2:12). In this narrative, Mary moves from instructing and trying to influence Jesus to submitting to his timing (his "hour") and encouraging others to listen to him. In this way, Mary again models discipleship. Near the end of John's Gospel, Mary continues to follow Jesus closely as one of his disciples and remains to the end at the cross (John 19:25). While hanging there, Jesus bequeaths her a son and a home in the person of John, demonstrating again God's grace and kindness toward her (John 19:25–27). John's narrative of Mary reinforces the picture of her as a disciple; she learns the posture of a disciple, encourages others to listen to Jesus, is with Jesus in his early group of followers, and remains to the last at the cross. Across the four Gospels, Mary is pictured as a woman of faith and obedience, a recipient of God's grace who is found in the early community of Jesus's followers. How she was cast in subsequent centuries is vastly different from this historical picture.

II. *Mary in the Tradition: Mary Accomplishing Redemption Alongside Her Son*

In the course of history, Mary's narrative was constructed into a vastly different Marian vision after the close of the New Testament. After Mary's last-named appearance in the Bible (Acts 1:14), the interpretation of Mary moved from a view of her as a picture of faith in God's promises, obedience to God's word, and reception of God's grace to one of her as a *conduit* of God's grace, made possible *through* her faith and obedience. The historical

account in the New Testament is at odds with later Marian piety and devotion, where Mary is cast as "the Mother of the Church," who "cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the Savior's work," which led to titles such as "Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix" being attributed to her without her being the source of salvation herself.[10] Mary's faith became the reason she was able to cooperate with God in bringing salvation to the world alongside her son, and Mary's consent to the Incarnation was pivotal to cooperating with God's work of redemption.[11] This is decidedly different from the New Testament depiction of Mary as an everyday disciple among many, *simul iustus et peccator*. This section will examine how Mary's story developed in the subsequent centuries after the Gospel accounts were written. It will focus on what contributed to, by Reformed standards, an increasingly inflated Marian vision, particularly in the Western church tradition from the early church onwards as it developed into the Roman Catholic Church.

1. *The Contemporary Marian Vision: Mary as* Co-Redemptrix *in the Roman Catholic Church*

In the contemporary Roman Catholic Church, Mary possesses a unique position in bringing salvation to humankind. Some Catholics maintain that Mary is *co-redemptrix* because she participates alongside Jesus in the work of redemption, despite a more recent effort by the papacy to distance Mary from such a description. The Second Vatican Council strongly implied the Marian title, *co-redemptrix*.[12] The Roman Catholic Church states, "Mary's role in the Church is inseparable from her union with Christ and flows directly from it. 'This union of the mother with the Son in the work of salvation is made manifest from the time of Christ's virginal conception up to his death.'"[13] The fifth Marian dogma of Mary as *co-redemptrix* is not yet officially recognized. However, formal pronouncement or not, this notion of *co-redemptrix* is widely practiced and believed in the Roman Catholic

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[10] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (*CCC*; Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), 963–975, esp. 968–70. See the section "Mary, Mother of Christ, Mother of the Church" at "Catechism of the Catholic Church," The Holy See, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

[11] "By pronouncing her 'fiat' at the Annunciation and giving her consent to the Incarnation, Mary was already collaborating with the whole work her Son was to accomplish" (*CCC* 973).

[12] Mark Miravalle, "The Council and Co-Redemptrix," Mother of all Peoples, 2003, https://www.motherofallpeoples.com/amp/the-council-and-co-redemptrix.

[13] *CCC* 964; cf. *Lumen Gentium* 57. "*Lumen Gentium*" ("The Light of the Nations"), Promulgated by Pope Paul VI (1964), https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

Church, from the papacy to the laity, indicating that even if not officially recognized as a promulgated doctrine, the idea is embedded in popular-level practices, which are important elements in developing Roman Catholic dogmas. Furthermore, her other attributes contribute to this understanding of Mary as *co-redemptrix*.

Marian titles and dogmas illustrate her hyperveneration. The Second Council of Nicea (787 CE) determined that saints should be venerated (*dulia*), while Mary should be hypervenerated (*hyperdulia*).[14] In Roman Catholic theology, supreme worship and adoration (*latria*) are reserved only for the Trinitarian Godhead. Nevertheless, even though supreme worship is reserved for God alone, the titles and Marian dogmas demonstrate her hyperveneration, which is sometimes difficult to distinguish from worship. Along with *co-redemptrix*, Vatican II titled Mary *mediatrix* because she mediates God's grace, having cooperated in accomplishing salvation. Mary's eminence is also evident in other titles, including Queen of the Universe, Mother of the Church, and Advocate, because she can hear prayers and advocate for intercession with her son, given her assumption and close proximity to him.[15] The Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* states that, "The Blessed Virgin is invoked *by* the Church under the titles of Advocate, Auxiliatrix, Adjutrix, and Mediatrix."[16] The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception (promulgated 1854) and the Dogma of the Assumption (promulgated 1950) highlight that she originated and remained without sin, demonstrated in her perpetual virginity; her sinlessness in conception and life meant death could not hold her. [17] These Marian dogmas and titles provide evidence of a different Marian identity than that provided in the Gospel accounts.

Not only Mary's titles and dogmas, but Marian piety and prayers, which were developed in the church in the early centuries, point to her elevated status. Evidence from the late third century suggests that Christians in

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[14] De Chirico, *Mary*, 33.

[15] These titles are seen, for example, in *Lumen Gentium*, 59–62.

[16] *Lumen Gentium*, 62 (emphasis added). It is not the case that Mary is invoked *in* the Roman Catholic Church, but rather *by* the Church, which is an important distinction.

[17] The four Marian dogmas promulgated thus far are Mary as "Mother of God" (*theotokos*); Mary as "Ever Virgin" referring to her perpetual virginity before, during, and after the birth of Jesus; Mary's "Immaculate Conception," meaning Mary was conceived without the stain of original sin, and Mary's "Assumption," where she was taken up, or assumed, to heaven at the end of her earthly life. Within the Roman Catholic Church, a dogma is an unchanging and binding truth revealed by God and is a requisite belief of a communicant, faithful Catholic. See "*Munificentissimus Deus*: Defining the Dogma of the Assumption," The Apostolic Constitution of Pope Pius XI (1950), https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html.

Egypt prayed to Mary and asked for her intercession.[18] In the patristic period, Gregory of Nazianzus recorded a Marian prayer in the fourth century.[19] Gregory of Nyssa recorded the earliest known apparition in the third century.[20] The fourth-century *Six Books Apocryphon* demonstrates a significant increase in Marian veneration and is evidence that "full bloom" Marian piety already existed by then.[21] The *Apocryphon* records Marian devotional practices and references to the sun and moon worshiping Mary, Mary pleading to Jesus for mercy on behalf of the dead, her performance of miracles, and her intercession for healing.[22] Fourth-century evidence exists of annual commemorations of Mary, seemingly connected to her assumption, which included bread offerings in her honor.[23] Shrines to Mary were erected, and feast days were held from the late fourth or at least the early fifth century.[24] Therefore, there is strong evidence of Marian devotional practices, piety, and prayers in the church before the fifth century.

Prayers to Mary as a crucial devotional practice indicate her important position in Roman Catholic spirituality. She is approached in prayer because of her proximity to her son; as his mother, Mary is uniquely positioned to have the ear of Jesus and can intercede on the faithful's behalf. Mary is the maternal, more approachable figure; despite Jesus's ascension, he is often regarded as distant, while Mary is closer to people. Regarding specific prayers addressed to Mary, two will be mentioned here. The Rosary is an "epitome of the whole Gospel," and Mary is central to its practice.[25] The "Hail Mary" prayers, which address her and mention the "crowning" she receives upon the completion of every Rosary, make the Rosary one of the most essential spiritual practices for Roman Catholics.[26] The popularly used *Regina Caeli* ("Queen of Heaven") prayer demonstrates her intercessory role in praying to God for people, her merit that enabled her to bear Jesus, and her role in granting everlasting life. Prayers addressed to Mary indicate her essential role in the spiritual lives of the Catholic faithful.

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[18] The papyrus *Sub tuum Praesidium* records this prayer: "We take refuge beneath the protection of your compassion, Theotokos. Do not disregard our prayers in troubling times, but deliver us from danger, O only pure and blessed one." Stephen Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 69.

[19] Ibid., 174.

[20] Gregory recorded it in 380 CE in his biography of Gregory the Wonderworker; ibid., 175.

[21] Ibid., 130–33.

[22] Ibid., 136–45.

[23] Ibid., 145–52.

[24] Ibid., 17–18.

[25] *CCC* 971.

[26] According to the Roman Catholic Church, Mary has revealed to various people that for each completed "Hail Mary," she is given a rose, and upon a completed Rosary, she is given "a crown of roses," which is what "Rosary" means. De Chirico, *Mary*, 55.

Devotional practices linked to specific places also indicate Mary's exalted position. Worldwide, thousands of church buildings are dedicated to Mary. One of the oldest and most preeminent is Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, which demonstrates Marian devotion. Pope Francis dedicated his papacy and the world to Mary at this church, laying flowers at the feet of a statue of Mary and praying to her for her protection of Rome on the day after he was elected pontiff.[27] Shrines dedicated to Mary are found in everyday places and spaces, for example, at the side of the road, in gardens, schools, hospitals, and houses; the many Marian shrines indicate her accessibility and nearness. Places of Marian apparitions have become pilgrimage sites and form an essential part of Marian devotion. The liturgical calendar, which dedicates to her feast days and the month of May, also illustrates Marian devotion.[28] All these devotional practices demonstrate Mary's preeminent place in the spiritual lives of those devoted to her adoration.

2. *Early Marian Documents and Devotion: Praise for the Co-Redemptrix*

The early church recognized the New Testament books as the reliable, authoritative record of the events of Jesus's life, including Mary's narrative. However, several noncanonical works purport to provide further details, particularly regarding the infancy narratives, by expanding on Jesus's and Mary's works and words. Many of these works situate Mary instead of Jesus at the center of the narrative. In particular, her inherent holiness and worthiness uniquely position her to play a pivotal role in redemption. Rather than the New Testament's portrait of Mary as a disciple in the community of faith, these texts portray Mary as a central character who brings salvation alongside her son. For example, the *Protoevangelium of James* (ca. late second century CE) is the first noncanonical narrative of Mary's life. The existence and content of this text indicate that it is both the cause and the evidence of second-century Marian devotion, and "although it affords no evidence of any cult, the *Protoevangelium* attests to a surprisingly advanced piety centered on Mary's exceptional purity and holiness already by the later second century."[29] The *Protoevangelium* emphasizes Mary's ongoing virginity; indeed,

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[27] "Pope Entrusts World to Immaculate Heart of Mary," Catholic News Agency, October 13, 2013, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/28237/pope-entrusts-world-to-immaculate-heart-of-mary. Upon his election on March 13, 2013, Pope Francis indicated his plans for prayer to Mary for the following day; see "Transcript: Pope Francis' First Speech as Pontiff," National Public Radio, March 13, 2013, https://www.npr.org/2013/03/13/174224173/transcript-pope-francis-first-speech-as-pontiff.

[28] For further details on Marian devotional practices, see DeChirico, *Mary*, 60–62.

[29] Shoemaker, *Mary*, 22, 47–63.

it contains a story of the midwife who confirmed Mary's virginity after birthing Jesus. While these documents were composed too late to be canonical, they nevertheless gained influence and are evidence of early Marian piety. Marian devotion from the early centuries onwards emphasized Mary's holiness and purity and particularly concentrated on her perpetual virginity.

The inextricable link between Mary's piety and her virginity to emphasize her "purity" is evidenced in other early noncanonical writings. In addition to the *Protoevangelium of James*, the *Ascension of Isaiah*—dated from the second to the fourth century but most likely from the early-to-mid-second century—relates the tradition of Mary's virginity *in partu*—that is, during birth, her hymen remained intact.[30] The *Odes to Solomon*, a text of early Christian hymns from around the mid-second century, contains high praise for Mary and maintains that Mary retained her virginity in both the conception of Jesus and his birth. It also added the idea that Mary birthed Jesus without pain, which would become an essential theme in Marian devotion.[31] The *Book of Mary's Repose*, a third-century, Gnostic-flavored text, is the earliest known account of Mary's dormition and assumption—that is, the end of her life ("falling asleep") and her bodily assumption to heaven.[32] Mary's purity and protection from sin—highlighted in her perpetual virginity—are woven into the dormition and assumption, for death could not hold her, and her assumption confirmed her sinlessness.[33] Church councils would later confirm this connection between Mary's virginity and sinlessness. At the Council of Constantinople (533 CE), Mary was referred to as the *Aeiparthenos* ("the Ever-Virgin"). In sum, the Roman Catholic Church affirms not only Mary's virginity *ante partum* ("before birth"), as stated in the New Testament, but also her virginity *post partum*, and by a miraculous work of God, *in partu*. The perpetual virginity of Mary is one significant way that the Marian vision of the Roman Catholic Church is at odds with the historical record of the New Testament.

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[30] Ibid., 43. For further details on the *Ascension of Isaiah*, see the following critical edition of the text and the extensive commentary, Paulo Bettiolo, A. Giambelluca Kossova, Claudio Leonardi, Enrico Norelli, and Lorenzo Perrone, eds. and trans., *Ascensio Isaiae: Textus*, CCSA7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995); Enrico Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*, CCSA 8 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1995).

[31] Shoemaker, *Mary*, 44.

[32] The *Book of Mary's Repose* survived only in the Ethiopian language, Ge'ez, but also exists in fragments in Aramaic and Old Georgian. However, early and medieval Christian writings allude to its content. Ibid., 101–4.

[33] *CCC*, quoting *Lumen Gentium* and echoing *Munificentissimus Deus*, states, "'Finally the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death." *CCC* 966; *Lumen Gentium* 59; *Munificentissimus Deus* 40.

Early church fathers contributed to the theological development of Marian devotion. Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35–107 CE) considered Mary's virginity in the conception and birth of Jesus a cornerstone of faith, and he asserted as much in his letters in language similar to creedal statements (e.g., Ignatius, *Eph.* 19:2).[34] Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165 CE) and, later, Irenaeus of Lyons (d. 202 CE) developed a theology of Mary's virginity, particularly connecting it to Mary being a second Eve whose obedience and chastity reversed Eve's disobedience and sin.[35] Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* elevated Mary's status by identifying her obedient response at the annunciation as a turning point in salvation history; Mary's active participation in God's plan countered Eve's disobedience, opening the way for the destruction of sin and death.[36] Irenaeus's theory of recapitulation asserted this theme: as Christ is the new Adam, so Mary is the new Eve. However, Irenaeus developed this idea more explicitly, so Mary became the "cause of salvation" who "rescues" humanity from sin and death and whose obedience makes the salvation of God's creation possible.[37] Among Clement of Alexandria's (ca. 150–215 CE) surviving works, the sole reference to Mary states Mary's virginity *in partu*.[38] Origen (ca. 184–253 CE) seemed to give contradictory pronouncements about Mary's virginity in partu but did maintain that she never had sexual relations with Joseph; as Jesus modeled celibacy for men, so Mary did for women.[39] Origen's idea of Jesus and Mary being ideal models of celibacy had enormous repercussions for the church, and celibacy came to be viewed as the ideal, more spiritual, state. Tertullian was an exception among the early Church Fathers; he adopted a restrained Eve–Mary typology, but otherwise, he asserted a picture of Mary more in keeping with the New Testament.[40] Tertullian maintained that Mary did not remain a virgin *in partu* or *post partum*; rather, she married Joseph and had children with him.[41] He went further and placed Mary in the category of unbelievers, following Jesus's definition of "family" in Mark 3:32–35 and Luke 11:27–28.[42] The development of Marian theology, particularly regarding Mary as

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[34] Hans von Campenhausen, *The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church*, trans. Frank Clarke (London: SCM, 1964), 19, 29–30; Shoemaker, *Mary*, 44.

[35] Shoemaker, *Mary*, 44.

[36] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 100.4–5; see Shoemaker, *Mary*, 45.

[37] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.4; see Shoemaker, *Mary*, 46.

[38] Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 7.16; see Shoemaker, *Mary*, 67.

[39] Origen of Alexandria, *Homilies on Luke* 14; *Commentary on Matthew* 25; *Homilies on Luke* 7; see. Shoemaker, *Mary*, 67.

[40] For example, Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 7, 17, 20; see Shoemaker, *Mary*, 66.

[41] Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 23.2; see Shoemaker, *Mary*, 66.

[42] Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 7.13; see Shoemaker, *Mary*, 66.

the new Eve as connected to her virginity, was an extrabiblical legacy that some of the church fathers bequeathed the church.

Jerome's work on the Vulgate laid the groundwork for a theological understanding of the intersection of Mary and God's grace, particularly the notion that she possesses and is a conduit of God's grace. In 382 CE, at the request of Damasus, bishop of Rome, Jerome commenced work on a unified Latin translation of the Bible. Jerome was aware of the seriousness of the task, writing to Damasus in 383 CE that revising the old Latin version was a task "both perilous and presumptuous" and arguing that while the Latin version was "marked by discrepancies," he wanted to "go back to the original Greek and correct the mistakes introduced by inaccurate translators.... We must go back to the fountainhead."[43] Despite Jerome's conscientious effort to produce a trustworthy Latin translation based on the original sources, a translation choice about Mary did not adequately reflect the Greek and had associated theological repercussions. Luke describes Mary as "highly favored" (*kecharitōmenē*, Luke 1:28); Jerome, however translated the word as *gratia plenia*, that is, "full of grace," suggesting that grace is a substance that could fill Mary. This view of grace accords with the notion that Mary bore and birthed Jesus on account of her own merit as an obedient second Eve rather than the undeserved favor of God, who included her in salvation history as the mother of Jesus. Among other humanists, Erasmus in the sixteenth century demonstrated that *kecharitōmenē* meant "favored one" rather than "full of grace."[44] However, this understanding of Mary as "full of grace" was already theologically embedded in the Roman Catholic Church, where the Latin Vulgate remains the official translation. The locus of God's grace in the Roman Catholic system was not the grace bestowed on Mary, as proclaimed in the New Testament, but rather resided in Mary by virtue of her unique obedience, providing another example of how Mary's depiction in the course of history was not in accord with the vision of her in the Scriptures.

The Trinitarian and christological controversies of the early centuries led to statements about Mary's role as "God-bearer" or "Mother of God." In the face of various heretical movements, the church sought to clarify and articulate the nature and relationship between members of the Godhead, as well as the divine and human nature of God the Son. The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) sought to address Arianism and its teaching that Jesus was not

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[43] Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6: *St Jerome: Letters and Select Works* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 487.

[44] See Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 133.

coeternal; this is particularly evident in the Nicene Creed's statement of Jesus's complete divinity and humanity. These christological debates did not end at Nicaea but continued across the Roman Empire, and Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople, preached in late 428 CE that Mary should not be titled *Theotokos*. Nevertheless, she received this title at the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE, which Nestorius refused to attend. *Theotokos* is best understood as "the one who gave birth to the one who is God" and declared the divinity of Christ and the unity of his person, in opposition to Nestorius's division of his two natures.[45] While Marian devotion and piety were already established before the Council of Ephesus, what was a statement about Christ's divinity (*theotokos*) was soon accosted as a statement about Mary. This is evident in the council's immediate aftermath, when Pope Sixtus III began building Santa Maria Maggiore in Mary's honor to celebrate her proclamation as *Theotokos*.[46] Thus, early theological controversies and the church's response helped cement and articulate Marian piety.

III. *Redeeming Mary: Her Narrative as a Picture of Faith, Obedience, and God's Grace*

There are marked differences between the Mary of the reliable historical record of the New Testament and the elevated persona that developed over the following centuries in noncanonical texts, early church fathers, and theological controversies. The Scriptures testify to Mary as a woman of faith in God's promises, obedience to God's word, and a person who received the grace of God, neither through her personal merit nor because of any particular deficit. She bore witness to her son's development *in utero*, birth, life, death, and resurrection, and she was one of his early followers. As the story of a disciple and an everyday believer, hers is a powerful picture of what it means for millions of others across the centuries who count themselves as followers of her son. In this way, redeeming Mary's narrative allows those in the Reformed tradition to tell a better story of her life and witness than the one that led to her hyperveneration. Reexamining her in history contributes to the fields of apologetics and mission, particularly in settings where Mary occupies a dominant place in spiritual practices and devotion.

In contexts where Marian piety seems at odds with the Reformed faith, pointing back to a biblical portrayal of Mary can encourage people to

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[45] Jaroslav Pelikan helpfully defines *Theotokos* this way; see Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1996), 55.

[46] De Chirico, *Mary*, 30.

interact with her in a way that brings appropriate honor to her and her son. Wanting to respect Mary is an admirable quality, yet in giving her due honor, it would be remiss not to return to her original story in the New Testament. Mary points people to her son there: "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:5). Honoring Mary requires that the faithful honor Christ first and foremost. It is unnecessary to expunge Mary from spiritual life entirely; however, recovering her narrative will challenge how this is expressed and exclude any practices or beliefs that exalt her to a position that the New Testament's testimony does not endorse. Mary's story is about a woman whom God treated graciously and kindly and included in salvation history. It is the remarkable story of a woman who carried, birthed, and raised Jesus to maturity and learned what it meant to be his disciple. She was faithful, part of the remnant of followers of Jesus who were last at the cross, first at the grave, and among the earliest band of God's new community in the early church. Retrieving Mary's narrative as that of a woman of faith and obedience who received God's grace allows those in the Reformed tradition to tell a powerful story of what it means to receive and respond to God's grace in the person of Jesus Christ.

The juxtaposition of the New Testament's depiction of Mary with later Marian devotion in subsequent centuries reveals a marked chasm between them. The New Testament historical record reveals that Mary was an everyday disciple. This accessible exemplar received God's grace not through her own merit but by God's kindness toward her. She was the first to believe the gospel and bore witness to Jesus's entire earthly life, from the womb to childhood and adulthood. She followed him as a disciple until the end, staying at the foot of the cross and hurrying as soon as she could to the mouth of the empty tomb. While Mary occasionally made demands of Jesus or misunderstood him, even in this, she models that discipleship is a journey of following Jesus, not a status that demands perfection. A very different image emerges when this depiction of Mary is held up against the Marian vision that developed in the aftermath of the New Testament. Here, she accomplishes salvation alongside her son by her obedience, her perpetual virginity and sinlessness lead to her dormition and assumption, and she intercedes as mother of the church on behalf of those who pray to her. Redeeming Mary's historical narrative opens the way for those in the Reformed tradition to tell a compelling gospel story wherein God's grace enters the world in the person of her son. For all who follow Jesus as Mary did, she provides a robust paradigm of discipleship, one worthy of emulation. In the redemption of her story, it is evident that she was a woman in need of redemption, not a woman who accomplished redemption.