CHAPTER IV

MARY AND ELIZABETH
The fifth woman mentioned by Matthew in Jesus Christ's genealogy is Mary. The word "Mary" is derived from the Greek words "Maria," and "Mariam," which in turn are derived from the Hebrew word "Miriam." The Hebrew word "Miriam" may have been derived from the Egyptian word "Mariye," which means "dear." Mary was simply a humble village maid. She was of royal descent, but her family had fallen into obscurity. She was a person of superior mind, but she held no office that could distinguish her from others.

Mary was promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of king David. She, after this engagement with Joseph, knew God "nearly, deeply and in a new way."1

It was the time when all Hebrews were waiting for the promised Messiah as prophesised in Isaiah 7:14.

Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

One day, to Mary's astonishment, an angel appeared to her and gave the message that she would become the mother of the Saviour:
And the angel came in unto her, and said,
Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord
is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

(Luke 1:28)

Mary, the lowly maiden, was troubled. She could
not picture in her mind the meaning of his salutation. On
one hand she might have felt happy on hearing that she is
"highly favoured, the Lord is with thee," but on the other
hand she might have been in great confusion. She wondered
what his words meant. Then the angel suppressed the chaos
raised in her mind by saying:

Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour
with God.

And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy
womb, and bring forth a son, and
shalt call his name Jesus.

He shall be great, and shall be called
the son of the Highest: and the Lord
God shall give unto him the throne of
his father David:
And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. (Luke 1: 30-33)

Mary was only engaged to Joseph and not married to him. She was a virgin that time and it was very heavy to digest. For a moment she forgot that everything is possible to God. She forgot the rescue of Israelites by the Lord God. She expressed her doubt in the following words:

How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? (Luke 1:34)

Mary did not doubt the message. She only wanted to know how it could be. She wished to know how it could be, but she believed it would be. She believed, for it was said of her, "Blessed is she that believed" (Luke 1:45).

The angel answered,

The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the son of God.

(Luke 1:35)
Mary was very dear to God and therefore highly honoured and greatly favoured. She was a person of eminent character. She was gracious and devout. And hence she was visited by an angel and was favoured with the prediction of a marvelous birth. She was full of wonder and hence inquired. There was no wrong in that desire. She believed the surpassing promise and only wished to know how it could be performed. She sought only explanation but not token. She asked for instruction, and she had it. She did not ask for a sign but she had one, the most pleasant one that could possibly come to her, her cousin Elizabeth. She was her sign given by God:

And, behold, thy cousin Elizabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.

For with God nothing shall be impossible.

(Luke 1:36-37)

Then Mary realised the fact that for God everything is possible: "Instead of recoiling in terror or objecting stubbornly, Mary submitted completely to a pregnancy she had to know would give rise to ugly rumors and
murderous accusations." She recovered the courage which she should have as a child of God and said,

Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. (Luke 1:38)

Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, was the wife of Zacharias, a priest. They both were very old. But they did not have children:

And they had no child, because that Elizabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years. (Luke 1:7)

Laurence E. Porter says, "Zacharia, an aged priest, is ministering in the Temple when he is interrupted by the appearance of the angel Gabriel bringing the news that his wife, the elderly Elizabeth, will bear him a son. This son will be a prophet in the OT tradition; more, he will be Messiah's forerunner. So astonished is Zachariah that he cannot believe the news; for his incredulity he is stricken dumb until the promise is fulfilled."

The privilege of burning incense was permitted only once in the lifetime of any priest. It was accorded by
lot like all priestly activities. During that time an angel appeared to him and told him that his prayer had been heard and his wife Elizabeth will bear a son whose name will be John:

And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth.

For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And many to the Lord their God.

And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the first, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1:14-17)

Zacharia became dumb for doubting the Lord's message. Then, as the time came, Elizabeth conceived:

And after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,
Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men. (Luke, 1:24-25)

Like Mary, Elizabeth also found favour in the sight of God and hence was blessed with the promise to give her a son, and to remove the title barren woman. It was in her sixth month that the same angel, Gabriel, was sent to a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to virgin Mary, to tell about her pregnancy. Mary, full of faith, went to see Elizabeth, who was also full of holy confidence. And both praised the Lord. Spurgeon says, "Instead of two ordinary village women, we see before us two prophets and poets upon whom the spirit of God abundantly rested." 4

Mary went to Elizabeth and greeted her. Then the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped. And Mary was filled with the Holy Ghost:

And she spoke out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.

And where is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?
For lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord. (Luke 1:42-45)

There was scope for Elizabeth to feel jealous that Mary’s son would foreshadow her son. But Elizabeth overcame that temptation and greeted Mary with clear spiritual insight and without any jealousy. And Mary responded with the hymn of praise beloved in Christian devotion as the Magnificat. Laurence E. Porter's comments on this Magnificat are as follows:

The Magnificat is in form a beautiful lyrical poem uttered by a Jewish peasant girl whose cultural background was the OT writings, which supply the very expressions she uses. The main source on which she draws is the song of Hannah (I Sam 2:1-10) to which her canticle corresponds in general outline as well as in various details, though there are echoes of other OT passages, as Leah’s utterance (Gen 30:13) and some Psalms."

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Porter divides the hymn into four stages:

1. 46-48 : Mary praises God for His goodness to her.
2. 49 - 50 : And to all those who fear Him.
3. 51 - 53 : He succors the oppressed against the oppressor.
4. 54 - 55 : In the final verses the song of praise ends in peaceful tranquillity.

The hymn runs as follows:

My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my saviour.

For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.

And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.
He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree.

He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.

He hath holpen his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy.

As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever. (Luke 1: 46-55)

"This beautiful lyric," says Plummer, "is neither a reply to Elizabeth nor an address to God. It is rather a meditation; and expression of personal emotions and experiences." Laurence says, "It is lyrical in tone not only because it is what Wordsworth declared all lyric poetry to be - the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling' - but also because Mary knew the OT thoroughly, and many portions, especially the more lyrical ones, by heart. Their language became the natural vehicle of her praises."
Mary was to be the mother of the Messiah, an honour which Jewesses longed for, but surely scarce dared to hope for. This unbelievable matter evoked her emotion, and came out in the form of this noble song. Her heart was merry within her. Her subject was the Saviour. She hailed the incarnate God. She sang about the long expected Messiah who was about to appear and for whom prophets and princes waited long. She was the blessed among women and highly favoured of the Lord. Her peculiar delight was not that there was a saviour to be born, but that He was to be born of her.

Mary knew that all things are possible to God. She simply trusted His promise, delivered by an angel. And her heart leaped with pleasure and her tongue glorified His name: "To her the substance of things hoped for was her faith, and that was also her evidence of things not seen. She knew, by the revelation of God, that she was to bear the promised seed who should bruise the serpent's head, but other proof she had none." Mary did not look at this matter unbelievingly. She not only appreciated the greatness of the favour, but also rejoiced the more heartily on that account. "For he that is mighty hath done to me great things." She sang, "His mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation." She looked beyond the captivity to the days of the kings - to Solman, to David - along through the judges.
into the wilderness, across the Red Sea to Jacob, to Issac, to Abraham, and onward until pausing at the gate of Eden, she heard the sound of the promise, the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head. She magnificently summed up the book of the wars of the Lord and the triumph of Jehovah, "He hath shewed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts." She delightfully intermingled His mercy with judgment in the next canto: "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away."

Mary not only tuned her heart to glory in her God for His wonders in the past, but also dwelt upon the note of election: "I love him because he first loved me." She had the doctrine of election in her song. In Kent's words:

A monument of grace,
   A sinner saved by blood;
The streams of love I trace,
   Up to the fountain, God;
And in his mighty breast I see,
   Eternal thoughts of love to me.10

Mary did not finish her song until she reached the covenant. In the last verse of her song she sang, "As he spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to his seed for ever,"
that was the covenant. She praised her God heartily. She was all heart. Her soul was on fire. And the fire burned when she pondered and then she spoke with her tongue. Her praise was very joyful: "My spirit hath rejoiced in God my saviour." She was confident enough in the promise and hence she sang sweetly. But there was something more than confidence in her song: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour .... For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name," thus there was also familiarity. While her song was all this, yet it was very humble and full of gratitude. Though papist calls her "Mother of God," she never mentions such a thing in her song, and calls God her Saviour. She wanted a saviour and she had one. She felt happy because there was a savior for her. She did not talk as though she could commend herself to Him, but she hoped to stand accepted in the Beloved.

Thus Mary stayed about three months with Elizabeth, and then went back home. Elizabeth gave birth to a son, when the time came for her, and named him "John" following God's command. But all their neighbours wondered at their decision because there was no relative with that name. A question arose in their hearts : "What manner of child shall this be!" (Luke 1:66). But it was plain that the Lord's power was with him.
The angel appeared to Joseph, who wanted to leave Mary secretly, and convinced him that Mary was not guilty in any sense and whatever was going to happen was only through the Holy Ghost:

Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife; for that which conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins.

(Matthew 1: 20-21)

At that time Emperor Caeser Augustus sent out an order for all the citizens of the Empire to register themselves for the census. When this first census took place, Quirinius was the governor of Syria. Everyone, then, went to register himself, each to his own town. Joseph was a descendant of David. He went from the town of Nazareth, in Galilee, to Judea, to the town named Bethlehem, where king David was born. He went with Mary to register. When they were in Bethlehem time came for her and she gave birth to a son:
And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

Then an angel appeared to the shepherds of the same country and disclosed the birth of Saviour. When the angels went back into heaven, the shepherds hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and saw the baby lying in the manger. And they told them what the angel had said about this child. All who heard it were filled with wonder at what the shepherds told them. Mary remembered all the things, the angel told her, and thought deeply about them:

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. (Luke 2:19)

The three wise men who were also astrologers, studied the stars and went to see the Saviour. They went into the house and saw the child with his mother Mary. They knelt down and worshipped him. Then they offered gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then to perform the ceremony of purification according to the Law of Moses, Mary and Joseph took Jesus to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. Simeon, a God-fearing man, waiting for Israel to be saved, took the child in his arms, and gave thanks to God:
Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart
in peace, according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face
of all people;
A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the
glory of thy people Israel. (Luke 2: 29-32)

Joseph and Mary were amazed at the things Simeon
said about him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary,

Behold, this child is set for the fall and
rising again of many in Israel; and for
a sign which shall be spoken against;
Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own
soul also. (Luke 2: 34-35)

Anna, a prophetess, daughter of Phanuel, of the
tribe of Asher, arrived at the same hour and gave thanks to
God, and spoke about the child to all who were waiting for
God to redeem Jerusalem. Every year Jesus' parents went to
Jerusalem for the feast of Passover. When Jesus was twelve
years old, they went to the feast as usual. After the feast
they started back home thinking that Jesus was with some of
their relatives. But when they returned to Jerusalem they did not find him there. They found him on the third day, in the temple, sitting with the Jewish teachers, listening to them and asking questions. His parents were amazed when they saw him, and his mother said to him,

Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.

(Luke, 2: 48)

Mary and Joseph did not understood anything when he answered,

How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?

(Luke 2: 49)

But Mary kept treasured all these things in her heart. Mary is seen only three times in the whole history of Jesus.

First, we see them in a wedding at Cana:

And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there:
And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage. (John 2:1-2)

When the wine for the guests was over, Mary asked her son to help:

And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine.

(John 2:3)

But his reply to her mother makes us feel that Mary was hurt:

Woman, what have I to do with thee?
Mine hour is not yet come. (John 2:4)

But Alfred E. Garvie notes, "Jesus' answer to her is not discourteous or disrespectful, according to the usage of the term 'woman' at the time; but it is an assertion that in the use of his supernatural power he could follow no human prompting, not even his mother's but only God's. The mother's words to the servants show that she did not feel rebuffed, but remained expectant. When the divine indication came, her hopes were fulfilled." The following verse justifies Garvie's view:
His mother saith unto the servants,
Whatever he saith unto you, do it.

(John 2:5)

Secondly, we see them in a meeting where Jesus was preaching parables (Matthew 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21)

There came then his brethren and his mother, and, standing without, sent unto him, calling him.

And, the multitude sat about him, and they said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren without seek for thee.

And he answered them, saying, who is my mother, or my brethren? (Mark 3: 31-33)

Thus, when Mary with his sons went to meet her first-born son who was preaching to the multitude, she received an answer regarding her part: she was only the mediator to bring Jesus to this world to save His people.

Thirdly, we see them at the cross of Jesus Christ:
When Jesus therefore saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son!

Then saith he to the disciple,
Behold thy mother! (John 19:26-27)

Mary remembered His birth, the shepherds' words, the wise men's visit, and Simeon's and Anna's words. She remembered what Simeon said about her son: "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also. (Luke 2:35) Though she knew that something would happen to his son, she could not do anything because God did not want her to. So silently she accepted all that happened to her and accepted her son's death.

We finally see Mary praying together with the disciples in a room:

These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.

(Acts 1:14)
Thus a mother of the Saviour performed all her duties till her last breath. Elizabeth was blessed by John who was a forerunner of Jesus, Mary's child. He cleared the path for Christ. And Christ gave His life on the cross to save His people. So the two women Mary and Elizabeth were blessed by God with sons. The common factor in both was that they did not speculate to others of their son's future. They did not shrink from forebodings.

To conclude,

We view Mary as the most privileged woman who ever lived, and in a sense, she was. At times we may not realize, however, the price she paid for the honour. Though she knew she was pregnant through the Holy Spirit, many neighbours and acquaintances undoubtedly spread deadly gossip that she had fallen into sin with her fiance or someone else. When Jesus began his ministry, surely Mary must have cringed and feared for Jesus when she heard people call him a bastard, a drunkard, and even Beelzebub himself. And finally, as she watched her son die at Golgotha, mere
tears must have hardly reflected the wrenching agony she felt inside. Yet from Mary we can learn that God gives more grace as our burdens grow greater. From whom he asks much he also supplies much, and God will be there for you if a sword pierces your own soul.12
REFERENCES


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