

The Quest for the Historical Mary

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In the first century in Galilee, there lived a Jewish woman named Miriam of Nazareth. Because she was the mother of Jesus, Christians in later times called her the Mother of God, *Theotokos* in Greek, God-bearer, the one who was heavy/pregnant with God. She is arguably the most celebrated woman in the Christian tradition. Who could count the different paintings, sculptures, and icons; the music and poetry; the liturgies and feasts, spiritual writings and official doctrines that pay tribute to her; even the universities named after her. The title of a book by George Tavard gets it exactly right: *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*. Every generation has honored her according to their own best lights. Now it is our turn. Here is the basic question: how can our generation carry forward this rich, living tradition of honoring Mary? How can we, living in a multicultural church in the twenty-first century, appreciate her significance for our life of faith and its practice?

One fruitful answer that has emerged in recent decades proceeds in two steps. First, we envision Mary as a real woman of history who walked faithfully with her God; then, connecting with her living memory in the communion of saints, we draw courage, comfort, and challenge as she walks with the community today. This two-step approach ramifies out from the insight that God's saving revelation takes place precisely in history, in specific times and places rather than in the platonic realm of eternal ideas. Hence it entails a paradigm shift from a primarily doctrinal or devotional Marian imagination to an imagination colored by history, that is, to a picture of the historical Mary fed by the gospels. This does not mean that doctrine and liturgy have no part in interpretation, but their symbolizing arises from and is tethered down by her concrete reality at every point. We should envision Mary as an historical person, who lived in a particular time and place, who had her own troubles and joys to experience, her own decisions to make, her own life to compose; and then, appreciating the reality of her life, draw inspiration and courage for our own lives as she walks with us today.

In this lecture we will look at four areas of research that have borne fruit in this quest for the historical Mary, namely, cultural, economic, political, and religious. In each instance we will see how this knowledge helps us understand the life Mary actually lived. In the end we will ponder the theological significance of this picture. I invite you to see if this approach "from below," through history, works for you, that is, if it leads to a view of Mary's significance that is credible (first of all), as well as theologically sound, ecumenically fruitful, spiritually empowering, and socially liberating.

A prefatory word about sources: We start the quest with the New Testament which contains the earliest stories about Mary. There are thirteen distinct passages where she speaks, takes action, or is described as an essential part of the action. Matthew and Luke place her primarily at the beginning of Jesus' life; John depicts her at the end by the cross; all four gospels have scenes

where she appears during Jesus' public ministry; Luke takes the further step of naming her among the women and men disciples gathered in the upper room awaiting the Spirit before Pentecost. As you know, these gospels reflect the missionary interests of the early church. They are not biographical but profoundly theological writings. Thus they give us a picture of a woman whose life is woven into the story of salvation coming from God in Jesus through the power of the Spirit. At the same time, because they believe that God's revelation has occurred in history, they never lose touch with concrete times and places:

“After being warned in a dream, he (Joseph) went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth” (Matt 2:22-23); “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan” (Mk 1:9); “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary” (Lk 1:26-27). These and similar texts allow us to situate Mary in time and place: the first century, and a town called Nazareth in Galilee, part of the land of Israel which was occupied by the military power of the conquering Roman empire. Using the spade of archaeology, the measuring tools of social-scientific studies of the Roman Empire, and the quill of ancient authors, let us go questing for the historical Mary.

Cultural Research

Galilee forms the northern region of the land of Israel. Blessed with a Mediterranean climate, it is land of hills and valleys that sinks down to the Sea of Galilee in the east. One adjective repeats over and over again in ancient and modern descriptions: fertile. Speaking of the grains and cereals, the grape vines and olives, Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, wrote that “The land is everywhere so rich in soil and pasturage and produces such variety of trees, that even the laziest are tempted by these facilities to devote themselves to agriculture.” Hundreds of farming villages dotted the landscape, one of which was Nazareth.

Since the 1980's, scientifically-conducted archaeological excavations have produced a veritable explosion of information about ancient Galilee in Roman times. This painstaking work uncovers the material culture of the place, which in turn helps scholars assess what life was like. Jonathan Reed, a key practitioner of this art, points out that the hard remains uncovered in Nazareth to date include olive presses, wine presses, millstones for grinding grain, cisterns for holding water, and holes for storage jars. What has not been found is just as significant. To date nothing that indicates wealth has been uncovered in Nazareth: no paved roads or civic buildings, no inscriptions (this indicates a mostly illiterate population), no decorative frescoes or mosaics, no luxury items such as perfume bottles, not even any simple glass.

As in villages all over Galilee, the homes were small and clustered together. Each family occupied a domestic space or “house” of one or two small rooms built of native stone held

together by a mortar of mud and smaller stones. Floors were made of packed earth. The roofs were thatched, constructed of thick bundles of reeds tied over beams of wood. Instead of standing alone, three or four of these small dwellings were clustered around a courtyard open to the sky. Surrounded by an outer stone wall, they formed a secure living space. The enclosed family rooms were used for sleep and sex, and taking shelter from the elements. In the unroofed, common courtyard, inhabitants of the domestic units, most likely a close kinship group, shared an oven, a cistern, and a millstone, indicating that this was the kitchen where food was prepared. Domestic animals also lived here.

Alleyways or “streets” ran crookedly around the domestic enclosures. Reed notes that “none had channels for running water or sewage, which must have been tossed in the alleyways. Instead, the roads bend at the various clusters of houses, and were made of packed earth and dirt, dusty in the dry hot seasons and muddy in the short rainy seasons, but smelly throughout.” Living at a subsistence level, households by and large grew their own food, did their own building with the help of the local carpenter, and sewed their own clothes from cloth that they spun and wove, mostly woolen cloth from sheep. Judging from its small size and its location, off the main roads, Nazareth was a farming village of no special importance.

The woman we are questing for spent most of her life in this village and its surroundings. Her daily language was Aramaic, spoken with a Galilean accent. Rather than the fair-haired, blue-eyed, svelte figure of popular art, her location in Nazareth indicates that along with the people of her class and ethnic heritage she would have had Semitic features and Mediterranean coloring of skin, hair and eyes. Given her everyday life, she would also have had a strong body shaped by the routines of hard daily labor. Commenting on how the ruling classes of the Renaissance had turned the mother of Jesus into a fair, gentlewoman like themselves, “Our Lady,” the pioneering biblical scholar John L. McKenzie noted, “About Palestinian housewives they knew nothing. If they had, they would have found her like the maids of their palace kitchens or the peasant women of their domains.” Reflecting on this cultural research, poet Kathleen Norris has called on artists today to produce more work that envisions Mary as a strong peasant woman “capable of walking the hill country of Judea and giving birth in a barn.”

According to custom Mary entered into an arranged marriage with Joseph. At some point her household consisted of Jesus, the ones whom the gospels call his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas, and his sisters, unnamed by the gospels but numbering at least two (Matthew says “all his sisters” 13:56). The Catholic church teaches that these were Jesus’ cousins. The Orthodox position sees them as Joseph’s children by a previous marriage. Protestants by and large see them as the natural children of Mary and Joseph. Even if these cousins did not live in the immediate household but perhaps shared a courtyard, their repeated presence yoked to the mother of Jesus in the gospels indicates a closeness of multiple children in this extended family. When these other children are taken into account, the romanticized picture of an ideal “holy family” composed of an old man, a young woman, and one perfect child needs to be revised.

The insight that Mary was a poor village woman of the people gains further traction in view of studies of how the economy functioned.

Economic Research

As a province within the vast world of the Roman empire, Galilee was technically an “agrarian” society, meaning not only that most people worked the land but also that their productivity was extracted for the benefit of rulers without an equivalent economic recompense. According to the influential model developed by Gerhard Lenski, agrarian societies have basically two major classes, upper and lower, with an enormous gap between them. The upper class consisted of the ruler, his administrators, and the scribes, military personnel, merchants and priests who all helped to govern. These comprised 10% of the population. On the other side of the chasm was the peasant class, consisting mainly of the farmers and fishers who worked the land and the sea, but also artisans who served their needs. These were the great majority of the population whose energy produced what was necessary for life. Below these on the economic ladder was the unclean class, separated from the mass of peasants and artisans by circumstances of birth or occupations such as prostitution. Finally, most terribly, was the expendable class, about 5% to 10% of the population. “These included a variety of types, ranging from petty criminals and outlaws to beggars and underemployed itinerant workers, and numbered all those forced to live solely by their wits or by charity.”

The social stratification based on wealth described in this model was not absolute but, given the relative power of the upper classes and the relative powerlessness of the lower ones, downward mobility was much more frequent than upward. Lenski’s observation on the whole set-up alerts us to the dynamic at work: “One fact impresses itself on almost any observer of agrarian societies ... This is the fact of *marked social inequality*. Without exception, one finds pronounced differences in power, privilege, and honor associated with mature agrarian economies.” The mechanism that maintained this inequality was taxation. During the period of Roman occupation, Galilean villagers were triply taxed. They had to pay the traditional tithe or 10% of the harvest for support of the Temple and its priesthood in Jerusalem. They were also required to pay tribute to the Roman emperor, and an additional tax to the local Jewish client-king through whom Rome ruled by proxy (Herod). These monies were skimmed off as a certain percentage of the villagers’ crops, flocks, or fish hauls. In lean years, needing to borrow to pay these taxes, many fell into increasing indebtedness to the wealthy. Over time they too easily lost their land and became truly impoverished. In this context, Jesus’ proverb rings bitterly true: “I tell you that to everyone who has, it shall be given, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Lk 19:26).

As the wife of a village *tekton*, the Greek word used in the gospels to designate a carpenter,

stonemason, cartwright, and joiner all rolled into one, Miriam of Nazareth belonged to this peasant world and, using Lenski's model, to its lower bracket of the artisan class. In addition to carpentry work the family probably also cultivated some plot of land for basic foodstuffs. This might explain why many of the images in Jesus' parables are taken from farming rather than carpentry, though he was himself a *tekton* (Mk 6:3) and son of a *tekton* (Matt 13:55). We need to guard against romantic images of the carpenter shop, for being an artisan in an agrarian society like that described by Lenski did not give one the same economic and social standing that being a skilled carpenter in an advanced, industrial market economy like our own bestows.

This family was a village family of the artisan class, no more respectable than anyone else. They belonged to the poor who had to work hard for their living. It is true, as John Meier argues, that theirs "was not the grinding, degrading poverty of the day laborer or the rural slave." But it is equally misleading to compare, as Meier does, their economic status, however hazily, to "a blue-collar worker in lower-middle-class America." The analogy does not work because studies show there was no middle class. The family of Miriam of Nazareth lived on the economic underside of a two-sided system. Her life and labor is typical of that of countless women throughout the ages who experience civic powerlessness, poverty, and the suffering that results from low social status and lack of formal education.

It is instructive to see how people in marginalized communities the world over, from the vantage point of their distinctive experience of struggle, see connections that more privileged eyes have missed. Poor people in Latin American *comunidades eclesiales de base*, for example, have grasped the concrete similarity of their lives with that of Mary, a village woman who suffered from state violence. With this identification, they interpret her song the *Magnificat* as an anthem of fierce hope in God and counter-cultural resistance to oppression. "For poor women," explains Latina theologian María Pilar Aquino, "Mary is not a heavenly creature but shares their lives as a comrade and sister in struggle." Indeed, in her own person as a poor Galilean woman she becomes a lodestone of hope for those who have been cheated of their lives.

Political Research

The poverty and hunger in Galilee acted as a spawning ground of first century revolts against the repressive Roman occupation and the taxation it engendered. Rome customarily appointed client-kings from the conquered population, rulers who were charged with keeping their own people under control. This policy of indirect rule through native aristocracies backed up by Roman military might brought three generations of the Jewish Herod family, father, son, and grandson, to power. The first, Herod the Great, came to power in 37 BC and ruled until his death in spring of 4 BC, during Mary's childhood and young adult years. Politically savvy about how to deal with the Romans, he was a cruel tyrant at home and ruled with an iron fist. The incident recounted in Matthew's gospel of Herod's killing all the male children under the

age of two in Bethlehem, even if not strictly speaking historical, fits with the way he was remembered. His brutality was matched by a scandalous love of luxury. The people hated him.

This King of the Jews took the already existing town of Sepphoris, perched on a hill four miles from Nazareth, beautified it, and fortified it as the center from which to administer the region. He found the resources he needed for this and other building projects through increasingly heavy taxation. To the peasants in the villages the already burdensome triple tax load became next to unbearable as Herod's portion was jacked up to pay for this urban expansion. The prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, with its plea to "give us this day our daily bread," had critical resonance as many were squeezed dry, tipped over from subsistence living into penury and loss of family land. People yearned for a messianic king who would do justice for the poor. Rebellion was in the air.

When Herod died, resentment exploded in revolt all over Palestine. In Galilee the insurrection was led by a popular leader named Judas. According to Josephus, "Judas, son of the brigand-chief Ezekias ... when he had organized a large number of desperate men around Sepphoris in Galilee raided the royal fortress; having seized all the weapons stored there, he armed all his followers and made off with all the goods that had been seized there." Facing widespread uproar, the Romans responded with brutal efficiency to quash the uprising. In Jerusalem, Josephus notes, they crucified two thousand Jewish men outside the city walls. In Galilee they recaptured Sepphoris and, in Josephus' succinct summary, "burned the city and enslaved its inhabitants." Recent excavations at Sepphoris do not as yet show any evidence of fiery destruction from this period. Scholars surmise that Josephus used Sepphoris as a proxy for the surrounding villages, which would have been leveled to punish the rebels among their inhabitants. Richard Horsley points out that, "in the villages around Sepphoris such as Nazareth the people would have had vivid memories both of the outburst against Herod, and of the Roman destruction of their villages... the mass enslavement and destruction would have left severe scars on the social body of the Galilean village communities for generations to come."

While this incident is not recorded in scripture, the basic chronology of Jesus' life indicates that his mother would have been around fifteen or sixteen years old at the time, a married woman with a young child. She and her husband obviously survived the depredations of the rampaging Roman legions. But what terror did they experience, either directly or vicariously through what was done to their neighbors? How much rebuilding absorbed their energy when psychically they were at a low ebb and materially they had so little to begin with? Sad to say, the wretched wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries leave little work for the imagination. Watching village women in Viet Nam, El Salvador, Bosnia, Darfur, Congo, and Iraq flee with their children from forces intent on their destruction conjures such suffering in real time. The world of Miriam of Nazareth was no stranger to such violence and social disruption. Horsley explains, "From the Roman point of view, the slaughter of people,

devastation of towns and countryside, and enslavement of able-bodied survivors after the rebellions in 4 B.C.E. and the widespread revolt in 66 CE were all pointed attempts, finally, to terrorize the populace into submission.” The crucifixion of Mary’s son midway between these two Jewish uprisings can be understood historically in this context as one more dose of violence meted out to control an occupied people.

Religious Research

As this picture of the political-economic world of Galilee implies, Miriam of Nazareth was a member of the Jewish people. This is meant not only in the ethnic sense that she was born into the people who trace descent from Abraham and Sarah, but also in the religious sense. Her faith in God was shaped by the covenant forged at Mount Sinai, nourished by dramatic Jewish narratives of God’s liberating deeds, oriented by the prophets’ announcement of God’s loving-kindness to the poor, and expressed in the prayers, rituals, and ethical observances of Torah. Diversity was a hallmark of pre-70 AD Jewish religion, with many different interpretations of the tradition advocated by different groups. For all of this documented pluralism, however, a relatively clear combination of belief and practice identified the Jews as a single religious community, recognized as such by Rome even when they became Hellenized and widely scattered in the cities of the empire.

Among scholars there is ongoing dispute over just how Jewish the village residents of Galilee actually were. A history of warfare starting in the eighth century B.C. had decimated the ten tribes of Israel that had settled in the north, leaving Galilee open for foreign inhabitants. In addition, Roman rule coupled with Herod’s building projects had imported Hellenistic culture to the province. How deep did this overlay of pagan culture extend? Based on diggings in village households, Jonathan Reed argues for an indigenous Jewish population: “wherever archaeologists have excavated, Jewish religious indicators permeate Galilean domestic space in the Early Roman Period.” Pointing to the material culture left by first century residents as evidence, he lists four archaeological indicators of Jewish religious identity: numerous *miqva’ot* or baths used for ritual immersion; stone vessels made of soft limestone rather than clay, also tied to a concern for ritual purity; ossuaries or bone boxes, indicating the Jewish burial practice of collecting and reburying a corpse’s bones after the flesh has decomposed; and a diet without pork, which information is gleaned from analysis of those human bones. The first three of these have been found in Nazareth. When you couple this evidence from private life with the absence of pagan shrines in the public setting, it seems right to conclude that the people of Galilee were clearly Jewish.

Centered on covenant with the one God, incomparable Creator of the universe, who acts in history to redeem, this was the religion of Jesus which he never repudiated, and of the family from which he came. The gospels’ depiction of his teaching, healing, and personal religious

behavior allows the conclusion that theirs was an observant Jewish household. This subject gives me the opportunity to note that one of the first scholars to tackle this subject is St. Mary's own Prof. Bernard Lee; his fine book *The Galilean Jewishness of Jesus* has been helpful to a whole generation of scholars trying to do justice to the immediate religious world that the gospels portray. Turning this research on Mary, it is fair to conclude that the days, weeks, and years of her life were marked by the Jewish rhythm of daily prayer and conduct, Sabbath rest and participation in synagogue, and, occasionally, festival pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem, as ordained in the Torah.

Miriam of Nazareth lived and died a faithful Jew. Placing her in the Christian community is not without basis insofar as Luke depicts her praying with the disciples assembled in Jerusalem after Jesus' death, awaiting the Spirit (Acts 1:14). While this community indeed developed into a religious organization separate from Judaism and can even be called the "early" church, it was in those first decades still a recognizably Jewish group. The definitive split came after the destruction of the Temple in 70 when rabbinic leaders tightened the borders of Jewish identity in order for the community to survive. As an Aramaic-speaking Galilean Jew, Mary's faith was not shaped by the belief and devotion to Christ characteristic of the post-Nicene church three hundred years later. Rather, she was a Jewish believer who trusted in the God of Israel through whose mercy she had borne the child now seen to be the Messiah who would soon return: Miriam of Nazareth, on the cusp of the divide between two world religions.

To sum up: granting Mary her own historical existence makes clear that her life was lived out in an economically poor, politically oppressed, Jewish peasant culture marked by exploitation and publicly violent events. Occupying the lower rung of the social ladder, she is sister to the unchronicled lives of marginalized women throughout the ages, and to all who stand in solidarity with them.

In the Great Cloud of Witnesses

The relevance of this historical information becomes clear when theology reflects on the biblical affirmation that it is precisely to such a woman that God has done great things (Lk 1:49). Then her story becomes revelatory of God, and also points to the way people today can relate to her in a faith-filled manner.

Reflecting on the *Magnificat* as a hymn of praise, for example, Gustavo Gutiérrez underscores the lowliness of Mary's situation, described in the term *tapeinosis* that in other biblical usages connotes affliction and oppression. God has looked upon her unjust suffering with a gaze of love, the canticle continues, which causes her spirit to exult for joy. She blesses the holiness of God's name. But this mercy is not for herself alone. It is intended by God's gracious love for all who suffer humiliation and hunger, even to the point of starvation. For God "has put down the

mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly;” “has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Lk 1:52-53). This is the paradoxical truth proclaimed in Mary’s canticle: divine holiness which creates the world acts by doing justice out of the same freely-given, unmerited love. If we strip this song of its historical sting, Gutiérrez warns, our exegesis is fruitless, because “Mary’s song tells us about the preferential love of God for the lowly and abused, and about the transformation of history that God’s loving will implies.” At the same time, the spiritual power of her words consists in their ability to make us see that the quest of justice must be located within the dynamism of God’s holy love or it loses its meaning in Christian life. Take Galilee out of this analysis, and it loses its strength.

In addition to disclosing the God of life, receiving the historical Mary into a theological framework allows us to understand her relationship to us today: she walks with the community, accompanies us, relates to us as a fellow traveler, a *compañera*. True, the world races along today in ways she never dreamed of. But her reality as a Galilean woman creates the possibility for a deep solidarity with those who strive for life here and now. Far from being an exercise in fantasy, this connection has a solid foundation in the Christian teaching of the communion of saints, which connects people across the generations. Down through the centuries, as the Holy Spirit graces persons of every race and nation, they form together a grand company of the “friends of God and prophets” (Wis 7:27). Geographically this company encircles the globe in space. Historically, it stretches backward and forward in time to encompass those living on earth and those who have died and live now in the embrace of God.

As a first century Jewish woman of faith who responded full-heartedly to the Spirit, Mary is a friend of God and prophet who belongs in this company of grace. In no way does this placement among the friends of God and prophets diminish her unique historic vocation to be the mother of the Messiah or the specific grace that accompanies this vocation. It remains true however, that a woman’s maternal function does not exhaust her identity as a person before God. While honoring her pivotal, unique relationship with Jesus, therefore, relating to Mary as “truly our sister” within the communion of saints refocuses her significance for the church today in terms of her whole graced life lived before God.

The question then arises of how to relate to her. Two possibilities lie open. In one, the patronage model which has dominated the tradition, Mary and the saints are approached primarily as intercessors before the throne of God. Here we imagine that God exists like a king ruling in splendor, with courtiers ranked in descending order of importance. Being far from the distant throne, we need more important people to plead our cause, friends in high places, so to speak. This patron-client relationship is not found in the New Testament nor in the early Christian centuries. It developed once the church had been officially established in the late Roman empire under the influence of the civil patronage system.

The earlier, more biblical way of seeing this relationship is to posit the living and the dead as

companions to each other in one Spirit-filled community. This companionship model situates the saints in heaven not *between* God and those on earth but *alongside* their sisters and brothers in Christ. The letter to the Hebrews envisions them as a great cloud of witnesses, up in the stands of the stadium cheering on those who are still running the race (Heb 12:1). In the companionship relationship with its lively sense of mutuality, one key practice entails *remembering* those who have gone before us. This is not sentimental reminiscence that bathes the past in a rosy glow. Rather, it recalls the courage, defeats, and victories of those who toiled before us in order to unlock what Augustine calls their “lessons of encouragement.”

This is memory with the seed of the future in it. In a provocative turn of phrase, German theologian Johannes Baptist Metz has called this kind of remembering “dangerous.” Why dangerous? Because it interrupts both complacency and discouragement, disclosing that “something more” is possible. Remembering the saints this way creates a moral force that propels the church out of passivity into compassionate, active engagement on behalf of all those in agony. Empowered by their memory, we become partners in hope.

One concrete example of how this “works” comes from El Salvador. In the villages, people recite the traditional litany of the saints, adding the names of their own martyrs for the cause of justice. To each name the people respond *Presente*: be here with us. Oscar Romero: *Presente*; Ignacio Ellacuría: *Presente*; Celina Ramos: *Presente*; young catechists, community workers, and religious leaders of the *pueblos*: *Presente*. This prayer summons the memory of these martyrs as a strong, enduring presence that commits the community to emulating their lives. The fire of each martyred life kindles a new fire in the next generation.

Within this great cloud of witnesses stands Miriam of Nazareth, a woman of faith who heard the word of God and kept it, partnering God in the great work of redemption. Remembering her story releases dangerous power in the life of the church. While the precise circumstances of her actual life can never be repeated, the style and spirit of her life reverberate through the centuries to propel us forward in today’s different cultural contexts. In solidarity with her, we find strength to face up to our own encounters with the Spirit and go forward with the best of our faithful wits. This impetus receives a critical edge when we remember Mary historically as poor, female, and endangered in a violent society. Then the vital memory of this woman of Spirit has the quality of “danger” insofar as it awakens courageous compassion for the struggle for the reign of God, for a just and peaceful world in which poor people, women, indeed all human beings and the earth, can flourish as beloved of God.

The Wedding at Cana (Jn 2: 1-11)

A typically poor family in the small village of Cana in Galilee hosts a wedding banquet. Amid the dancing and the singing, the wine gives out. Miriam of Nazareth noticed. And she acted.

“They have no wine,” she says to Jesus. Despite his hesitation, she gets results: six water jars filled with excellent wine. In this story in John’s gospel, the wine, more than one hundred gallons of it, signifies the abundant gift of salvation being joyfully poured out by the presence of Christ. But Mary’s action here is dangerous.

~ First, because she behaves counter to traditional definitions of the ideal “feminine” person, who passively takes direction from male authority. Far from silent, she speaks. Far from passive, she acts. Far from receptive to the wishes of the leading man, she contradicts and persuades him otherwise. Far from yielding to a grievous situation, she takes charge, organizing matters so that a bountiful abundance soon flows to those in need.

~ Second, because her words call out prophetically in criticism and hope. People in poor nations hear her say, “They have no wine,” and continue in her name: nor no food, no clean drinking water, no housing, education, health care, no employment, no freedom or political power, no security from rape, no human rights. Mary stands among the marginalized people, herself a member of the group without wine, and speaks the hope of the needy. Her strong impulse to call for relief corresponds to God’s own compassionate desire to spread the hospitality of life on the earth. Just as her words propelled Jesus into action at Cana, her challenging plea addresses the conscience of the church, which is the body of Christ in the world today. Even though people in wealthy nations might prefer not be informed, her voice reverberates through the centuries: “They have no wine ... you have to act.”

Conclusion

The quest for the historical Mary is one component of a theology capable of promoting action on behalf of global justice and peace, particularly empowering to the flourishing of women, coherent with elements of biblical, classical, and conciliar church teaching, and productive of religious meaning for our time. First-century Galilee, as geographic region and social location, is not mere background but the warp and woof of the world in which the revelation of God took place. It is precisely in this economic, political, and cultural setting, living out her Jewish belief as a peasant woman of the people, that Mary walked her journey of faith with enormous consequence. It is precisely to such a woman that God has done great things. In response, it is precisely such a woman who joyfully sings that the mercy of God overturns oppression in favor of the poor of the earth. The style and substance of her living witness to God reverberate through the centuries to galvanize our own commitment. Allowing the matrix of her historical world to shape theological imagination helps to assure that the way the church honors her and theologizes about her significance releases the power of the God of life. *Miriam of Nazareth: Presente.*