

# THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

## Mary and the New Testament

‘I SEE NO reason why a Catholic’s understanding of what Matthew and Luke meant in their infancy narratives should be different from a Protestant’s.’ These words of the roman catholic biblical scholar Raymond Brown<sup>1</sup> mark a quiet revolution in christian thinking about Mary, a revolution which is not yet over. The coming of modern biblical criticism is putting increasingly into the past the days when Christians’ views about the mother of Jesus and their understanding of the gospel infancy narratives were partly or wholly determined along confessional lines. Since modern biblical criticism has recognized and developed its own presuppositions and methods of working, denominational differences, prejudice apart, have happily less and less influence on our understanding of what the bible has to say about the mother of Jesus.

Because the infancy narratives hold a special place in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, modern interpreters of the place of Mary in the New Testament have to be clear about the presuppositions with which they approach the biblical text and about their methods of exegesis. These include answers to such questions as: what kind of literature the gospels are; how they came to be formed; how the infancy narratives are related to the rest of the gospels and what might constitute valid methods and criteria of interpretation. It was these and other similar questions that an ecumenical panel of scripture scholars, who worked together for three years to produce the book *Mary in the New Testament*, the most balanced recent study in English of what the New Testament tells us about Mary, tackled first.<sup>2</sup> The composition of the panel — biblical scholars working out of backgrounds of different christian Churches — encouraged a breadth of view, a tolerance of pluralism in theological outlook and an invitation to allow a common scientific method to ease inter-confessional tensions. In this essay I am surveying some recent studies about Mary in the New Testament that follow or claim to follow scientific methods of biblical interpretation. I am not concerned with liturgical, typological or devotional readings of ‘marian’ texts from the bible (such as passages from Wisdom, or Isaiah 7,14). The scope of such a survey would be beyond the compass of a short essay, though such ways of reading scripture are, of course, traditional and enriching. We attend first, therefore, to questions of method.

### *Presuppositions and method*

The authors of *Mary in the New Testament* distinguish three main stages in the formation of the gospels. Working backwards in time, which is the

order of interpretation though not, of course, of gospel formation, stage three is that of the composition of the written gospels. Stage two is the formation of traditions (oral or written) which the evangelists used in composing their gospels. Stage one, historically the earliest and most basic stage and in interpretation the least easy to reach with certainty, consists of the historical deeds and sayings on which these traditions were based. The interpreter's main task begins with stage three: 'to report how each evangelist understands Mary and her place in the salvation accomplished in and through Jesus'<sup>3</sup>; then to work back, as far as possible, to stages two and one. This way of proceeding, whose validity is now widely accepted among christian biblical scholars and theologians, poses particular problems when one looks at the infancy narratives, Mary in the gospels and the question of the 'Mary of history'.

For an understanding of the place of Mary in the individual gospels, several other presuppositions should be kept in mind. With regard to the order of composition of the gospels it is the generally accepted view that Mark was the first of the canonical gospels to appear in its present form, and that the author of Luke also wrote Acts. Secondly, it is important to note that in interpreting Matthew's infancy narrative, the main external key to its meaning will be its conformity with the rest of Matthew. Likewise, the key to Luke's birth and infancy story is primarily the rest of Luke-Acts, and not, for example, Matthew's infancy narrative. (We interpret Shakespeare primarily by Shakespeare, not by Ben Jonson.) Moreover, it has to be recognized that the main focus of both infancy narratives is not Mary but Jesus, though in fact Luke seems to give greater prominence to Mary than Matthew does. With regard to the Fourth Gospel, when it is a question of the scenes in which 'the Mother of Jesus' appears (the author does not give her the name 'Mary'), it is especially difficult to go back beyond stage three of interpretation to pre-johannine traditions and to 'history'. And since many have read the figure of the woman in Revelation 12 as a symbol of Mary (as does the Church's liturgy), and have linked this reading with the Fourth Gospel, the authors of *Mary in the New Testament* thought it important to state that they reject the position that the same person wrote both the Fourth Gospel and Revelation.<sup>4</sup>

These presuppositions about the main books of the New Testament which contain references to Mary have implications for the theological method that one adopts in evaluating the New Testament evidence. This point is especially important because pre-critical ages of biblical interpretation took it for granted that the material of the infancy narratives and the references to Mary in John's gospel were straightforward reports of historical facts and events. Some modern biblical scholars too have laid great emphasis on trying to prove the historicity of the infancy stories, especially that of Luke.<sup>5</sup> Here it would be well to be aware of two extremes

and to eschew them. One is the tendency to assume that, because it cannot be proved that certain events are historical, these events were *not* historical, they never happened, they are 'simply' legend or folklore. The other extreme is to suppose, *a priori*, the opposite: that when historicity is unprovable, it is more likely that the events *were* historical. The key principle is that the New Testament writings do not have history, but faith, theology and christian living as their primary aim. The fact that we are uncertain about the historicity of some of the events connected with Mary does not mean that the task of interpretation is vain and fruitless. The harvest that it yields is the mariology of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John: how our christian forebears understood Mary.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from history there is also the problem of pluralism. The authors of *Mary in the New Testament* accept New Testament pluralism as a fact; that is, they recognize sometimes considerable diversities of outlook and judgement among New Testament writers. They resisted, therefore, the tendency to interpret one author by means of information or theology supplied by another (as, for example, explaining Luke 2,35 by reference to John 19,25-27) except where there is firm positive evidence of a link between them. While it is *possible*, for instance, that other New Testament writers besides Matthew and Luke knew of the tradition of the virginal conception, such knowledge cannot be simply assumed. The burden of proof lies with those who wish to demonstrate that writings which make no explicit reference to the virginal conception of Jesus do in fact show an implicit knowledge of it. Finally, the authors of *Mary in the New Testament* did not feel obliged to try, as earlier generations had tried, to reconcile conflicting information as, for example, that about events surrounding the birth of Jesus. Such divergent views form the 'New Testament picture of Mary'; it is not a uniform picture, just as the New Testament picture of Jesus is not uniform.

Among recent writings in English on Mary in scripture, two trends are evident with regard to presuppositions and exegetical method. One, exemplified by the ecumenical panel of authors of *Mary in the New Testament*, consists in keeping a strict watch on the rigorous scientific evaluation of evidence: not to accept as established what is only possible or probable; not to accept as fact what is hypothesis. The other tendency, among scholars perhaps more subject to diverging confessional influences, is to look more benignly and build more confidently upon tenuous connections and hypotheses, seeking perhaps, in biblical criticism as well as in liturgy and devotion, a modern version of a *sensus plenior* for scripture.<sup>7</sup>

These questions about the presuppositions and methods with which we approach the New Testament are crucial for a modern biblical mariology. Every game has rules; different rules produce different games (rugby union is not rugby league), and not observing the rules changes the result. If these metaphors are too frivolous, one can put it differently: a task for christian

scholars and theologians is to work towards an understanding of Mary by using the best available insights and modern methods of their trades. Not all modern scholars, however, would accept in practice all the principles adopted by the authors of *Mary in the New Testament*.<sup>8</sup> As a final word about presuppositions and method, it will be well to mention Raymond Brown's discussion of these matters in the introduction to his commentary on the infancy narratives. He distinguishes three stages in the development of a valid and scholarly understanding of these narratives:

- (a) the perception that the infancy narratives differ significantly from the main body of the gospel material;
- (b) the problem of historicity becomes more acute through the perception of the degree to which the two canonical infancy narratives differ from one another;
- (c) the historicity problem is somewhat relativized by the perception that the infancy narratives are primarily vehicles of the evangelist's theology and christology.<sup>9</sup>

If the infancy stories in Matthew and Luke are theology, the 'essential gospel story in miniature' and elements in the early christians' development of christology 'not an embarrassment but a masterpiece',<sup>10</sup> the main question to be asked is: what message are the evangelists conveying to the Church through them? Each evangelist's understanding of Mary is part of that message and should be read and evaluated in that context and not in any other.

*Mary in the New Testament: Paul*

In the rest of this essay I shall focus on the principal New Testament passages that carry a reference to the mother of Jesus. I shall discuss them in roughly chronological order of composition, in so far as that has been determined with accuracy, with perhaps occasional minor deviations and different groupings. Commentators have tried to quarry insights about Mary from the letters of Paul, but without much positive yield. It has been claimed that in some of the passages in which Paul refers to the birth of Christ (Gal 1,19; 4,4-5.28-29; Rom 1,3-4; Phil 2,6-7) he is a witness to the belief in the virginal conception. But these passages, taken singly and together, throw very little light either on this or on the mother of Jesus. Paul's main concern in these contexts is with Christ and not with Mary. And while he is certainly interested in the fact that Jesus was fully human (cf Gal 4,4), he is not concerned with the manner of Jesus's conception or birth. Further, as the editors of *Mary in the New Testament* note, the pre-existence of Christ and the idea of a virginal conception are never brought together in the New Testament in the sense that one implies or necessitates the other.<sup>11</sup> Even if Paul, therefore, believed in or wrote of the pre-existence

of Christ (as has been suggested for instance for Phil 2,6-7), this implies nothing about his view of the manner in which Jesus came to be conceived.

The arguments to support the view that Romans 1,3 implies a belief in the virginal conception are at best inconclusive. This passage is generally held to be a pre-pauline confession, and Paul's real intention here is not so much to link Jesus with the line of David as to state that Jesus, the davidic messiah, is risen. Paul never writes about the activity of the Spirit in the conception and birth of Jesus. Likewise, in Galatians 4,4, the context provides the main key. In speaking of Jesus as 'born of woman' Paul is of course referring to Mary. This reference, however, is quite indirect, by way of a stereotyped expression, and Paul is saying nothing about how Christ was conceived. Finally, Dibelius's theory that a belief in Isaac's conception by divine impregnation lies behind Galatians 4,28-29 is inconclusive and improbable. Even if it is valid, it is doubtful whether it has anything to contribute to the problem of the virginal conception of Jesus according to the New Testament. We are led, therefore, to the conclusion that just as Paul was not particularly interested in the earthly life of Jesus, so he does not pay attention, in any significant way, to the conception, birth or mother of Jesus. He does not mention the virginal conception, and we have no reason to think that he was aware of it.

#### *The Gospel of Mark*

One question about the Gospel of Mark that affects our understanding of the New Testament picture of Mary has to do with Mark's presentation of scenes involving the family of Jesus (including his mother) and its implications about the Synoptics' views on Jesus's relationships with his family during his public ministry. Rosemary Reuther states that:

Mary and Jesus's family are unbelievers who stand aside from and even oppose his mission . . . Jesus's family tries to seize him, believing him to be mad (Mk 3,21). . . . At one point Jesus's mother and brothers come to speak to him. Jesus takes the occasion of their arrival to repudiate loyalty to his family in favour of kinship with his disciples (Mt 12,48-50). . . . Jesus's preaching is marked by a negativity towards the kinship group.<sup>12</sup>

The authors of *Mary in the New Testament* present a more nuanced and less extreme view. In the context of Mark 3,20-35, Jesus is shown as indicating a contrast between his physical family and his 'eschatological' family. The point is not that members of the physical family are repudiated, but that belonging to the natural family of Jesus is no guarantee, in and by itself, of a place in the eschatological kingdom. Membership of that depends on a person's acceptance and practice of the word of God. This panel of scholars, anxious not to overstress the apparent opposition of Jesus's

physical family, interpret Mark 3,31-35 as showing that they 'misunderstand' Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

On the interpretation of the 'brothers and sisters of Jesus' (Mk 6,3), John McHugh, intent on being faithful to the roman catholic doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, was at pains to establish that the people here mentioned were first cousins of Jesus on Joseph's side.<sup>14</sup> On this matter the authors of *Mary in the New Testament* point out the important fact that the continued virginity of Mary after the birth of Jesus is not a question explicitly raised by the New Testament,<sup>15</sup> and one must be very hesitant, tentative and careful about method when asking the New Testament writers to answer questions they have not posed to themselves. Later on in christian history it was precisely that question of Mary's continued virginity that focused attention upon Jesus's exact relationship with those 'brothers and sisters'. But it cannot be said, on the other hand, that the New Testament *indubitably* identifies them as Mary's children. It is certainly true that the solution favoured by scholars partly depends here on the authority they allot to later christian and confessional insights and teachings.

Theologically speaking, however, the Gospel of Mark gives us a picture of Mary that is at least verging on the negative. She is not differentiated by Mark from those members of Jesus's family who at best misunderstand and perhaps even refuse to believe in him and who oppose him. We shall see in due course that this view is modified by the later evangelists.

#### *The Gospel of Matthew*

In a recent issue of *The Way*<sup>16</sup> Andrew Hamilton showed how, when one writes a story, the account of the beginnings of the story is often the last to be written, and our interpretations of the beginnings are modified and coloured by later events in the story and later reflections on the story's meaning. This pattern of re-writing could well have taken place in the composition of Matthew's and Luke's infancy narratives. Post-easter and later theological views of Jesus have significantly influenced the account of his conception and birth (just as they have influenced the story of his ministry).

There is discussion about the basic plan and structure of Matthew's infancy narrative.<sup>17</sup> Whichever suggestion one adopts, however, several features seem clear: Matthew's prime focus is on Jesus; he is concerned to show that the coming of the Messiah was prepared for by God in the Old Testament; he is at pains to present Jesus as 'Son of David', 'Son of Abraham' and 'Emmanuel'; and in the persons of Joseph (a central figure in the story) and the magi, Matthew is appealing both to Jews and to Gentiles.<sup>18</sup> This brings us to Mary. When Matthew introduces her at the end of his genealogy (1,16) it is to point to her as an instrument of God's providence in the messianic plan. This is what she has in common with the other rather unexpected women in the genealogy: they all contracted

extraordinary or irregular unions through which, nonetheless, God carried out his promises and plans for the saving of his people. The story of the conception and birth of Jesus in Matthew re-emphasizes and elaborates upon what is suggested in the genealogy. In irregular marital circumstances, by means of the Holy Spirit, God causes Mary to conceive the Messiah himself, who is both Son of David and Emmanuel. So Mary plays a key part in God's saving his people, but Matthew never mentions her personal attitudes, thoughts or feelings. After the birth of Jesus, Joseph is given the centre of the stage.<sup>19</sup>

Matthew 1,18-25 raises questions about the virginal conception of Jesus.<sup>20</sup> The authors of *Mary in the New Testament* approach the problem in this way. If we work back from Matthew's account of Jesus's birth, it is difficult to know with certainty whether the idea of a virginal conception was Matthew's own, or whether it was in the tradition which he inherited. And about the factual historicity of the virginal conception, they argue, the evidence is even more limited, and no certain conclusion is possible.<sup>21</sup> In any case, Matthew's christological purpose remains clear: Mary is the instrument by whom God brought into the world the Messiah who was Son of David and God-with-us.<sup>22</sup>

René Laurentin is an eminent marian theologian, but his judgment about references to Mary in the synoptic gospels outside the infancy narratives is mildly and unduly pessimistic:

If there were nothing beyond these texts there would be nothing on which to found a theology of the mother of Christ. Although they attest the existence, within history, of a mother of Jesus, called Mary, living in Nazareth, they have no additional significance; all they do is warn us against erroneous assessments of Mary from a carnal standpoint.<sup>23</sup>

A comparison of parallel scenes in Mark and Matthew shows that Matthew has re-worked his inherited marcan material to bring it into line with the positive attitude towards Mary which he exhibits in the infancy narrative. He tempers Mark's harshness towards Jesus's family (Mt 12,46-50) 'to at least neutrality',<sup>24</sup> and reinforces his own view that Jesus is the Son of David.

#### *The Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles*

Luke's material about Mary is more plentiful than that of any other New Testament writer. We do not know for certain the order in which Luke wrote the various parts of his work, and it is conceivable that he composed his story of the birth and childhood of Jesus after Acts and the rest of his gospel. Here, however, I shall discuss the passages in which Mary appears in the order in which they come in the gospel and Acts as we have them.<sup>25</sup>

Because Luke's use of the Old Testament in his infancy narrative is often more indirectly allusive and oblique than Matthew's, it has given rise to more speculation about Old Testament themes that might underlie Luke 1-2. John McHugh distinguishes the historical events that Luke describes from the literary form in which he couches this description. This literary form is like 'a tapestry woven from Old Testament threads. The threads are the various texts or ideas from the Old Testament which Luke weaves together in such a way as to produce a new pattern'. For McHugh, Luke is showing how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophetic expectations about the Messiah and gave them a more profound meaning than the original authors intended. With Jesus as his central reference point, Luke re-interprets Old Testament passages, with the guiding thought that the son of Mary was also the son of God whose coming has fulfilled Israel's expectations.<sup>26</sup>

For John de Satgé, who approaches marian studies out of an evangelical protestant tradition and background, the theological key to Luke's infancy narrative is the belief that Jesus is Israel's true king, a messiah (anointed) king, a deliverer descended from David. The coming of this king inaugurates a new age, one important feature of which is an outpouring of a spirit of prophecy, upon, initially, Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary.<sup>27</sup>

All of which brings us again to Mary herself. As well as 'Daughter of Sion' John McHugh also sees Mary as the figure of the new 'Ark of the Covenant'. The creative power of God overshadows her as the glory of God had once come upon the israelite tent of witness and filled it with the divine presence. The *Magnificat* for McHugh is a hymn celebrating God's redemption of the 'lowly' and 'poor' whom Mary personifies and in whose name she praises God. The day of Jesus's birth is the day of salvation for these poor and lowly of Israel. John McHugh's general tendency is to try to combine theological and historical interpretations of incidents in the infancy narratives, a combination which is often uneasy and unsatisfying.<sup>28</sup>

The interpretation of Mary in Luke 1-2 as a symbol rather than as a person was taken up again by Marie Isaacs, a baptist scripture scholar. She gives the salutary caution that one should beware of speaking of Mary as a *mere* symbol: 'there is nothing inferior about symbols'.<sup>29</sup> Luke presents Mary as a recipient of God's mercy, a representative of the faithful remnant of Israel, and of the poor who prayerfully and eagerly await the coming of the Messiah. She is also the 'slave of the Lord' (Lk 1,38) and the recipient of the promised Spirit — one of the menservants and maidservants who would 'see visions and dream dreams' (cf Acts 1,16-20 and Joel 3,1-5). Mary's *Magnificat*, which articulates the faith of the *anawim* in trusting to God to reverse common scales of values and to vindicate the faithful remnant, recalls Hannah the mother of Samuel and so presents Mary as a symbol of devoted motherhood and religious piety.

John de Satgé stresses different elements in Luke 1-2. For him, too, the



central figure is Jesus, characterized by both 'brotherness' and 'otherness'. The annunciation takes up the theme that the gospel and the kingdom demand and provoke acceptance or rejection. Mary's response was not a foregone conclusion. By her exercise of free choice the long history of God's choice of Israel and of Israel's consequent closeness to God was vindicated: it prepared the way for the Lord to come to his people. And de Satgé highlights the fact that throughout this infancy story God intervenes and acts through people who are weak, poor, humble in station, unobtrusive and perhaps even ineffectual. The narrative also lays down the main lines of the relationship between Jesus and his mother which will continue through his life as Luke presents it to us. That his understanding of this relationship is different from Mark's is clear from other episodes in Luke (especially 8,19-21, and 11,27-28). The mother of Jesus, in Luke, is definitely included in Jesus's new 'eschatological' family of the kingdom. Her blessedness lay precisely in believing the word of the Lord and doing what that word implied (Lk 1,38; 8,19-21; 11,27-28).<sup>30</sup>

This motif of Mary's belonging from the outset to Jesus's new family of those who hear the word of God and do it is also taken up by *Mary in the New Testament*. The reflective process in a developing christology and mariology that operates in Luke 1-2 seems to be this: Luke is taking some features of post-resurrection christology and carrying them back to the moment of Jesus's conception. So, for example, it is fitting that he who in his ministry was greater than John the Baptist should also be shown to be greater in the events surrounding his birth. Luke presents the two births as a series of diptychs: just as God intervened in the conception of John the Baptist (Lk 1,5-25; 59-80) so he intervened in a more remarkable way in the conception of Jesus (Lk 1,26-38; 2,1-20). And in the annunciation scene Mary is being presented as the first to hear and respond to the gospel. Her response (Lk 1,38) shows that she is already prepared to be a member of Jesus's eschatological family; she is already a believer for whom God's word is enough. So, as the obedient servant of the Lord she goes *with haste* to her cousin who greets her as 'she who believed' (Lk 1,45). In the *Magnificat* she proclaims the good news 'by anticipation': she is the spokeswoman both for ancient Israel and for christian disciples. Additionally, Luke could be portraying Mary as the believing disciple in presenting her as holding on to words and events and meditating over them. Through these scenes, then, Mary grows as a believer and a disciple. At the same time, the story hints that even for Mary complete discipleship is not yet possible (Lk 2,50-51). Her discipleship will be completed and perfected through the ministry, cross and resurrection of Jesus as she continues to search for understanding (Lk 2,51b).

This consistency in Luke's picture of Mary is carried on into Acts. The qualities of discipleship — humble, accepting, obedient to the word in faith — that Mary shows in the story of Jesus's birth are carried through

his ministry, his death and rising into the post-easter community (Acts 1,14), where Christians are called 'servants and *handmaids* of the Lord' (Acts 2,18). Mary's first response to the good news was 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.' The real import of Acts 1,14 is to remind the reader that she had not changed her mind.<sup>31</sup>

### *The Gospel of John*

There are two episodes in the Fourth Gospel in which the mother of Jesus appears (Jn 2,1-12; 19,5-27).<sup>32</sup> Though John McHugh adopts a now unfashionable view of the composition of this gospel, when he explains the Cana story much of his emphasis is on its theological import. The key to his interpretation is Jn 2,9-10: this is the *beginning* of signs which, in the course of this gospel, rise in a crescendo to the raising of Lazarus and then the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the supreme sign. In chapter two Mary is presented to us as the person who believed in Jesus even before the first sign took place, before the disciples believed. By her intervention she occasioned that first sign. In the scene on Calvary, this theme of Mary's faith is continued. The disciple whom Jesus loved and who stands with Mary at the foot of the cross is a representative of all faithful disciples whose faith is not destroyed by the cross. Mary is henceforth to be the mother of these disciples and her faith is to be the pattern for all the disciples. This johannine portrait is intended to embody what faith involves: standing beside the crucified when evil seems triumphant.<sup>33</sup>

Since John McHugh's book was published much work has been done on the Fourth Gospel which would modify this view of Mary. Other interpretations of the Cana story come at different points on a broad spectrum. At one end is the now old-fashioned interpretation that the story exemplifies Mary's intercessory power. At the other end is the view that since Mary persisted in her demand after Jesus's refusal, we are meant to understand this as showing that Mary did not believe in Jesus. The fact that Jesus does provide the wine, however, makes it unlikely that the scene is meant as an attack on his mother. It makes better sense to see her as one of the people who, despite their good intentions, misunderstand Jesus. (Other examples of this 'johannine misunderstanding' — perhaps largely a literary device — are the woman of Samaria and Nicodemus, both of whom later believe and become disciples.) Mary's request for a sign, demonstrating perhaps a certain naïve confidence and imperfect understanding, leads ultimately to solid faith; she remains with him (Jn 2,12) and is present at his death (Jn 19,25-27). It is only on Calvary that she finally becomes a model for believers.<sup>34</sup>

Several more symbolic interpretations of John 19,25-27 have been offered, some seeing Mary as Second Eve or as a symbol of Israel, and others linking this scene with the figure of the woman in Revelation 12.

One which commands more general support continues the faith theme that I have outlined and links this scene with Mark 3,31-35, and Luke 18,19-21. As she stands at the foot of the cross, Jesus gives his physical mother a 'spiritual' role as mother of the disciple. In this way Jesus's physical family is replaced by the beloved disciple who is not a natural relative but someone particularly loved. Jesus's physical mother, however, does become part of this 'eschatological' family, since the beloved disciple is given to her as her son. An interpretation along this line seems the most fruitful and plausible of those recently offered.<sup>35</sup>

#### *The Book of Revelation*

Ancient christian liturgical and exegetical traditions have seen in the figure of the woman in Revelation 12 an image of Mary.<sup>36</sup> And, reading that chapter, one 'feels' it is appropriate, especially as the author refers to the woman as the mother of the Messiah. But most contemporary scholars agree that this interpretation has real difficulties, among which are the following. Early christian writers did not interpret Revelation 12 mariologically; the first known mariological reading is from the fourth century. Moreover, the author of Revelation does not identify the woman, and the description of the birth of her child does not correspond to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. The safe conclusion is that an intended reference to Mary in Revelation 12 is very unlikely. The woman appears to be primarily intended as an image of the people of God, the messianic community.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Conclusions*

This survey has been confined to the interpretation of Mary in relevant passages of the New Testament and has not taken account of ancient or modern theological, dogmatic or devotional reflections on the biblical evidence. What emerges from the survey, among writers who owe allegiance to different christian Churches, is a remarkable degree of consensus and relatively few areas of conflict about both presuppositions and methods of exegesis on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the results of the application of those methods. While some Roman Catholics might regret that they have lost some of the riches of a pre-critical 'high mariology', Christians of other traditions might be glad for precisely the same reason. But exegesis once again provides a basis for real ecumenical co-operation in an area where confessional differences have been very marked and sometimes bitter.

The survey also reveals differences in New Testament attitudes to Mary, attitudes which are perhaps more closely linked to differences in christology than I have brought out in this essay. Mark's attitude to Mary is somewhat negative; Matthew and Luke modify their inherited view of Mary in Jesus's ministry in accordance with their portraits of her in their own

infancy stories. The position of Mary in the Fourth Gospel is part of its originality, but has points of similarity — especially the theme of faith and discipleship — with the Synoptics. Paul's theological and ethical concerns lead him to place little or no emphasis on the mother of Christ. In these divergencies we can trace developments.

Questions connected with the conception of Jesus have traditionally been divisive among Christians, and while they are not the most important ones for biblical mariology, they should be mentioned. It will perhaps be helpful to summarize very briefly the present state of play. The biblical evidence is that both Matthew and Luke state or imply that Jesus was conceived without a human father. The first question is, what did they mean by this? In a recent book on christology, Gerald O'Collins, a roman catholic theologian, says that Matthew and Luke probably meant that to be understood as a statement of historical fact. Raymond Brown, on the other hand, stresses the *theological* import of this evidence.<sup>38</sup> One may surmise that the process of reflection went something like this: as time went on, after the crucifixion of Jesus, the christian communities came to understand more and more the implications of Jesus's being both a man and 'Son of God'. This latter does not necessarily imply a 'high' christology of 'pre-existence'. They realized increasingly that he possessed a special divine status as risen Lord. In time, this divine element was seen as active in the ministry of Jesus (e.g. in the account of the transfiguration), in his baptism and in accounts of his birth and conception. This essential fact of Jesus's having a special divine element or status is expressed narratively in the infancy stories of Matthew and Luke by the affirmation that Jesus was conceived without a human father.<sup>39</sup> The doctrine of the virginal conception, therefore, as far as the New Testament is concerned, is important primarily for what it tells us about Jesus. Later ascetical teaching, which gave particular prominence to an ideal of virginity, turned attention more to Mary's virginity as a model of christian perfection. This has sometimes led to the excess that virginity has been represented as the primary or even exclusive way and mark of christian holiness. Whether 'Mary of history' was *biologically* a virgin when she conceived Jesus is a question the New Testament does not try to answer. Nor is it a central question for christian doctrine or for our theological thinking about the mother of Jesus.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Brown, Raymond E.: *The birth of the Messiah* (London, 1977), p 9 (to be referred to as *Birth*).

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Raymond E.: and others (eds): *Mary in the New Testament* (London, 1978), ch 2 (to be referred to as *Mary NT*).

<sup>3</sup> Cf *Mary NT*, p 10.

- <sup>4</sup> The material of this paragraph comes from *Mary NT*, ch 2.
- <sup>5</sup> Cf especially, McHugh, John: *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (London, 1975).
- <sup>6</sup> Cf especially, *Mary NT*, ch 2.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf McHugh, *op. cit.*, part I, ch 4, for example.
- <sup>8</sup> McHugh, *op. cit.*, pp 60-61 and part I, ch 14.
- <sup>9</sup> Brown, *Birth*, p 26.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 8 and 38.
- <sup>11</sup> This discussion of Paul is based on *Mary NT*, ch 3.
- <sup>12</sup> Reuther, Rosemary Radford: *Mary — the feminine face of the Church* (London, 1979), p 31.
- <sup>13</sup> Cf *Mary NT*, ch 4.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf McHugh, *op. cit.*, pp 200-54, especially pp 234-54.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf especially *Mary NT*, p 72.
- <sup>16</sup> Hamilton, Andrew: 'Images of beginning', in *The Way*, vol 24, no 1 (January 1984), pp 8-16.
- <sup>17</sup> This discussion is summarized in Brown, *Birth*, pp 50-56 and *Mary NT*, pp 75-77.
- <sup>18</sup> *Mary NT*, *ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Cf *Mary NT*, pp 74-97. The view that Matthew later (ch 21) rejects the 'Son of David' title has much in its favour.
- <sup>20</sup> McHugh's discussion of this is on pp 269-343 of *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*.
- <sup>21</sup> *Mary NT*, p 96.
- <sup>22</sup> Cf *Mary NT*, ch 5.
- <sup>23</sup> Laurentin, René: 'Pluralism about Mary, biblical and contemporary', in *The Way Supplement*, 45 (June 1982), p 81.
- <sup>24</sup> *Mary NT*, p 103.
- <sup>25</sup> Luke's theology and history have been fully discussed by Conzelmann, Flender and Marshall. Cf also Brown, *Birth*, pp 235-55.
- <sup>26</sup> McHugh, *op. cit.*, pp 24-36.
- <sup>27</sup> De Satgé, John: *Mary and the christian gospel* (London, 1976), pp 28-35.
- <sup>28</sup> Cf McHugh, *op. cit.*, part I, ch 6-13.
- <sup>29</sup> Isaacs, Marie E.: 'Mary in the lucan infancy narrative', in *The Way Supplement*, 25 (Summer 1975), p 95.
- <sup>30</sup> De Satgé, *op. cit.*, ch 2.
- <sup>31</sup> Cf *Mary NT*, p 177. The previous two paragraphs are based on chapter 6 of this book.
- <sup>32</sup> For basic suppositions about the composition of this gospel, see *Mary NT*, pp 179-80.
- <sup>33</sup> McHugh, *op. cit.*, pp 351-60, and pp 388-403.
- <sup>34</sup> Cf *Mary NT*, pp 180-96.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 206-17.
- <sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the problems of interpreting Revelation, see *Mary NT*, pp 219-34.
- <sup>37</sup> This paragraph is based on *Mary NT*, ch 8. Adela Yarbro Collins, in *The Apocalypse* (Dublin, 1979), pp 82-88, has argued persuasively that Revelation 12 takes up the myth of Leto/Apollo/Python. The woman, mother of the Messiah, is not Mary but the messianic community. She is also the Jerusalem above (cf 12,17) and the pain of her labour is the suffering of the whole people of God as they await their anointed king.
- <sup>38</sup> O'Collins, Gerald: *Interpreting Jesus* (London, 1983), pp 195-201 discusses the virginal conception from a christological angle (with helpful bibliography). Cf Brown, *Birth*, pp 517-33.
- <sup>39</sup> A more nuanced view is given in *Mary NT*, pp 289-92.