



MARY KEPT ALL THESE THINGS. BY HOWARD LYON

# Mary

## the Mother of Jesus

---

Mary's story is a timeless reminder of the costs and blessings of discipleship.

**By Gaye Strathearn**

Associate Professor of Ancient Scripture, Brigham Young University

**M**ary, the mother of Jesus, is one of the few women mentioned in scripture and the only one whose life and ministry were prophesied about centuries before her birth (see 1 Nephi 11:15, 18; Mosiah 3:8; Alma 7:10).<sup>1</sup> The New Testament authors of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John provide only glimpses into her life and ministry because their focus is rightly concentrated on the Savior. But the early Christian church gave Mary the title of *theotokos*, the “bearer or mother of God”<sup>2</sup> as a reminder of the important part that she also plays in the Father’s plan.

Elder Bruce R. McConkie (1915–85) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has written: “Can we speak too highly of her whom the Lord has blessed above all women? There was only one Christ, and there is only one Mary. Each was noble and great in [the premortal existence], and each was foreordained to the ministry he or she performed. We cannot but think that the Father would choose the greatest female spirit to be the mother of his Son, even as he chose the male spirit like unto him to be the Savior. . . . We should . . . hold up Mary with that proper esteem which is hers.”<sup>3</sup>

Luke’s account of the story of the Annunciation to Mary

(see Luke 1:26–56) gives us a window through which to better appreciate this remarkable young woman. Through her interactions with Gabriel and Elisabeth, we see a young woman trying to grasp and understand her unique call from God. The magnitude of that call must have weighed heavily upon someone so young, and yet she readily submitted her will to that of the Father. Her story reminds us that God is aware of all of His children and that He calls ordinary men and women to participate in extraordinary ways to help build His kingdom. She became Jesus’s first disciple, and thus she is a model for all who choose to follow Him.

### **Nazareth: Mary’s Home**

Unfortunately, the New Testament tells us nothing about Mary’s parents, her birth, or anything about her life in Nazareth. Luke describes Nazareth as a *polis*, which can be translated as either a city or a town, but it does not appear to have been a place of significance. Outside of the New Testament, Nazareth is not mentioned in any text until the end of the second century AD.

We do know that Nazareth was located on a hill in lower Galilee overlooking the fertile Jezreel Valley, 65 miles (105 km) north of Jerusalem. Archaeology indicates that



first-century Nazareth was more like a village than a city or even a town, with an estimated population of around 400–500.<sup>4</sup> With few exceptions, much of the population throughout Galilee struggled to survive as subsistence workers, tending livestock, fishing, and working the land just to put food on the table for their families and to pay their taxes. The village had no fortifications; there is no evidence that it had paved streets or monumental architecture, nor that it used luxury items such as marble, mosaics, or frescos in the buildings, or that the households contained imported fine wares.<sup>5</sup> The two first-century houses that have been excavated appear to be modest one-story abodes with two rooms, a thatched roof, and a small courtyard.<sup>6</sup> Burial practices and some limestone vessel fragments indicate that the inhabitants were Jewish rather than Gentiles.

While none of these discoveries can be tied directly to Mary or her family, they do give us a sense of what her life in Nazareth may have looked like: a peasant girl living in a rural village, far from the religious center of Jerusalem with its temple, priestly aristocracy, and wealth. Even as a young girl, she would have worked beside her mother and the other women of the village, weaving cloth, cooking, gathering firewood, collecting water from the household cisterns or village wells, and working in the fields—all to help her family survive from day to day.

### **Mary's Call**

Mary's story in the book of Luke opens with the appearance of the angel Gabriel, the same angel who had earlier appeared to Zacharias in the temple (see Luke 1:11, 19, 26). When Gabriel appears, Mary is a young woman who was engaged to be married to Joseph (see Luke 1:27). Although we do not know how old Mary was at the time, in antiquity it was possible for marriage contracts to be arranged even before puberty. Gabriel's appearance and declarations that Mary is "highly favored," that "the Lord is with thee," that she is "blessed among women," and that, according to the Joseph Smith Translation of Luke 1:28, she was "chosen" (see also Alma 7:10) must have elicited a mixed reaction

of confusion and even fear in Mary. We can only imagine what thoughts might have raced through her mind at that moment, but they could have included questions like, "Why does God consider me to be 'blessed among women'?" "Why have I 'found favor with God' and what does that even mean?" "Why did God send Gabriel to me and not to any of the other young women in Nazareth, or in Jerusalem?" Yes, she was from the house of David (see Luke 1:32; Romans 1:3), but that meant little under the Roman occupation. After all, she was just a young woman from a peasant family, living in an insignificant village. As Nathaniel would later ask, "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

Gabriel does not answer any of the questions that may have filled Mary's mind and heart. Instead he continues with his message: she will conceive a child, but not just any child. Her child shall be called the "Son of the Highest" and will receive "the throne of his father David" (see Luke 1:32–33). In other words, Gabriel told Mary that her son would be both the Son of God and the promised Messiah. If Mary had been confused and afraid before this announcement, we can only imagine her heightened state after it.

Let's consider one principle that this part of Mary's story teaches about discipleship. God's plan for Mary was not something that she had asked for! Gabriel had appeared to Zacharias because he and Elisabeth had prayed for a miracle child, but he came to Mary under very different circumstances: not to fulfill a petition, but to announce God's will for her. With her impending wedding, Mary had probably thought about the possibility of having children in the future. But even though there was a wave of messianic expectation in Judaism in the first century, would Mary have thought that she, a peasant young woman from Nazareth, would be the mother of the Messiah? Probably not. The point is that calls of discipleship often require alterations to our personal life plans.

Luke focuses his record on the declarations of Gabriel and then Elisabeth. But there are three occasions when Mary articulates her thoughts and feelings.





*The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary with the astonishing message that she was “blessed among women” and that she would bear the Son of God.*

### **An Inspired Question**

The first is her question to Gabriel, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?” (Luke 1:34). Given the circumstances, her question is a reasonable one. It reminds readers of Zacharias’s question, “Whereby shall I know this? [i.e., that Elisabeth would bear a son]” (verse 18). But whereas his question expresses doubt about Gabriel’s answer to a prayer that Zacharias himself had offered up to God, Mary’s question seeks clarification about God’s declared will for her. Questions are inevitable when God’s invitations challenge disciples to raise the bar and move out of their comfort zones, and inspired questions lead to revelation.

Gabriel’s answer to Mary’s question comes in three parts:

1. First, he tells Mary, “The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee” (verse 35). The Holy Ghost is the power whereby

disciples in every age are magnified in their callings.

“Remember that this work is not yours and mine alone,” taught President Thomas S. Monson (1927–2018). “It is the Lord’s work, and when we are on the Lord’s errand, we are entitled to the Lord’s help. Remember that whom the Lord calls, the Lord qualifies.”<sup>7</sup> Then Gabriel gives Mary information specific to her situation: “And the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee:<sup>8</sup> therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (verse 35).

2. Second, Gabriel tells Mary about Elisabeth, someone who is experiencing a similar, although not identical, miraculous pregnancy (see verse 36). Elisabeth’s pregnancy is a sign to Mary that she is not alone, that there is at least one other person who has some sense of what she is going through.





*Mary's and Elisabeth's stories are interwoven through their love and support for each other in a time of need.*

3. Third, Gabriel unequivocally declares, “For with God nothing shall be impossible” (verse 37). God did the impossible when Elisabeth conceived.<sup>9</sup> Gabriel’s declaration is a reminder to disciples in every age that when we respond to God’s invitations, miracles can take place.

### **A Disciple’s Willingness**

Mary’s second verbal response in the story epitomizes, in my mind, the commitment and outlook of a disciple: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word” (Luke 1:38). “Handmaid” indicates that Mary has chosen to accept the call that God has extended to her. This statement is Mary’s version of what her Son will say in Gethsemane, “not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). While it seems clear that at this point in her journey, she cannot possibly understand all that will be required of her—Simeon later prophesies to her that “a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also” (Luke 2:35)—nevertheless, Mary chooses to move forward with faith.

“And the angel departed from her” (Luke 1:38). When Gabriel leaves, Mary is left alone. While it is one thing for a disciple to make declarations like hers in the presence of a divine messenger, what does she do now that the angel is gone? How does she explain this experience to her parents? to Joseph? What is the personal cost to her if they or the inhabitants of Nazareth do not believe her? The close quarters of her life in Nazareth could now become difficult for her.

So she recalls the second part of Gabriel’s answer to her question and journeys to the home of Elisabeth. Once again, Luke’s two opening stories are woven together. As soon as Mary greets Elisabeth, “the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb” (Luke 1:41–42). Her Spirit-directed salutation reinforced what Gabriel had already declared about Mary’s blessed place among women. Mary now had a second witness of her calling, but it came only after she had willingly accepted the call.

The account of Mary and Elisabeth is a reminder of two great aspects in the lives of modern disciples. It is a reminder of the great symbiotic value at the heart of Relief Societies around the world: women of different ages and at different stages of life coming together to sustain and support each other in times of need. It is also a reminder that God does not abandon those He has called in their times of need but that



He often responds by encircling them in the arms of others whom He has also called.

### The Magnificat

Mary's final expression is known as the Magnificat and is her manifestation of joy in response to Elisabeth's declarations. She expresses her feelings about what has transpired in her life and reflects her newfound understanding of her place in God's plan. First and foremost she feels to magnify, give praise to, and glorify her God, in whom she rejoices as her Savior (see Luke 1:46–47). She sees in her experience the ongoing mercy of God, both in the fact that He chose someone of "low estate" like her (see verses 48–50) and also in the fact that He has chosen her to play a central part in the fulfilling of the Abrahamic covenant (see verses 54–55).

"And Mary abode with [Elisabeth] about three months, and returned to her own house" (verse 56). Mary was now more prepared to fulfill her divine calling.

### Mary's Example for Us

Modern disciples are removed from the story of Mary by both culture and 2,000 years. Nevertheless, her story is a timeless reminder of the costs of discipleship. God expects His followers to step up to the invitations He extends to them. President Russell M. Nelson reminds us that "God has always asked His covenant children to do difficult things."<sup>10</sup> Mary was no exception, and neither are we. Our challenge is to have the faith to submit our will to His, to accept His calls with faith that His Spirit will magnify us in His service. Bonnie H. Cordon, Young Women General President, also reminds us that "we can do hard things," and then adds, "but we can also do them joyfully."<sup>11</sup>

As modern disciples, what will our Magnificat be? How will we express our rejoicing in our God? How will we express the magnificence of His mercy in our lives? How will we find ways to celebrate our part in the fulfilling of the Abrahamic covenant in our day? These are perhaps just some of the ways that we can learn from Mary's remarkable story of discipleship. ■

### NOTES

1. Matthew also understands Mary to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of a virgin who will bring forth a son named Immanuel (see Isaiah 7:14). His quotation of "a virgin" is from the second century BC Greek translation of Isaiah, which was used by the early Christians and is used in the King James Version of Isaiah 7:14.
2. In the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 11:18 also describes Mary as "the mother of God."
3. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mortal Messiah*, 4 vols. (1981), 1:326–27, footnote 4.
4. See James E. Strange, "Nazareth," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:1050; Jonathan L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-examination of the Evidence* (2002), 131.
5. See Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus*, 131.
6. See Ken Dark, "Has Jesus' Nazareth House Been Found?" *Biblical Archaeology Review*, vol. 41, no. 2 (March/April 2015), 54–63; see also Ken Dark, "Early Roman-Period Nazareth and the Sisters of Nazareth Convent," *The Antiquities Journal*, vol. 92 (2012), 37–64.
7. Thomas S. Monson, "Duty Calls," *Ensign*, May 1996, 44.
8. The Greek word translated as "overshadow" (*episkiazō*) is the same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe the cloud descending on the tabernacle when it was completed. It described the glory of the Lord.
9. The Lord said likewise to Abraham when he and Sarah learned that they would have a child in their old age (see Genesis 18:14; Romans 4:19–21).
10. Russell M. Nelson, "Stand as True Millennials," *Ensign*, Oct. 2016, 27; *Liahona*, Oct. 2016, 49.
11. "Bonnie H. Cordon: Young Women General President," *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2018, 129.

