

Meet the Real Mary

Thoughts for Marian Feast Days

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was Jewish. Her religious worldview was shaped by the covenant of Sinai, the narratives of the Hebrew scriptures, the rituals and festivals of Judaism, and ethical observance of Torah. She would have participated in synagogue worship, celebrated Jesus' circumcision, kept the Sabbath, observed Jewish dietary laws, as well as purity laws relating to menstruation and childbirth.

This picture is filled out by Elizabeth Johnson in *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (Continuum, 2003). While acknowledging the shortage of specific facts about Mary's life, Johnson explores the first century social, political and religious world in which the mother of Jesus lived. Her work in this area remains an important landmark because, to this day, despite the Church's embrace of its Jewish roots and the Jewishness of Jesus, the Jewish identity of Mary attracts relatively little attention.

Paradoxically, the universal appeal of Marian symbolism—in itself praiseworthy and resulting in so many beautiful works of art and expressions of piety—can have the effect of hiding the real person at the heart of the symbol, hence concealing the centrality of Judaism to the Christian story.

On a darker note, the anti-Jewish 'teaching of contempt' that has infected so much of Christian history—and which only in recent decades has been decisively confronted by official Church teaching—has tainted Marian interpretation as well. As Edward Kessler (Woolf Institute, Cambridge) has pointed out, the Church's gradual separation from its Jewish roots was accompanied by a hardening of anti-Jewish attitudes. When Jewish polemic of the early Middle Ages challenged the teaching of the virgin birth, it reinforced the Christian view of Jews as enemies of Mary. [1]

These days we live in a brighter era in terms of Jewish-Christian reconciliation. Today the Church

positively embraces its Jewish heritage, affirms the enduring vitality of the Jewish covenant, and encourages a relationship of reconciliation and respect between Christianity and Judaism. It teaches that the Jews are not to be held collectively responsible for the death of Jesus, and that antisemitism is the antithesis of the gospel. We can rejoice in the bold leadership taken by the Council fathers at Vatican II in re-setting the Church's compass in relation to the Jewish people. But old habits and attitudes die hard. Even today it is necessary to counter the residue of anti-Judaism in grassroots Christian consciousness. I see this first-hand in some parish circles where the charge 'but the Jews killed Jesus' still holds sway, and the odd anti-Jewish slur slips out as a 'joke.' It can be seen in some instances of mainstream gospel commentary where the 'loving and liberating' Jesus is cast as opposing his Jewish religion which is stereotypically portrayed as 'rigid and legalistic.' I have seen it subtly at work in my own writing of years gone by, when my zeal for the gospel had not yet deeply assimilated the Council's teaching in *Nostra Aetate*.

It will take time for Catholics to fully embrace this new awareness of Judaism as being 'intrinsic' to their faith tradition, just as it will take time to win the trust of the Jewish people after centuries of damage done through impact of displacement theologies. But embrace it we must and, given the power that the person and symbol of Mary wields in the Catholic psyche, a significant step forward we can all take as Catholics is to reacquaint ourselves with Miriam of Nazareth, faithful daughter of Israel, the Jewish woman whom we lovingly esteem as 'Mary.'

[1] See Edward Kessler, 'Mary—The Jewish Mother', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 76:3 (2011): 211-223.

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