

WHO IS MY MOTHER?



THE ROLE AND STATUS OF THE MOTHER OF JESUS IN
THE NEW TESTAMENT AND ROMAN CATHOLICISM

ERIC D. SVENDSEN

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Marian Issues in Matthew 1:18–25

Matthew 1:18–25 is a key text in any discussion about Mary’s person and role in the church, as well as a major support for the orthodox view of the virgin birth of Christ. Conservative Roman Catholics and Evangelicals are in agreement on the latter, and so no attempt will be made here to enter into that discussion.¹ It is the former issue that concerns us here. The passage reads:

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ² came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet³: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.” When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with

The Phrases ἕως οὗ and ἕως οὗτου in Non-biblical Literature from 100 B.C. to A.D. 100

The number of passages that use the constructions ἕως οὗ or ἕως οὗτου in the literature of the centuries immediately surrounding the birth of Christ is surprisingly few. The actual count in the literature currently available in a searchable format (i.e., on an electronic database) numbers fewer than fifty—roughly twice as many as are found in the comparatively scant amount of literature of the NT. The range of usage found in this literature practically mirrors that of the LXX, with the exception of perhaps one or two nuances found in the latter but not in the former. A summary of usages follows.

A Summary of the Phrase ἕως οὗ

The meaning of ἕως οὗ found to be primary in the NT and the LXX—*until* [*but not after*]²¹—in which the action of the main clause discontinues after the action of the subordinate clause, is also dominant here. There are several examples of this from the writings of Dionysius of Halicarnassus. “And he continued from that time to maintain this pretense of folly from which he acquired his surname, *until* he thought the proper time had come to throw it off.”²¹ In this instance the action of the main clause (the protasis) discontinues after the action of the subordinate clause (the apodosis). The same is true of another instance of this phrase in Dionysius. “And from that time the two classes remained aloof from each other until the commonwealth was composed and reunited.”²² In this case the geographic separation of classes remained intact only until the commonwealth was established. Similarly, when recounting the way in which decisions were reached in the Roman military, Dionysius tells us:

If therefore...ninety-seven [military] centuries [in the first class] were of the same opinion, the voting was at an end and the remaining ninety-six centuries were not called upon to give their votes. But if this was not the case, the second class, composed of twenty-two centuries, was called, and then the third and so on until ninety-seven centuries were of the same opinion.²³

It is clear that votes were taken only until ninety-seven centuries were in agreement, and then the voting stopped; hence, the action of the main clause discontinues after the action of the subordinate clause.

Examples such as these abound. All five instances of ἕως οὐ in the pseudepigraphical book *The Apocalypse of Moses*²⁴ have this meaning. Two of these are found in Adam's instructions to Eve concerning his body:

But when I die, leave me alone and let no one touch me *until* the angel of the Lord shall say something about me; for God will not forget me, but will seek his own vessel which he has formed. But rather rise to pray to God *until* I shall give back my spirit into the hands of the one who has given it.²⁵

Here it seems reasonable to suppose that in both instances the action of the main clause would cease after the action of the subordinate clause, so that in both cases the meaning is “only until [but not after].”

Likewise with the narrative of Adam's death:

For the earth did not receive the body [of Abel], saying, ‘I shall not receive another body *until* the mound of earth which was taken from me and formed [into Adam] shall come [back] to me.’ Then the angels took up the body [of Abel] and set it on the rock, *until* the time his father died, and both were buried according to the command of God in the regions of Paradise in the place from which God had found the dust.²⁶

There can be no question that what is being asserted here is a reversal of the action of the main clauses by the action of the subordinate clauses. The earth would in fact receive the body of Abel, but *only after* it had received that of Adam. Consequently, the placement of Abel's body on the rock was *only until* Adam was buried—then Abel too was buried.

A final occurrence of this construction in the *Apocalypse of Moses* is found toward the end of the story. Here God sealed Adam in a temporary container “in order that no one might do anything to him for six days *until* his rib would return to him” (42.1). This also seems to be an instance where the intent of the construction is to show the

NOTES

Prolegomena—An Overview of Mariology

1. The authors of *Mary in the New Testament* (Raymond Brown et al, eds., Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978) devote an entire chapter to cryptic Marian references in Romans, Galatians and Philippians with no substantial findings (33-49). (The aforementioned work is commonly known as *MNT*, and its authors as the *MNT* taskforce. This nomenclature will be used throughout this work). See also Raymond Brown ("Mary in the New Testament and in Catholic Life," *America* [May 15, 1982]), who points out that "the great Apostle of the Gentiles could preach the gospel and yet not mention Mary," and that "we know not a single New Testament detail about Mary in history after Pentecost" (374-75). There are indeed a few Pauline passages that have indirect Marian significance—those that mention the "brothers" of Jesus—but none of these is favorable to the Roman Catholic view of Mary. These passages will be dealt with in a subsequent chapter that specifically examines Jesus' biological relations, so that no special examination of Paul's writings is necessary.
2. Maron Gottfried, "Mary in Protestant Theology," in *Mary in the Churches* (ed. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann; Etr. Marcus Lefébure; New York: T. & T. Clark, 1983), 45-46.
3. *MNT*, 8 n. 15.
4. Küng, "Editorial," in *Mary in the Churches* (ed. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann; Etr. Marcus Lefébure; New York: T. & T. Clark, 1983), vii.
5. John McKenzie, "The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament," in *ibid.*, 4.
6. Jürgen Moltmann, "Editorial: Can there be an Ecumenical Mary?" in *ibid.*, xii.
7. Anthony J. Tambasco, *What Are They Saying About Mary?* (New York: Paulist, 1984), 3.
8. *Ibid.*, 8.
9. *Ibid.*, 10.
10. *Ibid.*, 5.
11. *Ibid.*, 10.

12. Ibid., 9-11 passim.
13. Ibid., 11.
14. Ibid., 16. Tambasco goes on to ask whether confessional formulas, such as “born of the Virgin Mary,” are simply symbolic (as opposed to historical) statements intended to convey truths about the divinity of Jesus (ibid., 19), and concludes that it is legitimate to view this as a mere theological symbol “which has simply been presumed to be historical” (ibid., 23).
15. Walter M. Abbot, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, 730-731.
16. McKenzie, 9. McKenzie’s words are stated in relation to the teaching of the NT, not to the teaching of the Roman Catholic church.
17. Elizabeth Johnson, “Mary and the Image of God,” in *Mary Woman of Nazareth: Biblical and Theological Perspectives* (ed. Doris Donnelly; New York: Paulist, 1989), 38-39.
18. Tambasco, 74.
19. Ibid.
20. Nikos Nissiotis, “Mary in Orthodox Theology,” in *Mary in the Churches* (ed. Hans Küng and Jürgen Moltmann; Etr. Marcus Lefebure; New York: T. & T. Clark, 1983), 36.
21. Kari Børresen, “Mary in Catholic Theology,” in ibid., 55.
22. Richard Kugelman, “The Object of Mary’s Consent in the Annunciation,” *Marian Studies* 11 (1960): 75.
23. Børresen, 51.
24. Ibid.
25. Nissiotis, 31.
26. See Pope Pius XII’s *Bull Munificentissimus Deus* (1950).
27. Some who affirm that Mary died point to Pius XII’s *Munificentissimus Deus*, in which he mentions Mary’s “death” several times. There are theological ramifications, however, if Mary, who was supposedly sinless, died. According to John Damascene (from whence this tradition originates):

St. Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem, at the Council of Chalcedon (451), made known to the Emperor Marcian and Pulcheria, who wished to possess the body of the Mother of God, that Mary died in the presence of all the Apostles, but that her tomb, when opened, upon the request of St. Thomas, was found empty; wherefrom the Apostles concluded that the body was taken up to heaven.

According to this tradition Mary was not put to death, but rather died of natural causes. But since death is the consequence of sin (Rom 6:23), that naturally raises the question as to how someone who is sinless can die in this way.
28. Nissiotis, 33.
29. See chapter 9 of this work. Even as late as the 13th century, Aquinas rejects this interpretation in favor of identifying the “woman” as the church.
30. *MNT*, 266.
31. Ibid.

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