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GALILEE: A CRITICAL MATRIX FOR MARIAN STUDIES

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Historical imagination can open a powerful door to the world of Mary of Nazareth depicted in the Gospels and relate her to the quest for justice today. Galilee as a geographic region and social location is a marker of Mary's time and place that serves as shorthand for the scandal of God's preference for the lowly of the earth. To illuminate the significance of God's preference, this article traces four areas of Galilee research that impinge on Marian interpretation and underscores resulting theological ramifications.

"THE DOOR WHEREBY *one enters on* a question decides the chances of a happy or a less happy solution," observed Yves Congar, because the concepts one uses in starting out largely determine what follows.[1] For Christian faith, the life of the first-century woman Miriam of Nazareth is woven into the story of salvation coming from God in Jesus through the power of the Spirit. Over time many different doors have served as portals for theological interpretation of her significance. In the first Christian centuries when Docetic tendencies attempted to blot out the genuine humanity of Jesus Christ, Mary's genuine female pregnancy and birthgiving protected his identification with the human race. It was even written into the creed that he was born *of* the Virgin Mary, *ex Maria Virgine*, out of her very stuff, not *through* her, like water passing through a tube, as Gnostic opponents wished to maintain.[2] A very different door opened in the late Middle Ages when the church's juridical practice and its attendant theology divided the so-called kingdoms of justice and mercy. While the lion's share of justice went to Christ, Just Judge of sin, Mary ruled the realm of mercy. As a mother, she did not want one of her children to be lost; as Jesus' mother, she could and would intercede with him on their behalf; as

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[1] Yves Congar, "My Path-findings in the Theology of Laity and Ministry," *Jurist* 32 (1972) 169–88, at 176, emphasis original.

[2] Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.7,2; see 3.11,3; describing the Valentinians.

at the wedding in Cana, she would succeed. The experience of divine mercy survived under the outstretched folds of her protective mantle.[3]

THEOLOGY WITH A HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

In our day yet another door has opened to Marian studies, an approach through critical history. Part of a larger shift in contemporary theology, this approach ramifies out from the insight that God's self-revelation takes place in history, in specific times and places, rather than in the Platonic realm of eternal ideas. The postconciliar renewal of biblical scholarship underscored this insight, with significant impact on all areas. Consider Christology as a prime example. Critical studies of the Gospels emphasize that, since these writings reflect the kerygmatic interests of the early church, they are not biographical but profoundly theological in character. At the same time, their witness to the grace and truth of God's saving love keeps a sound link to historical time and place as the locus of this gracious revelation. In addition to work on the genre, literary formation, and social contexts of the Gospels, broader literary studies of extrabiblical writings along with historical studies of the political, economic, social, and religious conditions of Roman-ruled first-century Palestine have lent concreteness to Gospel depictions of the Messiah's life and ministry. As a result, interpretations of Jesus as Word and Wisdom of God have arisen that have their roots in time and place. Broadly speaking, Christology now operates with a historical imagination.

As part of this project, Galilee research has proved to be a potent tool. The very idea that Galilee is a distinct region with its own viable subculture to be investigated is itself relatively recent, much previous archeological work having concentrated on Jerusalem and other centers of ancient Israel.[4] Scholarly attention focused on this district in recent decades has brought to light salient concrete conditions of the immediate world in which Jesus lived and ministered. This knowledge in turn forms part of the matrix in which the salvific good news of the gospel can be construed.

In an analogous development, this scholarship spills over to limn an evocative picture of the person of Mary, embedded in this same location. Each of the canonical Gospels places her there: "After being warned in a

[3] For historical information see Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1990); and Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition: 100–600*; and Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma: 1300–1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971 and 1983).

[4] See the groundbreaking work by Sean Freyne, *Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian, 323 B.C.E. to 135 C.E.: A Study of Second Temple Judaism* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1980), esp. chap. 3, "Galilee under the Romans" 57–97.

dream, he [Joseph] went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth" (Mt 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); "On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there" (Jn 2:1). Entering through the door of Galilee allows theology of Mary to construe her as an actual historical woman in the concrete. In turn, this insight guides interpretation of her significance within the revelatory narrative of God's self-gift in history.

The trajectory of scholarship to date affords something of a surprise. While Galilee research has been largely the province of white, educated men of First World nations, its results have intersected with theologies being done by new practitioners of this ancient craft, not persons of the dominant race, class, or sex, but people in poor, marginalized communities and women the world over. From the vantage point of their distinctive experiences of struggle, these groups inevitably raise questions and see connections that eyes trained by classical forms of privilege have missed. People in Latin American *comunidades eclesiales de base,* for example, have grasped the concrete similarity of their lives to that of the Galilean Mary, a poor village woman who suffered from state violence. With this identification, they interpret her *Magnificat*, omitted from traditional Mariologies, as an anthem of fierce hope in God and countercultural 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."[5] Indeed, in her own person as a Galilean woman she becomes a lodestone of hope for those who have been cheated of their lives.

Insofar as such theologies start out with conscious reference to their own social location which then plays a guiding role in their understanding of Christian faith and praxis, they can be called contextual theologies. Whether liberation theology done out of Latin American, southern Asian, or African communities; or theology done in black, Hispanic, or Asian communities in the United States; or theology done from the experience of women in feminist, womanist, *mujerista*/Latina, or Asian women's formats, all allow the specificity of their situation and its attendant suffering to filter the meaning of the gospel. In the light of human finitude, of course, all theology is contextual; no universal viewpoint is possible. Theologies that assume the contrary almost always emanate from positions of privilege and historically have had the effect of making poor, marginalized groups

[5] María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 176–77.

and women as a whole virtually invisible and silent in their deliberations. By contrast, contextual theologies claim their particularity precisely as an honest and humble way of reading the good news that leads to universal significance for the whole church. Their resulting construals bring the liberating intent of God's saving actions in Jesus through the Spirit unmistakably to the fore.

Galilee: both a geographic region and a social location, it serves as shorthand for the scandal of God's compassionate preference for the lowly of the earth. To illuminate its significance as a door for Marian studies, this article first presents the earthy results of four areas of Galilee research that impinge on the interpretation of Mary, and then notes the resulting theological ramifications.

GALILEE RESEARCH

Archeological/Cultural Research

Forming the northern part of the ancient land of Israel, Galilee is a distinct region from Judea in the south. Its most obvious geographic features are four continuous hilly ranges that march across the land like stripes in an east-west direction. In between are broad valleys dotted with farming villages that worked the fertile soil. In John Dominic Crossan's description, the 470 square miles of Lower Galilee are "rich with grain and cereal on valley floor and with vine and olive on hillside slope."[6] At the region's eastern boundary the land sinks down into a basin that contains the Sea of Galilee, a fresh-water lake flowing into the Jordan River. The lake, river, and their surrounding lands are all below sea level, creating a subtropical zone in an otherwise generally Mediterranean climate.

Since the 1980s, scientifically-conducted archeological excavations have produced an explosion of information about ancient Galilee in Roman times. This painstaking work uncovers the material culture of the place, which in turn helps scholars reimagine everyday life. Jonathan Reed, a key practitioner of this science, points out that unlike literary texts, which intentionally set out to tell a story or make a plea from a definite point of view, archeological evidence uncovers not only the intentional witness of public architecture but also many unintentional witnesses to everyday life in antiquity. "Sherds from pots and pans, hidden coins, discarded kitchen scrap—all afford a glimpse behind closed doors of antiquity."[7] Scholars

[6] John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 219.

[7] Jonathan Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A Re-examination of the Evidence* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2000) 19.

have married this knowledge to studies of cross-cultural anthropology, economic systems, and literary, political, military, and historical sources to help reconstruct a general picture of village society.[8]

The village that interests Christian theologians most is Nazareth, a small place located on the slope of a broad ridge in southern Galilee. Though only three to four miles from the gleaming regional city of Sepphoris, it was situated off the main road that funneled most people to that administrative center. Most of the hard archeological remains point to farming as the villagers' main occupation: olive presses, wine presses, millstones for grinding grain, cisterns for holding water, holes for storage jars. These findings indicate that the inhabitants were either peasants who worked their own land, tenant farmers, or craftspersons who served the inhabitants' needs. To date, nothing that indicates wealth has been uncovered in Nazareth: no public paved roads or civic buildings, no inscriptions, no decorative frescoes or mosaics, no luxury items such as perfume bottles or even simple glass.

As in villages all over Galilee, the homes were small and clustered. 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, most likely covered with packed mud for additional protection. 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, giving birth and dying, and taking shelter from the elements. In the unroofed, common courtyard, inhabitants of the domestic units, most likely an extended family, 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" skirted 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."[9] Living at a subsistence level, households by and large grew their own food, did their own building, and sewed their own clothes from cloth (mostly woolen) that they spun and wove. The identity of Nazareth as an agricultural hamlet of little consequence would seem to be born out in the literary

[8] See Douglas Edwards and C. Thomas McCollough, eds., *Archaeology and the Galilee: Texts and Contexts in the Graeco-Roman and Byzantine Periods* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), esp. James Strange, "First Century Galilee from Archaeology and from Texts" 39–48. A helpful study that applies knowledge of Galilee to Jesus is Bernard Lee, *The Galilean Jewishness of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1988).

[9] Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus* 153.

record. The Hebrew Scriptures do not mention this place, nor does Josephus who names 45 villages in Galilee, nor does the Talmud which refers to 63 Galilean villages: "from Jewish literary texts, then, across almost one thousand five hundred years, nothing."[10]As Richard Horsley observes, "Judging from its somewhat out of the way location and small size, it was a village of no special importance."[11] Mary of Nazareth spent most of her life in this village and its environs.

Galilee at this time was a multilingual world. Latin was the native tongue of the Romans; Greek was the *lingua franca* of the educated, business, and ruling classes throughout the empire and had made massive inroads in Palestine; and Hebrew was the ancient language of the Bible, heard when the Torah scrolls were read and their fine points debated. In the households and villages of Galilee, the ordinary, everyday language was Aramaic, spoken, it would appear, in a distinct style. During Jesus' trial a bystander accosts Peter in the courtyard saying, "Certainly you are one of them, for your accent betrays you" (Mt 26:73). It is fair to assume that, like her neighbors, Mary spoke Aramaic with a Galilean accent.[12] Her location in this village also indicates that rather than the fair-haired, blue-eyed, svelte figure of popular Western art, she, along with the people of her class and ethnic heritage, 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 "Our Lady," a fair, gentlewoman like themselves, pioneering biblical scholar John L. McKenzie commented: "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."[13] Reflecting on this cultural research, poet Kathleen Norris has called on artists 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."[14]

[10] John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 15.

[11] Richard A. Horsley, *Archaeology, History, and Society in Galilee: The Social Context of Jesus and the Rabbis* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1996) 110.

[12] See the lucid presentation by John Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 3 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 1:255–68.

[13] John L. McKenzie, "The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament," in *Mary in the Churches*, ed. Hans Küng, Jürgen Moltmann, and Marcus Lefébure (New York: Seabury, 1985) 9.

[14] Kathleen Norris, *Meditations on Mary* (New York: Viking Studio, 1999) 16–17.

According to custom Mary entered into an arranged marriage with her husband, Joseph. At some point her household consisted of her son 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; see Mk 6:3). The Catholic Church teaches that these were Jesus's cousins. The Orthodox Church 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 they 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. Given these brothers and sisters, the romanticized picture of an ideal "holy family" composed of an old man, a young woman, and one perfect child needs to be revised.

Given this Galilean location, contextual theologies' identification of Mary as a poor woman of the people gains further traction in the light of studies of Galilean economics.

Economic Research

Starting in 63 BCE the Roman empire had expanded to conquer the land of Israel. As a province within this vast empire, Galilee was technically a peasant 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. In other words, the basic economic structure of this society was that of a redistributive network. "This means that taxes and rents flowed relentlessly away from the rural producers to the storehouses of cities (especially Rome), private estates, and temples."[15] According to the influential model developed by Gerhard Lenski, mature agrarian societies have basically two major classes, upper and lower, with an enormous gap between them.[16] The upper class consisted of the ruler, his administrators, and the scribes, military personnel, merchants, and priests who all helped him govern. These comprised ten percent of the population. On the other side of the chasm was the peasant class, consisting mainly of the farmers and fishers who worked

[15] Douglas Oakman, "The Countryside in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation,* ed. Jerome Neyrey (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991) 156.

[16] Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966). John Kautsky's idea of a commercializing agrarian society (see his *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1982]) has nuanced Lenski's view of traditional agrarian society. The Lenski-Kautsky model now appears in numerous studies of Galilee. See also Sean Freyne, "Herodian Economics in Galilee: Searching for a Suitable Model," in his *Galilee and Gospel: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000) 86–113.

the land and the sea, and 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 five to ten percent 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."[17]

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, downward mobility was much more frequent than upward. Lenski's observation 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."[18] 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 for the Temple in Jerusalem, tribute to the Roman emperor, and a third tax to the local Jewish client-king through whom Rome ruled by proxy. 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 taxes, many fell into increasing indebtedness to the wealthy. Over time villagers 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 artisans. In addition to plying their craft her 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* (Mt 13:55).[19] 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 craftsman in an advanced, industrial market economy like our own bestows. Consulting an ancient "lexicon of

[17] Lenski, *Power and Privilege* 281.
[18] Ibid. 210, emphasis original.
[19] See an illuminating description of this work by Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 278–85.

snobbery," MacMullen found *tekton* among the slurs the literate upper classes could throw at those of plebeian origins.[20]

This family was a village family of the artisan class, no more respectable than anyone else. Its members belonged to the poor who had to work hard for their living. It is true, as Meier argues, that theirs "was not the grinding, degrading poverty of the day laborer or the rural slave."[21] But it would seem equally misleading to compare their economic status, as Meier does, to "a blue-collar worker in lower-middle-class America."[22] The analogy does not work insofar as structural analysis indicates that there was no middle class. The family of Miriam of Nazareth lived on the underside of a two-sided system. Occupying a lower rung of the economic ladder, her situation is typical of that of countless people throughout the ages, including countless women, who experience the civic powerlessness, low social status, and lack of formal education that result from poverty.

Political Research

The poverty and hunger in Galilee acted as a spawning ground of first-century revolts against the repressive Roman occupation and taxation. Rome customarily appointed client-kings from the conquered population, rulers charged with subduing their own people. This policy of indirect rule through native aristocracies backed by Roman military might brought three generations of the Jewish Herod family to power. The first, Herod the Great, came to power in 37 BCE and ruled until his death in spring of 4 BCE, during Mary's childhood and young adulthood. Politically savvy in dealing with the Romans, Herod 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 only by his love of luxury and the hate he engendered in the people.[23]

This King of the Jews took the already existing town of Sepphoris, four miles from Nazareth, beautified it, and fortified it as the center from which to administer the region. To the peasants in the villages the already burdensome triple tax became next to unbearable as Herod's portion was increased to pay for this and other massive building projects. The prayer

[20] Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations, 50 B.C. to A.D. 384* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1974) 107–8.

[21] Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 1:282.

[22] Ibid.

[23] It took Herod three years to quash popular resistance to his reign, especially in Galilee where people already knew of his brutality. See Peter Richardson, *Herod, King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1996).

Jesus taught his disciples, with its plea to "give us this day our daily bread" (Mt 6:11), had critical resonance as many cascaded 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 organized by a popular leader named Judas, son of the brigand-chief Ezekias, who led a large number of desperate men in a raid on the royal fortress in Sepphoris. Having seized all the weapons stored there, he armed his followers and made off with all the military and food supplies. Facing widespread uproar, the Romans responded with brutal efficiency to quash the uprising. In Jerusalem they crucified 2000 Jewish men outside the city walls. In Galilee they recaptured Sepphoris, set fire to homes and shops, and enslaved many inhabitants. Recent excavations at Sepphoris do not as yet show evidence of total fiery destruction from this period. But the city and the surrounding villages were severely damaged to punish the rebels among their inhabitants. 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 the Romans, and of the destruction of their villages and the enslavement of their friends and relatives. . . . The mass enslavement and destruction would have left severe scars on the social body of the Galilean village communities for generations to come."[24]

While this incident is not recorded in Scripture, the basic chronology of Jesus' life indicates that his mother would have been around 15 or 16 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 20th and early 21st centuries leave little work for the imagination. Watching village women in Vietnam, El Salvador, Bosnia, Congo, Iraq, and Darfur flee with their children from forces intent on their destruction conjures up such suffering in real time. Miriam of Nazareth was no stranger to 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 BCE and the widespread revolt in 66 CE were all pointed attempts, finally, to terrorize the populace into submission."[25] The crucifixion of Mary's firstborn son

[24] Horsley, *Archaeology, History, and Society* 32, 112.

[25] Richard A. Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1995) 123.

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 cultural-economic-political world of Galilee indicates, 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. Jewish faith in God was shaped by the covenant forged at Mount Sinai, nourished by dramatic 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 Jewish religion before 70 CE, with many different interpretations of the tradition advocated by different groups. For all 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.

Scholars dispute over just how Jewish the village residents of Galilee actually were. A history of warfare starting in the eighth century BCE had decimated the ten tribes of Israel that had settled in the north, leaving Galilee open to foreign inhabitants. In addition, Roman rule coupled with Herod's building projects had imported Hellenistic culture to the province. How deeply did this overlay of pagan culture run? Based on diggings in village households, Jonathan Reed argues for an indigenous Jewish population: "wherever archeologists have excavated, Jewish religious indicators permeate Galilean domestic space in the Early Roman Period."[26] He lists four archeological 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 indicating the Jewish burial practice of collecting and reburying a corpse's bones after the flesh had decomposed; and a diet without pork, as indicated by analysis of those human bones. The first three of these have been found in Nazareth. When this evidence from private life is coupled with the absence of pagan cultic shrines in the public setting, it seems right to conclude that the people of Galilee in the north shared the same pattern of religious belief as the Jews of Judea in the south.

[26] Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus* 53; Freyne (*Galilee from Alexander the Great to Hadrian* 112–31) renders a similar judgment.

One relevant structure that archeology might be expected to turn up, but that is almost entirely missing, is the synagogue. The remains of one have been found in Gamla, a village near Capernaum, and possibly one or two more. But constructed synagogues as a whole in Galilee before 70 CE are absent (so far). Given the hypothesized Jewish character of the region, this is puzzling. It is equally curious in view of the Gospels' picture of Jesus of Nazareth preaching and healing in the synagogues of Galilee. Scholars explain that, while our imagination conjures up a building when we hear the word synagogue, the original Greek term *synagōgē* actually means an assembly or a congregation of people. It is similar to the word "church," *ekklesía*, which, though it now usually denotes a building used for Christian worship, originally referred to the assembly of persons consecrated by baptism: the people are the church. Thus the synagogue in first-century Galilean villages was the local village assembly: the people were the synagogue.[27] On the Sabbath they would meet in an open space, a public square, under the trees, or in a private house to read and interpret Torah, offer prayers of praise and petition, and take care of other religious business. Since there were no priests in Galilee—they were clustered around the Jerusalem Temple to perform sacrifice—leadership was taken by villagers, most likely men but with women's contributions expected in this assembly of village people who shared a common faith.[28]

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 his own family. The immediate world that the Gospels portray and the style and content of Jesus' adult teaching, healing ministry, and personal religious behavior are saturated with Jewish belief and custom and cannot be understood apart from this religion. Turning this research on Miriam of Nazareth allows the reasonable supposition that she and her husband, like their neighbors, ran an observant household. The years of her life would be marked by the rhythm of daily prayer and conduct, weekly Sabbath observance, and, occasionally, festival pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem, as ordained in the Torah.

Miriam of Nazareth lived and died as a faithful Jew. Placing her in the Christian community is not without basis insofar as the last we see of her in the New Testament, she is 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

[27] While the "synagogue" is mentioned in texts about Galilee from Jesus' period, archeologists have uncovered almost no synagogal structures. The much-visited one in Capernaum dates from the fifth century CE. See Horsley, *Archaeology, History, and Society* 131–53; and Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus* 154–57.

[28] Horsley, *Archaeology, History, and Society* 131–53; see also Horsley, "Synagogues: The Village Assemblies," in his *Galilee* 222–37.

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 CE 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 300 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.

Entering a theology of Mary through the door of Galilee offers at the outset a rather definite portrait. Occupying a lower rung of the social ladder, Miriam of Nazareth's life was lived out in an economically poor, politically oppressed, Jewish peasant culture marked by continuous exploitation and occasional publicly violent events.

THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Catching a glimpse of the Galilean Mary is the first step through the door of contextual Marian studies. The relevance of this particular 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 the second step can be taken, which interprets her story as both revelatory of God and significant for the church. This two-step method entails shifting from a primarily doctrinal or devotional approach to one colored by history that draws on a picture of the historical Mary culled from the Gospels read within the matrix of her Galilean context. This shift does not mean that doctrine and liturgy have no part in interpretation, but that their symbolizing should arise from and be tethered to her concrete reality at every point.

Lest this approach be seen as a collapse of the transcendence proper to any theological interpretation, it must be reiterated that history is the locus of God's saving encounters with humanity. "The great salvific, revealing, and communicating acts of God have taken place in history," underscores Ignacio Ellacuría, even though this cannot be proved scientifically by historical research.[29] From the freeing of the Hebrew slaves in the Exodus to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, people can point to moments, places, and concrete events where the ineffable graciousness of God becomes unusually present, knowable, and effective. The same experience of God is kept alive for later generations who relive these events

[29] Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 251.

in word and anamnetic ritual. This emphasis on history, coherent with the *logos* of our age, in no way ignores divine transcendence or reduces it to a merely inner-worldly reality. Rather than conceiving of divine transcendence as distance, absence, or separateness from the world, however, contextual theology understands transcendence to be the freely-given presence of God amidst historical events. Transcendence refers to the whole rich, mysterious reality of God gratuitously present and accessible, creating scandal and giving hope, in theophanies that nourish life. Here the essential mystery of divine nature is not safeguarded by placing God beyond time and space, but by recognizing God's free theopraxis of life embracing everything.

As appropriated by contextual theologies, Galilee research discloses that not just any history bears the key to divine ways in the world, but a particular concatenation of events that reveal the creator God to be freely on the underside of history, identified as source of hope with those ground down by oppression and death. The Galilean context of Miriam of Nazareth's life provides rich material for this line of thinking.

Revelatory of God

Reflecting on the *Magnificat*, Gustavo Gutiérrez underscores at the outset the lowliness of Mary's situation, described by the term *tapeinōsis* that in other biblical usages connotes affliction and oppression. God has looked upon her suffering with a gaze of love, the canticle continues, which causes her spirit to exult for joy. But this mercy is not for herself alone. It is intended 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 freely creates and redeems 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."[30] At the same time, the spiritual power of her words consists in their ability to make us see that the quest for justice must be located within the dynamism of God's holy love, otherwise it loses its meaning in Christian life. Take Galilee out of this analysis, and it loses its strength.

An analogous approach to the modern Marian dogmas has been worked out by Brazilian theologians Ivone Gebara and María Clara Bingemer. The Immaculate Conception and the Assumption carry the memories of

[30] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis, 1991) 185.

other generations, they write, and true though these dogmas be, their relevance is not immediately apparent today on a continent marked by the suffering of millions of poor people. Yet these dogmas carry a liberating impulse and can be made to work as allies in the struggle for life. For the *Immaculata* venerated on church altars is the poor Mary of Nazareth, insignificant in the social structure of her time. She embodies the confirmation of God's preference for the humblest, the littlest, the most oppressed. Similarly, the Assumption exalts the woman who gave birth in a stable, lived a life of anonymity, and stood at the foot of the cross as the mother of the condemned. "The Assumption is the glorious culmination of the mystery of God's preference for what is poor, small, and unprotected in this world," Gebara and Bingemer write; the Assumption sparks hope in the poor and those in solidarity with them "that they will share in the final victory of the incarnate God."[31] These dogmas reveal the unrepentant ways of the living God whose favor shines on those whom the worldly elite see as insignificant or, indeed, do not see at all.

Similarly, for theologians of Latino/Latina communities in the United States, Mary's historical roots in poverty and oppression create a strong connection between people's devotion to her and hope for their own lives. While the plethora of Marian images and titles defies neat systematization, they are always and everywhere a symbol of grace, of God's faithful solidarity in the midst of struggle. As Miguel Díaz observes, "Whether understood as the female face of God (Rodriquez, Elizondo), a symbol of the Holy Spirit (Espín), the poetry of the trinitarian God (García), or the *mestizo* face of the divine (Goizueta), it is clear that U.S. Hispanic theologians understand Marian symbols as mediators of the life of grace, especially to and within the experience of the poor and marginalized."[32]

Women theologians the world over note that many women engaged in the struggle for equality and human rights find themselves repelled by traditional theologies of Mary, shaped as these are by patriarchal expectations: the passive, obedient woman who stands ready to do whatever men in authority direct; the desexualized figure whose lack of experience is taken as a sign of holiness; the woman whose *sole* purpose in life is to bear a child (which is not to downplay the value of women's ability to give life); or the silent embodiment of the so-called feminine ideal of sweetness and nurture. None of these construals promotes women's flourishing in an age of expanding social roles and independent notions of the female self. None offers a firm ground for resisting male dominance with its all-too-often

[31] Ivone Gebara and María Clara Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989) 120–21.

[32] Miguel Díaz, *On Being Human: U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001) 125.

physically violent manifestations. By contrast, reading the Gospel stories of Mary's life through a Galilean lens offers a different view of this woman through whom God became a child of earth, and a concomitantly different understanding of the holy God whom she praised.[33] The village woman who proclaims the *Magnificat* stands in the long Jewish tradition of female singers, from Miriam with her tambourine to Deborah, Hannah, and Judith who sang dangerous songs of salvation. Once an analysis of patriarchy is in place, Mary's song of God's victory over those who dominate others rings with support for all women in their struggle against sexism in combination with racism, classism, heterosexism, and other demeaning injustice. "Mary's song is precious to women and other oppressed people," writes Jane Schaberg, "for its vision of their concrete freedom from systemic injustice—from oppression by political rulers on their 'thrones' and by the arrogant and rich."[34] As in society, so in the Catholic Church: women in whose tradition Mary has been a significant figure wrestle with the significance of this canticle for their own subordinate ecclesial position. With unassailable logic Susan Ross argues that, since in many ways the mighty still occupy the church's thrones, the lowly still await their exaltation. Indeed, Mary's prophetic song characterizes as nothing less than *mercy* God's intervention into such a scandalous social order.[35]

Mary preaches as a prophet of the poor and marginalized. She represents their hope, as a woman who has suffered and been vindicated. These several examples illuminate how Galilee forms a matrix for contextual theologies' interpretation of Mary's story that is revelatory of the liberating God of life.

Significant for the Church

With a firm grasp of Mary's historical circumstances, contextual theologies understand her relationship to the church today in dynamic terms: 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

[33] For an overview, see Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001) chap. 5. Also Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994) chap. 5; and Sally Cuneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (New York: Ballantine, 1996).

[34] Jane Schaberg, "Luke," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 373.

[35] Susan A. Ross, "He Has Pulled Down the Mighty from Their Thrones and Has Exalted the Lowly," in *That They Might Live: Power, Empowerment, and Leadership in the Church*, ed. Michael Downey (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 145.

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, alive 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 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. Broadly speaking, two possibilities lie open.[36] One, more continuous with the biblical notion of the holy people of God, envisions the living and the dead forming a company of mutual companions in the one Spirit-filled community. The other, influenced by the civil system of patronage, structures this relationship according to patron-client dynamics. While at first the two interacted with each other in an ever-changing cultural context, eventually the patronage model took a commanding lead and carried the torch of the communion of saints into the medieval period and beyond.

The ground of the companionship pattern is a lively sense of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the people as a whole, shaping them into a holy people. When through a combination of personal giftedness and historical circumstance some individuals stand out, the church receives their lives with profound gratitude because of how powerfully their witness nourishes the faith of the rest. 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 this spirit, speaking of the company of martyrs now joined by their beloved bishop Polycarp, the church at Smyrna exclaimed, "May we too become their comrades and fellow

[36] For a full discussion, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

disciples."[37] Comparing the martyrs to jars of aromatic ointment whose fragrance fills a house, Augustine eloquently preached: "Blessed be the saints in whose memory we are celebrating the day they suffered on. They have left us lessons of encouragement."[38] Since they did what they did by the outpouring of the gift of God, in their company we find courage and hope in our own struggles to be faithful: "The fountain is still flowing, it hasn't dried up."[39] In this paradigm, the living and the dead form a circle of hope centered on the graciousness of the living God.

By contrast, the patronage system arises when concentrations of wealth and political power in the hands of the few, coupled with neediness of the many and lack of democratic processes, conspire to create permanent social stratifications. According to Carl Landé, whose definition reflects a wide consensus, "a patron-client relationship is a vertical dyadic alliance, i.e., an alliance between two persons of unequal status, power or resources each of whom finds it useful to have as an ally someone superior or inferior to himself."[40] The purpose of this relationship is an exchange of benefits, whether material or intangible. The Roman empire was no stranger to the structure of patronage, which formed a linchpin of its social, economic, and political organization. A mass of little pyramids of influence, each one nested in one of greater power, cascaded upward to form the warp and woof of public life, with not only individuals and families but even towns and whole regions seeking benefit by subservient alliance with personages more powerfully placed than themselves.

Given the church's inculturation into this system, it is perhaps not surprising that the patronage pattern also began to govern transactions with the realm of heaven. According to a study by G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, "by the later fourth century the term *patrocinium* [patronage] has begun to be applied to the activity of the apostles and martyrs on behalf of the faithful. . . . Just as the terrestrial patron is asked to use his influence with the emperor, so the celestial patron, the saint, is asked to use his influence with the Almighty."[41] Being far from the distant throne, people need more important personages to plead their cause; they need friends in high places, so to speak.

[37] "The Martyrdom of Polycarp" 17, in *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, ed. Herbert Musurillo (Oxford: Oxford University, 1954) 17.

[38] Augustine, Sermon 273.2, *Sermons*, 10 vols., trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 1990–1995) 8:17.

[39] Augustine, Sermon 315.8 (*Sermons* 9:133).

[40] Carl Landé, "Introduction," in *Friends, Followers, and Factions*, ed. Steffen Schmidt et al. (Berkeley: University of California, 1977) xx.

[41] G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, "Suffragium: From Vote to Patronage," *British Journal of Sociology* 5 (1954) 33–48, at 46.

The rise of patronage left the companionship pattern largely undeveloped in the theology of the saints. The presence of this more collegial paradigm, however, can still be discerned in ancient texts and practices, where it now serves as a fruitful resource for contextual theologies. 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 course, defeats, and victories of those who toiled before us in order to unlock their "lessons of encouragement." In a provocative turn of phrase, Johann Baptist Metz calls this kind of remembrance "dangerous."[42] 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 those in agony. This is memory with the seed of the future in it. Empowered by their memory, we become partners in hope.

One concrete example of how this pattern of veneration "works" comes from El Salvador. In the villages and cities, 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 emulate their lives. The fire of each martyred life kindles a new spark in the next generation.

Within this great cloud of witnesses stands Miriam of Nazareth, a Galilean woman of faith who heard the word of God and kept it. Remembering her story releases dangerous power in the life of the church. While the precise circumstances of her life cannot 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 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 has the quality of "danger" insofar as it awakens courage to struggle for the reign of God, that is, for a just and peaceful world in which poor people, women, indeed all humans and the earth, can flourish as beloved of God.

Interpreting Mary as a historical Galilean woman who kept faith with God and now abides in the communion of saints broadens Marian studies

[42] Johannes Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980) 88–118.

beyond the parameters of doctrinal Christology where it has long been situated. Indeed, as the mother of Jesus who is the crucified and risen Savior, Mary's meaning took shape according to developments in Christology, all the way up to the title *Theotokos*, God-bearer or Mother of God. Without diminishing the importance of this pattern, glimpsing the Galilean Mary opens yet another trajectory, one that emphasizes her own faith journey in response to the Spirit of God throughout her adult life. A pneumatological Mariology understands her significance in light of the actual life she lived as a poor woman in a world awash in violence. With a bracing jolt of reality, it roots grace in the vagaries of her history rather than treating the Spirit's presence in an abstract manner.[43]

With this move, contextual theologies invite the whole church to connect with this friend of God and prophet and honor her memory with its Galilean colors, to practical and critical effect. Resisting the tendency to privatize and overspiritualize devotion to Mary, which may allow first-world Christians placidly to neglect the world's poor, and resisting romantic construals of her femininity which legitimate women's subordination in male-designed systems, such theologies of Mary work positively to illuminate the liberating God of life and the justice that is a hallmark of God's holy reign.

CONCLUSION

Galilee, as geographic region and social location, functions in contextual theologies not as mere historical background but as the warp and woof of the world in which the revelation of God took place. It is precisely in this cultural, economic, political, and religious setting that Mary, living out her Jewish belief as a peasant woman of the people, walked her journey of faith with enormous consequence. It is here that God poured out divine favor on a marginalized female villager, calling her to participate in the great work of redemption. It is precisely such a woman who sings with joy that the mercy of God overturns oppression in favor of the poor of the earth. Allowing the matrix of her actual world to shape theological imagination is one way to make certain that when the church remembers and honors her and theologizes about her significance, it serves the power of the God of life. Miriam of Nazareth: *Presente.*

[43] For a pneumatological theology of Mary in the communion of saints, with abundant references to Galilee and contextual theologies, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003).