

The Real Mary



This is the Mary of popular imagination – a serene, beautiful young woman in her twenties. But history suggests that the real woman would have been a very different person ...

The Young Mary

Mary was born in Nazareth, a tiny village of less than 400 people in Galilee. Her real name was likely to have been Miriam or Maryamme – the name given to about one in three girls at that time. As a Jewish woman living in first-century Palestine, Mary would be considered a second-class citizen and her early life would have been very hard. As soon as she could walk, she would have been put to work with her mother and she was unlikely to have ever been taught how to read or write.

As a young woman, Mary would never have worn the blue robes so familiar from Biblical images. As historian Dr Miriam Peskowitz says: “It’s very unlikely that Mary would have worn blue silk robes as the traditional image suggests. Both blue as a colour and silk as a material

were largely limited to the affluent and Mary was not part of that class.” Instead, Mary would have dressed in simple wool or cotton tunics, covered by a shawl.

Politically, Mary lived in a volatile and difficult age. The dictatorship of Herod the Great was coming to an end and Roman Legions were called into Galilee to put down Jewish revolts. The Jewish writer Josephus tells us that many cities were burnt and many people died at the hands of the Roman soldiers.

In such an environment, children grew up quickly. Girls were betrothed at what seems to us a shockingly young age. Marriages were contractual arrangements, not love affairs, and determined by the girl’s father. Mary was probably betrothed to Joseph when she was no more than 12 or 13 years of age and Joseph was likely to have been a lot older than her. But, before Mary could marry Joseph, she became pregnant and her life changed forever.

The Virgin Birth

For millions of people around the world, the divine conception of Jesus is a miracle – a simple and unquestionable matter of faith. But this classic version of the Virgin Birth is not straightforward. The Gospels of Mark and John and the letters of St Paul do not mention the Virgin Birth. It is only included in the later Gospels of Matthew and Luke, although both give very different accounts. Professor James Charlesworth says: “Should we take it literally, symbolically or metaphorically? Christians line up behind every one of those”.

If Mary’s pregnancy was not divine, who might have been the father of her child? As an unmarried mother-to-be, Mary was in a perilous position – Joseph could have had her banished or even stoned to death. But, according to the New Testament, Joseph was a good man and he did not abandon his young fiancée.



Historians have looked for reasons to explain Joseph's loyalty and sympathy towards Mary. One second-century historian claimed that Mary was actually the victim of a rape by a Roman soldier called Panthera and, indeed, many women at the time would have been raped by soldiers. However, that story is much more likely to have been circulated falsely in an attempt to discredit the growing Christian movement.

Biblical historian Mark Goodacre concludes: "The Christian in me wants to say that it is quite likely to be God because I like the idea of a wonderful, miraculous birth – something supernatural ... happening right there at the origins of Christianity. The historian in me does have some problems with that and does wonder if Joseph is the better option."

The Traditional Nativity Story

The traditional Nativity story has Mary giving birth in Bethlehem after travelling there with Joseph to take part in a census. However, it seems far more likely that Jesus was born in Nazareth itself. The story of Jesus's birth in Bethlehem features only in Matthew and Luke's Gospels, and both tell it in very different ways. There is also no historical evidence for a census taking place in the Roman world at that time.

With nowhere to stay, Mary is said to have given birth to her baby in a stable. But the Gospel writers again disagree on the circumstances surrounding the birth. It is only Luke's Gospel that has Jesus born in a stable, surrounded by oxen and visited by shepherds, while the wise men only appear in Matthew's version. Biblical historian Dr Helen Bond says: "Each of the Gospels was composed in a different environment at a different time with ... a slightly different theological overtone. Each of them is writing for a slightly different purpose and that gives each of the Gospels its own particular traits."

It now seems likely that Mary stayed in Nazareth and, at some point, moved in with her fiancé, Joseph, without any ceremony. It would have been a huge transition for a young girl of 12 or 13, leaving her family home to move in with the family of a man she hardly knew. And childbirth would have been a terrifying, life-threatening experience. But Mary survived to bear a son and her status instantly rose in the community.



In the traditional version of the story, King Herod, aware of the birth of a new Messiah, ordered the slaughter of all male children under two and Mary and Joseph were forced to flee to Egypt. However, this story only appears in Matthew's Gospel and may have been written to fulfil old prophecies, echoing the story of Moses and the Exodus.

Mary as Mother

Mary was central to the household, despite women's low family status. Traditional Jewish families would have been large, with around half a dozen children. As the eldest child, Jesus would have been expected to help Mary with the upbringing of the rest of the family.

Joseph appears to have been a good and supportive husband and father but he is rarely mentioned in the Bible and disappears from the story when Jesus is 12 years old. Life expectancy for men was only 45 at the time and, if he was a lot older than Mary, the chances are that he did not live long enough to see Jesus begin his ministry.

After Joseph's death, Mary found herself a single mother, without a powerful man to bring in money and protect the family. Her life was, once again, turned upside down. Jesus's situation would have also changed dramatically, as he became the head of the household with huge financial responsibilities.

From all the evidence, it appears that Jesus became a preacher quite late in life. The Gospels give hints that Mary was concerned about the risks her eldest son was taking. Perhaps he was not fulfilling all his responsibilities as head of the household and she knew he was putting his life in danger.

Mary's fears were realised when her son was arrested at Passover in Jerusalem and sentenced to death. There is some confusion between the Gospels about whether Mary was present at the crucifixion of her son. She must have been torn between wanting to be with her child and the pain of seeing him endure a lingering death. It is a potent image that, to this day, resonates with women around the globe who have lost children.

Life After Jesus

For the second time, Mary mourned the death of the most important man in her life. Traditionally, as a mother, Mary would have washed and anointed her son's body. But she



never had the opportunity because, three days after Jesus's death, his body disappeared and, as Christians throughout the world believe, he rose from the grave, giving birth to a new religion.

After Jesus's death, his family found new meaning in his teachings and went on to become principle figures in the new Church. Mary is mentioned again only once in the New Testament – with the disciples in Jerusalem at Pentecost – before disappearing from history.

Mary's Death

At the time of Jesus's death, Mary would have been in her forties and may not have had long to live. Nobody really knows when or where she died. Some say she died in Ephesus in Turkey, where she went to live with John; but the evidence for this story is flimsy and it would have been a long way for an old and frail woman to have travelled. It seems more likely that she stayed in Jerusalem or travelled back to the family home in Nazareth, where she would have been cared for by her remaining children.

Roman Catholics believe that Mary's body was not buried but lifted up into Heaven. It was a last act of purification, reuniting her with her eldest child.