



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Articles:

- 📖 Mary and the Women from Galilee  
(*Women and the Church*, pp. 50-57)
  
- 📖 What Should We Say about Mary?  
(*Women and the Church*, pp. 88-93)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# What Should We Say about Mary?

As Protestants show new interest in the mother of Christ, they often think they need to have something to say *about* Mary, rather than *to* her. Why not begin with the first words spoken both *to* and *about* Mary from God's own messenger, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28)? If we offer this as an address, rather than a theological proposition, we might begin to understand more fully what it means to honor Mary.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:26-45

### Meditation<sup>†</sup>

The Archangel was not foretelling the future by saying "The Lord is with thee," but was declaring what he saw happening invisibly at that time. Perceiving that divine and human gifts of grace were to be found in Mary, and that she was adorned with all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, he truly proclaimed her full of grace. He saw that she had already received to dwell within her the One in whom are all these treasures of grace....Even if other women may be extolled, no other can be magnified with the surpassing glory of the Virgin Mother of God.

*Gregory Palamas (1296-1359)*

### Reflection

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman," the Apostle Paul wrote, "so that we might receive adoption as children" of God (Galatians 4:4-5). Each phrase of that simple good news, he believed, is a wonderful mystery to be savored – not because it leaves us in mystery-mongering darkness, but because it sheds new light, and much more than we can comprehend, upon God, ourselves, and the world. Consider that phrase "born of a woman." How amazing it is that God entered the world as a baby, totally dependent on a young woman and her beau for nourishment, training, and love. How amazing that the two of them – Mary and Joseph – were up to the task!

In the Orthodox tradition, Mary is often called the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. Orthodox theologian Gregory Palamas noted that Mary was chosen for this honor not because she had perfected herself, but because she was "full of grace" – fully welcoming of and prepared by God's abundant love.

In "Mary and the Women of Galilee," Heidi Hornik describes Giotto's frescoes in the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy, which depict events in the lives of Joachim and Anna (Mary's parents), Mary, and Christ. Though several scenes in Giotto's iconographic program are apocryphal – filling in the 'blanks' left by biblical accounts of Mary – all are designed to lead viewers to worship the God who graced Mary. Hornik highlights two paintings:

- ▶ In *The Flight into Egypt*, Giotto makes Mary the central figure, a departure from the gospel account that focuses on Joseph (Matthew 2:13-15). A guiding angel looks directly at Mary. "Her strength as she holds Jesus on her lap is immediately conveyed to the viewer," Hornik notes. "Giotto portrays Mary as protector of the Christ Child and, by extension of the Church. The overtly



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grand stature of Mary is reminiscent of altar panels depicting the Madonna and Child enthroned.”

- ▶ *The Lamentation* depicts the three Marys grieving over Jesus’ body after it had been taken from the cross. Though this traditional scene is apocryphal, it includes details from biblical accounts. “Mary, the mother of Jesus, wearing a deep aquamarine gown, holds the head and upper body of Jesus across her lap. This detail of the painting also recalls the *pietà* tradition of Mary mourning over the body of Jesus, another popular apocryphal subject,” Hornik writes. “Giotto created a new kind of pictorial space in *Lamentation*...[pushing] the entire narrative into the frontal plane, directly confronting the viewer with the monumentality and emotion of the scene.”

“Only time will tell if the current buzz about Mary among Protestants will produce any fruit,” Carole Baker concludes. Will they rejoin the history of Christian whose knowledge of Mary does not come “through rational assent to doctrines or dogmas, but rather through a relationship” with the Mother of God?

### Study Questions

1. Compare Giotto’s *The Flight into Egypt* with the biblical account in Matthew 2:13-15.
2. Come Giotto’s *The Lamentation* to the gospel stories about the women present at Jesus’ crucifixion and burial.
3. How might you *honor* Mary in your congregation, if you do not accept official doctrines of Mariology?

### Departing Hymn: “The Women’s Hymn” (vv. 1, 2, and 4)

Come, women, wide proclaim  
life through your Savior slain;  
sing evermore.  
Christ, God’s effulgence bright,  
Christ, who arose in might,  
Christ, who crowns you with light,  
praise and adore.

Work with your courage high,  
sing of the daybreak nigh,  
your love outpour.  
Stars shall your brow adorn,  
your heart leap with the morn,  
and, by his love upborne,  
hope and adore.

Then when the garnered field  
shall to our Master yield  
a bounteous store,  
Christ, hope of all the meek,  
Christ, whom all the earth shall seek,  
Christ your reward shall speak,  
joy evermore.

Fannie E. S. Heck (1913)  
Tune: ITALIAN HYMN

† Gregory Palamas, *Mary the Mother of God*, edited by Christopher Veniamin (South Canaan, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2005), 55.

# What Should We Say about Mary?

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To study Giotto's frescoes *The Flight into Egypt* and *The Lamentation* in relation to the biblical stories on which they are based.
2. To consider how we should honor Mary in our Christian discipleship.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Women and the Church (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "The Women's Hymn" locate the familiar tune ITALIAN HYMN in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Story

"In 2000, I began my seminary education at a Protestant seminary. The first semester I signed up for a course in Catholic Moral Theology," Carole Baker recalls. When the class gathered to discuss a book entitled *Mary: Mirror of the Church*, "the room was completely silent. This was not typical for this group of young, eager theologians who all semester long had come to class eagerly awaiting their moment to share their profound theological insights. Finally a young man broke the silence professing, "I just don't know what to do with Mary." This confession prompted other similar confessions and I sat in amazement as I listened to these bright, articulate Protestants attempt to convey their befuddlement when encountering the Lord's mother.

When I returned home for Christmas, just days after the semester's close, this moment still haunted me. And when my great aunt, also a Protestant, asked me casually and without any prompting at Christmas dinner, "Why did Protestants get rid of Mary?" my own silence and befuddlement marked the beginning of what has now become a longstanding fascination with Mary's role in the Christian Church." (*Women and the Church*, 88-89).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for Mary and for her faithfulness in conceiving and bearing Jesus Christ.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 1:26-45 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This study focuses on Giotto's frescoes *The Flight into Egypt* and *The Lamentation* (reproduced in grayscale in *Women and the Church*, 50 and 56), and their relation to biblical accounts of the events they depict. Before the group meeting, download color photographs of these two paintings from the Internet. The artist's honoring of Mary raises the larger question of how we should honor Mary today. In "What Should We Say about Mary?" Carole Baker reviews three books on the resurgent interest among Protestants in the Mother of our Lord. En-

courage members to discuss their experiences in regard to Mary, and to explore ways of honoring Mary that are consistent with their Christian discipleship.

### Study Questions

1. Before discussing Heidi Hornik's reflection on Giotto's *The Flight into Egypt*, ask members to close their eyes and visualize the holy family's flight to Egypt as you read Matthew 2:13-15. Invite them to share what they have imagined. Perhaps Joseph is the main character, there are only three travelers, and they are walking (or running) through the night. Now notice how Giotto elaborates the biblical narrative. Mary is the central figure in the painting. She regally rides on a donkey and holds Jesus on her lap. "Joseph is deemphasized on the right side of the composition: while he turns in conversation with a member of the apocryphal entourage, the guiding angel looks directly at Mary," Hornik writes. "Giotto uses monumental rock forms [as he does in *The Lamentation*] to accentuate the primary action and direct the viewer's attention: the pyramidal form of the rock frames the Madonna and Child."
2. Assign four groups to study the gospel accounts in Matthew 27:55-61, Mark 15:40-47, Luke 23:48-56, and John 19:38-42. Who are the women, according to the Synoptic Gospels, present at the crucifixion and burial of Jesus? According to the Gospel of John, who prepares Jesus' body for burial? Do any of the Gospels describe the lamentation scene that Giotto depicts?

In Giotto's painting, "Mary, the mother of Jesus, wearing a deep aquamarine gown, holds the head and upper body of Jesus across her lap. This detail of the painting also recalls the *pietà* tradition of Mary mourning over the body of Jesus, another popular apocryphal subject in art," Hornik writes. "Mary Magdalene, who is identified by her red drapery and long flowing hair, sits with the feet of Christ in her lap. The other Mary, wearing a halo, leans over the body of Christ between the other Marys and below John the Beloved. In tradition the beloved disciple is identified with John the Evangelist, the author of the fourth Gospel, and visually represented as a youth who lack facial hair. The long line of the barren rock, perhaps ending in a tomb to the right and outside the border of the painting, leads the viewer's eye back to the intimate exchange between Mary and Christ. The angels in the air above, each with a unique expression of grief (wringing their hands, twisting and turning in various directions), heighten the drama of the death."

Hornik describes the composition of "large simple forms, strong and emotional grouping of figures, and the limited depth" in the fresco. "Giotto created a new kind of pictorial space in *Lamentation*. Instead of depicting details of the story in a way that forces one to look from one segment of the painting to another, he pushed the entire narrative into the frontal plane, directly confronting the viewer with the monumentality and emotion of the scene."

3. The doctrines of Mariology (the theological study of Mary) in the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches evolved over the years through reflection the biblical narratives, saint's experiences, regional practices, and official pronouncements. The differences between these three churches, which largely agree, and Protestants, who share no official doctrines about Mary, are a difficult reminder of division within the Body of Christ. The Roman Catholic Church recognized these four doctrines about Mary: (1) She was perpetually a virgin before, during, and after the birth of Jesus; (2) she is truly the Mother of God (Council of Ephesus in 431); (3) she herself was immaculately conceived without original sin (pronouncement of Pope Pius IX in 1854); and (4) she was assumed body and soul into heaven at the end of her earthly life (pronouncement of Pope Pius XII in 1950).

Each Protestant congregation might honor Mary with a special day to reflect on the biblical stories of her faithfulness and love. Baker suggests we might talk to Mary (not pray to her) as we might speak to a dead loved one whom we feel as present with us.

### Departing Hymn