

## Was Mary the Name of Jesus' Mother? A Source-Critical Perspective

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If we had no reliable written sources mentioning the name of Jesus' mother, a good guess would be Mary. Statistically, it was one of the most popular, if not the most popular, name for Jewish women in the first century.<sup>1</sup> In the Christian scriptures, more women have the name Mary than any other name. The question I wish to raise here is whether we have any reliable written evidence that Mary was the name of Jesus' mother.

Following standard scholarly practices, I will rely on the following source-critical principles.

- Paul's letters appeared before the first gospel, and were written about twenty or more years after the death of Jesus.
- Mark was the first gospel to be written. Most scholars date it to 65 C.E. or later, about thirty-five years after the death of Jesus.
- Matthew and Luke both made extensive use of written Mark as a source of information about the life of Jesus. Matthew dates to about 85 C.E. or later. Luke dates to about 90–110 C.E.
- It is widely believed that John had no knowledge of any of the gospels in written form, a thesis I challenge in my recently released book *The Case for a Proto-Gospel: Recovering the Common Written Source Behind Mark and John*. However, I will not make use of my thesis in this essay.
- The gospels were written anonymously and few if any scholars believe that any of the gospel authors had firsthand information about Jesus or came from Judea or spoke Aramaic (the language of Jesus and the Jews.)

Paul's letters, the earliest Christian writings, make no mention of the name of Jesus' mother. Putting aside for now the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, the New Testament contains only three direct mentions of a Mary being the mother of Jesus. I'll address the reliability of the birth narratives later.

The first written mention of the name of Jesus' mother appears in Mark, in the course of a story about Jesus appearing in a synagogue whose congregation knew the names of members of Jesus' family.<sup>2</sup> There are, as I show below, some serious problems with the reliability of Mark's use of Mary's name in this story. The second mention occurs during Matthew's version of Mark's story, which account is clearly dependent upon Mark as a source.<sup>3</sup>

The third mention appears early in Acts, where "Mary the mother of Jesus" is incidentally mentioned as one of the women in a room with the apostles.<sup>4</sup> Although Luke is also the author of Acts, outside of the birth narrative in his gospel he makes no mention of the name of Jesus' mother anywhere in his gospel account of the adult Jesus.

John, the fourth evangelist, never refers to the mother of Jesus by name except for one possible but highly unlikely and ambiguous reference to the names of two women at the cross with Jesus. Although Luke and John also have variations on Mark's story about the congregation that knew the names of Jesus' family members, both say the only name mentioned was Joseph, the father of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

That Luke, who used Mark as a source and mentions the name of Jesus' mother in his birth narrative, and John agree with each other against Mark suggests that there existed an earlier core source for this story in which the only family member name present in the story was Joseph, the father of Jesus. If Mark knew this source story, he may have changed the identity of the Jesus parent known by the congregation. If Mark did make a change, then there is a question as to whether his use of the name Mary is reliably sourced.

Just prior to the start of Jesus' mission, Luke and John each report one incident in which Joseph is again mentioned as the name of Jesus' father.<sup>6</sup> In all four gospels, right after Jesus begins his mission, there is only one story in each that mentions the name of any members of Jesus' family and in each gospel it is a variation on the story about the congregation knowing the name of one of Jesus' parents and rejecting Jesus' teaching. During the adult life of Jesus, there are no other gospel mentions of the names of Jesus' parents.

### **The Hometown Rejection Story**

Mark is the first of the gospels to tell the story of Jesus' rejection. In the NRSV translation this episode is titled "The Rejection at Nazareth" but Mark only uses the term "hometown" and does not mention Nazareth.<sup>7</sup> The only gospel placing this incident in Nazareth is Luke's.<sup>8</sup> According to Mark's account, Jesus returned to his "hometown" synagogue and taught to the congregation.<sup>9</sup> The members were "astounded. They said, 'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! *Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us [emphasis added]?*'"<sup>10</sup> (*Joses* is a variation of the name Joseph.)

Mark's phrasing implies that things were going quite well for Jesus. But suddenly, right after the congregation tells us the name of Jesus' family members, "they took offense at him."<sup>11</sup> Why? Something happened here and Mark appears to have deliberately omitted the cause of the hostility.

In response, "Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, *and among their own kin*, and in their own house. [emphasis added]'"<sup>12</sup> The implication here is that whatever caused the congregation to turn hostile, Jesus' own family also took offense.

When Jesus left the synagogue, "he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them."<sup>13</sup> Mark omits what words impressed the congregation, why the members turned hostile, and what powers Jesus lost and why. His story evidences a good deal of redaction concerning the underlying events.

Matthew generally follows Mark's version of this story but makes a few minor changes.<sup>14</sup> Where Mark identifies Jesus as a carpenter, Matthew identifies Jesus as "*the son of the carpenter*," a possible indication that Mark may have deleted the reference to Jesus' father. Matthew also redacts Jesus's speech about the rejection of prophets, removing the reference to "kin" being among those rejecting him.

Outside of the birth narratives, this one story in Mark and Matthew is the only reference in the gospels to Mary being the name of Jesus' mother. Given how closely Matthew follows Mark's story, Matthew cannot be considered an independent source for the name of Jesus' mother.

An odd thing about Mark's story is that he identifies Jesus by reference to his mother instead of his father. Joel Marcus, in his commentary on this episode, notes that in "Jewish sources the father's name is normally used to identify the son even when the father is dead."<sup>15</sup> Richard Bauckham and others have tried to explain this away by citing some exceptions to the rule.<sup>16</sup> Marcus, however, in his commentary on Mark, finds these arguments wanting.<sup>17</sup>

He suggests that the congregation's use of the mother's name was intended as a slur against the legitimacy of Jesus, in line with later post-crucifixion criticisms of Jesus that he was born a bastard.<sup>18</sup> He cites other sources in which the use of a mother's name indicates an attack on the birth legitimacy of other individuals.<sup>19</sup>

Although Luke mentions Mary as the mother of Jesus in his birth narrative, his gospel never mentions her by name again in the course of Jesus' adult life his gospel. He does, however, as noted above, briefly mention her by name in the beginning of Acts. (See also discussion below.) Especially surprising is that despite using Mark as a source, when presenting his version of Mark's rejection story his account looks nothing like Mark's.<sup>20</sup> It is significantly longer, presents substantial dialogue between Jesus and the congregation, and, shockingly, the only family member named is Joseph, Jesus' father, the only member of Jesus' family not mentioned by Mark.

Why would Luke, who uses Mark as a source, so radically alter the identification of Jesus' family members, such that he omits the name of Jesus' mother and substitutes the one name that Mark avoids? The many changes and details present in Luke could not be reasonably intuited from Mark's account. Luke's very much longer and different story appears to be based on a source independent of Mark. Of course, if Luke knew that Jews traditionally used the father's name for the purpose of identifying a son, he may have thought he was correcting Mark. However, his very different version of Mark's account suggests that a source version of Mark's story was floating around that used the father's name and Mark may have significantly redacted the details.

This raises the question of which family names were in the source story, Mary the mother in Mark's story or Joseph the father in Luke's (and John's) alternative. Since the most likely reason for Luke to depart from his Markan source would be that he thought the alternative story may have been more authoritative, there is reason to think that Mark may have changed the names of the family members.

In support of that thesis, we should note that Mark's gospel never mentions that Jesus ever had a human father. The gospel shows Jesus only as the son of God. Mark, therefore, had a theological incentive to remove the name of Jesus' father and substitute a name for the mother. This should also remind us of Matthew's alteration to Mark's "carpenter" reference. Matthew says that Jesus had a father who was a carpenter. Mark's reference, consistent with hiding information about Jesus having a human father, omits "son of" and makes Jesus the carpenter.

In addition, we have evidence from John that corroborates Luke and contradicts Mark. He, too, has a story about Jesus going into a synagogue where the congregation knows members of Jesus' family and rejects Jesus' teachings.<sup>21</sup> John's version looks nothing like Mark's or Luke's but it is evident that he knows details of the stories in Mark and Luke. John folds his version into his discourse on the Bread of Life.

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven'?"<sup>22</sup>

Later, John says this incident took place in the synagogue in Capernaum. Although John omits from this episode Jesus' quote about prophets without honor, he has relocated it into another story. "When the two days were over, he went from that place to Galilee (*for Jesus himself had testified that a prophet has no honor in the prophet's own country*) [emphasis added]."<sup>23</sup> Note here, that John doesn't say Jesus said this at the time he left Galilee. He just says that Jesus had said it sometime in the course of his mission and that explains why he went to Galilee. John, for all practical purposes, is using the quote from the Rejection story to explain what happened on another occasion.

John and Luke both agree that the congregation referred to Jesus' father by name and not to his mother by name. If the scholarly consensus is correct in holding that John didn't know written versions of the other gospels, we have what appears to be an independent attestation that the original version of the Rejection story contained only the name of Jesus' father and did not mention the name of Jesus' mother or any other family members, a highly suggestive indication that Mark altered the existing story for theological reasons to replace the name of Jesus' father with a name for Jesus' mother.

There is also another odd matter in connection with Mark's knowledge of the name of Jesus' mother. Prior to Mark's Rejection story, he has only one specific mention of Jesus' mother, saying "Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him."<sup>24</sup>

After they call to Jesus, he turned away from them and, pointing to those gathered around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."<sup>25</sup> Matthew and Luke both have versions of this incident that appear to be based on Mark as a source.<sup>26</sup> This incident indicates that Jesus (or Mark) thought that Jesus' mother had rejected her son's teaching. This foreshadows Jesus' later statement that "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, *and among their own kin* [emphasis added]."

Since this is the first mention of Jesus' mother in Mark's gospel, and if her name was well known at the time he wrote, one might expect him to introduce her by name as the mother of Jesus, but he doesn't.

The evidence, so far, suggests that outside of the birth narratives, the only independent reference in the gospels to Mary being the name of Jesus' mother appears in Mark, and that Mark appears to have altered the original source story by replacing the name of Jesus' father with a name for Jesus' mother. What he based that name on we don't know. It could have been rumor or tradition, reliable or unreliable. If that is the case, then Mark appears to be an unreliable witness to the name of Jesus' mother.

### **Some Other Maries in Mark**

After the story in which Mark mentions Mary's name as the mother of Jesus, she disappears from his gospel. Shockingly, she is never mentioned as being among the woman who witnessed

the crucifixion, the burial, or the empty tomb, but Mark does mention some other Maries and the names are problematic.

Mark's very next reference to anyone named Mary occurs during the crucifixion. "There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary *the mother of James the younger and of Joses* [i.e., Joseph], and *Salome* [emphasis added]."<sup>27</sup> Grammatically, there are some issues as to how many people are present. There are several plausible possibilities.

Is Mary a different person than the mother of James the younger. The probability is they are one and the same. But is she also the mother of Salome? The latter may not be the daughter of Mary but rather a third woman present at the scene. The most important issue, however, is that this Mary is never described as the mother of Jesus.

It could be argued that given the story where the congregation names the brothers of Jesus, two of whom are James and Joses, that we can infer that this Mary is the mother of Jesus. But this is not very plausible. If she were the mother of Jesus why wouldn't Mark say so?

Furthermore, this Mary is the mother of "James the younger", which sounds like a different person than James the son of Mary. As a side note, describing people by their relationship to a family member is a literary convention intended to separate people with the same name from each other and the associated names should remain consistent. The omission of the other two brothers of Jesus would, therefore, be problematic.

Mark's next mention of a Mary adds some complexity to the problem. After a few hours pass, according to the narrative, Jesus was removed from the cross and buried (entombed?) "Mary Magdalene and *Mary the mother of Joses* saw where the body was laid [emphasis added]."<sup>28</sup> Mark describes this second Mary as the mother of a "Joses" but omits any reference to a James the younger or Salome. Is this Mary the same person as the earlier Mary? Again there is no direct indication by Mark that this Mary is the mother of Jesus.

Mark's last Mary reference follows in the very next verse but chronologically the event occurs on the day after the burial, after the sabbath. "When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and *Mary the mother of James, and Salome* bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him [emphasis added]."<sup>29</sup> Here we have a different permutation of identifiers. A James is mentioned again, but without the "younger" attached. Salome is mentioned again but she may be a third woman present at the scene rather than the daughter of Mary. Lastly, Joses is missing as one of the male children names. Again Mark gives no direct indication that this Mary is the mother of Jesus or that any two or three of these three Maries are the same person.

Sequentially, we have (1) a Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, [and Salome?], (2) a Mary the mother of Joses, and (3) a Mary the mother of James [and Salome?]. Mark makes no reference in any of these three stories to any of these Maries being the mother of Jesus. If Mark wanted us to think that any of these Maries were the mother of Jesus, why wouldn't he say so? And if all of these Maries were the mother of Jesus, why does he use different identifiers for each one? The absence of Jesus' mother from these last three Passion stages is surprising. One would at least suspect she would appear at the tomb. But Mark doesn't place her there.

Given that Mark may have wanted to replace the name of Jesus' father with a name for Jesus' mother, it is possible that he cobbled an imagined Mary name by drawing on these various other Maries. Consider, James and Joses, the sons of the other Maries, are the first two sons in Mark's list of Jesus' brothers. The other two brother names, Simon and Judas, were also very popular names among the Jewish people and he may have attached them to the James and Joses

sequence in order to distinguish this Mary, the mother of Jesus, from the other Maries who are not the mother of Jesus.

### **The Other Maries in Matthew**

As in Mark, after the scene where the congregation refers to the name of Mary as the mother of Jesus, Matthew has no other references to a Mary until the crucifixion. He, too describes women watching from a distance. “Among them were Mary Magdalene, and *Mary the mother of James and Joseph*, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee [emphasis added].”<sup>30</sup> Matthew mentions the same two sons of Mary as Mark does, James and Joseph (i.e., Joses) but drops “the younger” from James’s name. He also omits Salome but adds in the unnamed mother of the sons of Zebedee. Since, grammatically, Mark’s reference to Salome could refer to either a daughter of Mary or a separate third woman at the scene, a number of commentators have suggested that Salome was the mother of the sons of Zebedee.<sup>31</sup>

Matthew next parallels Mark’s episode in which two Maries witness the burial. “Mary Magdalene and *the other Mary* were there, sitting opposite the tomb [emphasis added].”<sup>32</sup> Here Matthew replaces Mark’s “Mary the mother of Joses” with “the other Mary.” This “other” Mary almost certainly refers back to the witnesses to the crucifixion, which includes “Mary the mother of James and Joseph.”

Matthew seems to be amending Mark’s account by equating Mark’s “Mary the mother of Joses,” the second Mary in Mark’s sequence, with “Mary the mother of James and Joses,” Mark’s first Mary in the sequence. At the same time, Matthew never says that either of these two Maries is the mother of Jesus. It would certainly be strange for Matthew to knowingly refer to the mother of Jesus as “the other Mary.”

Matthew also parallels Mark’s third Mary story, the post-Sabbath visit to the tomb. “After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and *the other Mary* went to see the tomb [emphasis added].”<sup>33</sup> Here Matthew replaces Mark’s “Mary the mother of James” with “the other Mary.” Again, this “other Mary” refers back to the first Mary in the sequence.

Matthew has taken Mark’s three different descriptions of a Mary, which create uncertainty as to whether they are one and the same woman, and eliminated the inconsistent descriptions by referring to her as “the other Mary.” In Matthew, there is no uncertainty as to the three Maries being one and the same. But nowhere does Matthew identify this “other Mary” as the mother of Jesus. I can’t seriously imagine someone referring to the mother of Jesus as just “the other Mary.” Matthew seems to corroborate the idea that none of the Maries mentioned by Mark after the Rejection story correspond to the mother of Jesus.

### **The Other Maries in Luke**

Luke departs slightly from Mark and Matthew with regard to Mark’s other Maries. At the crucifixion scene, Luke says female witnesses were present but doesn’t give their names. “But all his acquaintances, *including the women who had followed him from Galilee*, stood at a distance, watching these things [emphasis added].”<sup>34</sup> Acquaintances and female followers from Galilee could possibly include Jesus’ mother, but those seem to be rather vague terms that don’t single

out any members of Jesus' family, let alone his mother. If Luke meant for us to know Jesus' mother was among the women present, wouldn't he have told us so if he knew?<sup>35</sup>

Luke's burial scene again mentions the presence of the women who followed Jesus from Galilee but still omits any names. "The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid."<sup>36</sup> Again, one wouldn't expect to see Jesus' mother simply embedded into a group of female followers from Galilee without mentioning she was among them.

At the tomb visitation scene, Luke says the same group of women went to the tomb. Initially, they are unnamed but when they discover that Jesus is not in the tomb, Luke says the group included, "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, *Mary the mother of James*, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles [emphasis added]."<sup>37</sup>

Luke places a "Mary the mother of James" at the tomb visitation. That is who Mark places at the tomb, not surprising given that Luke uses Mark as a source. But Luke has dropped the other two Marias mentioned by Mark. In Mark, there is an ambiguous reference as to whether Salome was there. In Luke, Salome is omitted but a Joanna, as well as "the other women," is added to the list. Luke gives no indication that this Mary is the mother of Jesus.

### **The Other Marias in John**

John departs significantly from the other three gospels with respect to Mark's three other Marias. He is the only one of the evangelists to identify Jesus' mother as being present at the cross but there is a grammatical issue as to whether he mentions her by name. If he did mention her name, it would be the only time in his gospel this happens, but the likelihood that he did mention her name is faint.

According to John, "standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene."<sup>38</sup> Here's the grammatical problem. How many people are described here, two, three or four? Are the mother of Jesus and the mother's sister separate individuals from the two named individuals or are they the two named individuals? Let me clarify the issue.

One possible interpretation of this sentence is that Mary the wife of Clopas is the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene is the sister of Jesus' mother. Brown finds it highly unlikely that Mary the mother of Jesus, married to Joseph, would be referred to as the wife of Clopas.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, some early church fathers tried to find some sort of relationship that would try to connect "wife of Clopas" with Mary the mother of Jesus.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, there is no other evidence that Mary ever married someone else. But if you really want to stretch a point, if Clopas were the brother of Joseph, and Joseph had died, then under Jewish tradition the husband's brother would marry the widow.

The closest we come to a Clopas in the gospel accounts is in Luke, who, after the resurrection, mentions a minor follower of Jesus named Cleopas.<sup>41</sup> But there is nothing in Luke's story to suggest that Cleopas was married to Mary the mother of Jesus. Given the similarities in spelling, it shouldn't be surprising to find that some readers have tried to identify the two as the same person. Brown takes the position that the two names are different and there is no connection between the two.<sup>42</sup>

Another problem with this two-women interpretation thesis is that it would make Mary the mother of Jesus the sister of Mary Magdalene, something that is never hinted at anywhere in the gospels or Christian traditions.<sup>43</sup>

In a similar vein, another interpretation is that there were three women present, the mother of Jesus who is not named, the sister of Jesus' mother who is the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. Brown rejects that view and comes out forcefully for the presence of four women at the cross, the mother of Jesus and the mother's sister who are not named, and the two Maries, four in all.<sup>44</sup> In either of these last two cases, the mother of Jesus is not named. This makes John the only gospel that doesn't mention the name of Jesus' mother.

John doesn't say any women witnessed the burial of Jesus but shortly after that he notes that when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, she saw that the stone had been rolled away.<sup>45</sup> This implies that Mary Magdalene had witnessed the burial. But no other women are mentioned as potential witnesses to the burial. John initially implies that the only woman who went to the tomb was Mary Magdalene but he later says that when Mary Magdalene reported back to the disciple what she saw, she said, "*We* do not know where they have taken him [emphasis added]."<sup>46</sup> This implies that Mary Magdalene was with other women when she went to the tomb.

In John, therefore, contra the other three gospels, Jesus's mother was present at the cross. Also contra to the other gospels, he mentions none of the other Maries mentioned by Mark. Further contra the gospels, he introduces another Mary, wife of Clopas, who does not appear in any of the other gospels but does appear at the cross.

### **A "Three Women" Tradition**

Like many scholars interested in trying to piece together the network of relationships among all the women in the various scenes, Brown assembled a chart tracking all the mentions of women in each of the gospels in all the key scenes.<sup>47</sup> He concluded that there existed an historical tradition that linked a group of three women to the various scenes at the cross, the burial and the tomb.<sup>48</sup> One of the women was Mary Magdalene.<sup>49</sup>

A second one, he says, was also named Mary, but he does not equate her with the mother of Jesus.<sup>50</sup> He thinks Mark's "Mary the mother of James and Joseph" should probably be identified with John's "Mary the wife of Clopas," whom Brown isolates from John's mother of Jesus.<sup>51</sup> Although the tradition of Mary Magdalene and another Mary remained fixed as to the first two identities, he suggests, each of the evangelists appeared to have their own ideas about who the third should be.<sup>52</sup> Thus, for each of the gospels, the evangelists inserted their own preferences, although what they were based on we don't know.

### **"Mary" in Acts 1:14**

Since Luke knows that Mark used the name "Mary" for Jesus' mother, absent evidence to the contrary, we should not consider this usage independent of Mark. While it could be argued (despite a lack of evidence) that Luke might have had a source for this passage independent of Mark, Keener, the author of a massive multi-volume commentary on Acts, points to at least three motives for Luke to include a reference to Mary as the mother of Jesus, all of which are dependent on his earlier gospel.



First, he writes, "By referring to Mary, 'Jesus's mother,' in his introduction [to Acts], Luke recalls the first two chapters of his first volume, which also evoke Jewish piety."<sup>53</sup> This suggests that his birth narrative is the source for this usage. (See the birth narrative discussion below.)

Second, he proposes, "Luke distinguishes Mary from the other women perhaps partly because of her special role *but, more to the point, because he did not mention her presence, or that of Jesus's brothers, at Jesus's final Passover in Jerusalem . . .* [emphasis added]."<sup>54</sup> Why doesn't Luke mention the presence of Mary at the Last Supper? The most likely explanation is that he is following Mark as his source, who fails to mention the presence of either the mother of Jesus or his brothers.

Some scholars, though, have attempted to explain away the absence of Jesus' family members at the last supper by suggesting that they didn't go to Jerusalem for the holiday.<sup>55</sup> Keener, however, observes, that "it is *not clear that they would not have been in Jerusalem*; if the family regularly made the relatively short journey from Galilee for Passover ( Jos. Life 269; cf. Luke 2:41; John 2:13; 7:10), would they have avoided the city at the height of Jesus's career [emphasis added]?"<sup>56</sup>

Third, Keener adds, "Luke's failure to mention Mary in his passion narrative requires him to explicitly note her presence here in addition to 'the women.'"<sup>57</sup> If this is the case, and if Luke had a source separate from Mark for this passage, then Mary's name wasn't in the source.

A fourth possible motive for Luke to include Mary the mother of Jesus in this passage may relate back to Mark's various remarks about a troubled relationship between Jesus and his mother and brothers. Luke edited these various references in one way or another, leaving the overall impression that there was no problem. Consider, for example, Luke's version of Jesus' prophet without honor speech. "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown."<sup>58</sup> Note here that Luke has omitted from Mark's version the concluding portion, which said, "and among their own kin, and in their own house."<sup>59</sup>

I have another problem with the passage. The phrasing seems a little off. It reads, "All these [i.e., the male Apostles] were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, *together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers* [emphasis added]."<sup>60</sup> What a curious way to refer to Jesus' mother, as one of a group of "certain women."

Given her important relationship to Jesus one would expect Luke to say something different, like "these [Apostles]. . . Mary the mother of Jesus, his brothers *and* certain women." The present phrasing suggests an editorial addition to the underlying passage, which would have included "certain women" but no family members. In support of this I would note Keener's observation that those hearing this passage, after hearing Luke's passion narrative, would have likely thought that the "certain women" were Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary mother of James, the three women in Luke who witnessed the empty tomb.<sup>61</sup> (Keener readily rejects the idea that "Mary the mother of James" is the mother of Jesus.<sup>62</sup>

In context, given that this description of the women is appended to a list of apostles who were present, one might have expected that any "Mary" to be mentioned would have been Mary Magdalene, who not only has an elevated status in the gospels and interacts with the apostles, but is the only Mary to regularly show up at all the key scenes in the death of Jesus and its aftermath. Did Luke change "Magdalene" to "mother of Jesus"?

Luke's various motives for adding "Mary the mother of Jesus" to Acts 1:14 strongly suggest, whether he had an independent source or not, adding in the presence "Mary the mother of Jesus" was his own invention. In any event, the use of "Mary" as the name of Jesus' mother

cannot be considered independent of Mark unless Luke's birth narrative can be considered a reliable independent source, which issue I take up next.

### **The Birth Narratives**

Finally, we come to the birth narratives. Since Mark has no birth narrative, it could be argued that those stories in Matthew and Luke constitute independent attestations to the name of Jesus' mothers based on possible sources independent of Mark. Both mention Mary as the mother of Jesus. Can these birth narratives be considered independent sources? On further examination it seems unlikely.

First, the two narratives contradict each other on just about every detail that has a potential parallel in the other. I'll skip over the litany of inconsistencies. At least one must be in substantial error and very probably both are historically unreliable. The problems inherent in these conflicts, per the New Testament letter to Titus, appeared to have been a significant source of conflict among Christians in the time of Matthew and Luke. "But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless."<sup>63</sup> Although Titus has traditionally been attributed to Paul, suggesting a pre-Matthew date, Brown notes that 80 to 90 percent of critical scholarship considers the letter to postdate Paul and he dates Titus to the late first–early second century.<sup>64</sup>

Second, we don't have any source stories behind either of the birth narratives. Matthew appears to have simply updated the story of the birth of Moses and applied it to Jesus, with Herod the Great replacing the Pharaoh. Luke seems to have depended in part on a very botched reading of Josephus's account of a census taken by the Syrian Governor Quirinius ten years after the death of Herod the Great,<sup>65</sup> suggesting that he made up much of what he wrote.

Without an identifiable source story for the birth narratives, we can't know if the name Mary was used in a gospel source story or if some other description of Jesus' mother was used, with one or both of the evangelists inserting the name they found in Mark.

Third, even if there were source stories for Matthew and/or Luke that mentioned the name of Mary, we would need to know whether they were independent of Mark or preceded Mark. Otherwise, the source may have also relied on Mark.

As to the dating of any potential birth narrative source stories, Raymond Brown, in his *The Birth of the Messiah*, makes the argument that "one may speak of the Gospels as developing backwards."<sup>66</sup> He argues that Christians were initially concerned with the death of Jesus; later they became interested in his activities among the people; lastly, they became interested in birth stories.

This suggests that Matthew and Luke probably first wrote about the story of Jesus' adult life, based in large part on Mark, and had no independent knowledge of the name of Jesus' mother at the time. In that regard, we note that in all three of those gospels, the only mention in the story of Jesus' adult life of his mother being named Mary comes from Mark's story about the Hometown Rejection. At a later time they attached the birth narratives to their respective gospels.

A number of motives have been suggested for why Luke and Matthew added birth narratives to the gospels.<sup>67</sup> Brown proposes that the most plausible explanation is that the story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem "was intended as a response to a Judaism skeptical about a messiah who came from Galilee."<sup>68</sup> The Gospel of John suggests that, despite the birth narratives

in Matthew and Luke, where Jesus was born remained a highly contentious issue among Jews who rejected Jesus as the messiah. "Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? . . . Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?"<sup>69</sup> Brown also observes that the birth narratives may have also been intended to counter claims that Jesus was the product of an illegitimate birth.<sup>70</sup>

By the time Matthew and Luke got around to writing the birth narratives, perhaps fifty to seventy years after the death of Jesus, many traditions, valid or invalid, would have become culturally fixed. Mark had put out the name Mary as the mother of Jesus about twenty years before the next gospel had been written. It would not be surprising if the name of Jesus' mother were a stable tradition in the decades when Matthew and Luke were writing.

Given the unreliable history in their contradictory accounts of the birth of Jesus, we have no way to know if Matthew and Luke had a separate independent source that predated Mark and named the mother of Jesus or if they simply relied on Mark's usage and added it into their birth narratives. Whatever written evidence we have about the name of Jesus' mother traces back to Mark's own very unreliable single reference to Mary being the name of Jesus' mother. Mark may have had good evidence from a witness who may have known the mother of Jesus or who was familiar enough with one or more apostles to have learned the name of Jesus' mother, or he may have simply relied on unsubstantiated rumors, tradition, or legends. We have no way of knowing.

## **Conclusions**

In all of Christian scripture there is only one independent reference to Mary being the name of Jesus's mother. That appears in Mark's story of the congregation that knew the names of members of Jesus' family and rejected him, written some thirty to forty years after Jesus' death. Matthew, writing at least twenty to thirty years later than Mark, simply repeated what Mark wrote.

Luke, who knew Mark's story, presents a radically different and significantly longer account of that incident. In his version, the congregation only mentioned the father of Jesus by name, Joseph. Luke never mentions the name of Jesus' mother at any point in his account of Jesus' adult life.

John, like Luke, never mentions the name of Jesus' mother in his gospel account of Jesus' adult life, and agrees with Luke, against Mark in identifying Joseph as the only family member mentioned by name. If the current modern consensus about John's relationship to the synoptic gospels is reliable, John's version would be considered an independent attestation as to what name was mentioned by the congregation.

This suggests that Mark heavily redacted the story and replaced the father's name with a mother's name. But we don't know where Mark got the name from. Mark mentions three women named Mary at various stages in Jesus' death narrative, but none of them are identified as the mother of Jesus. It is possible that, although Mark doesn't identify these Maries as the mother of Jesus, Mark may have been influenced by these other Mary passages in creating an imagined name of Mary for the mother of Jesus, that being one of the most popular female names in his time. Matthew and Luke essentially followed Mark in naming one or more Maries in the scenes mentioned by Mark and they, too, fail to identify any of these Maries as the mother of Jesus.

The only evangelist to actually say that Jesus' mother was present at the crucifixion is John and he does not give us her name. Finally, the birth narratives probably did not come into existence until after Mark wrote, undermining any likelihood that they represent stories based on a source independent of Mark.

Based on a source-critical perspective, we have no reliable written evidence that Mary was the name of Jesus' mother. This doesn't necessarily mean she wasn't named Mary or that her name wasn't known from early on among Jesus's followers. It only means that we have no reliable written evidence that she was named Mary.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 747

<sup>2</sup> Mark 6:1–6.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 13:54–58.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 1:14.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:22; John 6:42.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 3:23; John 1:45.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 6:1–6.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 4:16–30.

<sup>9</sup> Jesus could have multiple “hometowns,” including Bethlehem where he was allegedly born, Nazareth where he spent time prior to his mission, and Capernaum where he established his headquarters. One might ask if Mark actually knew where Jesus' hometown was.

<sup>10</sup> Mark 6:2–3.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 6:3.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 6:4.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 6:5.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 13:54–58.

<sup>15</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8: A new translation with introduction and commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 374.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Luke 4:16–30.

<sup>21</sup> John 6:35–59.

<sup>22</sup> John 6:41–42.

<sup>23</sup> John 4:44.

<sup>24</sup> Mark 3:31.

<sup>25</sup> Mark 3:34–35.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 12:46–50; Luke 8:19–21.

<sup>27</sup> Mark 15:40.

<sup>28</sup> Mark 15:47.

<sup>29</sup> Mark 16:1.

<sup>30</sup> Matthew 27:56.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), s.v. Salome (2).

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- <sup>32</sup> Matthew 57:61.  
<sup>33</sup> Matthew 28:1.  
<sup>34</sup> Luke 23:49.  
<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, vol. 2 (New York, Doubleday, 1994), 1017, n 84.  
<sup>36</sup> Luke 23:55.  
<sup>37</sup> Luke 24.10.  
<sup>38</sup> John 19:25.  
<sup>39</sup> Brown, 1014.  
<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, n 81.  
<sup>41</sup> Luke 24:18.  
<sup>42</sup> Brown, 1014, n 81.  
<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1015.  
<sup>45</sup> John 20:1.  
<sup>46</sup> John 20:2.  
<sup>47</sup> Brown, 1016.  
<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 1195.  
<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1196.  
<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 1017.  
<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 1196, n 139.  
<sup>53</sup> Keener, 746.  
<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 747.  
<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 748.  
<sup>58</sup> Luke 4:24.  
<sup>59</sup> Mark 6:4.  
<sup>60</sup> Acts 1:14.  
<sup>61</sup> Keener, 748.  
<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 747.  
<sup>63</sup> Titus 3:9.  
<sup>64</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, (New York, Doubleday, 1997), 639.  
<sup>65</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:1–5.  
<sup>66</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, (New York, Doubleday), 26.  
<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.  
<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>69</sup> John 7:41-42.  
<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*