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THE ROLE OF MARY IN CHRISTIANITY

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INTRODUCTION - Recently, the headquarters of the Catholic Church in Rome announced that the Church had decided to review certain schema concerning the Virgin Mary. What this announcement may mean in a practical way for Catholics, we will not know for some time. The announcement stimulates us, however, to analyze the role of Mary in the Church, and we are moved to study the history of Judaism to determine if there is evidence of a similar figure in Jewish history.

Just as we undertake our study of Judaism by reviewing the more ancient pagan religions, so we look first for prototypes of the Mary figure in the religions which preceded Judaism. Such prototypes are in abundant evidence. Catholicism has long called Mary not only the Virgin, but the "Mother of God." The title "Mother of God" is an extremely ancient one. Four thousand years ago, the Goddess Nintu in the Mesopotamian civilization was shown in art reliefs as a woman suckling a child. She is called specifically the "Mother of the Gods", (Intellectual Adventures of Ancient Man, p.145). She is also called "The Queen of The Gods" and "The Lady Who Determines Fates." We shall see that in the Eastern Roman Empire, Mary was pictured by the artists who prepared the robes of the emperors as the Queen or Empress, while Jesus was pictured as the Emperor. We shall see also that in the Middle Ages, in Europe, the masses appealed more to Mary to determine their fate than to Jesus.

In ancient Western Asia, the God of Vegetation was known as Attis. He was said to die in the Winter, and to be resurrected in the Springtime. He was born of Nana, a Virgin, who, the Asiatics said, was impregnated by a ripe almond that was placed in her bosom. In Egypt, the Goddess Isis came to be adored for her moral purity, and Frazer writes in the "Golden Bough", "In art the figure of Isis suckling the infant God Horus is so like that of the Madonna and Child that it has sometimes received the adoration of ...Christians", (p. 383.) The infant Sun-God was said to have been born of a Virgin Mother on the 25th of December, the day on which it was thought that the sun began to grow in power as the days became longer. Among the Semites, the heavenly Virgin was called Astarte. It is a known fact that the birthday of Jesus, insofar as it is identical with that of the Sun-God, was not fixed by the Church until the Fourth Century, (Frazer, p. 358.)

In our study of Judaism, we have pointed out that developing higher religions always borrow a great deal from older religions. The important question is not when did the original story begin, but what does the higher religion do with the old story? In order to try to understand the role of Mary in Catholicism, I have studied a Catholic Primer, Frazer's "Golden Bough", which is the authoritative study of ancient religions, George Foote Moore's "History of Religions", "The Intellectual Adventures of Ancient Man", and "The Age of Faith" by Will Durant. I mention these sources, merely to let you know that what I am about to say is not merely a personal opinion. Judaism was the first religion to speak of one God to the exclusion of all other Gods, but the main contribution of Judaism was not this. The most dramatic contribution of our Bible is its conception of the character of the one God. As we read the Bible, we can see how the ancient Hebrews first thought of God as a God of justice and punishment, and how they later came to understand him as a God, not only of justice, but also of mercy and love. Among the Pagan religions, one God had stood for justice, another for mercy. Judaism contended that one God incorporated both of these qualities.



With the exile of the Hebrews to other countries, however, there came a diluting of the strict monotheism of Judaism. From the Persians, the Jews absorbed the idea that each nation had a patron angel who represented them in the heavenly assembly. The Bible does not suggest that Jews prayed to their patron angel to intercede with God for them, but the Bible does mention these angels in the latter books. When the close-knit Hebrew society disintegrated, the Jews came to think of God as being far away. They could have decided that it was necessary for them to pray to the angel as a sort of half-God, but this they refused to do. The Jews insisted that the one God was somehow very far away, and, at the same time, nearer than breathing. Some more philosophically inclined Jews conceived of the idea of the logos, which was a part of God, and yet not exactly the same as the totality of God. These Jews taught that the logos was that part of God which did His work for Him. Those who developed Christianity substituted Jesus for the logos. They taught that Jesus was that part of God, which came near to the world, and did the divine work of the Father-God. They further made a distinction between the Father-God as the source of justice, and the Son-God as the source of mercy. When this division of the functions of God was made, a new religion was indeed born. For Jews, to say that God is divided into 2 or into 3, is to say that there are two or three Gods.

Christianity, as it developed, spoke increasingly of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit or Ghost. In the dark ages of Europe, let us say from about 500 to 1000 BCE, the theoreticians in Christianity began to change the character of the Son of God. Originally, he represented the merciful aspect of the deity. As Christians spoke more about hell and more about the punishments for sin and penalties for deviations from the teachings of the church, Jesus came to assume the character of a punishing God. The image of the Son and the Father coalesced. The average Christian did not feel any personal attachment to something called the Trinity. It sounded abstract and far away to him. He wanted a God who would hear his personal pleas and forgive him. The average Christian found such a God in Mary, "The Mother of God."

It would be fair to say that the Catholic Church contributed to the transformation of Mary into a full scale God, although this was not the purpose of the Church. In 429 of this era, the Bishop of Constantinople, a man named Nestorius, opposed giving Mary the title, "Mother of God." He claimed that she did not give birth to a God, but only to a man who became God. Nestorius lost this battle to give Mary only a minor place in Catholicism. At the Council of Chalcedon (p. 227, Moore, History of Religions), Mary was officially elevated to a rank far above the apostles and the multitude of saints. She was not given equal ranking with the Father and the Son, to be sure, but the Church encouraged, by this maneuver, a concentration of prayers to the Virgin as having special influence with God.

In order to understand the increasing role that Mary came to play in Catholic Christianity, we have to understand that Catholicism believed then, as it does now, in intercession. The souls of the saints and of Mary are deemed to be alive in the heavenly assembly, and they are understood to have influence in the heavenly council. Jesus was first understood as standing between little man and the forbidding father as an intercessor. When Jesus and God the Father became fused as one image, responsible for hell-fire and innumerable church rules that bore heavily upon the people, the people turned to a new intermediary. Pope Pius the IX, formalized the new role that Mary was playing among the people, when in 1854 he promulgated the dogma of immaculate conception, which means simply that of all the human beings born of



man, only Mary was not born with original sin. By this dogma, the way was cleared for Mary to become officially something much higher than a sainted mortal.

A thousand years earlier, Mohammed, who did not study Christianity as a scholar, learned it from the masses. Mohammed concluded that the Christian Trinity consisted of a holy family -- father, son, and mother. In the European middle ages, after 1000 of this era, Mary became the most popular figure in Christianity. Will Durant writes in "The Age of Faith", (p.746), "in effect the Mother, the oldest figure in religious worship, became as Mohammed had prophetically conceived her, the third person of a new Trinity...images of her rose everywhere...a thousand cathedrals were dedicated to her name..."

Durant writes further, "The worship of Mary transformed Catholicism from a religion of terror to a religion of mercy and love." In the eastern part of the Roman Empire centering around Constantinople or Byzantine, from the Fourth Century onward, statues of Mary appeared alongside that of Jesus. Emperors represented themselves as the human counterpart of Jesus while the Empress was the human counterpart of Mary. The Emperor Justinian in rebuilding certain key governmental buildings, had artists draw pictures of his wife and himself kneeling before both Jesus and Mary. When the citizens of Siena in Italy (Tuscany) defeated Florence in a major battle in the 13th Century, they paid tribute not to Jesus but to Mary, and their official coins bore the title, "Civitas Virginis."

Legends grew up in the Middle Ages about the miraculous deeds of Mary. These legends far outnumbered the legends about the deeds of Jesus. Durant quotes one historian (p. 746-8), as writing, "A youth...was persuaded by Satan.. .to deny Christ, but could not be induced to deny Mary; when he repented, the Virgin persuaded Christ to forgive him." The legend shows the relative importance of these two figures in the folklore of the masses. Durant continues, "Men prayed so much to the Virgin that popular fancy pictured Jesus as jealous." One legend described Jesus as saying to the people, "My Mother thanks you much for all the salutations you make to her, but still you should not forget to salute me too" (p.746).

When the Protestant Reformation began, the Catholic Church criticized the rebels as trying to Judaize Christianity. This charge was true in part. There was a concerted attempt on the part of the Protestants to restore Mary to her proper position, and to simplify the approach to God. Protestants do not have the special problem concerning the deity of Mary that Catholics have today. It must, of course, be understood that, especially in America, the sign of Mary is not what it was in Europe.

We Jews observe the new announcement from Rome with special interest. It may just be that the Catholics intend to define Mary in more human terms. We would suggest, however, that the problem is more basic than merely re-defining the status of Mary. We would suggest that once you dilute the oneness of God, you are, in effect, inviting the problem of a multiplicity of Gods. For us, whether the Holy Ghost in the Trinity is displaced by Mary or not, is an academic question. We would contend that God is not three or even two. God is one. He is far, yet near. He stands for justice, yet love.



Judaism has not encouraged a belief in a mother goddess for the simple reason that God is considered to be beyond any sex. God cannot be either Father or Mother in the common understanding of these terms. Our Bible teaches that God is not comparable to human beings. He is neither a mother, nor a son, nor really a father, and He is not divisible into these component parts.

We teach that man needs no intermediary to the throne of God, for "He is near to all who call upon Him in truth", says the Psalmist. When speaking of God's instructions to men, the Book of Deuteronomy says, "Don't ask who will go up to heaven to get God's word for us: Don't ask who will go across the sea to get His word for us: For His law is near; it is in your hearts that you may do it." Only probe your hearts, and search your souls, and you will hear the Divine voice speaking.