

MIRYAM OF NAZARETH



WOMAN OF STRENGTH
& WISDOM



ANN JOHNSON

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To my mother, children, and grandchildren.
All of you have gifted me with inspiration and joy.



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Introduction

Miryam of Nazareth is the story of one particular woman's life in living dialogue with the One God, the One Who Is. This book was written to re-present a strong, appropriate, and theologically stimulating vision of living faith as expressed by a woman of the Bible. I have used free verse grounded in traditional biblical poetry to tell this story.

The woman of the story is the person who was the one witness of the entire drama of Jesus' life, the woman we now call the Greek name Mary, a woman deeply rooted in her religious Jewish history. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the root of the name Mary is the Hebrew *Miryam* meaning "rebellion." How fitting for a people called to be a people of God, often in conflict with political authorities, whose infant sons were at times systematically slain by alien rulers, to name their daughters "hope of change." And indeed, the daughters of Zion have a rich heroic tradition. According to Hebrew history, Jewish heroines were active seekers of salvation and rescue for Israel. They were strong and powerful, strikingly assertive individuals. From Genesis to Acts there is a line of women living lives of religious vitality, cultural integrity, and political involvement while performing deeds which powerfully transformed the nation of Israel and ultimately the modern world.

Whether in the role of prophet, judge, warrior, matriarch, lover, or liturgical psalmist, the women of the covenant shared a common pattern of relationship with their God. Grounded in deep prayer, liturgical observance, celebration,





and communal sensitivity, these women moved out to speak and act in ways which turned around the Hebrew community both historically and perceptually. In the true fashion of rebels, they made war on faithlessness, hopelessness, and narrow-mindedness. They questioned, searched, changed, and led their families and their nations into new understandings of relationship with God and with one another.

Many modern women have found it useful to unearth ancient female goddess figures for feminine models who reach into the life and spirit of earth and heaven. Others have turned away in anger from a Mary ill-used to contort their own individuality by fearful though well-meaning parents, priests, and teachers. I, too, am a modern woman intent on searching out the feminine face of God and I find that the gospel traditions are rich in energy and wisdom for the needs of our time. If Mary is a type of the church, then she is witness, she is prayer, and she is disciple. She is celebrant. If she is the model of Christians, then she is a faithful Jewish woman who reached into mystery and courageously drew herself anew. If she is the Mother of God, then she is somehow foundation, companion, and potential. If she is the Mother of God, then she is a point of unity within which all people of all faiths may search for commonality.

This book is constructed in three sections recapitulating Miryam's life possibilities 1) in the captive Israel of the longing and faithful people, 2) in Jerusalem of the living Jesus and the summoning community, and 3) in the Israel of the resurrection community. The theme of each period of her life is grounded in prayer and action springing from the consequences of her human growth and faith experiences: first in the nourishing and enabling traditions of her heritage as detailed in the Hebrew Bible, then in the life-changing experiences with Jesus and her immediate situation retold in

the Christian Bible, and finally centered in the people, spirit, and house churches of the Acts community.

The central form of the book is a collection of Magnificats. This form of praise and petition is grounded in Hebrew biblical tradition and would have been well known to Miryam. The Magnificat prayer form is a concise and powerful expression of the totality of the God-human relationship, a dialogue which turns the world inside out, confirms our history, and calls us to remember and renew. This poem form expresses the rich and extremely effective feminine approach to a life lived in consort with a creative God. Mary as a woman made in the eternal image and reflecting that image is a woman who lives and expresses her God relationship in its fullest potential.

Our most familiar theology has traditionally called us to a spirituality which transcends our humanity. I envision this woman issuing a companion call to a humanity which transcends our spirituality. A humanity so simply lived that we do not practice spiritual rigors to condition ourselves for closeness to God. A humanity so filled with the love of God/neighbor that the Word is commonly spoken in simple miracles of God-bearing, healing, sharing, transfiguring, and Shalom. The word is spoken in song and dance, in loving rememberings of those who have gone before, and in rejoicing embraces of those we talk with, feed, nurture, and with whom we celebrate.

Twenty Years Later

Miryam of Nazareth was first published in 1984. I hope I've learned a few things in the intervening years that are reflected in this Christian Classics edition. Several items underlie the changes and additions I've made:

- I've been living in Israel, on site so to speak, for over a decade.





- I've been able to take advantage of advances in scholarship among both Christian and Jewish scholars.
- And I've called on the Jewish Bible rather than just the Christian Old and New Testaments.

With attention to historical integrity, I have made changes in three areas of the text: the use of the name Yahweh, the references to Christ, and changes in the text on the "Reflections on Esther."

Yahweh: I no longer make reference to Yahweh in the book. Although this is the name given by God when God uttered the mystical four letters to Moses, the name is never used by Jewish texts. Rather it is translated as "the Lord." This name is not even spoken by religious Jews, either today or in the Second Temple period in which the gospel community lived.

The reason is quite simple. No one knew exactly how to pronounce it. Made up of four breath letters, it may have sounded either like a gentle breeze or a strong wind when God revealed it on Mount Sinai. Since a name is extremely important in the Jewish tradition, especially the name of God, it must be spoken with great reverence and attention to the nature and pronunciation of the word itself.

In Mary's day the name was spoken only once a year by the high priest in the Holy of Holies within the Temple during the Rosh Hashanah services. No person heard the name, only and essentially God.

Mary would not have uttered this holy name either aloud or in prayer. I have therefore used some of the beautiful biblical and ancient poetic names which express the nature of the prayer and the One to whom the pray-er is praying.

Christ: I have dropped any reference of this name beloved of Christians because it is of Greco-Roman origin and would have been unknown to Mary.

The Book of Esther: The recounting of Esther's story in the

original Hebrew Bible is significantly different than it is in the Christian Bible. Unlike the Christian version, God is not mentioned, the only book in the Hebrew Bible where this is the case. Even the observation that Esther prayed is not there. Yet some sages say that, along with the Torah, Esther is the most essential book in the Bible.

Why? One of the lessons of Esther is that the presence of God is sometimes hidden. It was occasionally hidden from Moses and from others. Thus on Purim, the Feast of Esther, people wear masks and disguises to remember that we don't always see or understand God's intention for us. Sometimes we feel isolated, even deserted. This insight also helps me understand Jesus' desperate cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Esther is a resource for these terrible moments. She fasted after asking her community to fast with her and emerged courageous and filled with brilliant plans to defeat the evil Haman. Also, Esther is the only book in the Bible designated a Book of Miracle. In addition, the Christian version is filled with beautiful prayers that would have been unknown to Mary.

Since living in Israel I have come to ask some questions and learn answers about the history and land which have influenced my revisions.

For example, why did Mary live in Nazareth? Her birthplace was Jerusalem. Her schooling was in Jerusalem. Five hundred years before her birth, during the restoration of the Temple, the prophet Hulda had established schools on Temple Mount for both girls and boys.

So why Nazareth? It was notorious in Jewish texts for its radical positions, and one Talmudic text advises travelers not to get stranded there because its residents were extremists.

The answer is found in the model of marriage we see in the gospels. Known as betrothal, it solidified the marriage with a single blessing followed by a year of preparation in the





company of married people. Within the community the couple was taught their responsibilities, helped with setting up their household, and generally educated in the Jewish way of married life.

However, Jerusalem was occupied by Roman legionnaires far from home and bored among an unimportant people of strange custom. Given to raucous and violent “games,” the soldiers would kidnap and gang rape the bride at her betrothal.

The Sanhedrin, the Jewish judicial council, issued two legal responses. One strengthened the Jewish law of matrilineal descent that had been in existence since the time of Sarah and Abraham. All children born of Jewish women were Jews no matter who the father was. That law is in effect today.

The second response was to issue an alternative to the traditional marriage. The entire seven blessings of both betrothal and final marriage could take place at the same time, avoiding the year of preparation. The wedding guests then accompanied the couple to a private bride’s room and kept guard outside.

Thus brides of this time had choices and many elected the new way. Others chose to continue the traditional year of preparation. If they remained in Jerusalem, they isolated themselves during the betrothal year in “bowers,” where they were protected and where married women came to teach them. In his description of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, Josephus notes two terrible sounds: the explosive cracking of the great Temple stones echoing throughout the valleys as they were heated, and the screams of the brides being burned alive in their bowers.

The third choice is the one I believe Mary made. She retained the traditional way, left Jerusalem, and found sanctuary in a very traditional town. Nazareth is a mountain village far to the north of Jerusalem, and was relatively

isolated at Mary's time. Here her decision would be strongly supported, and she would be protected.

Another question: Why was there no room at the Inn?

When the Roman legionnaires wanted the use of a Jewish place, they simply seized it or desecrated it. With the Roman command that Jews return to their place of birth for a census, thousands of Jews would have descended on Bethlehem only to find that the Roman census clerks and their wives would have confiscated rooms in the inns.

Throughout history, invading armies desecrated Jewish places by sacrificing pigs and sprinkling their blood throughout sites such as homes, synagogues, and schools. The gospels tell us that Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Festival of Lights, now known as Hanukkah, which commemorates a victory over the Greco-Syrian armies by telling the story of the desecration of the Temple and the people's cleansing and reentry into the holy places. The festival was named for the miracle of finding, amid the smashed glass, a single cruet of oil that could be used for the eternal light. That oil, enough for a single day, burned for eight days until new oil from the Mount of Olives could be harvested and pressed.

I have written an addition to the "Magnificat of the Stable" to tell what I believe to be historically correct about Bethlehem at the time of the great census.

And finally, why did Jews shout, "Crucify him"?

The Antonia Fortress housed the headquarters for the Roman government and the army and contained tunnels of prisons. It still exists, housing an Arab boys' school overlooking the Temple Mount.

The Jews despised the Antonia, not only as a Roman headquarters but because the Romans had moved the stone floor of justice from the palace of Queen Shalom Zion, the last reigning monarch of the country, and reset it on the dais of





the Fortress. The stone floor was symbolic of what are today called the “golden years” of the country when crops flourished; when the queen’s brother, Shimon ben Shetak, established educational systems in the countryside; when the queen established progressive justice systems and became known as the Queen of Peace. This floor can be seen today in the archaeological site of the Sisters of Sion two blocks away, where the Emperor Vespasian moved it. This symbol, dear to Jerusalem, became the site of yet more Roman “games.”

I have written a new Magnificat—“The Magnificat of Terror”—to detail what records show us could have happened.

A Beginning

My God

Adonai

For what is Israel's story of our life with you,
if not for now?

Figure of my people,

Why do you exist if not to be for us in this moment?

In the tremor of our song we have carried you from age
to age,

song lifting hope into the tremor of these times.

Guiding fire

Clarifying light

For whom the story told if not for me;

for whom the storyteller if not for you, Teacher of Israel?

Hope of my People, One Who Is, becoming

the story drawn from storehouses of a people's

legend scratched in stone and skin, branded in

communal memory,

store on store of lingering images born in the

Ark of Throbbing Promises

whispered in the hollow cave of desert blown linen

rustling in the Holy Wind.

My God

Adonai

One who leads us through the desert

One who leads us through the raging sea





As the kinswomen of my heritage walked
shoulder to shoulder
stride for stride

You looked upon us who were Israel and you walked with us.

My God

Adonai

Like my kinsman Moses, I come to the mountain of God.

You who will be what you will be,

restore and reconsecrate my heart and mind,
the hearts and minds of all the called of God.

One that is

One who hears

One who becomes aware

One who leads us into freedom

Whom have you chosen for a people?

If not us, who?

You who are ancient of days,

before all morning and night,

come to those who live Torah.

Have you not promised you would come?

If not now, when?

God of our history

God of our days

We stand again at the foot of your mountain.

We stand as it seems in the last days.

If there is to be a tomorrow, speak again.

Bestow again Torah.

Magnificat of Betrothal

Luke 1:27

Our souls are filled with wonder at the gift of our loving,
and our spirits take on new meaning in the giving
of love,
God of the Flowing Well,
you have looked upon us with favor as we join our lives
in response to you.

Yes, from this time on all people who look upon us
will recognize us as being life companions
and will call us blessed,
for you, the One who dwells in human hearts,
have done great things for us.

Holy is your name,
and your confirming joy reaches from age to age
to those who dare to journey
on the unknown pathways of committed love.

You have shown us the life-changing power of our love
in the eyes of those who know us and
in the richness of our work.

You have humbled us by the intensity of our otherness.
The false pride that we treasured in our ability to stand alone
has been cast aside
and we understand ourselves and you more tenderly
as we begin to experience the treasure
of a lifetime of standing together.





We are no longer lonely:

We touch with compassion those who come to us filled
with needs.

You have opened the doors of eternity to us

as we searched for you,
mindful of your own longings for a people to love

. . . according to the dreams and murmurings you
have shared

with those who love since the beginning of time . . .

mindful of your own longings for a people to love,

we recognize that the bondedness of human hearts
and lives

reflects one true reality of you, the Living God.

The Prayer of Miryam in the Desert



In the days when Judea was oppressed in the reign of King Herod, there lived a woman named Miryam.



Miryam who listened:
listened to the songs in the Temple
listened to the stories of her people
listened to the talk in the market
listened to the fear in the streets
listened to the prayers at her table
listened to the stirrings in her heart.

Miryam who wondered:
wondered at the look of passive faces
wondered at the glare of angry eyes
wondered at the failure of the Maccabees
wondered at the Law so carefully fulfilled
wondered at the hopes of her community
wondered at the passions in her soul.

Miryam who knew:
knew the promises of the Loving Creator
knew the heritage of Israel from Abraham and Sarah
knew the lifelessness in captive people
knew the mercy of the Lord on those who seek justice
knew the fervent hopes of those she loved
knew the possibility within a life held open to the touch of God.



The hope of Israel's resurrection rose in Miryam's heart.
The seed of rebels, echoed in her name, sprung life-bound
from her spirit.

The tradition of her people called forth in her an energy tough-
bounded by her vision.

Ash covered and sack clothed
she walked into the desert.
Miryam entered God's wilderness in longing
to bring her people home.

My God
To what mountain have you fled?
Within what cavern have you hid?
I am your people.
I am Israel and
I call to you.

Daily I listen for evidence of your vitality.
I hear only shallow resonances of what once was.

Daily I hear stories of our past with you.
Exodus and prophecy seem old and far away.

Daily I witness a beaten people begging alms and hanging on
a Roman tree.
Your nation rots, twisted and suppressed in Roman hands.

My God
Have you forgotten who we are?
Are we forsaken by a love grown cold and faithless?
I am named Miryam.
I am Hebrew and

I claim my hour with you.
I remind you of the covenant forever binding on us both.
I call on you to honor it.

I sound forth Isaiah's promise . . . Prince of Peace, Redeemer,
King.
I do not come in knowledge, but in hope.

I implore you in this hour to fulfill our destiny.
I stand with Deborah and with Ruth willing to risk everything.

My God
Crushed spirits cry, "Messiah."
Compromised, defeated, "Now, Messiah."
Born in the bloodline of the desert priests,
 betrothed to David's house,
What place I have I do not know, but
I am here.

