

# Mary, the Mother of God, or Goddess Mother?

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## Foreword

Throughout the Christian world, especially that part which is Roman Catholic, Mary, the mother of Jesus as recorded in the Bible, is honored and revered. But in Spain and other Latin areas, this reverence is expressed with such fervor than it can only be called worship, the worship of a goddess. According to the Catholic Church, it is expressly forbidden to speak of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a goddess. Theologically speaking, she must be considered human and therefore to have been born of humans and to have died. To what extent Mary is thought to have divine powers is supposedly closed from a theological point of view. The Church denies that she has any divine power, though admits that she has great intercessory power by which she may induce her Son, Jesus, to grant the prayers of those who pray to her. This seems to be a quibble for the masses of people who turn out to follow the many processions in her honor held throughout the year in Spain. It takes little effort to imagine Mary as ranking among the many goddesses of the ancient world.

I have seen the reverence and worship given to Hindu goddess such as Parvati and Devi, and find it easy to imagine how goddesses must have been worshipped in ancient Greece and Rome, and even before that when goddesses were in their ascendancy. In Spain I see processions featuring Mary, the divine mother, almost without letup the year round. In this paper I mean to show that there is little difference between the cult of Mary as it is celebrated today and the reverence paid to goddesses in the past, and even in the present in such places as India. No matter the theological protestations of the Church, the expectations of the faithful are that Mary has supernatural powers that will protect them and bless them. When the theologians of the Church would say that she only has "access" to the supernatural power of her son, it is an evasion I believe, especially when Pope Paul II makes a special trip to Fatima in Portugal to thank Mary for saving him from an assassin's

bullet, which he offers to her there. In other words, despite the doctrine of the Church, the Church itself treats Mary as a goddess. The only thing that prevents it from actually calling her a “goddess” is that they must only admit a single God, the mystery of there being three gods in one notwithstanding.

If we examine the characteristics attributed to Mary by the Catholic Church and by the masses of Catholics found worshipping at her shrines, and compare them to those characteristics found in the ancient Great Mothers and Earth Mothers, we will find that Mary is at least as qualified as they are to bear the title of “goddess.”

### The World of Goddesses

For most in the Christian world, the word “goddess” is either used figuratively to designate a beautiful woman, or to refer to mythological goddesses who are considered the material of legend with no significant existence in the real world. In fact it has been a religious joke to even fit the word “woman” and “god” together, at least until the rise of the woman’s liberation movement,

It is hard to imagine a world in which the goddess was the chief deity and that society was attuned to the will of the goddess. From perhaps five or six thousand B.C until the time somewhat before the myths of ancient Greece found their final form, that is, around the year 700 B.C., the Middle East especially was populated with many goddesses, usually Earth goddesses who were seen as the source of all life, an attitude that is thought to have arisen from the move to agriculture as the means of livelihood around 10,000 B.C. Often they were absolute, or primary, such as Gaia, though they were also often co-rulers with a sky God, such as Anat to Baal of Canaan.. The people of those times usually saw the world in very human terms, and the earth and sky as behaving in the way humans behaved. This often involved for example, intercourse between the earth mother and the sky god to produce the Spring and the rebirth of plant life. An example of this can be found in the Japanese word for “lightning,” “稲妻” (inazuma) where “稲-*ina*” is the word for “rice stalks” and “妻-*zuma*” the word for “wife,” indicating

that it was by lightning that the sky god impregnated the earth mother to give birth to the basic source of nourishment, rice.

The devotion to great mother goddesses was fairly universal throughout the agricultural world. There came, however, a backlash against mother goddesses, especially from those non-agricultural nomadic peoples who were chiefly engaged in herding, especially of sheep and goats. The Hebrews were one such people who apparently found their basic divinity, Yahweh, in the Sinai peninsula, and brought it into Canaan in the beginning of the first millennium B.C. (Freud suggested, however, that the Hebrew God Yahweh was really the same as Aten, the Sun God of the Pharaoh Akhenaton given to the Hebrews by one of his lieutenants, Moses.)

Even the Hebrews, however, had a mother goddess, Aserah, the “Shekinah” or wife of Yahweh, who was only taken out of the temple in Jerusalem sometime after 500 B.C. In the Bible there is reference to the Great Mother Goddess as the Leviathan destroyed in the sea by Yahweh as mentioned in Isaiah 27:1 and elsewhere. In another area, Marduk of Babylon defeated his own mother, the creator of heaven and earth, Tiamat, to gain control of the heavenly kingdom. In Crete there are evidences of the Great Mother ruling in Knossos, and in the Greek peninsula mother goddesses were also plentiful before the arrival of the Dorians and their central deity, Zeus. In Greece most mother goddesses were subjugated to Zeus; Athena, Hera, Demeter, and Artemis to name a few. Some were demoted to evil goddesses such as Medusa. Gaia and her daughter Rhea became background goddesses belonging to an earlier divine generation. The Shrines at Olympia and Delphi originally belonged to Gaia until usurped by Zeus and Apollo respectively. Demeter continued on as a fertility goddess underground, in a sense, being the center of the Eleusinian mysteries, a cult centered on the goddesses Demeter and her daughter Persephone, which remained active well into the Christian era, only being officially shut down by Emperor Theodosius I in 392 A.D.

The main function of the Earth Goddess was giving life to the world’s flora and fauna, including humans. As such she was the focus of prayers for life and for

harvest, and even before agriculture, her function as the source of life was reason for worship even among the hunter-gatherers, as attested by the "Venus" figurines several thousand years before agriculture began in Europe such as those from Willendorf and Laussel. She had the aspect of caring, loving, protecting mother for most and was therefore the figure to which one prayed for these "motherly" benefactions. She also had the reverse character of being jealous of her offspring if they should stray from her protection, and the final function of returning all things at death to the earth, the womb from which they had come. It was thus that a large portion of humankind relied on mother goddesses for the necessities of life over many centuries and the desire for a protecting mother never really died out even when the male divinities began to regain control. The Hindus retained their mother goddesses for the most part, mostly as consorts to the central male gods; Brahma-Parasurama, Vishnu-Lakshmi and Siva-Parvati. And other goddesses remain to receive the petitions of the faithful, such as Devi, a terrible deity that is merciless to demons and other enemies. In Japan, Izanami was consigned to the netherworld, but (in the *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀)) through her daughter Amaterasu she was mother to the Japanese race.

In Europe and the Middle East, however, Judaism, Christianity and Islam prevailed. There the divinity, Yahweh, God or Allah was most definitely male. The Hebrews exiled Aserah and made her the great enemy of Yahweh, presumably because as the goddess Anat, with Baal, she was one of the chief divinities of the Canaanites with whom they fought for control of what became Israel and Judea. The Christians and Moslems simply inherited this orientation for the Jews. God for the Christian is "The Father" but there is no "Mother."

### **The Cult of Mary**

The Jews and Moslems, while still considering Yahweh or Allah as "Father," use the word in a figurative sense of being the protector and guide and judge of mankind, the Christians, however, consider Jesus the "Son" of God, and therefore feel there must be a "Mother" of God.

The title of Mother of God was not really debated among the first Christians since their hope was for a "Savior," someone who would create a new "Kingdom of Heaven" on earth like the Kingdom of David in Jewish legend. Jesus was executed because he represented a danger to those in power who were unnerved at the people calling Jesus the "Son of David," to them a political statement, which signified the expectations of the people of the overthrow of the regime and establishing Jesus as a new "King."

It was only later with the failure of the Jewish rebellion and their suppression by the Romans in 70 A.D that the idea of Jesus as divine in nature developed along with the theological ramifications of having a human mother.

The gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus are all aimed at providing a basis for calling Jesus the "Messiah" who would come as a Son of David to overthrow those oppressing the Jews and establish a new kingdom. (Even the dates given in the Gospels evince the lack of direct knowledge of the birth of Jesus. In Matthew 2, King Herod, figures in the visit of the Wise Men from the Orient, and the massacre of the children of Bethlehem. Herod died in 4 B.C. In Luke 2:1, on the other hand, Quirinius, as governor of Syria issued the edict by which Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem. Quirinius was only appointed Governor in 6 A.D., leaving a ten-year period in limbo, so to speak.)

The birth accounts are legends in which were written for a political purpose, what "should have happened" if Jesus was really the "Christ," the "anointed" one, the re-incarnation of David, the King.

It was these parts of the Gospels, however, which gave the major boost to what became the cult of Mary, or, as it is often called, Mariology. (The term was coined to mean the investigation of Mary's place in the divine plan, and thus the "theology" of Mary, but it is sometimes used in the derogatory sense of the "Idolatry of Mary.") Nothing is really known of the life of Mary if we discount the birth accounts, and she only appears in the later parts of the gospels concerning the period that Jesus taught publicly in a very subordinate role.

Into the second and third century of the Christian era Mary began to take on

the role formerly played by the Earth Mother as protector and comforter, and intercessor in answer to the supplications of the faithful. The Church declared Mary to be the Mother of God in the fifth century but also denied that she was divine in herself. Nevertheless, she became the center of a cult which endures to this day, a cult within the Church in which Mary is treated as a goddess while not being given the title literally. For her faithful she has the attributes and power of a goddess, but not the status.

To understand how Mary has this unofficial goddess status, we need only compare the beliefs concerning her with those in classical mythology concerning goddesses.

## **Divine Attributes**

### **1) Divine Mother**

The most compelling reason for thinking of Mary as a goddess is that she is supposed to be the "Mother of God," in the same way as Gaia, Rhea, Isis, and Venus were mothers of various gods. Gaia, especially, was the first and foremost in giving birth to the Gods, even bearing the first male god, Uranus through parthenogenesis. Rhea was also prolific in bearing divine children, and Isis seated with her son Horus, the living god of the Egyptians (as opposed to Ra, the Sun God, and Osirus, her husband and God of the Dead) on her lap. This figure of Isis and Horus prefigures pictures of Mary holding Jesus.

Myth follows an unwritten rule that both parents of a god must be gods. The only exception is Heracles who was made a god after death though his mother was human. All the other offspring of Zeus and other philandering gods and goddesses were special, but not awarded godhood. Gilgamesh is another early hero who had partial divine ancestorship, but was unable to achieve divine or eternal life. So it would seem that Mary, in order to be the mother of a god must herself, in some way partake of a divine nature.

It goes without saying that the goddesses, except Gaia, had consorts of the same divine status, and it requires a rather complicated bit of theological reasoning

to understand how a human Mary is physically impregnated with the seed of God the Father and then bears the divine Son naturally. Presumably her human egg and God's divine sperm functioned as in a normal pregnancy. The makeup of Jesus' DNA would be interesting to examine. Would it indicate a divine DNA, or only have Mary's as if cloned?

In this way Mary, for the Christians, while not being the "wife" of God, she *is* "His" mother. It is hardly unreasonable to assume that Mary and God are of the same divine species, a problem the theologians of the Church tried to overcome in declaring the Immaculate Conception. The Protestant Christians simply say that Mary only bore the human nature of Jesus, while the Catholics answer that "natures" are not borne, only persons. That Mary is the Mother of God was made dogma by the Council of Ephesus in 431. This was necessary in order to say that Jesus was really God and was specifically aimed at the Nestorian idea that Mary only gave birth to the human nature of Jesus which was also condemned as heresy by the Council.

## 2) Untainted by Sin

The Immaculate Conception refers to the belief that Mary did not take part in the sin of Adam. That is to say that only she, among all humanity, was not the inheritor of sin, and therefore worthy to be the mother of Jesus, who is God's son. In other words, she was "set apart" from humans from the moment of her conception.

It goes without saying that other divine mothers are blameless. Being a goddess means that no action can be blamed or be judged since it is divine. The usual understanding of "sin" is an offense against God which is subject to judgment and punishment by God. If one is a god or goddess, one makes or breaks one's own rules, and obviously a god or goddess does not punish him- or herself. In Greek mythology, goddesses sometimes fall into the immoral habits of humans, Aphrodite being a good example, enjoying many extra-marital relationships with Ares, for example, but never demoted from divine status, or punished, (unless you

call punishment the trick of Hephaestus in catching the two of them, Aphrodite and Ares, in an unbreakable net, and then showing them off to some of the other gods for their derision; a tale told by Homer in the Iliad).

The Immaculate Conception was declared dogma by the Catholic Church in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. The purpose in doing so was probably to obviate the above problem of having declared Mary the Mother of God while she was only human and not, therefore, qualified to be a partner of the divine being in bearing their child. It raised her status to “quasi-divine,” so to speak.

The image of Mary standing on a quarter-moon is associated with her status as the Immaculate Conception, and is said to have been seen in a dream by the Pope. It indicates Mary as the Queen of Heaven. The quarter moon, however, is very reminiscent of Artemis as the huntress-virgin.

The Immaculate Conception declares that Mary was born in the pristine innocence of Adam and Eve before they sinned, meaning that she was indeed made in the “Image of God” as declared in Genesis when Yahweh determines to make “beings like unto Himself.” We can thus say that Mary was “Godlike” in the eyes of the Church, asserting her divine characteristics even while denying her divinity. The Church denies that Mary is “worshipped,” reserving that word for adoration given to the one God alone, but it is very hard to tell the difference in Catholic cultures such as Spain between “worship” and the “reverence” paid to Mary.

### **3) Perpetual Virginity**

The mother of all the gods in Greek mythology, Gaia, gives birth to Uranus as a virgin, though afterwards apparently conceives and gives birth in the human fashion. It is however, not too much to compare Mary to Gaia in being the mother of God as a virgin. The perpetual virginity of Mary, however, is a statement not only that Mary did not have physical intercourse to bear Jesus, but also that her hymen was not broken at birth and remained intact throughout her life. The view that her virginity ended with the birth of Jesus was condemned by the Synod of



Milan in 390, and afterwards the dogma was reaffirmed by the Council of Trent and by the Church's favorite theologian, Thomas Aquinas.

Most Protestants deny the perpetual virginity of Mary, pointing out especially the passage in Matthew 13:55 in which Jesus is told that his mother and "brothers" are outside waiting to talk to him: and Matthew 1:25 which states that Jesus was the first born of Mary and that she had no marital relations with Joseph *until* she had born a son. They assume, therefore that Mary had other children after giving birth to Jesus. The Catholics usually counter this by saying that the word "brother" was used for the extended family and included cousins, or that Joseph had children by a previous marriage and that the word "until" does not have the English meaning of the reverse being true afterwards. In these cases also, the meaning is adjusted to be in tune with what "should" be according to the Catholic Church.

There is some doubtful reasoning involved in declaring that even the birth of Jesus did not break the hymen, but this evinces the cultural values concerning virginity of the people of the time. It sees a great spiritual value in virginity symbolized by the intact hymen. Sexual intercourse was considered a necessary evil for mankind, and it was always thought that, if possible, it was the best course to refrain from sex, even though Paul says in one of his Epistles that it is,..."better to marry than to burn (with lust)" and, of course, the hymen was the symbol of purity, and a pierced hymen the symbol of shame. This idea was true in much of the world until recent times and hearkens back to the days of the mythical Great Mother, in which the "Mother" is also a virgin.

Artemis (or Diana to the Romans) is an extreme case, displaying 24 motherly breasts, but swearing virginity and even murdering Actaeon for having caught a glimpse of her bathing in the nude. This was an aspect of other goddesses. Especially known in Greek Mythology are Artemis, Athena and Hestia. The basic reasoning being that having intercourse with a male meant subjugation and therefore inferiority. Being virgins, however, did not limit the power of these goddesses. In fact, Artemis was the patroness of childbirth and protector of women who were soon to be married. Hestia was the goddess of the hearth, and protector

of the home. Hestia evolved into Vesta for the Romans, and again she was the guardian goddess of the city of Rome, her priestesses swearing virginity while they guarded the sacred flame in the center of Rome, the Fora Romana.

#### 4) Fertility Goddess

Fertility goddesses usually were depicted as holding a sheaf of wheat or other crop to indicate their power over nature. Hera usually is shown holding a sheaf of grain, as is Demeter, Venus holds an apple. The rewards at the Olympic Games were crowns of olive leaves awarded by Gaia, while at Delphi they were of laurel and at Corinth celery. Mary is not specifically known as a protector of the harvest, but she is often associated with the particular agriculture of an area.

In Malaga, Spain, she is worshipped as “Mary of the Sugar Cane,” and processions are held with her statue holding a bamboo staff signifying the cane, and those in the procession all hold these staffs of cane as well.



Illustration 1:  
Mary holding a bamboo cane



Illustration 2:  
Demeter with Persephone,  
holding a cane and shoots of  
grain

## The Forms of Mary Worship

The worship of Mary increased through the middle ages in Europe. Her icon was especially prominent in Byzantine religious art, and Mary was depicted an extremely ethereal women dressed in queenly robes and stiffly holding the baby Jesus. In Western Europe she had a more human aura. The north portal of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris has an unusual representation of Mary brandishing a sword against what is apparently an evil spirit or a devil. This seems incongruous to many Christians today, but is one example of her role in protecting mankind, or at least those who pray to her.

By the time of the Renaissance in Italy Mary began to have a more human aspect, her divine image being portrayed through physical beauty. Giotto began the trend by painting in a suggestion of breasts under heavy robes, but Rafael was even accused of over-emphasizing the beauty of Mary's face. Leonardo painted one picture of Mary breast-feeding Jesus which now hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, and is probably the most extreme depiction of the humanity of Mary. She has never, to my knowledge, been depicted nude by any artist of note, and no sexual suggestiveness is associated with her image, aside from the extreme beauty of her features.



Illustration 3:  
Mary nursing Jesus (Leonardo in  
the Hermitage, St. Petersburg)

In much of Europe Mary gave her name to churches large and small, and there are so many churches that are named "Notre Dame" or "Nuestra Señora" that they usually bear a qualifier such as "Notre Dame de Paris" or "Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza."

Since the Renaissance, the cult of Mary has grown stronger even as the force of the Catholic Church itself has grown weaker. The Church today has nowhere near the strength it had in the tenth and eleventh centuries when the Pope could call

for a crusade against the infidel Moslems, and see vast numbers of people do his bidding. Now the Pope can only call for peace and charity to all in the face of Islamic hostility. But during this period Mary is said to have appeared on earth many times to advise humans in person. Examples of these apparitions include those to Bernadette of Liseaux in 1858 at Lourdes in France, and to three Portuguese children, Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco in 1917 at Fatima in Portugal. These have been the focus of the worship of Mary in France and Portugal in the last two centuries. They were supposedly warnings against godlessness.

In Spain the worship of Mary is expressed most outstandingly in the processions throughout the year, and especially during Holy Week. In the city of Malaga alone there were 43 processions through the streets of the city during Holy Week in 2007, and though they were meant to commemorate the passion and death of Jesus, a statue of Mary is found in every procession, often as not the most central figure rivaling that of Jesus. These statues of Mary are made to indicate her great sorrow, and come with many glycerin tears adorning her cheeks. In spite of the solemnity of the occasion, the shouts of "Guapa! Guapa!" can be heard from many of the onlookers. ("Guapa" is the Spanish word for "beautiful.")

### **Holy Mother of God**

Prayers to Mary include litanies in which she is praised and supplicated under many names and functions. These are often recited in chorus by the faithful in church before or as a part of a ceremony. The contents of these litanies are orthodox, but some of them can be open to interpretation that would make Mary divine.

"Mother of Christ; Mother of Divine Grace; Mother Most Pure;" are statements praising Mary for bearing Jesus and being a virgin, but "Mother More Spacious than the Heavens" somewhat oversteps humanity in its scope, as does "Mother of Eternal Glory"; and "Mother of the Heavenly and Earthly Church."

"Lady of the Heavens" certainly seems a statement of divinity, while "Seat of Wisdom" is much the same title as awarded Athena. "O Renewal of Life" could be

addressed to a goddess of fertility. "Gate of Heaven" seems to indicate that Mary is in charge of allowing souls into heaven as does "Keeper of the Portal."

So it would indeed seem that the faithful pray to Mary as they would to a goddess, when they use such phrases as: "Daughter of God the Father; Mother of God the Son; Spouse of God the Holy Spirit."

### Conclusion:

Mary is a modern day Goddess. For her devotees she performs the same services that the goddesses of Greece, Rome and Egypt performed long ago, and those that the goddesses of India perform for the Hindus even today. She is most often represented as a mother weeping for her son, while dressed in queenly robes. Artists and sculptors vie to bring out her beauty, and during Holy Week the thrones on which she is carried through the streets of every city in Spain are *royal* in the extreme.

She is not, however, consigned only to an historical role in the religious life of the believers. They pray to her fervently and continually to receive her favor and blessings. She has appeared on earth, (coming down from heaven as though from Olympus as Athena and Aphrodite in the Iliad) to do so, apparently, to many individuals and granted them great boons. And the believers, as well as the curious, flock to these sites of her appearances to receive health or happiness from her. Very recently the Catholic Church decided to stop using the word "miracle" to describe cures received from Mary, rather it has decided to call them "inexplicable cures," the reason being, as one of the responsible officials at Lourdes stated on TV, that "it takes a long time to prove that a cure is a miracle, and since there are cures almost everyday at Lourdes, it is too much work to try to have them all be called *miracles*."

While the Church apparently denies Mary's "Godhood," even the Pope makes a pilgrimage to Fatima to thank her for protection. The Pope is admitting the power of Mary is supernatural, though perhaps second to the all-powerful God, it is at least as great if not more so than the power of Hera or Athena, which was only limited by that of Zeus in Greek Myth.

母なる女神、マリア

No matter what the scholars of the Roman Catholic Church say, the faithful, at least in Spain, rely on the divinity of Mary, Mother Goddess.