

## Book Review

### **Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints By Elizabeth Johnson**

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In *Truly Our Sister*, Elizabeth Johnson, a Roman Catholic nun who is Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University, New York, introduces a new theological perspective for appreciating Mary, the mother of Jesus, in today's world.<sup>1</sup> To do this, Johnson takes Mary down off the pedestal, where she has been worshipped as an ideal of womanhood in Christian, or more particularly Catholic countries, for many centuries. Johnson believes this traditional view of Mary is no longer appropriate, as it is too removed from the life of ordinary women. Instead, she portrays Mary as a very human figure, as a companion or sister for other women, who shares in their joys and sorrows, and supports their struggles for egalitarian treatment. Mary, then, is now to be removed from all the problematic associations she has had with purity, submissiveness, and unselfishness that have been used to keep women in a secondary position. For Johnson, Mary should rather be an inspiration, encouraging women to find their own voice and to work for justice, both for themselves and all human beings who suffer from religious, cultural and political inequity. This is indeed quite a revolutionary revision in the understanding of Mary. It is in keeping, however, with Johnson's two previous books, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (1992), and *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (2000) - both of which, in some ways, provide a basis for the central elements of Johnson's redescription of Mary in this book.

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<sup>1</sup> NEW York: Continuum, 2005. All page references in the text are to this book.

The book itself also draws on a number of areas of scholarship in order to locate and define this new depiction of Mary. Johnson bases her research on recent work in archaeology, ancient history, social sciences, literature as well as feminist theory. These all assist her in formulating the "revisioning" of Mary that introduces a new theological position. It would be impossible to relate all of these elements that comprise this revision. So I will highlight a number of developments that I consider most notable.

Perhaps it is necessary to say at the beginning that Elizabeth Johnson's stance is inspired by a Catholic form of feminism that takes liberation theology seriously. This implies that Mary is viewed, like her son, Jesus, not as someone who must be imitated spiritually so that one will be rewarded after death for having lived a good life, but as someone who sincerely cares about relieving the suffering of people during their life on this earth – i.e., about liberating people by helping to bring about justice in this world. This is, of course, a twentieth century theology that has inspired many Catholics, especially in South America as well as the United States, but it has also been viewed with great suspicion by the Vatican. For Asian readers, Elizabeth's portrait of Mary may seem a very liberal American one where women seek equality in their present existence rather than waiting for divine recompense in the next life after death. Johnson, however, does not speak in an absolute way, without awareness of the sufferings and condition of women in many different parts of the world – examples of whose lives she relates in the book. Her more general intention is to help those women from the Catholic tradition, where Mary is still presented as a figure of passive compliance with the will of God, to not allow themselves to be exploited or oppressed. Johnson believes that Mary has too often served as a projection of male fantasies of what a perfect woman should be, and that it is now time for women to stop being manipulated by such images or idols, and to claim their own identity. This involves a redefinition of virginity, which does not necessarily mean sexual intactness, but something more along the lines of maintaining one's own integrity and self-directedness. Johnson's position is also informed by her emphasis on the first version of the creation of human beings by God in the book of *Genesis* where it is said: "Male and female he created them; in the image of God he created them (*Genesis* 1: 27)." This makes her claim for

parity between the sexes more plausible in contrast to the second version of human creation, which is the one most cited in support of women's subordination, where Eve is created from Adam's rib (2:22).

So how exactly does Elizabeth Johnson undertake the demanding and difficult task of depicting the manner in which Mary can be redefined in order to allow women to achieve these changes? The book is organized into a number of different sections which all attempt to provide background information to support Johnson's interpretations. The first section is mainly critical, basically analyzing the problem of those past ideals imposed by men that only served to polarize women and their options. This is very evident in the part where Johnson describes the comparison between Eve and Mary (pp. 23-25). Here Eve is portrayed as representing sinfulness and deviant sexuality to which women are still prone because of Eve's original sin. In contrast, Mary becomes the model of a sinless virgin woman, a transcendent symbol of antisexuality that ignores, or even repudiates the basic reality of love and caring sexual expression that is a meaningful part of most women's lives. To counteract this false dichotomy, Johnson seeks for ways in history and in scripture to understand Mary as a fellow creature, a companion in life's struggles and suffering, even calling her "a sister". Johnson looks first to archaeology and history to examine what the actual life of Mary – or Miriam of Jerusalem, as Johnson refers to her – may have been like. Johnson cites the work of scholars, such as Carol Meyers' article: "Everyday Life: Women in the Period of the Hebrew Bible" (1998), that help to understand the way of life of that time period. As Johnson expresses her own understanding, Mary was "a Jewish woman in a relatively poor, politically oppressed first-century peasant society (p. xvi)."

In her search into the Christian scriptures, particularly the four Gospels, Johnson finds thirteen occasions where Mary is mentioned. She carefully explores each of them, seeking evidence that helps to draw a more human portrait of Mary as an actual historical person, rather than an idealized symbol. Johnson portrays Mary as a human being who definitely suffers from discrimination and injustice and thus can function as someone with whom women most especially can identify in their own sufferings. Johnson also points out in this more realistic description of Mary that she certainly was not the blond, blue-eyed female so often depicted in medieval and Renaissance paintings. She also did not live in

a palace, and most probably did not read. (These are often ways that she appears in these paintings.)

The second section of the book is more creative, especially from a theological perspective. This is because Mary wasn't simply an ordinary woman. God selected her to be the mother of his son, Jesus, who would become a man. And this makes all the difference. Yet Elizabeth Johnson wants to keep a strong awareness of Mary's human aspects, even as she is chosen to be something that sets her apart from other women. Johnson doesn't want Mary to lose her humanity and become a type of goddess figure, or even the maternal face of God. To achieve this, Johnson has undertaken some very interesting and intricate theological manoeuvres. One of these is an analysis of Mary's motherhood of Jesus, who is both human and divine, according to Catholic teaching. Johnson's evocation of Mary in this connection is one where Mary is: A concrete woman of history who was filled with the Spirit of God: (p. xiii). This connection of Mary with the Spirit of God is a very deliberate one in that this Spirit, for Johnson, signifies the creativity of the Spirit. (This Holy Spirit of God is regarded as the third person of the Trinity which consists of God, his Son and the Spirit.) In making such a move, Johnson's intention is to appreciate Mary as filled with the wisdom of God, which the Spirit also represents. At the same time, this Holy Spirit is traditionally attributed as the intermediary of God through which Jesus was conceived by Mary without any human agency being involved. This event is, indeed, of paramount importance for Christianity, but it is also held to be extremely controversial because it indicates an extraordinary intervention on God's human affairs. As such, it defies the natural laws of biology and distinguishes Mary in a very remarkable way from all other women. This is how Johnson chooses to interpret this event:

A begetting by divine power through the Holy Spirit always remains *analogous* to human begetting and needs to be understood by appreciating the myriad ways Spirit-Sophia [wisdom] works in the world. In this light, the gospel story of the conception of the Messiah by the Holy Spirit places Mary with the life-giving powers of her body at the heart of Sophia-God's approach to the world. Conceived by the Holy Spirit, the Messiah was born of the virgin Mary (p. 237).

In order to balance this special intrusion of the divine into the human realm, Johnson again appeals to scripture and stresses Mary's participation in the early community of the followers of Jesus, particularly after his death. Following recent scholarly research on this faithful community, Johnson wants to view it as based on a "companionship model," where all those involved were "partners, companions, comrades (p. 317)." By advocating this model, Johnson draws on her earlier work, especially *Friends of God and Prophets* (2000), because she wants to incorporate Mary and the members of the early community into the "communion of saints." This technical term is often invoked in Catholicism to refer to the vibrant body of all beings – both living and dead – who have witnessed to the coming of Jesus to dwell among human beings and to the Christian faith and church that resulted. All members of this community can take comfort from past exemplars of this faith. They must not, however, simply rest on their achievements and memories, but continue to meet the present challenges of human existence, whatever form they take, so as to enhance this legacy. As Johnson states:

Woven into this paradigmatic memory of Jesus Christ are the lives of all the disciples and seekers in the Spirit, who reveal the face of God while disfigured by suffering, alive with resistance, beautiful with love, compassionate to heal, in other words, all the saints. Their dangerous memory can galvanize the church (p. 320).

For Johnson, Mary has a particular creative role in this community. In order to illustrate this role, Johnson introduces the *Magnificat*, the song of praise of God by Mary when she visits her cousin, Elizabeth, after the angel has announced to Mary that she will become the mother of Jesus. (This episode can be found in the gospel of the apostle Luke, 1: 46-55). This particular song is perhaps the most important component in Johnson's interpretation of Mary's role as a model for imitation. This is as a result of Johnson's interpretation of Mary's words in this song, most especially the part where Mary says:

You have put down the mighty from their thrones,

And have lifted up the lowly.  
 You have filled the hungry with good things,  
 And have sent the rich away empty handed (p. 324).

Johnson declares that these words of Mary are prophetic. By this, Johnson means to indicate that Mary fulfills a prophetic mandate in that she advocates a certain type of activity that is pleasing to God. She is setting forth an example of behaviour that is to be followed. As Johnson states: "her passionate joy, protest, and hope, flow through the centuries and become ours (p. 324)." Johnson believes that this spirit-filled song of Mary spans the gap between Mary's historical period of existence and the present day and that the same dynamics that inspired her can be integrated into a person's life today. Indeed, this is one of the ways that Johnson discerns that the community of saints operates.

In the concluding chapter of her book, entitled: "Mary, Friend of God and Prophet," Johnson celebrates what she believes is Mary's special message – her prophetic vision for Christians, with particular emphasis on women, in the contemporary world.

She [Mary] sings her joy in God because the mighty are brought down and the hungry fed: The revolutionary energy of her words inspires the song to go on in countless hamlets and cities where women struggle against their own diminishment and for the flourishing of the world. Her courageous response to the Spirit's call charts lessons of encouragement for both women and men and nurtures the spirit of the whole community. Faithful to God through all uncertainty, she becomes part of the community's story. Companion in memory, she becomes through solidarity with the struggle of women a companion in hope. She is truly, subversively, our sister (p. 322).

Elizabeth Johnson's work is itself a labour of erudition and courage. It is also an exhortation. For Johnson, to be a Christian is not to adopt an attitude of complacency, of certitude that one is saved, or of superiority. Instead, it is to follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before in faith and hope. It is to follow a tradition that she believes

has a specific task of comforting those who suffer, no matter in what way, and also of empowering those who are treated with injustice. Only in this manner can God's kingdom, as made visible in the life of Jesus and his mother, Mary, become manifest in this world, rather than being relegated to a heavenly or eternal realm that is totally alien to the daily lives of contemporary Christians.

*Biographical Note:* **Morny Joy** is University Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Calgary. She has an MA from the University of Ottawa (1973) and a Ph.D from McGill (1981). Morny's principal areas of research are religion and philosophy, especially Continental philosophy. She has written and co-edited a number of books and has published many articles in the area of women, philosophy and religion. Her most recent work is *Divine Love: Luce Irigaray, Women, Gender and Religion* (University of Manchester, 2007)