

Is She or Isn't She?

As for the title, you'll have suffer through what follows to know why it is as such. Not a big deal, really, because the article is short. This recommendation is important follow because then and only then the title will become clearer with respect to the contents. On the other hand, some may find the whole enterprise to be a waste of time. No problem there, really. What counted was the pleasure of having composed it, that being a reward in and by itself. With regard to the title, the only hint I can divulge right now is that it pertains to the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus Christ.

I started the article itself with the intent of making it a kind of appendix to the one before it entitled **Reverse Redemption**, also on this homepage. Then with further consideration I decided to work it into one standing on its own. The decision came spontaneously and with a sense that the previous article somehow needed to be fleshed out. The context (actually for both) is the third chapter of the Book of Genesis or more specifically the so-called "fall" and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. That's where Eve and Mary come in. Even though I thought I had gone over the text closely, once more it started to yield completely new insights. This is a rather common experience when doing *lectio divina*. You think you may have exhausted given number of verses but a short time later you turn around and voila. A whole new slew of insights comes rushing at you. Indeed, this is both a mystery and a gift. The only response is unending gratitude for being on the receiving end.

As noted above, the Virgin Mary is central here because Catholic theology and tradition has held her as playing a key role throughout the history of the church right down to the present day. Tradition has drawn a parallel between her and the first woman to whom "the man" gives the proper name Eve in 3.20: "because she was the mother of all living." (*Chavah* and *hava*'). Easily we find echos of this with regard to Mary. Thus the two share similar characteristics yet are very different from each other.

Catholic teaching also holds that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was free of sin from the day of her conception. We hear that word tossed about so freely often without consideration of what it means. My guess is that everyone is supposed to know but if pressed, we'd get two responses: either a ready-made textbook definition or embarrassing silence. Because of this we need to give the idea of sin some attention because tradition speaks of it in the context of the so called "fall," that too being another word little reflected upon. The Hebrew verb is *chata*' meaning to go wrong but more fundamentally to miss the mark as in shooting an arrow. Common

experience with regard to both target practice and in a battle is that should you miss, you don't throw down your bow and arrow and walk away in frustration. Rather, a miss prompts you to try again, even multiple times, until you hit the target. Actually the misses are spurs which urge you on without any compulsion involved. This is true even if the matter at hand is serious. Another way, albeit traditionally, is to view it as repentance.

So *chata'* as just presented doesn't minimize the severity of any wrong doing but whose value lies in focusing upon trying again...and again if necessary. Should we take this in the literal sense it has a definite appeal because it's based on experience. Let's apply being free of *chata'* to Mary. That means she'd be free of having to try again. In a way, *chata'* suggests that from the get-go Mary is deprived of something very human. It consists in the ability to start again after a failure, even after a whole series of them. In short, Mary is stunted even before she existed her mother's womb because she doesn't know anything about growth where it really counts. No small wonder often she's depicted as having gotten pregnant in her early teens or perhaps slightly before that. The further back, the better which suggests emphasis is not her innocence as commonly supposed but her ignorance.

The parents of Mary go by the names Joachim and Anne of whom we know nothing but can assume they were regular human beings living a backward existence in a backward part of the world. God loves such obscurity because he can do what he wants without anyone questioning him. The people he's dealing with are too dumb, plain and simple. Choosing such people is a favorite tactic of his and sometimes elevated to near a sublime level by the Catholic Church when it comes to many who've had visions of the Virgin Mary. Actually this is held up as a model to be cultivated. While such persons may indeed be touched by the divine, they can be easily manipulated.

With regard to Joachim and Anne, somewhere along the line a divine intervention occurred that made Mary free from sin which tradition is fond of calling original. Clearly her parents had nothing to do with it, being free from sin wholly beyond the reach of any human intervention. As for that sin, it's interpreted differently from *chata'* as defined above and customarily traced back to the Adam and Eve story in the garden of Eden. Joachim and Anne had sexual intercourse in the normal way. When Anne detected that she was pregnant, she knew something was different. It was a feel unlike any pregnant woman ever felt in her life. She was unique insofar as she felt the lack of sin so endemic to the human race not only did this apply to her but to her husband. At the same time both couldn't quite put their hands on what was going

on. Nevertheless, they did their best to keep this quiet, for no one would understand. They might even lean toward convicting them of some kind of diabolical activity.

At the same time the pregnancy continued as usual, and Mary came to birth but with one huge difference despite everything physically speaking being as normal. Joachim and Anne checked her out as thoroughly as possible in an attempt to discover her uniqueness. However, everything was just fine. Despite their best efforts, they couldn't quite put their fingers on it. It'd come as no surprise they thought of consulting local religious authorities but decided against it. As noted above, Mary might be taken as some evil being who has come into the world. Mary was the only person on the entire planet to have come into existence without this sin which is original. To really comprehend that was impossible. It was as though she were a being from another planet or to put in terms more pertinent to the culture of the time, an angelic being.

Because of Mary's uniqueness we can't help but be led to examine the more precise point of origin of what has become known as the sin called original, the one from which all others had sprung. As tradition has it, *chata'* represents alienation from God. To correct it, a long, drawn-out and painful process of restoration has been set in motion. Behind this attitude is that the more drawn out, the better. In fact, you can't but help detect a certain delight in this. However, there do exist alternatives which can be considered later. As for the actual biblical reference of sin, it doesn't occur until Gn 4.7 with regard to the Lord's rejection of Cain's offering before the murder of his brother Abel. So the notion of sin somehow got moved back to when the woman consumed the fruit of the tree in the garden's center.

While the woman's taking of the fruit from the tree in the center of the garden indeed sets things in motion, what really got it underway was when the man and the woman made a beeline for the nearest shelter they could find, neither bushes nor trees but a singular tree, *hets*. They hid themselves literally in the midst of this tree which is the meaning of *betok*. The verb here is *chava'* which implies withdrawal. Was this the same tree similarly *betok* with respect to the garden? Chances are it wasn't, a kind of anti-tree, the two being connected. The man and woman were drawn immediately there which played a role in tripping them up.

What is the precise point where things went wrong? It boils down to hearing. The man and the woman heard the voice of the Lord walking in the garden, that is, they heard one whom they never have seen. For the very first time they experienced an overpowering fear from the *qol* which they have heard a countless number of times

while the Lord was taking his daily walk in the *ruach* or “wind” of the evening hours. It’s impossible for such fear not to be hidden, especially when taking into account the uniqueness of the garden. Because fear was as alien to it as you could get, we could say that the Lord actually smelt this fear. Thus the image that’s conjured up in our minds from this perspective is quite terrifying.

Both the man and woman were naked, their natural state, which now became a source of shame. Thus the *qol* or sound of the Lord sparked immediate awareness of this nakedness. Once the man and woman were inside the tree, they started bickering about how they’re going to handle this very awkward situation. Should they remain in the tree until the Lord passes? That wouldn’t work because the voice is far more pervasive than vision and could penetrate every nook and cranny of the tree. In fact, their bickering could have attracted the Lord’s *qol* without them being aware of it.

It was getting close to making a fateful decision. The two of them were hemmed in or perhaps better, squeezed, a situation which they couldn’t deal with much longer. Their only option was to take their chances and stand before this divine voice. They knew it was nearby awaiting a response. If they stood their ground, things would have been turned out differently, very much so. In fact, the Lord would have given them a rebuke but in reality he’d be quite proud for their courage after which he would have continued his walk.

So hiding is where it all began and continues down to the present day in various forms. Right from the beginning the man and woman had no concept of what the Lord looked like nor did it ever enter their minds to ask. Note, however, vs. 8 literally implies sight with respect to the hiding at hand as “from faces (*mipeney*) of the Lord God.” Granted that *peny* with *m-* or *min* (‘from’) prefaced to it means from in front of, not necessarily referring to vision or sight.

With the sense of vision in mind, it’s as though the divine *qol* suddenly became so menacing that to the man and the woman it was as good as being visible. Confronted with this, the only alternative was to run and hide as quickly as possible. And so hiding...not eating the so-called forbidden fruit...is the issue at hand which ticked off the Lord mightily. Like a self-centered bully he demanded his customary attention in the evening hours at the end of the day and wasn’t given it by his two prized creations, the man and the woman. Immediately he thought of the most long and drawn out way to extract vengeance.

As for Mary, she didn’t hide when the angel Gabriel approached to get her consent to

be mother of Jesus Christ. The reason is simple. She was incapable of doing so. Further, there was no reason for it. Just before dispatching Gabriel the Lord filled him in on the situation. Mary would be an easy target by reason of not being a flight risk as was the case with Eve. In fact, he reminded Gabriel to consider what happened in the garden. The woman remained hidden in the center of a tree from which she plucked the fruit in the center of the garden. I.e., she was associated with two instances of *betok*, in the center of At least the man had courage enough to respond to the Lord's voice. He figured that if he could do it, so couldn't his wife. Unfortunately she acted in a cowardly fashion. Armed with this knowledge, Gabriel went off on his mission hoping for the best.

Mary has a lot in common with the woman in the garden, that is, during the good old days. However, once the Lord discovered the woman who had remained in the tree, she too received a harsh lecture from the Lord. She wasn't alone. The serpent and the man were lined up and subjected to a prolonged lecture from the Lord or let's say, from his voice. It is precisely being subject to an uncomfortable, embarrassing lecture that made an indelible imprint on the man and the woman, so much that it's handed down to succeeding generations. If we wanted a truly accurate description of what became known as original sin, it's traceable to the resistance and anger at being lectured. No doubt about it. This is something as true today as it was then. As for the serpent, previously it enjoyed an upright position and came away pretty much unscathed. He was transformed from an upright position to one where he'd crawl on the ground. Soon he discovered this was a huge, huge advantage he could use again future descendants of the man and woman.

Now with the man and the woman fully aware of having riled the Lord and are about to pay for it by being banished from the garden, they discover that they have an advantage over him. This is something that never...never...would have entered Mary's mind. Let's call it a secret weapon. It may seem small but turns out to have a lasting significance. The event just discussed had the unintended result to make the Lord aware of something that wasn't in his original design for creation. That consisted in the advent of self-awareness which, in turn, involves free will, activated unintentionally by the Lord when his voice summoned him and he emerged on his own from the tree. Now if the Lord wanted to continue on with his creation, he'd have to put up with human being challenging him, a brand new experience for him.

Let's get back to Mary, if you will. She, like the woman in the garden, lacked awareness of her individuality, that being her natural state and thus quite unlike the rest of us. She was more than innocent, not super-innocent but in a way deformed.

Such is the effect of being without sin as traditional teaching or dogma has it. Never did Mary hide from the voice of the Lord as in the singular tree. Strange to say, such a condition turns out to be necessary when it comes to the divine meeting the human in such an intimate way known as the Incarnation. When Christ is born, Mary's identity isn't diminished, rather, there was nothing there to diminish. This was mirrored externally, if you will, by the so-called obscurity of life at Nazareth. It was necessary so this could play out and develop over time or until Jesus left to commence his ministry.

Thus Mary was consigned to live out her life in a kind of garden of Eden-like environment yet like Eve's husband, banished from it. That means she had one foot in the garden and the other outside it. This unique situation contributed to making her obscure, very much in the background to which she had been consigned and from which she could never emerge. Although she was sinless, it'd be more accurate to say that she lacked individuality. So in a way she was free but in a less than full way as when a person revolts against God but then returns.

When Mary consented to Gabriel's request to be the mother of Jesus, obviously she complied but forfeited something very precious. She opted for being essentially not human, something for which the Lord had his eyes peeled for a long time and finally discovered it. This is precisely what succeeding generations found so attractive in her and why she became an object of veneration. No small wonder that tradition says no one is like her. And so Mary stands out as unique, marvelous to behold but not to be imitated.

Thus God the Father was as harsh on Mary as he had been with Eve but in a different way. The point at hand...and this is key...each consented to be brow-beaten by a lecture. Mary's came from Gabriel. Not only was he an angel but an archangel, very important because the Lord wanted to make sure someone of the utmost competence would carry through on his mission. So the archangel's impeccable credentials and Mary's lack of individuality worked hand-in-hand. Thus Gabriel had no difficulty in eking out a desired response. He had been sent on a mission to have Mary depersonalized, if you will, and succeeded admirably.

In this way Mary became fit to receive the Father's equal, the Son or Jesus Christ. As for Jesus himself, as time went on, and after having grown up with Mary at home, he saw first hand the effects of this depersonalization. He had been living with a mother who never had sexual intercourse as is the normal course of events along with a father who was...for all practical purposes...pretty much a nobody. No small wonder

that scripture is silent about Joseph after the birth story.

Jesus felt it rather uncomfortable living in such a situation. After all, he was the product of a woman with a most unique background as well as having a heavenly Father. Indeed, that's a combination for the ages. By no means did he utter a word about it to any relatives or fellow towns folk. They would have thought him as downright crazy. So after thirty long years of this, Jesus felt the need to break out.

While Jesus did spend time healing and teaching fellow human beings, we know so well that he faced constant, stiff opposition from religious authorities, the infamous Pharisees. They were only doing what was expected of them as heirs of a religious tradition which put a prime on being lectured. That, of course, traces its root back to when the Lord had lined up the serpent, woman and man and blasted all three each in their own way. Not only could they not forget it, they were doomed to transmit this to all succeeding generations. Furthermore, they carried it out without the slightest hint of an alternative. Such is the profound effect of being lectured at. To prove it, all we have to do is examine our own personal history and how when push comes to shove, we enjoy doing it to others.

After some time dealing with the Pharisees and their rigidity or better, their calcification, Jesus didn't stop with them but moved on further, much further, all the way to the way his Father. Such is the source, the one who had been dealing with humankind and more specifically, the nation of Israel. Jesus was well aware of this historical background. He saw beyond that as well, recognizing that his first priority was to educate the Father. He had to inform him that, yes, it's okay for a human being to be an individual or a person differentiated from him with freedom of choice. Jesus didn't speak as such directly while engaged in his ministry. He did it indirectly by speaking a lot about his relationship. That was a subtle, albeit sly way to shmooze the Father without him knowing it.

As time went on the Father started to suspect that when Jesus returned to his native land traditionally called heaven, he'd give him a taste of his own medicine. Not even the humiliation of the crucifixion could stop him. Now the one so fond of lecturing would be subjected to the lecture of a life time. All this wouldn't have been possible otherwise. What precipitated it was the need to choose a human being pretty much devoid of will and therefore sin. Enter Mary. Not that she was unhuman but in way, not fully human. Such is her uniqueness and reason for being honored.

At last, after so many centuries, Mary receives the honor that had been due to her.

That came through the Assumption proclaimed in 1950 when the Catholic Church recognized that she had come into her own, that is, is assumed into heaven in her entirety. Note the word “assumed” which sounds a bit vague but becomes clear in a mythic way when compared with the ascension of Jesus. Jesus returned to heaven under his own power. On the other hand, to be assumed is something like being grabbed all at once and brought to another place. Consider Mary’s forerunners, namely, Enoch and the prophet Elijah.

Once back home in heaven, Jesus had to do a lot with regard to educating his Father. Only he as man-and-God could do this. After all, Mary had been his mother during their earthly existence. Thus he had unique credentials. The Father was at a loss as how to handle Mary, let alone Jesus’ words. He had spent much time searching for someone like her and dispatched the archangel Gabriel to get her consent to give birth to Jesus. Finally he agreed that the Son had a valid point. Both settled upon Mary’s Assumption as a token of reconciliation, if you will...a human being brought into their realm whole and entire, not just her “soul” minus her body. Thus Mary becomes a kind of intermediary between the Father and the Son. While naturally tempted to favor the latter, she took exceptional pains to be on guard and remain impartial. So despite this reconciliation, there remained an uneasy alliance.

Now at last a quick note as to the Title, **Is She or Isn’t She?** as promised in the first paragraph. Throughout these pages some thoughts were presented as to a connection the Virgin Mary had with her “predecessor” Eve and of course her son Jesus Christ. The traditional view of sin as original was noted but pointed out as not quite suitable with regard to the precise point of alienation of humankind from God. That alienation was posited as our deep, inbuilt resistance to being lectured compared with any incident that had precipitated it. Thus instead looking at all this in a hard-and-fast manner, we can see that there’s a lot more to the Virgin Mary than meets the eye. Not only that, she promises to provide further undiscovered insights into the mystery of how she relates to her Son and how he in turn relates to us. Then, of course, there’s the Father who is more a beneficiary than anyone else. In light of this, is Mary the super-exalted, almost semi-divine being we have to accept or is she something else, something else, a human being in a way more flawed than any of us? Is she or isn’t she? The question remains open-ended, at least as far as this limited and indeed imperfect article is concerned.

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