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THE MOTHER OF OUR LORD

MARIOLOGY I

By D.B.Knox

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Mary, the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ was chosen for the high privilege that of being the mother of our Saviour. All Christians echo the greeting of the angel "Hail, thou who art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women". The fact that the Son of God was born of a human mother reminds us that He was a true man. Though He was God, yet while remaining God for our sake He became man, that as a man He might die in our place. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it in chapter 2 verse 14, "Since we are sharers of flesh and blood, He also partook of the same nature, that through His death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and might deliver all those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage".

We honour the memory of Mary for the high privilege that God gave her, and we honour her motherhood for testimony to the reality of our Saviour's true manhood. However, through the centuries, the virgin Mary has come to take an improper position in the religion of the Roman Catholic church, so that to-day she is commonly described by Roman Catholics as Mediator, and Co-Redeemer with the Son of God. Roman Catholic churches have images of her, and worship and prayer is constantly offered to her. It is not very pleasant to have to criticise our fellow Christians' worship but the matter is so important in its consequences that it cannot be passed over in silence.

The growth of Mariology in the Christian church was slow. It is quite absent in the earliest Christian writings for example in those of the second century such as the Epistles of Clement or of Barnabas or of Polycarp and the Shepherd of Hermas, there is no mention at all of the mother of our Lord, nor is any prayer to the blessed virgin to be found in the voluminous works of St. Augustine, who wrote in the fifth century. It was only after this date that the cult of Mary took hold within the Christian Church. Thus in the seventh century Mary's perpetual virginity was affirmed, but it was not till the nineteenth century, in 1854, that the Pope declared that it was necessary to believe that she was born free from sin. This view had been strenuously denied by such

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famous Roman Catholic theologians as Thomas Aquinas. Again it was only as recently as 1950 that the Pope declared that belief that her bodily resurrection had already taken place was necessary.

If we turn to the Bible we will find that, as in the early Church, astonishingly little ^{is said} about the mother of our Lord. Outside the Gospels, there is only one direct mention of Mary, in Acts 1. Within the Gospels themselves the references are very few. And what little is said is more by way of reproof than commendation. Thus after the nativity accounts in Matthew and Luke we read in St. Luke's Gospel of the surprise of our Lord's parents in finding Him in the temple, and our Lord's gentle rebuke of His mother is recorded, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?"

After our Lord's ministry has begun, in Mark 3 it would appear that His mother joined with His brothers in misunderstanding His ministry, and in regarding His preaching activities as a sign of a mental breakdown, so that she and His brothers journeyed down to Capernaum to take charge of Him and to bring Him home. On another occasion our Lord corrects the untimeliness of His mother's request, at the marriage feast of Cana, with the words "Woman, what have I to do with thee, mine hour is not yet come". John 2. At the cross, Jesus directs His disciple John to provide for His mother. These four incidents comprise all the references to the mother of Jesus in the Gospels outside the nativity story. In addition in Acts chapter one, mention is made that Mary is with the company of believers, and St. Paul in Galatians mentions in a general way that our Lord was born of a woman, born under the law, but apart from these two references there is no other reference to the mother of Jesus in the rest of the New Testament. This paucity of reference to Mary in the inspired scripture would be incredible if it was God's intention that Mary should occupy that place in the Christian religion which she has come to occupy in the thoughts and worship of modern Roman Catholics.

The early Church reflects the New Testament position in its scanty references to the mother of Jesus and in the

absolute absence of any suggestion that she occupies any place in Christian worship. It might almost seem that the reticence of the Scriptures with regard to the mother of Jesus and the fact that when mention is made of her relationship to her divine Son, mild rebuke rather than praise is more often the tone of the narrative, suggests that the Holy Spirit, the divine Author of Scripture, would guard us against the error of elevating her to an improper place in our worship. Certainly the inordinately prominent place given to the Virgin Mary in modern Roman Catholic religion is not only out of keeping with the religion of the first centuries but is also contrary to the proportion of the teaching of the Bible.

It may be asked, on the one hand where did the cult of the Virgin Mary spring from, and secondly what makes it so popular in Roman Catholicism? Of course, a question of origins cannot be proved conclusively. However, the first appearance of Mariology is in the Apocryphal romance called the Protevangelium of James. The cult of Mary first took hold amongst semi-pagan heretics. Thus in the fourth century, the heretical, semi-Christian Collyridians were condemned by Bishop Epiphanius for offering cakes to Mary, such as in the days of their heathenism they had offered to the female deities of Asia. Epiphanius rebuked them, saying "Let Mary be had in honour, let the Lord be worshipped" and he condemned them for calling her the Queen of Heaven. Pagan religion witnesses to the attraction of female deities and there is a natural desire of the human heart to worship the principle of creativeness expressed in female deities, an inclination which we see plainly represented in the heathen religions, but forbidden in the Bible.

In fact, the Bible does not support any of the three chief doctrines which Roman Catholics believe about Mary. For example, the Bible suggests that Mary had other children after the birth of Jesus; secondly Mary's description in the Magnificat, of God as her Saviour shows that she was conscious that she needed a Saviour and so was not immaculate; thirdly the doctrine, promulgated by the Pope in 1950 that Mary's body has already ascended into heaven, has not the slightest support in the Bible.

Roman Catholics stress the importance of the blood relationship between our Lord and His mother. But it is interesting that Jesus, and the Scriptures in general minimize this. This is not only indicated by the scanty references in Scripture to Mary, but is also made explicit on two occasions by Jesus Himself. Thus in Matt. 12 when He was told that His mother and His brothers were outside of the crowd looking for Him, He replied, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers, and He stretched out His hand towards His disciples and said, Behold my mother and my brothers. For whoever shall do the will of my Heavenly Father, he is my brother and sister and mother".

On another occasion, when a woman in the crowd called down a blessing on our Lord's mother, in what we may describe as an early Hail Mary, Jesus again minimised the importance of blood relationship in comparison with relationship to Him by faith, saying "Yea rather blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it (Lk. 11:27,28).

There is a threefold objection to exaggerating the position given to the mother of our Lord. Firstly, worship is given to a creature instead of to the Creator. Attempts are made to avoid this conclusion by making distinctions between worship and worship. These distinctions are verbal and have no reality in practice. God is not pleased, nor can true religion flourish, where the worship with the stern enjoinder "See thou do it not, worship God." He plainly knew nothing of these verbal distinctions between latria, dulia and hyperdulia, by which it is sought to justify kneeling in worship before the images of the Virgin and of the saints. "See thou do it not". This is God's word with regard to all such kneeling and worship.

A second objection is that trust is placed in Mary rather than in God. This may be illustrated by a quotation from The Glories of Mary by Alphonse Liguori, a book of which a Pope has said there is nothing in it to censure. Liguori writes "Brother Leo once saw in a vision two ladders, one red at the summit of which was Jesus Christ; and the other white at the top of which presided His blessed

Mother. He observed, that many who endeavoured to ascend the first ladder, after mounting a few steps, fell down; and on trying again, were equally unsuccessful, so that they never attained the summit; but a voice having told them to make trial of the white ladder, they soon gained the top, the blessed Virgin having held forth her hands to help them." P176 Glories of Mary, Dub.1841

What a dishonour, such teaching is to the all-merciful Jesus, who ever lives to make intercession for us, and who is able to save unto the uttermost, all who come unto God by Him! - Who has given the gracious invitation, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Matt.xi.28.

Thirdly, by the exaltation of Mary, Roman Catholics make our salvation depend upon a human being, for they view the whole story of redemption as hinging upon Mary's consent in her reply to the Angel "Be it unto me according to thy word". But an examination of the account in Luke 1 reveals no suggestion that God waited on Mary's consent. Rather the angel announces God's plan, which will surely take place. But the Roman Catholics make Mary's consent the vital thing. Here we have the central error of Roman Catholicism, which mingles human merit with the grace of God as the ground of our salvation. But our salvation is not to be attributed, either to the merits of Mary, or to any other saint or to our own merits to any degree at all; but only to God's grace alone. He alone is our saviour. We are saved by his grace and not by our own works or deservings. To Him be the glory, and to Him alone, be the glory in every aspect of our Christian religion, and worship.

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