

in the preparation and distribution of the sacrificial elements, and they may certainly derive nourishment, both literal and symbolic, from their consumption. Where, by contrast, sacrifice is seen as alimentary, and motifs of communion, nourishment, and memorial are foregrounded, gender becomes less marked, and women may act as agents and even preside, the constraints on their role being merely customary as opposed to anthropological and theological.

To the Christian understanding of sacrifice, gender, and paternity, we return at length in the pages to come. Here, we may merely note that read in light of the story of Abraham, its sacrificial motifs, and the practices it authorizes and at times seems even to inaugurate, the figure of Mary in the New Testament appears deeply shaped by the anthropological and theological constraints we have been describing and by the story of Abraham, which embodies them so paradigmatically.

For Mary too, must endure the removal of her son in from her sphere, the silencing of her voice, and her son's self-offering for immolation. True, Mary is less silenced or relegated to the background here than Sarah is in Genesis, in part because she is providing a son not just for a privileged patriline, which must be made prior to and privileged over the maternal contribution, as in the E and P documentary strands, but for a double line of filiation, a line that includes both mothers *and* fathers, as in the J material. As in the Qur'an, her surrender, her ethical purity, and her unique spirituality are also of more interest to the narrators of her story than in Sarah's case, for there is a dimension of witness to her participation in the logic of sacrifice as a believer, rather than simply as a mother, that places her outside its purview, as a point of repair and critique, as well as of contribution and benefit.

Nonetheless, both in the New Testament and in the evolving Eucharistic discourse of the early church, insofar as she remains primarily the mother of a sacrificial son, Mary's role is circumscribed both with respect to priestly agency and to her important position in constructing and reproducing the religious tradition and understanding. Thus, the story of Abraham provides the context for a closer look at Mary's role in sacrifice, the deep roots of that role in the faith of her fathers, and its changes in meaning and instantiation in the three major religions that divide and perpetuate the spiritual legacy of Israel.



## Marian Sacrifice

The union of the Mother and the Son in the work of redemption reaches its climax on Cavalry, where Christ offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to God (Hebrews 9:14) and where Mary stood by the cross (John 19:25) suffering grievously with her only begotten son. There she united herself with a maternal heart to his sacrifice.

Pope Paul VI

**T**HE THEME OF THE ABRAHAMIC SACRIFICE OF THE SON, THE PATERNAL MOTIFS that surround it, and the role of mothers within it recurs in the stories of Mary and Jesus in the New Testament and the Qur'an. These stories have many figurative and typological connections with previous Biblical dramas of chosen sons, their ordeals and triumphs, their contributions to the lineage of Israel. The gospels and the Qur'anic accounts also extend these dramas in new directions, both in terms of the magnitude of the contradictions entailed and their divisiveness and the potentially healing power of their resolution.

Though she appears also in festive, joyful, and celebratory contexts, Mary's primary role in the gospel scenario is as a witness both to the unique sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and to the sacrifices of many such sons and daughters in Israel who have led lives of religious ordeal and affirmation. Standing in a long line of women from Sarah through Hannah to the mother of the Maccabees, she endures the danger and difficulty created by her son's prophetic and messianic mission and endures as well the conflicts and various forms of bloodshed, both symbolic and real, that this mission creates. Mother and child are on trial, so to speak, from his very birth, and they draw others into their ordeal both to bear witness to its bloody and sorrowful passages and to affirm its outcome in affirmation and joy.

This role, its background in the patriarchal narratives, its textual base in the gospels, and the Biblical, anthropological, and theological coordinates that

shape it in the early church are traced in detail the chapters to come. Its general outlines, however, may usefully be considered here, both as a case in point for the theories of sacrifice we have been canvassing and as a way of indicating how deeply the figure of Mary is constructed in their terms. For following the footsteps of Sarah (not to mention Hagar, Rachel, Elizabeth, and others) Mary conceives a divinely favored son, conceives him in a situation wherein the patriline is threatened by attenuation or rupture, and bears him through a direct relationship with the Holy one of Israel.<sup>1</sup> And following in the footsteps of this line of sacrificial mothers, she endures his passage through mortality to a role in the renewal and transmission of the religious heritage from which he springs.

Mary also follows on here – in some ways even more strongly – in the wake of Abraham himself. As does Abraham in response to God's promise of heirs, she responds to the news of her "impossible maternity" both with questioning and with affirmation.<sup>2</sup> "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" she asks. And when the angel explains, "Here am I," she answers, "the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:34, 38). Her answer echoes Abraham's great affirmation, the *hineni*, "here I am," of Genesis 22: 1.

A moment later, Mary's parallel with Abraham is underscored, for in the great Magnificat she utters when her status and pregnancy are affirmed and blessed by her kinswoman, she specifically invokes his name. The Mighty One has done great things for her, she sings:

He has helped his servant Israel,  
In remembrance of his mercy,  
According to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
To Abraham and to his descendants forever (Luke 1:54–55)

Later, the terms of this promise will come under threat for Mary as they had for Abraham, for she too will have to witness and endure a piercing of soul (Luke 2:35) and the threatened extinction of her only son Jesus on the cross at Golgotha (John 19). As with Abraham, however, her faith will be vindicated in the event, for her son will live again, and his spiritual progeny will be part of a new religious order.

The status of this new order is, however, quite problematic. In the first place, Jesus, the son in question, is very much a "mother's son," with all the potential for dissemination and decay that attends this status. With this son, furthermore, Mary has an especially close relationship, if only given her awareness of divine intervention in the unusual circumstances of his birth. To make matters worse, her son has potentially no earthly father at all – at least until Joseph grants him preliminary legitimacy and recognition by accepting

Mary as his wife. Mary's child is then in a sense hers and hers alone; he has no biological datum from his earthly father's side at all but is begotten of spirit only. True, Jesus is quickly provided with a legal father in these narratives (Matthew 1:20–21), and just as quickly he is legitimized and inducted into the patriline by presentation in the temple (Luke 2:21–39) and later by his participation in the cult at Jerusalem (Luke 2:41–52). But if only by virtue of the entire absence at his conception of any visible human father, Jesus is even more completely a "mother's son" than his predecessors. Indeed, his neighbors in at least one instance pointedly refer to him as the "Son of Mary," not the "Son of Joseph" (Mark 6:3), a way of address unusual, scholars tell us, at the time even for a son whose father has died.<sup>3</sup>

As time goes on, however, Jesus is increasingly recognized not just as the son of his completely human mother but also, exceptionally and dramatically, as the son – indeed the favored and beloved son and thus the potential heir – of his completely divine Father "in heaven." This identity is made clear from the start in the terms of the annunciation, which specifies a special messianic destiny for this child. "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High," says the angel (Luke 1:32). It is further foretold at the presentation in the temple, where Simeon, who is very preoccupied with a threat to the lineage of Israel and seems to have wished to ward off death to preserve it, feels that he can now die assured of this continuity. He prophesies that this child will be a light to the Gentiles and the glory of his people Israel (Luke 2:25–32).

This identification of Jesus's identity as a chosen son of God and as the bearer forward on earth of the spiritual legacy of Israel is further ratified, at his baptism in the Jordan by his cousin John.<sup>4</sup> The Holy Spirit descends on him and a voice from heaven says, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). Much of the conflict arising around Jesus – and indeed around Mary as well – arises from the extremity of his double line of descent, on the one hand bonded exclusively with an entirely human mother and on the other exceptionally with the Father of Fathers, the Holy One of Israel.

Mary's virginal conception of Jesus is, of course, at the heart of this problematic double identity, for it is generated from her irregular bodily maternity in conjunction with the spiritual energy of God. The issue of this conjunction, Jesus, is then both a messianic figure, able to deploy the full symbolic capital and treasure of centuries of Israelite spirituality, and a humanly vulnerable one, exposed to the scandal and recrimination of his people.<sup>5</sup> Not only is Mary's legal and ethical status in question here but so is her place in the human order. For, like a number of her maternal ancestors, Mary's situation

offers an implicit challenge to human fatherhood and to masculine agency leadership in the service of the God of Israel. At the same time it offers new hope for renewal of that leadership. Furthermore, while she is portrayed in the gospels as a faithful daughter of Zion, a chaste and devoted spouse, and a devoted mother, Mary, like many of her prophetic ancestors both masculine and feminine, also challenges hierarchies and received understandings of tradition.

In these and many respects, the figure of Mary evokes Sarah and Hagar as well as Abraham. Her wondering question at the news of her conception echoes Sarah's incredulous laughter at the news of her conception in her old age, and so does her gradual recession from a foregrounded role in his story and the necessity for enduring the threat to his life occasioned by the need for sacrifice. The parallel between Sarah's son Isaac and Mary's son Jesus has a long pedigree, stretching from Hebrews 11:17–19, which explains that Abraham acted in good faith in binding Isaac, considering the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead, and that "figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."<sup>6</sup>

Mary's irregular position as pregnant though unmarried also echoes, in an intensified way, Hagar's situation as concubine. In her role in her son's death and resurrection, Mary also maintains this link to Hagar, for like Hagar, the conception of her son places her in an irregular and dangerous status, and yet, like Hagar, she lives to see her son rescued from permanent oblivion and removed from the direct line and inheritance of his fathers to found a secondary line and a new order in another place.

Furthermore, Mary, Jesus, and Joseph are driven out of their home into Egypt to escape Herod's jealousy and concern for the succession of his kingship (Matthew 2:13–14) just as Hagar and Ishmael are driven out by Sarah's jealousy and concern for the succession of her son. Mary, too, can lay claim to being "seen" by the Holy One of Israel in hers and her son's danger and rescued by him in her passage across the desert. Thus, Mary's son combines in one person aspects of the identity of the chosen, legitimate, "cultural," and sacrificial son Isaac, who bears his father's name, and of the "natural" but also divinely sustained son Ishmael, who does not bear the name but founds a new lineage of his own. (As has been suggested, lineage, as it comes to be developed in Islam, does not rely for validation on a chain of identities supported and mediated by a sacrificial priesthood, though it does involve a strong sacrificial discourse centered in the role of the *pater familias* in the rituals surrounding the hajj.)

This pattern becomes clearer when Mary and Jesus's story is further juxtaposed with those of this family and lineage. By a series of what Francis Moloney

has called "impossible maternities" in these stories, alliances between God and mothers over and over again provide the primal maternal matter for the continuation of the spiritual and paternal legacy of the people, especially, as Lefebvre has shown, in the line of Judah and especially when and where its continuity is threatened.<sup>7</sup> However, this primal matter is dangerously powerful, undifferentiated, and capable of adulteration and dispersal, and it must be reshaped by fatherhood, legitimation, and cultural recognition into a form supportive of human life on earth.

As his destiny evolves, the life of Jesus reflects the full range of these potentials from renewal to conflict, from rupture to varying modes of support, vis-à-vis the patrimony. On the one hand, Jesus's teaching seems, to some of his contemporaries, disturbingly heterodox; he is seen to be in contact with women, Gentiles, Samaritans, and with the sinful and impure, and eventually a status is claimed for him that might seem to threaten the absolute priority of the deity. Often, too, he appears to be out of compliance with the laws that establish and regulate the patrimony, both in cultic and in legal terms. He appears to endorse, at least on one occasion, the shucking of grain on the Sabbath; he enters into extended conversation with what is for his lineage an unorthodox Samaritan woman of dubious marital status; he endures the touch of a woman diseased and bleeding. Not only does he operate outside the traditional Jewish cult, but it is even claimed for him that he can *replace* the temple, symbolically speaking, in his own resurrected and glorified body (or so later expositors would interpret Mark 15 to mean).

At the same time, the record shows Jesus insisting on his identity as a dedicated and obedient representative of the faith of his fathers, a faith to which he bears repeated and eloquent testimony. He has come, he insists, to fulfill the law, not to abolish it, and he dies still addressing his life and fate to the God of Israel, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). In this, he seems to conflate insider and outsider, devotion and sacrilege, observance and transgression, continuity and rupture, in one and the same person. Seen in this perspective, Jesus, like others before him, offers both hope and challenge to the founding distinctions by which legacy of his people is perpetuated, exposing it to new dangers of dispersion and contamination but also to new potentials for reinvigoration and propagation.

In order for this reinvigoration to take place while maintaining some continuity with the past, however, the anomalies and disturbances for fatherhood and social identity raised by Jesus's unusual conception, the resulting closeness of his mother-son bond, and the challenging nature of his teaching and mission must be "rectified" – to use Jay's term – by sacrifice. They are partially addressed, at least with respect to his birth, by Joseph's recognition of Mary

and the child and his affirmation of his own completely culturally constructed fatherhood, which has no biological base at all. This recognition takes care of much of the scandal at the human and earthly levels.

But the problem is larger than a simple case of irregular pregnancy producing a "natural" child and his recognition and acceptance into the community, for Jesus is not just a natural but a primary son and heir, uniquely qualified by a mission announced at his birth to save his people. Beyond even these terms, he later comes to be understood, even more problematically, as the ultimate and particular "Son of God." If he is to realize this enormously powerful paternal identity, however, the maternal, mortal, and potentially disseminative aspect of his being must – at least from an anthropological perspective – be thoroughly and definitively purified, lest the divine itself be subject to dissemination and decay.

As we have seen, the classical remedy for this kind of purification in Israel is the dedication of a child through strong, expiatory sacrifice. It is in terms of this sacrifice, long established in the tradition, that the crucifixion later comes to be understood. Even the extremity of the sacrifice in this case – a sacrifice in which no substitute, no ram appears, but one that is carried out both in the real and the symbolic modes – may be illuminated by placing it in this perspective. For in the case of Jesus, who is absolutely bonded to his mother and absolutely chosen by his father, the act of sacrifice must be equally absolute, or absolute in proportion.

Only by a passage through death itself to full, earthly and heavenly resurrection, both real and symbolic, may Jesus, who is alike and at once the strongest possible case of a natural child and the strongest possible case of a chosen heir, be fully inducted into the spiritual legacy and able to carry its mandate forward in time. This ineluctable logic leads directly to the cross, where, as John's gospel tells us, Jesus finishes his work on earth and goes "to the Father" (John 13:1). It also leads, however, to the resurrection of both body and spirit, in light of which Mary's own role is transfigured and transformed.

The place of mothers in this discourse of sacrifice is from the very first, even in the story of Abraham and Isaac, both clear and tragic. Like Sarah and Hagar, Mary must testify both to maternal bonding and to the necessity of its transcendence through sacrifice in a paternal religious order, placing her in a position of double witness, both to her own loss and to the world's ultimate gain. Her dwindling role in the story of her son's life after the events of his birth and childhood until his coming of age express this double witness. These motifs are parallel to Sarah's and Hagar's receding roles in Genesis as well (a pattern well identified in Esther Fuch's studies of the patriarchal narratives.)<sup>8</sup> Like the binding of Isaac, the crucifixion becomes, typologically

and theologically speaking, a form of sacrifice that unites Jesus with his Father in heaven, and this process first relativizes and then obviates Mary's earthly maternity in favor of her new, nonbiological, symbolic role in the spiritual community of all believers.<sup>9</sup>

As we shall see, the gospels demonstrate harshly the anguishing process by which Jesus removes himself from the sphere of the earthly mother and indeed from a host of kinship and communal relationships on his maternal side and is eventually reconciled with his heavenly Father through his death and resurrection. These events culminate in the account of the passion, especially as dealt with in the gospel of John. Through her combined purity and obedience to the covenant and the faith of her fathers, and through her witness to the cross, Mary testifies both to the importance of the maternal element in this construct and to the need for this distancing, its renunciation, rectification, and rebalancing in and through the passion sacrificially understood. It is the conjunction of these motifs of mother-son bonding and patriarchal sacrifice that both "transpierces" Mary,<sup>10</sup> as Simeon had prophesied, and makes of her, with her sacrificial son, a founding figure of a new religious order.

This structure encodes the anthropological and psychological function of sacrifice as a way of generating and regenerating from problematic beginnings a new being, a new person who is inscribed in a symbolic, culturally constructed lineage as well as in the order of nature. This new person is not simply a creature of flesh, born in blood, born to mortality, and representing by definition a degree of discontinuity with paternal kin; he – for it is usually, though not always he – is rather a creature of culture, born of spirit, born to immortality, at least in the sense of carrying on to new generations the father's line and spirit legacy. In some instances, the maternal contribution is almost entirely erased in this process of maturation and acculturation through sacrifice; in others, it is to one degree or another maintained but balanced out with respect to the paternal. In any case, however, there is a necessary rupture in the mother-child bond, a rupture that produces both individuation and cultural and religious identity.

The composite picture of Mary in the gospels, following on what are from a literary and canonical point of view its Old Testament precedents, testifies to this process, first establishing Mary's role as the mother of the chosen son, and then progressively distancing her from his life and mission, until, near the cross, she relinquishes him to the Father. He is restored to her only in a religious, symbolic, and sacerdotal context in which she becomes the sacrificer par excellence, the first beneficiary of the grace that flows into the community from his saving work. At the same time, however, the gospels also inaugurate a more generous and open discourse of sacrifice, the alimentary sacrifice of

communal bonding. As we shall see, this motif and Mary's role within it are first announced at the very beginning of Jesus's mission, at the wedding at Cana, and they recur again at the end, in the last supper that Jesus shares with his disciples and in its reinstatement in the Eucharist seen as a feast of celebration and praise.

#### A VIRGIN CONCEIVED

Among the most illuminating of the works that have begun to recognize this pattern in the case of Mary, the problem it represents and the resolutions to which it points, is Mary Foskett's *A Virgin Conceived*. As Foskett points out, Mary's conception of Jesus "illustrates the subversion of a husband's authority by the deity," providing a kind of "extreme case" of the Jewish idea that God controls the womb (cf. 1 Samuel 2; Luke 1:28). Indeed, Foskett comments, God so governs Mary's reproductive role that the participation of a human is "entirely omitted." The deity does not guide or inspire Mary in her traverse from young girl to woman, wife, and mother but claims her for His own. Thus, for Foskett, "Mary exemplifies the virgin whose primary relationships with the deity eclipses social norms."<sup>11</sup> To this, we might only add that it eclipses religious norms as well, including the norm of strict and rule-governed contact between divine and human in order to avoid sacrilege and social chaos.

Furthermore, with Mary, this excess is intensified, because not only is the divine inspiration direct and not at first mediated in any way by the presence of a husband and father, but also the conception is completely paradoxical, not simply anomalous or unusual; and the resulting son is unequivocally, or so the narrative has it, the "only begotten" son of God, not just a chosen or favored child. As a result, seen in the framework of Old Testament precedents, Mary and Jesus expose the people of Israel to extreme opportunities but also to extreme dangers as well. It is no wonder then that this messianic son of Mary's is at once a great renewer of the religious patrimony and also a divisive figure. Indeed, these double potentials are clear from his infancy because they are inherent in the terms of his conception, quite apart from the realization of his mission later in life.

Mary is, however, not entirely contained within this sacrificial structure. In the first place, the stories of her in the gospels demonstrate a high and unusual degree of personal agency and subjectivity in her relationship to the divine. Not only does she sing and prophesy when she is with child but also it is twice said of her that she questions and reflects on the events of her son's life and "ponders" them in her heart. As we shall see, in her choice to bear Jesus, in her ability to reason and thus to contribute to the religious discourse of Israel,

and even in the personal mobility that allows her to travel alone to seek out her kinswoman Elizabeth, Mary's agency and her challenge to usual roles and norms come to the fore.<sup>12</sup>

Most importantly of all, perhaps, Mary's experience points to a potential always latent but seldom manifest in Israelite tradition: the potential for a feminine as well as masculine mode of transmission of the spiritual legacy, one in which the divine creativity of maternity is not a threat but a promise, and faith is passed on not only in and through alliances between fathers and sons marked by strong sacrifice, but as in the story of Ruth and Naomi, from woman to woman marked by acts of ethical recognition and communal life. By participating as well in this alternative transmission, Mary braids together male and female, maternal and paternal contributions to the legacy of Israel and its forward transmission.

As we shall see, this fusion is signaled in particular at the moment of her journey to see her kinswoman Elizabeth when both are with child. In that moment, she pays tribute to this elder and receives in turn her blessing and legitimation. Again, Foskett has discerned this pattern and its significance. As she argues, Elizabeth's salutation shows the reception and recognition of Mary – her legitimation, so to speak – by a senior woman of her community (a woman whose family, not incidentally, we might note, is associated with the priesthood) and indicates her worthiness to express and transmit the spiritual legacy of her people. It is no accident that Mary is immediately empowered to prophesy, and breaks out into the famous Magnificat, the great song of praise and of the overturning of all hierarchies of gender and power.

Thus, the visitation validates both Mary's status as a chaste mother and the "word" in which she has believed.<sup>13</sup> As we shall see, it also inaugurates what the gospels will present as the carefully elaborated and hierarchical but peaceful and nonviolent bond between their respective sons Jesus and John – sons who, like Isaac and Ishmael, *could* be set up by their respective patriarchal mothers as rivals, but who are here presented as kin and future colleagues in the development and transmission of their shared legacy. This bond will be threatened with rivalry, at times, as we shall see, but it will not in this case lead to the kind of schism with which this particular structure, when unmediated by maternal as well as paternal transmissions, can generate. This braiding together of paternal and maternal transmissions is extended in the stories of Jesus's childhood, for *both* Mary and Joseph witness the presentation of child in the temple and *both* take him to Jerusalem for the Passover.

This sacrificial discourse and its representation in the stories of the life of Mary and Jesus in the gospels and early Christianity requires closer scrutiny, especially in terms of the genealogies provided for these figures, in terms

of the way in which their relationship develops over the course of his life and mission and in terms of the way the sacrificial mandate – and Mary’s special place within it – is presented again in the cult life of early Christianity. Before turning to that project, however, an initial juxtaposition of the two key and defining moments of this discourse, the binding of Isaac in Genesis, as discussed in the previous chapter, and the crucifixion, as discussed in Part II, will throw into relief both their similarities and their differences, and help to illumine their import for the sacrificial theme in and among the monotheisms.

Both as a literary trope and as an anthropological and theological crux, the story of Mary and Jesus on Golgotha, like that of Abraham and Isaac on Moriah discussed in Chapter 1, is laden with significance for the patriline and spiritual legacy of Israel. Mary’s presence at this scene (and her future appearance with the disciples in Acts 1:14) also make visible the contribution of motherhood to this process, a contribution that helps to heal the potential erasure of that contribution implicit in Hagar’s banishment and Sarah’s absence and death. Thus, the parallels between and her Old Testament ancestors, far from simple analogies, create a charged field of potential meanings, not all of them easily harmonized, in which the permutations of sacrificial discourse are themselves called into question and transformed.

As with the earlier narrative, the painful and deliberate steps of this formative story are unforgettable. In John’s gospel, we learn how Jesus, like Isaac on the way to Moriah, carries the wood of sacrifice to the mountain of sacrifice on his back. He is crucified on that wood, and his garments are dispersed among soldiers. Then we read:

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home. After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), “I am thirsty.” A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:26–30)

The beloved disciple here is traditionally understood to be John, and the words with which Jesus entrusts Mary to his care indicate, as we shall see, in Roman Catholic traditions the transfer of the mother-son relationship to him and the founding of the church, the new sacerdotal order that springs up in his wake.

During these events, Mary is entirely silent, and her silence is as fraught, as profound, and as compelling as that of Abraham on Mount Moriah. Like his, it is also not an easy silence to interpret, though many have either ventured or assumed a reading of it. We hear again and again, for instance, that Mary is a person of simple faith who rejoices in the completed work of her son; that she is a mother bereft indeed but delighted with the consolation of her new role among the disciples; that she really is no more than one among many mourners at the foot of the cross. Yet, to these sometimes facile understandings are difficult to sustain in the face of the long tradition of reconstructions of and meditations on this moment in Christian art and devotion. (Imagine, for instance, trying to maintain the force of any one of these readings in the presence of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*.)

As we can see from even a preliminary juxtaposition of their stories, both Mary and Abraham have many similar roles here. Both are parents of important sons in the spiritual and biological lineage of their people; both are prominent in narratives in which these sons are offered up to God; and both are understood to have attested to the faith in the great outcome of this moment – though not without questions and struggles – through faith and surrender. Each is also later invoked as a founding figure in the cultic and sacrificial discourses that follow in the wake of these narratives: Abraham in the priesthood and temple cult of Israel and Mary in the ecclesiastical body and sacerdotal discourse of the Christian church. Thus, each figure, typologically speaking, bears a relationship of witness to sacrifice and to the inauguration of new religious and spiritual line of descent.

There are, of course, also important differences between Mary and Abraham. Even at the simplest level, Mary’s fiat is, from a canonical point of view, a step forward in time from Abraham’s, and it is thus different from his precisely in having his precedent to follow. It is furthermore Isaac’s father in Genesis who takes him to the mountain; his mother is absent from the scene and shortly to die. It is Jesus’s mother in John’s gospel who is present at the cross (John 19:25); his earthly father is absent from the scene and perhaps, as traditional interpretations of the life of Joseph have often held, already dead.

This change from paternal to maternal foregrounds the issue of gender itself in a different way, so that the question of male or female identity can no longer – if it ever could – remain an unmarked feature of the events being described. Thus, Mary’s motherhood throws into relief Abraham’s fatherhood, and it invites us to consider the question of the roles of mothers and fathers in general compared with the operations of sacrifice both in Genesis and John. Her difference of gender also profoundly changes the terms on which Mary’s story operates, as does her very different role in the death or threatened death



of her son, who is not offered up on an altar, as is Isaac, but on a cross, and whose death is only seen as sacrificial after the event. Indeed, as we shall see, the Mary-Jesus pair is in some respects rather more like the Hagar-Ishmael pair than the Sarah-Isaac pair, and Mary's place in the sacrificial discourse of the son is correspondingly different as well.

Furthermore, Mary – unlike Abraham – is not depicted in the gospels as instructed by any agency, divine or human, to sacrifice her son, and she does not initiate this sacrifice, nor does she endorse it, unless her mere silent but remarkable presence at the event, be seen, as some have done as constituting a kind of endorsement. She does not take nor does she accompany Jesus to Golgotha, and in terms of scripture, she can in no way be understood (*pace* the Roman Catholic magisterium on this point) as officiating at or as explicitly consenting to this violent consummation. She utters here neither a fiat nor a version of Jesus's "it is finished." Rather, she bears mute witness to the event, and her silence stretches deep into the gospel accounts of the resurrection, for it is not this Mary, his mother, to whom the risen Jesus appears, but to another Mary, his friend and disciple (John 20:1). The reunion of mother and child is here not an accomplished vision but a still deferred eschatological hope.

Thus, as we shall see in more detail in a moment, Mary's silence at the foot of the cross seems to suspend her between two opposing religious regimes with respect to sacrifice, a masculine, paternal regime in which expiatory sacrifice inaugurates a closed economy ratified by word and deed, and a feminine, maternal regime in which such sacrifice is nothing but tragic, and one before which silence speaks louder than words. Nevertheless, in assenting to his birth and mission and witnessing to his sacrificial death and resurrection, Mary is, like Abraham, acting not only as a natural mother but as a daughter of Zion, acting, that is, in the light of a prior agreement or covenant to which she has committed her faith, her treasure, and her hope for the future. This agreement promises suffering, but it also promises new and eternal life not only for their chosen children but for a wider kin as well.

#### HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

As Jon Levenson notes, the sacrifice of Isaac begins in early Christianity to shape the story of Jesus, the crucified "firstborn" of God. That story, as it comes to be understood, takes place very much in the context of the story of Abraham and of the sacrificial discourse, including a discourse of priesthood and temple worship, that had sprung up in Israel in his wake.<sup>14</sup> As we shall see, the New Testament shapes its stories of the life and death of Jesus and the role

within that life and death of his mother, Mary, in this context. In these stories of sacrifice, and in the subsequent traditions of interpretation that condition how they are read, Jesus is the firstborn son of God, and his death on the cross comes to be understood as the "sacrifice" of that firstborn son, to be reenacted through the substitution of bread and wine by a new priesthood on a new form of altar and in a new sacerdotal order.

This process is a complex one. In the first place, from a certain point of view, the crucifixion as narrated in the gospels, may not be seen or have been seen, in its time, as a ritual or sacrificial event. It seems to have taken place somewhat outside any usual religious ritual or cultic terms. Though there are sketchy indications of a kind of political purging in the mocking of the victim, it seems simply and brutally a case of torture and mob execution.<sup>15</sup> Very quickly, however, the passion is seen as sacrificial in Christian tradition. The moment that inaugurates this somewhat retrospective sacrificial interpretation is the moment at the last supper when Jesus, understood proleptically, inaugurates a new sacrificial economy based on the figurative evocation of his own spilt blood and broken body to come.

Although it is possible that the earliest textual referent to this moment is found in Paul's writings, the locus classicus occurs first, canonically speaking, in the gospel of Mark:

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take: this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many."  
(Mark 14:22–25; cf. Luke 22:14–21)

When these words are later understood through the lens of his death and resurrection, they become the foundation of a new cult and religious order in Jesus's name. For as the full dimensions of the gospel accounts of the passion begin to resonate among Christians, Jesus's gesture of breaking bread as his body and offering wine as his blood evolve into a major ritual, the Eucharist, at which he becomes, figuratively speaking, both the priest-agent of a new religion and its founding sacrificial victim, dedicating his life "once for all," as Hebrews has it, on behalf of the entire people of God on earth (7:27). The figure of Mary as it comes to be understood in early and high church Christian tradition is also seen primarily against the specific background of this form of strong sacrifice, though not without reference to other themes, motifs, and understandings.

In general, then, as we have seen, the narrative texts involving Mary in the gospels may be read and have often been tacitly understood as portraying in

heightened terms the pattern that necessitates the deployment of sacrifice as “childbirth done better” in the patriarchal narratives in the Old Testament. To some extent, as we shall see in a closer examination of the gospels in Part II, these texts also inaugurate the same zero-sum, closed economy, and attendant fratricidal violence, an economy of the “one true faith” in which only a single son and lineage may inherit, not several and not in a plural formation, in part to avoid partition of the patrimony and diminution or adulteration of its terms.

Whereas this way of viewing Mary in the New Testament is primarily figural, typological, and structural, and emerges to a great extent from a synchronic perspective in which past and future cast light on one another, the historical context of this inauguration of a new sacrificial economy around the figures of Mary and Jesus is suggestive. This context has been intensively examined by Bruce Chilton, in *The Temple and Jesus: His Sacrificial Program within a Cultural History of Sacrifice* and, building on Chilton’s work, by Bernhard Lang, in his *Sacred Games, a History of Christian Worship*.

Prescinding for a moment from the question of the absolute historicity of their reconstructions (some of which, as they note, are highly speculative), we may say that the picture painted by Chilton and Lang of sacrifice in the context of the life of Israel and of early Christianity accords with the understanding of sacrificial discourse in Biblical traditions emerging from the anthropological and theological perspectives we have been discussing.

Furthermore, this picture provides the background against which in the ensuing centuries the figure of Mary begins to take increasing shape and definition as both the pillar and chief witness of a new sacrificial order, the “Temple of the Temple,” as she has been called, and the witness as well of a prophetic transvaluation of sacrifice evolving rapidly in this time in both rabbinic and Christian understandings and practices.

Chilton and Lang argue that the Eucharist as instituted by Jesus transformed a well-known and often practiced form of sacrifice celebrated in Jerusalem, the cultic center of Israel at the time, into a ritual to be performed outside the temple, substituting bread and wine for the blood of the animal and the words of institution for the blessings of the temple priesthood.<sup>16</sup> They paint a picture of a Jesus who is concerned, like the other religious leaders of his time and place (including the great reforming Rabbi Hillel), with issues of purity and sacrifice, but who wishes less to spiritualize these into an entirely ethical and intentional sacrifice of the heart or communal feast and celebration of praise – into “weak” sacrifice – than on the contrary precisely to reestablish a more direct connection between the sponsor of sacrifice and the actual practice of shedding animal blood.

Very recently in Jesus’s day, it seems, rather than bringing one of their cattle from home, people wishing to offer a sacrifice in the temple would pay for an animal in the temple precincts. This victim was immediately handed over to the clerical personnel, often for some period of time, and they therefore had very little personal connection with it other than monetary investment and a sort of symbolic designation. The actual sacrifice also happened at a distance, for the people were consigned to an outer court, thus threatening to violate the principle that sacrifice must not only be done but be seen to be done and<sup>17</sup> attenuating the force of the function of the animal as a substitute for a more extreme victim, perhaps a son or the sponsor.

Although tradition always held that an offering cannot be made unless the sponsor is standing by its side, this mere presence at a distance was, Chilton and Lang suggest, not direct enough for sacrificial reformers such as Jesus and Hillel. The sponsors should, the latter proposed, at least lay their hands directly on the animal’s heads as a gesture of both ownership and offering. Jesus too wished to bring sacrifice closer to home in some way; it was for this reason that he challenged the trade in animals within the temple precinct.

Invoking the book of Zechariah, a prophecy deeply concerned with the quality of sacrifice in the temple, Jesus thus recalls the prophecy, “there shall no longer be traders in the house of the Lord of Hosts” (Zech. 14:21). He attempts to restore proper sacrifice by cutting out the middleman. When his challenge has no effect on temple sacrifice other than to call down the wrath of the authorities on his head, he creates his own substitute for it. To the feasts and celebratory meals with which his ministry is attended, he adds a new ritual action, declaring that the bread and wine often dedicated to God as an offering of thanks on such occasions may also function as sacrifice in the stronger sense, as substitutes for the body and blood of a living victim in the temple cult. Thus, as Lang puts it, stretching, perhaps, the bonds of historical reconstruction to the maximum, a simple and straightforward declaration said over bread and wine becomes, in the minds of Jesus and his followers, a replacement for sacrifice as performed in the temple.<sup>17</sup>

Whether this is what Jesus intended, either in cleansing the temple or at the feast around the time of Passover where he uttered the words “this is my blood” and “this is my body,” it is certainly along these lines that the early church developed its understanding of the Eucharist as a form of religious sacrifice, one requiring a sponsor, a priesthood, and a victim to perform. Thus too did the understanding of the role of Jesus as sacrificial son and – as we shall see – of Mary his mother in its regard evolve and become for many centuries the dominant, if not the only paradigm, of the Eucharistic celebration. This should come as no surprise, for the dilemmas of monotheism,



fatherhood, motherhood, rivalry, and continuity in Israel and their resolution or attempted resolution through the discourse of sacrifice continue into the intertestamental, rabbinic, and early Christian periods and are perhaps, as we shall see, even intensified there.

As Lang points out, the understanding of the Eucharist as a sacrifice became even more vital to Christians when their early participation in the temple cult ended. It did so as a result of two challenges: the first from theologians and intellectuals, who argued that Christ had abolished sacrifice by making himself the ultimate victim and performing it "once for all" and the second from history, when the Romans destroyed the second temple and with it, to a great extent, all sacrificial activity of the kind Israel had endured and celebrated for centuries.<sup>18</sup> It is partly in response to these challenges, Lang argues, that the early church developed a sacrificial economy of its own, based on Jewish tradition, on a masculine line of succession, and on patrilineal values, but these newly refigured and revised and with new opportunities for further refiguration and revision as well.

Not wishing to push the historical evidence and sociological evidence unduly, we may note that this development of a sense of Jesus as a sacrificial son and the founder of a new cult does respond well to a number of problems in the context both of the particular situation in the life of Israel in New Testament times and of the evolving church. For during this time, the largely patriarchal social and personal boundaries that define religious community in Israel are threatened as never before and are much in need of sacrificial reinforcement.

With the Roman occupation and the expansion of a global Hellenistic culture, Jewish society in Palestine experiences pressure not only from the forces of imperialism and colonialism but also from assimilation and sectarianism as well. As Shaye Cohen and others have demonstrated, during this period, kinship and social identity among Jews gradually begins to be established, at least when disputed, through the matriline rather than the patriline. By rabbinic times, for instance, the mother's identity trumps the father's in the case of a difference between them, and a child is Jewish if born of a Jewish mother and a gentile father, but not vice versa.<sup>19</sup>

This kinship pattern does not constitute a return of some putative primitive matriarchy. Marriage in Israel still removes the woman to the man's home and inheritance still passes in patrilineal fashion from father to son. But it does represent a coming to the fore of the latent possibility of matrilineal succession, or at least of the importance of the maternal contribution to it, together with a new sense of the ways in which the cultural and spiritual legacy can be carried on. It also becomes more possible at this time to enter

the community of Jewish identity by conversion, though not entirely without invidious distinctions. (Converts, for instance, are not allowed to say, "God of Our Fathers" but have to say, "God of Your Fathers" during prayers.)<sup>20</sup>

This and other tendencies toward dispersion, attenuation of social identity, and discontinuity threaten the integrity and value of the spiritual treasure of Israel as traditionally defined and require profound revisions in its understanding and transmission. It does so for those who wish to identify with Jesus as well as for those who do not. As we might expect, and as Chilton, Lang, and others have argued, sacrificial discourse is important during these times, but its terms are contested, especially with respect to substitution and mediation.

Furthermore, as has been said, the work of sacrifice suffers a severe trauma, the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE). Partly as a result, several developments occur: In the first place, sacrificial motifs begin to migrate outside of temple or cult locations and to modulate into calls for ascetic renunciation, for instance, or for new exploration of saving energies "outside the camp" of the old order. At this time, too, as Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has shown, the symbolic capital of Israel is increasingly seen as reliant on text-based as opposed to cultic practices. Wisdom is transmitted from generation to generation, some rabbis begin to teach, primarily through the study of the Torah in the synagogue rather than through the maintenance of a pure lineage and service in the temple.

The aspiration of the religious man is less to fulfill his cult, and even in some cases his marital obligations, than to "make the Torah increase" by study and questioning, and by highly symbolic ties between (male) student and (male) teacher. "For his father brought him into this world, and his teacher who taught him wisdom brings him into the world to come," says the Avot, among the first rabbinic texts to reflect on Torah study in this way. There is a growing emphasis, too, on the synagogue and the home as places of worship and transmission of the heritage, a new interest in asceticism, martyrdom and in alternative ways of living, the founding of intentional communities, and the development of affinities beyond the normal bounds of family, ethnicity, and descent.<sup>21</sup> Deliberate choice, law, and language, as opposed to biological destiny, ritual, and cult, act as vehicles for adding value to the spiritual legacy and passing it along through time.

These changes in what it means to be a man of God, changes entailing the ascetic emulation of the deity and the devaluing of the patriline, make literal biological fertility less important here than symbolic social and linguistic inspiration. A man no longer has to be married or beget children to participate in the transmission and expansion of the symbolic capital of the community. Indeed, so attenuated does the patriline seem here that it becomes possible, as

Eilberg-Schwartz puts it, to imagine a God who “fathers a human child with no help at all from the seed of man.”<sup>22</sup> These changes in the patriline and the mode of production of symbolic value not only change what it means to be part of a mother and child pair, but what it means to be a father and son in Israel.<sup>23</sup> They are developed and extended in Rabbinic Judaism, in Christianity, and in Islam.

The full scope of Mary’s role here is, however, best understood as a matter of typology rather than history, and the Christian development of the mother-son, father-son drama mediated by sacrifice operates primarily in figural terms. In these terms, although Mary has often been referred to as the New Eve, she is also and importantly the Daughter of Zion and the New Abraham. The typology of Mary as Daughter of Zion takes its point of departure from the angel’s greeting to her in Luke’s gospel (Luke 1:28–29). As Laurentin points out, the greeting usually translated as “hail, Mary” from the Greek *chaire* (and the Latin *ave*) corresponds to the greetings of messianic joy addressed by the prophets to the Daughter of Zion – Israel collectively – in Zechariah 9:9, Joel 2:21–27, and especially Zephaniah 3:14–17.<sup>24</sup> The trope takes on a deeper significance, however, as we shall see, when Mary is placed in the context of her maternal and paternal ancestors.

The typology of Mary as the New Abraham is less to the fore in the tradition, but is derived from the many references to Abraham in a Marian context in the New Testament and is a running theme of Marian theology throughout the tradition from the patristic period to the present day. For Mary is, like Abraham, the perfect exemplar of the obedient servant of God and of sacred hospitality to the other, and she is a major, if silent, witness to the sacrifice and renewed life of her son and the establishment of a new religious covenant in his name. As we have begun to see, her assent to the annunciation, her place near the cross on Golgotha and the subsequent understanding of her foundational role in the Christian ecclesia echo, across the years, Abraham’s assent to the call to wander, his journey to Mount Moriah and the subsequent understanding of his foundational role in the religion of Israel (Genesis 22; Luke 1; John 19). In both cases, these figures at once participate in a discourse of sacrifice and help to reconfigure its terms.

While the title New Abraham has not been to the fore in figural interpretations, the link between these two figures is by no means a novum. Instances of this comparison may be found early and late in the tradition, ranging from the first hymn of Ephrem the Syrian on the nativity, which compares Abraham’s and Mary’s compassion for the poor, through John Henry Newman’s celebration of Mary’s faith as an augmentation of Abraham’s to more recent writings of the magisterium. “Did Abraham believe that a son

should be born to him of his aged wife?” Newman inquires rhetorically. “Then Mary’s faith must be held as greater when she accepted Gabriel’s message.”<sup>25</sup>

Ephrem’s is one of the more beautiful of these texts and allusions. In his hymn for the vigil of Christmas-Epiphany, he writes:

Serene is the night on which shines forth the Serene One Who came to give us serenity.

Do not allow anything that might disturb it to enter upon our watch.

Let the path of the ear be cleared; let the sight of the eye be chastened;

Let the contemplation of the heart be sanctified; let the speech of the mouth be purified.

Mary today has hidden in us the leaven from the house of Abraham;

Let us, therefore, love the poor as Abraham [loved] the needy.

Today she has cast rennet into use from the house of David, the compassionate one;

Let man have mercy on his persecutor as the son of Jesse on Saul.

The sweet salt of the prophets today is scattered among the peoples;

Let us acquire by it a new taste by which the former people would lose its flavor.

On this day of redemption, let us speak a speech of interpretation.<sup>26</sup>

Pope John Paul II draws on these and other sources to offer summary of the parallel between Abraham and Mary. In his catechetical statement on Mary, *Theotokos: Woman, Disciple and Mother*, Mary’s “act of faith” he suggests,

recalls the faith of Abraham, who at the dawn of the Old Covenant, believed in God and thus became the father of a great posterity (cf. Genesis 15:6; Romans 14). At the start of the New Covenant, Mary also exerted with her faith a decisive influence on the fulfillment of the mystery of the Incarnation, the beginning and synthesis of Jesus’ entire redeeming mission. The close relationship between faith and salvation, which Jesus stressed in his public life (cf. Mt 5:34; 10:52, etc.), helps us also to understand the fundamental role which Mary’s faith exercised and continues to exercise in the salvation of the human race.<sup>27</sup>

This statement draws on many years of reflection on Mary and Abraham in the magisterium, including several other papal documents that draw on this typology.<sup>28</sup> As John Paul’s earlier document *Redemptoris Mater* (1987) notes, just as Abraham is “our father in faith” (cf. Romans 4:12), so is Mary “our mother in faith,” for just as his *hineni*, “here I am” had inaugurated the old covenant, so does her *fiat mihi*, “be it done to me” inaugurate the new. Thus, Mary affirms her acceptance of and belief in the terms and promises of the angel’s promise, a promise that she will bear the Son of God, who will inherit

and rule over His kingdom. She exemplifies hope as well as faith, a hope for a truth that will trump the natural order, for just as Abraham and Sarah were by the time of the promise of Isaac barren, so was she barren, being a virgin.

*Redemptoris Mater* notes that the parallels between Abraham and Mary do not end here but extend with surprising consistency through the entire journey of faith each undergoes. For both figures must confront and endure what seem to be the inscrutable ways and unsearchable judgment of the Most High, who both promises redemption and increase to their line and demands acts and intentions that seem to counter that promise. In both cases, too, Mary and Abraham have also to bear a revelation that is in many respects challenging with respect to the religious understandings of their culture of birth, and they have to nurture and protect this new religious vision with prudence and persistence, even in the face of their own very partial understanding of its full extent. This task appears especially difficult when the revelation is seen to involve a potentially disruptive divine predilection, as the document puts it, an arbitrary seeming preference for one human lineage, one son, or set of sons, over all the others.

Though the encyclical does not quite state it this way, such a precedent and such a predilection are a mixed blessing. For especially in Genesis 22, Abraham is not only the father of faith but the father of sacrifice, and sacrifice not only in terms of the several strange burnt offerings he is induced to offer, but in terms of the supreme sacrifice for which he is asked at Mount Moriah, the sacrifice of his beloved son and heir. He is also – and as we shall see in a related way – the founding figure of a closed economy, one in which only one son may inherit, lest the legacy be diluted and diminished by partition or by marriage, which imports another kinship line.

Once again, we may look both early and late in the tradition to see this mandate made clear. In what its editor calls a Christian midrash on the story of Abraham and Sarah, Ephrem the Syrian writes of the importance of Abraham's having a single designated heir. Scripture, for Ephrem, shows that Abraham did not have "blessed seeds" (plural, emphasis added). Rather,

Only one is his seed that blesses all.  
If Abraham has a multitude  
Of blessed seeds – behold Esau  
And Ishmael are first-born sons  
Of the House of Abraham. By two cursed [men]  
[scripture] showed that the blessed seed is one.<sup>29</sup>

As another of the several twentieth-century papal statements on Marian doctrine, *Mariialis Cultus* (1974) makes clear, Mary shows what seems to be

a similar willingness to offer up the treasured life of her only son and heir to God. The episode of Mary and Joseph's presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple shortly after his birth alludes not only to the purification of the woman emerging from childbirth (Leviticus 12:6–8) but also to the cultic analogue of the Israelite sacrifice of the firstborn son (Exodus 13:11–16), though there is more here than mere observance of ritual law. Although the argument from silence may be a weak one, it is clear that Luke knew that the parents of a firstborn son offered silver pieces to a Levite to "redeem" the child (see Luke 2:49).<sup>30</sup> This willingness to consider the immolation of a firstborn son – or what is sometimes construed as a willingness – is also signified by Mary's presence at the crucifixion, where it is said that she unites herself with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and in a sense performs that sacrifice with him.

Making the assumptions here explicit – although with a certain tone-deafness to the emotional issues evoked – the papal document goes on to say:

The union of the Mother and the Son in the work of redemption reaches its climax on Cavalry, where Christ "offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to God" (Heb. 9:14) and where Mary stood by the cross (John 19:25), suffering grievously with her only begotten Son. There she united herself with a maternal heart to His sacrifice, and lovingly consented to the immolation of the victim which she herself had brought forth and also was offering to the eternal Father. To perpetuate down the centuries the Sacrifice of the Cross, the divine Savior instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the memorial of His death and resurrection, and entrusted it to His spouse the Church, which, especially on Sundays, calls the faithful together to celebrate the Passover of the Lord until He comes again.

The document cites in conclusion a twelfth-century prayer of St. Bernard of Clairvaux as further precedent for this understanding: "Offer your Son, holy Virgin, and present to the Lord the blessed fruit of your womb. Offer for the reconciliation of us all the holy Victim which is pleasing to God."<sup>31</sup> Behind this figure lies the shadowy precedent of Abraham, who also offered his Son on the altar to God.

Even though she is a woman and a mother, Mary can play a major role in this emerging discourse because she is understood as exempted from much that makes maternity problematic in a ritual, sacrificial context. Although through her fertilizing contact with the Holy Spirit she has an extremely close and potentially problematic alliance with the fathering otherness of the deity, she is nevertheless free from the implications pollution of sex, childbirth,

blasphemy, and mortality that might otherwise hover over this contact. There is thus no need to silence or exile her definitively from the narrative and the cult in the way that Sarah often is silenced and exiled.

Mary gains this freedom first through what comes to be understood in Christian traditions as her virginal conception of Jesus, this through a kind of miraculous "overshadowing" that is only metaphorically analogous to insemination by an earthly father. When in some Christian formations even this extraordinary condition seems insufficient to ward off dissemination and decay, further elaborations of Mary's status are made through added doctrines, among them, in Roman Catholicism for instance, the persistence of her virginity after childbirth, her own pure birth, and her exemption from the bonds of mortality. As indicated by the doctrines of the immaculate conception, perpetual virginity and assumption respectively, these conditions allow her to become and to remain prominent in a cult where strong sacrifice and priestly hierarchy are emphasized. They diminish in importance when and where that motives are in abeyance or where a motifs of alimentary sacrifice and communal and egalitarian identity tend to take their place.

#### THE CONCEPTION AND BIRTH OF MARY'S SON IN THE QUR'AN

In the name of these stories of Abrahamic and Marian sacrifice, and the long religious and doctrinal histories they entail, various religious orders and understandings form that are impossibly tangled and conflicted with one another. At his presentation in the temple, the gospel of Luke tells us an old man named Simon foretells that Jesus is "destined for the rising and falling of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed" (Luke 2:34). Mary brings these divisions into sharp focus, for she is in one person both the daughter of the old covenant and the mother of the new. Just as Jesus will be divisive for Israel so, it is said, a spear will "pierce" her own soul as well (Luke 2:34-35).

Christian exegesis has long associated this piercing with the divisions in and among the people of Israel over Jesus's messianic mission and identity. Jesus and Mary are alike "signs of contradiction" for the people of Israel and their heirs, signs that divide Jews, Christians, and Muslims in times to come. Like Abraham, Mary has a complex and often divisive role both within her own line of descent and beyond it; she is a figure that traces profound connections but also deep fault lines within and among the monotheisms.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Mary becomes the index of many of their theological and political divisions. These divisions over the theology of her conception and that of her child, her own religious and cultic status, and the degree of devotion due her haunt Christian traditions both from within and without.

In general, in these formations, as we shall see, where she is seen as the sacrificer or prototypical officiant, "lovingly consenting" to the "immolation" of her son, Mary, like him, inaugurates, underwrites, and blesses a specific, restricted, hierarchical religious order and the priesthood and ecclesiastical institutions devised to contain and protect it.<sup>33</sup> Where, however, she is seen as outside that sacerdotal discourse and order, either because its function in the economy of salvation is performed by repentance, amends, or other forms of sacrificial discourse, as in the Qur'an, or because it has been almost entirely subsumed into the alimentary sacrifice of communion, praise and thanksgiving, as in many forms of Protestantism, she stands outside that order and in some tension with it.

The accounts of Mary and of the conception and birth of Mary's son in the Qur'an, like the gospel accounts but acting as their counterexample, exhibit this underlying structure. These accounts are found in three Meccan and four Medinan Surahs.<sup>34</sup> The earliest and longest account is in Sura 19, which is titled "Mary" and begins with a parallel between Mary and Zachariah similar to that between Mary and Zachariah in Luke's gospel. In the former account, Zachariah's wife is barren, but he prays for a son and heir. His prayer is answered, though he asks how this might be. The Lord says "It is easy for Me" and notes that he has created Zachariah himself out of nothing. When Zachariah asks for a sign, the sign is to be his silence for three nights. When his son John is born, he is commanded to "hold on to the Scripture firmly," and is wise, pure, devout, and kind to his parents from his early days (Sura 19:9-15).

The emphasis here is strongly on Zachariah's and John's moral and ethical status and the need to represent the posterity of Jacob in the sense of right conduct, an order made up of those with whom the Lord is well-pleased (19:6). It is not on the need to continue the line of Israel as a biological and priestly patrimony. Consonant with this emphasis, Zachariah is not punished for skepticism by being physically muted (for he has made no ethical error) but is rather abjured to remain silent for three days merely as a symbol of his fatherhood. As 'Abdullah Yusef Ali, a major twentieth century scholar-translator of the Qur'an, comments, Zachariah does not express skepticism here but wonder; the sign is granted not to convince him of the truth, for he has faith; and the conception of John, while miraculous, is not dogmatically significant, for "even if there are material processes in forming the body, in accordance with the laws of nature, the real creative force is Allah."<sup>35</sup>

All is normative and righteous from birth, all is in direct and ever renewed contact with the divine, and all is thus utterly beyond the need for purification and mediation by sacrificial remedy institutionalized in a formal priesthood.

Even what might be regarded as John's later sacrificial death as a martyr is not agonistic, a matter of ordeal and transformation, but is rather peaceful and confirmative of a condition of purity that already exists. Peace is on him, the Qur'an says, "the day that he was born, the day that he died and it will be upon him the day that he is raised to life again" (19:15).

It is in this context that the Qur'an introduces the conception of Jesus. Here, again, the conception is virginal, unmediated, direct, unproblematic, and not as exceptional and theologically monstrous as from an Islamic perspective the gospel accounts would make it seem. An angel appears to Mary in the form of a human, who is only a messenger, and not a harbinger of the Holy Spirit. He announces to her that she will bear a son but does not refer to any mysterious "overshadowing." He merely refers to the truth already established in the account of John's conception, the truth that such a matter is "easy" for the Lord (19:21). It is a matter of universal mercy and power, not of some curious and exceptional manipulation of the laws of nature.

Furthermore, this virginal conception in the Qur'an, as Timothy Winter points out, is not made a precondition for the purity of mother or child nor is it particularly dogmatically significant – or no more so than the other miracles attending Mary's life, the provision of sustenance for her directly from Allah in her cell, or the visitation of the angel Gabriel. As Winter concludes, "Mary's virginity, while affirmed by most Muslims . . . bore no significance as a proleptic transcendence either of the flesh or of a peculiarly unregenerate femininity."<sup>36</sup> Barbara Stowasser, too, makes a similar point, noting that while some interpreters have thought that Mary's purity here included freedom from menstruation, these readings have remained marginal to the consensus-based doctrine that defines Mary's purity in ethical terms.<sup>37</sup>

Mary then experiences the pangs of childbirth and is driven to take refuge under a palm tree, where a river rises up from beneath her to cool her and fresh ripe dates fall into her hands (19:25). She thus gives birth not contrary to the order of nature but supported and sustained by it. Again, Winter is helpful here. Though the gospel is silent on the question of Mary's pangs, this detail, he points out, contrasts with the frequent patristic and apocryphal insistence in the Christian tradition that she felt no pain in the process of giving birth, for such pain is the result of Eve's fall and punishment (Genesis 3:16).<sup>38</sup> He notes that this contrast "may be an indication of the strength of Arab naturalistic reluctance to absorb negative images of birthing, which was seen as pleasing to God."<sup>39</sup>

When Mary brings the baby to her people, however, they cry out against her as if she has born a monstrosity, has "done something terrible" (19:27). They point out that she is a "sister of Aaron" and that her father was not "evil" nor

her mother "unchaste." Again, while "sister of Aaron" may imply that Mary was of priestly descent,<sup>40</sup> here the emphasis seems to be on the moral conduct of her forbears, both male and female.

Mary is rescued from her predicament not by a dream, by Joseph, or by some patriarchal form of legitimation by adoption or cultural recognition, far less by some priestly, sacrificial gesture, but rather by the prophetic wisdom and ethical authority of her son. The baby speaks from the cradle and says that he is a prophet, committed to a life of prayer and charity, and that he is deeply and again unproblematically bound to his mother by religious and moral ties. For, he says, the Lord has made him kind to his mother and "not domineering or graceless" (19:31). Thus, Jesus, like John, needs to undergo no sacrificial ordeal, at least of the kind that functions to mark his own maturation or his inscription into the unbroken patriline and genealogy that carry on the legacy of Israel.

Like John's, his death too is not agonistic, nor does it lead to some change in status or identity or some unnatural form of immortality outside of the normal order, for none of these changes are needed. "Peace was on me," he says, "The day that I was born and will be on me the day that I die and the day I am raised to life again." (19:33).

Thus, in the Qur'anic accounts of Abraham and likewise in the accounts of Mary, we find a different understanding of sacrifice, one in which the strong or expiatory sacrifice necessary to create a favored son and heir is discountenanced. Preferred are the sacrifice of a righteous and obedient heart (as in the case of Abraham's son) or in some instances the foreclosure of sacrifice altogether, as in the case of the dismissal of the so-called crucifixion as an illusory event. (That sacrifice returns, and returns with great power, in Islamic religious traditions is, as we have seen, certainly the case, but it does so precisely because, as in Christianity, issues of legitimacy, priority, and propagation of the faith arise again in all their intransigence in later generations.)

In this context, there is no problem with the "otherness" of female fertility nor with the undue contact of mothers with the divine, nor is there a related condition of original sin, for the true source of children is in every case God, who creates them directly, and not as a kind of father figure.<sup>41</sup> There is therefore no need to "rectify" a maternal overdetermination or putative condition of birth-impurity with some agonistic and sacerdotal institution of sacrifice. Furthermore, there is no need to establish the priority of one son over another by sacrifice, because in this vision, all are "in one line" (3:34), and the lineage is carried forward not by descent in a favored male line, a zero-sum game, but by ethical observance, an infinitely expandable legacy. Thus, Jesus's status as

a “mother’s son” is not problematic; indeed, the Qur’an refers to him as the Son of Mary, “held in honor in this world and the next” (3:45), clearly not a matter for derogation, as it may be in the gospel of Mark.<sup>42</sup>

There are, however, still deep underlying contradictions and unresolved problems running through this account of the birth of Mary’s boy. Among other things, there is the problem of preventing an overwhelming, potentially blasphemous and contaminating contact with an absolute God who is nevertheless as close to humans “as the jugular,” as a frequent saying in Islam goes. There is also that of finding a way to specify descent to maintain the theological balance between contribution of both male and female, and that of adjudicating among heirs, if only on the issue of what constitutes ethical obedience and what does not. It is perhaps for this reason that the Qur’an generates an intense discourse of cleanness and ethical purity, an intense need to protect its revelation from corruption at the hands of humans, and an intense theme of apocalyptic judgment, in which God and God alone, not the ritual and cultic inventions of men, with their tortured ecclesiastical inventions and their elaborate sacerdotal conceits, determines who is and who is not a participant in the divine economy.

Mary’s maternity and its relationship or absence thereof to the issue of sacerdotal sacrifice are at the heart of these problems and contradictions, though she is very differently envisioned in the different contexts in which she has been placed. Although these differences are the result of long processes of reflection and interpretation in and among the monotheisms, the parameters of the debate are first set in the gospels themselves, and it is to Mary’s few but vital appearances in the New Testament, their implications for her role in the lineage of Israel and her stance at the crucifixion or sacrificed her son, that we now turn.

## PART TWO



### MARY, MOTHERHOOD, AND SACRIFICE IN THE GOSPELS