

DOCTRINE FOR THE YOUNG

THE NAME MARY

by the Rev. Donald L. Rose

“And the virgin’s name was Mary” (Luke 1:27).

I do not know of any place in the Writings that gives the meaning of the name Mary. Nor is this verse in the Christmas story specifically explained. But I invite you to join in some thoughtful searching. In the book by Bishop de Charms we find inspiring encouragement to seek diligently for new insights into such things in the Word (see especially pages 14-16 of this book).

Should this phrase arrest our attention? “And the virgin’s name was Mary.” In answer to this, let us consider a similar phrase in the book of Genesis. It speaks of a handmaid, and it says that her name was Hagar (Gen. 16:1). Notice what the Writings say about this.

“When anyone’s name is stated in the Word as here that ‘her name was Hagar,’ it signifies that something is involved in the name to which attention should be given, for to ‘call by name’ means to know a person’s quality. No syllable in the Word is there without a cause, or without a signification in the internal sense of some actual thing” (AC 1896).

A casual reader might think the mention of a name is not worth attention. For example, one might think it unimportant that we have the name of Peter’s father and that the name was Jona. But the Writings point out that the name Jona comes from a Hebrew word meaning “a dove” and that this is of spiritual significance. (AE 443) The same passage invites us to take note of the fact that Peter is sometimes called that comes from the Hebrew word for hearing.

When the Lord told the parable of a rich man and a beggar, He gave a name for the beggar—Lazarus. There is an inner reason for this (AE 137:2).

Our interest here is in the name of the virgin mentioned in the Gospels. We often read of women whose names are not given. We are told of a widow whose son was raised to life. We read of a sick woman who touched the Lord’s garments; also, a paralyzed woman, a sinner, a Samaritan woman, a wife. But how many names do we read in the Gospels?

We find that the name Mary is by far the most emphasized name in the New Testament. There are a few names that appear but once. Joanna, the wife of Chuza, is mentioned once in the Gospel of Luke, as is Susanna (Luke 8:3). The name of the aged prophetess Anna occurs once. We are told about Herodias who plotted the death of John the Baptist, and of Salome, one of the witnesses to the crucifixion. (Mark 15:40). Evidently, these are not prominent names in the Gospels.

Other than “Mary” (a name mentioned more than forty times in the Gospels) there are only two names of any prominence. There is Martha, the sister of the man raised from the dead, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. There are but these two, and each of them is mentioned along with a Mary and as secondary to a Mary.

Martha was encumbered with external cares, but her sister Mary chose the better part. (Luke 10). Elizabeth greets her cousin, Mary, calling her “blessed” and the mother of her Lord. (Luke 1:42, 43). Evidently "Mary" is the feminine name of prominence in the New Testament. According to Young's Concordance the name is not from the Hebrew name "Miriam" (meaning thick or strong) but from the Hebrew word MARA, meaning, "bitter."

Let us look at this name in the Gospels with the meaning of bitterness. One could conclude that from a verse in John that three women stood together at the cross, each one of them named Mary. For we read “Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother and His mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene.” (John 19:25). It is something to contemplate—three at the cross with the name of bitterness. One recalls that the old man Simeon, in the Christmas story, said to Mary that a sword would pierce through her soul (Luke 2:34, 35). As Bishop de Charms points out, this saying of Simeon “foretells in the literal sense the suffering of Mary when the Lord was crucified.” Spiritually, it refers also to the temptations “of all who sought to embrace the Christian Faith.” (*Harmony of the Four Gospels* p. 57).

Besides the Mary of the Christmas story, we would mention three women named Mary. One of them was Mary's sister. (Two in the same family!) She is twice referred to as “the other Mary.” She was with the women who beheld the events at the crucifixion, and was one of the two women who witnessed the lying of the body in the sepulchre (Mark 15:47). She was one of those who went to the sepulchre, and to whom the angels said, “Fear not.” As they departed, the Lord met them and told them to go to the disciples with the good news. (Matt. 28).

There was also Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus. This family lived in the town of Bethany not far from Jerusalem. It is said that Jesus loved them (John 11:5), and it is likely that their home was often His resting-place. Concerning this Mary we read, “It was that Mary which anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair.” (John 11:1, 2). This is the Mary who symbolizes those who love to sit at the Lord's feet and hear His Word (Luke 10:39). The Lord said: “Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42).

Finally, there was the Mary who came from Magdala of Galilee, Mary Magdalene of the Easter story. In this Mary especially do we see evidence of the meaning of the name, bitterness. It was this Mary out of whom the Lord cast seven devils (Luke 6:2). We read of this woman standing out side of the sepulchre weeping bitterly. It was to her that it was said, “Woman, why weepest thou?” And then a single word was said by which she recognized her Master. That single word was "Mary."

The first time the Hebrew word Marah, or “bitterness,” was used as a name was when it became the name of a place. The name was used to tell a story of the time when the people found the water too bitter to drink. The waters of the place were bitter “therefore the name of it was called Marah.” (Exodus 15:23).

When we know the first person to apply that name to herself, we understand better why two girls of the same family should be so named. Mary’s family (like the family of Joseph) was of the house and lineage of David. The most famous of all their female ancestors was Ruth. The story of Ruth was especially treasured by this family. In that account, Ruth’s mother-in-law comes to Bethlehem and says, “Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me” (Ruth 1:20).

The name Mary is related to a story of bitterness, but it is a bitterness that leads to a new and higher happiness. The place of Marah is a place where the waters were bitter, but it is also the place where the water became sweet. When the angel Gabriel first addressed Mary, we read that she was “troubled” (Luke 1:29). The original Greek word is stronger than “troubled.” It has been translated “deeply disturbed,” or “greatly troubled.” But later in the same chapter we see Mary speaking beautiful words of the greatest joy. “My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.” This has been rendered, “My soul is full of joy in God my Saviour.” Most interesting to us in these words of the “Magnificat” is the saying that from that time onwards people would call Mary by the name of happiness. That Virgin who was deeply troubled at the salutation of an angel was destined thereafter to receive in an eminent way the name of happiness, the name “blessed.” “For behold from henceforth, all generations shall call me happy [MIKARIOS, BLESSED, HAPPY]” (Luke 1:47).

One who is really affected with the truth casts in the mind and ponders in the heart. In the affection of truth there is the sweetest of delights. But anyone who follows the Lord or aspires to be of His church will meet something of spiritual temptation. That free determination to look to higher values than the cares of natural life must surely lead to some painful and bitter times. We are, indeed, being asked to take up our cross. We are not following the easy way of natural life. The Lord tells us that in the World we will have tribulation, but this bitterness is attended with hope, and He tells us to be of good cheer (John 16:33).

These are but a few thoughts that we may relate to “Mary.” Perhaps we can think of the call of Mary when we contemplate what the call of spiritual life means to us. And we may remember that beautiful response from the girl whose name meant bitterness but whom all generations shall call blessed. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy Word.”

Text: Luke 1:27