

CELEBRATING MARY: A BIBLICAL EXAMPLE

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Many Christians misunderstand the vibrant celebration of Mary in Catholic circles, failing to see its origin and inspiration in scripture. In fact, the primordial example of Marian veneration comes from the story of the Visitation, recorded in the Gospel of Luke:

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' (Lk. 1:39-45)

Mary is in the spotlight in this pericope; the entire passage extols her. At the sound of *Mary's* greeting, the unborn John the Baptist is overcome with joy. Elizabeth twice proclaims the blessedness of *Mary* (only once extolling the blessedness of her Child). Elizabeth also expresses her overwhelmment at the privilege of welcoming *Mary* in her home: "why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" (v. 43).

Even though Mary receives the most direct praises in this pericope, however, God remains preeminent. Elizabeth recognizes Mary as worthy of honor only as she is "the mother of [the] Lord," and because she "believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." In all, the glory is ultimately God's, who, in Mary's own words, "has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant," and "has done great things for me" (vv. 48-49). Mary immediately returns the acclaim she receives to God (vv. 46-55), rejoicing in Him (v. 47).

Of note, the exclamation "blessed are you among women" evokes the song of Deborah in Judg. 5, which the Israelites sang in a festive procession (cf. Judg. 5:11).. In the midst of glorifying Yahweh (v. 2ff.), the song turns to praise the valiant fight of "the commanders of Israel" (v. 9), the "peasantry in Israel" and Jael in particular, who for slaying Sisera is honored as the "most blessed among women" (Judg. 5:24-27). Elizabeth, by

applying the same title to Mary, resumes the ancient Israelite tradition of honoring heroes of faith (cf. 2 Sam 1:17-27).

All Generations

Mary follows the greeting “blessed are you” with a song of praise of her own, during which she predicts, “surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed” (Lk. 2:48). Apparently, Elizabeth’s ecstasy, reverence, and song-like exclamations of blessing for “the mother of [the] Lord” were never intended to be an isolated event. All generations are to experience the same joy in the Spirit, leaping and crying aloud at the memory of “she who believed.”

Catholics, moved by the same Spirit, share the enthusiasm of Elizabeth and John. We extol Mary’s blessedness, honoring her as the Israelites honored their heroes: in music, exclamations, and festive processions. And yet, even when she is the primary subject of our adulation (as in Lk 1:39-45), we know Christ is the one ultimately glorified. He is her worthiness and her honor. One can only hope that all Christians, reflecting upon the same scriptures, will someday join Catholics in the same celebration.