

THE HEART OF MARY IN LUKE 2: A BIBLICAL IMAGE, PROPHETIC WORDS

INTRODUCTION

Luke, known as the author of the “third Gospel” and the “beloved physician” (Colossians 4:14), speaks of the “heart of Mary” (2:19, 35, 51). Tenney admits that the actual source of these texts is not known, “but it is more than likely that they came from Mary herself. . . she lived into the apostolic period [and] could very well have told this to the early leaders of the church, including Luke”.¹

The reference to “heart” is easily romanticized and spiritualized. While our present work will not deny the attributed power given to the heart of Mary, we will focus on the meaning of the image as presented in the Bible. In Hebrew the term for “heart” derives from לב, and is understood as inner man, mind, will, along with heart. In Greek, the term used by Luke is ΚΑΡΔΙΑ, understood as mind, character, inner self, will, and heart. J. L. McKenzie discusses the complex image of the heart as found in the Bible. Although the heart is recognized as the “chief bodily focus of emotional activity”, the Bible presents the heart as “the seat of intelligence”. It is where decisions are made and might align itself most closely with the English “mind or will”. In the New Testament, “the heart is the seat of divine operations which transform the Christian . . . the spirit of wisdom and revelation and the knowledge of Christ enlighten the eyes of the heart (Eph 1:17f)”.²

The image of the heart is a powerful one throughout the world of myths and legends as well. The heart represents the “centre of being; both spiritual and physical”. It is also the centre of the “wisdom of feeling”; mediating between “selfless consciousness” and “selfish egotism”; the battle between “idealism and personal desire”.³

The term for “heart” occurs over nine hundred times in the Bible, “almost never literally”. The heart was regarded as the “seat of affections” and the “seat of intellect and of the will. . . Often it signifies the innermost being. . . Often the word *heart* implies the whole moral nature of fallen humanity”.⁴

¹ M. Tenney, Gen ed., *New International Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 628.

² J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce, 1965), 345.

³ S. Gordon, *The Encyclopedia of Myths and Legends* (London: Headline, 1993), 312.

⁴ Tenney, 424.

It should be noted that the image of the heart is prominent only in Luke's Gospel. Luke was a gentile. Therefore, he may have been more comfortable with mythic imagery than the other evangelists. Also, tradition holds that he was a physician and the imagery of the heart being a center point of the spiritual and physical aspects of a human may have held more importance and interest for him than the other Gospel writers.

KEY BIBLICAL TRADITIONS

There are several powerful Scriptural passages which seem to form the basis for the construction of the Lukan verses and his understanding of the image.

Judges 16:17-18

In the Delilah account within the Samson narratives, we read of an exchange between Samson and Delilah in which he tells her the "secret" of his strength. Judges 16:17 literally reads; "He told her all his heart". Similarly, Judges 16:18 reads; And when Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart" and "he has told me all his heart". Often, the first two references are rendered something on the order of "took her into his confidence". While there can be no doubting that a certain trust is demonstrated by his words, it would be misunderstanding the textual imagery to see this as a romantic expression or licentiousness on the part of Samson, as some have argued.⁵ This cannot be construed only as a manifestation of his love for Delilah (Judges 16:4). Rather, it is the result of her persistence in questioning him and finally taking her seriously enough to offer a glimpse of the relationship between him and YHWH. The text suggests a redoubling of her efforts to find the source of his strength (Judges 16:6) and he is responding to this concerted effort.⁶ The seriousness of her questions demanded a serious, honest, answer- not the lovers' games he had been playing. He told all that he knew of the source of his strength; to keep his hair uncut. This being the only restriction mentioned by Samson agrees with his birth account; only the restriction of cutting his hair was placed on the boy to be born (Judges 13:5).

Therefore, overall, the Samson and Delilah account illustrates how the image of the heart represents the will, intellect, and discernment. He discerned the serious nature of her questions, by an act of will he told her all his knowledge of the source of his strength, and gave her a glimpse of his inner self and relationship with YHWH. It is a powerful and intense scene which shows the manifold properties of the heart.

⁵ Perhaps, Matthew Henry's Commentary typifies this argument most precisely.

⁶ Similarly, following many early Biblical commentators and expositors, Delilah seems to be following a new tone in his answer regarding the vow of uncut hair. This serious tone of Samson prompted her to go to the Philistines once more after three failed attempts.

PROVERBS 27:19

A difficult passage, Proverbs 27:19 seems to read; “As in water, a face to a face, so a man’s heart to a man”.⁷ The, conspicuously missing, action has to be established by context. But, there seems to be a literary parallel being drawn between the properties of water and the heart. Therefore, the concepts of reflection and revelation must be surmised. In light of the text being in the “wisdom” literature and that there exists a relational quality in the second part of the couplet that refers to man, the rendering of reflect/reveal seems to be the closest to the meaning of the original author.

The construction is unique; water and heart are parallel as are the doubled terms of face and man. Therefore, the riddle that must be answered is what does water do to the face that can parallel the heart can do toward man. The answer is that water reflects the outer man whereas the heart reveals the inner man.

M. Fox argues along these lines. When one looks into water, one sees his own face. Likewise, when one looks at another’s heart, to determine how the person feels, one “sees a reflection of his own heart. . . In other words, we project our own feelings onto others”. Fox calls the verse enigmatic and points to several major understandings;

- 1) Community of feelings, an experience which would occur between two individuals sharing the feelings.
- 2) Insight, wherein the encounter with the heart gives greater knowledge.
- 3) Introspection, in which the heart is only a mirror of an individual’s nature- not his true nature.
- 4) Fellowship, as the verse has been understood as suggesting a turning to another.
- 5) Parallelism, in that as people see each externally they can also see into others’ hearts.
- 6) Recognition of others’ feelings, by looking into your own heart you will see what others feel.⁸

Following Fox’s argument, it seems that the difficulty with this verse and its renderings is the tendency to move beyond the boundaries of the analogy. Luke seemed to understand

⁷ An alternate rendering has been “as one face differs from another, so does one human heart from another”

⁸ M. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31* (New Haven: Yale, 2009), 812-813.

this difficulty and avoided it with his verse about the heart of Mary. Jesus is always part of the experience which Mary took into her heart. Luke seems to be depicting a bond between Jesus and Mary in that Mary is a reflection of Jesus.

2 ENOCH 65.2.2

Part of the Apocrypha, the books are named after an antediluvian patriarch whose lineage was traced to Cain (Genesis 4:17). Enoch is a unique figure in that his life was noticeably shorter than most of the figures of the era, even his son, Methuselah, (Genesis 5: 18-24) and that he seemed to enjoy a singular relationship with God, as he was remembered to have “walked with God” and was “taken” by God. In Sirach 44:16, Enoch is called “a wonder of knowledge for all generations”. McKenzie argues that, based on the few and brief notices about him, Enoch was a “much larger figure in popular tradition” than scriptural traditions.⁹

Scholars have debated as to the dating of this book, also known as “Slavonic Enoch” or the “Secrets of Enoch”. However, a consensus of sorts seems to agree on the time period of First Century BC or the First Century AD. By all accounts it was widely popular among early Christians and, therefore, it seems highly likely that Luke was familiar with the work.

The text of 2 Enoch 65:2 deals with man being made in God’s image and it reads that the heart was given to “understand, to reason”. Some renderings simply read, “to think”. However, the concepts of understanding and reason being given to man, making him singular among creation, reflect the philosophical trends of the Greco-Roman era. Beginning with Aristotle, a formative question in Philosophy was to ask how man is different from other animals. The Aristotelian answer, followed by many, was that man was different, and had a purpose, in that he could reason. By reasoning, man could fulfill his ultimate purpose.

Luke, a gentile, would be aware of the philosophical trends of thought. Therefore, these trends seem to be reflected in his writings about the heart of Mary.¹⁰ He portrays her heart as a place of reflection, thought, and understanding.

⁹ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 239.

¹⁰ In-depth analysis is difficult as 2 Enoch, as the book only became widely known in 1892 and it was preserved in Slavonic literature. Therefore, complete scholarly analysis is still ongoing, with only general comments being possible.

THE LUKAN TEXTS

There is a consensus among scholars that the “third Gospel” is the “work of a Gentile Christian written for Gentile Christians”. He painstakingly worked to “find the Greek words which would be both an intelligible and a faithful presentation of the gospel traditions”. Lue’s Gospel was infused with a “universalism” that “expressed the belief that the gospel is addressed to all men”. Luke wrote “more for Greeks than for Jews” as he wanted the Greco-Roman society to embrace his universalist theology.¹¹

Significantly, Luke emphasizes the role of Mary in the birth account of Jesus (Luke 1-2). He relies on many Old Testament texts and traditions to convey the messianic nature of Jesus. However, his depiction of Mary has been debated among scholars. McKenzie sees a difficulty in reconciling the messianic texts of the Old Testament, which appear throughout Luke 1-2 with the wonder and astonishment to which he also alludes (Luke 2:33, 48). He also points to a “lack of understanding” of Jesus on Mary’s part (Luke 2:50). His solution follows;

“Lk’s sources apparently had two variant conceptions of Mary; in one she was aware to some extent of the messianic character of her son, and in the other she was unaware of it. The messianic texts come very probably from the expansion of the infancy narratives by early Christian teachers”.¹²

McKenzie’s argument is compelling, as there may have been various memories and traditions which were attached to Mary. However, the solution does not readily present itself in Luke simply incorporating a blatant contradiction. Rather, the solution to the problem to which McKenzie points lies in the image of the heart. The heart, in the Jewish and Greek perspectives, had a wide array of properties and characteristics attributed to it. Such an entity would be able to absorb and reflect the events unfolding before her.¹³ The wonder or astonishment would be a human response to the events and words she witnessed and heard. Luke saw and understood the apparent contradiction. Therefore, he chose an image, the heart, which the ancient world could comprehend reconciling the conflicting emotions. By using the image of the heart, Luke was able to merge the variant memories seamlessly while preserving both the singular messianic character of Jesus and Mary embracing and growing into her role in Jesus’ ministry.

¹¹ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 526.

¹² *Ibid.*, 552.

¹³ In modern vernacular, she would “process” the events..

LUKE 2:19

The text, literally, reads that “Mary was treasuring up these matters pondering them in the heart of her. The construction is similar to Genesis 37:11, in the Joseph traditions, where Jacob kept these words or, as sometimes rendered, kept these matters (in mind). The construction of these verses causes a parallel between “heart” and *dbr*, a Hebrew term with a wide semantic field. It is usually translated “word”. But, the connotations include “thing, matter, event”. Ancient peoples saw a dynamic, living element, in the spoken word. Relevant to Luke, the word lived and was not completed until it was fulfilled. The power of the word is a reflection on the speaker.¹⁴

The Genesis text uses this imagery to “subtly” introduce a theological importance to the words of Joseph. The pondering of Jacob completes the theological significance of the dreams.¹⁵ Significantly, the dreams are future oriented.

A parallel construction to the Lukan text is found in Daniel 7:28. The Daniel text is the culmination of a powerful apocalyptic vision. Because of the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who actively persecuted the Jews, Daniel kept silent.¹⁶ Again, this image speaks to the importance of the events just narrated. Also, like the Genesis passage, the emphasis is future events.

J. Fitzmyer points out that this verse is part of a series of reactions to “angelic manifestation”; that of the shepherds, those whom the shepherds told, and Mary. Mary treasuring and pondering these things is how “Luke depicts Mary trying to hit upon the meaning of all that she has witnessed herself and heard from the shepherds”. This refrain will be echoed in Luke 2:51 and although she has some understanding of the role of her son as the “Davidic Messiah”, Luke shows that she has not “perceived the deep implications of everything”. Fitzmyer further comments;

“Mary’s reaction to what has happened is something that she keeps to herself, and is contrasted to the reaction of the shepherds who go forth to spread the news, and to the reaction of wonder and astonishment of those who heard the news. Her treasuring and pondering is part of the picture of the ‘believing woman’, ‘the handmaid of the Lord’”.¹⁷

¹⁴ McKenzie, *Dictionary*, 938.

¹⁵ E. Maly, “Genesis”, *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1:38.

¹⁶ L. Hartman, “Daniel”, *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1:457.

¹⁷ J. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (NY: Doubleday, 1970), 397-398.

Luke uses a phrase, rendered treasuring or pondering, that literally means “tossing them together in her heart”. It is a construction that seems peculiar to Luke. It depicts Mary “trying to hit upon their right meaning”.¹⁸ In other words, Mary is depicted as turning these events and images around in her intellect, her heart, trying to understand all the complexities and power behind them. B. Buby expands on this argument. By keeping this things in her heart, Mary is the “first Christian believer [who] attempts to plumb the meaning of God’s action among his people through the birth of her son, but she, too, as a believer cannot comprehend the full significance of the happening”.¹⁹ Buby will also argue that “her humility, acceptance, and obedience to the word of God makes of her a believer-disciple for ‘those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart and bring forth fruit with patience’”.²⁰

LUKE 2:35

The devout man, Simeon, speaks of the future of Mary’s child and then turns his attention to her; a sword shall pierce your soul too, so that thoughts of many hearts may be revealed”. Again the words are future oriented. Mary is part of the ministry of Jesus and, thus, her role is expanded from only maternal to being a “faithful disciple”. The hearts that will be revealed are “those hostile or antagonistic thoughts that will cause human beings to resist the ministry of Jesus itself”.²¹ Therefore, Luke seems to be suggesting that Mary, as a disciple, will extend the ministry and act as a buffer or mediator between Jesus and those resistant to his words.

The image of the sword is used by Luke. C. StuhlmueLLer points to the context of Mary being extolled in the Gospel. Therefore, he offers the comment;

“The sword could be indicative of the sorrow experienced by a humble person before the demands of an exalted vocation, by a delicately thoughtful person before the profound mystery of salvation or by a sympathetic person before the revenge inflicted on the innocent”.²²

Mary fulfills two of these clauses; a humble or lowly person bestowed with an exalted vocation (Luke 1:48) and the thoughtful person before the mystery of salvation as embodied in her son, Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Ibid., 413.

¹⁹ B. Buby, *Mary, The Faithful Disciple* (NY: Paulist, 1985), 77.

²⁰ Buby, 77.

²¹ Fitzmyer, 423,

²² C. StuhlmueLLer, “The Gospel of Luke”, *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 2: 125.

Fitzmyer speaks to the enigmatic nature of the verse. The sword is an intense and powerful image and places the “stress on Mary’s individual lot”. He terms this the “sword of discrimination”, discrimination between falling and rising, and places it in a rich historical and Old Testament background. The phrase echoes the LXX Ezekiel 14:17 also the Sibylline Oracle 3.316. The Lukan context is the idea that Jesus will cause the “rise and fall” of many in Israel and Mary, as part of Israel, will be part of the events. Luke seems to suggest that Mary will endure the pain of realizing that Jesus’ mission and obedience to the Word of God will supersede familial loyalties; a theme that will be picked up in 8:21 and 11:27-28.²³

Luke draws a powerful parallel between soul (psuche’) and heart. The soul is immaterial, the heart is not. A sword can pierce the heart, only metaphorically can it pierce the soul. However, the meanings of the two words overlap as both connote the inner self and the seat of affections and will. Luke is using a concrete image to depict Mary as part of the ministry of Jesus.

Luke 2:51

The setting of this phrase is the independent finding of Jesus in the Temple. Regarding Mary, Luke is continuing that which is introduced in the Simeon oracle (2:35) in the image of the “sword of discrimination” piercing her. Luke illustrates Jesus’ obedience to his earthly parents in leaving with them, but his “independent conduct” depicts his “obedience as son toward his heavenly Father transcends even that filial piety to Mary and Joseph”. For Luke, “it is much more important that her maternal ties yield to those of Jesus’ heavenly Father”. As in the notice in 2:19, Mary is accepting all the events and words trying to hit upon their right meaning.²⁴

Although in 2:50, Luke speaks to Mary and Joseph not fully comprehending the actions and words of Jesus and, in doing so, he uses a stark and powerful comment; “and they did not understand”. This is not to belittle Mary or Joseph, but a reflection of the complexity with which Luke viewed Jesus. Yet, keeping these events in her heart was a sign of the “gradual awareness of Mary about her son that is the Lukan picture of her”.²⁵

Mary must “grow again and again” to fully comprehend the actions and words of her son. Buby suggests that “the scene in the temple area confirms that necessity to grow further in understanding her Son’s relationship to God his Father and her own relationship to that

²³ Fitzmyer, 430

²⁴ Fitzmyer, 438

²⁵ Fitzmyer, 445-446.

same God”. This event is an example of the “sword of discrimination” and with it her heart is pierced but her faith and knowledge deepens and grows.²⁶

Mary is given a glimpse of the dynamic relationship between Jesus and the Father and is finding her place in regard to this relationship. Mary is seeing an example of authority and balance between earthly, familial, ties and the salvific will of the Father. Following Buby and Fitzmyer, here is the “sword of discrimination” causing her parental authority to recede while the plan of salvation takes to the forefront. This is part of the rising and falling spoken of by Simeon, within the Holy Family. Mary had to know when to defer to the will of the Father; to subordinate her own will and parental authority for the plan of salvation. This determination was an act of thought and will that originated in the heart of Mary.

CONCLUSIONS

Many scholars, as typified by Fitzmyer and Buby, see the references to the heart of Mary as an illustration of her not understanding the full meaning of the events. While she is of the created order and may not understand the mind of God, her pondering and treasuring these events and words do not speak to a lack of comprehension. Mary knew the Holy Books and the Annunciation foretold the role her yet-to-be born son was to play. There is no indication of Mary not accepting and embracing the news, hence she is a “faithful disciple”, as Buby would term it, as she is acting upon the word of the Divine messenger as through it was guaranteed and not yet seeing the fulfillment of the words.²⁷

Fitzmyer, in his literal rendering of Luke 2:19, seems to capture the singular position and gift of Mary. She is “tossing” them about in her heart to “hit upon” the correct meaning. In other words, like the practice of many humans, Mary is turning the events and words over and over in her intellect, her heart, to process and comprehend all the nuances and aspects of what had just transpired. Her knowledge and understanding, her heart, is tasked to expand in proportion with the revelations of her son, the Christ.

We see similar “expansive” role in other Gospels. While Mark does not focus on Mary, he does not deny her role. Mary takes on a more prominent role in Matthew 1:23, as she is the virgin that was foretold by Isaiah and was integral to the sign to the “house of David”, which was to be either deep as the nether world or high as the sky (v.10). John’s Gospel redefines her role of mother to encompass all Christians, as represented by the “Beloved Disciple” John, at the foot of the Cross (John 19:25-27).

²⁶ Buby, 81.

²⁷ This is similar to the criteria of the roll call of the great heroes of faith, found in Hebrews 11.

Therefore, with the image of the heart of Mary, Luke is weaving together Biblical and literary traditions with the early Christian theology. It is a striking image that combines connotations of intellect and emotions and the depths of the inner person. According to Luke, Mary's heart can accept and expand to understand the events and words. At that point, she becomes a faithful reflection of the ministry of her Son, Jesus Christ.

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APPENDIX: The Catholic Devotion

LUKE 2:35- INSPIRATION FOR SWORD IN HEART

Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a popular method of expressing faith among Christians; particularly Catholics. The current understandings of the Immaculate Heart are often born out of theological interpretations of Mary's life and faith. While these interpretations are valuable, they often do not encompass the rich Biblical imagery which the Immaculate Heart evokes.

It seems that the image of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, with her heart pierced by a dagger or sword, echoes the Lukan interpretation found in 2:35. As we have noted, Luke draws a parallel between "soul" and "heart" and throughout the centuries the connotation of "heart" became the more popular. The prophecy of Simeon is also said to have formed the basis for the devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows, *Beata Maria Virgo Perdolens*, and Our Mother of Sorrows, *Mater Dolorosa*. These images portray Mary as having seven daggers or swords piercing her heart.

The heart of Mary has gathered the attention of Christians since the Gospels. She has always been recognized for her work in the redemptive process, her faith, and love. However, it was only by, approximately, 1000 AD that stylized and regular devotions to the Heart of Mary began to emerge. Most religious scholars see the devotion as taking a definitive shape and force in the Middle Ages; promoted by men such as Anselm of Canterbury and Bernard of Clairvaux, developed further Mechtilde, Gertrude the Great,

and Bridget of Sweden. Some of the writings of Bernardine of Siena, often called “Doctor of the Heart of Mary”, have been formally adopted by the Roman church for the feast of the Heart of Mary.

Devotion to the Heart of Mary was spreading throughout the ascetic and contemplative areas of the Church. It was only in the 1600’s, with John Eudes, that the devotion was propagated on a widespread public basis and we begin to see a movement to have a feast in honor of the Heart of Mary. He worked throughout France, established societies, and wrote *Coeur Amirable* in 1681. Although Rome was reluctant to embrace the devotion, the popularity of the Heart of Mary spread. In 1805, Pope Pius VII allowed a feast in honor of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. This devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary was buttressed by the visions of Catherine Laboure’, of the Daughters of Charity of Paris. In 1830 she had a vision which was the inspiration for the “Miraculous Medal”; first crafted in 1832 it shows the Immaculate heart of Mary side-by-side with the Sacred heart of Jesus. On the reverse side of this medal we see clearly the Biblical imagery with which most are familiar in most renderings of the Immaculate Heart; the flame and her heart pierced by a dagger. Additionally, the reverse side features an image of a cross on top of the letter “M”. Many have interpreted this as echoing Mary standing at the foot of the Cross of Jesus, a echoing the Johannine Gospel account. Although beneath the image of the cross, the prominent “M” is intertwined along the line that stands for the ground on which the cross stood. We would propose that it also seems to indicate the foundational nature of Mary, inclusive of all the Biblical themes she culminates and represents, to the mission of Jesus. In other words, Mary was seen as being inextricably part of the ministry of Jesus.

It seems the final element, the thorns, was introduced at Fatima, to three shepherd children, in 1917. In the words of Lucia, one of the children, the Heart was “vertically encircled by large thorns that pierce it on all sides. The thorns alone, of the entire apparition, are not made of light. They look burnt-out, brown, and natural in quality”.²⁸ The thorns are a most striking feature and, perhaps, the feature that has been most subject to various depictions.

The Immaculate Heart of Mary has come to reflect the joys, sorrows, virtues and faith that are shown in the life of Mary through her few presentations in the Bible. It hints at her virginity, speaks to the love she has for son, and how this love is extended to all Christians. As to the issue of the physical reality of the Immaculate Heart, we will leave this to the Theologians and other Mariologists.

²⁸ J. Pelletier, *The Sun Danced at Fatima* (NY: Image, 1983) 48.