

Is Saying the "Hail Mary" Biblical?

Hail, Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed are thou amongst women, and blest is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen.

There is, for some reason, much Christian opposition to this prayer said by Catholics and some other Christian Churches that give Veneration to the Virgin Mary. The opposition seems to focus on two serious misconceptions that some non-Catholics have about the Virgin. The first, and certainly the most grievous of the two, is that Catholics Worship Mary when we say it. The second, which is not so much grievous as it is ridiculous, is that since the prayer is not in the Bible, then it shouldn't be used. I'll start with the second error before moving on to the more involved first one.

A) Breaking Down the Prayer:

"Hail, Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee" is the introduction Gabriel gave Mary as he declared the Annunciation and is found in Luke 1:28 (different translations vary slightly on wording). Only Mary's name is added to the prayer, so as to clarify the subject, whereas in the Bible it was already made quite clear (verse 27). Actually, the exact wording of Luke 1:28, "Hail, *favored one*...", is the one and only time in the entire Bible where an angel greets a human with a *title* instead of the person's proper name. I will get to the significance of this shortly.

"Blessed are thou amongst women, and blest is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus" is found in Luke 1:42 (again, different translations may vary), with "Jesus" added for clarity.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God" is merely a rewording of what has already been said and serves as a transition from the first half of the prayer to the second, much like the refrain in a song helps mark the different verses. Curiously, to call her "the mother of God" still needs more explanation and I will go into that in **Topic B**. It would seem to me that since Luke 1:35 explicitly states that her child will be called the Son of God, she should be, by definition, the child's mother. Saint Paul does not appear to have a problem with this: ...God sent his Son, born of a woman... (Galatians 4:4, more of this passage will be discussed later). Still, there is some interesting history wrapped up in this one line. So, while this line itself may not be explicitly stated in the Bible, we will soon learn how much of the Bible is actually contained in these few words.

"pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death" is perhaps the greatest problem many Protestants have with the prayer, as they claim it is a form of Worship, therefore making Mary an Idol. I will not go into a full explanation here as to the differences between Veneration and Worship, although it needs to be stressed that they are not the same. Appropriate Veneration is not only *allowed* by the Bible, it is *demand*ed by the Bible. The Ten Commandments themselves show us such an example (Honor thy father and thy mother). We see Saint Paul apologizing at least once in the Acts of the Apostles for not giving proper respect to figures of authority (23:5). The Gospels and the Letters both require us to respect authority (Matthew 23:2-3 and Romans 13:1-7, just to name two). And if one remembers, we just saw Gabriel, an Angel of God, Venerating Mary by calling her "favored one."

In **Topic C**, I will address the Biblical support for asking for Mary's intercession. Of course, even a cursory look at this line is proof enough that this is not Worship. Asking Mary to "pray for us" clearly shows she has not been elevated to deity status. If she were, then we would not ask her to pray for us, but rather for her to grant our prayer. As it stands, we see without a doubt that we are asking for

intercession, just like we might ask our friends to pray on our behalf (more in **Topic C**).

B) Mary as the Mother of God: The debate over Mary being the mother of God is quite surprising considering the Biblical testimony supporting it, yet is nothing new. Letters of Saint John are believed to have been directed at such matters when he warns against the "anti-Christ." When Christianity was no longer criminalized by the Roman Empire, the first heresies to be addressed by formal council dealt with this very issue (The Synods of Antioch and the First Council of Nicea in the 4th Century and Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. are particularly important concerning this paper). But if scripture is so clear on this matter, why was there debate then and why does it still exist today?

For the sake of space, I must abbreviate here. Ultimately, it comes down to the question of what is the nature of the Christ. If He is God, the one who is hinted at and even seen in the shadows in the Old Testament, then He is eternal and therefore cannot be "born." There are three possibilities that can be considered outside of the Catholic Church's understanding (which is also understood by most Protestants).

The first possibility is that Jesus was merely an avatar, a costume He wore for some time so as to be able to interact with us in a personal manner. The main problem with this theory is that, if this is the case, then His passion was a farce. He did not really suffer for our sins because His physical body was not real. Jesus would not have shared in our suffering, but rather mocked it. While this is not the place to go into detail, the whole concept of Jesus defeating death by His own is in jeopardy because Jesus did not die.

The second possibility is that Jesus was merely a man who, like Noah, Abraham, Moses and David, was singled out by God for a special purpose. A purpose so special that God may have done the unprecedented and adopted him (this is Adoptionism, and was declared a heresy at both Antioch and Nicea). The problem with this is that it also makes Jesus a pathological liar. Jesus cannot truthfully say He saw Satan fall (Luke 10:18), nor call Himself "I Am" (no less than 8 times in the Gospel of John), nor any of the other indications He gave of His being eternal. If Jesus was a human picked out especially by God, then the Jewish religious leaders were quite justified in having him executed for blasphemy (note me using the uncapitalized "him" this time) because he would not be a god. And if Jesus was a mere man who had been adopted by God, then how do we reconcile Galatians 4:4-7: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, *so that we might receive adoption*. As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God."? (italics mine). Note how awkward and contradictory this passage is if it is Jesus and not us that are being adopted.

The third possibility is to depict Jesus as a pagan demigod, like Hercules. This does answer the issues concerning Jesus as an avatar, but fails to answer the problems of Jesus being merely human. It also presents new questions all its own. Demigods have to prove themselves to claim their divine inheritance, otherwise they remain mortal. One could argue that the temptations in the desert and/or the crucifixion were His trials, but God the Father already announced His pleasure and fatherhood during the Baptism which took place before either event. Furthermore, we are constantly told in scripture that those events were for our sake, not His.

The Catholic Church's position, which has remained the same since the Council of Chalcedon, is to say that the nature of Jesus is not just divine and not just human, but *both* fully human *and* fully divine. Two distinct yet perfectly united natures. While the mystery of how this can be can never be

fully known in this life, neither is such a concept unique within Christianity. We see mysterious unions throughout our faith. In fact, unions are so common to Christianity that it is simply taken for granted. As early as the 2nd chapter of Genesis, man and woman are two separate entities that were meant to become one. All Christian Faiths that acknowledge the Triune God proclaim faith in the mystery of three persons in one God to be true. There is the matter of our own dual natures: fully spiritual (our soul) and fully physical (our bodies). If it is so easy to accept our own dual nature, why is it so hard to accept Jesus as having united human and divine natures?

We now must understand where those natures come from. One can either *create* a *new* nature (like a sculptor making a statue out of rock) or one can *beget* a *like* nature (like the same sculptor fathering children). Now, if Jesus was begotten as opposed to being created and has two distinct yet united natures, then His human nature could only have come from Mary. To say otherwise brings us back to the Avatar problem.

So, as the Christ in Jesus has a human nature as well as being God, then Mary is truly the mother of God in the literal sense of the word. This, as I hope can be seen, eliminates all of the above problems without creating any new theological ones. Being fully human, Jesus did indeed share in our birth, suffering and death. Being fully divine, the Son of God really was at the beginning of time and need not prove anything to inherent His glory. This may sound nice, but so what? Is this not just a word game? Perhaps, but let's look briefly at something else so many Christians of all Faiths simply take for granted.

As Christians, we all hope to join Jesus as children of God (as per my Galatians quote above). Does not the dual nature of Jesus shed a lot of light on this mystery? We are clearly what God created, not what God begetted, so why is there so much emphasis on our becoming *children*? As humans, all of whom can trace our lineage to two patriarchs (Adam and Noah), we share a common brotherhood with the human nature of Jesus. As Jesus is likewise begotten of God the Father, we can therefore claim a sonship and daughtership with the Father as long as we remain brothers and sisters of Jesus.

I want to point out that Nestorius, who originally questioned the Mary the Mother of God concept in the heresy that led to the Council of Chalcedon, was satisfied with this solution and reconciled with the early Church. In a major example of sad irony, his opponent, Eutyches, who essentially won his case against Nestorius with only minor concessions, did not accept this. He was, regretfully, a poor and temperamental speaker. Despite his views concerning the controversy dominating the council, the first Schism of the Church was created and the Coptic Church left Rome. Most of the animosity that once existed between the Catholic and Coptic Churches has disappeared since the Renaissance era.

What the third line of the prayer does is make a declaration of faith that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. It summarizes large parts of scripture, of which I only touched upon. It is a declaration of Faith designed to protect the petitioner from several heresies concerning the nature of Jesus. Finally, it helps us understand just how far God has gone in His efforts to save us from ourselves.

C) Mary as the Queen Mother: As much as I don't want to go into this, it appears I must as there is an incredible amount of denial on this matter. Jesus was born of a Jewish woman in a Jewish town and grew up with a Jewish stepfather. He moved to Egypt as an infant, and returned to Jewish lands to mirror the Hebrew nation's travels as told in Genesis and Exodus. Jesus was raised in Jewish communities both in Egypt (according to Coptic tradition) and in Palestine (as seen in his public

ministry to his hometown). He claimed to have given the Hebrews the law they abide by, and He claimed to have followed that law perfectly. He participated fully in Jewish religious activities (as we know his stepfather was "righteous," we know the education Jesus would have received). He fulfilled at least 574 Jewish prophecies, 29 in a single day! He was brought up on false charges of violating Jewish law and was executed according to Jewish justice. He was recognized by Roman authorities to be the King of the Jews. Ethnically, nationally, legally, culturally, religiously, politically and symbolically, Jesus was a Jew.

So what? Well, as strange as it may seem to us, a Jewish queen was not the wife of the king. The wife of a Jewish king was simply a woman who married well. In Ancient Jewish times, the *mother* of the king was the queen. If we look at the books of Samuel and Kings, we can see this. In neither the stories of Saul nor David do we see queens being mentioned, nor any woman who might seem to fit that bill (despite Saul having a concubine and David practicing polygamy). It is not until Solomon (the third king of Israel) that a woman with queenly power is presented. It is Bathsheba, his mother. In 1 Kings 2:19, we see her given a throne. To suggest that she was given a chair of lesser stature (as some claim) is incorrect, as the same Hebrew word for "chair" is used for both Solomon's and Bathsheba's seating arrangements. Furthermore, we see Solomon Venerating Bathsheba in that very same verse. Moving on, most genealogies in the Bible start with one's father, but many of the recorded Kings have theirs starting with their mother. This tradition is extended to Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, where many scholars believe a discrepancy in the original Greek indicates that Joseph is considered a son-in-law, hence the line presented is actually Mary's. In 1 Kings 15:13, Asa deposes the *queen* mother Maacah (his grandmother) for her abuse of power in establishing a pagan idol. In contrast, in 1 Kings 21:7, Jezebel is called the *wife* of the living King Ahab, not the queen. Yet with Jezebel, we have perhaps the most colorful discussion concerning the queen mother found in the Bible.

When Ahab died (1 Kings 22: 34-35), his son Ahaziah assumed kingship (1 Kings 22:40), which means she *would* be the queen mother. This helps explain why she took the time to adorn herself in such a fine manner when Jehu came to overthrow her (2 Kings 9:30). But she was mistaken in assuming her son was rightfully king and that she was the queen mother. Ahaziah was not mentioned as being anointed, whereas Jehu was (2 Kings 9:6). Jehu was not an insurrectionist; he was the rightful king, while Ahaziah and Jezebel were pretenders. This is why the eunuchs were so accommodating in killing her (2 Kings 9:32-33).

For my final notes on this matter, in Jeremiah 13:18, the queen mother is described as having a tiara. While tiara's are fairly commonplace today, in ancient times it was a defining symbol of supreme authority. We see another notable woman in the Bible wearing a crown in the Revelation of Saint John (12:1). While this woman remains unnamed (Saint John presented images with dual meanings very frequently in his writings), it is clear in the rest of the chapter that Mary is one of the two symbolized by the image of this woman, with the nation of Israel being the other.

All that being said, if we accept Jesus as being Jewish, Mary as the Mother of Jesus (**Topic B**) and that Jesus is King of Heaven (I hope I don't have to present a defense of that claim), then we are not left with a choice in recognizing Mary as the Queen Mother of Heaven. This claim is also made in the Book of Revelation of Saint John while using symbolism with obvious meaning.

But what is the role of the Queen Mother? We see this in 1 Kings 2:16: it is to intercede on behalf of the subjects. And we even see an example in the Bible of Mary actively filling this role. At the Wedding at Cana (John 2:1-12), whoever asked for help (presumably the wedding coordinator) did not come to Jesus directly, but rather came to His mother, Mary. If we understand the role of the Queen

Mother, then the next few mysterious words of Jesus makes sense: ...Woman, how does your concern affect me? *My hour has not yet come.* (John 2:4, italics mine). He is telling her that He is *not yet* the King (His kingdom begins at the Resurrection); therefore, she is *not yet* the Queen Mother. This is not really a rebuke to Mary (Jesus cannot fulfill the law by breaking the Commandment of honoring one's parents), but rather a clarification to the early Christians who were mostly Jews. Saint John the Beloved did not want his readers to think that the kingdom was at hand before the Crucifixion. Saint John was letting his followers know in a subtle but powerful way that the real kingdom was still yet to come when the wedding took place.

There are many who claim that Jesus is the only intercessor we need, with the possible addition of the Holy Spirit. I agree to a point, but one must remember how the trinity is set up.

It has been said that we seek the Father *through* the Son *with* the Holy Spirit. This is why the word "God," which technically means the whole trinity, is most often used in the context of "God the Father." If we can imagine the Father on a throne, then it is the Son who introduces us to the Father, while it was the Holy Spirit who inspired us to try for an audience in the first place. And some will say that is all that is needed, so why include Mary?

Well, in part because God the Father is not the king of the Heavenly Kingdom; God the Son is (there are at least 10 notable scripture passages that claim this, I personally like John 18:36). God the Father, from whom all authority comes from, gave to His Son the kingdom and the authority to rule it. Just as the Son intercedes on our behalf to be let into the kingdom, Mary (and all the saints) intercede on our behalf on matters concerning the kingdom.

Finally, we cannot forget human nature. We, like the wedding coordinator, seem incapable of simply going directly to Jesus, or at least going to Him alone every time. Every Church I know of has a prayer line established. I'm constantly asked by friends and relatives to pray for this or that person for whatever reason. I've yet to be told "Oh, that's not Biblical" if I offered to pray for someone who shared their personal concerns with me. We see Abram interceding for the town of Gomorrah. Examples of people (including kings) asking prophets to intercede with God abound in the Old Testament. And intercession need not only be for those still of the world, as Jeremiah tells us that it was the intercession of Rachel (Jeremiah 31:15), not the priests or the faithful leaving in exile, who convinced God to let the exiles return home one day. She had been dead for at least 1,300 years by that time! Jesus not only told us to intercede for others, but requires us to do so for our enemies! Despite our best efforts of denial, most of us ultimately realize that we can never escape the fact that we cannot do all of this by ourselves. At some point, we all reach out to fellow Christians for help. The Saints are there for that purpose. Mary, as the Mother of God and the Queen Mother, is the foremost of Saints, second only to Jesus in ruling the Holy Kingdom and whose office is to intercede for us on our behalf.

Conclusions: Far from being unbiblical, the "Hail Mary" prayer actually summarizes an amazing volume of scripture. It is also a ward against several heresies (including Nestorianism, Arianism and Adoptionism to name a few), and is even a lesson in how to properly address any saint when seeking help in our lives. At only four sentences long, we find very few examples inside or outside the Bible where so much of our Faith and history is said with so few words.

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