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Hypothesis

Biblical Proof of the Immaculate Conception and Perpetual Sinlessness of Mary—*The Riddle: John and the Least in the Kingdom: The Solution: The Immaculate Conception*

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Abstract

One of the most numinous expressions in the gospel is the assertion by Jesus in Matthew 11:11 that amongst those born of women, none is greater than John the Baptist and yet the least in the kingdom is greater than John the Baptist. We show here that the obstacle to understanding the statement lies in the misconception that it is as a monovalent statement of fact rather than in actuality a riddle; the solution to which expresses multivalent realities. In form, Jesus employs the same lexical bauplan of the conundrum couplet as Sampson in his infamous riddle in Judges 14:14. We show that Jesus consistently phrases paedagogic riddles in this guise. The use of the phrase “*of women born*” to describe the pool of comparators necessarily includes Jesus and his mother, Mary. Hence continent in the riddle are two elements. Firstly is the question as to how John can be greater than Jesus or Mary. Since Jesus is making a comparison between those inside and outside of the Kingdom, the only possible solution to this moiety of the riddle is that Jesus and Mary are within the Kingdom. This re-affirms the Kingship of Jesus and Queenship of the Mary. By definition the King must be in the Kingdom. However it is the second limb that is even more instructive. The second question is why John is not in the Kingdom. Baptism is the means to enter the Kingdom. As Jesus himself confirms to Nicodemus in John 3:5, one must be baptised by Water and the Holy Spirit. St Thomas Aquinas explains that this is the means of removing the obstacles to the Kingdom. He adumbrates the Catholic Catechism. Both disclose the reality that original sin and personal sin are obstacles to entry into the Kingdom. Some traditions assert John the Baptist was “*baptised*” during the Visitation, but their remains, nonetheless, the impediment of personal sin. The only possible sequitur is that if Mary is in the Kingdom, before Jesus’ sacrifice and resurrection, she must have been born without original sin and must never have sinned, via the grace of God. The only other alternative is that she is outside of the Kingdom and not of equivalent greatness to John the Baptist, who said of himself he was not fit to untie of sandals of Jesus; but we must conclude is greater than she who was chosen to carry and nurture Jesus himself. This contradiction must be rejected. This puzzle, which compares of all those born of women, John the Baptist and those in the Kingdom, is in some ways a prolegomenon or pre-articulation of the words of our Lady to Saint Bernadette at Lourdes in 1858 that she is the Immaculate Conception and pre-affirmation of the dogma of the Catholic Church in 1854.

Keywords: immaculate conception; Mary; Mother of God; John the Baptist; least in the kingdom; Mathew 11:11; gospels; Bible; riddles

Introduction

One of the most elusive statements of Jesus in the Gospels is the assertion that the least in the Kingdom is greater than John the Baptist. We see this in *Luke 7:28* and *Matthew 11:11*. However the proposition has proven such a challenge as it has been construed as an expression of axiomatic sequiturs rather than exegeted in its true identity, namely as riddle or puzzle, which Jesus proffers to

provoke and prompt his audience to an epiphany on divine realities. Herein we show that the statement is actually a puzzle, the solution to which is the Immaculate Conception of Mary.

Puzzle not Prose

The statement in Luke 7:28:

"I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."

New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE)

In Matthew 11:11

"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." NRSVCE

Authors from the early Church to present day have grappled with this phrase [1–3]. However there has been an inveterate tendency to regard the statement as prose rather than a puzzle, the solution to which relays empiric truths. Herein we exploit an original heuristic of attempting to find the solution of what is *prima facie* a riddle. Hence earlier works are invaluable but of a tangential relevance. Of significant import is that the most august, cerebral and intellectually prepollent forefathers saw the text as a challenge but did not approach it as a riddle [4].

Jesus' contention is counterintuitive and contradictory. However, it remains unintelligible and a point of contention, if consigned to an assertion of fact rather than a riddle. By using the inclusive term "*among those born of women*" Jesus compels his audience to include both himself and his mother, Mary, in this equation. Indeed this construction excludes Adam and Eve. However the fundamental point is of such a profundity that these exceptions are warranted.

There is no explicit need for Jesus to use this specific phraseology "*those born of women*" to define the pool of John the Baptist and his comparators. However this specific choice belies the epistemological challenge faced by the listener. Had he used generic collectives such "*of all men*" Jesus could have been conveniently excluded by reference to his divinity. This would make the problem too simple. However the inclusion of Jesus in the conundrum paradoxically betrays the answer.

Given that Mary and Jesus himself are necessarily, included the parameters of the challenge are set.

The Riddle

- Amongst those of women born none is greater than John but the least in the Kingdom is greater than he
- Both Jesus and Mary are born of women and must necessarily be included.
- How can John be Greater than Mary, mother of God and Jesus himself?

The Dialectic

- How can John be Greater than Mary, mother of God and Jesus himself?
- Could Mary and Jesus be in the Kingdom of God?
- Why is John not in the Kingdom of God?

The Solution

- The Immaculate Conception and Perpetual sinless state of Mary

Jesus: A Riddler par Excellence?

We show that not only does Jesus consistently have recourse to riddles as a paedagogic instrument but he frequently leaves listeners with no solution but lets the passage of time reveal the resolution, indeed so much so that the listener is wholly unaware the proposition is a riddle. It is instructive to see some examples both in style and substance:

To he who has more will be given, to who he has not.

The riddle is not a new communication paradigm for Jesus. He states that which seems *prima facie* impossible or antithetical but the solution betrays divine reality. In its most rudimentary form, it comprises two apparently contradictory statements. Indeed Jesus is expressly asked why he speaks in parables, or in what one would equally understand as riddles. His answer is indeed another riddle see Matthew 13:10-15

“Then the disciples came and asked him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ He answered, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

*‘You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.*

*For this people’s heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn —
and I would heal them.’*

Matthew 13:10-15 NRSCV

This seems *prima facie* inequitable. It appears contradictory to Christian principles. Hence it is clearly a riddle, a rather classical one. What is it that if you have it, more will be given to you, but if you have not, even what you have will be lost? One answer is a container or vessel. If you have, you can receive more water or grain. If you have not even any water you try recover will escape. This can be translated to the spiritual realm: if you have a vessel, receptive to the promptings and the teaching of the Lord, you will be full and fulfilled with eternal life and resurrection. If one has no receptivity or vessel or container for the Lord, one will lose everything even the life one has and one’s soul. It is fascinating that Jesus states the one purpose of the parable, paradeigma or puzzle is that “*seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand*”. This applies to the least in the Kingdom and John the Baptist. We hear and have done so for 2000 years, but do we appreciate the meaning? Or is it merely that it is to be revealed at a fitting time?

Puzzle par Excellence: If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”

We see again the ethymematic riddle with a latent premise, which is metachronously obvious. Jesus expressly asks how King David can refer to the Messiah as Lord if the Messiah is his descendant. Contemporary cognizance that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of God and Descendant of David makes this obvious, but not so synchronously.

“Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question:

‘What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’

They said to him,

‘The son of David.’

He said to them,

‘How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

“The Lord said to my Lord,

Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”?

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’

No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions”

Matthew 22:45 NSRVCE

This is an explicit riddle. This is an unqualified expression of his divinity and humanity. In retrospect this is clear but for co-eval listeners this posed and insurmountable test in religious logic. The most intriguing element of the exchange is Jesus gives no answer to the riddle because the puzzle is paedogogic. The logical sequiturs are

The Messiah is David’s son

David calls him Lord. Hence David’s son must also be greater than he.

Indeed the Lord calls David’s son Lord.

David’s son must be but equivalent to God.

He is still David’s son, so he must be fully human and fully divine.

This guise of riddle is enantiomeric to the riddle of the Least in the Kingdom

Destroy the temple.

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

John 2:19 (NRVSC)

The Pharisees request a sign and Jesus gives them a puzzle. In retrospect the meaning of this riddle is obvious but to his listeners it is almost insoluble. The capacity to reconstruct the temple with such celerity appears impossible and the significance of 3 days obscure. The Greek renders the proposition unequivocally as a puzzle but equally more accessible in retrospect.

ἀπεκρίθη Ἰησοῦς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς Λύσατε τὸν ναὸν τοῦτον, καὶ ἐν τρισὶν ἡμέραις ἐγερῶ αὐτόν.

The word used for “this” is “τοῦτον” which connotes something more proximate than the English “this” *per se*. It is perhaps best translated “*this very same*”, something of the utmost propinquity. Indeed there is use of the demonstrative pronoun anaphorically, but no express contingent antecedent. While Aramaic may not have the same syntactically discriminatory machinery as Greek, it clearly makes the distinction with the specific article and demonstrative pronoun [5]. The implication with the use of the word “τοῦτον” in lieu of “τον”, the definitive article; hence “this” rather than “the”, is that Jesus is referring to himself [6]. Further two words are used for temple in this chapter: *ναός* and *ἱερόν*. The former implies the innermost sanctuary of the Temple or Holy of Holies [7]. Jesus clearly anticipated a retrospective appreciation of statements to teach two fundamental aspects of his haecceity. Firstly he is the “suffering servant” Messiah that will be rejected and put to death. Secondly he attests to his resurrection and divinity. Jesus’s divinity is a leitmotiv for his riddles germane to their interpretation. As is evident with this example Jesus employs what is apparently a chrono-divergent enthymematic puzzle; with a latent predicate that is insoluble synchronously, but almost obvious, metachronously. Hence in the above example, knowledge that Jesus will be rejected, put to death and rise on the third day renders the puzzle self-evident. The solution otherwise requires an eclectic assimilation of Isaiah 53 and Hosea 6:2. The solution is instructive. It teaches of Jesus’ prescience to his death and resurrection and affirmation of his divinity. Despite the fundamental significance of this reality, he leaves the solution for his contemporaneous listeners to ponder. The puzzle is paedogogic. The teaching is in the solution. However tellingly his interlocutors do not even appreciate the statement is a puzzle until the passage of time.

Before Abraham I am.

Jesus’ assertion that he is God is another enthymematic riddle predicated on the understanding of his co-substantiality with God.

“Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’”

John 8:58 NSRVCE

The paedogogy lies in the solution.

Jesus is before Abraham, this only being possible if he is divine.

However he is clearly and tangibly human. He must be human and divine

Jesus “is” before Abraham not “was” before Abraham. His being is not antecedent to but transcendent to Abraham. His being is not bound by time. Saint Thomas Aquinas and others obviously and famously pursue this to its logical terminal conclusions, namely that Jesus, God is being itself.

Equally significantly here, Jesus gives no solution. His listeners are bemused hearing the words but not understanding their meaning, as they construe them as a monovalent statement of fact rather than a puzzle the reveals the truth of Jesus’ identity.

Rules of the Riddle

The seminal feature of the riddle is that it is internally soluble without reference to external sources. It is an exercise more of logic than knowledge. Compare this with the “riddle” of Samson. This is really a quasi-riddle. Samson asks his Philistine wedding guests:

“Out of the eater came something to eat, And out of the strong came something sweet.”

Judges 14:14 NSRVCE

Traditional wisdom teaches this puzzle is only decipherable if one were aware Samson had overcome a lion and returned to find a bee hive with honey inside the carcass [8]. I use this example to demonstrate that logic alone without any extraneously knowledge is typically required to tackle a riddle. However recent ecological findings shed an entirely new light on Samson’s Riddle. A new species of bees known as Vulture bees were characterised in the 1980s [9,10]. These bees specifically invade the carcasses of dead animals. They consume the meat to create a food substance similar to nectar. If such bees were indigenous to the Levant then it is conceivable that the interlocutors could have deduced from the riddle a Lion’s carcasses infested with vulture bees. Indeed Samson did not appear surprised by the sight of bees in a carcass and knew honey would be recoverable. Also vulture bees are known to lack the ability to sting. This would appear to account as to why Samson casually collects honey with no impediment in the form of bee stings. Further the wedding guests to whom the puzzle is addressed do not appear startled or alarmed by the incredibility of the solution.

The only reservation to this postulate is that Vulture bees have only been observed in the Americas. Their previous presence but extinction in the Levant is not wholly unfeasible. This is especially since they lack the ability to sting and hence may not have been able to defend themselves from predation.

Riddles in Proverbs

The iconic Riddle in Proverbs 30:4, attesting to Jesus some years before his birth, is more prosaic than the couplet formula. However in substance it is almost identical to the repertoire of Christ’s. With retrospect the answer is self-evident. The contemporaneous auditor is beleaguered.

Who has ascended to heaven and come down?

Who has gathered the wind in the hollow of the hand?

Who has wrapped up the waters in a garment?

Who has established all the ends of the earth?

What is the person’s name?

And what is the name of the person’s child?

Surely you know!

Proverbs 30:4 NSRVCE

There is a tentatizing clue in the next line

Every word of God proves true; Proverbs 30:5 NSRVCE

Solution One

While Samson’s Riddle may not be a puzzle, *forme pleine*, its formula is instructive. Jesus employs the same lexical couplet bauplan

Samson says

*“Out of the eater came something to eat,
And out of the strong came something sweet.”*

Jesus says

*“None of woman born is greater than John but
The least in the Kingdom is greater than John”*

Again

*“To he who has more will be given
To he who has not what he has will be taken”*

Again

*“If David calls him Lord
How can he be his son”*

The pedagogy is in the solution.

John the Baptist and Least in the Kingdom

The first limb of the puzzle could be answered with relative ease and expounds the first level of truth.

The notion that Saint John the Baptist is greater than Jesus is obviously rejected. John consistently attests to the ascendancy of Jesus and to the divinity of Jesus.

*“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘**After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.**’ I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ **And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.**”*

John 1:29-34

*John answered, “No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘**I am not the Messiah,** but I have been sent ahead of him.’ **He who has the bride is the bridegroom.** The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease.”*

*“**The one who comes from above is above all;** the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. **The one who comes from heaven is above all.** He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. **The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life;** whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure God’s wrath.*

John 3:27-35

This is a perfect articulation of the quiddity (God) and haecceity (God the Son) of Jesus. Again *John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; **but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.** He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

Luke 3:16

From the last excerpt one must also reject the notion that John the Baptism is greater than Mary the mother of Jesus and thereby God. St. John confesses that he is not fit to undo the sandals of the

Messiah. His greatness is then necessarily subordinate to that of she who was chosen by God himself to carry the Messiah, clothe, bathe, feed and nurture the Messiah. Further the mother of the King, Queen Mother, the Gebirah, was the highest office second only to the King himself. There is the intriguing passage in Kings where Bathsheba tentatively approaches and supplicates herself before King David to make a request (1 Kings 1:16). This occurs when David is elderly and thus been with Bathsheba for a number of years. However, she boldly enters King Solomon (her son's) court (1 Kings 2:19). King Solomon responds by *prostrating himself before her* setting a throne for her on his right [11]. Mary exhibits the same boldness when she approaches Jesus at the wedding feast Cana (John 2). By comparison all other supplicants in the Gospels tend to petition the Lord to save life or restore health and even in these circumstances their posture is precatory and entreating.

Jesus, Mary and John the Baptist are all of women born. There is none of woman born greater than John, with the qualifying caveat that those least in the Kingdom are greater than John.

The only sequitur is that Jesus and Mary are in the Kingdom. Jesus necessarily and by definition must be present by his Kingship in the Kingdom and Mary thereby in her Queenship. As John is neither greater than Mary nor Jesus, they must be in the Kingdom. Jesus effectively affirms his Kingship and the Queenship of Mary. However the final question is the most fructifying.

The Ultimate Solution

Why then is John not the in Kingdom. Baptism is a necessary rite of passage for entry into the Kingdom. Jesus teaches Nicodemus

"Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."

John 3:55 NSRVCE

Baptism is the remedy to the barriers to the kingdom namely original sin and personal unatoned sin.

Saint Thomas Aquinas states:

Summa Theologicae: Third Part: Question 69: Article 7

I answer that, To open the gates of the heavenly kingdom is to remove the obstacle that prevents one from entering therein. Now this obstacle is guilt and the debt of punishment. But it has been shown above (Articles 1 and 2) that all guilt and also all debt of punishment are taken away by Baptism. It follows, therefore, that the effect of Baptism is to open the gates of the heavenly kingdom.

Reply to Objection 1. Baptism opens the gates of the heavenly kingdom to the baptized in so far as it incorporates them in the Passion of Christ, by applying its power to man.

Reply to Objection 2. When Christ's Passion was not as yet consummated actually but only in the faith of believers, Baptism proportionately caused the gates to be opened, not in fact but in hope. For the baptized who died then looked forward, with a sure hope, to enter the heavenly kingdom.

He prefigures the Catholic Catechism VII Grace of Baptism 1263

By Baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins, as well as all punishment for sin.65 In those who have been reborn nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God, neither Adam's sin, nor personal sin, nor the consequences of sin, the gravest of which is separation from God.

John may not have been baptised and thus still has this affliction of original sin. Even if he were baptised, he would still have the burden of hitherto uncompensated sin.

However, Mary is the Kingdom notwithstanding the fact that Jesus had not undergone his Passion and she was potentially not baptised at this time. Both Mary mother of God and St John the Baptist had the necessary prerequisite for entry, namely faith in Jesus. The necessary sequitur is that the barriers or impediments to the Kingdom, namely original sin and personal sin, must have been absent in Mary. The only sequitur is the Immaculate Conception of Mary and perpetual sinless state of Mary. Our Lady is free from original sin not by her merits by the merits of the Lord Jesus and his passion. Jesus himself is God hence was conceived without original sin as a feature of his divinity.

Further we have established that Mary was conceived with original sin. In addition Mary had a physiologically natural rather than supernatural conception as is the case with Jesus. This remarkably consistent with the apparition of Fatima where, in 1985 she states in 1854 to Saint Bernadette [12].

"Que soy era Immaculada Concepciou"

"I am the Immaculate Conception"

She is indeed the not a but the Immaculate Conception. This is the latent premise of Luke 7:28 and Matthew 11:11. It renders the indeducible, obvious. If Mary is afflicted with original sin she is outside the Kingdom and must therefore be of inferior greatness to Saint John the Baptist, which we have rejected.

Necessary or Fitting or Necessary Sequitur

There has been and continues to be much lucubration on whether the Immaculate Conception was *Necessary* or *Fitting*. However it is evident that it was neither but rather more of a *Necessary Sequitur*. St Paul describes the function of baptism as a means of initiation into the kingdom and its effect on the person and soul. As shall be seen these *necessarily, actually and materially* apply to Mary as Jesus's mother. The Roman Catholic Catechism explains the impact of baptism, founded on the writings of St Paul. The first is the transition from metaphorical slave to the law, to heir or part of the same family, congenially.

1265 Baptism not only purifies from all sins, but also makes the neophyte "a new creature," an adopted son of God, who has become a "partaker of the divine nature," member of Christ and coheir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit Catechism of the Catholic Church

In relation to being an heir reference is made to Galatians 4:

So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God

Galatians 4:7 NSCRV

The principle is that the imprint of baptism is indelible and irrevocable. Hence it is not akin to the standing of slave but as a son that cannot be disinherited. However clearly the father is immortal and eternal but we still have access to the inheritance. Mary's maternity of Christ is equally irreversible and irrevocable as a matter of fact. As mother she too is not possibly or in any way a slave but entitled to gifts to the son. As the son is immortal and eternal, Mary's entitlement remains and in this context is equivalent to that of a son. This element, bequeathed to us in baptism, is for Mary a necessary sequitur of the fact that she is *Theotokos* (Mother of God).

In relation to the new creature reference or neophytic efficacy of Baptism the Eastern Orthodox tradition explicitly affirms Mary as a new Creature. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explicates:

493 The Fathers of the Eastern tradition call the Mother of God "the All-Holy" (Panagia), and celebrate her as "free from any stain of sin, as though fashioned by the Holy Spirit and formed as a new creature". By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long.

It is made explicit in 1 Corinthians 6:19 in baptism we are temple a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. The Catholic Catechism cites this verse affirm this very point

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? 1 Corinthians 6:19 NSRVCE

Again in conceiving Jesus Mary's body was a temple to the Holy Spirit in a unique way. See Luke: 1:35

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. NSRVCE

The act of being the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit is grafted to us in baptism, the rite of passage into the Kingdom. However, for Mary it is a *necessary sequitur* of being the Mother of God.

It is clear baptism make us one part of the body of Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church:

1267 Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ: "Therefore . . . we are members one of another." Baptism incorporates us into the Church. From the baptismal fonts is born the one People

of God of the New Covenant, which transcends all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races, and sexes: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body."

This is derived and synonymous with 1 Corinthians 1:13 and Romans 12:5.

For we were all baptized by[a] one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. 1 Corinthians 1:13 NSRVCE

So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. Romans 12:5 NSRV

Mary with the child Jesus *in utero* shared one body in a tangible way but there had distinct bodies. Even in the process of the incarnation they share a body in practical way. This is explained in the Roman Catholic Catechism

485 *The mission of the Holy Spirit is always conjoined and ordered to that of the Son. The Holy Spirit, "the Lord, the giver of Life", is sent to sanctify the womb of the Virgin Mary and divinely fecundate it, causing her to conceive the eternal Son of the Father **in a humanity drawn from her own.***

495 *Called in the Gospels "the mother of Jesus", Mary is acclaimed by Elizabeth, at the prompting of the Spirit and even before the birth of her son, as "the mother of my Lord".¹⁴⁴ In fact, the One whom **she conceived as man by the Holy Spirit, who truly became her Son according to the flesh,** was none other than the Father's eternal Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Hence the Church confesses that Mary is truly "Mother of God" (*Theotokos*).*

By baptism we share in these graces. Mary necessarily had these graces as function of the maternity of God. The Immaculate Conception was neither solely fitting nor solely necessary but rather a necessary sequitur of being *Theotokos*. Musing on whether the Immaculate Conception was fitting or necessary is akin to pondering on whether it is fitting or necessary that you related to your mother. One is a *necessary sequitur* of the other.

Alternative Dispute Pre-Resolution

The solution to the riddle also expounds the indelible nature and irreversibility of the graces of baptism won by the sacrifice of the Christ. If sin could eject a member from kingdom those in the kingdom are not greater than John, but far subordinate. That which makes one greater than John must necessarily equally keep one in the Kingdom. If sin abrogates baptism, then we can neither really be new creatures, nor sons of God, nor be part of the body of Christ nor be heirs. We revert to and are revertible to slave status; neither of whose inheritance nor position in the house is assured.

Jesus articulates this so perfectly

*Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. **Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.**" John 8:34 NSRVCE*

We are all set free from sin by the Son by the Sacrifice of Christ realised in Baptism and thereby have a permanent place in the family. This is only possible if the obstacles to our congeniality with Christ are eradicated namely original sin and unatoned personal sin via Baptism. However even before this Sacrifice and liberation by the Son or any Baptism, Mary's permanent place in the family as mother of God was immutable and irrevocable as a matter of fact as Christ's mother. What we acquire through baptism Mary enjoys *per se* as mother of God. Mary must have been pre-liberated *in utero* at conception of the obstacle of Original Sin by the Sacrifice of Lamb via the Immaculate Conception.

For we who have sinned, all sin can be vitiated by repentance and sacrament of reconciliation following the merits won by the Christ

The instant riddle also pre-resolves the dispute between the Novatianists and the Catholic Church in the third century. The former practised re-baptism in the belief that the graces of baptism

could be lost by sin. This was vehemently and fervently opposed by Pope Cornelius, Pope Lucius I and Pope Stephen I [13]

As the catechism mentions

1272 Incorporated into Christ by Baptism, the person baptized is configured to Christ. Baptism seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark (character) of his belonging to Christ. No sin can erase this mark, even if sin prevents Baptism from bearing the fruits of salvation.⁸² Given once for all, Baptism cannot be repeated.

If the graces of baptism can be forfeited and the believers expelled from the Kingdom on sin, the least in the Kingdom is not greater to John but very much subordinate to John. However the only way we can never be disenfranchised is if we are members of the family, children and heirs of God. This is possible by the sacrifice of the Christ via baptism. Mary as mother God has an ineffaceable relationship with God with or without baptism. The Immaculate Conception is a necessary sequitur of divine maternity.

The First Baptism by Water and the Spirit in utero?

Some traditions argue that John was baptised at time when animated by the Holy Spirit and he "leapt for joy" in the womb of the Holy Spirit. This is not a postulate irreconcilable with our solution. As stated John would still have the load of minor venial sin.

Contextual Milieu: Marian Typography

In Luke's Gospel the directly antecedent event to the instant riddle is that relating to the Widow at Nain (Luke 7:7-11). Here Jesus resurrects the widow's only son, who was young adult. An eminent feature of the account is Jesus was moved with compassion for her. He expressly tells her not to cry. This is one of the few spontaneous miracles Jesus performs with no petition. Following the miracle Jesus actively returns the man to his mother. Widow's with no children were exceptionally vulnerable in this era. However one must not overlook the fact that plight of the window possibly reminded or perhaps "pre-minded" him of his own mother who would be in similar situation at the foot of the Cross. Jesus then poses a Riddle praising John the Baptist and educating the observant listener about spiritual realities relating to his mother

Marian Co-Operation

Mary was indeed highly-favoured. However she was not an immaculate automaton furnishing the Kingdom. Her place in the Kingdom is by grace but she is not merely a genetic Gebirah. She cooperated with grace. She chose to have faith, she chose humility. She chose to avoid sin. Her life was consistent with that of one in the Holy Spirit. Faith and works were not antagonistic, counterpoised but cooperative and collaborative.

Mary's choice to have faith, humility and exercise the fruits of the Holy Spirit are encapsulated in the following final words to the Archangel Michael

*"Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."
Then the angel departed from her." NSRVCE Luke 1:38*

Faith

Mary response to the revelation of the Angel was unique, unexpected, out of place and discordant with antecedent and postcedent events; indeed indicative of one in kingdom.

St Paul engages and captivates us with his encomium on Abraham's faith in Romans 4 and Galatians 3, Abraham being quintessentially the father of faith and justified by faith. Abraham shows flawless obedience to God. Nonetheless when he is advised by the Lord that he and his wife, Sarah will have son in their senescence they are both incredulous and laugh (Genesis 17:17 and Genesis 18:12). He says.

Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, "Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" Genesis 17:17

He fulfils his calling.

Next we have Moses unimpeachable in his fear of the Lord. Nonetheless during the first revelation when God informs him that he will be his instrument to free the Israelites, Moses declines five times and finally asks the Lord to find another (Exodus 3&4). He says

But Moses said, "Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else. NSRVCE Exodus 4:13

Moses nevertheless ultimately performs everything as instructed by God

Subsequently we see Gideon was of outstanding courage in his pursuit of the Lord. However when he is first approached by God to be the leader to liberate the Israelites, he is pusillanimous, mindful that his clan is modest and he the most diminutive in his family. He then requests a sign (Judges 6:15-17). He laments

He responded, "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." The Lord said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them." Then he said to him, "If now I have found favor with you, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. NSRVCE

He nonetheless fulfils the Lord plan.

Now Jeremiah is despondent at the wide divergence between the splendour of the God and the exiguity and fugacity of the humanity. He mourns

"And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"" Isaiah 6:5 NSRVCE

This very apsis between Creator and dependant creation resulting in the Immaculate Conception is the very reason for Mary's rejoicing in the Magnificat (Luke 1:).

Then we are presented with Jeremiah, who was tasked to be a seminal prophet, but when approached by the Lord he demurs, concerned he is too young. Jeremiah 1:4

"Alas, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am too young." NSRVCE

Next Jonah must preach a message of repentance to those for whom he may have had some contention. Nonetheless when he has the revelation of his mission, he flees in diametrically the opposite direction

But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord. Jonah 1:3

Seguing to the New Testament we see the priest chosen by God to burn incense in the temple in OBC is Zechariah. He is informed that he and his wife will have a child. He asks for sign to know this will be true.

"How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." Luke 1:18 NSRVCE

The Messenger Archangel Michael has to reaffirm his identity. John the Baptist is born and Zechariah agrees to name him John.

Enter Mary. She is informed she will be the mother of God by a virgin birth at a time when extra-marital indiscretions could result in death and at the very least social exclusion, at a time it would be impossible for a single pregnant woman to sustain a livelihood. She responds:

"Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her." NSRV Luke 1:38

(Another interesting contrast is to compare the salutation given by Michael the Archangel to the Priest chosen to enter the Holies of Holies, Zechariah, and that given to Mary.). Note also the Mary immediately hurries to visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth; hence before any signs of Mary's pregnancy are demonstrable or perceptible (Luke 1:39).

Now Peter is a rock on which the Church was and is built. However when the Lord calls him, the experience is overwhelming and he asks that the Lord leave him.

But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" Luke 5:8 NSRVCE

St Paul is a chosen vessel of the Lord. Nonetheless when Lord asks Ananias to seek and heal St Paul. The latter is hesitant and uncertain of God's choice.

Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much [a]harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." Acts 9:13

Mary's response is in conspicuous by its dissimilitude with other protagonists. We typically see a biographical bildungsroman where the hero is saved from their hamartia by their journey with the Lord, experiencing metanoia. Mary, by grace was already on that that plane. There is markedly no *metanoia* in the story of the Mary only perpetual *eunoia ab initio*. Her will aligns with that of the Lord. In some ways this even applies *in utero* via the Immaculate Conception to which she "*post-consents*" at the Annunciation and is pre-effected by the merits of the Christ.

Humility

When the disciples begin to appreciate the identity of Jesus, James and John request that they be granted seats at his right hand and left. Their mother makes a similar petition. The remainder of the disciples are incensed by their surreptitious attempts to seek ascendancy. Similarly the disciples later argue who is the greatest.

However Jesus dissembles this praxis and teaches the greatest in the one who serves.

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." Matthew 18:25-28

When Mary is informed she will be the Mother of God and that her son will have the eternal throne of David. Her response

"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her."

Hence thirty years before Jesus espouses the truth that the greatest in the servant; Mary is informed she is to be the mother of the God, mother of a King greater than David with an eternal throne to rule all nations but yet she appreciates that, as the mother of God, she is the first and most subordinate servant of God. The disciples were request a seat at either side of table. However Mary identified was one not even at the table but watching while others eat at the Banquet. The Lord eschews any attempts by his Disciples at pre-establishing a celestial hegemony of followers. He does however concede:

*"but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, **but it is for those for whom it has been prepared** by my Father." Matthew 20:23 NSRVCE*

We can surmise to whom at least one of those places belong.

Mary's faith has a profundity that differs from that of protagonists in salvation history before and after her, Mary's response to the news of Saint Michael the Archangel appears in secular terms a non-sequitur Michael says

"You will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" Luke 1:31-33 NSRVCE

Mary replies that she is a servant. She is granted the greatest accolade but she shows no affiliation to the Gebirah but rather identifies as a servant. Her response reflects the fact that she understands

her role, and that of all Christians, is one of service. The response one would anticipate is gratitude at the honour being the mother God. Mary nonetheless understands that nature of the role of service. Consistent with the apothegm of Jesus:

"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Matthew 16:25 NRVCE

Mary's fiat adumbrates this 30 years earlier.

Faith-Humility Conjugate: Jesus' Marian Allusion

Jesus alludes to this unique faith-humility dyad in a Delphic passage in the Gospels. In Luke 17:5-10 the Disciples asks Jesus to increase their faith. Jesus' response is that faith the size of a mustard seed is sufficient to uproot trees. He then segues to what at first glance appears an incongruous conclusion.

"7 'Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? 8 Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? 9 Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? 10 So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'" NSRVCE Luke 17:7-10.

Why should Jesus move from faith to describing a docile servant, who after performing his duties avers he is merely a servant? Hopefully given the foregoing this is obvious. This is clearly a recapitulation of Mary at the Annunciation. Angel Gabriel informs her of her imminent divine maternity. Mary shows great faith dissimilar in some ways to her forefathers at first supernatural confrontation. Significantly after this act of faith she displays the humility and accepts her role as the handmaid of the Lord.

"Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Then the angel departed from her." NSRV Luke 1:38

By means of the passage, Jesus in Luke 17:5-10 also retro-alludes to the encounter of Mary and Elizabeth at Visitation. Elizabeth lauds Mary's faith and Mary identifies with a lowly servant: First Elizabeth commends of Mary

*"43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And **blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.**"* Luke 1:43-45 NSRVCE

Mary responds

My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

*48 for he has looked with favor on the **lowliness of his servant.***

Life in Spirit

Mary exhibited features of those invested in spirit. These are unmistakable. She displays and tenacity and intrepidity peculiar to scriptural accounts of work in the Holy Spirit. Mary, on learning of the conception of John the Baptist, visits Elizabeth and Zechariah, in Jerusalem, and stays with him for 3 months (Luke 1). Zechariah was chosen by lots, it would appear, to burn incense in the Holy of Holies (Luke 1:10). In addition at this time he remained for a protracted period in the temple and emerged having lost his speech. He was not a discrete figure. It would have been scandalous for a young, unmarried, pregnant woman, as Mary was to, to sojourn at his house; *a fortiori* given Zechariah was a priest. Mary remained with Elizabeth for 3 months during which time the signs of pregnancy may have become conspicuous. In the light of this Visitation, one needs to reframe the events in Luke. Those present at the time construed the drawing of lots as an indicator that Zechariah was to enter the House of God to offer incense. However the meaning is diametrically opposite. God was to come to Zechariah's house in pregnant Mary's womb, and ultimately immolated himself for

our sins – essentially an encapsulation of the entirety of the incarnation. This is not missed by Luke. Luke makes it pellucidly clear and expressly states that Mary enters Zechariah's house, not even Zechariah's and Elizabeth's house. Elizabeth's salutation and response expressly acknowledge the presence of the Lord *in utero* in this visit.

*[S]he entered the **house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth**. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And **why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?**" Luke 1:40-43 NRSVCE*

This may be patriarchy but rather belies the fact that henceforth the High Priest no longer enters the House of God but God now enters our own home and we become party of his body in baptism (see above). In this Visitation the arrival of Jesus *in utero* at Zechariah's house is almost an exact reversal of the events when Zechariah enters the Temple, the House of God where Ark of the Covenant of the temple is resides. Elizabeth acknowledges the child Jesus *in utero* is present. Mary is unquestionably again here the Ark of the Covenant. There may be scandal but Mary and Elizabeth were indifferent and insouciant. Zechariah's consent to the visit is not a factor engaged by Mary or Elizabeth or the Gospel writer Luke.

Mary returns home at 3 months pregnant. She would have left Nazareth with no signs of pregnancy and then returned showing progressive signs of increasing gestation. At the time of the Incarnation the Jewish people were still strongly influenced by the indelible imprint of the Maccabean revolt. The Zeitgeist was very much of religious fundamentalism or least uncompromising resistance to Hellenization and Romanisation of Judaism [14]. The vehement legalism we see in the opposition of Jesus is possibly a misguided vestige of this. It is evident in the case of the woman caught in the act of adultery; that around 30AD women could still be stoned for sexual indiscretions (John 8). However, Mary is not a woman who recused herself or concealed her pregnancy; then appeared 9 months later with a child she euphemises is her "nephew" or "kinsman", in order to avoid societal opprobrium. We see again Jesus states

"No one, when he has lit a lamp, covers it with a vessel or puts it under a bed, but sets it on a lampstand, that those who enter may see the light" Luke 8:16 NRSVCE

Similarly, St Paul states

God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control 2 Timothy 1:7 NRSVCE

Mary encapsulates one in the kingdom with the grace of the Holy Spirit. She is not an automaton positioned in the Kingdom for optics.

In Body and Spirit

Mary was not merely mechanistically within the kingdom. She was so placed in body in a spirit. Her position was not by genetics, nepotism nor was it earned; it was by faith. This is highlighted, where detractors had given misleading and/or false testimonies, as they would do around his passion, however on this case, to his family. Understandably on this basis of this false testimony his family are concerned that he had taken leave of his senses. Mark 3:31-35

"Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Hence Mary is both physically the Mother of God but also because she pursued the will of God. It is the primacy of her faith and co-operation with the will of God not the familial tie.

Conclusion

To grasp the assertion that there are none greater than John one must treat it as it was possibly intended, as a puzzle or riddle. The only possible solution to it reveals a fundamental reality of soteriology. When Jesus spoke of raising the Temple, the focus was not the Temple it was the future reality and the new Temple, himself as the head of the Church. Similarly, in the comparison with John the Baptist and those in the Kingdom, the focus is on the future. The climax of old the Testament Prophets is John but, following the death and resurrection of Christ we have access to unfathomable and ineffable graces epitomised by the Immaculate Conception and Baptism. The puzzle points not necessarily to the virtues of any one individual but rather pellucidly emphasises the magnitude, marvel, supra-perfect and efficacious nature of the sacrifice of the Christ. Mary points directly and unequivocally to Jesus.

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