

## **Mary Interviewed**

So you want me to talk about my son, you want me to talk about Jesus? I know that you have asked me many times before, and I have prevaricated. This time, it seems right that I should talk. But you want to write down words. Words can be slippery, you can say one thing, and another



will be written down, the words can leap off the page and be taken away, and new meanings can be made from them. They can slide around the page changing order and obscuring the truth. Words are indeed difficult to pin down. I want to tell you the truth about my son. I want to tell you all about him, so I will tell you of his deeds, I will tell you of Yahweh's deeds, and you can write down your words describing the deeds, and maybe, just maybe they will not slither and slide and decay with time, and my son will stand before all nations, for all times as a true and faithful witness to Yahweh, his Father.

The first deed has to be mine. One dark night when everyone else was asleep, I was lying wrapped up in my cloak across the floor of the room from my parents. I remember that it was a dark, dark night, and despite having worked hard all day preparing grain for bread, by doing the daily grind for my mother, bringing water from the well and preparing olives for preserving, I could not sleep. The night seemed somehow alive, as if I held out my hand, I could touch it. So I did. I held out my hands in front of me, and I made a motion like I do to part the hangings over our door, and a streak of light hit me in the face. I withdrew my hands and turned my face into my cloak, I counted to ten, and turned back round again, and the light was still there. I was absolutely petrified that I had done something wrong, but I had no idea what. As I watched, the small gap my hands had created grew and grew, until it was big enough for a man to step through.

What actually stepped through was an angel, bright and fierce, light and dark, calm and storm. I turned my face back into my cloak again, but the angel gently touched me, and gestured me to sit up, so I sat. The angel then told me that Yahweh had chosen me to be the mother of his son. All sorts of questions ran through my mind: Why me?, Why now?, How! The angel seemed to read my thoughts, and sat down beside me and spoke to me gently. It could have spoken to me for hours, or it could have been just minutes, I will never know. Its voice was melodic and musical. It was thunder and a running stream, it was human and divine. What I do know is that when

the conversation finished the only thing I could do, my big gesture, was to bow my head and submit to Yahweh's will. The really strange thing was that neither the light nor the angel woke my parents. This turned out to be a problem when I had to explain my pregnancy to them.

Joseph, the man I had recently become betrothed to, turned out to be a much more wonderful man than even I could have imagined. He had to leave the house when I first broke the news to him, but having thought and prayed about it over night, he came back and literally took me by the hand and led me from my parents house to the house he had built with his own hands, with help from a few friends. A house of solid mud brick walls, with a carpenters workshop attached, where he could earn us a living. Behind the house was courtyard around which several other houses were built, and in the middle was a communal oven where we could bake our bread. The betrothal contract had been signed, so Joseph decided there was no urgency to have the wedding. We would wait until the baby had been born.

I don't know what urged me to leave Joseph then, and go to visit my cousin Elizabeth in the hill country nearer to Jerusalem. That was until the moment I stepped in the door of her house, and her hand went instinctively to the swell of her belly. I had not known that she too was pregnant. I didn't realise that someone of her age could become pregnant, but as I knew, with Yahweh all things are possible. My visit was healing and uplifting. She was the only person I could ever talk to who knew, who understood just what my baby was. In the same way I watched her son John grow up, and set out to do Yahweh's work, she watched mine, and just knew. When I received the news that Herod had had John executed, the words of the Magi came back to me regarding the gifts they gave to Jesus; Gold for a King, Frankincense for a Priest and Myrrh for a death. I wondered for the first time whether Jesus' life may also need to be sacrificed for Yahweh. But I am digressing now.

What was next in Yahweh's big plan? That came in the form of a Roman soldier on a horse, with a piece of papyrus and a large hammer and nail. He arrived in the village, with an escort big enough to protect him, and threatening enough to make sure that we would obey the summons. Each of us were to travel to our family towns to be registered for a census. We knew that meant tax. There was the beginnings of a riot, which the soldiers quelled more by look than deed. I am told in other villages the Romans had to break a few skulls to get people to calm down again. The Romans were not to be denied, no excuses would be accepted.

Joseph and I decided that we just had to trust that this was in Yahweh's plan as well. So we walked, and rode, and rode and walked. I was tired, oh so tired by the time we reached Bethlehem, only to find that everyone else had reached there first. I was at the end of my strength, with ankles so swollen that every step was painful. I could have cursed Yahweh, but as gestures go, it would not have been a good plan. By now I was convinced that Yahweh did know what was going on, and everything that was happening to us was in his big plan, his big gesture for mankind. So I sunk down to

the ground, my back to the city wall just inside the town gate of Bethlehem, and left Joseph to find somewhere for Yahweh's baby to be born. From where I sat I could see him knock at door after door. Some opened for him, many did not. Some heads peeped out, and glanced down the street towards the gate where I sat, but they still shook their heads and closed their doors. At last Joseph disappeared around a corner. I closed my eyes as a wave of pain flooded over me, and I knew instinctively what it meant. Yahweh's son was on his way. He was going to be born in the street, in a small insignificant town, in a small insignificant country surrounded by, well nothing and no one.

But I had underestimated Yahweh's ability to plan, yet again, and Joseph reappeared trailing behind a very determined woman. From my glance at Joseph's face I could see that she thought that he had lied to her about my state. Just as she arrived in front of me, another wave of pain swept over me and I groaned. All anger left the woman's face, and she turned to Joseph and asked why he hadn't said that the baby was actually coming, now. Joseph just shrugged. The woman crouched down beside me, and gently pushed my hair away from my face. 'Come on child. As soon as this one is over, I will help you back out of the gate and round to our stables. It is the best I can do tonight. You will be warm and quiet, and I will come back with help as soon as I can. Come on, up we get now.'

So Yahweh's son was not born in a street all alone. He was born in a cave, in the hillside just outside the town, which the Innkeeper had converted into a stable for his ploughing ox and a few sheep. Joseph and I added to the audience, our little grey donkey, who had so nobly carried me, when I grew too tired, as well as the food we had brought with us for the journey, and some swaddling clothes for the baby. The Innkeeper's wife came with hot water and cloths to wash Jesus, and to clean Joseph's sharp knife. Joseph held my hand, and I squeezed him so tight that at one point he yelped out in pain. Another woman in another place would have thought that it was a small price to pay for being saved the pain of the birth of their child. Jesus was not Joseph's child, his had not been the act of conception, his was to be the joy and fear of raising him to adulthood. To him fell the joy of cutting the cord severing him from me and launching him out into Yahweh's great world, to begin his great work for humankind.

And the people of the town came to see him, to see Jesus, drawn by the story of his birth, which had flown around the town. They came in ones and two's, the old and the young, the poor and the rich, all of them curious to see this baby. Most of them were bored waiting for the day of the census; we were something to do. They did not know what it was they had come to see. Children came, one emulating the adults, who brought presents of food, brought a pretty stone he had found on the road, and polished up on his tunic. Roman soldiers came to check what was going on in a small cave in the hillside, which seemed to be drawing large numbers of people. They wanted to make sure we were not fomenting any trouble. The crying of a new born baby reassured them, and they too knelt beside him and worshipped this baby, not

knowing or understanding who he was, and I did not enlighten them. To them he was just another Hebrew baby.

Among all the visitors we had in those days after Jesus birth, there were two groups that stick in my mind. Now that I come to think of it, those shepherds must have been the first visitors, because it was still dark when they arrived. We knew they were coming because they were shouting to each other, as they tried to find where exactly we were. We had no idea how they had come to know that Jesus had been born, because no one had left the cave. When they finally knocked on the door, and came in looking sheepish (I like that phrase, don't you? A shepherd looking sheepish? No? Oh well) One or two were ringing their hands together in nervousness. They were silent for a long while as they took in the scene around them. The Innkeepers wife hands on hips just about to bite their heads off for making so much noise. Joseph moving protectively between them and me. Me looking rather hot, bothered and dishevelled, trying to cover myself up, as I had been trying to feed Jesus. Then the lead shepherd spoke in a whisper to ask whether this baby was Yahweh's son. The Innkeepers wife opened her mouth again to put them in their place, but I just simply said 'Yes', and Joseph recognising that they must know who we were, moved aside to let them see Jesus properly. The whole lot of them, and I suppose that there must have been five or six of them, came and knelt at my feet, and just gazed at Jesus.

There was a long moment of silence, then Joseph asked them what they meant when they asked whether this was Yahweh's son. They then told this fantastic story of how they had been sitting outside their cave, guarding the sheep resting inside. By the light of the fire they were talking, and singing together when suddenly it seemed as if the sky had been torn in two, and a great light shone out. From behind the light they could hear the most wonderful music that they had ever heard. It was angels singing a great song of praise to Yahweh. When the music stopped a voice like that of an angel seemed to travel down the light to them, telling them that a baby had been born in Bethlehem, who was Yahweh's son. It said that we should go now and visit him, and then go and tell everyone in Bethlehem what they had seen and heard.

So here they were, following the angels instructions. Then the shepherd at the back of the group held out a lamb that he was carrying. He thrust it into Joseph's arms, and just said 'For the baby'. Then the whole lot of them turned and left the stable. As soon as they were all out, and the door shut behind them, we could hear them singing and shouting and praising Yahweh, as they presumably headed towards the town. We know that they followed the angels instructions, as many of our later visitors told us that they were awakened by them, and to put it mildly were not very happy to be woken by what they thought was a group of drunken shepherds – still they did come to see for themselves.

The other visitors that really stuck in my memory, came a while after the census day, and after most people had left Bethlehem to return to their own towns. We were just waiting for Jesus to be a little older before we started back on what would be a

journey of a week or so. With a small baby it was going to be difficult. Dusk was just turning to night, and I was outside the cave, sitting feeding Jesus and watching the stars appear one by one, when a camel hove into view, followed rapidly by several more. I covered myself up again, hoping that the camels and their riders wouldn't take too long to pass, as Jesus was getting a bit impatient for his food, and was not being quiet about his disturbed meal. I put him over my shoulder, and made to move back into the cave when the rather exotic looking man on the first camel hailed me, and asked whether the baby was the son of the God Yahweh. I just looked at him in astonishment. At this point Joseph ran up, having seen the camels pass him by as he trudged back from the town, where he had been working for our food, by making some wooden items for one of the men in the town. He answered the traveller warily, asking why they had asked that question. At that, the man got down from his camel and motioned to his companions to do the same. Some servants travelling with pack animals, also got down and ran to take the camels away, but not until a large pack on the side of one of the animals had been opened, and three boxes removed.

The man came forward and bowed low before me. He introduced himself as Melchior, then he present me with a box, which he said contained Frankincense. I stood there absolutely astonished. Then the next man came and introduced himself as Caspar, and he held out a box, which when he opened it contained a larger quantity of gold than I have ever seen in my life. A third man then held out the third box, and from the smell, I could tell that it contained Myrrh. He told me his name was Balthazar. So there we were, standing like statues, with these three men looking hopefully at me, and Jesus yelling louder and louder at the indignity of being separated from his food, when Joseph stepped in, and asked the men if they would like to sit and eat with us, while I went inside and fed Jesus and got him settled. Melchior turned and looked at a man standing nearby, who immediately gabbled away in another tongue. Melchior then turned back and in his very careful Aramaic, thanked us, and said that their servants would help prepare us some food. I took myself into the stable cave, leaving the problem of the boxes behind me.

When I came back out again with a clean and sleeping Jesus, it was fully dark, and before our shelter was a roaring fire around which everyone was now sitting. The boxes sat to one side under the watchful eye of one of the servants. I was motioned to sit on a chair covered in the most wonderful fabric, next to Melchior who sat on a rug on the ground. While we ate like kings on olives, fine bread, fruit and some lamb which must have been bought locally, the three men told us of their adventures. Melchior had travelled from Persia, where he was a scholar, a magus he said that he was called. Caspar told us that he was originally from a country called India, and that the gold was from there. He had travelled to Persia where he had met up with Melchior and Balthazar, who was from Babylon. The three of them were working and studying together, when they noticed in their charts that a great king was going to appear soon in Judea, so they had resolved to set off and see this great king. I asked them how they had found us. Balthazar just pointed over my head. I looked behind me to where the stable stood, and there hanging over the stable was the biggest star I

had ever seen. I had thought that it was the moon lighting our gathering, but it was dwarfed by this large twinkling star. We have been following that star all the way from Persia he said simply.

As the night drew on Caspar told me that they had made a mistake on their journey, and left following the star to go to the palace of the King, Herod, where they thought that would find that the great king they were trying to find was one of his family. Joseph and I looked at each other horrified. We knew what Herod did even to members of his family, if he felt threatened by them. Caspar noticed our look and gravely said that he had had a dream the previous night warning him that they should not travel back to Herod with news of this new great king, but go back to their own country another way. Joseph and I should leave as soon as possible as well. We agreed. It was a really horrid end to what had been one of the most memorable nights of my life, for we spent most of the rest of the night packing up our few belongings and loading them onto our donkey. We snatched a couple of hours sleep, and then as soon as it was light enough for us to see, we left with the three magi and their servants, and headed south towards their home in Persia. Over the next few days as we travelled slowly, still talking, with them still trying to get their heads around the stories of Jesus conception and birth, we discussed where we should go. If Herod should come looking we should not stay together, so regretfully our roads parted and they continued on to Persia, while we turned west towards Egypt, carrying with us the three boxes, which enabled us, with Joseph's skills as a carpenter, to live in Egypt until after Herod's death when we were able to return safely to Nazareth again.