



# THE MAKING OF MARY

**How did a few cameos in the Bible create the world's most powerful woman ever?**

**BY BRIAN BETHUNE** • Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus Christ, rates a mere 19 references in Scripture, and barely dented the consciousness of Western Christianity in the first millennium of its existence. Rather miraculously, for all this, today she is the most recognizable female figure in the world. Her reach is enormous in the heartland of what was once Christendom. A short walk along the Thames, as Peter Ackroyd points out in *Sacred River*, yields over 50 churches and other religious foundations named after her. And that's in Protestant England: in Catholic Spain, it's impossible to turn a corner without encountering something or someone, woman or man, named after Mary. She is found throughout the Western tradition in painting, sculpture and music, not to mention in Christian liturgy and Christmas ads. Nor is devotion to her a mere echo of past belief. The modern pace of Mary's ongoing

apparitions has, if anything, quickened since she showed herself in 1858 to a poor French girl named Bernadette in Lourdes, and to three children at Fatima in Portugal in 1917.

Outside Europe, too, Jesus's mother has been a powerful presence for centuries. One of Mary's most recent appearances to be accepted as genuine by the Roman Catholic Church took place in a Japanese nunnery in 1973. Then there is Guadalupe. No other Marian site is more significant in the history of Catholicism than the Mexican shrine. There, in 1531, a decade after the Spanish Conquest, on a hilltop sacred to an indigenous mother goddess, Mary appeared to an Aztec convert, Cuauhtlatoatzin—known since his canonization in 2002 as St. Juan Diego—and spoke to him in his native Nahuatl language. Our Lady of Guadalupe was the bridge between natives and Spaniards in their slow fusion into Mexicans, and a crucial force in bringing millions of New World natives to Catholicism. Today 10 million people a year visit her basilica.

How it all came to be, how Mary emerged from a handful of Gospel references to become so woven into the fabric of Western life that it is impossible to conceive of Western history

without her, is the subject of Miri Rubin's wonderful book, *Mother of God: A History of the Virgin Mary* (Yale UP). Some of Mary's scant scriptural references, like the stories of the Christ child laid in a manger and the flight into Egypt, are cherished parts of the Christian story; while others, like the Annunciation (when the Angel Gabriel told the virgin she would bear the son of God) and the Magnificat (Mary's prayer of praise), are vital in theological and liturgical terms.

But, as in the case of Christ himself, there is little personal information about Mary's life. Just as the pious speculated about the true nature of Jesus in the decades after his death, Rubin notes, they pondered—for the same reasons—those questions about his mother. The Apocrypha, books of Christian devotion and legend that were not ultimately absorbed into the canon of Scripture, filled the gap, abounding with tales of the marvellous child and the special woman who bore him. By 150 CE the Protogospel of James had given Mary a backstory appropriate for the mother of God. The daughter of a rich couple, precocious Mary was offered to the Temple at age three and dwelled there in purity until