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# Contents

- 3** Editorial: The Same Better Hope for an Anxious World
- 7** *Bruce Henning*, Hekate in Matthew's Gospel?: Greco-Roman Mythology in Matt. 16:19
- 19** *Peter G. Bolt*, How Mark Moved/s the World
- 33** *Ali Robinson*, Is Mary blessed?: Reconsidering Luke 11:27-28 and Mary's embodied discipleship
- 51** *Paul N. Anderson*, Authentic worship in John and in Luke-Acts: Influence, interfluence, and resonance
- 85** *Alan H. Cadwallader*, Bad smells at a religious gathering
- 101** *James R. Harrison*, 'Signs on the earth' below (Acts 2:19b): Luke-Acts and the Miraculous in the Graeco-Roman World

## Book Reviews

- 135** Elekosi F. Lafitaga, *Apocalyptic Sheep and Goats in Matthew and 1 Enoch*.
- 137** M. John-Patrick O'Connor, *The Last Will Be First: Divine Judgment in the Gospel of Mark*.
- 140** Jens-Arne Edelmann., *Das Römische Imperium im Lukanischen Doppelwerk*.
- 142** Joshua Paul Smith, *Luke Was Not a Christian: Reading the Third Gospel and Acts within Judaism*.
- 144** James W. Barker., *Writing and Rewriting the Gospels: John and the Synoptics*
- 147** Wil Rogan, *Purity in the Gospel of John: Early Jewish Tradition, Christology, and Ethics*.
- 149** Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel and the Gospels: Christian Proclamation and Early Jesus Books*.

# Is Mary blessed?

## Reconsidering Luke 11:27–28 and Mary’s embodied discipleship

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### Abstract

Noting the controversial place that Mary, the mother of Jesus, has held throughout church history, this paper joins the growing body of scholarship that seeks to lift her from doctrinal battles. This study challenges the traditional reading of Luke 11:27–28 where a woman in the crowd raises her voice and says to Jesus, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!” To which Jesus replies, “Blessed rather (μενοῦν) are those who hear the word of God and obey it!” Since the Reformation, these verses have been predominantly interpreted as negative discourse, with Jesus’ words functioning as a corrective or rebuke of the woman in the crowd. In turn, this verse is often seen as Jesus scorning the woman and reducing the maternal significance of Mary’s role. However, using a linguistic, contextual, and theological argument, this paper seeks to challenge the dominant position, demonstrating, first, that Jesus is not correcting the woman from the crowd, and second, that Jesus affirms both his mother and the woman in the crowd (Luke 11:28). It will be suggested that in these verses we hear echoes of Luke’s unique portrait of Mary as blessed precisely because of her physical and bodily participation in the gospel.

**Key words:** Mary; Embodied discipleship; Blessedness; Luke–Acts; μενοῦν or μὲν οὖν

### 1. Introduction

For centuries, Mary, the mother of Jesus, has occupied a contested space within Christian theology. Many Protestant traditions have limited their focus on Mary to the nativity narratives, approaching her cautiously to avoid crossing into what might be seen as needless devotion. As Beverley Gaventa helpfully states, “So fearful have we been of what seems to us excessive attention to Mary in Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions that Mary is virtually absent among us”.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, in certain traditions, Mary has been a marginal figure in New Testament scholarship. However, in recent years, a growing number of Protestant theologians and biblical scholars have called for a renewed engagement with the biblical witness of Mary.<sup>2</sup> This essay contributes to that effort

1 Gaventa and Rigby, *Blessed One*, 1.

2 Examples include Braaten and Jenson, *Mary Mother of God*; Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women*; Gaventa, *Mary*; Bauckham, *Gospel Women*; Ralston, ‘The Virgin Mary’, 187–200. For an ecumenical discussion on Mary, see Brown, Donfried, Fitzmyer, and Reumann, *Mary in the New Testament*.

by re-examining a passage in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 11:27–28) that is frequently interpreted as minimising Mary’s role and significance in the life of Jesus. In contrast, it will argue that the passage in question *affirms* Mary’s distinctive and pivotal role within the Gospel narrative.

## 1.1. The Central Passage: Luke 11:27–28

In Luke 11:14–26, Jesus is teaching a crowd about his authority to cast out demons. Amid this teaching, an unnamed woman from the crowd raises her voice and declares, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!” (Luke 11:27)—to which Jesus makes the now famous reply (as rendered in most English Bibles), “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!” (Luke 11:28).<sup>3</sup> It has been argued by many scholars that Jesus in his reply is refuting this woman’s comment with the use of the word “rather”, either because the woman’s words are mere flattery, because her statement is inadequate, or simply because it is inaccurate.<sup>4</sup> An inference, then, would be that Jesus’ mother (the one whose womb bore him and whose breasts nursed him) does not have special status and is not to be considered especially noteworthy due to her maternal connection to Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Instead, the blessed one is the *theoretical* believer who hears and obeys God’s word. And thus, Jesus rejects this woman’s public assertion.

This paper will challenge the traditional interpretation of Luke 11:27–28, arguing that: (1) linguistically, this passage can be understood as an affirmation of Mary’s role rather than a dismissal; (2) contextually, a positive reading of this passage fits with how Mary is portrayed throughout Luke’s Gospel; (3) theologically, a positive reading highlights the importance of Mary’s physical and spiritual participation in God’s plan.

## 2. A Linguistic Argument for a Positive Reading of Luke 11:27–28

As mentioned, English Bibles predominantly employ negative language and phrasing to represent the words found in Luke 11:27–28 with Jesus’ response being viewed as a corrective: “Blessed *rather* are those who hear the word of God and obey it!” The term on which these translations rest is the Greek particle *μενοῦν*, often taken to mean “rather” or “nay”. This understanding first arose in Luther’s 1522 commentary on the New Testament, where he asserted that Jesus rejected the woman’s words in Luke 11:27 in the following verse (v.28) because they were nothing but “womanish shameful thoughts”.<sup>6</sup> Luther’s interpretation was a direct response to Erasmus’ translation, penned a decade prior, which took Luke 11:28 (*αὐτὸς δὲ εἶπεν μενοῦν μακάριοι*) positively, “and he said, indeed blessed”. Erasmus viewed the woman in the crowd as a symbol of the church rising against the slanderous voices of the crowd and marvelling at Jesus’ wise and powerful words.<sup>7</sup> For Erasmus, Jesus’ reply is not a rejection of this woman’s words but an affirmation of them. This reading echoes that of Margery Kempe, a fifteenth-century English mystic who viewed this as a story about

3 For example, NRSV (“Blessed rather”, NET (“Blessed rather”), NASB (“On the contrary”), ESV (“Blessed rather”, and NIV (“Blessed rather”). For a helpful treatment of this, see MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England*, 4–5.

4 These various positions will be discussed in §2.1.

5 Pitre notes that many Christians are quick to assert the “ordinariness of Mary” despite the respect and reverence she received among ancient believers. See Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary*, 33.

6 Kreitzer, Manetsch, and George, *Luke*, 8272. See also Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, 281.

7 Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, 15. Erasmus states, “Jesus did not reject her declaration but perfected it, in saying, [Yes] ‘Truly blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep’”. Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, 16, 48.

a woman who is praised by Jesus for recognising his healing.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Tyndale, working from both Erasmus' translation and an acquired copy of Luther's German translation of the New Testament (prior to its publication), stayed in line with the positive reading of this verse, "But he sayde: Ye happy are they that heare the worde of God and kepe it".<sup>9</sup> However, despite these early positive translations, the negative reading became dominant and then solidified in the Sixteenth Century when Calvin stressed in his commentary that while it cannot be denied that "God conferred the highest honour on Mary, by choosing and appointing her to be the mother of his Son [...] Christ's reply is so far from assenting to this female voice, that it contains an indirect reproof. *Nay, rather*".<sup>10</sup>

Most major modern translations of Luke 11:27–28 are still coloured by this hermeneutical lens, and many commentators hold similar positions. For instance, Marshall comments that the saying by this woman "has little positive importance in the present context (although Catholic scholars assess it more positively)".<sup>11</sup> Morris claims the particle "rather" points to a deeper and more profound truth, as it is "not a physical relationship to Jesus that is supremely important, but hearing and keeping the word of God".<sup>12</sup> Carroll supports a similar line of thinking, commenting, "Enthusiastic acclamation by an admirer receives gentle rebuke, for what matters, what conveys real blessing, is the reordered life made possible by Jesus' benefaction which requires enduring commitment".<sup>13</sup> In a slightly different argument, Parsons suggests that Jesus' response is an attempt to dispel cultural traditions of "flattery often bestowed on the women who bore great men (cf. Petronius, *Sat.* 94.1), so as not to be seduced by false praise".<sup>14</sup> While some scholars, such as John Nolland, do not accept that Jesus *rejects* the woman's words in Luke 11:27, they still hold the view that the particle functions either as a corrective or a modification of the previous statement.<sup>15</sup> Even Luke Timothy Johnson, a scholar in the Catholic tradition, concludes that Jesus redirects the woman's statement toward obedience, arguing that the woman's admiration is insufficient; thus Jesus seeks to direct our attention to those who hear and keep God's word instead.<sup>16</sup> This suggests that exegetical stances on this passage cut across confessional boundaries.<sup>17</sup>

8 See Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 93. Interestingly, Margery Kempe used this passage in her argument to the archbishop to support her efforts to preach the good news.

9 For a survey of these translations, see Partridge, *English Biblical Translation*, 38–39.

10 Calvin, *Commentarii in harmoniam Evangelicorum*, 348. While Calvin recognises that Mary received the favour of God, he remained hostile to those who would elevate her beyond what he deemed to be acceptable, writing, "The Papists discover amazing stupidity by singing, in honour of Mary, those very words by which their superstition is expressly condemned, and who, in giving thanks, detach the woman's saying, and leave out the correction. But it was proper that such a universal stupefaction should come upon those who intentionally profane, at their pleasure, the sacred word of God". See Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, "Luke XI. 2".

11 Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 481.

12 See Morris, *Luke*, 218. Even as far back as Plummer's 1896 critical commentary on Luke, we have this same assertion that "Jesus does not deny the woman's statement, but He points out how inadequate it is. She has missed the main point, to be the Mother of Jesus implies no more than a share in His humanity. To hear and keep the word of God implies communion with what is Divine". Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Luke*, 348.

13 Carroll, *Luke*, 256.

14 See Parsons, *Luke*, 192. Here Parsons notes that "praising an offspring by extolling the parents and caregivers were common in the ancient world" (cf. Prov. 23:24–25). I concur with Parson's observation here, but do not see this as permission to read this verse in a negative light. This data could also support the view that the woman in the crowd is following a culturally appropriate practise which Jesus affirms. This will be discussed further in §3.2.

15 Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, 648–649. See also Thrall, *Greek Particles in the New Testament*, 34–35.

16 Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 186.

17 Alternatively, Anthony Maas interprets these words as Jesus praising his mother "in a most emphatic way; for she excelled the rest of men in holiness not less than in dignity". See Maas, "The Blessed Virgin Mary". This sits in line with the Second Vatican Council: "In the course of her Son's preaching she [Mary] received the words whereby in extolling a kingdom beyond the calculations and bonds of flesh and blood, He declared blessed those who heard and kept the word of God, as she was faithfully doing". Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964, sec. 58 lines 291–292.

There are scholars, of course, who recognise the flexibility of the particle. Fitzmyer comments that *μενοῦν* may be taken negatively or affirmatively depending on context, noting that in Luke 11:28 the latter is plausible given Luke's broader portrayal of Mary.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Bock acknowledges that the particle allows for an inclusive affirmation in this setting.<sup>19</sup> Stein also notes the flexibility of this particle, offering an expanded translation: "What you have said is true as far as it goes. But Mary's blessedness does not consist simply in her relationship with me, but in the fact that she heard the word of God and kept it, which is where true blessedness lies".<sup>20</sup> On this Thompson agrees, noting that the particle is not necessarily a correction but might merely be used to emphasise Jesus' point that "a positive response to him must be accompanied with genuine adherence to his word".<sup>21</sup> This aligns with the view of Alicia D. Myers, who writes:

[F]or Luke, Mary is indeed blessed, but not because she fulfilled her obligation as a woman to become a mother. Instead, she is rightly called blessed because of her willingness to hear and obey the "word" (*logos*) spoken to her—and thus implanted within her—as a part of God's plan rather than the cultural narrative of a maternal telos for all women.<sup>22</sup>

This paper will build on the work of Fitzmyer, Bock, Stein, Thompson, and Myers, arguing for a positive reading of Jesus' words. To demonstrate the validity of this positive reading, first the Greek particle, *μενοῦν*,<sup>23</sup> traditionally taken to mean "rather" or "nay", needs to be reconsidered. As mentioned, this word does not have an exclusively negative meaning. Importantly, the particle can also be used in an *affirmative* sense to agree with or emphasise a previous statement (that is, to mean "Yes", "Indeed", or "Yes and").<sup>24</sup> And there are linguistic grounds for this claim.

- i) Though the particle *μενοῦν* as a single word does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament, it does appear as two words *μὲν οὖν*. Given that Greek manuscripts had no spaces between words, it is not clear if *μενοῦν* was intended to be read as one compound word or two separate words. Thus, it is reasonable to look at instances of *μὲν οὖν* in this study.

In other parts of Luke–Acts, *μὲν οὖν* is used to denote a continuation of thought, similar to the phrase "so then" (e.g. Luke 3:18, "so then [*μὲν οὖν*] with many other exhortations he proclaimed the good news" and Acts 1:6, "so then [*μὲν οὖν*] they welcomed his message").<sup>25</sup> There are also examples where *μὲν οὖν* is used in an emphatic sense to mean "indeed" (see Acts 5:41; 8:4,25; 9:31; 11:19; 14:3; 15:3; 16:5; 17:12; 23:18). Although these instances appear in the context of narrative, as opposed to dialogue, they nonetheless demonstrate the flexibility of this term.

- ii) *μενοῦν* has connections to the term *μενοῦνγε*, which appears in Romans 9:20 and 10:18 and can be taken to mean either "indeed" or "rather", and in Philippians 3:8, where it is taken to mean

18 Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV*, 927–29.

19 Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1095. Bock notes, "The connective *μενοῦν* (menoun) has three possible senses (Fitzmyer 1985: 928): (1) an adversative meaning 'on the contrary', thus rejecting the previous remark (Manson 1949: 88; Marshall 1978: 482); (2) an affirmation meaning 'indeed' (as in Phil. 3:8); or (3) a correction meaning 'yes, but rather' (Luce 1933: 216; Arndt 1956: 302; Plummer 1896: 306; Danker 1988: 235; Schneider 1977a: 269). The first meaning is not likely, since Luke has already affirmed such a blessing (Luke 1:42, 48) and elsewhere uses *οὐχί*, *λέγω ὑμῖν* (ouchi, legō hymin, no, I say to you) to express rejection of an idea (12:51; 13:3, 5; Fitzmyer 1985: 928). The sense is not complete affirmation either. Rather, the woman's remark is correct, but not exhaustive". Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1094–95. See Bovon, *Luke 2*, 131–32.

20 Stein, *Luke*, 333.

21 Thompson, *Luke*, 190.

22 Myers, *Blessed among Women?*, 66.

23 BDAG, s.v., *μενοῦν*, 630. See also BDF §450. *μὲν οὖν* denotes continuation (BI-D. §451).

24 See Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 163–4; Nolland, *Luke*, 648–649.

25 See also Acts 1:6; 5:41; 8:25; 9:31; 11:19; 13:4; 14:3; 15:3,30; 16:5; 17:12; 19:32; 23:18,22,31; 25:4; 26:4,9. It should be noted that these examples are of *μὲν οὖν* being used in a narrative context as opposed to dialogue.

“indeed” or “more than that”. Thus, just as *μεν* and *οὖν* independently can be progressive, adversative, affirmative, or emphatic, the combination *μενοῦνγε*, or *μενοῦν* in the case of Luke 11:28, presents the same “considerable diversity of usage”.<sup>26</sup> It means that the particle does not have one single way of being translated.

- iii) Additionally, when surveying texts outside the New Testament and LXX, Denniston’s extensive study of Greek particles has developed a theory based on the emerging patterns found in contemporaneous texts of the New Testament. In narrowing down the most reliable options, Denniston suggests that when *μενοῦν* (or *μεν οὖν*) is used: (1) in *dialogue*, and (2) in *response to a non-question (i.e. a statement)*, the particle most often carries the meaning “certainly” or “indeed”, stating that, in these instances, the term is an *affirmation* and not a corrective (See Plato, *Theaet.* 158d, 159e, 189e; Plato, *Phaedrus*, 262a).<sup>27</sup> (3) If the replying speaker *repeats a word used by the first speaker*, *μενοῦν* can carry an emphatic sense, making the positive response slightly stronger (Plat. *Prot.* 309c–309d).<sup>28</sup>

Building on this, similar examples of the emphatic usage can be found in the New Testament. In Acts 25:11 Paul says, “if indeed I do wrong” (εἰ μὲν οὖν ἀδικῶ), and in Acts 26:4, “indeed my manner of life is from youth” (τὴν μὲν οὖν βίωσίν μου τὴν ἐκ νεότητος). (See also Acts 17:30; 19:38; 26:9).

Therefore, using Denniston’s observations and the textual evidence, a case can be made linguistically that *μενοῦν* in Luke 11:28 should be read in the affirmative. First, there is *dialogue* between Jesus and the woman. Second, the first speaker [the woman] makes a statement [*non-question*]. Third, the second speaker [Jesus] *repeats a key word from the first speaker’s phrase*, namely, the term “blessed”. Therefore, based on the contemporaneous sources and the flexibility of this particle, it is at least possible that the particle *μενοῦν* in Luke 11:28 *affirms* the previous statement or offers something slightly stronger in the response (i.e. “yes and” or “indeed”). In this case, then, Luke 11:28 should be read as Jesus saying to the woman in the crowd, “*Yes indeed*, blessed are the ones who hear and obey the word of God” [with Mary being one of those who hear and obey, not apart from her maternal role but through it].

### 3. A Contextual Argument for a Positive Reading of Luke 11:27–28

This section seeks to demonstrate that there are contextual grounds for reading Luke 11:27–28 as a positive exchange. This will be demonstrated by examining how Luke categorises blessedness, assessing how Luke’s Gospel portrays Mary, and considering the immediate context of Luke 11.

#### 3.1. Blessedness According to Luke’s Gospel

Before looking at Luke’s portrayal of Mary, we must first ask who Luke deems as blessed. In Luke’s Gospel, much like other parts of the New Testament, a person is blessed (*μακάριος*)<sup>29</sup> because they share in the salvation of the kingdom of God (see Luke 1:48, 11:27). Blessed are those who “see” and

26 For an extensive study of the use of *μὲν οὖν* see Denniston, *The Greek Particles*, 470–481.

27 Denniston, *The Greek Particles*, 476.

28 Denniston, *The Greek Particles*, 476–477.

29 BDAG, s.v. *μακάριος*, 611. According to Josephus, to say someone is blessed is to say they are the “privileged recipient of divine favour” (Jos., *Ant.* 9, 264; cf. Rom. 4:6; Isa. 30:18).

“hear” what the kings and prophets have longed to see (Luke 10:23–24; cf. Luke 4:21) and blessed are those who “keep” or “put into practice” the words of God (Luke 6:47; 11:28).<sup>30</sup> Luke says blessed are the steadfast (Luke 12:37), the ones devoted to God (Luke 12:43),<sup>31</sup> and those who fulfil God’s moral requirements (Luke 14:14). Blessed are the poor, hungry, weeping, and hated (Luke 6:20–22). Jesus utters twelve *makarisms* (Luke 6:20–23; 7:23; 10:23; 12:37,38,43; 14:14,15; 23:29; see also Acts 20:35) in Luke–Acts. These are all viewed as statements of affirmation. Likewise, exclamations of blessedness by other characters throughout the Gospel are also seen as positive affirmations (See Luke 1:42,45,48). Thus, not only is blessedness exclusively spoken of in favourable terms in Luke’s writings, but as will be seen in the next section, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is also portrayed as one who is blessed.<sup>32</sup>

### 3.2. The Blessedness of Mary in Luke

Several times throughout Luke’s Gospel, Mary is either directly called blessed or is seen to display the aspects of blessedness which Luke describes (see §3.1).<sup>33</sup> In Luke 1:27–28, the angel Gabriel exclaims: “Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you” (χαῖρε, κεχαριτωμένη, ὁ κύριος μετὰ σοῦ, Luke 1:28).<sup>34</sup> “O graced one”, “favoured one”, or “the one blessed by God”,<sup>35</sup> is the way in which Mary is addressed by God’s messenger, and throughout Luke’s opening chapter these sentiments are affirmed several times. For example, Mary is said to have “found favour with God” (Luke 1:30) and she is specifically called “blessed” by her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1:42). Joel Green, noting the connection between Luke 1:42 and Luke 11:27, comments that while it is grammatically possible to read Jesus’ words in Luke 11:28 as a contradiction of the woman’s pronouncement in Luke 11:27, “the fact that Elizabeth had spoken similar words, and done so under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (1:41–42), makes this option doubtful”.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, according to Schreiner, within the context of Luke’s Gospel, being filled with the Holy Spirit is usually related to prophetic activity. Therefore, Elizabeth is bringing forth prophetic speech, which is later echoed by the woman in Luke 11:27.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Mary herself says that her soul magnifies God because “he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant”,<sup>38</sup> and that now “all generations” will bless her

30 The term “keeping” comes from φυλάσσω (cf. Deut. 4:6; 28:13; 15 LXX), traditionally meaning “watch”, “guard”, or “protect” (BDAG, s.v. φυλάσσω, 1068) but can also express the idea of keeping a law or command (see Exod. 31:16; Rom. 2:26; John 12:47). Keeping God’s word in Luke 11:28 is most likely linked to obeying and keeping the commands of God.

31 In Wittman’s study he explores the blessedness of God, examining how Jesus’ disciples are blessed as God works through them, and as they abide in God’s love. See Wittman, “The Logic of Divine Blessedness”, 151.

32 Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 461.

33 See Brown, Donfried, Fitzmyer, and Reumann, *Mary in the New Testament*, 125–135.

34 Spencer, *The Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles*, 104. For a detailed study on the birth narrative see Coleridge, *The Birth of the Lukan Narrative*; Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*.

35 Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 288, 325–326.

36 Green, “Blessed Is She Who Believed”, 12. Interestingly, Green still sees the particle as a corrective, writing “the sense that best fits this narrative context is that the words of this woman are not altogether wrong but are in need of substantive modification”. Here I part from Green. As I have argued, I do not see Jesus’ words as a corrective but as an affirmation with the offering of additional information in support of Mary’s blessedness.

37 See Schreiner, *Commentary on Luke*, “Luke 1:39–56”, Kindle edition.

38 There are similarities here between Mary’s song and that of Hannah. Mary proclaims that God “has looked on the lowliness of his servant” (Luke 1:48) and Hannah prays, “if you will look on the lowliness of your servant” (1 Sam. 1:11). These songs, as Bauckham suggests, highlight “God’s gracious action for the singer herself” and through humility, those who are part of God’s faithful community. See Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 61. There are also connections between Mary’s song and that of Moses (Exod. 15:1–18), Miriam (Exod. 15:21), Deborah and Barak (Judg. 6), Hannah (1 Sam. 2), David (2 Sam. 22), Hezekiah (Isa. 38:9–20), Judith (Jdt. 16), Tobit (Tob. 13), and Israel at the exodus (Isa. 12).

(Luke 1:49).<sup>39</sup> The lowliness spoken of here may not necessarily denote low social status,<sup>40</sup> but (as Bauckham suggests) indicates an *attitude* “of humility before God and trust in God”, another mark of blessedness according to Luke.<sup>41</sup>

Not only is Mary’s blessedness directly affirmed at multiple points,<sup>42</sup> but like so many of God’s servants who hear the words “I am with you” at the commencement of a formidable and challenging ministry (e.g. Isaac in Gen. 26: 24; Jacob in Gen. 28:15; Moses in Exod. 3:12; Joshua in Josh. 1:5; Gideon in Judg. 6:16; and Jeremiah in Jer. 1:8), Mary responds with trust.<sup>43</sup> When receiving the news that she will bear a son, Mary responds, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). The title “servant of the Lord” also indicates this readiness to serve God, linking her to other great leaders who played an integral role in God’s salvation story, such as Abraham (Ps. 105:42), Moses (Neh. 9:14), Joshua (Josh. 24:29), David (Ps. 89:3), and Daniel (Dan. 6:20), who are likewise identified as servants of God.<sup>44</sup> In her acceptance of the task (“you will conceive and give birth to a son”), Mary shows herself to be a model of faith and an example of obedient discipleship. Her “exemplary qualities” become evident as she ponders the incredibly demanding words spoken by the angel and yet responds in obedience and faith, calling herself a willing servant of the Lord.<sup>45</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to Zechariah’s story, which is designed by Luke to be read in parallel to this account.<sup>46</sup> Prior to Mary’s announcement, a priest from the order of Abijah (Luke 1:5) also receives a visit from Gabriel.<sup>47</sup> The angel meets Zechariah while he is offering incense in the sanctuary of the Lord (Luke 1:9).<sup>48</sup> Zechariah is “troubled” (ταράσσω), Mary is “deeply troubled” (διαταράσσω) and both are told not to be afraid for God will give them a son. However, only Zechariah is told this in response to his prayers: “Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son” (Luke 1:13). Mary, by contrast, did not pray for this and therefore had no reason to expect the angel’s visit or anticipate that this would be her calling. But still, when she hears the word of God, she responds with ready

39 Others who are called most blessed among women include Jael (Judg. 5:24; cf. *Bib. Ant.* 32:12) and Judith (Jdt. 13:19–20). On the Magnificat, Brown makes an interesting argument that Luke may have received this canticle from a group of Jewish Christians and that it, along with the other canticles, may have been originally written to praise the salvific action of God more generally. He writes, “In my hypothesis Luke took these general expressions of joy manifested by the Jewish Christian *Anawim* over the salvation accomplished in Jesus and applied them with a specificity that was not in their original purview”. See Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 353.

40 Especially given that Mary is a relative of Elizabeth (a woman of priestly descent, cf. Luke 1:5, 36) and that Joseph was of Davidic descent (Luke 1:27).

41 Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 71.

42 Green, “The Social Status of Mary in Luke 1:5–2:52”, 468.

43 Luke 1:28 may be calling to mind the prophecy of Zephaniah, “Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem [...] the Lord, is in your midst [...] Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst!” (Zeph. 3:14–17). As Sri suggests, the implication is that Mary is the one through whom the awaited salvation is brought. Sri, *Rethinking Mary in the New Testament*, 11. Bovon, however, rejects this connection, seeing it as a “far-fetched” claim made primarily by Catholic theologians. See Bovon, *Luke 1, 50*. Alternatively, Brown sees a connection between Luke 1:28 and Judges 6:12, stating that these two verses are closer in context and wording than the Zephaniah passage. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 324–325.

44 Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 66.

45 See Ralston, “The Virgin Mary”, 111.

46 Spencer, *The Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles*, 101.

47 It is widely agreed by scholars that we are meant to read these stories together and in parallel. See Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 82.

48 One can assume by his position that he was already held in high honour among his people, yet Zechariah does not receive the same honoured greeting that Mary does. Notably, he is not called “favoured” or “blessed”.

acceptance: “Here, I am”.<sup>49</sup> Zechariah, in stark contrast, even while serving the Lord in the sanctuary, questions the reliability of the angel’s words and is rendered mute as a result (Luke 1:59–64).<sup>50</sup> When Mary journeys to Zechariah’s house to share her news with Elizabeth, Zechariah remains mute while Mary is singing and prophesying.<sup>51</sup> Mary not only hears the news about her role in bringing in the kingdom of God, but she also believes it. This is why she is “blessed” (Luke 1:45–55).<sup>52</sup> It is emphasised in Luke’s Gospel that Mary listens and acts on the word of God. This, according to Brittany E. Wilson, is “an essential aspect of discipleship in Luke. This dual response to the word [listening and acting on] is mentioned a total of three times, two of which have direct bearing on Mary”.<sup>53</sup> Forbes and Harrower add that not only does Mary demonstrate great faith, but she is “the first person to link Israel’s salvation history with God’s actions in her own time”.<sup>54</sup> Mary is, therefore, discussed by scholars as the “first believer” of the good news about Jesus.<sup>55</sup>

Mary, according to Ralston, is consistently portrayed in Luke’s Gospel as “deliberate and thoughtful, a determined and persistent woman possessing deep spirituality tempered with a rich biblical understanding”.<sup>56</sup> For instance, Mary is said to treasure (διατηρέω and συντηρέω) God’s words and ponder them in her heart (Luke 2:19,51). The words used here for “treasure” (διατηρέω and συντηρέω) mean to watch closely, keep safe, preserve, or observe strictly.<sup>57</sup> “Treasuring” and “pondering” are symbols of Mary’s growth and learning which go beyond the temple scene. She keeps the words and prophecies of Jesus and *about* Jesus in her heart.<sup>58</sup> While she may not have immediately understood all that she heard, she faithfully obeys the instructions of God and keeps these things in her mind in order to better understand them.<sup>59</sup> After Jesus’ birth, Mary’s devotion to God’s word, laws, and commands “comes into sharper focus” when both she and Joseph do all things according to the law, including the required offerings and the presentation of Jesus for his circumcision (Luke 2:21–41).<sup>60</sup> This is in keeping with the larger image of Mary and Joseph as faithful and Torah-observant Jews (Luke 1:6,59; 2:21–27,36–38).<sup>61</sup> Helen Bond also notes that the offering of two small doves in the temple (Luke 2:24) may reflect Mary and Joseph’s low economic status, which aligns with Luke’s concern for the marginalised, drawing a further

49 In the context of ancient Judaism, both Mary and Elizabeth receive the blessing of a child. It is clear throughout the Hebrew Bible that children are viewed as a blessing from God (e.g. Ps. 127:3; Deut. 7:14; cf. Gen. 1:28). It is God who opens or closes a woman’s womb (cf. Gen. 20:18). Myers notes that the pregnant Elizabeth (“filled with a holy Spirit” when seeing Mary) loudly shouts and “proclaims both the greatness of Mary’s child and her own blessed status (1:41–45)”. Myers, *Blessed among Women?*, 63–64.

50 Coleridge, *The Birth of the Lukan Narrative*, 70.

51 Spencer states: “In the absence of patriarchal priestly proclamation, the two spirit-filled women take the lead in sharing and declaring the good news”. Spencer, *The Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles*, 106. Mary hears and reflects on the divine word and responds positively, even proclaiming it in a prophetic fashion (Luke 1:26–38,46–55; 2:19,51). See also Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 461; Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus*, 127.

52 McGrath adds that he sees an echo here of Jesus’ own prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Where Jesus prays, “Your will be done”, Mary utters, “Let it be unto me”. McGrath, *What Jesus Learned from Women*, 33.

53 Wilson, “Pugnacious Precursors and the Bearer of Peace”, 450.

54 Forbes and Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity*, 59.

55 See Fitzmyer, “Mary in Lukan Salvation History”, 69. See also Brown, Donfried, Fitzmyer, and Reumann, *Mary in the New Testament*, 114–115.

56 Ralston, “The Virgin Mary”, 109.

57 LSJ s.v., διατηρέω and συντηρέω. See also Webb, “Overcoming fear with Mary of Nazareth”, 97.

58 Stein, *Luke*, 24, 110.

59 Bovon, *Luke 1*, 115. Compare also Dan. 4:28 LXX and Gen. 37:11 where a similar phrase is used to describe a person puzzled by what they have heard.

60 Ralston, “The Virgin Mary”, 111.

61 Parsons, *Luke*, 58.

connection between those who are poor and those who are blessed (cf. Luke 6:20).<sup>62</sup>

Even though Mary's story is not front and centre throughout the remainder of Luke's Gospel,<sup>63</sup> we are assured of her continued faithfulness given that she is named explicitly by Luke among the first community of disciples at the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:14). By being present among this community and specifically named as one of those "constantly devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14), Mary is seen to be a faithful and long-standing disciple.<sup>64</sup> As Brown notes, she not only appears "as a representative of the ideals of true discipleship" but she "endures till Pentecost to become a Christian and a member of the church".<sup>65</sup> The image, then, that Luke gives of Mary, the mother Jesus, is a woman who is favoured, called by God to a salvific role, faithful, humble, obedient, who treasures and keeps God's word in her heart, and, as Pablo Gadenz states, "sets an example for other disciples to follow on the way to beatitude: hear the word and act on it".<sup>66</sup> Within the context of Luke's Gospel, she is blessed.

There is, of course, a passage which can be used in opposition to this theory, namely Luke 8:19–21. It reads, "Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you'. But he said to them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it'". Mary Marshall helpfully unpacks this verse showing that Luke's account differs from that of Matthew (12:46–50) and Mark (3:31–35), with Luke notably "omitting elements that would evoke a negative understanding of the [Jesus'] family".<sup>67</sup> Luke's account omits the question, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" (Mark 3:33), along with the image of Jesus "looking at those who sat around him" and saying, "Here are my mother and my brothers" (Mark 3:33). Amy Peeler also challenges a negative reading of Luke 8:21, rejecting the view that this verse demonstrates Mary's lack of trust in her son, but rather suggests that Luke includes this story here to highlight that Mary's vocation is not limited to her biological role as mother but includes other forms of discipleship, too.<sup>68</sup> For Peeler, Luke's Jesus does not reject his earthly mother and brothers but expands his understanding of family by including those who are faithful to his word. To this, John Painter adds the observation that Luke reworks Mark 3:31–35, placing this story about his family directly after the Parable of the Sower, suggesting that his mother and brothers *are* the good soil (Luke 8:15).<sup>69</sup> Together these arguments demonstrate the way in which readers of Luke 8:19–21 often import the hostility witnessed in Mark 3:31–35 and have it colour Luke's relaying of the event.<sup>70</sup>

62 Bond and Taylor, *Women Remembered*, 124. The usual offering was a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering (Lev. 12:6), but Leviticus 12:8 allowed a woman after childbirth who could not afford a lamb to offer "two turtledoves or two young pigeons".

63 There is the inclusion of a Special Lucan account in Jesus' childhood when he is temporarily lost but later found by his parents in the temple (Luke 2:41–49). After this, Luke narrates that Jesus returns to Nazareth with his parents and "was obedient to them" (Luke 2:50), he increases "in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" while "His mother treasured all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:50–52; cf. 2:19). See Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 157.

64 Seim, *The Double Message*, 10–11.

65 Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 499.

66 According to Gadenz, Mary is a model disciple. Referring to Luke 11:28, he writes, "Jesus replies to the woman with a beatitude that echoes Elizabeth's, specifying this more basic reason for blessedness: Blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it. Indeed, Mary has a model response to God's word (1:38), and thus she is the *blessed* Virgin Mary". Gadenz, *The Gospel of Luke*, 228.

67 Marshall, "The Rise of James the Just in Luke-Acts", 96. These views build on the Markan priority theory. See Goodacre, *The Synoptic Problem*, 84–105.

68 Peeler, *Women and the Gender of God*, 194.

69 Painter, *Just James*, 41.

70 See also Maunder, *Mary*, 90–91. Maunder speaks here of both Luke 8:19–21 and Luke 11:27–28 noting that while it might initially appear as though these are instances of Jesus "distancing himself from his mother" the contexts suggest otherwise.

### 3.3. The Immediate Context of Luke 11

If we think about Luke's broader literary or narrative style, Luke tends to pair stories or characters together for emphasis, as we previously saw with Zechariah (1:5–25) and Mary (1:26–38). There are many other examples, including Simeon (2:25–35) and Anna (2:36–38); the searching shepherd (15:3–7) and the searching woman (15:8–10); male disciples who betray Jesus (22:54–62) and female disciples who remain faithful (23:49; 24:1–10).<sup>71</sup> With this literary and rhetorical preference in mind, if we examine the verses immediately surrounding Luke 11:27–28, it can be argued that there are two responses to Jesus' healing and subsequent teaching that are designed to be read side-by-side.

Prior to the verses in focus (Luke 11:27–28), Jesus casts out a demon and heals a mute man (Luke 11:14–26). Some in the crowd are stunned (Luke 11:14), others accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebul (Luke 11:15), and others test his power (Luke 11:16). Knowing this, Jesus uses the illustration of a divided kingdom to demonstrate that a kingdom cannot stand if it is turned against itself, professing, “whoever is not with me is against me” (Luke 11:23). After this teaching a woman from the masses raises her voice and—in contrast to the crowd who fail to recognise Jesus' authority (Luke 11:15)—*correctly* asserts Jesus' power. This insertion is unique to Luke's Gospel. While the Beelzebul teaching has parallels in the other Synoptic Gospels (cf. Mark 3:22–35 and Matt. 12:22–37), Luke's insertion of vv.27–28 is distinctive.<sup>72</sup> The unique addition of Luke 11:27–28 highlights Luke's particular interest in the theme of blessedness. This insertion also raises the question as to whether or not this is another example of Luke editing the Markan tradition in a more positive light, as was seen in Luke 8:19–21 (cf. Mark 3:31–35).

If in antiquity a mother is brought honour through the greatness of her sons,<sup>73</sup> then the woman's admiration (“Blessed is the one that bore you and nursed you”, Luke 11:27), would have been viewed as a culturally accepted form of praise (Ovid, *Metam.* 4.320–24; Petronius, *Sat.* 94.1; *Inf. Gos. Thom.* 7.5–8; 17.3). As Wolter suggests, “The macarism with which a woman from the crowd reacts to Jesus applies to the mother of Jesus only on the surface of the text. It is actually Jesus to whom the praise refers”.<sup>74</sup> The woman calls Jesus' mother blessed as a way of praising and affirming Jesus' power and authority. If blessedness is consistently spoken of in positive terms in Luke's Gospel, and this exclamation is a form of praise (Luke 11:27), then it, too, should be viewed in an affirmative sense. And if the responses from those in the crowd are to be read in parallel, the woman's response (Luke 11:27) stands in stark contrast to the crowd. The other characters in the crowd misunderstand Jesus entirely, accusing him of gaining his power from Beelzebul (Luke 11:15), but the woman recognises Jesus' authority and offers praise. Therefore, for Jesus to affirm the woman's declaration in Luke 11:28 is contextually plausible as this woman is aligning herself with Jesus, the one who has just proclaimed, “whoever is not with me is against me” (Luke 11:23).<sup>75</sup> Thus, the way Luke frames these verses makes it probable that Jesus' response in Luke 11: 28 should be read in the affirmative.

71 Other examples include Luke 1:46–55 and 1:68–79, Luke 8:41–42 and 8:43–46.

72 While this scene as depicted in Luke 11:27–28 does not appear in any of the other Synoptic Gospels it is echoed in the Gospel of Thomas (cf. *Gos. Thom.* 79). Scholars differ on their view of the relationship between these two sources. For instance, Gathercole argues that Thomas incorporates distinctive Lukan phraseology (Gathercole, *The Composition of the Gospel of Thomas*, 185–208) whereas Patterson makes the case that Thomas is not dependent on Luke but instead preserves sayings of Jesus that circulated independently in early Christian oral tradition. See Patterson, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Origins*, 100. While it is likely that an oral tradition preceded Luke's Gospel, my focus is on the literary presentation of this episode as found in Luke 11:27–28.

73 Bock, *Luke* 9:51–24:53, 1094.

74 Wolter, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 110. See also Kittel and Fredrich, s.v. μακάριος, 367–370.

75 For a discussion on Luke's inclusion of women in his narrative see, Embudo, “Women Vis-à-Vis Prophecy in Luke-Acts”, 111; Karris, “Women and Discipleship in Luke”, 1–20.

## 4. Theological Implications for Reading Luke 11:27–28 Positively

This brings us to the final part of this essay, where we will see the theological implications of a positive reading of Luke 11:27–28.

### 4.1. The Annunciation and the Embodied Discipleship of Mary

A significant aspect of Mary's life and mission is related to her biological role as the mother of Jesus.<sup>76</sup> For Mary to fulfil her call to bear "the Son of the Most High" (Luke 2:32) required her to give up her body as an instrument for God's intentions.<sup>77</sup> If we return to Luke 1:42, Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit, says that Mary is blessed among women, and blessed is the fruit of her *womb* (κοιλίας). Here we have the specific mention of the physical site of Jesus' conception: Mary's womb. It is the same part of her body that is called blessed by the woman in the crowd in Luke 11:27.<sup>78</sup> In fulfilling God's call (Luke 2:31–35), Mary allowed God to break into her physical body. In this case, her body is the very place in which her faithfulness and obedience to God are lived out. Without Mary's body, there is no obedience to her call and no place for the Son of God (Luke 2:35) to be conceived. Karen O'Donnell in *Broken Bodies* makes an apt observation that Jesus' birth<sup>79</sup> "cannot be separated from his mother, Mary [...] it is dependent upon, and inseparable from, her".<sup>80</sup> This calling required Mary "to surrender her body as an act of faith".<sup>81</sup> Moreover, her calling required her to physically grow, bear, and nurse Jesus. It required her to give up her plans,<sup>82</sup> and endure the hardship of watching her son suffer, as Simeon foretold ("and a sword will pierce your own soul too", Luke 2:35b).<sup>83</sup>

There is no doubt in the minds of some feminist scholars that there is a significant element of trauma in Mary's bodily participation in God's salvation plan.<sup>84</sup> Though some scholars are firm

76 Elvey, *An Ecological Feminist Reading of the Gospel of Luke*, 121. See also Matthews-Green, *Mary as the Early Christians Knew Her*, 1; Gaventa, "Nothing Will Be Impossible with God", 23.

77 For a helpful discussion on Luke's narrative Christology and what it means for Jesus to be "Lord" in Luke's Gospel, see Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology*, 162, 197–207.

78 This is affirmed by Reid and Matthews who, in pointing to Elizabeth's words, emphasise that Mary is blessed not only for her obedience but because she physically bears Jesus. See Reid and Matthews, *Luke 1–9*, 56.

79 While later theology articulates this in terms of the "incarnation" and Mary as "Theotokos" it is important to note that Luke himself does not employ such categories. Instead, Luke presents Mary as a faithful servant whose embodied obedience enables God's salvific plan. For a discussion on the title "Theotokos" as used for Mary, see Kateusz, *Mary and Early Christian Women*, 113–120.

80 O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 19.

81 Mulya, "Queering the Virgin/Whore Binary", 55.

82 Some suggest that Mary's question in Luke 1:34, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" indicates that she took a vow to *never* "know a man"—one she had to forfeit in order to be obedient to the call of God. The theory is drawn from Num. 30:6–16 (cf. Mishnah, Yom. 8:1), suggesting that women took vows of sexual abstinence even in marriage, vows "denying" themselves. Documents from Qumran speak of similar vows taken by women in the home of their father or husband (11 Q Temple 53:16). See Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary*, 117. See also Sri, *Rethinking Mary in the New Testament*, 53–56; Brown, Donfried, Fitzmyer, and Reumann, *Mary in the New Testament*, 114–115. For an argument against this view see Shaker, "Sub Tuum Praesidium", 3–25.

83 Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 61. It is recognised by most scholars that this is a difficult verse to understand. It may refer to the sorrow Mary will face when seeing her son crucified, but it could also refer to her own stumbling. See Stein, *Luke*, 24, 117. See also Chen, *Luke*, 40. Thinking of Mary watching her son's death is a sober reminder of what Shelly Rambo calls "the space of death", where death has occurred and there is not yet the hope of new life. This is the space Mary occupies at the cross. See Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 56, 172.

84 According to O'Donnell, "To be traumatized is to have been made powerless in an experience or experiences. The traumatic event itself is one that overwhelms the resources a person might already have in place". O'Donnell, *The Dark Womb*, 48–49. See also Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33.

in stating that Mary consents to what is done to her body,<sup>85</sup> others, such as Mulya, suggest that “Gabriel’s use of the term *episkiasei*” conveys that Mary will be “overcome by God’s spirit” and that, importantly, at no point is she asked for her consent. Therefore, Mary can only respond, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38).<sup>86</sup> Likewise, Parks notes that though Mary accepts her call, she uses the language of being enslaved to God, which—for the original readership—would conjure up “all that would have come with being an enslaved woman pregnant with the child of her slave-owner”.<sup>87</sup> Whether one believes that Mary did in fact give consent (willingly or somewhat powerlessly), it cannot be denied that her body was still overcome. Therefore, to ignore or downplay the bodily and somatic participation of Mary in the Gospel would be to downplay or ignore the physical cost of Mary’s call and the lived ways in which she heard and obeyed God’s word. Forbes and Harrower write, “Bearing God within oneself is perhaps the highest calling a human being could receive” and the way she carries out this call is one of her greatest attributes.<sup>88</sup> Likewise, to downplay Mary’s bodily participation is to downplay the way that believers—the body of Christ—participate in God’s work in the world.<sup>89</sup> It is for this reason that “Christianity’s earliest and most persistent doctrines focus on embodiment”.<sup>90</sup>

## 4.2. Jesus’ Human Dependence on his Mother

Finally, if Jesus does in fact *rebuke* the woman in Luke 11:27, this not only negates Mary’s physical participation in God’s call and denies the bodily space in which God enacted his salvation plan, but it also shows Jesus denying his very real human dependence on his mother. In James MacGrath’s work, *What Jesus Learned from Women*, he explains that, while many Christians today say they believe in the humanity of Jesus, when you ask them to picture dirty nappies and scraped knees, this notion is put to the test.<sup>91</sup> If Jesus was truly human, a child of flesh and blood,<sup>92</sup> he was born weak and vulnerable, fully dependent on his mother for all his needs (food, milk, bathing, nursing, someone to teach him to speak, walk, learn, and grow).<sup>93</sup> In his weakest and most dependent state, he required the faithful offering of Mary’s body and life. If Jesus were not entirely dependent on Mary to carry him, nurse him, love him, teach him, and show him right from wrong, then Jesus would not be fully human.

85 See Pope, “Luke’s Seminal Annunciation”, 789–807. See also Webb, “Overcoming Fear with Mary of Nazareth”, 98; Gaventa, “Nothing Will Be Impossible with God”, 35.

86 Mulya, “Queering the Virgin/Whore Binary”, 55. For a discussion on the virgin birth and what it might mean for Mary to be overcome by the Spirit, see Otober, “The Holy Spirit and Luke’s Infancy Narrative”, 44–46.

87 Parks, Sheinfeld, and Warren, *Jewish and Christian Women in the Ancient Mediterranean*, 167. Mulya, however, makes a rather different point, suggesting that the worth of Mary is unhelpfully found in her *absence* of sex. It is through her eternal virginity that she embodies the patriarchal ideas of “female purity, obedience, and submission”. Mulya, “Queering the Virgin/Whore Binary”, 53.

88 Forbes and Harrower, *Raised from Obscurity*, 49.

89 A similar idea is observed by Green when speaking of embodied conversion in Luke–Acts and bodily participation in baptism. See Green, *Conversion in Luke–Acts*, 77.

90 O’Donnell, *Broken Bodies*, 1. The Gospel of John, for instance, goes to great lengths to emphasise the bodily and physical aspects of Jesus’ humanity (the word became flesh, John 1:14). The writer to the Hebrews uses the humanity of Jesus as reasons for his ability to not only empathise with us but to show how he (paradoxically) conquered sin and death. Paul says that he exalts God in his body (Phil. 1:20) and claims in 1 Corinthians that to deny bodily resurrection is to deny the gospel (1 Cor. 15:13–17). See Gorman, *Participation*, 21.

91 McGrath, *What Jesus Learned from Women*, 21.

92 Seim, “The Virgin Mother”, 99.

93 For a helpful reimagining of Mary’s relationship with Jesus and how Mary may have influenced Jesus’ ministry, see Bond and Taylor, *Women Remembered*, 128.

With this in mind, a positive reading of Luke 11:28 seems to lead to a more theologically coherent understanding of this passage. If Jesus *affirms* the proclamation, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!” (Luke 11:27) with the reply, “*Yes indeed*, blessed are the ones who hear the word of God and obey it!” (Luke 11:28)—with his mother as a leading example—we see Jesus recognising his own humanity, weakness, and dependence on his mother, and we note Jesus acknowledging the sacrifice that Mary made in allowing her body to be the physical place in which Jesus was carried, nurtured, and raised. We see Jesus admiring the faithful obedience of his mother as a source of life for him. We see Jesus acknowledging the way in which God fulfilled the salvation plan as prophesied by Gabriel—the son of the Most High conceived in the womb of a young virgin (Luke 2:31–32).

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the long-standing negative interpretation of Luke 11:27–28, where Jesus is thought to dismiss the woman’s praise and, by implication, diminish the role of his mother, warrants a fresh perspective. It has been demonstrated in this paper that it is linguistically feasible to interpret Luke 11:27–28 (and most importantly the particle *μενοῦν*) positively. Not only does the grammar allow for this, but contextually this aligns with Luke’s portrayal of Mary. Within the broader framework of Luke’s Gospel, Mary is portrayed as a model of blessedness, embodying the very qualities that Jesus praises in disciples—faithfulness, obedience, and a deep connection to God’s word. Theologically, the positive reading not only restores Mary’s rightful place as an exemplar of discipleship but also highlights the profound reality of Jesus’ humanity, which was intimately tied to his relationship with his mother. Mary’s physical and spiritual role in God’s redemptive plan is not something to be downplayed but rather affirmed and celebrated. Examining Luke 11:27–28 through this lens invites us to move beyond doctrinal divides and instead see Mary not only as the mother of Jesus (which is important enough), but as a figure of faith and obedience in her own right, embodying the blessedness that Jesus himself affirms. In doing so, we arrive at a more theologically coherent understanding of both Mary’s discipleship and the humanity of Christ.

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