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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ HISTORICAL

Mary and the Goddess of Ephesus: The Continued Life of the Mother of Jesus

Melanie Bacon
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Building a novel around the mother of Jesus is a brave, bold, and difficult undertaking, one sure to create controversy in some camps. A former seminarian, Melanie Bacon is to be applauded for her courage, as well as her ability to bring this woman so beautifully and believably to life in *Mary and the Goddess of Ephesus: The Continued Life of the Mother of Jesus*.

The author portrays Mary not so much as the Holy Virgin Mother but as a heartsick, anguished parent mourning the loss of her only son. Bacon's Mary is very human. The reader feels her pain and confusion over how Christ's followers manipulate his words and actions to further their own religious, political, and personal agendas.

While not quite an indictment of the early church, Saint Paul and other religious figures are often portrayed in a less-than-holy light. That they reference Jesus' teachings as they set up doctrines of celibacy and decry so many pleasures of life makes Mary wonder if they really knew her son at all.

As Paul borrows heavily from the rites of Artemis, Dionysius, and other pagan gods to create a liturgy, he further mystifies Mary and John, the disciple who accompanies her to Ephesus. Finally, when Paul first performs communion with the words, "This is my body, given to you. Take it and divide it among you. Do this in remembrance of me," John becomes "disturbed." Turning to Mary, John says: "I don't remember him saying that. Do you remember him saying that?"

Such questions about how Christianity evolved in the first twenty years after the death of Jesus are raised throughout the novel. Each chapter ends with Mary asking a question or making a comment to her son, as if he were standing by her side. In one such passage she wonders, "If my son is divine, who am I?"

Bacon writes beautifully. Her descriptions of people, places, and daily life in the Roman world during the time of Jesus appear to be well-researched and, at times, quite vivid. Mary is very much a real person in Bacon's novel—as are the Jews and gentiles, Christians and pagans, and Greeks and Romans she encounters and often befriends.

That Bacon has made Mary a grieving, human figure may disappoint, or even anger, some readers. Nonetheless, Bacon's portrait of a woman who holds such an important place in Christian history makes for a very interesting read.

MARK G. MCLAUGHLIN (December 20, 2011)

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