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Title: Review of James D. Tabor, *The Lost Mary: Rediscovering the Mother of Jesus*

Review Article

James D. Tabor, *The Lost Mary: Rediscovering the Mother of Jesus*, London: Thorsons, 2025.

ISBN: 978-0-00-881209-6 (hbk), 221 pp.

In 2020, Flammarion of Paris published a book by James Tabor in French, *Marie: De Son Enfance Juive à La Fondation du Christianisme*. This was a translation of his 2019 manuscript *Lost Mary* which, for some reason, never appeared in English, despite the author being an American. The new version that has now been published as *The Lost Mary* is not an exact copy of *Marie*, although there is considerable overlap and the overall argument is the same. I was very keen to read both *Marie* and *The Lost Mary* because of the many parallels to my own *Mary, Founder of Christianity* (Oneworld, 2022), which is similar in genre to Tabor's books in that reference is made to scholarly sources, but the text is written in a style that is intended for the general reader.

James Tabor has published several such works, the best-known of which is probably *The Jesus Dynasty* (2006). There he explored what has become a commonly accepted theory: that Jesus' family were prominent in the early Church, Jesus' brother James being heir to the leadership of the community, but the advent of Pauline Christianity along with the shift of the faith away from Jerusalem and its Jewish roots led to the role of Jesus' brothers being minimised in the Gospels and Acts. This, of course, is very relevant to the status of Mary in the earliest Christian community. *The Lost Mary* picks up this theme in conjunction with the feminist view that women's contributions were generally marginalised in the New Testament, and that they were far more integral to Jesus' ministry and the post-Easter Church than the texts suggest. Tabor therefore identifies Mary as a matriarch in the Jerusalem Church and, in parallel to my own work, argues that she can rightly be called a 'founder' of Christianity through her influence, example, and leadership.

Where Tabor and I part company, however, is that, while I envisage my argument as a justification for Marian devotion as it developed later, Tabor regards the Marian tradition in the Church as a total divergence from the reality of the Mary of history. Hence, he describes the Jewish Mary of Nazareth and Jerusalem as the 'lost Mary', and he sets out to rediscover the reality of her life which he feels has been erased by the doctrines and traditions about her in both Eastern and Western Christianity.

Tabor is an archaeologist and his reconstruction of the social world of Mary forms the backbone of the book and constitutes its major strength. He plausibly builds upon a tradition that Mary came from Sepphoris, an important but often forgotten urban centre of ancient Galilee, only a few miles from Nazareth. He suggests that the city and its building projects provided the family with income as artisans. Yet in the background lay a turbulent history of the region and, to rediscover it, Tabor draws upon the works of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus. He surmises that Mary, a young adult at the time of the revolution and civil unrest that followed the death of Herod the Great (4 BCE), would have observed the incursion from Syria of the Roman legions who carried out mass crucifixions and arbitrary killings. It therefore made perfect sense that the messianic movement of Jesus practised nonviolence, an ethical strategy that Tabor attributes to the guidance of Mary.



Tabor's radical thinking about Mary does not sit comfortably with his generally noncritical and selective approach to the narratives of Jesus' conception and birth. He accepts as true to history Luke's account of Mary's priestly ancestry and her family relationship with Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist. Jesus' genealogy includes priestly names, and Mary's relative Elizabeth is described as having an Aaronic lineage. This leads Tabor to suggest that Mary was descended from both David and Aaron, giving her and Jesus a dual royal and priestly heritage, based on his conclusion that Luke's genealogy of Jesus' descent from David is through Mary rather than Joseph, even though the latter is the plain reading of the text.

Because Tabor does not believe in the virgin conception but does accept other elements of the texts in Matthew and Luke, he concludes, like other writers before him, that Mary's conception was illegitimate, that is, by another man but not Joseph. The best candidate, he suggests, is 'Pantera' or 'Penthera', the father of Jesus according to some sources in the first centuries of Christianity. While this tradition is usually thought to be based on hostile polemic against Christian belief in the virgin conception, Tabor provocatively mentions some Christian sources which convey it, suggesting that it was not always pejorative. Nevertheless, it is better, in my view, to regard the material in the conception and birth narratives as legendary and metaphorical, except for the general insight that Mary was prophetic, reflective, and a foundational figure for Christian faith. This removes the need for any speculation about illegitimacy. But I suspect that the chapter on Mary's secret relationship will have been welcomed by a publisher looking for good sales figures!

Having said that, I do feel a good deal of empathy with Tabor's project, which is not far in spirit from my own. He describes how he spent time in an excavated tomb near Jerusalem in 1980. The names on the ossuaries included 'a Jesus son of Joseph, a Yose, a Maria, and a Mariamne' (p 141). He writes, 'Those moments in the tomb inspired me with a renewed devotion to resurrect a more accurate historical memory of this remarkable woman' (p 143).

The fragmented nature of the New Testament and extrabiblical narratives about Mary, allied to the great importance placed upon her in Christian tradition, understandably leads people to try and join the dots in order to construct a plausible biography, just as they have with the 'Jesus of history'. Of course, it is a speculative endeavour, but it can be argued that this is true of all reconstructions of early Christianity, however scholarly, and that new perspectives on Mary inspired by feminism have equal value to any other. There is an assumed history of Mary in mainstream Catholicism, for example, that can and should be subject to critique. Tabor makes a helpful contribution to the subject of the historical Mary; his is not the final word, but he has added valuable insights regarding the social and historical context into which both Mary and Jesus were born. The book is quite accessible and can be read quickly. It will be an uncomfortable read for many because of Tabor's insistence on the illegitimacy theory and his rejection of Mariology, but it is certainly food for thought for anyone interested in the history behind early Christianity and the possibilities for reimagining the life of Mary.