

**“Hail Mary, Full of Grace”:
The Mother of the Messiah’s Role in the Tudor Reformation**

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“Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you. . . . Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”¹ These words are some of the most striking in the New Testament and provided foundational belief for generations of medieval Roman Catholics on the Virgin Mary and what her purpose was for the faithful. Eventually, these statements became the Hail Mary prayer in the fifteenth century, which is still a staple for modern Roman Catholics.² However, due to disapproval from the Reformation’s founder, Martin Luther, this prayer was no longer acceptable for many of those who belonged to newly formed Protestant groups.³ While Luther set the stage for dramatic changes in Marian belief amongst Protestants, such ideology differed according to the individual reformer or budding denomination. In England, King Henry VIII’s creation of the Anglican Church forced all the country’s citizens to change many of their core religious beliefs. The Hail Mary was eventually included in these changes when King Edward VI, Henry’s son, forbid it through his royal injunction, *The Injunctions of 1547*.⁴ Nevertheless, the Hail Mary was only one small aspect of the many religious changes during the Tudor Dynasty. In particular, England had an interesting relationship with the Virgin Mother during the Reformation. Anglican Church doctrine bounced back and forth between primarily Catholic beliefs and predominantly Protestant theology only to settle somewhere in the middle of these two traditions. Overall, as the English monarchy drifted towards Protestantism, the Anglican Church de-emphasized Mary’s role as the Queen of Heaven; instead, she simply represented the ideal saint and woman. During the reign of Henry VIII, the Virgin Mary’s role remained mostly stagnant, but the Church under Edward VI stripped her of many distinctions to become merely the quintessential example of an honorable saint; after eradicating the reinstated Catholic Marian doctrine of her late sister Queen Mary I, Protestant Queen Elizabeth I secularized and imitated the Virgin’s role.

Protestant thought on the Virgin Mary differed significantly according to the time period and the individual reformer, but never again would Mary be held to the same esteem she received from the Roman Catholic Church. Sarah Jane Boss, Director of the Institute for Marian Studies at the University of Cambridge, stated, “In the late Middle Ages there was in Western Europe a whole range of popular expressions of devotion to Mary (among other saints), warmly supported by the

¹ Luke 1:28, 42, NABRE.

² Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary: The Complete Resource* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 390.

³ Chris Maunder, *The Oxford Handbook of Mary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 447.

⁴ Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 118.

Roman Catholic Church. Liturgy, private prayer, the calendar, pilgrimage, iconography, imaginative lives of Mary, lyrical poetry and music were all interwoven in Marian devotion."⁵ Many of these practices would be gradually stripped away by Protestants. As the founder of the Reformation, Martin Luther's theological writings set the stage for Protestant thought, including his teachings on the Mother of God in his 1521 commentary on *The Magnificat* compiled for Duke John Frederick of Saxony. Luther's text proclaims, "The tender mother of Christ . . . teaches us, with her words and by the example of her experience, how to know, love, and praise God. . . . she finds herself the Mother of God, exalted above all mortals."⁶ Here, Luther still regarded Mary as holding the revered position as the Mother of God and believed she had a special position amongst humanity. He also accepted Mary's perpetual virginity, the belief Mary remained a virgin throughout her entire life. Luther defended Matthew 12:46, explaining the mentioned brothers of Jesus were actually his cousins.⁷ Despite this admiration and his preservation of some Marian characteristics, Luther forewarned against those who revered her too highly:

Hence all those who heap such great praise and honor upon her head are not far from making an idol of her, as though she were concerned that men should honor her and look to her for good things, when in truth she thrusts this from her and would have us honor God in her and come through her to a good confidence in His grace. Whoever, therefore, would show her the proper honor must not regard her alone and by herself, but set her in the presence of God and far beneath Him⁸

Hence, Luther cautioned people against exalting Mary, an idea that grew considerably into the Protestant critique that Roman Catholics worship Mary.

Years after writing *The Magnificat*, Luther's opinion towards Mary, considered a saint, changed. In 1537 Luther warned against idolatrous practices, including those which involve Mary, in the *The Smalcald Articles*:

The invocation of saints is also one of the abuses of Antichrist conflicting with the chief article, and destroys the knowledge of Christ. . . . it does not follow thence that we should invoke and adore the angels and saints, and fast, hold festivals, celebrate Mass in their honor, make offerings, and establish churches, altars, divine worship, and in still other ways serve them, and regard them as helpers in need (as patrons and intercessors), and

⁵ Boss, *Mary: The Complete Resource*, 314.

⁶ Martin Luther, *The Magnificat*, translated by A.T.W. Stienhaeuser, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 21: *The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and The Magnificat*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 295–355 at 301, 308.

⁷ Maunder, *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, 450.

⁸ Luther, *The Magnificat*, 322.

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divide among them all kinds of help, and ascribe to each one a particular form of assistance, as the Papists teach and do. For this is idolatry, and such honor belongs alone to God.⁹

Here, Luther appeared to no longer support praying to the Mother of God regarding such as idolatrous and harmful to one's relationship with Christ. Nonetheless, Luther did not reject or even extensively question Marian doctrine, but rather disagreed with focusing on her instead of on Jesus.¹⁰ Luther may have started the Protestant Reformation, but his ideas were much more moderate towards the Virgin Mary than those of the later theologians he inspired.

Mary's honors continued to be stripped away by later Protestant reformers such as John Calvin, who taught more radical teachings on the Mother of God. Like Luther, he argued against praying to the Virgin.¹¹ He also argued against calling Mary the Mother of God, one of her defining roles. In a letter of 1552 addressed the French Church in London, he argued, ". . . speaking of the Virgin Mary as the mother of God I cannot conceal that title being commonly attributed to the Virgin in sermons is disapproved, and, for my own part, I cannot think such language either right, or becoming, or suitable. . . . to call the Virgin Mary the mother of God, can only serve to confirm the ignorant in their superstitions."¹² According to Catholicism, this removed Mary from one of her critical functions. To certain Protestant theologians and their followers, she was abolished as an interceder and was no longer even called the Mother of God. Chris Maunder, a theologian specializing in the Virgin Mary and a senior lecturer at York St. John University, explained, "Protestantism ultimately attempted to retrieve a Chalcedonian image of the Virgin and evangelicals therefore stripped away those things identified as accretions. As a result, Mary no longer had any special prerogatives on account of her relation to Christ. . . . the Virgin was available as a paradigm of godliness for both sexes."¹³ In the Council of Chalcedon in 451, Mary received no mention as an intercessor or figure deserving prayer, but rather focus remained on her

⁹ Martin Luther, "Of the Mass," in *The Smalcald Articles* (1537), trans. F. Bente and W.H.T. Dau, in *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1921), *Project Gutenberg*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/273/273-h/273-h.htm> (accessed December 13, 2020).

¹⁰ Boss, *Mary: The Complete Resource*, 316.

¹¹ Maunder, *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, 309.

¹² John Calvin, "Letter CCC.—To the French Church in London" (September 27, 1552), in *Letters of John Calvin: Compiled from the Original Manuscripts and Edited with Historical Notes*, ed. and trans. Jules Bonnet (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), 360-363 at 362, *Project Gutenberg*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45463/45463-h/45463-h.htm> (accessed December 13, 2020).

¹³ Maunder, *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, 415.

role in the Incarnation and as a good and chaste example for women.¹⁴ Protestants hoped to return to the early church's ideology, which emphasized the role of Mary much less than the medieval Roman Catholic Church. Protestant thought and teaching gradually reduced the Virgin Mary's importance to little more than a saintly example who aided in the Messiah's existence.

The English Reformation's ideology came from both a mix of Catholic doctrine and newly formed Protestant theology. The Church of England, upon its creation, did not significantly follow Protestant ideals but rather retained much Catholic doctrine. King Henry VIII of England had ironically been a Catholic for the majority of his life, even writing a treatise *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum (In Defense of the Seven Sacraments)*, in 1521, which resulted in Pope Leo X rewarding him as *Defensor Fidei (Defender of the Faith)*.¹⁵ Yet, after Henry's *Act in the Restraint of Appeals* (1533) and *Act of Supremacy* (1534), the Church of England broke with Roman Catholicism and, most notably to Henry, separated from the pope.¹⁶ Henry's creation of the separate Church of England and his declaration as the Supreme Head of the Church of England was for political reasons more so than religious ones. Throughout his life, Henry drifted back and forth between Catholic beliefs and more Protestant doctrine. Nevertheless, even with his break from the Roman Church, Henry never deferred significantly on the Virgin Mary. *The Ten Articles of 1536* were the Church of England's first official doctrine.¹⁷ The document talks about images, including those of Mary in "Article Six" and praying to saints in "Article Eight":

And as for censing of them [images], and kneeling and offering unto them, with other like worshippings, although the same hath entered by devotion, and fallen to custom; yet the people ought to be diligently taught that they in no wise do it, nor think it meet to be done the same images, but only to be done to God, and in his honour, although it be done before the images, whether it be of Christ, of the cross, of Our Lady, or of any other saint beside. . . . yet it is very laudable to pray to saints in heaven everlastingly living, whose charity is ever permanent, to be intercessors, and to pray for us and with us, unto Almighty God . . . and in this manner we may pray to Our Blessed Lady . . . so that it be done without any vain superstition.¹⁸

¹⁴ Maunder, *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, 75.

¹⁵ Robert Bucholz and Newton Key, *Early Modern England, 1485–1714: A Narrative History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 54.

¹⁶ Bucholz and Key, *Early Modern England, 1485–1714*, 79.

¹⁷ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), 392.

¹⁸ The Church of England, *The Ten Articles*, in *Religion and Society in Early Modern England: A Sourcebook*, ed. Cressy, David, and Lori Anne Ferrell (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 19–25 at 23–24.

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While these articles are cautious in their approach to the Virgin Mary, her role did not change from these rules or any other doctrine from Henry's reign.

Mary's role remained stagnant during Henry's lifetime, as shown by *The Institution of a Christen Man* (1537). The work is considered to be written by the Church of England with heavy influence from King Henry VIII. The source discusses Mary extensively in the section "The Ave Maria," proclaiming, "callynge her full of grace. This is nowe her newe name. [A]nd this is the highest name, that cant be in any creature . . . for she conceyved and bare hym [Jesus], that is the auctour of all grace, and this is the singular grace by whiche she is called, not onely the mother of man, but also the mother of [G]od."¹⁹ Therefore, Mary maintained her status as the Mother of Jesus, filled with grace and the greatest of all God's human creation. Additionally, in Henry VIII's *The King's Book* (1543), it is said, "Lauds, praise and thanks are in this Ave Maria [*sic*] principally given and yielded . . . therewithal the virgin lacketh not her lauds, praise, and thanks for her excellent and singular virtues, and chiefly for that she believed and humbly consented . . ."²⁰ Once again, Henry VIII's reign was shown to accept prayer to Mary. Noteworthy change on the Virgin Mary never officially appeared in Henry VIII's Anglican Church.

However, this changed with Henry's son, King Edward VI, who implemented the most extreme changes on the Virgin Mary. When Henry died, he appointed his son Protestant inclined advisors and tutors, which resulted in the Anglican Church leaning significantly towards Protestantism during the boy king's rule.²¹ The young King Edward and his ministers implemented strict Protestant doctrine. The 1548 *Royal Injunctions for Lincoln Minister* proclaims, "They shall from henceforth sing or say no anthems of our Lady."²² The King required the *Book of Common Prayer* to be in every parish church; the first version came out in 1549. The text mentions the Virgin Mary in the context of the biblical narratives; nevertheless, she does not have an essential role outside this. Previously, during King Henry VIII's reign, Protestant-leaning theologians had already begun the process of stripping the Mother of God of her various honors, including her sinlessness. These men, such as Hugh Latimer, gained influence and importance with Henry's Protestant predecessor. Latimer, who served as the king's chaplain, stated in 1533 (during the reign

¹⁹ The Church of England, *The Institution of a Christen Man* . . . (1537) (London: Thomas Bertheletus, 1537), 94, *Archive.org*, <https://archive.org/details/institutionofchr00chur/page/n9/mode/2up> (accessed September 8, 2020), 202.

²⁰ Henry VIII, "The Salutation of the Angle to the Blessed Virgin Mary," in *A Necessary Doctrine and Erudition for Any Christian Man* (1543) (London: R. Browning, 1895), 134–38, *Project Canterbury*, <http://anglicanhistory.org/henry/book/> (accessed September 8, 2020).

²¹ Bucholz and Key, *Early Modern England, 1485–1714*, 101.

²² The Church of England, *Royal Injunctions for Lincoln Minister (1548)*, in *Visitation Articles and Injunctions of the Period of the Reformation*, vol. II: 1536–1558, ed. W.H. Frere and William McClure Kennedy (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1910), 166–170 at 168.

of Henry VIII): "To make a pernicious and a damnable he, to have our lady no sinner, is neither honour nor yet pleasure to our lady; but great sin, to the dishonour and displeasure both of God and our lady."²³ Although it was written during the reign of Henry VIII and did not become Anglican Church doctrine, this statement shows how radically different the Church of England was from the Roman Catholic Church. Latimer became highly influential to the boy king and the Church of England. His ability to write this statement and escape the church burning him as a heretic during Henry or Edward's reign – he was executed by the Catholic Queen Mary I in 1555 – shows the radical changes in belief surrounding the Mother of God.

Despite King Edward VI's radical changes to the Church of England, they did not last long. Edward died at the age of fifteen, and Queen Mary I ascended the throne and reigned from 1553 to 1558. Queen Mary reimplemented Catholicism as she believed it was her destiny to save her people's souls by returning them to the "true" faith.²⁴ Therefore, the Roman Catholic woman restored belief and doctrine on the Virgin Mary. Many English appeared to be happy about the return to Catholicism. Ruth Vanita, professor of liberal studies at the University of Montana, explained, ". . . many parishioners who bought images, vestments, and other church property auctioned under Henry [VIII] and Edward VI, preserved and restored them to churches in Mary Tudor's reign."²⁵ Thus, a secret Catholic piety is illuminated, which survived through the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI. Fidelity to the Virgin Mary and her traditional Catholic roles also survived these Protestant periods. Late Jesuit priest and theology professor at Fordham University William Wizeman noted, ". . . devotion to the Virgin Mary in Marian England was not an abiding causality of the preceding reformation Most Marian theologians . . . emphasised Mary as the sinless virgin, Mother of God, unique in creation yet approachable as a powerful intercessor for sinners, and as model and companion in the Christian life."²⁶ Hence, Queen Mary people reinstated the Virgin Mary's honors which many formerly Anglican English seemingly restored in their faith. The return of Catholicism with the resulting joy and contrasting despair of different English people, this reappearance of Catholic doctrine, including that of the Virgin Mary, did not last long. Once Queen Mary I's unfortunate five-year reign came to a quick end in 1558, England's religion changed yet again.

²³ Hugh Latimer, *Articles Untruly, Unjustly, Falsely, Uncharitably Imputed to Me [Hugh Latimer] by Dr. Powell of Salisbury (1533)*, in *Sermons and Remains of Hugh Latimer*, ed. Rev. George Elwes Corrie (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1845), 228.

²⁴ Bucholz and Key, *Early Modern England, 1485–1714*, 109.

²⁵ Ruth Vanita, "Mariological Memory in 'The Winter's Tale' and 'Henry VIII,'" *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2000): 311–37 at 320.

²⁶ William Wizeman, "The Virgin Mary in the Reign of Mary Tudor," in *The Church and Mary: Papers Read at the 2001 Summer Meeting and the 2002 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, ed. R. N. Swanson (The Boydell Press, 2004), 239–248 at 247.

The reign of Elizabeth I, from 1558 to 1603, settled the religious turmoil, something the people of England were quite ready for after the seemingly constant change in their state-sanctioned faith. With each of these four monarchs' reigns, there existed differing Catholic and Protestant doctrine in the country. *The Act of Supremacy (1559)* declared Elizabeth I the Head of the Church of England, and *The Act of Uniformity (1559)* acted as a compromise between Protestantism and Catholicism.²⁷ However, the Virgin Mary was not a topic discussed in *The Act of Uniformity*. The 1559 version of *The Book of Common Prayer* has slightly more detail on the Virgin Mary than the previous 1549 edition. The section "Proper Prefaces: Upon Christmas Day, and Seven Days After," states, "Because thou didst give Jesus Christ, thine only Son, to be born as this day for us who by the operation of the Holy Ghost, was made very man of the substance of the Virgin Mary his mother, and that without a spot of sin, to make us clean from all sin."²⁸ Thus, Mary was still the Mother of God, and she made her son man. Still, the document makes no mention of whether Mary herself is sinless. Images of Mary and other forms of iconoclasm were viewed by the church quite negatively. Elizabethan historian Susan Doran believes that during the reign of Elizabeth I: "Protestant sermons imbued ordinary men and women with deep anti-papism, a strong iconophobia (hatred of images) . . . [there occurred] a decisive shift from belief in the Holy Virgin and the 'holy company of saints' to a 'personal faith in the mediation of Christ and redemption through Him.'"²⁹ During this time, England's people arguably started to become comfortable in their Anglican faith, as Elizabeth's reign ended the chaotic religious change of the past. Conversely, there is evidence that individuals defied the law and kept their "idoltrous images" and Catholic items. Vanita also notes, "despite strict orders to deface and destroy all images, altars, and pictures, especially those of the Assumption of the Virgin, 'and all other superstitious and dangerous monuments', and the imposition of severe penalties for their preservation, many recusants did preserve these objects and some were discovered as late as the nineteenth century."³⁰ When it was much safer for the parishioners to burn such objects, their preservation shows there were still remnants of faithful Catholic groups or individuals who held onto Catholic-leaning beliefs. The resurgence of these Catholic objects in the nineteenth century shows that England, throughout the entirety of Elizabeth's reign, was not safe enough for the people to uncover these objects. The parishioners had to keep the pieces hidden for so long, they likely forgot about the items. England under Elizabeth I was not the ideal place for veneration of the Virgin Mary, as she had been reduced to the saintly Mother of God and hardly anything more.

²⁷ Bucholz and Key, *Early Modern England, 1485–1714*, 122.

²⁸ The Church of England, *The Book of Common Prayer 1559: The Elizabethan Prayer Book*, ed. John E. Booty, (Washington: Folger Books, 1976), 260.

²⁹ Susan Doran, *Elizabeth I and Religion, 1558–1603* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 1993), 66.

³⁰ Vanita, "Mariological Memory in 'The Winter's Tale' and 'Henry VIII,'" 320.

An unexpected turn in Marian belief was Elizabeth I's portrayal as a parallel to the Virgin Mother. Scholars and her people portrayed Elizabeth during her lifetime as The Virgin Queen. Jaroslav Pelikan, late professor of Christian theology at Yale University, asserted, "A particularly fascinating aspect of the relation between the Protestant Reformation and the cult of the Mary as Virgin and Queen was the cult of Elizabeth I as Virgin and Queen, as Gloriana. . . . there are at least some indications that Elizabeth consciously invoked the parallel."³¹ The English replacement of the Virgin Mary with Queen Elizabeth as "The Virgin Queen," shows how far dethroned the Mother of God had become in Anglican England. Roman Catholics would never have compared the Queen of Heaven to a "sinful" human in such a way; it likely would have been considered heretical. The comparison of these two illuminates how the Virgin Mary changed from the figure with numerous titles and honors to simply a saintly example that any person could imitate; in the case of Elizabeth I, one could virtually replace the Mother of God.

The Church of England under the Tudor monarchs varied on Protestant and Catholic doctrinal teachings; however, it is clear that the characteristics of the Virgin Mary drifted up and down erratically to settle on the Mother of God as a saintly example for women, including through imitation by the Queen of England. Sarah Jane Boss stated, "The English Reformers of the sixteenth century reacted strongly against what they saw as the excesses of Marian piety, supported by the Roman Catholic Church, and sought to prune away devotions which obscured the central place of Jesus Christ in Christian belief and practice."³² These individuals were undoubtedly successful in their endeavor, as Mary lost many of her honors during the Tudor dynasty. King Henry VIII changed little on the Virgin, but Edward VI made radical changes, only for them to be entirely defaced by his Catholic sister Mary I. The most contemporarily recognizable Anglican Church is that of Queen Elizabeth I, which compromised between Catholicism and Protestantism. Yet, this doctrine on the Mother of God was not completely balanced, instead it greatly reflected Protestant ideals. For modern-day Protestants, despite its many different traditions, Mary remains a positive and holy figure. Still, she also causes great apprehension and disapproval when referred to with doctrine from the Catholic devotion to Mary, which still exists today.

³¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 161.

³² Boss, *Mary: The Complete Resource*, 314.

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