

Colm Toibin's "Testament of Mary" brings Jesus' mother down to earth

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NEW YORK (RNS) How far can one go in retelling a Bible story, adding things that are not in the original? In "The Testament of Mary," Colm Toibin goes a long way.

His 2012 book is now a Broadway play presenting a view of the mother of Jesus so different from pious tradition that it angers some Christians, creating a "new," intellectually and spiritually challenging Virgin Mary.

Yet in the end, Toibin's searingly human Mary may be ultimately more accessible than the Mary of porcelain perfection set high on a pedestal.

The Irish writer, who has written about his strong Catholic childhood, imagines Mary 30 years after the crucifixion of her son. She lives as a virtual prisoner of two of Jesus' disciples, still mourning her son's death, bitter at what has happened since, and seeking consolation from pagan idols, which make more sense to her than what happened to Jesus.

While the book seems to slog through Mary's angry "testament," the play, which opened Monday (April 22) at the Walter Kerr Theater, lets actress Fiona Shaw ("True Blood," "Harry Potter"), in a virtuoso performance, infuse the aging Mary's monologue with intense power and passion.

The play begins with her sitting piously, the familiar blue cloak over her head and shoulders; but she soon casts this off to reveal a woman in rough work clothes.

This Mary is a mother grieving and angry about the path taken by her son. She dismisses the disciples as a "bunch of misfits" and oddballs. She warned Jesus not to do the water-into-wine miracle at the wedding in Cana, knowing it would draw unwelcome attention to him.

Raising his friend, Lazarus, from the tomb was an even bigger blow because people then began to call him son of God. "You are in great danger," she tells him and begs him to stop preaching. He ignores her, but she cannot get over the thought that she should have done more to save his life.

Present at the crucifixion, Mary remembers the gore and her poignant question, "How long will it take?" But she fled the scene with the disciples, fearing arrest. Having been rejected by Jesus at every step, she is now unable to even say his name, referring only to "my son."

She now asks, as the play closes, "was it worth it?" Her answer: "No."

Roman Catholic protesters stood across the street from the Walter Kerr theater as the play began previews in March, chanting rosaries and bearing signs label the play "blasphemy."

But the Bible itself says almost nothing about Mary after the crucifixion of Jesus. Legend has it she lived out her life in Ephesus, the scene of Toibin's play. Christians have revered what they believe to be Mary's piety, even giving her the title "Mother of God."

Pious history uniformly respects Mary, emphasizing her willingness to bear Jesus as a sign of her humble submission to the will of God. In delivering Jesus to the world, she is seen as a model for the church.

Some in the Catholic church have even toyed with a teaching that would make the Virgin Mary "co-redemptrix," that is, a necessary worker with Jesus in saving the world, although that is not official Roman Catholic doctrine.

The anger about Toibin's book and play is understandable. But Toibin's works are fiction, not Scripture. Novels often expand the stories of biblical heroes such as David, Solomon, Moses and St. Peter.

Usually, however, those works have been in tune with Christian piety. It is not inherently wrong to ask the "what if" questions, to wonder how the characters in the Bible "really" felt or acted. Preachers do it every Sunday in their sermons.

Toibin says he wrote "The Testament of Mary" out of anger at Roman Catholicism. In 2008, he told The New York Times last year, he concluded that there was "almost a vacuum of faith in Ireland." The church was rocked with scandal and largely ignored. He wanted to write something giving Mary a "human voice," knowing full well that he was "playing with fire."

Toibin's Mary is still an iconic, elevated figure, a woman whose suffering is immense. She is haunted by her past and the death of her son and though she seeks meaning in it, she finds nothing but emptiness and despair.

Reflecting on her son's miracles, she senses something transcendent, but cannot make the leap to believe what others say he was.

Seeing Mary as one who cannot find faith rather than as the model of perfect faith is unsettling. But Toibin's work is nonetheless moving, for once he prompts us, it is not hard to imagine a mother whose grief leads not to faith, but to anger.

Perhaps Toibin's Mary stands in for those who catch only a glimpse of the divine, who might want to believe, but cannot.