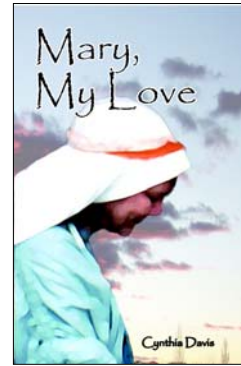


Mary, My Love by Cynthia Davis

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CHAPTER 1

God was a distant premise until the Holy One stole the woman I loved. It was then I learned about faith and love.

My father was a successful carpenter and trader. His tales of travels to Damascus and Tyre were fascinating to me as a boy. Even though the man remained proud of his descent from King David, I rarely saw him darken the door of the synagogue. He even abandoned his Jewish name, Jacob, for the Greek name Heli. My mother called him Jacob, as did all in Nazareth, but his foreign customers used the Greek name.

“Our son should learn to read Torah,” I overheard my mother Sarah begging when I was five.

“If it makes you happy, he may study with the rabbi,” my father replied. “It matters not to me.”

I was excited to sit at the rabbi’s feet in the early mornings learning to read Torah and memorizing the myriad laws. At first I tried to share the lessons with my father.

“We are the chosen people,” I told him. “Since Abraham, the True God has promised to be with us. If we are forsaken, it is because we have turned from God to worship idols.”

“Your mother must be proud to have you spout such learning,” he sneered. “What do you really know of this God? Has God ever done anything for you? When you have experienced the silence of God, in the darkness when you cry out for help, then speak to me about being a chosen people.”

“The rabbi says we must turn back to God. Then Messiah will come,” I insisted.

With a cuff on the head, he shouted, “Get to work! You waste my time! Spend your time leaning to do man’s work. Leave praying to your mother and the women.”

His derision made me cringe, but did not stop my desire to learn. Eventually I quit trying to talk to my father about my lessons.

Rebelliously I told myself, “I know God cares. Someday I will find something within the scrolls that will convince my father to believe.”

By the time I was of an age to become a Son of the Promise, I had seven siblings. The four girls, Ruth, Deborah, Hannah, and Sarah, were finally followed by three brothers. The twins, Judah and Benoni, and Matthat the baby, clung to mother’s skirts as she went about the daily round of tasks. My sisters accompanied her to the well and market. They learned the womanly arts of baking, weaving and cleaning.

When I was almost twelve, my father said, “Soon you will be old enough for me to trust you with simple repairs. It will be several years before your brothers can learn the craft. When I travel, you will be able to help some of the customers here.”

Not long afterward, Ezra the rabbi, announced me ready to read Torah, the ceremony that would make me an adult member of the community.

“I will be one of the youngest in Nazareth to become a man by reading and interpreting the scriptures!” I bragged to my father, hoping he would take an interest. “Rabbi Ezra says I have excelled in my studies.”

My father’s response left me aching from his searing words. “Go ahead! Prattling from a scroll will not make you a man. My son will be considered a man when he can prove his worth by earning a living as a carpenter.”

I snapped angrily, “When has my work been left unfinished or rejected by the customer? I have never neglected...”

He grabbed my wrist and threw me out of the shop, bellowing in rage, “Grovel to your mother’s God! Do not come back until you learn the respect due a father under the Law you claim to follow.”

Humiliated at being thrown into the street, I slunk home to soak my wrist in a cool bucket of water and hide from my siblings' prying eyes. Mother found me when the afternoon shadows lengthened.

"My son, why are you here?" She asked with surprise.

I answered without looking up, trying to conceal the bruise by holding my arm behind my back.

"My mother, Father is not pleased that I plan to participate in the ceremony this Sabbath."

She sighed and looked sadly toward the workshop where a lantern still glowed although no sounds of work emerged.

"My husband has been angry at the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for a long time. He has never spoken of it to me except to insist that until God proves himself, he will not believe that there is any difference in the Living God of Israel and the worship of the Samaritans and Romans." She laid a gentle hand on my shoulder. After a moment of silence the woman added, "You must decide for yourself whether to stand up tomorrow and take your place as a man of Nazareth."

I took her work rough hand in mine. With a proud lift of my chin I announced my intentions more loudly than necessary, hoping the man would hear. "I will not change my mind now! My father may do as he pleases!"

The evening meal was subdued. Jacob's frowning silence even affected the twin's antics. They usually kept us entertained with attempts to feed the baby. My sisters kept their eyes lowered, focusing on their food. They hurried to help our mother as soon as possible. The meal ended when my father hefted himself to his feet. I stood and faced him.

"My father," my voice cracked and I cleared my throat. "I would be honored if you attended synagogue tomorrow morning."

Even when the man swung around to face me, I refused to flinch. With my head lifted slightly to meet his gaze, I waited. Without an answer, my father stamped into the street. I swallowed the hard lump of sorrow in my throat. Forcing myself to unclench my hands and breathe naturally, I turned to my mother and siblings.

"Good night," I said, in a tone that was almost normal.

I hurried to my pallet on the roof before the tears in her eyes unmanned me.

"God of my ancestors, help me obey both you and my father. I think you must still care for your chosen people. Send me proof for my father. If you are real, give me a sign," I begged, half ashamed of my need.

Only the night sounds answered me. Far away a wild dog barked and an owl hooted. For a moment I wondered if my father was right. Then I looked up to the stars and remembered how God walked with Abraham and showed him the same stars as a promise.