There is little about Mary in the gospels beyond her role as the mother of the Son of God. As Theodore Ziolkowski reminds us, “the figure of the Virgin Mary is singularly colorless in the Gospels and offers little material for the writer. . . . It was not until medieval times that the emerging Marian cults gradually endowed the Virgin Mother with the characteristics subsequently popularized in art and legend” (282). The two subjects that are mentioned in the gospels—Mary’s marriage and pregnancy and the relationship between Mary and Jesus—thus become topics for the authors who retell the gospel stories. If one struggles with the idea of the Son of God, then one also struggles with how a woman could possibly be a mother of that Son of God. Almost all of the authors, Mailer being a visible exception, show a Mary who does struggle with her role in Jesus’ life, as might be expected. These five writers are consistent in their presentations of Mary. Apart from Ricci, who clearly states that Mary was raped, and Saramago, who ignores the subject altogether, the authors show her as a virgin. They also show her as knowledgeable about what Jesus can accomplish, that he is set apart somehow, yet almost all of them, save for Burgess, also show her as trying to prevent him from leading anything other than a normal life. Ricci and Saramago, too, use Mary to consider women’s roles in the Jewish culture of Jesus’ time.

It is not surprising that most authors who portray Mary choose to focus on her virginity and the divine conception of Jesus. From the Bible, the main emphasis placed on the character of Mary is that she is the mother of Jesus and that, more notably, she gives birth to Jesus without having had
sex. Thus, her being chosen as the mother of the Messiah shows that she has, as the angel tells Mary, “found favor with God” (Luke 1:30). In fact, there is almost nothing more about Mary’s relationship with Jesus when he is a child.

The writings of the early church expand on this idea of the virgin birth. According to the Book of James (or Protevangelium), Mary was dedicated to the temple as a virgin when she was a child. She married Joseph, who was an old man at the time, because of a sign from God. However, they never consummated their marriage, and the supposed brothers and sisters of Jesus are from Joseph’s marriage (Cunneen 69–71, 74).

The orthodox concept of Mary, though, developed near the end of the fourth century and into the fifth century, leading to the declaration at the Council of Ephesus of Mary as Theotokos (God-bearer), moving the focus away from Mary as a person and toward her role as Jesus’ mother. This idea became the main way that Mary was perceived (Cunneen 101).

According to the Book of James, again, Mary was supposedly born to rich parents, Joachim and Anna, who had prayed for a child for years. When she was born to them, they dedicated her to God. She was one of seven virgins who was working on a new curtain for the temple when she was chosen to marry Joseph. Because she was pregnant before they were actually married, she and Joseph were forced to undergo the water test for pregnancy found in Numbers 5:16, which they passed (Blair 293).

Despite Burgess’ Catholicism, Mary is not very visible in his novel. Her portrayal is quite traditional, and Burgess clearly emphasizes her virginity. In fact, Burgess presents Mary as a young woman who wants to keep her virginity forever, never marrying. Thus, Joseph, with his inability to have sex, seems to be the perfect husband for her. Even though she is not even fifteen years old, she seems to understand the decision she is making concerning

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1This is not to say that she is not seen as holy in her own right, just that the focus is on her role as the bearer of Jesus. There are other legends of her as set apart from other women. For example, according to the Liber Transitus (Assumption of the Virgin), Mary died in Jerusalem, where the apostles were miraculously assembled. A Jewish priest attempted to overturn the bier on which she lay, but he was unable to do so and was not able to let go of it until he confessed faith in Jesus. After her death, Jesus raised her from the dead and took her to heaven. A papal bull issued November 1, 1950, stated that she was taken up into heaven after her death, and that belief continues to hold sway (Blair 293).
her abstention from sexual activity. The most important sacrifice, as her mother tells Joseph, is that she will be “shut off from the hopes that go with the carnal life, the hope of Jewish women, I mean” (19). Her mother does not merely mean that she will not be able to produce children, but that she will not have the hope of producing the Messiah. Since Burgess does not question Jesus’ role as the Messiah or Mary’s virginity, her mother’s comment becomes obviously ironic, as if Burgess is trying to draw even more attention to Jesus’ miraculous birth.

In fact, all of the women in Burgess’ book, the traditional Jewish women anyway, seem to be obsessed with the possibility that their child could be the Messiah. The men, too, of this time seem obsessed with the idea of the Messiah. In a morning study, Mary and Joseph’s rabbi, Gomer, insists that the correct interpretation of the passage from Isaiah concerning the woman who will give birth to the Messiah is that she is a virgin, not merely a young woman, as the Hebrew might also be translated to mean. Burgess here clearly lays out his presentation of Mary as a virgin, in the face of scholars who have begun to interpret the passage to mean that a young woman, not necessarily a virgin, will produce the Messiah. By having Gomer insist so clearly that the woman must be a virgin, Burgess, as he does with Mary’s mother’s comment, draws even more attention to the miraculous birth of Jesus. Given his Roman Catholic background, his position is not surprising at all.

Ricci’s portrayal of Mary is dramatically different from Burgess’, as well as from the other authors’ portrayals. Mary is usually presented as a young, poor, innocent girl, but Ricci puts her in different social class. Her father is a clerk in Herod’s court; thus, one might assume that she will make a good marriage. Her father is not presented as a good Jew because he’s willing to consider a marriage for her outside of the Jewish faith, which is not surprising given his work for Herod. He seems more concerned with advancing the family fortune.

Thus, Joseph presents Mary with a few men whom she might marry, but she passes on them. One, however, is a Roman legate. Mary’s father leaves the two of them alone, and the legate forces himself on Mary with threats
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of violence, and she becomes pregnant. Some scholars believe that Mary was not a virgin when she was married and that Jesus is the result of a rape. E.P. Blair, for example, points out that the concepts of Mary’s virginity and the virgin birth do not appear in any of the sermons in Acts or in Paul’s letters, raising the question of whether or not the idea is added later (290). And, given Ricci’s research into the writings of the Jesus Seminar, most of the participants of which do not believe in a virgin birth, this change in the gospel story removes yet another supernatural event from Jesus’ life. Ricci’s changes in Mary’s status from a virgin in a different social class create a situation in which no one will marry her, so her father turns to Joseph, a forty-five-year-old widower who has already put one wife away for barrenness. Since Mary has already proven herself to be fertile, she is an appealing wife for Joseph, but he still makes Mary’s father pay an exorbitant dowry: “Nonetheless, to make up for the dishonour of me and the expense of being saddled with a child not his own, he asked much above the usual dowry, all in coin, and offered no bride price. It cost my father all his small fortune to satisfy him, in which however I took some bitter consolation, for he had ruined my life in the hope of advancing his own ambitions” (228). Mary clearly recognizes that her father is to blame for what has happened, but she also does not condemn the Roman legate; in fact, she seldom mentions him again and then only when talking about what resulted because her father left her alone with him.

Kazantzakis hews more closely to the traditional interpretation by at least having Mary be a virgin when she gives birth to Jesus. In fact, the events surrounding Jesus’ birth are even more supernatural than the other events in the gospels. Thus, Mary should be the character in Kazantzakis’ novel who has the most reason to believe that Jesus is, if not divine, at the least called by God for some great purpose. She remembers the odd events that occurred around his birth, which Judas recalls hearing when he first begins to wonder about Jesus’ purpose:

Jostling in his mind were the signs and prodigies which had surrounded this youth from his birth, and even before: how,
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when the marriage candidates were assembled, the staff of Joseph—among so many others—was the only one to blossom. Because of this the rabbi awarded him Mary, exquisite Mary, who was consecrated to God. And then how a thunderbolt struck and paralyzed the bridegroom on his marriage day, before he could touch his bride. And how later, it was said, the bride smelled a white lily and conceived a son in her womb. And how the night before his birth she dreamed that the heavens opened, angels descended, lined up like birds on the humble roof of her house, built nests and began to sing; and some guarded her threshold, some entered her room, lighted a fire and heated water to bathe the expected infant, and some boiled broth for the confined woman to drink. . . . (22)

Mary also remembers how she and Joseph went to Elijah’s summit the day of their wedding in order to petition the prophet, so that she and Joseph might have a son: “They wanted to beg the fiery prophet to mediate with God so that they might have a son, whom they would then dedicate to the prophet’s grace” (60). While on the mountain, a thunderstorm comes, and Joseph is struck by lightning and paralyzed, but Mary hears God speak to her from behind the thunderstorm. She is unable to recall what God said to her until the rabbi comes to visit, and, even then, all she can remember hearing is God saying, “Hail, Mary!” (62). Kazantzakis’ reference to the ave Maria here is also echoed in his account of Mary’s origin, thus further strengthening the idea that she is a virgin and is to be revered for her role in Jesus’ birth.

When Peter sees Mary at the crucifixion of a zealot, he remembers her family, whom he lived near when growing up. He believed that “the angels went regularly in and out of their simple cottage, and one night the neighbors saw God Himself stride across their threshold dressed as a beggar. They knew it was God, because the house shook as though invaded by an earthquake, and nine months later the miracle happened: Anne, an old woman in her sixties, gave birth to Mary” (43). Thus, this story opens up the
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possibility that Mary is herself the offspring of God, and at least shows the reader that Mary is someone specially chosen by God.

As in Kazantzakis’ novel, Burgess presents a Mary who has knowledge beyond that of the other characters. Burgess’ Mary is assured that she will be the mother of the Messiah.² In fact, Joseph points out in the study with the rabbi that the Messiah must be born in Bethlehem, as David was. Mary, however, argues that the Messiah will be of Bethlehem, not necessarily born in Bethlehem, and, as Joseph is descended from the House of David, then Jesus will be of Bethlehem.

Since Burgess’ Mary knows what Jesus is destined for, she never stands in his way. There is no passage in Man of Nazareth where Mary considers him insane or tries to stop him from leaving, as there are in the gospels and in other novels. Instead, she sees his impending death even before he is born: “Mary sat and saw in the fire pictures that gave her no pleasure. She saw one picture that made her catch her breath with fear; there was a pain in her midriff, as if a sword had struck” (42). This passage should remind the reader of the prophecy made by Simeon in Luke that a sword will pierce Mary (Luke 2:35). Roman Catholics through the ages have depicted Mary’s suffering in the image of the pietà, which heightens Mary’s role as the God-bearer. Thus, it is not surprising that Burgess would choose to focus his story on this idea.

One of the ways Mary encourages Jesus to realize his true calling is to discourage him from getting married, which she thinks will distract him. Given her ideas of virginity and marriage, we can understand her thinking. Thus, she questions his marriage and has another presentiment that it will end badly:

Jesus’s mother thought much of the meaning of this [Jesus’ wife’s two miscarriages] but kept her own counsel, wondering

²Christopher Moore, in Lamb, takes this idea further by having his Mary quote prophecies that Jesus is fulfilling, even as a child. For example, when a cobra follows him home, she quotes the book of Isaiah that says “the suckling child shall play on the hole of the asp” (22).

³Interestingly, Reynolds Price has his Jesus born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem, though he tends to stay closer to the gospel stories than almost any contemporary writer who tackles Jesus’ life.
no doubt about the propriety of the destined Messiah’s begetting sons and daughters like other men. Indeed, the very propriety of his marriage remained in doubt with her, and she had strange presentiments about the future of it. One morning, at cock-crow, she had a vivid dream in which Sara [Jesus’ wife] melted like wax before her very eyes, while cooking the evening meal in the kitchen. (89)

Of course, Sara does die, trampled to death by Syrian soldiers, and Mary’s dream proves to be prophetic. This shows a Mary who not only knows more than other characters in the novel but also who knows more than Jesus himself. Even though Jesus argues that he must know all parts of being human, Mary sees the suffering that will come from that experience, not just suffering on Jesus’ part, but on Sara’s part, as well.

Through such events Burgess is at least implying the inevitable divinity of Mary, if not laying it out completely. She is able to sense what will happen, at least where it concerns Jesus and his ministry. Thus, whenever she visits a place where he is or encounters a disciple, she wants to know how he is currently doing. When Jesus sends the disciples out to preach on their own, John visits Nazareth where Mary meets him after he has finished teaching. After finding out that he is doing well physically, she reminds John that Jesus is “much hated. [She] fear[s] for him” (197), though she still plans to meet him in Jerusalem for the Passover. She is much more actively involved in Jesus’ ministry than is shown or suggested in the gospels where her only encounters with Jesus during his ministry are times when she tries to stop him from teaching.

Unlike Burgess, Mailer’s Mary’s appearances are in keeping with what readers familiar with the gospel stories expect, though Mailer makes minor changes and expands a bit, as well. Mary and Jesus’ brothers try to stop

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4In Lamb, Christopher Moore satirizes our culture’s obsession with the divine Mary when he has her face appear on the wall of a temple in India. When Biff tells Joshua (Jesus) about this event, Joshua merely responds,”Yeah, she does that. . . . She used to do it all the time when we were kids. She sent James and me running all over the place washing down walls before people saw. Sometimes her face would appear in a pattern of water drops in the dust, or the peelings from grapes would fall just so in a pattern after being taken out of the wine press. Usually it was walls” (298–99).
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him from preaching. The gospel accounts have them saying that Jesus is crazy, though Mailer does not let them go that far at this point. He does, however, indicate Mary’s having said that Jesus is “wrong to perform cures on the Sabbath and so must be full of devils” (92). This event echoes Mary’s first appearance in Jesus’ adulthood, after Jesus has come down from the mountain, but before he begins his ministry. Jesus wants to become a wandering minister, but Mary wants him to stay in Qumran and become a good Essene. She is portrayed as someone who believes that authority should be followed, not rebelled against, which is why Jesus does not tell her about his temptation on the mountain: “Yet she was also a mother. She knew me very well. So she could now surmise that it had not only been my Father who was with me on the mountain but the Other. If the Devil owned the powers of darkness, then I was weak enough, as she would see it, to have been tainted. Therefore I must be guided by a community of the most devout” (60). Like Burgess, then, Mailer gives his Mary the ability to know things about Jesus, but he does not give her supernatural knowledge; instead, her knowledge comes simply from being a mother. Mailer’s Mary is not divine, but a good, human mother.

Saramago also stays close to the gospel accounts and thus presents Mary as believing Jesus to be insane; Saramago’s Mary does not believe Jesus when he comes to tell her that he has seen God. And even when Jesus tells her of this event, she still does not relate to him what happened when she was pregnant, despite the fact that she knows Jesus has been working with Pastor (the beggar) for the past four years. Instead, she believes that Jesus is in Satan’s power. In the end, though, Pastor appears to Mary and tells her that Jesus is the Son of God. She sends James and Joseph to look for Jesus without telling them what she has learned, but he refuses to come home because they did not believe him. She has supernatural knowledge in Saramago’s work, but it is only through revelation; otherwise, she does not truly know who her son is, even with the odd events surrounding his birth.

It is interesting that an atheist, such as Saramago, and a confessed Christian, such as the Protestant Reynolds Price, both show Mary as believing that Jesus is insane. Not surprisingly, though, they both differ radically from Roman Catholic Burgess.
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Though Kazantzakis presents his Mary with compelling evidence that Jesus is the Son of God (or at least called by God in some manner), she still wants him to have a normal life, as she conveys to the rabbi when he begins to imply that Jesus might be the Messiah: “Have pity on me, Father! A prophet? No, no! And if God has it so written, let him rub it out! I want my son a man like everyone else, nothing more, nothing less. Like everyone else. . . . Let him build troughs, cradles, plows and household utensils as his father used to do . . .” (64). In fact, she has long wanted the rabbi to cast out the demons that she believes make Jesus act the way he does: “How many times had she prostrated herself before her brother-in-law the old rabbi, who was versed in exorcizing devils. The afflicted came to him from the ends of the earth and he cured them. Just the other day she had fallen at his feet and complained: ‘You heal strangers but you do not want to heal my son’” (29). This event echoes the gospel portrayal of Mary’s believing that Jesus is insane, though it takes the idea even further by creating a Mary who believes her son is possessed by the devil. Leavitt describes Kazantzakis’ Mary as “a prototypical Jewish (read Greek) mother: domineering, possessive, embittered by her son’s refusal to lead the life she outlined for him” (Leavitt 65), but he misses part of the point here. Yes, she does want Jesus to live the life she has in mind for him, but she also attributes his unwillingness to do so to the devil, not to the rebellion typical of a son. This portrayal is a far cry from Burgess’ Mary who makes sure Jesus does not get off the course he needs to pursue to be the Messiah, yet both Marys want to guide Jesus’ life.

It’s obvious that Kazantzakis’ Mary loves Jesus and wants him to return home rather than trampise over the countryside preaching to the poor, but he always shuns her when she comes to find him, which only makes her bemoan her situation even more. When Salome tells her that Jesus is “in safety now; he’s under God’s roof,” Mary replies, “A mother’s pain is heavy, Salome. . . . God sent me but one boy, and he a blemished one” (167). Later, after Salome has seen angels behind Jesus as he taught, though Mary has not, Salome tries to tell Mary of what she has seen: “While he spoke, didn’t you see blue wings, thousands of blue wings behind him? I swear to you, Mary, there were whole armies of angels” (189). But Mary has no interest in
angels' wings: “What good are angels to me, Salome? I want children and grandchildren to be following him, children and grandchildren, not angels!” (190). Kazantzakis does not make clear whether or not Mary does not see the wings because she does not want her son to be the Messiah or that God has kept her from seeing, for whatever reason.

Thus, despite the ample evidence Mary had from Jesus’ birth, she still wants Jesus to be normal, more than anything else, still wants him not to be who everyone else seems to think he is. In doing so, she often appears callous and self-centered, in that she is more concerned for the things of this world than heavenly issues, as Jesus might say. The only time Mary seems to focus on anyone other than herself is when the crowd is chasing Mary Magdalene in order to stone her. Mary Magdalene hides in Zebedee’s house, and Mary and Salome try to comfort her. Mary Magdalene is crying because she does not want to die; she simply loves being alive, and Mary tells her, “Do not be afraid, Mary. . . . God protects you; you won’t die.” And when Mary Magdalene asks her how she knows this, Mary simply responds, “God gives us time, Magdalene, time to repent” (171). It is true that Mary was originally repulsed by Mary Magdalene’s previous life and that this repulsion probably motivates her statement that Magdalene needs time to repent, but she moves outside of herself, beyond her repulsion, and tries to comfort Mary Magdalene in the only way she knows how.

Ricci’s Mary also tries to prevent Jesus from the life he chooses; thus, almost every time Mary encounters Jesus when he is teaching, Jesus shuns her. Stoffman points out, “Ricci’s Jesus . . . is a great teacher, fearless in argument, a man of compassion, an inspired healer, bonesetter, diagnostician, a wise friend, but a cold and distant son to his fearful and conventional mother” (J15). In the gospel accounts, Mary is anxious about Jesus when he is grown, but he seems to take little notice of her, even to the point of rudeness. Other than John’s report that Jesus made sure Mary was taken care of after his death, the encounters Mary has with the adult Jesus are all negative. Mary and Jesus’ brothers seek him because they think that he has gone crazy, but Jesus will not even meet them. Instead, when they send someone to tell him of their presence, Jesus responds by teaching the
crowd: “Who are my mother and my brothers? . . . Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:33–35). Ricci follows the gospel accounts in this instance and creates a tenuous relationship between Mary and Jesus. When Mary goes to Kefar Nahum to try to speak with Jesus, he will not come out of the house; instead, he sends Mary Magdalene, a young girl in Ricci’s book, to deliver the message: “It seemed a tremendous mistake now to have come, only to trouble myself with humiliation, to be sent a girl to turn me away so that I might understand the fullness of his contempt” (291). Jesus does not send Mary Magdalene as a sign of contempt, but it is clear that he does not focus on his relationship with his mother. Whether this is because he is more focused on his teaching, because he simply does not understand how to relate to her, or because he is a typical child who is rebelling against his family is unclear. In light of Ricci’s human Jesus, the second and third reasons make much more sense than the first.

There is one moment in the gospels, though, when Mary and Jesus’ relationship is loving, especially from Jesus’ side. The gospel of John shows Mary at the cross at Jesus’ crucifixion, and Jesus asks John to take care of her (John 19:26–27). Drawing on John’s account, the authors show Jesus, near the end of his life, treating Mary much more kindly. Burgess, for example, has her meet him in Jerusalem, but only briefly before he is taken prisoner. Instead, she accidentally rooms with Mary Magdalene and Salome, and they become friends. In fact, it is because of Salome’s connections that Mary is able to be near the cross as Jesus is crucified. She also arrives at the tomb, along with Mary Magdalene, before the disciples, and it is she alone who hears Jesus’ voice in the tomb telling the disciples to go to Galilee to meet him. The switch from Mary Magdalene hearing Jesus after his resurrection confirms Mary’s high standing in Burgess’ novel. If Mary Magdalene was the original apostle in the gospels and in early church tradition because she was the first to take the message to the disciples, in Burgess’ novel, Mary the mother has taken that role away. Thus, not only does she give birth to Jesus, but now she is the one to hear the message of his resurrection, as well.
Mailer’s Mary’s last appearance is when Jesus is on the way to the cross. He sees her in a crowd, and he realizes at that moment that her love was “a gift from the Lord, and so, in her awe of me, she had contended with all I did” (233), and his understanding of this concept leads him back to her: “I belonged to my mother again” (233). Thus, he picks out a disciple (Timothy in Mailer’s account, though John in the gospels) to protect her now that he is going to die. This protection explicitly contrasts with how Jesus has treated her earlier, when she and his brothers came to stop him from preaching. Someone calls out to Jesus, “Behold, your mother and your brothers look for you,” to which Jesus responds, “These are my brothers! Those who are with me. For he who does the will of God is my brother and my mother” (92). Even then, Jesus wants to take those words back, as he hears they’ve made his mother cry. But he believes that her fear of Romans and her lack of pride in dealing with wealthy Jews have only served to fuel his anger. Thus, by trying to stop Jesus from doing what he is called to do, she leads him down the path where he can best fulfill his duty to God.

For Ricci, at the last meeting, Jesus treats his mother with respect, almost as if he knows what is going to happen to him, though Ricci does not give the reader any indication that he does. When he sees her, he introduces her and his brothers to his disciples; then Mary comments, “Then he embraced his brothers and took my hand in both of his and brought it to his lips, which in all his life he had not done” (307). Mary eventually meets Mary Magdalene, and they comfort each other after Jesus’ arrest: “So grateful was I to find a stranger who shared sympathy with me that I forgot all resentment towards her and embraced her, also falling to tears. For a moment we stood there unable to speak for emotion” (312). They go together to the crucifixion, and Mary the mother comforts Mary Magdalene there: “I noticed now that the mother had an arm around Mary, the two joined under the mother’s cloak as if they’d been brought to the same level, helpless like children who’d been left behind. It didn’t seem to matter any more how differently they’d seen Jesus—it had come to the same thing, in the end, that neither had got what they’d wanted from him, and now they’d lost him” (448). Mary the mother does not see Jesus after his supposed resurrection, nor does she see
the empty tomb. Her last glimpse of Jesus is on the cross, watching him suffer, unable to turn away. Though Ricci’s portrayal of Mary is otherwise quite different from Burgess’, they both show Mary’s suffering, which is one of the main attributes of her character in the gospels.

In addition to drawing from the gospels and the legends surrounding Mary, both Saramago and Ricci go beyond these ideas and use Mary to comment on women’s roles in their society. When Saramago first introduces her, in fact, he writes, “Unlike Joseph her husband, Mary is neither upright nor pious, but she is not to blame for this, the blame lies with the language she speaks if not with the men who invented it, because that language has no feminine form for the words upright and pious” (16). Saramago uses other women to convey this point as well; on the road to Jerusalem the men pray, but the women “merely mumbled the words, for it is pointless raising your voice if no one is likely to listen, even though they ask for nothing and are grateful for everything” (35). Because Judaism at the time did not allow women religious education or practice, the women rightly conclude that it does them no good to attempt to participate. Mary becomes the main representation of this idea throughout the novel.

The connection between the Jewish religion and Mary’s status in society is reinforced when Jesus is born. Jesus, though still a child, is allowed to learn about religious matters, while Mary cannot even ask him what he has learned. She shows her cleverness, though, by learning what she can from what Jesus tells Joseph about what he learned in class that day. Saramago also takes pains to point out that Mary is not able to enter the Temple, having to stop at the Court of the Women, while Joseph goes forward to offer the sacrifice. Instead of being able to participate in this event, Mary “will not stir until Joseph returns, she simply steps aside so as not to obstruct the passage, and waits, holding her son in her arms” (73). Helena Kaufman points out that Saramago’s narrator, “far from accepting it, . . . stresses the inferior position women were assigned in Jewish society and religion” and “recognizes that the difference by which the feminine can be described results from the socio-political structure” (456). Saramago does not use his novel, then, merely to criticize Christianity’s portrayal of God, the devil,
and Jesus; instead, he also uses it to examine the roles of women, mainly in ancient Israel, but certainly with echoes for today.

Mary’s background, with her lack of rights, helps explain some of her actions later in the novel, especially what she does not share with Joseph. From the outset, when Mary encounters the beggar at the door who knows she is pregnant, though she has told no one, she does not tell Joseph that she believes he is an angel. Because the beggar leaves a bowl with soil, which seems to glow, with them, Joseph suspects that the beggar might have been an angel or a devil, but Mary does not tell him that the beggar knew she was pregnant. Mary, in fact, never tells him about the beggar, even though she sees him several more times before Joseph’s death. Mary’s interactions with Jesus also center around what she tells him, though this relationship also involves what he tells her. Mary does not tell Jesus of the beggar’s appearance when she was pregnant, nor does she tell him about the circumstances surrounding his birth in Bethlehem. It is only when he begins having his nightmare that she is forced to tell him everything. As Mary has been denied access and knowledge in the early part of the work due to her status as a woman in this culture, she also denies knowledge to the men around her. Knowledge becomes her only power in this society, and she uses it wisely to attempt to get what little power she can get.

In Ricci’s work, Mary is not happy being married to Joseph, but there is nothing she can do, as a woman, in her culture. She endures Joseph, especially in the area of sex, which she compares to her rape by the Roman; there is no emotion or love. However, after Joseph dies, she realizes just how good he was to her:

It surprised me then the grief that went through me, for I had not imagined I loved him. Indeed, perhaps I had not, except that I had been with him some fifteen years, and had borne his children, and he had spared me, as I saw now, a life surely far worse than the one he had given me. Never once had he raised his hand against me or asked of me anything it was unreasonable for a man to ask of his wife, and the fairness of
mind I had detested in him as a bride had in the end stood me well in all my years with him. (272)

Ricci does not accept the culture that he portrays here, but he also does not represent it falsely. He does not create a Joseph who allows Mary to learn or have a voice in the decisions of the family, but he does create one who is as kind to Mary as a man could have been in ancient Israel. Mary’s recognition of this reinforces those limits without necessarily accepting them.

When Joseph moves Mary and Jesus to Alexandria where no one knows Jesus is not his son, Mary, without Joseph’s knowledge, explores the city and learns Greek, showing how different the Egyptian culture is from the Jewish culture. As Mary says, “But in this [learning Greek] I was no different from the other women of Alexandria, be they Greek or Jew, for they did not believe there, as in Judea, that a woman was only a chattel but that she might make her own life” (237). This idea that she can learn on her own, just as a man can in Israel, serves as a foil to the culture they have left and to which they will return. Though she ultimately turns her back on learning, she at least experiences a culture that shows her that women can be more nearly equal to men, and when she does shift her focus to her family, she later regrets giving up on learning. It is only near the end of Jesus’ life that she realizes what she has given up, and it is Jesus who helps her to this realization, though not directly:

And the restlessness I had felt as a young woman in Alexandria began to return to me, for I saw how my mind had been open then but had grown complacent, and how I thought only of my position now, just as Yeshua [Jesus] had once accused me, when before I had cared more for truth. Indeed it seemed that since Yeshua had gone from me I had put from my mind all thoughts except those of the marriage of my daughters and sons, and that the doorway he had opened for me had been closed. (285)
They Love to Tell the Story

Even Judas can tell a difference between Mary and the other Nazarene women: “She was the first woman I’d seen in the town in whom there was any sign of an intrinsic beauty, though it was clear from her look, which had something of the Arab to it, and from her bearing, which was that of a city woman, that she did not belong to the place, and that indeed she would gladly have kicked the dust of it from her heels” (76). It is not just the education she receives that changes her, but the recognition that she might have a different status in a different society, the appreciation of her knowledge, which makes her different from the other women.

Though Mary does not have much power as a woman, all the authors allow her a knowledge that provides her with power. In some cases, she hides this knowledge as a means of gaining power over the men around her. The knowledge also scares her; thus, she seeks to prevent Jesus from becoming whatever it is that God has in store for him. Only Burgess presents a Mary who uses her knowledge to support Jesus in his role. The others hew more closely to the gospel stories, showing her struggles with Jesus’ role, making her a more human mother.