

# It's Time to Stop Hating on 'Mary, Did You Know?'

There are plenty of candidates for the worst Christmas song.

"Do They Know It's Christmas?" comes off as the humanitarian equivalent of an "Arms of the Angels" ASPCA ad; "Here Comes Santa Claus" seems to be proselytizing for some kind of strange, syncretistic Christmas religion; and "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas" is enough to make me reevaluate my policy of never punching small children.

Yet for many Christians, one song deserves more hatred than all the rest: "Mary, Did You Know?"

This touching 1991 Christmas lullaby has become a staple of the holiday season and an essential track on every pop star's Christmas album. But although [some biblical scholars have praised](#) the platinum hit for its simplicity and sense of wonder, it's attracted more than its share of theological criticism as well. In 2016, [Lutheran writer Holly Scheer described](#) "Mary, Did You Know?" as "the most biblically illiterate Christmas tune."

I disagree. "Mary, Did You Know?" is not only emotionally moving, it is also theologically accurate and spiritually edifying.

In one section of her article, Scheer sums up her argument about the song's supposed lack of biblical fidelity:

*To answer the questions ["Mary, Did You Know?"] poses: Yes, Mary knew she was having God's Son. Luke 1:30-33, 35 answers this clearly: 'And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of*

*the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” [...] And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.”’* Yep, Mary knew that her baby boy was God himself.

Did she, though?

Mary certainly would have had no way of knowing that Jesus would “one day walk on water” or “calm a storm with his hand,” but leaving the questions about specific miracles aside, would she have known that Jesus was fully God, the preexistent “Great I AM” and also the sacrificial “perfect lamb”? I would argue no. In fact, it seems likely that Mary would have interpreted God’s promise that her Son would inherit “the throne of his father David” as a description of the political warrior-Messiah that most Jews expected.

There is actually biblical evidence that Mary still did not fully understand her son’s mission as he grew older. Luke chapter two recounts how Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple at age 12, but accidentally left him behind on their return home. Coming back to Jerusalem they found him in the temple talking with the religious leaders:

*And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing.*

*And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?*

The passage concludes by noting the confusion of Mary and Joseph over this statement.

Even after Jesus began his ministry, Mary’s understanding

remained incomplete. In Mark chapter three, it is implied that Mary had come to fear that her increasingly controversial Son was "out of his mind," as the New International Version states, causing her to try, along with a few other relatives, to stage an intervention.

At the time of Christ's birth, Mary certainly knew that her child was the Messiah and the Son of God, but there is nothing in the Bible that requires a Christian to believe that she understood immediately and fully what those titles meant. The Virgin, having not yet heard Simeon's prophecy of a sword that would pierce her heart with grief for her Son, may have expected military victories over the Romans rather than a crucifixion at their hands. As for Christ's status as the "Son of God," that title bore many interpretations, not all of which supported the revolutionary idea that Mary's "baby boy" had existed as God from all eternity and, despite not having yet taken his first steps, had already "walked where angels trod."

Scheer's assertion that Mary intuitively and unambiguously foresaw the crucifixion and reached the same Christological conclusions at the Nativity that the bishops at Nicea would hammer out 300 years later ignores Mary's humanity, historical context, and the biblical text itself. To say that "Yep, Mary knew," is to replace Mary's bold, inspiring faith in God's unknowable plan with a dull factual certainty to which no ordinary Christian can relate.

Did Mary know that her Son was God in the flesh, that He would heal the blind and lame, and that He would die for the sins of the world? She may have had some idea. Surely, though, she could not have fully grasped the significance of what was happening as she cradled her newborn Son.

Luke tells us that Mary "kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart." The questions put to her in the song are certainly worth pondering. They are mysteries that must have

astounded the faithful young mother who accepted God's will, despite the impossibility of knowing where it would lead, and looked on in wonder as it unfolded.

May we all do the same this Christmas.

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