

Interview with Loren Woodson **Author of *The Passion of Maryam***

*Today Juanita Watson, Assistant Editor of Reader Views is talking with author and practicing psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Loren Woodson. Loren's novel, "**The Passion of Maryam**," is a dramatic reconsideration of the Virgin Mother and the most compelling mother-son relationship in history.*

Loren Woodson has written two screenplays and two novels. His devout Christian upbringing inspired his fascination with the New Testament figures and their stories, and close relationships with his family, especially his warm and expressive mother, enriched his psychotherapy observations about parent-child interactions.

Juanita: Welcome to Reader Views Loren. We are happy to have the opportunity to talk with you about your novel "**The Passion of Maryam**." Would you begin by telling us what your book is about?

Loren: The Mary (Maryam) in my novel is a pious first-century Galilean young woman who suffers a profound violation. This shatters her trust in her God, the God of Israel. She perseveres to become a wife and mother, entranced with her enigmatic and spirit-driven firstborn. Her witnessing his crucifixion devastates her, but finds her re-experiencing the many layers of their complicated relationship, as each has struggled with how close by evil is. She has lived under the shadow of her rape; he has struggled with various temptations and the vanity of trying to love the unlovable. What emerges is redemption for each.

Juanita: What inspired you to reconsider the Mary(Maryam)/Jesus(Yeshua) story, quite possibly the most well known mother-son relationships in history?

Loren: I grew up in a devout and observant Protestant home, though my parents always examined and renewed their faith and beliefs and passed on their sincere open-mindedness. It was my warm and expressive mother who sensitized me to the nuances of human interactions. In my career as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, observing parent-child interactions, I kept finding myself intrigued with that most famous of mother-child relationships. I figured that whatever one's beliefs were about Jesus the Christ, or Jesus the Galilean man, he must have had a very remarkable mother, and they a very amazing relationship.

Juanita: What type of research did you do to prepare for writing this novel?

Loren: I delved farther into what has been a longstanding interest in the Bible and its related literature. So I spent some seven years reading many dozens of books by Biblical scholars, attending lectures and seminars, studying Hebrew and Greek, and visiting the Holy Land. The aim was to put together as accurate a picture as possible of first-century Roman Israel regarding the land, its people, its politics, economics, and belief systems in the context of the Greco-Judaic mix that existed in that Roman colony. What kept coming up for me was how deeply the people back then lived in a world of spirits—holy and unholy, mighty and mischievous. There was essentially no one who did not feel their life influenced by God or gods, demons and angels, the divine messengers.

Juanita: Your book presents a very controversial twist on the idea of Immaculate Conception. What can you tell us about this crucial aspect of your story?

Loren: I took the basic premise from a Biblical scholar at the University of Detroit, Mercy, Prof Jane Schaberg, who wrote a book, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*. She based her book especially on text in the Gospel of Matthew referring to four women forbearers of Jesus: Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba, all of whom had irregular sexual unions but were considered essential to God's plan. Similarly, there are a number of citations in the Gospels in which Jesus is accused of having an irregular birth. The idea of his being the product of a rape is certainly not original with me.

Incidentally, the word "Passion," derives from the Greek for "pain" and "pathos," and doubles in my use to capture Maryam's intense quest in response to her pain.

Juanita: How would you describe Maryam as portrayed in your book?

Loren: I like the description that one of the readers of my book put forward. Jean Young, a psychotherapist and feminist theologian, says it well. "The first clue that this is a new view of the mother of Jesus (Yeshua) is her bold depiction on the cover by artist Joan Woodson. This is not a cloying, romantic vision of a girl/woman, eyes demurely cast down or to the side, forever balancing a halo, and forever young. This Maryam's eyes meet you straight on and wide open. This is a woman with a life. This is also a woman whose inner life is vivid, disquieting, and sometimes portentous. While those close to her attempt to dismiss her fears and apprehensions, she will not be persuaded to ignore her own inner wisdom. She meets evil early on and lives thereafter in the tension which comes from true encounter with shadows. Yet Woodson's Maryam insists that the Holy is present even in the shadows, even in the darkness of malevolence and cruelty, at birth and in death."

I want to point out that the cover mosaic portrait of Maryam is original art by my wife, Joan Woodson, who based it on a mosaic of St. Paul on display in Ravenna, Italy.

Juanita: How is the relationship of Maryam and Yeshua different in "*The Passion of Maryam*" from the widely accepted account?

Loren: A simplified version of the Christian account is that Mary was a betrothed virgin who conceived in a miraculous way by the divine intervention of the Holy Spirit, that is to say, an aspect

of God, and Jesus, God's son, was the divine product. I posed the question, While Mary and Jesus are usually pictured as embodying unsullied good, what if both, from the beginning, had been forced to seek the holy from an abyss of evil? Would that not reveal the depth and reach of their inspired lives? Thus Mary is forced, as a frightened, shattered fifteen year old, to deal with a completely unwanted pregnancy—even considering at one point taking an aborting agent—and to later deal with the child who is born of that act. The book is about how she and her son struggle with their respective proximity to this unfathomable evil as each keep at their quest to find God in and amidst it. Thus my Jesus/Yeshua is not an easy individual, as enchanting and charismatic as he is. Maryam sees his grandiosity, his willfully putting himself outside the traditional community of Israel, and his ultimate aloneness—even as she sees him seeking God.

Juanita: What led you to believe the plausibility of this version?

Loren: After I had posed the “What if ...?” question about the conception, I came across the book by Jane Schaberg, which helped fill in aspects of its plausibility. I was given some leeway because anyone who takes up the life of Mary has to fill in the gaps of what is an extremely sparse Biblical narrative. I choose a different way that Maryam's rape happened, compared to Schaberg's speculation, and that of others, that she was perhaps raped by a Roman or Herodian soldier, but she supplied the basic scholarship. The basic scheme of Maryam's encounters follows highlights of the New Testament narrative, including her relationship with Elizabeth (Elisheva) the mother of John the Baptist (Yohanan the Immerser), the birth in Bethlehem (though not in manger), the travel to Egypt, the wedding at Cana, and so forth. As I depict in the book, she did have four other named sons besides Jesus/Yeshua, as several of the Gospels state, and two unnamed daughters. Particular New Testament scholars, such as Professor Amy-Jill Levine of the Vanderbilt Divinity School, were consulted at various stages and attested to the basic plausibility of my narrative.

Juanita: How were you able to delve so deeply into Maryam's emotions as she journeyed through different stages of her life?

Loren: I like to think I have done what any good writer of fiction does: find a character who is “real,” present her with a very real set of dilemmas and conflicts, and let her responses to those lead to subsequent events and further decisions on her part. That narrative arc shows us who she is and what she is made of. This was an opportunity to explore how her pregnancy, her giving birth, and her early interactions with her newborn son both repulsed her and drew her in to him. Which was all the while happening against the backdrop of her reinterpreting her affiliation with a God who seemed so otherwise elusive and vexing to her. She eventually comes to a deeper affiliation with God, in the life she lives, but one born of struggle.

So much of life is about how we struggle with what life presents us. I hope I bring to Maryam's experience of being a daughter, a victim of rape, a wife, and a mother the immediacy of how she might have been as a real person, with all her feelings and beliefs and persevering spirit, dealing with horrible adversity and with what those she cared about presented her.

Juanita: What is the significance of Yeshua's execution in your story, in the context of the mother-son relationship?

Loren: For me it's the climactic heart of the story. I mean it to bring together the horrible evil that Maryam suffered at his conception bookended with the agony of her being with her tortured son at his end. I see the way they connect at the cross as being both real and in some way ultimately inexplicable. But their uncanny connection transforms the horrendous evil of the rape into what I call the transcendent mystery of the divine.

Juanita: What statements are you making in "*The Passion of Maryam*," towards good, evil and the divine?

Loren: I have long been fascinated with the problem of evil. As a psychoanalyst I see that harmful things are willfully done by those to whom harm has been done. But I don't think it's that simple. I don't believe in a literal devil, but I do believe that some people inflict pain for the *pleasure* of making another suffer. That's demonic, that's pure evil, the deriving of pleasure in making another suffer. How that kind of corruption of being human can happen, I don't think we understand. It doesn't explain anything to say that evil is abroad in the world, but there it is. I do assert in the novel that where evil is, there especially does one find God. I can only weakly attest to this in my own direct experience. But I do think that some truly holy people can—and I have found that such holy people exist. If one believes that God, in creating us, bestowed on us the great gift of freedom, then yes, we can stray into wrong acts of omission and commission. But likewise we can be open to finding God where otherwise horrendous evil exists. Some spiritually brave souls found and find God even in the ashes of the Holocaust. I am not made of that but that paradoxical intersection of evil and God is a major theme in my novel.

Juanita: What is Maryam's message/legacy? Why did she have to endure these challenging circumstances?

Loren: Let me combine my response with that to the following question.

Juanita: Loren, what are you ultimately trying to convey through "*The Passion of Maryam*"?

Loren: Maryam had to suffer what she did because that's what human beings, in their free capacity to perpetrate evil, assaulted her with. She struggled to make something good out of it, and though to the end her firstborn frustrated her, she could see that they shared an unquenchable thirst to make things right and good. Her legacy is therefore that meaning can be experienced in and amidst the most dire of events that life can throw us. I see the Maryam of my novel as a model for persevering with those one loves—and especially the challenging ones, the ones not always so lovable. Both as the icon of the Virgin Mother, and in my novel, Maryam is the quintessential mother, giving birth to and raising a family where each cared deeply about the other, a family of many children who were mutually supportive in every way possible, especially to and with their extremely vexing and difficult member, Jesus/Yeshua. Ours is an age where families can be fragmented and going one's own way is countenanced by an often narcissistic culture. I like to think my Maryam would have none of that.

Juanita: Loren, you really have captured the language of the time with your choice of historic terminology and poetic phrasing. Would you comment on your writing style and your ability to transport readers directly into the story?

Loren: I take the question as inherently laudatory! As I have said, I want to portray the land and the people in ways as accurately as can be historically assessed. That means using some terms in their Hebrew or Aramaic transliteration. One example is the Aramaic word, “avda,” for slave. (Aramaic was the most commonly spoken language of the area and the era.) Slaves were a commonplace at the time, but they were not simple property or seen as subhuman. While they were subject to the whims of their master, they could marry, own property and businesses, buy their freedom, even own other slaves themselves. So I use the word, avda, which in context is fuller than our term slave. Also, it fits with a major theme of the book having to do with submission and surrender. Maryam struggles with that mightily. Moreover, I wanted to bring a poetry to the language and the imagery, making metaphoric use of a variety of motifs, including water, food, sustenance, sacrifice, among others.

Juanita: Building on the idea that “submission and surrender” are the standout themes of your book - themes which are very universal and timeless- do you think Maryam and Yeshua represent archetypes or aspects of humanity that we all encounter within ourselves to varying degree?

Loren: That’s a very interesting question. What drew me to develop a story about these most famous of figures is precisely that they are larger than life. Such archetypal figures are both of the universal AND they express the individual, the particular. The myriad icons and depictions of the Virgin and of Jesus in paintings and sculpture do this as well, according the craft and vision of each artist. So I like to think we can be inspired by Maryam and Yeshua and find ourselves in them, even as their narrative has a kind of transcendence that we otherwise find hard to access in our everyday lives.

Juanita: Having had a strong Christian upbringing Loren, did you feel any guilt writing this story?

Loren: Quite the contrary, I would like this to be a springboard from which believers can find new and fresh ways of considering the Christian narrative. I believe and I find it to be the case in my work as a psychotherapist, that while there is no great or inherent virtue in struggling, it really does seem that very little worthwhile is achieved without it. And I feel this is especially true about seeking the divine, or any other kind of spiritual quest. It’s all too easy to recite a creed or perform a ritual and to be absent while doing it. To be there, to think about, to contemplate the large issues in life, to see where they lead, is very difficult. What if it is true that God is most conspicuously present in situations where bad things are happening? I found myself drawn into the heart of the Christian narrative to make that point, and I hope it does prod people to consider and reconsider what a search for the divine means—whether they’re Christians, Jews, Muslims, or whatever, and even if they’re non-believers, or former-believers, folks who can no longer find meaning in the religion of their earlier days.

I keep talking about a search for the divine. What kind of a God do you believe in? you might ask. I don’t believe in God in the sense of a figure who watches out for us and intervenes here and there.

But I do believe there is much more to this magnificent and mysterious universe than simple chance explains. So for me it's a search into what that mystery is about, that numinous, inexplicable, ineffable essence—or if you will, the divine, God, Allah, Yahweh, or as Deepak Chopra calls it, the Fullness of Non-Material Intelligence. I find the divine in all manner of ways that the world is itself, is its own amazing creation. Among many other sources, I find music, at least of the type composed by Bach, Brahms, Handel, Mozart—and the good old Christian hymns—as nothing less than sounding the voice of God. And I find the divine in such lives as Maryam and Yeshua.

Juanita: Loren, this is quite a controversial subject, what has been the response to your book?

Loren: Some have been unable to get into it, unable to set aside the version of Mary with which they are familiar. Fair enough. I suppose it's coming, but I have yet to have a really vitriolic response. Perhaps Dan Brown paved the way, and there are a number of books out there that basically dismiss, even trivialize, all of religious experience. As you can see, that's not this book. I am gratified that there have been a variety of ways the book has been experienced, and as I have been told, providing a fresh and thought-provoking read.

I really do hope that those in the Christian community will give it a read. I think it can be the basis of a fruitful discussion about one's faith and the place in it for struggle and where evil fits in the scheme of things. And the Jewish community as well. Jesus/Yeshua was of course thoroughly Jewish, which I hope I make clear, and while he will never be their Messiah, his basic values and traditions are those any observant Jew can embrace.

Juanita: Do you have any other projects in the works? How can readers find out more about you and your endeavors?

Loren: While it is gratifying to see my novel make its way into the marketplace it has taken me away from my next project. When I can, I am researching and doing the sketching of a novel about the relationship between Judas and Jesus. I can't seem to let the early Christian era and its fascinating confluence of forces go.

I would love to be able to discuss these themes with any who are inclined to take up the issues I put forth in *The Passion of Maryam*. Book groups by teleconference are a way that a number of authors are doing that these days, and of course is available all over the country. Just email me at loren.woodson@gmail.com.

Juanita: Loren, thanks for giving us an in-depth look at your fascinating book "*The Passion of Maryam*." We are honored that you shared your thoughts today, and encourage readers to look for your book at local and online booksellers. Before we let you go, do you have any last thoughts you'd like to share?

Loren: I hope readers find within "*The Passion of Maryam*" not facile sensationalism, nor an attempt to rewrite the Gospels, but a heartfelt quest on my part to bring a fresh perspective on both the struggle and the repose that experiencing the Divine seems to bring. Thank you very much for this opportunity to share my odyssey of finding that Divine within these two remarkable figures of history.