BookGist Summary

# Mary Sings Praises to Hymn: Meditations on Hymns and Carols Featuring Mary, Mother of Jesus

by John L Hoh Jr

## Key Takeaways

• The book reads familiar hymns and carols as windows into Mary's human experience: uncertainty, fear, faith, pregnancy, motherhood, and grief—not merely as decorations for the Christmas story.

• The Annunciation is both a personal upheaval for a young woman and a turning point in salvation history; Mary's acceptance follows a moment of honest questioning.

• Mary's visit to Elizabeth offers companionship and visible reassurance, while the Magnificat shows her interpreting her experience through Israel's Scriptures and God's promises.

• The book emphasizes that Mary is favored and chosen by God, not presented as sinless; in the Magnificat, she calls God her Savior.

• The carols' depictions of Bethlehem—an ordinary town, a humble birth, a manger, and shepherd visitors—underline the contrast between Jesus' divine identity and his lowly circumstances.

• Jesus' birth is inseparable from his mission: the child in the manger is the Messiah who teaches, heals, confronts injustice, dies, and rises again.

• Carols can expand on sparse biblical narratives, but their imaginative details should be distinguished from what Scripture explicitly records.

- The songs present humility, peace, love, forgiveness, and trust as responses to God's grace, while warning against reducing Christmas to a lesson in merely being good.
- The book invites readers to follow the story beyond the Nativity, tracing Mary's joys and sorrows through Jesus' ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and reign.

## Who Should Read This Book

This book is well suited to readers who enjoy Christmas hymns and carols and want to understand the biblical narratives, histories, and theological ideas behind them. Pastors, worship leaders, choir members, educators, and devotional readers may find it useful for planning seasonal services or preparing reflections. Readers especially interested in Mary will appreciate the effort to imagine her as a real person facing social risk, physical hardship, uncertainty, joy, and grief.

## Chapter Summaries

### *The Annunciation: "The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came"*

The book opens by exploring a Basque carol about Gabriel's visit to Mary. Its origins are uncertain, though it may be related to the medieval Latin hymn "Angelus ad Virginem." The author contrasts the carol's poetic image of an angel with the Bible's silence about Gabriel's appearance, while noting that angelic encounters in Scripture are often frightening. The message, rather than the angel's imagined wings or fiery eyes, is the decisive event: Mary, a young woman pledged to marry Joseph, is told that she will bear the promised child.

### *A Baby Changes Everything*

This reflection on Faith Hill's contemporary song frames the Annunciation through the imagined perspective of a frightened teenager. Its lyrics focus on Mary's disrupted plans, her relationship with Joseph, the prospect of leaving home, and the emotional weight of carrying a child whose origin few people would believe. The song gives voice to the isolation and anxiety that traditional, celebratory carols can leave unexplored.

### *The Pregnancy: "Ave Maria"*

The book examines the traditional "Ave Maria" by separating its biblical opening from its later intercessory petition. Gabriel's greeting in Luke supplies the phrases about Mary being favored and blessed; the prayer's request that Mary pray for sinners developed later and became standardized in the sixteenth century. This distinction helps explain why the prayer can be meaningful in some Christian traditions while raising questions for Lutherans and other

Protestants who emphasize direct prayer to God.

### *The Pregnancy: “Breath of Heaven”*

Amy Grant’s “Breath of Heaven” is treated as an imaginative attempt to enter Mary’s thoughts during pregnancy and travel. The Gospel accounts provide few details about her private feelings, so the song gives poetic voice to fear, exhaustion, loneliness, and the plea for God’s presence. The author places these emotions alongside Joseph’s initial plan to divorce Mary quietly and the angel’s reassurance to him, presenting both as ordinary people confronting an unprecedented situation.

### *The Pregnancy: “A Virgin Unspotted”*

This chapter uses an old carol to discuss the virgin birth and the theological meaning of Jesus being both fully human and fully divine. The author distinguishes the phrase “a virgin unspotted” from the doctrine of Mary’s Immaculate Conception, arguing that Scripture does not portray Mary as sinless. Mary’s own words in the Magnificat—calling God her Savior—are presented as evidence that she, too, stands in need of salvation.

### *The Pregnancy: “Maria Walks Amid the Thorns,” “The Magnificat,” and “The Cherry Tree Carol”*

“Maria Walks Amid the Thorns,” a German Advent carol, imagines Mary traveling to visit Elizabeth through a barren landscape where roses bloom as she passes. The thorny path represents the long wait for the Messiah; the sudden flowers picture hope and new life arriving with the child Mary carries. Its repeated “Kyrie eleison”—“Lord, have mercy”—links the carol to older Christian worship and to Advent’s practice of waiting.

### *The Nativity: “Mary’s Boy Child”*

“Mary’s Boy Child” offers a direct, accessible telling of the Christmas story: Jesus is born in Bethlehem, shepherds see the star and hear the angels, and the birth brings hope and peace. Its lively, memorable refrain makes the song especially suited to sharing the story with children. The meditation notes that the song combines the simplicity of a Christmas narrative with a strong declaration of the child’s saving purpose.

### *The Nativity: “The Son (Child) of the Mother” and “As the Beautiful Virgin Cradled Her Son”*

The Catalan “Carol of the Gifts” asks what people might give Mary’s child and answers with modest provisions such as raisins, figs, nuts, olives, honey, and curds. The ordinary foods suit the carol’s humble setting and contrast with the costly gifts often associated with kings. Its repeated verses create a simple, almost communal song of welcome, while the detail that the figs are not yet ripe leads the author to connect the carol’s Christmas imagery with the later events of Holy Week.

### *The Nativity: “Gentle Mary Laid Her Child” and the Christmas Lullabies*

Joseph Simpson Cook’s “Gentle Mary Laid Her Child” begins with a question: can a baby born in a manger truly be the Savior? Its first and third verses frame a middle verse filled with angels, shepherds, wise men, and the shining star. The song’s answer unfolds through that contrast: the child appears humble and unfamiliar, but is the undefiled Son of God who comes to save. The chapter also traces the tune, “Tempus Adest Floridum,” whose earlier spring-carol associations became linked with Christmas through familiar hymnody.

### *The Purpose: “The Seven Joys of Mary”*

Before turning to the later carols, the book states the theological link between Christmas and Easter: Jesus becomes human so that he can share human vulnerability and die, while his divinity enables him to overcome temptation and offer himself for humanity. “The Seven Joys of Mary” then traces the child’s life through a sequence of events, from his birth and miracles to his death and heavenly reign. The author notes that versions differ and that the American version used here includes healing the lame and blind, reading Scripture, raising the dead, bearing the cross, and wearing heaven’s crown.

### *The Purpose: “Mary, Did You Know?”*

The contemporary carol “Mary, Did You Know?” asks whether Mary understood the scope of her child’s future: walking on water, healing blindness, calming storms, raising the dead, and ruling the nations. Its repeated questions create dramatic contrast between the small child Mary holds and the Lord of creation he will be revealed to be. The book reads its images as a poetic summary of Jesus’ miracles and identity, rather than as a claim that Scripture records exactly what Mary knew on the first Christmas night.

## Notable Quotes

> *"“Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.”"*

> *"“For no word from God will ever fail.”"*

> *"“God does not call the equipped; he equips the called.”"*

> *"“A manger His cradle who came from above, The great God of mercy, of peace, and of love.”"*

> *"“Child you can follow Me And I will lead you home”"*

## Full Summary

The Basque carol “The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came” sets the Annunciation in motion, though no one knows its original author or precise beginnings. It may derive from the anonymous medieval Latin carol “Angelus Ad Virginem,” meaning “The Angel to the Virgin.” In its English form, the song pictures Gabriel with wings “as drifted snow” and eyes “as flame.” Luke gives no description of Gabriel, so these details are poetic invention, not biblical testimony. The carol’s announcement, however, is no embellishment: the angel tells Mary she is highly favored and that the Lord is with her. A young woman in Nazareth is chosen for a role that will alter her life and the course of salvation history.

The carol quickly moves from Gabriel’s greeting to Mary’s acceptance, as familiar hymns often do, skipping over the question Luke records: “How will this be,” Mary asks, “since I am a virgin?” Her question is neither unbelief nor defiance; it is an honest response to an unprecedented announcement. Gabriel answers that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her. He also points to Elizabeth, Mary’s older relative, who is already six months pregnant despite having been unable to conceive. The sign gives Mary something she can see and verify, and Elizabeth will become someone who can understand and support her.

The stakes are deeply personal. Mary is pledged to Joseph but not yet married. To others, a pregnancy could look like adultery, a charge carrying severe danger under Jewish law. Who would believe her account of an angel and a miraculous conception? The carol’s meekly bowed Mary may sound serenely certain, but Luke allows us to glimpse the uncertainty beneath that image. Mary’s consent follows her question and Gabriel’s explanation: she accepts what God asks of her. The carol celebrates her as “most highly favored,” not as a woman born sinless. Mary herself calls the child her Savior, and the book stresses the distinction: she is not presented as needing no redemption, but as chosen to bear the Redeemer. The carol ends by looking ahead to Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, while leaving his later life and mission largely unstated.

Faith Hill’s “A Baby Changes Everything” brings the announcement into a starkly contemporary emotional frame: a teenager, unprepared, discovers that she is pregnant. The song imagines Mary’s fears through the absence of a ring, the plans that must change, and the question of whether Joseph will trust her. Its image of a young woman crying does not appear in Luke’s account, and the song’s imagined details should not be confused with Scripture. Yet they give voice to the human vulnerability that a polished Christmas tableau can obscure. Mary’s pregnancy would affect her standing, her relationship, and her future; this child is no ordinary baby, but the Promise of God entrusted to her. The song’s later movement toward shepherds, angels, and the newborn King joins that upheaval to its larger meaning: the child’s birth changes not only Mary’s life but the world, because Jesus comes to redeem.

The traditional “Ave Maria,” often set to music, combines a scriptural greeting with a later prayer asking Mary to intercede for sinners. Its opening words closely follow Gabriel’s greeting in Luke, especially in the King James wording: “Hail,” “the Lord is with thee,” and “blessed art thou among women.” The prayer then adds, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and in the hour of our death.” The book traces this second portion to forms found in fifteenth-century writings and notes that the familiar wording became standard in the sixteenth century. The prayer is therefore not simply Gabriel’s biblical greeting, though much of it comes directly from Scripture.

That added appeal has a different meaning across Christian traditions. Lutherans hold that people may pray directly to God without the intercession of saints, but the author notes that even Johann Sebastian Bach composed an “Ave Maria.” The prayer’s words have also inspired modern settings. Céline Dion’s version incorporates a plea from a maiden for help and compassion, while Carey Landry’s “Hail Mary, Gentle Woman” retains the prayer and adds praise for Mary as a chosen woman, mother, and model of wisdom and love. Such music shows how a scriptural greeting can become both devotion and imaginative reflection.

“Breath of Heaven” goes further, trying to enter the mind of Mary during her pregnancy. Its imagined voice is cold, weary, frightened, and alone; those are not feelings Luke explicitly reports, but the song asks listeners to recognize the humanity of a young woman carrying a child under extraordinary circumstances. Matthew’s account makes clear that Joseph, too, faced uncertainty. Before an angel appeared to him in a dream, he intended to end the engagement quietly rather than expose Mary to public disgrace. His doubts are understandable: the pregnancy could be seen as evidence of unfaithfulness, and there was no ordinary precedent for Mary’s explanation. After the dream, Joseph takes her as his wife and accepts his part in the child’s life.

The song evokes Mary traveling while pregnant, though Scripture does not tell us that every journey was made on foot or that she traveled alone. Luke records her visit to Elizabeth; later, the census sends her and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The familiar image of Mary riding a donkey is also not specified in the biblical account. The song’s imagined moonless nights and difficult roads offer emotional texture, not documentary detail. They suggest the physical demands of pregnancy and the anxiety of entering an unknown future.

Its repeated plea, “Be with me now,” gives the title its force. “Breath of Heaven” may suggest the Holy Spirit through whom Jesus is conceived, while also expressing Mary’s need for God’s presence. The longing for light in darkness and for holiness recalls the Magnificat, in which Mary rejoices in God her Savior. That connection matters: she is favored and chosen, yet still a human being who needs God’s grace. The carol lets her ask for strength without making her invulnerable, as she offers herself to a plan whose demands she cannot yet know.

The phrase “a Virgin unspotted” can sound like a claim that Mary herself was born without sin, but the carol is better read as describing her virginity. Scripture does not say she was sinless; in the Magnificat she calls God her Savior. The distinction matters: Mary is favored and chosen, not set apart as someone who has no need of grace. The carol turns instead to the miraculous birth and to the child’s purpose: he comes as Redeemer from death, hell, and sin, consequences traced to Adam’s transgression.

Its opening recalls Isaiah’s prophecy, spoken in the days of King Ahaz. When God offered Ahaz a sign, the king refused, but God gave one anyway: a virgin would conceive and bear a son called Immanuel. Martin Luther argued that the Hebrew word almah refers to a young woman who is still a virgin, and that Matthew reads Isaiah in this sense when he describes Mary conceiving before she and Joseph came together. The carol thus treats the virgin birth as a sign of God’s promise, not a claim about Mary’s sinlessness. Its larger story reaches back to the Garden of Eden, where, even after Adam and Eve’s rebellion, God promised that the woman’s offspring would crush the serpent. This baby is born to fulfill that promise and redeem humanity.

The carol places that promise in a particular, unassuming town. Bethlehem was small beside Jerusalem, yet Micah had foretold that a ruler for Israel would come from there. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, but Caesar Augustus’s census decree sent them to Bethlehem, their ancestral home. The poet imagines a crowded town, a couple of limited means, and no lodging available. Luke records that there was no guest room for them and that Mary laid Jesus in a manger. The carol supplies more—the stable, its animals, and the hour of birth—but these are imaginative details, not all facts stated in Scripture. The manger is the firm point in the sparse biblical account; the exact animals and time of day are not given. In this humble setting, the promised King arrives without the trappings expected of royalty.

A very different image of Mary’s journey appears in “Maria Walks Amid the Thorns,” an old German Advent carol. It pictures Mary walking toward Elizabeth while carrying the child beneath her heart. The path is lined with thorn trees that have been leafless for seven years. As Mary and the child pass, roses bloom among the thorns. The repeated “Kyrie eleison”—“Lord, have mercy”—gives the song the quality of a prayer, while its winter landscape recalls the long waiting for the Messiah. The rose-bearing thorns make that waiting visible: barrenness gives way to life in the presence of the Creator, carried in Mary’s womb. The image is poetic rather than a detail Luke records, but it deepens the carol’s Advent meditation on hope emerging from desolation.

At Elizabeth’s home, Mary’s experience becomes song. The Magnificat, named for the Latin word meaning “glorifies,” begins with her rejoicing in God her Savior and acknowledging her humble state. Her blessing does not make her sinless or self-sufficient; it points to what God has done for her. She calls herself God’s servant, entrusted with a crucial part in the work of

grace. Her words also reveal how she interprets this astonishing pregnancy: not as an isolated wonder, but as part of God's long faithfulness to Israel.

The Magnificat is woven from Israel's Scriptures. Its praise echoes Hannah's prayer, spoken after she received the son she had longed for, and draws on the Psalms, Isaiah, Job, Genesis, and Micah. Mary celebrates God's mercy across generations, his power to scatter the proud and lift the lowly, and his provision for the hungry while the rich are sent away empty. She understands the child she carries through the promises made to Abraham and his descendants. The song's joy is therefore personal and public at once: God has looked upon Mary, and God is acting in history to help Israel and keep his covenant. Her confidence rests not in her own power, but in the God whose promises she recognizes.

"The Cherry Tree Carol" also imagines a scene during the journey to Bethlehem, but its story must be distinguished from Luke's account. In popular versions, Joseph walks beside Mary, who rides a donkey; they stop in a cherry orchard, and Mary asks him to pick fruit for her. Joseph answers harshly, telling her to ask the child's father instead. Then Jesus, still in the womb, commands a branch to bend down so Mary can reach the cherries. Joseph sees the miracle and repents. Neither the orchard nor the conversation appears in the biblical narrative.

The carol's imaginative tale has older relatives in religious storytelling. Its prototype is associated with the ninth-century Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, where, during the family's later flight to Egypt, a date palm bends to refresh Mary with its fruit. The Cherry Tree Carol moves such a miraculous tree into the journey to Bethlehem and makes Joseph's bitterness part of the scene. Its orchard also recalls Eden: fruit once associated with humanity's fall becomes, in this retelling, a sign of the child who will set things right. The carol allows listeners to picture uncertainty and tension within the traveling couple, while its miracle resolves the moment in wonder.

"Mary's Boy Child," by contrast, tells the Nativity in plain, memorable strokes, with a lively Caribbean feel that makes it easy for children to learn. It names the who, when, and where: Mary gives birth to Jesus in Bethlehem on Christmas Day. Shepherds watch their flocks, see a shining star, and hear angels sing. The refrain connects the child's birth with lasting life, while the song imagines a world aglow with joy and hope for peace. Its later verses address God directly: the Son is sent to save humanity, free people from sin's enslavement, and let love reign. The carol's simplicity makes the manger scene accessible, yet it points beyond the birth itself to the saving mission of Mary's child.

Other Nativity carols keep the manger in view while letting the music reach toward the life that follows. The Catalan "The Son (Child) of the Mother," sometimes called "The Carol of the Gifts," asks what might be offered to Mary's child. Its repeated verses suggest modest provisions—raisins, figs, nuts, olives, honey, and curds—rather than treasures fit for a king. Yet the figs are not ripe. The song imagines they will mature by Easter, or at least by Palm

Sunday, linking the infant's birth to the final days of his life. The reference recalls Jesus' encounter with a barren fig tree during Holy Week, followed by his cleansing of the temple and challenge to its corrupt practices. In the carol's simple offerings, a Christmas gift becomes a signpost toward the Messiah's work, including his confrontation with injustice and the events of his Passion.

"As the Beautiful Virgin Cradled Her Son," an early eighteenth-century Polish carol, offers a quieter picture: Mary rocks her baby and sings. Its gentle "lili" refrain sounds like a lullaby, but the words widen beyond a mother's private tenderness. Mary calls the child a great Prince and heir of heaven, and invites all creation and the angels to sing to him. The carol holds together the familiar and the extraordinary: in Mary's arms is a small child, yet he is also the Lord. The song gives poetic voice to the mother treasuring what she has witnessed, without claiming that Scripture records these particular words.

Joseph Simpson Cook's "Gentle Mary Laid Her Child," written in 1919, begins with the striking contrast between a humble birth and the child's identity. Mary lays Jesus in a manger, where he is "to the world a stranger," and the first stanza asks whether such a baby in such a place can truly be the Savior. The question is answered by those who have found his favor. In the next stanza, the scene expands: angels announce his birth, shepherds hear them, and wise men seek and honor him. The carol brings these visitors together in one bright Christmas tableau, though the Gospel accounts do not say that the shepherds and Magi arrived at the same time. Its final stanza returns to Mary and the child, now seen not as a stranger but as the undefiled Son of God. Cook's familiar tune was originally associated with a spring carol and became widely known through "Good King Wenceslas." The humble manger remains central, but the song teaches listeners to see divine majesty in lowly circumstances.

John Rutter's "Christmas Lullaby" similarly contrasts the scene's quiet appearance with its cosmic meaning. The angels sing and the wise men have journeyed, yet in the stable, the song observes, only a mother and baby lie there. Its refrain turns to "Ave Maria," addressing Mary as both maiden and mother of Jesus the King. Rutter then asks where the king's courtiers are and why he has neither scepter nor crown. The answer is startlingly unlike earthly power: shepherds are his courtiers, the poor his people, peace his scepter, and love his crown. The song's royal language does not disguise the child's vulnerability; it reveals the kind of king he is, one who gives himself rather than taking from others. Its later verse imagines the Magi's gold and incense, but redirects attention from material offerings to hearts filled with love.

Amy Grant and Chris Eaton's "Christmas Lullaby (I Will Lead You Home)" turns the lullaby toward loneliness, displacement, and the promise of belonging. It asks whether someone far from home needs directions or simply a companion who will say, "Follow me." Jesus himself entered a life of uncertainty: his family traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, later fled to

Egypt, and eventually settled again in Nazareth. As an adult, he wandered without a permanent home. The song presents him as one who understands loneliness and can guide others through their own difficult paths. Its closing prayer borrows the familiar language of “Away in a Manger,” asking Jesus to stay near, care for children, and lead his people to heaven. The baby’s purpose, the lullaby insists, reaches beyond the stable to redemption and life with him.

The songs grouped under Mary’s joys make that reach explicit. Christmas cannot be separated from Easter: Jesus had to become human in order to face temptation and die, while his divine identity gives his death its saving power. “The Seven Joys of Mary” is one of many counting carols, and its verses trace a progression through Jesus’ life and ministry. Unlike the rosary’s traditional sequence of mysteries, the American version counts Mary’s joy in seeing her son born, heal the lame and blind, read Scripture, raise the dead, bear the cross, and finally wear heaven’s crown. English versions vary: some give Jesus’ childhood or his resurrection a place in the sequence, while the American version used here moves from his miracles to the cross and heavenly rule. Its recurring praise to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost frames Mary’s personal joys as part of a larger confession of faith.

The first joy is the sight of Jesus as her child. The next two recall signs of the Messiah: the lame walk and the blind see. When John the Baptist’s disciples ask whether Jesus is the one to come, Jesus points to these works, alongside healing and good news for the poor, as evidence. The verse about Jesus reading the Bible seems out of order, but it can recall his lifelong engagement with Scripture, especially his reading in Nazareth of Isaiah’s promise to bring good news and liberty. By declaring that the prophecy is fulfilled in him, Jesus begins his public ministry—and provokes anger from people who know him as the carpenter’s son. The fifth joy is his raising of the dead, including Lazarus. The sixth brings the carol into sorrow: Mary sees her son bear the cross. Simeon’s earlier warning that a sword would pierce her soul finds its painful fulfillment as Jesus dies for those who have rebelled against God. Yet the final joy does not end at the tomb. Jesus rises, ascends, and reigns; Mary’s grief is encompassed by the promise of his victory.

“Mary, Did You Know?” asks what the mother could foresee as she held her newborn. Its questions name the miracles and signs of Jesus’ ministry: he will walk on water, give sight to the blind, calm a storm, and bring the dead to life; the deaf will hear, the lame leap, and the mute praise the Lamb. The song also calls the child Lord of creation, ruler of nations, heaven’s perfect Lamb, and “the great I Am,” connecting him to the God who revealed himself to Moses. Mary had received extraordinary assurances from the angel, Elizabeth, and Simeon, but the carol wonders whether she could have understood the full course of the next thirty-three years. Its answer lies less in what Mary could know than in the mystery of the child himself: God uses an ordinary birth and a vulnerable human life to accomplish salvation. The songs do not all preserve the precise sequence or details of Scripture; their imaginative

scenes and questions help listeners picture Mary’s experience, while the Gospels anchor the story in Jesus’ teaching, healing, suffering, death, and risen life.

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