

mary in TRANSIT

DON BEMIS

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Books by Don Bemis



*Inspiring adventures
with a twist of folksy humor*



Mary in Transit



Count Otto's Dragon



Heavens to Louie

One



In the Empire of Rome, in the Kingdom of Judea, in the City of Jerusalem, in the Temple of the Most High God, in a room full of priests, in a bowl on a table, was a ball of baked clay. It lay among numerous others, identical except for the names embossed into their surfaces. A hand reached into the bowl and swirled its contents. Two fingers and a thumb closed upon the ball and drew it out. The eyes of a seated priest read the name and scanned the assemblage.

“Zechariah.”

Two men stood up. One was barely twenty. An excited smile parted sparse whiskers that would eventually become a beard. To be selected the first time he came was almost too much to hope for. The priest who had called out the name inspected the young man’s face, then the ball, and the face again.

“This is an old one. Sorry.”

The disappointed young priest sat back down. The other man remained standing. Below a head cover grown thin from many launderings, above a grizzled beard, and framed by gray earlocks, a pair of eyes shone back from a wrinkled face.

Old Zechariah had wondered if he would ever be called again. He was pushing fifty, the age at which priests were retired. His group, the Abijah division, reported to Jerusalem twice a year for one week of Temple service. Even after a priest arrived, he would have no idea what he would be doing. Tasks were assigned by lottery because there were more priests than

special duties. Surplus priests might find themselves inspecting cattle, slitting sheeps' throats, or gutting goats all day.

Incense duty was a prize, highly visible but not difficult. Twice a day, a priest would enter the Temple to burn incense at a special altar, and he would pronounce a blessing on all the people as soon as he exited through the great doorway. Priests told horror stories among themselves about colleagues who had forgotten the words of the blessing, stumbled over the edges of their robes, died in the portico, or otherwise humiliated themselves and (if it were possible) their God. Older priests especially relished telling the stories to newer ones.

The time came for the evening incense offering. Crowds watched and waited in the courtyards of the enormous building. Even though the Temple complex was far from completion, the setting already was impressive. Some people came out of devotion, some for the spectacle.

Zechariah had been a part of the spectacle twice a year for thirty years, but he still was awed. He straightened his vestments, took the unburned incense issued to him along with a glowing coal from the main altar, and stepped through the entrance. There was no door, just a maze of heavy draperies to separate the inside from the outside. The curtains were spaced far enough apart that a careful priest would not accidentally set them afire with his coal.

Beyond the curtains, the only light would be from seven yellow flames atop a golden menorah. The burning incense would not substantially add to the light. God Himself had ordained the formula for the incense. He had designed it to smoke, not burst into flame. Priests who had previously been assigned duties inside the Holy Place all commented about the inability of the menorah to adequately illuminate the vast hall.

Zechariah was accompanied only by the tinkling of bells sewn to the hem of his robe. The draperies increasingly muffled the sounds of the outside world as he wound his way inward.

Soon he would be alone in the Holy Place. One curtain at the back of that hall would ultimately separate him from the Holiest Place, empty except for the presence of the God of the Universe.

The old priest secretly wondered if God was especially present there, given the fact that the Herod who built the Temple had so little use for Him. No heavenly fire or celestial voice had congratulated the king at the dedication of the new building. Maybe God had preferred its predecessor, five centuries old, built by grateful Jews after their return from exile.

Zechariah still remembered the wrench in his gut fifteen years earlier when the solid, square form of the old Temple had dissolved into a pile of rocks, and the sun intruded into places that had not seen the light of day for half a millennium. He himself had been a part of the destruction, as well as a participant in the construction of the new Temple that replaced it. Over a thousand priests, including a then younger and stronger Zechariah, had done all the work. Now the building was young and he was old, alone with his thoughts.

His next thought was that those other priests had exaggerated. Light from inside the Temple clearly illuminated the path between the last two rows of draperies. Maybe his eyes were adjusting to the darkness. Oddly, though, it was a steady white glow, not the yellow flicker of oil lamps. Zechariah's coal, which had glowed so orange only a few seconds earlier, took on the gray appearance of embers in daylight.

Finally the Holy Place began to be visible through the opening at the end of the fabric passage. Beautifully finished wood-paneled walls reached all the way to a lofty and equally dazzling ceiling. There was no darkness. It was not at all what he had imagined, stepping from the curtains into the room.

Not at all, indeed.

He was not alone! There, by the incense altar, stood a

person who obviously was not a priest, nor even human. No man would outshine seven lamps as this person did.

An angel! Zechariah thought with terror. *What could this mean?*

“Don’t be afraid, Zechariah,” the angel soothed. But it was not especially soothing. “Your prayers have been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will have a son.”

Zechariah was stunned. He had quit praying that prayer several years earlier. He barely heard the next part of the promise: that the boy—already named John—would delight his parents, the world, and the Lord. Zechariah did hear the warning that the boy would be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from birth. That would complicate meal arrangements. Anything that had ever been a grape would be off his menu. The part about him coming in the spirit and power of Elijah was too much to comprehend. Prophecies and angelic visits had ended centuries earlier.

Zechariah shook his head. “How can this be? My wife and I are both too old for such a thing to happen.”

The angel did not agree. “I am Gabriel,” he answered...as if that explained everything. “Now, because you won’t believe what God has sent me to tell you, you will be speechless until it happens.”

Zechariah opened his mouth to protest, but it was too late. Not a word came out.



Outside the Temple, people were getting restless. Incense usually didn’t take that long to offer. The priest already should have pronounced the blessing, but he was still inside.

“Do you suppose he died?” some asked.

“He looked pretty old,” others agreed.

Finally small bells could be heard again. The draperies

moved. The priest apparently had not died. If the volume of the jangling meant anything, he was indeed more vigorous than most. Dwarfed by the great doorway, he tottered out, his eyes wide with shock, and his body trembling violently. His mouth hung open above a quivering beard.

A murmur arose from the front of the crowd. Zechariah raised his shaking hand and they quieted. He opened his mouth.

Silence.

His lips moved. Still there was silence.

“Do you think he’ll last long enough for the blessing?” one man whispered to his neighbor.

A pair of priests detached themselves from a clump of their colleagues and ran to Zechariah’s assistance. “What’s the problem?” they demanded in low voices.

The murmur of the audience increased to a buzz.

Zechariah tried vainly to speak. Then he turned and pointed a wavering arm toward the Temple. He looked up at the sky, waved both hands at the heavens, and finally pointed at himself.

More priests, lured by the pantomime, joined the ecclesiastical cluster.

“A vision?” one asked.

He nodded vigorously.

“Of what?”

He again tried to speak, with the same lack of results.

The impromptu conclave drafted a priest with a voice to pronounce the blessing, and they hustled Zechariah away from the excited crowd.

“Another horror story for the new priests,” commented one rabbi to another.

“For old ones too, I suppose.”



Zechariah remained speechless and trembling for the remaining few days of service. He tried to relate his experience with pen and ink, but his handwriting, already unsteady from age, was illegible.

Finally his term was through for the last time. It was an odd trip back home to the hills. His birthday wasn't to come for a few more weeks, but he was as good as retired. For three days he traveled in silence, alone with his thoughts and unable to communicate with anybody else on the road.

"Some sort of vow?" some wondered.

"Unfriendly," observed others.

Zechariah's trembling slowly subsided as he adjusted to his new situation.

Finally he came within sight of home. Elizabeth's back was to him as she raked their empty garden. She had pulled up the last of the vegetables while he was gone, and now, to keep herself occupied in her husband's absence, she was preparing the plot for winter. She was old, and he was old, but their love for each other would last as long as either of them was alive.

If she raked the ground any smoother, thought Zechariah, *it would reflect.* He stooped slowly to pick up a pebble, straightened as much as his back would let him, and tossed the stone into the middle of the garden.

A puff of dust and a tiny crater marred his wife's work. She whirled around, dropped the rake, and hurried to hug him. "So, my man, gone two weeks, what do you have to say for yourself?" she teased.

He did not reply. His lips moved, but that was all.

Elizabeth went pale. "Are you all right? No, not a stroke! Come in. Lie down." Her arm dropped to his waist, and she tugged him toward the house.

Zechariah shook his head violently. He pulled himself free and scrawled in the dust with the end of his staff:

VISION

She gaped. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. Then he scratched again in the dirt:

BABY

She hustled him to the garden. Tapping the smooth earth with his stick, she ordered, "Tell me more."

Two



“**M**ary, come here.”

Mary heaved one last time, straightened up, and turned. Little brother Avram, four years old, had watched her curiously, but now that she again was erect, she no longer was interesting. He resumed his play below the side window. She entered the house.

Mary had known the summons would eventually come. Her mother watched all of her children closely and was not one to argue with. Neither was her father, for that matter. He fiercely loved his daughters. Nazareth was too full of temptations to let one's children run unsupervised.

“Sit.” Her mother pointed at a bench. “The trial seat,” the children called it.

“Yes, Mama.” Mary sat.

Her mother remained standing, her eyes boring into the top of her daughter's head. “Is there something you should tell me?” Mama's voice was not as steady as usual.

There was, but Mary couldn't. “I don't understand.”

“I think you do.” Mama sighed and sat next to her daughter. “Mary, some things you can't hide from a mama. Every morning for a week you have been sick, and then you get better by afternoon. Just as I did six times when I carried you and your brothers and your sisters. And two other times.” She paused. “*Now* is there something you should tell me?”

“Yes, but...”

“That's enough.” Mama was silent for a moment. But she

was a mama. As soon as the truth was out, she instinctively began to protect her daughter. “I had thought better of Joseph,” she muttered.

Mama might be a mama, but Mary was in love. “No, Mama, it wasn’t Jo—” she blurted and covered her mouth.

It was too late. “MARY!” Mama wailed. “You’re having somebody *else’s* baby?”



Avram listened wide-eyed outside the window. Then he saw old Rivka toddling down the street. Rivka was nice. She gave him sweets when he told her things.

He abandoned his post. “Rivka, Rivka, Mary threw up!”

“Oh, dear. A drunkard already?”

“She’s gonna have a baby!”

Rivka’s hand went to her mouth. “But she—oh, my!”

Avram’s shining eyes watched her hopefully. He licked his lips. She reached into her shawl and pulled out a fig. He grinned, took the prize, and ran back to the window. Rivka hobbled after him.



Meanwhile, Papa had been standing outside the front door. He stormed inside just as Avram scooted toward the road.

“Who was it?” Papa demanded. “I’ll have him stoned!”

“Eli!” Mama leapt up between her daughter and husband. “What do you mean listening?”

“Is this not my daughter too we’re talking about?”

“But you *knew*? How would you—”

Papa exhaled. “So, Hannah, because I’m a man I cannot tell? You think I don’t hear Mary running out the door every morning just as you did so many times? The days I got less

breakfast because you weren't hungry? Then by the time supper came you had eaten two days' food?"

Mama's head swiveled toward her daughter. "Men see with their stomachs."

Papa snorted. "So who's the father? The one I should stone?"

"Enough talk of stoning already," Mama interjected. "Who else would be stoned?"

Papa's eyes grew wide. Not his child! "Then who owes the bride price?"



Mary paused. This would be the second hardest part. The hardest was yet to come.

"Nobody."

"You don't *KNOW*?" Mama shrieked.

Papa took his wife's arm. "Were you attacked, child?"

"No. I agreed."

Mama groaned.

I've put my foot in it again. Mary tried to repair the damage. "But He isn't, wasn't..."

"Just nobody. Of course." Papa shook his head. "So who is this nobody?"

Another pause, and then a deep breath. "The Holy Spirit."

Her father blanched. "First I learn my baby is with child. Then she tells me she's a harlot. And now I find she's a blasphemer."

She jumped up. "No, Papa, it's true!"

"That you blaspheme?" He leaned against the wall. "Finally you tell the truth. For *that* you could be stoned." His eyes filled with tears.

Mary turned white. She had never seen him cry. "Papa?"

"Get out."

“But—”

“I can do nothing for you now. I heard none of this,” he snuffled. “Just leave!”

Mary wailed. The littlest sister in the corner howled.

“But if you will be a prostitute and a blasphemer, be a thief also,” Mama said in a broken voice. “There are coins and bread on the table. Steal what you need and go!”



Outside the window, Avram’s lip trembled. Mary was his favorite sister. He began to moan. Suddenly he felt Rivka’s gnarled hand across his mouth.

“Shh, shh!” she whispered urgently. “They’ll think we’re snooping.”

The crying occupants inside the little house did not hear. Mary piled a few clothes onto a shawl. Her mother wrapped coins in a napkin. Papa threw a loaf of bread and a half-empty wineskin onto the pile. Then he bundled it up, pushed it into Mary’s arms, and thrust her out the door.

“Go!” he sobbed. “Let your Nobody care for you!”

Avram struggled to follow, but Rivka’s grip was tight. “No, little one. Run inside, but say nothing about me, or no more figs for you!”

She released him, and he shot howling for the door. Rivka straightened up as much as she could and shuffled down the street. Mary had gone the same direction.



Joseph was a builder. His father Jacob had taught him well in a short time, and he already owned a good reputation. Whatever one wanted, he could make. Galilee was a stony land where trees struggled to survive, which meant that good masonry was

highly valued. Joseph could build a wall solid and square. Carpentry turned scarce wood into things useful and beautiful, and Joseph could do both. The little wood scraps that were left, and the branches too small or gnarled to be of use, were not wasted either. They were used for cooking fuel.

Joseph would work on several projects at once. He might build a wall and, while the plaster dried, repair a broken table in its shade. While laying a herringbone roof for one customer, he might find just the stick to turn into an axe handle for another. People trusted him to do good work and treat them fairly. For all that, though, he was not wealthy. Poor customers paid poorly. Rich customers were not much better. Besides, Joseph had his own expenses. Food and tools were important, but not as important as his special project. After working on other people's homes all day, he would spend the evenings building his own. It was getting close to completion.

He could have stayed in his parents' house attached to the shop, or was the shop attached to the house? There was little difference in a home business. His new house, in fact, shared a wall with the opposite side of the shop. Until the new structure was completed, Joseph would continue to sleep on a pallet in the same place where he and his brother had slept as children before his brother contracted lockjaw. Lumber was stacked in the corner where his mother had died from childbed fever. Baby sister had survived only a few days longer, in a cradle in the opposite corner where saws and axes now leaned against the wall. Hand tools rested on the table where his father's body had rested only a few months before.

Joseph had accompanied his father to look into a prospective customer's home addition project, and he had helped to carry his father home afterward....



“While you’re at it, maybe you can help me with another little problem. Do you see this?” the customer asked, pointing at a streak of dust on the floor. “Every time I come down from the roof, there is more dirt.”

Jacob looked down, then up. “In line with this beam,” he observed. He inspected the timber a few inches overhead. “Shaul, how long has this crack been here?”

“What crack?”

The older builder pointed to a honey-colored streak in the soot-blackened beam. It started at the bottom, meandered upward with the grain, and tapered to a point about two feet away.

“That’s odd. I never noticed.”

“Let’s take a look at your roof,” Joseph suggested.

“Good. That’s where I want the new room.”

The two of them started up the outside stairway. Jacob remained below, studying the crack.

Joseph shook his head. “With that problem down there, I don’t—” He stopped midsentence as the roof came into view. “What’s all that?”

“Rocks. Lumber. I’ve been collecting them for the project. Thieves won’t find them up here.” Shaul started for the pile.

“Shaul, you can’t keep it all on the roof. It isn’t strong enough.” Joseph went no farther than the top of the stairway.

“Of course it is! You just want more of my money. Forget it. Solid as a rock.” Shaul jumped up and down. “See?”

A jumble of noise and dust followed. First was a loud crack! below their feet, immediately followed by a surprised shout from inside the house, and then the hollow rumble of stone and wood disappearing into a long black gap.

Shaul scrambled for the stairway, but not quickly enough. Tan clouds of dust boiled upward from the void and outward through the door and window openings below. The next sounds were more confused: Shaul coughing as he stumbled out the

doorway, Joseph screaming “PAPA!” while pelting down the steps and into the house, and startled neighbors running toward the scene.

Then it was quiet. Too quiet. A dusty sunbeam intruded through the roof and illuminated an arm protruding from the silent pile of rubble.

The silence was short-lived. Weeping, Joseph flung debris to the side, and more tumbled in. Neighbors shouted to each other outside. Would-be rescuers grunted while trying to raise the fallen beam.

“My house, my house!” Shaul wailed in the yard....



That memory did not fully explain why Joseph was ready to move. As soon as the new house was done, he would gather his friends and send them by torchlight to Eli’s home. They would collect Eli’s family and friends, and they all would feast. Then he would take Mary, his bride, into their new home. Everybody else could feast and sing the night away for all he cared.

He was plastering the roof of his project when a familiar figure came slowly down the street, carrying a bundle. He hurried down the steps. “You brought me dinner, I see,” he called. “And so much of it!”

Then as Mary drew closer, his face fell. Her eyes were red. She snuffled. “Joseph, I need to talk to you.”

Something was wrong. “What is it?”

She looked around. “Alone.”

“But what—people may think—”

As if it matters. But it did.

“Please?”

A movement caught Joseph’s eye. Old Rivka was tottering up the street. Nosy old Rivka. She would talk if she heard them, and she would talk if she didn’t. It didn’t matter, then. Let her

talk, but not just about Mary. “Come in.” He pulled the door open.

Mary hesitated before entering. She looked around. “So this would be my house?”

Why did she not say, “So this will be my house?” Joseph was alarmed. “*Our* house.” He gestured toward a bench. “Please sit there. It’s almost clean.” A shuffling noise came through the window. “But wait. I’d hate for you to trip over that pail of whitewash. And the outside wall needs a bit more paint.”

He dumped the pail through the window, making as wide a swath as possible. A screech ensued, followed by footsteps pattering toward the street.

“Poor Rivka.” Joseph shook his head. “Her nice black robe is all stained, and so is she. And she can’t tell anyone how it happened. They might think she was snooping.” He sat on a pile of stones a few feet away from the bench. Rivka or no Rivka, he intended to behave.

Mary smiled a bit, seated herself, and set the bundle at her feet. Joseph also smiled. *She’s almost as beautiful there as I had imagined. Now when everything is finished...*

But Mary’s smile vanished. Her worried look pulled him back into the present. “Joseph, I’m scared. I need you to listen to everything I have to tell you. You may not believe it, but it’s all true. Then you can say whatever you want.”

“Of course I’ll believe you.” He was trembling.

“Listen first. Then decide.” She stopped, took a deep breath, and plunged on. “I’m pregnant.”

His mouth went dry. “But—”

“No, please,” she pleaded. “Let me tell you everything.”

“I don’t *want* to know everything!”

“If you ever loved me, listen for my sake.”

The room was terribly still. “Then talk.”

“I saw an angel. Gabriel. He told me I was highly favored by God. *Am I about to die?* I wondered. But then he told me I

would conceive the son of the Most High, but not by man. The Holy Spirit would make it happen. He also said that would not be the only strange thing. I have an old relative named Elizabeth. I don't even know quite how we're related, but she's nearly fifty and never could have children. Gabriel said she is six months pregnant already."

"By the Holy Spirit also?"

"He didn't say, but I suppose by her husband."

Joseph was silent for nearly a minute, staring at his sandals. "Well. Is there more?"

"I don't think so."

His head lifted, and he looked straight at her. "Mary, I love you. Loved you. Since our parents sealed their agreement, I have lived for the day you would be my wife. And now you're pregnant, but not by me, and you expect me to believe that...that *story*? Do you really think I'm that stupid?"

"But it's true!"

"Enough!" he yelled. "Your lying about it is the worst. I could maybe love you even if you carried another man's child, but to live with such a liar would be impossible!"

"Then you too would have me stoned, I suppose." Her voice was flat.

Joseph stopped. As the aggrieved party, he and one other person, probably her father, would be expected to take her to the top of the cliff at the edge of Nazareth, where they would strip her naked. Thus would she be displayed as a harlot, exposing to the whole town that which should have been hidden from all but her husband.

Then the two of them would push her over the edge. They would hike down the trail, followed by anybody else who chose to come. Joseph and Eli would find the largest boulder they could lift, and they would drop it onto the chest of the girl they both had loved. Nobody would be closer to hear the air screaming through her larynx and out her mouth, immediately

followed by a spray of blood from her smashed heart and lungs. Afterward, the waiting spectators would have their own opportunity to pelt the wreckage that had been Mary and the baby within her.

Joseph had seen a stoning, but only from the top of the cliff. That was close enough. Rivka also had watched that time. She said she would have liked to be closer, but her old knees were not suited to the steep path. She would do the same for Mary as she had for the other, telling everybody for the next month that she had seen it coming.

Joseph buried his face in his hands. “No, I can’t do that. Just go away!”

He heard Mary stand up. She picked up her bundle and left. The door thumped shut, and the sound of fading footsteps came in through the window.

Joseph did not move.

A few minutes later he lifted his head. His eyes were red, his hands wet with tears. He arose from the pile of stones and approached the bench where Mary had sat. It was to be a beautiful piece of furniture, a special gift for his bride. He ran his hand across it. Smooth and warm.

He straightened and returned to the rock pile. These were leftovers, not needed after all for the walls of a house that would be his alone. He had intended to haul them outside the next day. One particularly large stone caught his eye. Hoisting it from the pile, Joseph shuffled back to the bench. Grunting, he lifted the stone as high as he could and smashed it downward. The wooden seat split in two, cradling the rock that had destroyed it.

“NO-O-O!” Joseph wailed.

Dragging the shattered pieces from beneath the rock, he fitted their broken ends together. A few parts were still missing, trapped between the stone and the floor. He rolled the stone aside and searched for every fragment. The bench was not

beyond repair, even if it would never be quite the same.

He went into the old house and looked over the lumber stacked where his mother had died. A bit of wood, some glue, and a few pegs, and he could make it look like he had never meant it to be any other way. That was the mark of a carpenter.



There was only one place Mary might go. Her bundle, although fairly light, would be too bulky to carry all the way in her arms. Mama had said to steal what she needed, and Papa had helped her to do it. They had not given her much: her own clothes, a loaf of bread, a bit of wine, and some coins. Every coin, though, was that much food they could not buy for themselves. Mama and Papa had done all they felt they could for the daughter they no longer claimed. But Mary needed to steal one more thing.

She took a side path to the house that had been her home. Nobody was in sight. She stole into the stable where Sari stood in the stall, looking as bored as only a donkey could look, half-heartedly swatting at flies with her tail. Mary took the halter rope and started to open the gate.

“Mary?”

She spun around. Avram was crouched in the corner, with grimy tear streaks on his face and a kitten clutched to his chest. Mary might never see him again. Dropping the rope, she crouched in the muck and hugged her little brother. The kitten mewed between them.

“Can I see the baby?” Avram snuffled.

She jolted. How had he known? “Not yet.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not big enough. But I’ll bring it for you to see when it is.” She hoped she was not lying.

“Where are you going?”

“Away.” She gave him one last squeeze and stood up.

Taking the rope again, she led Sari into the sunlight and onto the side path....

For more of the story, read on...

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About the Author



DON BEMIS was born, educated, and married in New Mexico. In 1979, he and his wife, Lois, moved themselves, two children, and a pair of cats to Michigan.

Since that time they have added three children and hosted several generations of cats. Don works in engineering and plays in music, woodworking, and writing. He teaches adult Sunday school, preaches on occasion (usually in the county jail, but not as a resident), and is on the South Haven City Council.

His debut novel, *Heavens to Louie*, began as a dream that became a short story. He is threatening to write a sequel.

Count Otto's Dragon originated as a deliberately wretched opening sentence for submittal to the Bulwer-Lytton competition for deliberately wretched opening sentences, but it was never submitted and has since been made less wretched.

Both times, Lois told him, "Now turn it into a book."

Mary in Transit is the author's first stab at historical fiction. It was conceived as an essay, gestated as a sermon, and born as a novel before Lois could say anything. If you don't like the latest book, don't blame Lois. If you do like it, she critiqued it just like the others.

Don and Lois have five adult children and two grandchildren.

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