

Theotokos

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Theotokos (Greek: Θεοτόκος, translit. Theotókos) is the Greek title of Mary, the mother of Jesus used especially in the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Eastern Catholic Churches. Its literal English translations include *God-bearer* and *the one who gives birth to God*. Less literal translations include **Mother of God**. Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and some Protestants use the title Mother of God more often than Theotokos. The Council of Ephesus decreed in 431 that Mary is Theotokos because her son Jesus is one person who is both God and man, divine and human.^[1]

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An 18th-century Russian icon depicting various types of the Theotokos icons

Etymology and translation

Theotokos is a compound of two Greek words, Θεός *God* and τόκος *parturition, childbirth*. Literally, this translates as *God-bearer* or *the one who gives birth to God*. However, since many English-speaking Orthodox find this literal translation awkward, in liturgical use, *Theotokos* is often left untranslated, or paraphrased as *Mother of God*. The latter title is the literal translation of a distinct title in Greek, Μήτηρ του Θεού (translit. *Mētēr tou Theou*). *Mother of God* also accurately translates the Greek words Θεομήτωρ (translit. *Theomētōr*; also spelled Θεομήτηρ, translit. *Theomētēr*) and Μητρόθεος (translit. *Mētrotheos*), which are found in patristic and liturgical texts, e.g.

Λαβομένη η **Θεοτόκος** των εκ του αχράντου και παναμώμου αυτής θυσιαστηρίου σαρκωθέντα ζωποιόν και ανέκφραστον άνθρακα ως λαβίδι ... επί τούτοις παρουσιασάμενος ο δίκαιος και τη προτροπή είξας της διακονησαμένης Θεώ προς ανθρώπους **Θεομήτορος** ... περιφανώς ιερά **Θεομήτωρ** εξετέλει.^[2]

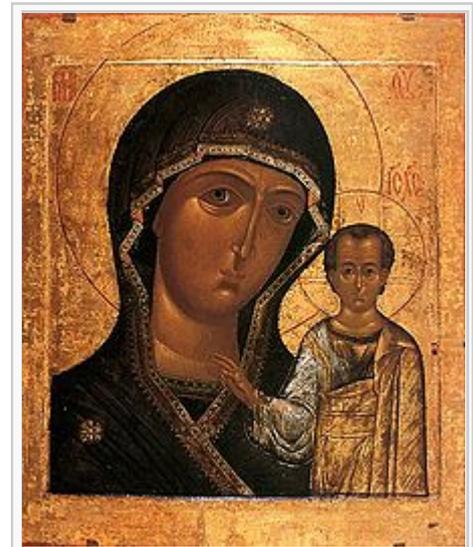
In many traditions, *Theotokos* was translated from the Greek into the local liturgical language:

Language	Translation(s)	Transliteration
Arabic	والدة الاله	<i>Wālidat Alelah</i>
Armenian	Աստուածածին	<i>Astvadzatzin</i>
Church Slavonic and Russian	Богородица	<i>Bogoroditsa</i>
Coptic	Ⲛⲉⲟⲩⲟⲕⲟⲥ	<i>Ti.Theotokós</i>
Georgian	ღვთისმშობელი	<i>Ghwtismshobeli</i>
Latin	<i>Deipara</i> <i>Dei genetrix</i> <i>Mater Dei</i> *	
Romanian	<i>Născătoare de Dumnezeu</i> <i>Maica Domnului</i>	
Serbian	Богородица / Bogorodica Мажка Божија / Majka Božija	<i>Bogoroditza</i> <i>Mayka Bozhia</i>
Ukrainian	Богородиця Мати Божа	<i>Bohorodytsia</i> <i>Maty Bozha</i>

^* Translation of the phrase *mother of God*

Mother of God

The English term *Mother of God* is mostly used as an imprecise translation of *Theotokos*, and frequently requires explanation.^[3] The other principal use of *Mother of God* has been as the precise and literal translation of *Μήτηρ Θεού*, a Greek term which has an established usage of its own in traditional Christian theological writing, hymnography, and iconography. In an abbreviated form *MP ΘΥ* it often is found on Orthodox icons (see illustration above), where it is used to identify Mary.



Theotokos of Kazan

A hymn normally sung as part of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom includes both titles in close proximity, in both cases referring to Mary, showing that the titles are not synonymous: "It is truly fitting to call you blessed, the *Theotokos*, ever-blessed and wholly pure and the *Mother of our God* (Ἄξιόν ἐστιν ὡς ἀληθῶς μακαρίζειν σὲ τὴν **Θεοτόκου**, τὴν ἀειμακάριστον καὶ παναμώμητον καὶ **μητέρα του Θεοῦ ἡμῶν...**", emphasis added.) The difference between the two terms is that the former, *Theotokos* explicitly refers to physical childbearing, while the latter, *Mother of God*, describes a family relationship but not necessarily physical childbearing.

Within the Christian tradition, *Mother of God* has **not** been understood, nor been intended to be understood, as referring to Mary as Mother of God *from eternity* — that is, as Mother of God the Father — but only with reference to the birth of Jesus, that is, the Incarnation. This limitation in the meaning of *Mother of God* must be understood by the person employing the term. To make it explicit, it is sometimes translated *Mother of God Incarnate* ^[4].

However, those reading or hearing the English phrase *Mother of God* as a translation of a Greek text cannot — unless they know the Greek text in question, or obtain additional information — know whether the phrase is a literal translation of *Μήτηρ Θεού* or an imprecise rendering of *Θεοτόκος* or one its Latin equivalents or equivalents in other languages.

In their use of the term Mother of God, Catholic and Orthodox Christians follow the example of Elizabeth, who in Luke 1:43

(<http://www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=Luke%201:43;&version=KJV;>) greets the Virgin Mary as the "mother of my Lord".

Theology

Theotokos specifically excludes the understanding of Mary as Mother of God in the eternal sense. Christians believe that God is the cause of all, with neither origin nor source, and is therefore "without a mother." This stands in contrast to classical Greco-Roman religion in particular, where a number of divine female figures appear as "mothers" of other divinities, demi-gods, or heroes. For example, Juno was revered as the mother of Vulcan; Aphrodite, as the mother of Aeneas.

On the other hand, most Christians believe God the Son is begotten of God the Father "from all eternity" (see Trinity and Nicene Creed), but is born "in time" of Mary. *Theotokos* thus refers to the Incarnation, when the Second Person of the Holy Trinity took on human nature in addition to his pre-existing divine nature, this being made possible through the cooperation of Mary.

Since mainstream Christians understand Jesus Christ as both fully God and fully human, they call Mary *Theotokos* to affirm the fullness of God's incarnation. The Council of Ephesus decreed, in opposition to those who denied Mary the title *Theotokos* ("the one who gives birth to God") but called her *Christotokos* ("the one who gives birth to Christ"), that Mary *is Theotokos* because her son Jesus is one person who is both God and man, divine and human. (Some Protestants still insist that Mary cannot be truly *Theotokos*, but only *Christotokos*.^{[5][6]}) Cyril of Alexandria wrote, "I am amazed that there are some who are entirely in doubt as to whether the holy Virgin should be called *Theotokos* or not. For if our Lord Jesus Christ is God, how is the holy Virgin who gave [Him] birth, not [*Theotokos*]?" (Epistle 1, to the monks of Egypt; PG 77:13B). Thus the significance of *Theotokos* lies more in what it says about Jesus than any declaration about Mary.

Within the Orthodox doctrinal teaching on the economy of salvation, Mary's identity, role, and status as *Theotokos* is acknowledged as indispensable, and is for this reason formally defined as official dogma. The only other Mariological teaching so defined is that of her virginity. Both of these

Key articles on Mariology



General perspective

Mother of Jesus

Specific views

Anglican • **Eastern Orthodox** • Marian veneration • Muslim • Protestant • Roman Catholic

Key prayers & devotions

Angelus • Hail Mary • Rosary

Ecumenical

Ecumenical views

teachings have a bearing on the identity of Jesus Christ. By contrast, certain other Marian beliefs which do not bear directly on the doctrine concerning the person of Jesus (for example, her sinlessness, the circumstances surrounding her conception and birth, her Presentation in the Temple, her continuing virginity following the birth of Jesus, and her death), which are taught and believed by the Orthodox Church (being expressed in the Church's liturgy and patristic writings), are nonetheless not formally defined by the Church, and belief in them is not a precondition for baptism.
[citation needed]

Use of *Theotokos* in the early Christian Church

Many Fathers of the early Christian Church used the title *Theotokos* for Mary since at least the third century AD.

Origen (d. 254) is often cited as the earliest author to use *Theotokos* for Mary (Socrates, Ecclesiastical History 7.32 citing Origen's Commentary on Romans) but the text upon which this assertion is based may not be genuine.

Dionysios of Alexandria used *Theotokos* in about 250, in an epistle to Paul of Samosata.

Athanasius of Alexandria in 330, Gregory the Theologian in 370, John Chrysostom in 400, and Augustine all used *Theotokos*.

Theodoret wrote in 436 that calling the Virgin Mary *Theotokos* is an apostolic tradition.

Third Ecumenical Council



Stained glass window of the Theotokos at the Annunciation Melkite Catholic Cathedral. The Greek letters **MP** and **ΘΥ** appearing on either side of her are abbreviations for the term "**Μ**ήτηρ του **Θ**εού" (*Mētēr tou Theou*, "Mother of God"), consisting of the initial and final letters of each word; the addition of these is a common practise in Eastern Orthodox iconography when depicting her.

The use of *Theotokos* was formally affirmed at the Third Ecumenical Council held at Ephesus in 431. The competing view, advocated by Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople, was that Mary should be called *Christotokos*, meaning "Birth-giver of Christ," to restrict her role to the mother of Christ's humanity only and not his divine nature.

Nestorius' opponents, led by Cyril of Alexandria, viewed this as dividing Jesus into two distinct persons, the human who was Son of Mary, and the divine who was not. To them, this was unacceptable since by destroying the perfect union of the divine and human natures in Christ, it sabotaged the fullness of the Incarnation and, by extension, the salvation of humanity. The council accepted Cyril's reasoning, affirmed the title *Theotokos* for Mary, and anathematised Nestorius' view as heresy. (See Nestorianism)

In letters to Nestorius which were afterwards included among the council documents, Cyril explained his doctrine. He noted that "the holy fathers... have ventured to call the holy Virgin [*T*]heotokos, not as though the nature of the [*W*]ord or his divinity received the beginning of their existence from the holy Virgin, but because from her was born his holy body, rationally endowed with a soul, with which [*b*ody] the [*W*]ord was united according to the hypostasis, and is said to have been begotten according to the flesh" (Cyril's second letter to

Nestorius).

Explaining his rejection of Nestorius' preferred title for Mary (*Christotokos*), Cyril wrote: "Confessing the Word to be united with the flesh according to the hypostasis, we worship one Son and Lord, Jesus Christ. We do not divide him into parts and separate man and God as though they were united with each other [only] through a unity of dignity and authority... nor do we name separately Christ the Word from God, and in similar fashion, separately, another Christ from the woman, but we know only one Christ, the Word from God the Father with his own flesh... But we do not say that the Word from God dwelt as in an ordinary human born of the holy virgin... we understand that, when he became flesh, not in the same way as he is said to dwell among

the saints do we distinguish the manner of the indwelling; but he was united by nature and not turned into flesh... There is, then, one Christ and Son and Lord, not with the sort of conjunction that a human being might have with God as in a unity of dignity or authority; for equality of honor does not unite natures. For Peter and John were equal to each other in honor, both of them being apostles and holy disciples, but the two were not one. Nor do we understand the manner of conjunction to be one of juxtaposition, for this is insufficient in regard to natural union.... Rather we reject the term 'conjunction' as being inadequate to express the union... [T]he holy virgin gave birth in the flesh to God united with the flesh according to hypostasis, for that reason we call her *Theotokos*... If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is, in truth, God, and therefore that the holy virgin is *Theotokos* (for she bore in a fleshly manner the Word from God become flesh), let him be anathema." (Cyril's third letter to Nestorius)

Hymns

Mary is very frequently addressed as *Theotokos* in the hymns of the Eastern Orthodox, Eastern Catholic and Oriental Orthodox churches. The most common is *Axion Estin* (*It is truly meet*), which is used in nearly every service.

Other examples include *Beneath thy compassion* dating from the third century, the *Hail Mary* in its Eastern form, and *All creation rejoices*, which replaces *Axion Estin* at the Divine Liturgy on the Sundays of Great Lent.

Solemnity

Main article: Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God

In the Roman Catholic Church, the solemnity of Mary as Mother of God (*Theotokos*) is celebrated on 1 January, on the same day as the Octave of Christmas. Her maternity was celebrated on 11 October in pre-1970 versions of the General Roman Calendar, which some traditional Catholics still observe.

This solemnity comes from around 500 AD and was originally celebrated in the Eastern Churches.

Icons



Theotokos of Vladimir



Theotokos Panachranta, illumination from the Gertrude Psalter.



Mother of God, mosaic icon, Hagia Sophia



Theotokos of St. Theodore



The Iveron Theotokos (Iverskaya), an 11th century Russian icon based on the 10th-century *Hodegetria* type, Iveron Monastery, Mount Athos.



Theotokos Panachranta from Svensky Monastery, by St. Alypius of Kiev



mosaic (ca 1130), Gelati Monastery, Georgia



Blachernaen Icon of the Theotokos

Notes

1. ^ The Canons of the Two Hundred Holy and Blessed Fathers Who Met at Ephesus (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf214.x.xvi.i.html>)
2. ^ Methodius of Patra, *Speech on Symeon and the Holy Theotokos*
3. ^ For example [1] (http://www.catholic.com/library/Mary_Mother_of_God.asp) , [2] (<http://www.ewtn.com/faith/teachings/maryc1.htm>) and [3] (<http://socrates58.blogspot.com/2006/08/mother-of-god-theotokos-does-this.html>)
4. ^ "We recognize the Blessed Virgin Mary as the Theotókos, the mother of God incarnate, and so observe her festivals and accord her honour among the

saints." *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC II)

5. ^ <http://www.be-ready.org/cult.html>
6. ^ <http://www.godondeathrow.com/subpage3.html>

See also

- Agni Parthene
- Blessed Virgin Mary
- Sophiology
- Holy Wisdom
- Christology
- Panagia
- Dormition of the Theotokos
- Anthropolitokos
- Frithjof Schuon
- Mary in Islam

References

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- Saint John of Shanghai and San Francisco, ""The Orthodox Veneration of Mary, The Birth Giver of God""(2004, Sixth Printing, Third Edition). ISBN 0-938635-68-9
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External links

- Theotokos article (<http://www.orthodoxwiki.org/Theotokos>) on the *Orthodox Wiki* (<http://www.orthodoxwiki.org/>)
- Resources on the Theotokos (<http://www.anchorite.org/blog/2007/08/06/resources-on-the-theotokos/>)
- Study of the Mother of the Lord the All-Holly Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary (<http://www.i-m-patron.gr/agiosnektarios/keimeno5.htm>) by St. Nectarios (in Greek)
- Icons of Theotokos, Orthodox World web-site

(<http://www.orthodoxworld.ru/english/icona/9/index.htm>)

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