

Seeking the Source of the Marian Myth: Have We Found the Missing Link?¹

George T. Zervos

The University of North Carolina at Wilmington

Two early pseudepigraphical documents afford us the opportunity to peer into the murky world of early Christian traditions concerning Mary, the mother of Jesus. One of these, the *Protevangelium of James*, is a New Testament apocryphon whose primary concern is the person of Mary. The other document, the *Ascension of Isaiah*, is commonly categorized as an Old Testament pseudepigraphon,² although it contains at least some manifestly Christian material.³ *Ascension of Isaiah* 11.2–16 constitutes an important witness to early Christian traditions about Mary apart from those commonly known from the canonical gospels. These include Mary's Davidic descent, her astonishment at the miraculous appearance of the infant Jesus after a short two-month pregnancy, the absence of a midwife in the nativity, and Mary's *virginitas post partum*. Both the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Protevangelium of James* have suffered from decades of neglect by scholars, with the result that their significance for the study of the origin and early development of Christian, and especially Marian, traditions has been seriously underestimated.

The paucity of original critical investigation of the *Protevangelium of James* has resulted in the entrenchment and perpetuation of an older scholarly consensus of opinion with regard to its date and compositional character⁴

¹ This article was prepared as a response to "The Portrait of Mary in the Ascension of Isaiah," a paper read by Jonathan Knight to the Christian Apocrypha Section at the Annual Meeting of the AAR/SBL in Nashville, Tennessee, in November, 2000.

² The *Ascension of Isaiah* is included in such classic collections of Old Testament pseudepigrapha as R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1913), 2:155–62; and James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols.; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983–1985), 2:156–76.

³ *Ascen. Isa.* 3.13–4.22; 9.13–18; 11.2–22.

⁴ George T. Zervos, "Dating the Protevangelium of James: The Justin Martyr Connection," *SBL Seminar Papers, 1994* (SBLSP 33; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 415–34.

that has effectively neutralized the perceived importance of this document for the study of early Christian thought. Hence the *Protevangelium of James* has been relegated to an inglorious position as a secondary writing of the middle to late second century C.E. with little or no presumable relevance for the study of earliest Christianity.⁵ It is a difficult task to overcome the inertia of a well-entrenched scholarly consensus and to argue in favor of an earlier date—and therefore enhanced significance—for a noncanonical document vis-à-vis its canonical and, in this case, noncanonical counterparts. This writer has been a φωνή βοώντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ in just such a process for the past two decades with regard to the *Protevangelium of James*.⁶ In the present paper I will support the position that the *Protevangelium of James* (or one of its source documents), which has been ignored as a factor in the critical assessment of the Marian traditions in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, could constitute the “missing link” that may hold the answers to some of the questions posed by the advanced Mariology of the *Ascension of Isaiah*.

In contrast to the *Protevangelium of James*, the *Ascension of Isaiah* has succeeded in gaining the esteem of the scholarly world. This is due largely to the efforts of what is referred to as “the Italian team,” a group of Italian researchers who have studied the *Ascension of Isaiah* intensively during the last twenty years and have produced a number of seminal publications pertaining to this document.⁷ Nevertheless, recognition and acceptance of the work of the Italian team by scholars has been painfully slow. As recently as 1996 Richard Bauckham described as “scandalous” the disregard for the early publications of the Italian researchers by recent major reference works in their treatments of the *Ascension of Isaiah*.⁸ However,

⁵ Ibid., 415–18.

⁶ George T. Zervos, “Prolegomena to a Critical Edition of the *Genesis Marias (Protevangelium Jacobi)*: The Greek Manuscripts” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1986); idem, “Dating”; idem, “An Early Non-Canonical Annunciation Story,” *SBL Seminar Papers, 1997* (SBLSP 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 664–91.

⁷ These include a comprehensive critical edition of the text of the *Ascension of Isaiah*, Paolo Bettolo et al., *Ascensio Isaiaae: Textus* (CChr.SA 7; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995), with accompanying exhaustive commentary by the foremost of the team, Enrico Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiaae: Commentarius* (CChr.SA 8; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995). For a brief but thorough survey of the Italian scholars and their publications, see Richard Bauckham, “The Ascension of Isaiah: Genre, Unity, and Date,” in his *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (NovTSup 93; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 363–65.

⁸ “Kerygmatic Summaries in the Speeches of Acts,” in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (ed. Ben Witherington; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 191 n. 19; idem, “Ascension,” 364–65; Jonathan Knight, *Disciples*

the most recent scholarly investigations of the *Ascension of Isaiah*⁹ have taken full account of the monumental work of the “Italian team.” This has resulted in a complete reassessment of the critical issues surrounding this pseudepigraphon.

Whereas earlier researchers viewed the *Ascension of Isaiah* as a composite work made up of earlier source documents that were joined together by a later editor,¹⁰ the latest trend among scholars has been to emphasize the unity of the *Ascension of Isaiah* as a whole and especially that of chapters 6–11.¹¹ The *Ascension of Isaiah* is now considered to be an early second-century Christian apocalypse made up of two parts: chapters 1–5, containing a narrative introduction to the whole work and disclosures of futuristic eschatology, and chapters 6–11, describing Isaiah’s mystical journey to the seventh heaven, where he witnesses the descent, earthly sojourn, and ascent of the heavenly redeemer followed by a narrative conclusion to the whole document. The final chapter of this second, and some think older,¹² section of the *Ascension of Isaiah* narrates the birth of the Lord Christ by Mary (including the important Marian witness in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16), his infancy, life, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension again to the seventh heaven, where he takes his place at the right hand of the “Great Glory.”

of the Beloved One: The Christology, Social Setting and Theological Context of the Ascension of Isaiah (JSPSup 18; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 5, 13.

⁹ Bauckham, “Ascension,” 363–91; Darrel D. Hannah, “Isaiah’s Vision in the Ascension of Isaiah and the Early Church,” *JTS* 50 (1999): 80–101; Loren T. Stuckenbruck, “Worship and Monotheism in the Ascension of Isaiah,” in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus* (ed. Carey C. Newman et al.; Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, formerly StPB, 63; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 70–89.

¹⁰ Robert H. Charles, *The Ascension of Isaiah* (London: Black, 1900); Michael A. Knibb, “Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah,” in Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 2:143–55.

¹¹ Jonathan Knight, *The Ascension of Isaiah* (Guides to Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); idem, *Disciples*, 28–32; Bauckham, “Summaries,” 191–92; and especially idem, “Ascension,” 365–80, where Bauckham presents an overview of scholarly opinions on the composition of the *Ascension of Isaiah* and his own detailed response to the theory of Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*, 36–52; Robert G. Hall, “Isaiah’s Ascent to See the Beloved: An Ancient Jewish Source for the Ascension of Isaiah?” *JBL* 113 (1994): 463–84, in contrast to his earlier work, “The Ascension of Isaiah: Community Situation, Date, and Place in Early Christianity,” *JBL* 109 (1990): 289–306; Hannah, “Vision,” 84–85; Stuckenbruck, “Worship,” 70–71 nn. 1, 2.

¹² See discussion with references in Bauckham, “Ascension,” 365–71.

The newly acquired scholarly respect for the *Ascension of Isaiah* necessitates a reassessment of the significance of the advanced Marian traditions presented in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16. The first step in such a reassessment occurred at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Nashville, Tennessee, in a session of the Christian Apocrypha Section that was entirely dedicated to a discussion of “Mary(s) in Christian Apocrypha.” In a paper prepared for this session entitled “The Portrait of Mary in the *Ascension of Isaiah*,”¹³ Jonathan Knight presented the case for a reevaluation of the portrait of Mary in the early church based upon all the available sources, both canonical and noncanonical.¹⁴ Knight rightly called attention to the sensitive ecclesiastical and dogmatic issues that may have impeded such a venture in the past¹⁵ and concluded that “the time is ripe for the reconsideration of Mary’s place in the contours of early Christian history and theology.”¹⁶

Unfortunately, the Marian witness of *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16 is part of a section of the document that is plagued by textual problems. *Ascension of Isaiah* 11.2–22 occurs only in the Ethiopic text of the pseudepigraphon and is absent from the Slavonic and part of the Latin manuscript tradition.¹⁷ The primary argument in favor of the authenticity of *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–22 is that the Ethiopic text generally seems to be more reliable than the Slavic and Latin manuscripts that omit these verses. Furthermore, an important Greek papyrus fragment of the fifth or sixth century C.E.,¹⁸ wherever it is extant,

¹³ Pp. ** in the present volume.

¹⁴ Knight’s contribution is the latest expression of the contemporary “reasonable consensus” in support of an early date and unified composition for the *Ascension of Isaiah* with “the obvious corollary that the *Ascension of Isaiah* ranks among our earliest noncanonical Christian literature” (Knight, “Mary,” **).

¹⁵ “No longer is it true to say that Protestants turn their backs on Mary because of the position she enjoys in Roman Catholic theology. Nor do Roman Catholics neglect the Bible when it comes to their evaluation of the mother of God” (ibid., **).

¹⁶ Ibid., **_**.

¹⁷ See the detailed discussion by Joseph Verheyden, “L’Ascension d’ Isaïe et L’Évangile de Mattheïu: Examen de AI 3,13–18,” in *The New Testament in Early Christianity: La réception des écrits néotestamentaires dans le christianisme primitif* (ed. J.-M. Sevrin; BETL 86; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989), 247–74.

¹⁸ B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt, *The Ascension of Isaiah and Other Theological Fragments, with Nine Plates* (part 1 of *The Amherst Papyri, Being an Account of the Greek Papyri in the Collection of the Right Hon. Lord Amherst of Hackney, F.S.A. at Didlington Hall, Norfolk* (London: Oxford University Press, 1900), 1–22; Enrico Norelli, “Frammento greco dell’Ascensione di Isaia (Papiro Amherst 1): Introduzione, edizione e traduzione,” in Bettiolio et al., *Ascensio Isaiae: Textus*, 133–45.

generally supports the Ethiopic text, thus suggesting that the papyrus might also verify the Ethiopic witness of *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16.¹⁹

Most scholars accept the authenticity of the Marian material in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16 in spite of the textual issues involved.²⁰ Jonathan Knight has been a persistent proponent of the originality of *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–22, and of its Marian witness in verses 2–16, for two basic reasons. First, according to Knight, this material shares a common outlook and certain distinctive ideas with similar material found in the first section of the apocalypse (3.13–18). Second, Knight finds it reasonable to assume that a later “orthodox” editor could have expunged the Marian passage because of its seemingly docetic character, thus leading to the abbreviated text of *Ascen. Isa.* 11 found in the Slavic and Latin manuscript tradition.²¹ Knight concludes: “It is very substantially easier to see *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–22, with all its warts, as part of the original apocalypse than to treat it as later hagiography.”²²

The probable existence of an authentic passage containing advanced Mariological material that is dated to the early second century C.E. necessarily raises critical questions pertaining to the possible sources of this material and to its place within the milieu of early Christian literature. Knight’s discussion regarding the position of the Marian section of the *Ascension of Isaiah* in early Christianity centers, first, around its relationship to the canonical Gospel of Matthew, which is the earliest known written witness to an elevated Mariology. Some scholars maintain that the *Ascension of Isaiah* was influenced by Matthew, while others ascribe the relationship to a mutual dependence upon earlier traditions.²³ Knight also discusses in detail the work of Bauckham on the phenomenon of “kerygmatic summaries” in early Christian literature.²⁴ Bauckham assigns the Christian material in *Ascen. Isa.* 3.13–18; 9.13–18; 10.17–11:33 (including the crucial Marian witness in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16) to what he calls the “kerygmatic summary” tradition.²⁵

¹⁹ P. C. Bori, “L’estasi del profeta: *Ascensio Isaiae* 6 e l’antico profetismo cristiano,” *CNS* 1 (1980): 367–89, comes to this conclusion regarding *Ascen. Isa.* 6.

²⁰ Bauckham, “Summaries,” 192–97; idem, “Ascension,” 379; Knight, *Ascension*, 75; idem, *Disciples*, 26–27; Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*, 42–43, 535–38; Hannah, “Vision,” 86; Hall, “Ascent,” 483 (with reservations).

²¹ Knight, “Mary,” **; idem, *Disciples*, 66.

²² Knight, “Mary,” **.

²³ See Knight’s summary and references in “Mary,” **–**.

²⁴ Bauckham, “Summaries,” 185–217; Knight, “Mary,” **–**.; idem, *Disciples*, 274–78, 288–89.

²⁵ Bauckham, “Summaries,” 191–204.

Bauckham describes “kerygmatic summaries” as a new, more flexible genre of Christian traditions characterized by their mythological quality in presenting Jesus as a divine being who has died in this world only to arise and ascend to an exalted position in heaven; he distinguishes this genre from the plain, fixed, narrative descriptions of Jesus found in the written and oral Gospel tradition. By identifying verbal points of contact in the “kerygmatic summaries” occurring in various canonical and noncanonical documents, and in other early Christian writers,²⁶ Bauckham has located “a common stock” of such material in Christian antiquity from which individual literary units were composed. According to Bauckham, the author of the *Ascension of Isaiah* “did not compose his summaries of the history of Jesus directly from the written Gospels or from the oral Gospel traditions, but followed a traditional pattern of kerygmatic summary which narrated the history of Jesus in a series of brief statements.”²⁷

Bauckham presents much compelling evidence in support of his “kerygmatic summary” theory that may explain, or at least illuminate, certain aspects of the early Jesus traditions, including those found in the three such summaries that he has identified in *Ascen. Isa.* 3.13–4.18; 9.13–18; and 10.17–11.33. However, it would be a mistake to assign the Marian passage *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16 to the “kerygmatic summary” category,²⁸ at least in its earliest pre-Gospel phase. Although it may be true that the three passages in question share the same mythological-christological framework with each other and contain material and language that is typical of other “kerygmatic summaries,”²⁹ Bauckham himself admits that in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–15 the author of the *Ascension of Isaiah* “has broken out of the form of kerygmatic summary altogether, and told this part of the history of Jesus in full narrative form.”³⁰ Thus, the passage in the *Ascension of Isaiah* that contains the crucial Marian material under discussion is excluded from Bauckham’s “kerygmatic summaries” category and, therefore, could not be part of the oral traditions circulating in the pre-Gospel stage.

Bauckham provides an explanation for this seeming inconsistency in his theory when he attempts to demonstrate the antiquity of his “kerygmatic summary” tradition by establishing a connection to what he calls “the one unquestionably very early kerygmatic summary we have (1 Cor. 15:3–7).”³¹ However, Bauckham seems to have used later sources, such as the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 191–213, contains numerous specific references.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 195, 199.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 203.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

Kerygma Petrou, Justin, and Irenaeus, to delineate the parameters of his “kerygmatic summary” tradition of Jesus (coming-birth-suffering/death-resurrection-assumption to heaven).³² But 1 Cor 15:3–7 refers only to the death, burial, resurrection, and postresurrection appearances of Jesus and does not mention Mary or anything having to do with the nativity. Bauckham attempts to justify this omission with the rationalization that “Paul cites that part of the summary which is relevant to his purpose: a discussion of resurrection. There is no reason why Paul should not have known a form in which it was usual to summarize the ministry of Jesus as well as his death and resurrection.”³³ Such an argument from silence must be rejected. The fact remains that there is no known source for the events surrounding the birth of Jesus in the pre-Gospel tradition.

The same dilemma confronts Bauckham when he attempts to trace the persistence of his “kerygmatic summary” tradition by “establishing that the kerygmatic summaries in the speeches of Acts belong to the same, broad, and diverse tradition of kerygmatic summaries of which a variety of other early Christian writings preserve evidence.”³⁴ The fifth point of Bauckham’s conclusions is particularly germane to our present discussion. He notes that “the kerygmatic summaries in Acts begin no earlier than the ministry of John the Baptist (10.37; 13.24). They do not refer to the birth of Jesus, still less his coming into the world.”³⁵ Bauckham then again refers to a series of later documents to demonstrate that “nearly all other kerygmatic summaries we have noticed refer to Christ’s birth.”³⁶ The first, and therefore oldest, of these proof texts for the authenticity of the birth of Christ as an element in the “kerygmatic summary” tradition is *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16! Bauckham again resorts to the argument from silence to support the nonexistence of the birth element in the “kerygmatic summaries” in Acts: “It seems likely that kerygmatic summaries beginning with the birth of Jesus go back to Luke’s time. If so, he has chosen not to follow these in the speeches of Acts.”³⁷ The fact still remains. There is no known source for the events surrounding the birth of Jesus in the pre-Gospel tradition.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 213.

³⁵ Ibid., 215.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 216. Bauckham’s statement that Luke’s Gospel “takes the story of Jesus back to his conception” cannot be used to support the presence of the birth element in the “kerygmatic summaries” of Luke’s time because of the questions surrounding the origin and character of Luke’s infancy stories.

In his own evaluation of the relationship between Bauckham's "kerygmatic summaries" in the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the "crystallizing Gospel tradition of the New Testament," Knight accepts the validity of the form of the "kerygmatic summary" as a genre, but stops short of acknowledging direct Matthean influence on the content of the *Ascension of Isaiah*'s "kerygmatic summaries."³⁸ While not ruling out the possibility that the author of the *Ascension of Isaiah* may have known Matthew's Gospel, Knight takes a strong position that "there is most certainly a connection between the *Ascension of Isaiah* and Matthew's *special material*.... This connection does not necessarily mean that the author used Matthew itself. He could have drawn on the source that provided Matthew's special material so that it is not proven to posit direct literary dependence in explanation of the facts in question. The latter argument is accepted as convincing by Norelli in particular."³⁹

Therefore, the current state of the question of the origin of the Marian material in *Ascen. Isa.* 11 seems to be that this passage may have originated in an oral tradition, or a written source, that possibly predated, and perhaps was even used by, the canonical gospels themselves. Knight concludes:

the evidence of *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–22 in the Ethiopic version suggests that the author used a pre-Matthean source for the summaries which Matthew also utilized. This is an important conclusion for the studying the Marian traditions in the apocalypse. It shows that, even if chapters 6–11 come from the second century C.E., they incorporate earlier material so that we are placed in touch with traditions about Jesus which circulated in the first century C.E., evidently before the writing of the canonical gospels.⁴⁰

Knight has long advocated the possible existence of earlier, nongospel sources of at least some of the Marian material in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16. He identified an "evident seam" between *Ascen. Isa.* 11.22 and 23 that "is a good indication that the author was drawing on a source in 11.2–22 (as he did in 3.13–18)."⁴¹

³⁸ Knight, "Mary," **–**. See also his discussion in *Disciples*, 276–78, 288, where he seemed closer to accepting such influence.

³⁹ Knight, "Mary," **. In an earlier study, *Ascension*, 15, he stated that "the ministry of Jesus is described in language which shows knowledge of Matthew's special material (3.13–18) and of broader traditions as well (cf. also '11.2–22 in the Ethiopic text')."

⁴⁰ Knight, "Mary," **.

⁴¹ Knight, *Disciples*, 68. See also his *Ascension*, 84: "The traditions about Jesus are inserted into the context of the mediator's descent in 3.13–18 and 11.2–22 and were originally separate from it."

This source, however, is never identified, much less associated with the *Protevangelium of James*. It seems to be a given among scholars that the *Protevangelium of James* is irrelevant to any discussion about traditions of the late first and early second centuries c.e. The *Protevangelium of James* is mentioned only occasionally in the scholarly debate on the Marian segment in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16 and usually as a secondary witness to what are assumed to be later developments in Marian teaching.⁴² A typical statement of the universally accepted position on the relation between the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the *Protevangelium of James* is: “The *Ascension of Isaiah* provides early evidence for the belief that Mary remained a virgin following the birth of Jesus (11.9). This idea was repeated in the later *Protevangelium of James* (c. 150 CE), which said that Mary’s birth, like Jesus’, was divinely ordained.”⁴³ The *Protevangelium of James* is not even mentioned in Knight’s 355-page comprehensive treatment of the *Ascension of Isaiah*.⁴⁴

In the following discussion of Knight’s assessment of the Marian traditions in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, which he describes as “the real content of this paper,”⁴⁵ I will attempt to supplement and complement his position with information from the perspective of my research on the *Protevangelium of James*. In my opinion, many of the questions left unanswered in the treatment of the Marian passage in *Ascen. Isa.* 11 by Knight and others may at least be illuminated, if not actually resolved, by the new perspective on the *Protevangelium of James* that I presented to the Christian Apocrypha Section in 1994 and 1997.⁴⁶ Valuable insights concerning the subject at hand may be gained from consideration of the possibility that one of the source documents of the *Protevangelium of James*, which I called the *Genesis Marias*⁴⁷ in my 1997 paper,⁴⁸ was already in existence as early as the late first or early second centuries c.e. As a result of this research, the position of Knight and the other scholars who advocate an early date for the *Ascension of Isaiah* would gain strong support from the existence of another early witness to the same Marian themes that distinguish the *Ascension of Isaiah*.

⁴² See, for example, Hall, “Ascent,” 483.

⁴³ Knight, *Ascension*, 88.

⁴⁴ Knight, *Disciples*.

⁴⁵ Knight, “Mary,” **.

⁴⁶ Published in the *SBL Seminar Papers* in 1994 (Zervos, “Dating”) and 1997 (idem, “Annunciation”).

⁴⁷ This is part of the actual title of the *Protevangelium of James* in the third- or fourth-century papyrus Bodmer V, which contains a complete text of this document.

⁴⁸ Zervos, “Annunciation,” 666, 686–88.

It was mentioned above that there were certain elements in the Marian material in *Ascen. Isa.* 11 that did not originate in the canonical gospel tradition. These were Mary's Davidic descent, her astonishment at the miraculous appearance of the infant Jesus, her short two-month pregnancy, the absence of a midwife in the nativity, and Mary's *virginitas post partum*. It was partly on the basis of the existence of two such non-canonical elements in the *Ascension of Isaiah* that Knight rejected the exclusive dependence of the *Ascension of Isaiah* on Matthew alone.⁴⁹ The first was the "strange description of the resurrection in *Ascen. Isa.* 3.16–17 (see *Gos. Pet.* 34–42)." The second concerned "the absent midwife in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.14." Knight rightly substantiates his first example with a reference to the *Gospel of Peter* but is silent on any non-Matthean parallels to his second example. Actually, the absent midwife in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.14 is an important contact with *Protevangelium of James* 19, which narrates the birth of Jesus. In *Prot. Jas.* 17–18 Mary is about to give birth on the road to Bethlehem. Joseph puts her in a cave and goes out in search of a Hebrew midwife to assist in the birth. By the time they arrive at the cave in *Prot. Jas.* 19.12–15, the child has already appeared. This is the first of the striking parallels between the *Ascension of Isaiah* Marian materials and the *Protevangelium of James*.

A second extra-Matthean Marian element contained in the *Ascension of Isaiah* is that Mary is a descendant of the house of David. Knight attributes this element to the second century and describes it as an attempt to improve upon what is known about Joseph's Davidic ancestry from Matthew in order to enhance Jesus' messianic qualifications.⁵⁰ I agree that this appears to represent an attempt to improve over Matthew's genealogy but question why it has to be placed as late as the second century. However, the relationship between Matthew and *Ascension of Isaiah* must be revisited first. If, as Knight seems to have concluded above, the author of *Ascension of Isaiah* did not know Matthew, then how could he know and respond to Matthew's genealogy? And even if, against Bauckham himself, *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–22 is a "kerygmatic summary" from preexisting non-Matthean material, it seems a stronger case can be made for an even earlier date for this Marian element. It must have been established in Syria before about 110 C.E., since Ignatius already knows of Mary's Davidic descent quite early in the second century.⁵¹

Since this second non-Matthean element in the *Ascension of Isaiah* also occurs in *Prot. Jas.* 10.2, there are solid grounds for regarding the Davidic

⁴⁹ Knight, "Mary,"***.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, **.

⁵¹ *Ign. Eph.* 18.2; 20.2; *Trall.* 9.1; *Smyrn.* 1.1.

descent of Mary to have been part of an early tradition or source that informed the *Ascension of Isaiah*, Ignatius, and the *Protevangelium of James*. Assuming that Ignatius himself did not create the idea of Mary's Davidic descent, it would be difficult to demonstrate definitively whether the *Ascension of Isaiah* or the *Protevangelium of James* contains a more original version of this element. Whereas *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2 very tersely states only that Isaiah saw a "woman of the progeny of David the prophet," *Prot. Jas.* 10.2 weaves this piece of information into a story of the making of the temple veil. And if Bauckham is correct, and *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–22 is not from an oral "kerygmatic summary" but from a written source in "full narrative form,"⁵² then what other such source would have existed that early, that is, before Ignatius and the *Ascension of Isaiah*, and with the specific content of Mary's Davidic ancestry, other than the *Genesis Marias*, the document that was later incorporated into the *Protevangelium of James*?

The next element to be examined in the *Ascension of Isaiah* Marian text is "that Joseph was dissuaded from divorcing Mary through an angelophany and that he had no sexual relations with her before the birth of Jesus."⁵³ Knight quickly dispenses with this passage as being Matthean in thought, although he accepts the language used as being peculiar to the *Ascension of Isaiah*. The basic theme of the passage does seem to be Matthean, but some parts of the text warrant closer inspection, especially with respect to the parallel text in chapters 13–14 of the *Protevangelium of James*. But any comparison of the two texts is problematic because the corresponding section in the *Protevangelium of James* has been heavily edited by the addition of Matthean elements to such an extent that one can discern only with difficulty the underlying *Genesis Marias* material.⁵⁴ The purpose of the later *Protevangelium of James* editor was precisely to bring his source document, the *Genesis Marias*, into conformity with the Matthean Joseph story.

However, the *Ascension of Isaiah* story contains some interesting affinities with the vestiges of the *Genesis Marias* tradition that are still discernible in the *Protevangelium of James*. First, *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2 refers to Joseph as a carpenter, which is not a particularly Matthean concept. Matthew 13:55 also describes Joseph as a carpenter, but this is not original to Matthew and is not associated with Matthew's birth story. This information has been taken and modified from Matthew's source, Mark 6:3, where Jesus is portrayed as a carpenter. The parallels in *Prot. Jas.* 9 and 13 again are built into the *Protevangelium of James* narrative, which presents Joseph

⁵² Bauckham, "Summaries," 203.

⁵³ Knight, "Mary," **.

⁵⁴ Zervos, "Annunciation," 422–25.

very strongly as being employed in construction. Even more significantly, *Ascen. Isa.* 11.9 shares with the *Protevangelium of James* the important non-Matthean element of the *virginitas post partum*.⁵⁵ Quite interesting also is *Ascen. Isa.* 11.3, which states that “Joseph came into his portion.”⁵⁶ The reference to Joseph’s portion, or lot, occurs in *Prot. Jas.* 9, where Joseph is chosen by lot to be Mary’s guardian. Joseph’s “lot” as well as the reference to Joseph as a carpenter are in a demonstrably *Genesis Marias* section of *Prot. Jas.* 9. Again the cumulative evidence of these parallels between the *Protevangelium of James* and the *Ascension of Isaiah* in this Marian element point to the narrative of the *Genesis Marias* as a possible source of at least some of the Marian information in the *Ascension of Isaiah*.

Another Marian element in this “kerygmatic summary” in *Ascen. Isa.* 11 is the description of the birth of Jesus, which according to Knight “is strikingly different from Matthew’s account.”⁵⁷ In *Ascen. Isa.* 11.8 Mary gave birth to Jesus after being pregnant only two months. Moreover, the birth itself apparently took the mother by surprise. Here, Knight does note the parallel in *Prot. Jas.* 13.1, which states that Mary gave birth in the sixth month of her pregnancy. However, one of the main themes in my 1997 paper, which was actually entitled “An Early Non-canonical Annunciation Story,” is that in the annunciation story of the *Genesis Marias* Mary was not informed of her impending pregnancy by the voice of the annunciation. She only became aware of this later and was perplexed when her womb began to swell. Knight attributes this supernatural birth of Jesus in the *Ascension of Isaiah* to the author’s desire to emphasize the supernatural character of Jesus. This may be true with respect to the present position of this story in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, but may not hold true for the original source of this story, which may have been the *Genesis Marias*.

Probably the most important single Mariological element in the Marian section of the *Ascension of Isaiah* is the *virginitas post partum* of Mary, which is nowhere to be found in the canonical birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. Knight comes close to attributing the responsibility for the creation of this idea to the author of the *Ascension of Isaiah*,⁵⁸ even though Knight himself notes the significant parallel in *Prot. Jas.* 19–20,⁵⁹ where it is graphically stated that the midwife physically examined Mary after the birth of Jesus and determined that she was still a virgin. Knight further notes that *Ascen. Isa.* 11.14 states that no midwife attended Jesus’ birth but

⁵⁵ See discussion below.

⁵⁶ Knibb, “Martyrdom,” 174, translates this as “lot.”

⁵⁷ Knight, “Mary,” **.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, **.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, **.

again attributes this to the author's desire to enhance Jesus. This also may hold true for the present position of this element in the *Ascension of Isaiah*, but it is also true that in the birth narrative of the *Protevangelium of James*, where Mary is the central figure, the midwife did not arrive in time to attend the birth of Jesus. This is yet another impressive example where the author of the *Ascension of Isaiah* may have taken an element from the source of the *Protevangelium of James* and inserted it into his own birth narrative, where there is more of an emphasis on Jesus as the mythological descending-ascending redeemer from the seventh heaven.

In evaluating the Marian material in the *Ascension of Isaiah* with a view to its contacts with other Christian literature describing the birth of Jesus, Knight sees two principal developments over the Gospel tradition: first, the spontaneous birth of Jesus that escapes Mary's notice and causes her astonishment when she sees the infant who has suddenly appeared, and, secondly, the fact that Mary was found to be a virgin after her delivery.⁶⁰ Both of these elements are part of the principal focus of the *Protevangelium of James* and of its source, the *Genesis Marias*. Knight interprets both of these as christological statements reflecting the belief that Jesus is the earthly manifestation of the divine mediator who descended from heaven. Knight asks the critical question *cui bono*, "to whose advantage these additions are made: to Jesus' or to Mary's."⁶¹ He rejects the latter possibility and maintains that these additions point beyond the person of Mary to the Beloved One. Knight then rightly concludes by contrasting the *Protevangelium of James*, which is decidedly written for the advantage of Mary, with the *Ascension of Isaiah*, whose entire framework is the myth of the descending-ascending redeemer.

It is precisely with regard to Knight's final questions and conclusions that the *Protevangelium of James* can be most instructive. Why should the author of the *Ascension of Isaiah* want to write about Mary in this way, especially if this author was most concerned with the heavenly redeemer Jesus? I would add a further question. Does Mary's *post partum* virginity and her astonishment at giving birth to Jesus enhance Jesus, or does it enhance Mary? The answer to these questions perhaps betrays the real source of the Marian material in the *Ascension of Isaiah*. I would agree with Knight that the author of the *Ascension of Isaiah* inserted material in his "kerygmatic summary" according to his christological scheme. But I would look elsewhere for the source of the seemingly unnecessary Marian material in the *Ascension of Isaiah*. I would look to a document, or a tradition, independent of the not-yet-canonical gospels, that had as its purpose

⁶⁰ Ibid., **.

⁶¹ Ibid., **.

precisely the enhancement of the person of Mary. I would look to a document that contained all the elements in the *Ascension of Isaiah* representing a departure from, or a development of, the Matthean Marian elements in this apocalypse. I would look to the *Protevangelium of James* and its underlying source document, the *Genesis Marias*.

Knight can only arrive at his conclusions concerning the Marian material in *Ascen. Isa.* 11 after taking as a “given that the *Ascension of Isaiah* is earlier than the *Protevangelium of James*,” which he dismisses as later “apocryphal Marian hagiography.”⁶² This “given” reflects the perception of most contemporary scholars that is based upon an outdated, but still well-entrenched, scholarly consensus that views the *Protevangelium of James* as a monolithic composition written in the middle to latter part of the second century C.E. whose value for earlier Christology and Mariology is not worth serious consideration. We should remember that the *Ascension of Isaiah* was branded with a similar set of misperceptions only a few short years ago. The *Protevangelium of James* has not had the benefit of international teams of scholars working arduously for decades to produce thorough critical editions of its text with accompanying exhaustive commentaries and volumes of extensive critical evaluations. Should such study of the *Protevangelium of James* come about in the future, this document will doubtless be identified as an invaluable and unique witness to the thought of earliest Christianity and will be recognized, even in its present heavily redacted form, as being at least equal in importance to the *Ascension of Isaiah*. And the *Genesis Marias*, in my opinion, will prove to be the primary source document of the Mariology of the ancient Christian world whose ideas were reflected in such later writings as the *Protevangelium of James*, *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16, and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch.

⁶² Ibid., **.

References are to page and line (e.g., 8.17 = page 8, line 17; 8.13up = page 8, line 13 up from the bottom of the main body of text).

- **General:** I will supply the cross-references to Knight's essay after first proofs, when we can be sure that the pagination is stable. I will also confirm any quotations for accuracy (since minor revision might yet take place).