

CHRISTMAS WITH SALOME

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After being treated rather indifferently in the earliest Christian sources, Jesus' mother found her portrait increasingly enhanced throughout late antiquity until she attained virtual mother-goddess status in the catholicizing churches of the East and West.¹ This apotheosis, this impossibly idealized version of Jesus' mother, would become for countless generations of Christian women both their icon to be worshiped and their role model to be emulated. But this icon demanded a high price – the suppression and denial of their sexuality both in its physical manifestation as well as in the internal realm of 'carnal' thoughts. The icon also dispossessed them of something even more important, their self-image. As Christian women through the millennia gazed prayerfully into the image of Mary's reverent face enveloped in the cowl of a loose-fitting robe that covered her body from head to foot, they believed that the mind behind that face never had a 'dirty' sexual thought or feeling, much less an actual sexual experience. Unable to measure up to such perfection, these women were reduced to begging this very icon for forgiveness for being what they naturally were, sexual beings, or, in the view that was imposed upon them, sinners.

This study illuminates a critical moment in the creation of this icon and thereby contributes towards the understanding of the historical process that produced an injustice of such monstrous proportions. It does so through an examination of the *Protevangelium of James* (*Prot. Jas.*), a unique primary witness to the progressive 'dogmatization' of the figure of Mary in early Christianity.²

The Developing Mariological Framework

The first known reference to Jesus' mother is by Paul who was in personal contact with the earliest circles of Jesus' followers, including his family. But Paul refers to Jesus' mother only once – without naming her – in Gal. 4.4: 'when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, made of (a?) woman, made under the law'.³ There is nothing here specific to Mary, and the phrase 'of (a) woman' (ἐκ γυναικός) may refer generically to women and not to Mary herself. The next source in chronological order to provide information on Mary is Mark's Gospel, which presents the

1 Among Orthodox theological circles Mary has been characterized as μετὰ θεὸν θεός ('God after God').

2 George Themelis Zervos, 'Caught in the Act: Mary and the Adulteress', *Apocrypha* 15 (2004), pp. 57–114, (88).

3 I prefer 'made' to 'born' as an indication that the verb is not specifically γεννάω (to give birth), but γίνομαι (to become, come into being). Paul's text reads: ὅτε δὲ ἦλθεν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου, ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ, γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός, ὑπὸ νόμον. Mary is not mentioned in Rom. 1.3–4 where Paul describes Jesus as son of God 'made (γενόμενον) of the seed of David'.

relationship between Jesus and his family, Mary included, in a negative light. In Mk 3.21, ‘when his family heard [of Jesus’ activities], they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind”’;⁴ in 3.31–35 Jesus denies his biological family in favor of those around him who do the will of God, whom he describes as ‘my brother and sister and mother’ (ἀδελφός μου, καὶ ἀδελφὴ καὶ μήτηρ). Finally, in Mk 6.4 Jesus includes his relatives and household in his derogatory statement: ‘a prophet is not without honor except in his own country and among his own relatives and in his own house’ (οὐκ ἔστιν προφήτης ἄτιμος εἰ μὴ ἐν τῇ πατρίδι αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐν τοῖς συγγενεῦσιν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐτοῦ).

It was the second generation of synoptic writers, Matthew and Luke, who began to treat Mary with more deference. In their parallel revisions of Mk 6.4 both Matthew and Luke soften Jesus’ harsh words. Mt. 13.57 omits the reference to Jesus’ relatives (ἐν τοῖς συγγενεῦσιν αὐτοῦ), while Lk. 4.24 deletes both the reference to Jesus’ relatives and to ‘his house’ (ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ αὐτοῦ). It is also Matthew and Luke, *in tandem*, who make the momentous leap into the virginal conception and birth of Jesus. But these Gospels portray Mary’s virginal status only before the birth of Jesus, and both leave open the possibility that Mary remained a virgin only up to the point that she gave birth. Mt. 1.18–25 validates Mary’s sexual purity at the time of her conception of Jesus by citing Isa. 7.14: ‘a virgin will conceive and bear a son’ (Mt. 1.23, ἴδου ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν). But this text is preceded and followed by statements that could insinuate that Mary and Joseph had sexual relations after Jesus’ birth. Mt. 1.18 states that Mary became pregnant ‘before they [Mary and Joseph] came together’ (πρὶν ἢ συνελθεῖν αὐτούς); while Mt. 1.25 states that Joseph took Mary as his wife and ‘did not know her until she gave birth to a son’.⁵ Lk. 2.7 in turn states that Mary ‘gave birth to her first-born son’,⁶ implying that other sons followed. This understanding is corroborated by Mk 6.3, which names four brothers and mentions at least two sisters of Jesus. The implication is that they were Jesus’ natural siblings.⁷

The amplification of the person of Mary from Paul’s generic ‘woman’ and Mark’s misunderstanding mother to Matthew and Luke’s *ante-partum* virgin constitutes

4 καὶ ἀκούσαντες οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ ἐξηλθον κρατῆσαι αὐτόν· ἔλεγον γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστι. The phrase οἱ παρ’ αὐτοῦ has also been interpreted as Jesus’ friends or associates.

5 οὐκ ἐγίνωσκεν αὐτὴν ἕως οὗ ἔτεκεν υἱόν· ἕως οὗ is generally taken to mean ‘until’ when following a negative ‘before’. These interpretations are based on a straightforward reading of the original texts. For the immense literature on this subject, much of which is driven by confessional concerns, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (2nd edn; New York: Doubleday, 1993).

6 ἔτεκεν τὸν υἱὸν αὐτῆς τὸν πρωτότοκον. Cf. W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr: ‘had Matthew held to Mary’s perpetual virginity (as did the second-century author of *Prot. Jas.* 19.3–20.2), he would almost certainly have chosen a less ambiguous expression – just as Luke would have avoided “first-born son” (2.7) (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* [3 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988], I, p. 219).

7 οὐχ οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ τέκτων, ὁ υἱὸς τῆς Μαρίας καὶ ἀδελφός Ἰακώβου καὶ Ἰωσήφου καὶ Ἰούδα καὶ Σίμωνος; καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν αἱ ἀδελφαὶ αὐτοῦ ὡς πρὸς ἡμᾶς; Mt. 13.55–56 not only reproduces Mark’s list of Jesus’ four brothers (James, Joses, Judas and Simon), but refers to ‘all’ Jesus’ sisters, implying more than two, οὐχ οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ τοῦ τέκτωνος υἱός; οὐχ ἡ μήτηρ αὐτοῦ λέγεται Μαρὶα καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ αὐτοῦ Ἰακώβος καὶ Ἰωσήφ καὶ Σίμων καὶ Ἰούδας; καὶ αἱ ἀδελφαὶ αὐτοῦ οὐκ εἰσὶν; πρὸς ἡμᾶς εἰσὶν; cf. the detailed study on the relatives of Jesus by Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990).

only the first phase in the magnification of Jesus' mother. The second phase, an even greater leap into the fabulous, is characterized by the extension of the chronological limits of Mary's sexual inactivity to include the birth process itself (*in partu*) and its aftermath (*post partum*). This extension appears in the *Ascension of Isaiah* and, more importantly, the *Prot. Jas.*⁸ The latter represents a pivotal point in the development of Mariology.

The *Prot. Jas.* was composed from an original pre-existing document, generally known as the Γένεσις Μαρίας,⁹ which shared the earlier, first-phase *ante-partum* Mariology of the canonical nativity stories. This document was redacted by the editor of the *Prot. Jas.* with canonical materials and with other texts containing the more advanced *post-partum* Mariology. The inclusion of elements from both phases of Marian thought establishes this apocryphon as a unique primary witness to – if not the actual perpetrator of – the extension of the *virginitas* of Mary from *ante* to *post partum* in the first half of the second century. The *Prot. Jas.* likely constitutes a literary photograph of the moment at which the *virginitas post partum* of Mary superseded the earlier 'canonical' notions of virginal conception and birth.

The Doubting Salome Episode

The *Prot. Jas.* introduced the *post-partum* virginity of Mary by attaching what I have termed the 'Doubting Salome' episode to a discrete pre-existing account whose central figure was a Hebrew midwife. This combined narrative, now found in *Prot. Jas.* 19–20, forms part of the expanded nativity story contained in *Prot. Jas.* 17–21.¹⁰ This nativity story follows the Γένεσις Μαρίας (*Prot. Jas.* 1–16) which recounts Mary's early life: her own conception, birth and childhood; her miraculous conception of Jesus; her accusation of adultery and subsequent exoneration by the high priest. By positioning the Doubting Salome episode as the central climactic event, not only of the birth narrative, but also of the *Prot. Jas.* in its entirety, the editor produced a document whose purpose was to authenticate the *post-partum*, soon to become perpetual, virginity of Mary.

The Salome story occurs at the cave, several kilometers outside of Bethlehem,¹¹ in which Jesus had just been born. An otherwise unidentified Salome is abruptly introduced – her only appearance in the *Prot. Jas.* – where she encounters the

8 On the relationship between the *Prot. Jas.* and the *Ascension of Isaiah*, see George Themelis Zervos, 'Seeking the Source of the Marian Myth: Have We Found the Missing Link?', in F. Stanley Jones (ed.), *Which Mary? The Marys of Early Christian Tradition* (SBLSymS, 19; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), pp. 107–20. Whereas the *Ascension of Isaiah* was virtually forgotten, the *Prot. Jas.* went on to have a dramatic and lasting effect on Christian thought and practice.

9 See George Themelis Zervos, 'Dating the *Protevangelium of James*: The Justin Martyr Connection', *SBLSP, 1994* (SBLSP, 33; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), pp. 415–34; *idem*, 'An Early Non-Canonical Annunciation Story', *SBLSP, 1997* (SBLSP, 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 664–91.

10 It must be left to future investigations to determine if any of the elements of this nativity story had an independent existence before they were appended to the Γένεσις Μαρίας or if they constituted an original part of this document.

11 See H.R. Smid's helpful discussion of the details of the journey of Mary and Joseph in the *Prot. Jas.*, *Protevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary* (Apocrypha Novi Testamenti, 1; trans. G.E. van Baaren-Pape; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1965), pp. 120–24.

Hebrew midwife who has just witnessed Jesus' miraculous birth. Salome doubts the midwife's account and declares, 'unless I put my finger and examine her nature, I will not believe that a virgin gave birth'. She then conducts a tactile examination of Mary's sexual organs which results in her offending hand 'falling off by fire'.¹² Salome prays, and an angel appears to declare that she will be saved if she touches the child. She complies and is healed.

The discrete narrative can be derived from a redaction-critical analysis of *Prot. Jas.* 18–20 as recorded in its oldest extant MS, the magnificently well-preserved, complete third-century (?) Bodmer Papyrus V (P. Bodm. V).¹³ The Greek text and English translation of *Prot. Jas.* 18–20, according to P. Bodm. V, are presented below in a manner that highlights the evidence of redaction.¹⁴ The original nativity story is shown in normal print, while texts considered to be editorial insertions are indented. Normal indented print denotes the Doubting Salome story; italicized indented print designates canonical material. Greek numerals (capital Greek letters) refer to the page numbers of P. Bodm. V. The designated modern chapter divisions reflect the current standard, but the line-by-line enumeration has no relationship to any previous edition; it is supplied solely to facilitate reference in this article.

The nativity story of the *Prot. Jas.* takes place as Mary and Joseph, together with his children from a previous marriage, approach Bethlehem. The time comes for Mary to deliver her child, so Joseph must find a shelter for her. The text below follows from that point.

The Text of Prot. Jas. 18–20 according to P. Bodm. V

- 18.1 καὶ εὗρεν ἐκεῖ σπήλαιον καὶ εἰσήγαγεν αὐτήν
 2 καὶ παρέστησεν αὐτήν τοὺς υἱοὺς αὐτοῦ
 3 καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ζητῆσαι μαίαν ἑβραίαν ἐν χώρᾳ Βηθλεέμ.
 4 καὶ εὐρῶν ἦνεγκεν

¹² There is great disagreement among the MSS of the *Prot. Jas.* with regard to the text of the digital examination. For the textual evidence and a discussion of the compositional issue, see Zervos, 'Caught' pp. 83–94.

¹³ It is in the spirit of Eldon Epp's superb presidential address to the 2003 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature ('The Oxyrhynchus New Testament Papyri: "Not Without Honor Except in their Hometown"?', *JBL* 123.1 [Spring 2004], pp. 5–55) that this study strives to demonstrate how seemingly arcane textual and papyrological evidence may illuminate a decisive moment in the development of early Christianity that would eventually have widespread social and personal ramifications. Following Smid, *Protevangelium*, and Jane Schaberg, 'The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth', in E. Schüssler Fiorenza (ed.), *Searching the Scriptures. II. A Feminist Commentary* (2 vols.; New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 708–27, I bypass the standard critical text and study of the *Prot. Jas.*, Émile de Strycker's *La Forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques* (*Subsidia Hagiographa*, 33; Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1961), in order to work directly from the text preserved in P. Bodm. V. It is precisely in its text of the nativity story that P. Bodm. V differs considerably from most of the MS tradition of the *Prot. Jas.*

¹⁴ This text was derived from the diplomatic *editio princeps* of P. Bodm. V by Michel Testuz, *Papyrus Bodmer V: Nativité de Marie* (Cologne-Geneva: Bibliotheca Bodmeriana, 1958) and compared to de Strycker's information on the text of the papyrus. Only obvious scribal errors, misspellings and itacisms have been corrected. The literal English translation is mine.

5 ἀπὸ ὄρεινῆς καταβαίνουσιν
6 καὶ εἶπεν Ἰωσήφ ΛΗ τῇ μαίᾳ ὅτι
7 Ἰαρία ἐστὶν ἡ μεμνηστευμένη μοι
8 ἀλλὰ σύλλημμα ἔχει ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου
9 ἀνατραφεῖσα ἐν ναῶ κυρίου.
10 Καὶ ἀπήει μετ' αὐτοῦ ἡ μαία.

19.1 καὶ ἔστησεν ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τοῦ σπηλαίου.
2 καὶ νεφέλη σκοτεινὴ ἐπισκιάζουσα τὸ σπήλαιον

3 Καὶ εἶπεν ἡ μαία,
4 ἔμεγαλύνθη ἡ ψυχὴ μου σήμερον
5 ὅτι εἶδον οἱ ὀφθαλμοῦ μου παράδοξα σήμερον,
6 ὅτι σωτηρία τῷ Ἰσραὴλ γεγένηται.

7 καὶ παραχρήμα ἡ νεφέλη ὑπεστέλλετο τοῦ σπηλαίου
8 καὶ ἐφάνη φῶς μέγα ἐν τῷ σπηλαίῳ ὥστε ΛΘ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς μὴ φέρειν.
9 καὶ πρὸς ὀλίγον τὸ φῶς ἐκεῖνο ὑπεστέλλετο ἕως ἐφάνη βρέφος.
10 καὶ ἦλθεν καὶ ἔλαβε μασθὸν ἐκ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ Μαρίας.
11 καὶ ἀνεβόησεν ἡ Μαία,
12 ὡς μεγάλη ἡ σήμερον ἡμέρα, ὅτι εἶδον τὸ καινὸν θέαμα τοῦτο.

13 καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἐκ τοῦ σπηλαίου ἡ μαία,
14 καὶ ἠπήντησεν αὐτῇ Σαλώμη,
15 καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ, Σαλώμη, Σαλώμη,
16 καινὸν σοι θέαμα ἔχω ἐξηγήσασθαι.
17 παρθένος ἐγέννησεν ἃ οὐ χωρεῖ ἡ φύσις αὐτῆς.
18 καὶ εἶπεν Σαλώμη, ζῆ κύριος ὁ θεός μου,
19 ἐὰν μὴ βάλω τὸν δάκτυλόν μου ἐραυνήσω Μ τὴν φύσιν αὐτῆς,
20 οὐ μὴ πιστεύσω ἢ παρθένος ἐγέννησεν.
20.1 καὶ εἰσῆλθεν καὶ ἠσχημάτησεν αὐτήν.
2 καὶ ἠραύνησεν ἡ Σαλώμη τὴν φύσιν αὐτῆς
3 καὶ ἀνήλλαξεν Σαλώμη,
4 ὅτι ἐξεπείρασεν θεὸν ζῶντα
5 καὶ ἰδοὺ ἡ χεὶρ μου πυρὶ ἀποπίπτει ἀπ' ἐμοῦ.

6 καὶ προσηύξατο πρὸς κύριον, καὶ ἰάθη ἡ μαία ἐν τῇ ὥρᾳ ἐκείνῃ.

7 καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄγγελος κυρίου ἔστη πρὸς Σαλώμην λέγων,
8 εἰσηκούσθη ἡ δέησίς σου ἐνώπιον κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ.
9 προσελθοῦσα ἄψε του παιδίου καὶ αὐτὸς ἔσωτε σοι ἡ σωτηρία.
10 καὶ ἐποίησεν οὕτω ΜΑ καὶ ἰάθη Σαλώμη.
11 καθὼς προσεκύνησεν καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἐκ τοῦ σπηλαίου,
12 ἰδοὺ ἄγγελος κυρίου ἐν φωνῇ λέγων,
13 Σαλώμη, Σαλώμη,
14 ἀν[α]γγεῖλις ὅσα εἶδες παράδοξα
15 ἕως ἔλθῃ ὁ παῖς εἰς Ἱεροσόλημα.

21.1 καὶ ἰδοὺ, Ἰωσήφ ἠτοιμάσθη τοῦ ἐξελεθεῖν ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ.

18.1 And (Joseph) found a cave there and led her in

2 and sat her with his sons,
 3 and he went out to seek a Hebrew midwife in the country of Bethlehem.
 4 Finding (one), he brought

5 *her coming down from the mountain region*
 6 *And Joseph said ΛΗ to the midwife that,*
 7 *'Mary is betrothed to me*
 8 *but she has a conception from the Holy Spirit,*
 9 *having been raised in the temple of the Lord.'*
 10 *And the midwife went with him.*

19.1 and stood her at the place (lit. in the place) of the cave.
 2 And a dark cloud (was) covering the cave

3 *And the midwife said,*
 4 *'My soul was magnified today*
 5 *for my eyes saw strange things today,*
 6 *for salvation has come to Israel.'*

7 And immediately the cloud was drawn away from the cave
 8 and a great light appeared in the cave so that ΛΘ the eyes could not bear (it).
 9 And for a little (time) that light was drawn away until a child appeared.
 10 And it came and took a breast from his mother Mary.
 11 And the midwife shouted,
 12 'Today is as a great day, because I saw this new spectacle.'

13 And the midwife came out of the cave.
 14 And Salome met her,
 15 and said to her, 'Salome, Salome,
 16 I have a new spectacle to report to you.
 17 A virgin gave birth to things which her nature does not allow.'
 18 And Salome said, 'The Lord, my God, lives.
 19 If I do not put my finger (and) examine Μ her nature,
 20 I will not believe the virgin gave birth.'
 20.1 And she went in and prepared her.
 2 And Salome examined her nature.
 3 And Salome cried out,
 4 'Because it tempted (the) living God,
 5 behold, my hand falls away from me by fire.'

6 And she prayed to the Lord, and the midwife was healed in that hour.

7 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood towards Salome saying,
 8 'Your supplication has been heard before the Lord God.
 9 Drawing near, touch the child and he will be salvation to you.'
 10 And she did thus ΜΑ and Salome was healed.
 11 As she prayed and came out of the cave,
 12 behold, an angel of the Lord with a voice saying,
 13 'Salome, Salome,
 14 you will proclaim all the strange things you saw
 15 until the child comes to Jerusalem.'

21.1 And behold, Joseph prepared to go out into Judea.

The ensuing ch. 21 is a retelling of the story of Herod and the Magi, most of which is borrowed from Matthew.

Commentary

The disarray in this text is apparent. Most conspicuous is the healing of the midwife in 20.6, ‘And she prayed to the Lord, and the midwife was healed in that hour.’ But there had been no indication up to this point that the midwife had done anything worthy of punishment or had sustained any wound. Why was the midwife healed when it was Salome who ‘tempted (the) living God’ two lines before (20.4), was immediately punished (20.5) and was healed four lines later (20.10)? It is possible, as Bauckham suggests,¹⁵ that the obviously dislocated 20.6 could represent an editorial attempt to identify Salome herself as the midwife. The composer of the *Prot. Jas.* certainly would have been interested in accommodating the inserted material to its new context. However, in contrast to the more careful editing evident elsewhere in the story (see below) this effort seems heavy-handed, incomplete and more likely to be the work of a later editor. One could also argue that this dislocated verse indicates the midwife story originally ended with a transgression on her part that resulted in a punishment that required her own healing, as in the case of Salome. This story could have been replaced by, or even transformed into, the Salome episode.

The passages 18.5–10 and 19.3–6, shown in indented italics, also appear to be interpolations that disrupt the contexts into which they were placed. The first passage, Joseph’s statement to the midwife, was inserted in the middle of a verse of the underlying midwife story comprised originally of what are now lines 18.4, ‘finding (a midwife), he brought (her)’, and 19.1, ‘and stood her at the place (lit. in the place) of the cave’. It was difficult for the editor to interject Joseph’s lengthy statement between the two consecutive aorist verbs ἤνεγκεν (‘brought’) and ἕστησεν (‘stood’)¹⁶ separated only by καί in the original Greek text: ἤνεγκεν καὶ ἕστησεν ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τοῦ σπηλαίου (‘he brought [the midwife] and stood [her] at the place [lit. in the place] of the cave’). The successive action of the verbs ‘brought’ and ‘stood’ allowed no time for talk. The editor therefore afforded Joseph the opportunity to make his statement to the midwife by prolonging their journey to the cave. This was achieved by the addition of lines 18.5 and 10 – before and after Joseph’s statement, respectively – to interface with the original text and to accentuate the duration of the trip. Line 18.10, καὶ ἀπῆει μετ’ αὐτοῦ ἡ μαία (‘and the midwife went with him’), not only creates the journey itself, but also serves to mitigate the abrupt appearance of the midwife at the cave in 19.1. The addition in 18.5 of the phrase ἀπὸ ὄρεινῆς καταβαίνουσαν (‘coming down from the mountain region’) also extends the time period of the journey with the ongoing action of the participle καταβαίνουσαν

¹⁵ Bauckham, *Jude*, p. 41 n. 136.

¹⁶ P. Bodm. V alone among the MSS of the *Prot. Jas.* preserves the first aorist causative form of ἵστημι which is understandable in the light of the redactional process described here. Many later scribes ‘corrected’ what they assumed to be an erroneous tense to this verb’s mostly second aorist forms.

(‘coming down’) and provides a scenario for the immediately following statement of Joseph to take place.

The redactional character of lines 18.5 and 10 is indicated by the tension they produce in the contexts into which they were introduced. The most obvious example is the grammatical awkwardness of the participle καταβάνουσαν (‘coming down’) in its present position as the direct object of the aorist ἤνεγκεν (‘he brought’). Since the feminine participle refers exclusively to Salome, the literal sense of the sentence is that Joseph found a midwife and ‘brought her’, but she was the only one ‘coming down’. A second point of tension is the discrepancy between the reference in line 18.3 of the original story to χώρα Βηθλέεμ (‘the country of Bethlehem’) as the place to which Joseph went to seek a Hebrew midwife, and the reference to the ὄρεινή (‘mountain region’) in the first line of the inserted passage, 18.5, as the place from which she was coming. The inconsistency would be even greater were ὄρεινή a geographical term used by ancient writers to indicate the hills of Judea or Jerusalem.¹⁷ Although this confusion is generally attributed to the author’s ignorance of Palestinian geography, the contradictory geographical references could be indicators of redactional activity and therefore offer further support for our interpolation theory of *Prot. Jas.* 19–20. It is particularly relevant that in line 21.1 – immediately following the inserted Doubting Salome episode – Joseph is preparing τοῦ ἐξελεῖν ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ (‘to go out into Judea’). But he is already in Judea, just outside of Bethlehem; and all the preceding events of chs. 19–20 took place in Judea.

The second inserted passage, the midwife’s exclamation of wonder in 19.3–6, breaks the continuity of the original story even more noticeably. In this case the editor has not utilized buffering materials to accommodate the midwife’s exclamation to its new context, as lines 18.5 and 10 were used for the statement of Joseph. The midwife’s exclamation of wonder causes an incongruity where it is interposed abruptly into the sequence of events that transpired during the birth of Jesus related in 19.2 and 7–10. Lines 19.2 and 7 describe a dark cloud that is covering the cave and is withdrawn immediately upon the midwife’s arrival. Lines 19.8–10 recount how the great light in the cave is withdrawn gradually until the child appears and takes his mother’s breast. The placement of the midwife’s words after her arrival at the scene is anomalous because nothing has occurred yet that would warrant an exclamation of such force: ἐμεγαλύνθη ἡ ψυχὴ μου σήμερον ὅτι εἶδον οἱ ὀφθαλμοῦ μου παράδοξα σήμερον ὅτι σωτηρία τῷ Ἰσραὴλ γεγένηται (‘My soul was magnified today, for my eyes saw strange things today, for salvation has come to Israel’). At this point the midwife has only seen the cave covered by a dark cloud. Even greater παράδοξα (‘strange things’) have yet to transpire – the sudden withdrawal of the cloud, the appearance and withdrawal of the great light, and especially the manifestation of the child.

The midwife’s exclamation is premature in its present position and would better follow all of the ‘strange things’ about to occur. But another editorial dilemma provided good cause for the editor to place the exclamation so early in the story. The original text into which the exclamation was being interpolated already contained a

17 Smid, *Protevangeliem*, p. 13; cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I–IX* (AB, 28; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), p. 363.

concluding exclamation by the midwife in 19.11–12, καὶ ἀνεβόησεν ἡ μαία, ‘ὡς μεγάλη ἡ σήμερον ἡμέρα, ὅτι εἶδον τὸ καινὸν θέαμα τοῦτο’ (‘and the midwife shouted “today is as a great day, because I saw this new spectacle”’). And this shout of joy appropriately followed the sudden withdrawal of the cloud, the appearance and withdrawal of the light, and the appearance of the child. The editor sought to diminish the redundancy of the midwife’s two exclamations by separating them as much as possible. The first exclamation was placed immediately after the midwife’s arrival – as early as possible in the sequence of events that would culminate in her now redundant second exclamation, her original shout of joy in 19.12. The editor chose to resolve the problem of the proximity of the two statements by sacrificing the contextual harmony of the first exclamation. Why, however, go to such lengths to add a seemingly superfluous element? Perhaps the editor inserted the first exclamation in order both to de-emphasize the midwife’s now second exclamation – that before the insertion of the new material, formed the conclusion of her original story – and, further, to enhance the Doubting Salome episode that the editor appended as the culminating event of the complete redacted narrative.

But the presence of the midwife’s inserted exclamation causes a second anomaly. The immediacy (παραχρήμα) with which the cloud withdraws after her exclamation leaves the impression that it was waiting for her to finish speaking, a prospect lending more prestige than her words warrant. Closer examination of the lines preceding and following her statement (19.2 and 7, respectively) reveals that the editor simply inserted the new material into the middle of a verse of the midwife story without providing transitional elements such as those used to accommodate Joseph’s statement to its new environment. Lines 19.2 and 7 appear to be the two parts of the original verse that described the cloud at the midwife’s arrival and its immediate withdrawal thereafter. When rejoined, these lines state most plausibly: καὶ νεφέλη σκοτεινὴ ἐπισκιάζουσα τὸ σπήλαιον καὶ παραχρήμα ἡ νεφέλη ὑπεστέλλετο τοῦ σπηλαίου (‘and a dark cloud [was] covering the cave and immediately the cloud was drawn away from the cave’). Supporting this reconstruction: the withdrawal of the cloud is more natural after the arrival of the midwife than after her exclamation. Finally, the primary purpose of the midwife is to witness the miraculous events surrounding Jesus’ birth, and this is specifically what motivates her original exclamation in 19.12, ὅτι εἶδον τὸ καινὸν θέαμα τοῦτο (‘for I have seen this new spectacle’).

The secondary nature of Joseph’s statement and the midwife’s exclamation is obvious from the disruption their insertion brings to the midwife story. But both passages also exhibit an internal characteristic that further distinguishes them from the narrative material in which they are embedded and more closely associates them with each other. Both 18.5–9 and 19.3–6 contain terminology that bears a striking resemblance to Luke’s nativity story. In his statement to the midwife in 18.6, Joseph describes Mary as ἡ μεμνηστευμένη μοι (‘my betrothed’) recalling Lk. 2.5 where she is referred to as τῇ ἐμνηστευμένῃ αὐτῷ. The same wording, παρθένον ἐμνηστευμένην (‘a virgin betrothed’), appears also in Lk. 1.27, part of the annunciation story of 1.7–38 containing other correspondences with Joseph’s statement in *Prot. Jas.* 18.7–8: Μάρια ἐστὶν ἡ μεμνηστευμένη μοι, σύλλημμα ἔχει ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου (‘Mary is my betrothed; she has a conception from the Holy Spirit’). In Lk. 1.31 the archangel announces to Mary, συλλήμψη ἐν γαστρὶ (‘you

will conceive in the womb'), a phrase reflected in the term σύλλημμα ('conception') in 18.8. In this same line the phrase ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου ('from the Holy Spirit') replicates part of Gabriel's answer to Mary's question in Lk. 1.35 concerning how she, a virgin, will conceive: πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐπελεύσεται ἐπὶ σέ ('the Holy Spirit will come upon you').¹⁸

The second inserted passage also recalls elements from Luke's Gospel. The words ἐμεγαλύνθη ἡ ψυχὴ μου σήμερον ('my soul was magnified today') in 19.4 of our text closely parallel Mary's song in Lk. 1.46, μεγαλύνει ἡ ψυχὴ μου τὸν κύριον ('my soul magnifies the Lord'). In 19.5–6 also the phrase ὅτι εἶδον οἱ ὀφθαλμοί μου παράδοξα σήμερον, ὅτι σωτηρία τῷ Ἰσραὴλ γεγένηται ('for my eyes saw strange things today, for salvation has come to Israel') has connections with the song of Simeon in Lk. 2.30, ὅτι εἶδον οἱ ὀφθαλμοί μου τὸ σωτήριόν σου ('for my eyes have seen your salvation').¹⁹ The expression εἶδον οἱ ὀφθαλμοί μου παράδοξα σήμερον ('my eyes saw strange things today') in 19.5 parallels the crowd's response to Jesus' healing of the paralytic in Lk. 5.36, εἶδομεν παράδοξα σήμερον ('we have seen strange things today'). These clusters of correspondences indicate that both insertions into the story of the midwife, Joseph's statement to the midwife and the midwife's exclamation of wonder, were composed by the editor of the *Prot. Jas.* with strong Lukan influence. This conclusion finds further support in the resemblance between εἶδον οἱ ὀφθαλμοί μου παράδοξα ('my eyes saw strange things') in the midwife's exclamation in 19.5, and the angel's statement to Salome in 20.14, ὅσα εἶδες παράδοξα ('all the strange things you saw'), which occurs in the Doubting Salome episode itself. The similarity between these texts establishes contact between the two statements inserted into the midwife story and the Doubting Salome material appended to it. Thus, perhaps all the texts suspected of having been inserted into *Prot. Jas.* 19–20 were composed and added by the editor of the *Prot. Jas.*

18 The reference to the Holy Spirit in this passage raises an important question with regard to the overall composition of the *Prot. Jas.* I argue ('Dating', pp. 423–24) that in the annunciation story contained in *Prot. Jas.* 11.2–3 Mary receives a double visitation from an angel who reveals details to her about her conception. In these texts, which also were taken by our editor from Lk. 1.30–31, 35, and inserted into the underlying source of the *Prot. Jas.*, it appears that not only is the reference to the Holy Spirit suppressed, but on the contrary Mary is told, συλλήμψη ἐκ λόγου ('you will conceive from the Word'). In the annunciation of the angel to Joseph in *Prot. Jas.* 14, however, most of which is taken almost verbatim from Mt. 1.20–21, her conception is specified as being from the Holy Spirit, as is the case with the editorial insertion in *Prot. Jas.* 18. Thus Joseph knew about Mary's conception by the Holy Spirit in his statement to the midwife in *Prot. Jas.* 18.8 of our text because he had already been told this by the angel in *Prot. Jas.* 14. But how can Mary's conception by the Holy Spirit be suppressed in *Prot. Jas.* 11 and promoted in *Prot. Jas.* 14 and 18? It is beyond the scope of this study to resolve the complex problem of the composition of the *Prot. Jas.* But unless there is some underlying theological reason that Mary was told that she conceived by the λόγος in *Prot. Jas.* 11 while Joseph was told by an angel in *Prot. Jas.* 14 that her conception was by the Holy Spirit, one could speculate about the possibility of multiple editors of the *Prot. Jas.* On the other hand, it is not uncharacteristic for our editor to overlook such inconsistencies and redundancies.

19 See also Lk. 1.69, 71, 77; 19.9.

Outdoing the Midwife

The editor of the *Prot. Jas.* has skillfully prepared the way for the climactic event of the birth narrative by stitching the beginning of the Salome material (19.15–17) to the ending of the enhanced story of the midwife and so by subtly elaborating upon the καινὸν θέαμα ('new spectacle') that the midwife claims to have seen in 19.12. As noted above, the concluding shout of joy, ὡς μεγάλη ἡ σήμερον ἡμέρα, ὅτι εἶδον τὸ καινὸν θέαμα τοῦτο ('today is as a great day, because I saw this new spectacle') in 19.12 was the culminating event of the original story of the midwife. This exclamation – the midwife's second in the *Prot. Jas.* but her only speech in the original story – was her response to the events she witnessed at Jesus' birth: the dark cloud, the great light and the appearance of the child. But at the beginning of the appended Salome material the editor adroitly transforms the original 'new spectacle' – the miraculous nativity – into the modified 'new spectacle' of a virgin giving birth and remaining a virgin. The 'new spectacle' articulated by the midwife in 19.16–17 is now: καινὸν σοι θέαμα ἔχω ἐξηγήσασθαι. παρθένος ἐγέννησεν ἃ οὐ χωρεῖ ἡ φύσις αὐτῆς ('I have a new spectacle to report to you. A virgin gave birth to things which her nature does not allow'). It only remains for Salome to enter the cave and verify the perpetual virginity of Mary.

As with the two interpolated passages discussed above, the point at which the Doubting Salome story is attached to the story of the midwife shows signs of editorial activity. The editor facilitated the transition from the story of the midwife to the Doubting Salome episode by adding lines 19.13–14 to set the stage for Salome's entrance: καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ἐκ τοῦ σπηλαίου ἡ μαία, καὶ ἠπάντησεν αὐτῇ Σαλώμη ('and [the midwife] came out of the cave, and Salome met her'). Their redactional nature is betrayed by the tension between them and the midwife story regarding the question of whether the midwife actually entered the cave or witnessed the nativity from outside. When she appeared on the scene in 19.1, her position was described ambiguously as 'at the place (lit. in the place) of the cave' (ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τοῦ σπηλαίου). When she arrived the cave was already covered by the cloud, as indicated by the participle ἐπισκιάζουσα ('covering') in 19.2, νεφέλη σκοτεινὴ ἐπισκιάζουσα τὸ σπήλαιον ('a dark cloud [was] covering the cave'). The only opportune time for the midwife to have entered the cave would have been after the cloud's sudden withdrawal. But it is difficult to imagine her entering after the appearance inside the cave of a light unbearable to the eyes. And there is no hint in the ensuing text leading to her exit in 19.13 that she did so. The midwife therefore must have witnessed the 'new spectacle' of the birth of Jesus from outside the cave in the original story,²⁰ causing a conflict with the interpolated Salome material.

An Early Non-canonical Nativity Story?

Such expansion of an original story appears to have been the standard procedure of the editor of the *Prot. Jas.*,²¹ for the annunciation story was enhanced in the same

²⁰ This is supported by another very early reference to the absence of a midwife at the birth of Jesus, *Odes Sol.* 19.9.

²¹ The findings of this investigation corroborate the conclusions I presented in 'Annunciation' concerning an underlying, pre-existing 'early non-canonical annunciation story' identified in *Prot. Jas.* 9–11.

manner as the present nativity story. In that case also the evidence appeared only in the text preserved in P. Bodm. V and was discovered after the papyrus text was purified of the sometimes misguided corrections made by both ancient and modern writers.²² The reconstructed text of what seems to have been the original nativity story is presented below. This text removes from *Prot. Jas.* 18–20 the passages that were inserted by the editor: Joseph’s statement to the midwife in 18.5–9; the first exclamation of the midwife in 19.3–6; and the Salome material in 19.13–20.15. The story that emerges appears as a coherent progression building to a climax. The protagonist, a midwife, fulfills her purpose, and that of the story as well, by her witness to Jesus’ miraculous birth and by her verbal acknowledgment of it. The editor transformed this narrative into an entirely different story with a new protagonist – Salome – and a new purpose – the verification of Mary’s *post-partum* virginity.

18.1 καὶ εὗρεν ἐκεῖ σπήλαιον καὶ εἰσήγαγεν αὐτὴν
 2 καὶ παρέστησεν αὐτὴν τοὺς υἱοὺς αὐτοῦ
 3 καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ζητῆσαι μαίαν ἑβραίαν ἐν χωρᾷ Βηθλεέμ.
 4 καὶ εὐρών ἤνεγκεν ἀπὸ ὄρεινῆς
 19.1 καὶ ἔστησεν ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τοῦ σπηλαίου.
 2 καὶ νεφέλη σκοτεινὴ ἐπισκιάζουσα τὸ σπήλαιον
 7 καὶ παραχρῆμα ἡ νεφέλη ὑπεστέλλετο τοῦ σπηλαίου
 8 καὶ ἐφάνη φῶς μέγα ἐν τῷ σπηλαίῳ ὥστε τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς μὴ φέρειν.
 9 καὶ πρὸς ὀλίγον τὸ φῶς ἐκεῖνο ὑπεστέλλετο ἕως ἐφάνη βρέφος.
 10 καὶ ἦλθεν καὶ ἔλαβε μασθὸν ἐκ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ Μαρίας.
 11 καὶ ἀνεβόησεν ἡ Μαία,
 12 ‘ὡς μεγάλη ἡ σήμερον ἡμέρα, ὅτι εἶδον τὸ καινὸν θέαμα τοῦτο.’

18.1 And he found a cave there and led her in
 2 and sat her with his sons,
 3 and he went out to seek a Hebrew midwife in the country of Bethlehem.
 4 Finding (one), he brought (her), from the mountain region
 19.1 and stood her at the place (lit. in the place) of the cave.
 2 And a dark cloud (was) covering the cave,
 7 and immediately the cloud was drawn away from the cave,
 8 and a great light appeared in the cave so that eyes could not bear (it).
 9 And for a little (time) that light was drawn away until a child appeared.
 10 And it came and took a breast from his mother Mary.
 11 And the midwife shouted,
 12 ‘Today is as a great day, because I saw this new spectacle.’

Whence Salome?

What motivated our editor to introduce the Salome episode – and thereby the *post-partum* virginity of Mary – into the *Prot. Jas.*? Was it a spontaneous expression of the editor’s own theological perspective, or a reaction to currents in the Jewish, ‘heretical’ Christian, or even Greco-Roman worlds? But first, who was Salome? Bauckham argues persuasively that our Salome was one of the two daughters

²² Both investigations were based on the presupposition that – given its proximity in time to the actual composition of the *Prot. Jas.* and the unique nature of its text – P. Bodm. V may preserve traces of the original editor’s work.

of Joseph – the sister (or half-sister) of Jesus – and so not the disciple of Jesus mentioned in Mk 15.40 and 16.1.²³ He rightly notes the similarities between the abrupt appearances of both Salome and James in *Prot. Jas.* 25.1; moreover, the absence of any editorial attempt further to identify either figure implies that ‘in the circle from which the *Protevangelium* comes’ Salome was known as a sister of Jesus in the same way that James was known as his brother.²⁴ This interpretation finds support in the identification of Salome as a sister of Jesus by the fourth-century Christian Epiphanius²⁵ whom Bauckham believes to have derived his information from ‘some apocryphal source which is no longer extant, probably one which bore some relation to the *Protevangelium* of James’.²⁶ But Bauckham’s perception of the *Prot. Jas.* as a unified late-second-century work does not permit him to explore the Salome reference in *Prot. Jas.* 19–20 from a source-critical perspective.²⁷

Could the Salome story have been created as anti-heretical polemic? It is surprising that the editor of the *Prot. Jas.* seems unaware of, or unconcerned by, the possibly Docetic implications of the midwife story. The physical aspects of the birth process are de-emphasized throughout the original story. The child simply appears out of the gradually fading great light. And Mary’s seemingly dispassionate statement in 17.3 before giving birth, ὁ ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐπιείγει με προελθεῖν (‘he who is in me presses me to come forth’), need not imply painful labor.²⁸ Mary’s one statement that suggests discomfort is 17.2, where Joseph sees her στυγνήν (‘sad’) and thinks, ἴσως τὸ ἐν αὐτῇ χειμάζει αὐτήν (‘perhaps the child is causing her distress’). But Mary informs him that her sadness is due to her vision of a people crying and mourning, and therefore not to labor pains. Indeed, the addition of the *virginitas post partum* element seems to enhance the story’s Docetic nature. Salome’s tactile examination must have revealed Mary’s sexual organs still to be intact as if the child never really passed through. Since the editor of the *Prot. Jas.* embraces both canonical and non-canonical material – the latter of which otherwise might be considered heretical – dogmatic concerns vis-à-vis another form of Christianity, particularly Docetism, may have influenced the Doubting Salome story.

Another possible motivation for the Doubting Salome story may stem from contemporary medical discussions. Certainly one of the editor’s primary concerns was to authenticate the *post-partum* virginity of Mary in the most decisive manner possible, that is, by a gynecological examination.²⁹ There were two significant

23 Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 189–92. Bauckham points out that ‘the *Protevangelium*’s readers would hardly expect to find [the disciple Salome] loitering outside a cave on the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Jesus’ (*Jude*, p. 40). But one of the sisters of Jesus would naturally be traveling with the family on their journey to Bethlehem.

24 Bauckham, *Jude*, p. 41.

25 *Pan.* 78.8. Along with Jesus’ four brothers, Epiphanius names καὶ δύο θυγατέρες, ἡ Μαρία καὶ ἡ Σαλώμη καλουμένη (‘and two sisters, Maria and the one called Salome’). Cf. 78.9; *Ancoratus* 60.1.

26 Bauckham, *Jude*, p. 37.

27 Bauckham is one of a number of scholars who follow de Strycker’s interpretation of the *Prot. Jas.*

28 This also finds support in the *Odes Sol.* 19.8.

29 Cf. Zervos, ‘Caught’, pp. 84–88. Ann E. Hanson points out that ‘midwives and wet nurses managed childbirth in most instances’, whereas Greek medical writers derived their information

developments in Greco-Roman gynecological thought at this very time that may reflect directly upon our subject: one regarding the anatomy of the virgin female, and the other concerning the advisability of permanent virginity for women. Both developments found their expression in the *Γυναικείων* ('Of Things Pertaining to Women') written by the revolutionary second-century CE physician Soranus of Ephesus.³⁰ Known more commonly as the 'Gynecology' of Soranus, this book has been acclaimed as 'the most authoritative compendium of developments in ancient gynecological theory and practice after the Hippocratic writings on the same subject in the fifth and early fourth centuries B.C.E.'³¹ Soranus himself is a distinguished representative of the medical sect of the Methodists, 'the sectarian success story of early imperial Rome'.³² In accordance with his tendency to depart from classical norms, Soranus seems to have reversed the opinion prevailing since the Hippocratic writings with regard to each of these two developments.

The first development – regarding the anatomy of the virgin female – relates to diverse descriptions of Salome's examination found among the Greek MSS variants of the *Prot. Jas.* Only about 15 per cent specify Salome's use of her finger or hand; the vast majority of witnesses describe a more or less close visual inspection ('unless I observe'; 'unless I examine'; 'unless I take note of').³³ But what was the physical sign of virginity for which they were looking or feeling? The obvious answer is the ὑμῆν ('hymen'), the membrane widely believed to seal the sexual organs of virginal females, and whose presence has become the focal point in popular culture as the primary proof of a woman's virginal status.

Ann E. Hanson and Giulia Sissa debate whether the Hippocratic corpus accepted the existence of the hymen.³⁴ Finding no reference to a 'membranous veil' in these

on such women's issues as pregnancy, birth and the *post-partum* period from women patients and their caretakers. See her 'Obstetrics in the *Hippocratic Corpus* and Soranus', *Forum: Trends in Experimental and Clinical Medicine* 4.1 (1994), pp. 93–110.

30 On Soranus see Ann E. Hanson and Monica Green, 'Soranus of Ephesus: *methodicorum princeps*', *ANRW*, 37.2, pp. 984–1075; also Rebecca Fleming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 228–46, gives an excellent summary of Soranus's work within the framework of the Methodist sect. The edition of O. Temkin, *Soranus' Gynecology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), is a handy translation.

31 Jody Rubin Pinault, 'The Medical Case for Virginity in the Early Second Century C.E.: Soranus of Ephesus', *Gynecology* 1.32', *Helios* 19 (1992), pp. 123–39.

32 Fleming, *Medicine*, p. 228; cf. Temkin, *Gynecology*, p. xxix. Fleming, p. 128, states that 'the centre of temporal gravity for the texts within the sectarian framework lies in the mid-second century AD', i.e., precisely within the time frame of the composition of the *Prot. Jas.*

33 This information was gleaned from two unpublished doctoral dissertations of Duke University, Boyd L. Daniels, 'The Greek Manuscript Tradition of the *Protevangeliu[m] Jacobi*' (PhD diss., The Duke University Graduate School, 1956), a massive three-volume listing of variant readings from 86 unpublished Greek MS(S), and George Themelis Zervos, 'Prolegomena to a Critical Edition of the *Genesis Marias (Protevangeliu[m] Jacobi): The Greek Manuscripts*' (PhD diss., The Duke University Graduate School, 1986), a similar listing of readings from 45 more MS(S) of the *Prot. Jas.* that were not available to Daniels. Cf. Zervos, 'Caught', pp. 91–94 and associated footnotes.

34 David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlen (eds.), *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990). A.E. Hanson's contribution, 'The Medical Writers' Woman', is found on pp. 309–38; Giulia Sissa's 'Maidenhood without Maidenhead: The Female Body in Ancient Greece' is on pp. 339–64.

earlier Greek medical writers, in Aristotle, and even in Soranus, Sissa asserts that ‘the most significant trait of Greek virginity is the absence of a maidenhead’.³⁵ Sissa notes the remarkable contrast between the Greek view and that of ‘Christian Latin literature’ exemplified by Ambrose and Augustine: ‘in Rome virginity implied the presence of an anatomical veil, a deployed bit of tissue’.³⁶ Providing a quotation from Augustine in which an *Obstetrix* (Latin: midwife) is able to destroy the virginity of a girl inadvertently while verifying her virginity,³⁷ Sissa rightly concludes: ‘that membrane whose rupture amounts to a defloration seems in fact to be a materialization of *virginitas*’.³⁸

Hanson, on the other hand, views the question of the hymen from the broader perspective of the images of the sexual organs of virgin girls on the popular level and in the medical writers.³⁹ She argues that according to the Hippocratic work, *Diseases of Young Girls*, the uterus of a young girl is ‘a sealed-off space to be opened by the first intercourse’.⁴⁰ Further, there exists ‘a seal or stopper at the mouth of the young girl’s uterus’⁴¹ causing blockage of fluids that at the onset of puberty must be discharged to prevent serious illness. The cure for this ‘disease’ was sexual intercourse and pregnancy. Thus for a woman to be healthy and to be a woman – to fulfill her primary purpose – she had to have intercourse, conceive and bear children.⁴² Soranus’s new image of woman constitutes a radical departure from some aspects of the Hippocratic model, including the problem of the hymen’s existence. He states, ‘it is a mistake to assume that a thin membrane grows across the vagina, dividing it, and that this membrane causes pain when it bursts in defloration or if menstruation occurs too quickly’.⁴³ Sissa joins Hanson in praising Soranus, characterizing him as one of the ‘lay physicians, the enlightened natural historians ... who denounce belief in the maidenhead as a simplistic fallacy, a male delusion ... a fantasy that must have been generated by the competitive masculine spirit, but ... has been nursed traditionally by women, themselves the trusty guardians of feminine cloisters, the professional performers of the ordeal by the finger’.⁴⁴

The disagreement between Soranus and his predecessors concerning the existence of the hymen is directly related to their equally contradictory opinions on the second

35 Sissa, ‘Maidenhood’, p. 360; cf. p. 352, ‘In the eyes and hands of Greek practitioners the female sexual organs were not originally sealed by a membranous veil. In the anatomy that can be reconstructed from the Hippocratic medical writings, there is no indication of a *hymēn* that belongs to the *parthenos*. In spite of his customary analytic and terminological precision, Aristotle himself never describes a membrane located at the opening of the virgin’s sexual orifice.’

36 Sissa, ‘Maidenhood’, pp. 361–62.

37 Sissa, ‘Maidenhood’, p. 362 n. 37. *Civ. Dei* 1.18, ‘Obstetrix virginis cuiusdam integritatem manu velut explorans sive malevolentia sive inscitia sive casu, dum inspicit, perdidit’ (‘A midwife, while exploring by hand the integrity of a certain virgin – be it by malice, ignorance, or accident – destroyed it while inspecting it’).

38 Sissa, ‘Maidenhood’, pp. 361–62.

39 Hanson, ‘Medical Writers’ Woman’, p. 324.

40 Hanson, ‘Medical Writers’ Woman’, p. 330.

41 Hanson, ‘Medical Writers’ Woman’, p. 324.

42 Pinault, ‘Medical’, p. 129, considers the *Diseases of Young Girls* to be an instrument for the socialization of young girls ‘to marry at the proper time, that is, at menarche, by threatening them with the physical dangers they would risk if they did not’.

43 Temkin, *Gynecology*, p. 15.

44 Sissa, ‘Maidenhood’, p. 363.

development: the advisability of permanent virginity for women. Hanson illuminates this subject by viewing Soranus's work within its larger context of the cities of the Hellenistic world and Rome.⁴⁵ Women are more free, more public and more involved in society; they are becoming more like men. Their similarity to men has by now been verified through medical dissections. Women also begin to assume the 'manly' characteristic of sexual independence. Their health no longer depends on their engagement in sexual activity. They now know that they can live a celibate life and not become physically ill and die as a consequence. It is precisely on this point that Soranus again reverses a Hippocratic opinion found in *Diseases of Young Girls*: he teaches that διηνεκῆς παρθενία ('permanent virginity') is more healthy for women than childbearing and asserts, 'We, however, contend that permanent virginity is healthful, because intercourse is harmful in itself.'⁴⁶

Pinault summarizes the great importance of Soranus's position:

Soranus' view that lifelong virginity is more healthful for a woman than any of the reproductive functions is of utmost importance because, first, it suggests an early parallel to Christianity's exaltation of virginity as the ideal state of the human body, although in purely medical terms, and, second, it was a complete departure from a recurring polarity in Hippocratic medicine. This polarity equated women's health with intercourse and child-bearing, on the one hand, and women's illnesses with virginity and celibacy, on the other.⁴⁷

Could our editor have derived from these contemporary medical developments the inspiration for the Salome story? There is good reason to doubt this connection. Logistically, it is unlikely that an eastern Christian would have been familiar with Soranus's revolutionary theories, and Pinault argues that other medical writers 'did not repeat his endorsement of lifelong virginity for women, even though they copied and paraphrased other sections of the *Gynecology* with great enthusiasm in the following centuries'.⁴⁸ The relevance of Soranus for our purposes is devalued even further by Pinault's assertion that his passage on permanent virginity is not a reflection of actual practice: 'Soranus included his endorsement of lifelong virginity in the *Gynecology* more for the sake of the theoretical controversy he was engaged in than as a practical prescriptive for his female Roman patients'.⁴⁹ Sissa contributes to this argument the Greek disdain for physical tests of virginity such as those in the Doubting Salome episode: 'The Greeks seem to have had no interest in digital inspection and to have been indifferent to the demonstrative value of ordeals – they counted on observation *in flagrante* or on the arrival of a *parthenios*, an unexpected birth, as the only infallible evidence.'⁵⁰

Soranus's rejection of Hippocratic tradition and endorsement of permanent virginity was only part of a larger trend, 'a reflection, in medical terms, of an ascetic attitude toward the body that was widespread in the early Empire'.⁵¹ But concerning

45 Hanson, 'Medical Writers' Woman', pp. 330–34.

46 Temkin, *Gynecology*, p. 29; cf. Pinault, 'Medical', p. 123.

47 Pinault, 'Medical', p. 129.

48 Pinault, 'Medical', pp. 123–24.

49 Pinault, 'Medical', pp. 130–31.

50 Sissa, 'Maidenhood', p. 358.

51 Pinault, 'Medical', p. 133, and see p. 134, on 'the growing aversion to all things material, including the human body, that swept over the Mediterranean basin between the second to fourth centuries C.E.'.

our present investigation, Soranus expressed what Pinault describes as ‘an emerging *zeitgeist* of asceticism aimed for the first time at women’, and ‘a new interest in female as well as male celibacy, which gave a new status to women in non-reproductive roles’.⁵² While asceticism and alienation from the body were widespread phenomena among the philosophical schools of the early Roman Empire – even the Jews had their Essenes and the Christians their Encratites⁵³ – in the final analysis the purpose of the digital examination in the *Prot. Jas.* was primarily dogmatic: to authenticate the editor’s belief in the *post-partum* virginity of Mary, and to do so in the most graphic manner possible. This attempt to substantiate a theological concept physiologically by establishing the presence of a membranous vaginal seal suggests a response aimed at a distinct target.⁵⁴ While our Salome story may be viewed within the wider context of Greco-Roman medicine, it would be better to seek the source of the digital examination in the ideological warfare being waged between Christians and their adversaries over the pedigree of Jesus of Nazareth.

Could the Doubting Salome episode have been introduced in response to criticism of the legitimacy of Jesus’ birth? The ambiguity of the canonical infancy narratives certainly allows suspicions to be raised about Jesus’ parentage. And this problem is exacerbated by the difficulty of reconciling the virginal conception of Jesus with the canonical genealogies, both of which trace Jesus’ lineage through Joseph and not Mary. Thus, Jane Schaberg asserts that the *Prot. Jas.* was written to clarify the ambiguities present in the canonical accounts and to counter those whose reading of the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives suggested that Jesus was the product of sexual relations between Mary and either Joseph or someone else.⁵⁵ For Schaberg, ‘the author of *Proto-James* will not allow these readings, but offers the one correct reading of Matthew and Luke, whose texts have been inserted into a broader story of the life of Mary, and forcibly harmonized, with the gaps plugged up’.⁵⁶ Episode after episode in the life of Mary as presented in the *Prot. Jas.* displays an ‘obsession with the physical virginity of Mary’⁵⁷ and confirms that the child she is carrying is not the result of sexual contact between her and Joseph or anyone else.

For Schaberg, the aim of this ‘obsessive concentration on the virginity of Mary in the *Prot. Jas.*’ is not to glorify Mary or Jesus, but rather to respond to alternative – and, no doubt, less complimentary – stories about Jesus’ conception.⁵⁸ Specifically, ‘*Proto-James* replies to allegations such as those raised by the Syrian Jew in Celsus’s *Logos Alethes (True Doctrine)*, written around 178), as reported by Origen in his work *Against Celsus* 1.7, 28, 32, 39, 69, written around 248’.⁵⁹ Origen gives the following elements of ‘the alternative story told by Celsus’s Jew’ that pertain to our subject:⁶⁰

52 Pinault, ‘Medical’, p. 131.

53 The Syrian Encratite communities may have provided an appropriate matrix within which asceticism could have been expressed in the form of a theological concept such as the *post-partum* virginity of Mary.

54 Schaberg, ‘Infancy of Mary’, pp. 718–19.

55 Schaberg, ‘Infancy of Mary’, p. 719.

56 Schaberg, ‘Infancy of Mary’, p. 719.

57 Schaberg, ‘Infancy of Mary’, p. 720.

58 Schaberg, ‘Infancy of Mary’, pp. 718–19.

59 Schaberg, ‘Infancy of Mary’, p. 718.

60 Schaberg, ‘Infancy of Mary’, p. 719.

Jesus himself fabricated his own virgin birth (ὡς πλασαμένου αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐκ παρθένου γένεσιν), Jesus was from a Jewish village and from a poor, local spinster woman (ἐκ κώμης αὐτοῦ γεγονέναι ἰουδαϊκῆς καὶ ἀπὸ γυναικὸς ἐγγχωρίου καὶ πενιχρᾶς καὶ χερνήτιδος), his mother was cast out by her husband, a carpenter by trade, having been convicted as an adulteress (αὐτὴν καὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ γήμαντος, τέκτονος τὴν τέχνην ὄντος, ἐξεῶσθαι ἐλεγχθεῖσαν ὡς μεμοιχευμένην), and thrown out by her husband and wandering around dishonorably, she secretly gave birth to Jesus (ἐκβληθεῖσα ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς καὶ πλανωμένη ἀτίμως σκότιον ἐγέννησεν τὸν Ἰησοῦν).⁶¹ Based upon its overlapping material with the story preserved by Origen, Schaberg assumes that the *Prot. Jas.* was written as a response to material similar to that in the statement of Celsus's Jew.⁶² Although this assumption virtually removes for her the *Prot. Jas.* from further consideration as a factor in Mariological development before the late second century, she does leave open the possibility that the material articulated by Celsus's Jew was 'drawn from older sources'.⁶³

Early as it is, the witness of Celsus's Jew still represents a later stage in a process that may have begun even before the circulation of Matthew and Luke. Both Schaberg and Gerd Lüdemann carry this inquiry a step farther back in time by speculating that the canonical stories themselves may have been responses to the earlier tradition – or reality – of the illegitimacy of Jesus.⁶⁴ If true, the so-called 'Jewish calumnies' against Jesus are but accurate reports that Christians countered by inventing the virgin birth.⁶⁵ Although their understanding of the *Prot. Jas.* as a unified, late-second-century work prevents them from considering this document as a witness to early Mariology,⁶⁶ Schaberg and Lüdemann's arguments for the existence of a pre-canonical illegitimacy tradition would find support in the results of our source- and redaction-critical analysis of the *Prot. Jas.* If the *Prot. Jas.* does constitute an expansion of pre-existing materials, then these materials must have been composed at a time so early, or in a place so far removed, that their authors either were not aware of, or deliberately ignored, the not-yet-canonical Gospels. Thus, not only should the original nativity story found in *Prot. Jas.* 19–20 be regarded as another early Christian response to the tradition – or reality – of the illegitimacy of Jesus, but also

61 See Julius Pollux, *Onomasticon* 3:21, where σκότιος is referred as παρθενίας δ' ὃν τις ἐκ τῆς δοκούσης εἶναι παρθένου, οὐ νόμῳ συνοικήσας, ἐποίησατο, καὶ σκότιος ὃν ἐγέννησέ τις λαθῶν ἢ ἔτεκέ τις λαθοῦσα.

62 Schaberg, 'Infancy of Mary', pp. 718–19.

63 Schaberg, 'Infancy of Mary', p. 719. See John Granger Cook, *The Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), for a most helpful discussion of the date of Celsus's *Logos Alethes*; cf. Michael Frede, 'Celsus Philosophus Platonicus', *ANRW* 36.7, pp. 5188–90, who carefully reevaluates the evidence for the date of Celsus's work and sets a *terminus post quem* as early as 160 CE.

64 See Schaberg's landmark *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987; repr. New York: Crossroad, 1990); Gerd Lüdemann, *Virgin Birth?* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), pp. 58–60; Zervos, 'Caught', pp. 110–14 (section on 'Was Mary the Adulteress?').

65 Note that Celsus's Jew stated that Jesus himself invented his own virgin birth, see above.

66 See Schaberg's references to the 'author' of the *Prot. Jas.*; it would be more accurate to refer to this person as an editor who composed this document by adding certain elements to pre-existing materials. See Lüdemann, *Virgin Birth?*, p. 41, and Bauckham, *Jude*.

the historical significance of the independent nativity tradition of the *Prot. Jas.* would be comparable to that of canonical Matthew and Luke.

It is difficult to regard the *Prot. Jas.* as a mere clarification of Matthew and Luke when it contains elements, such as the birth of Jesus in a cave outside of Bethlehem, that so blatantly contradict fundamental canonical traditions. And if, as is often presumed, the *Prot. Jas.* is dependent upon Matthew and Luke, why do the canonical materials occur consistently in sections of the text of the *Prot. Jas.* that are identifiable as interpolations?⁶⁷ Our examination reveals that the ‘obsessive concentration on the virginity of Mary’ in the *Prot. Jas.* is primarily on Mary’s *ante-partum* virginity; the only exception is the Doubting Salome episode with its concern for *post-partum* virginity. In this regard it is remarkable that, although Celsus’s Jew specifically mentions the virgin birth, he gives no hint of the concept of *post-partum* or perpetual virginity. Unless we entertain the unlikely prospect that Celsus would respond vehemently to the virgin birth of Jesus and ignore the even more vulnerable target of Mary’s *post-partum* virginity, we must conclude that Celsus was unaware of the later idea of *post-partum* virginity; he reacts to the standard tradition of the virgin birth of Jesus as presented in Matthew, Luke and the original source(s) of the *Prot. Jas.*, the Γένεσις Μαρίας and the midwife story in *Prot. Jas.* 19–20.

There appear to have been three separate sets of writings produced partly as a reaction to the illegitimacy of Jesus, whether real or perceived. But less clear is our editor’s motivation for including the Salome episode. If the illegitimacy of Jesus was the primary catalyst for the nativity stories of Matthew, Luke and *Prot. Jas.* 19–20, it does not appear to have been so for Doubting Salome. Since concern for the virginal status of Mary after the birth of Jesus in the earliest sources seems to be restricted to this witness in the *Prot. Jas.* and the brief reference in the *Ascension of Isaiah*,⁶⁸ it is difficult to determine what could have precipitated the creation of the *post-partum* virginity of Jesus’ mother.⁶⁹ If the *Prot. Jas.* is a positive dogmatic statement, addressed to other Christians and favorable to a Docetic viewpoint,⁷⁰ we might therefore tentatively place the *Sitz im Leben* of the Doubting Salome episode, not in the ideological battle among Christians, Jews and Greeks over the virgin birth, but in the dogmatic debate between rival Christian sects over the reality and the specific manner of his ‘incarnation’.

Conclusions

Ἄσπιλε, ἀμόλυντε, ἄφθορε, ἄχραντε, ἀγνή παρθένε . . .
 μὴ βδελύξῃ με τὸν ἁμαρτωλόν, τὸν ἐναγῆ,
 τὸν αἰσχροῖς λογισμοῖς καὶ λόγοις καὶ πράξεσι
 ὅλον ἑμαυτὸν ἀχρειώσαντα

Oh, unstained, unspoil, uncorrupted, untouched, pure virgin . . .

67 See the publications of the present writer cited above.

68 This is confirmed by the absence of this element from both the Γένεσις Μαρίας and the statements of Celsus’s Jew.

69 This discussion of the purpose of the various redactional elements helps resolve the confusion expressed by other writers who attempt to identify the purpose of the *Prot. Jas.* as a unified composition, cf. Ronald F. Hock’s *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (The Scholars Bible, 2; Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1995), pp. 15–20.

70 One is reminded of the recipients of the invective of 1 Jn 4.1–6, the ‘false prophets’ who do not confess Jesus Christ ἐν σαρκὶ ἐληλυθότα (‘having come in the flesh’).

be not disgusted with me, the sinner, the accursed,
 who with disgraceful thoughts, words, and deeds
 have rendered myself completely worthless.⁷¹

Whatever the ideological source of Mary's *post-partum* virginity, the image of the perpetual virgin would influence countless women. This influence is not due to the theories concerning the health benefits of 'perpetual virginity' or to speculation about Mary's sexuality in the discussions over the legitimacy of Jesus' conception. It appears rather to have been precipitated by an otherwise inconsequential event: a nameless, faceless person, a redactor, added the Doubting Salome story to an existing document. And because of the widespread dissemination of its teachings,⁷² this apocryphal document – augmented by Salome's certification of the *post-partum* virginity of Mary – played a central role in creating the ideal of the absolutely pure, virginal woman. This image was then relentlessly impressed upon the faithful by the Church and by the society saturated with its teachings, by ritualistic life, festal calendar, services, icons and hymnology, and more directly by priests presenting the stories of the *Prot. Jas.* as if they were gospel truth and extolling the 'ever-virgin' Mary as the model of female perfection.

With all her progress toward dogmatic sexual purity, the actual personality of Mary becomes increasingly one-sided; her ever-increasing virginity becomes the essential element in her character.⁷³ Mary has no mind of her own and is fully obedient to the divine and human male authorities that control her life. Significant events happen all around, and to, Mary whether or not she is aware of, understands, or consents to them. Mary contributes very little to the birth process itself. She has no apparent labor pain; Jesus just appears out of the cloud and light. She complacently submits to Salome's embarrassing examination. Since Mary's virginal status is strictly a function of the state of her hymen – and is completely independent of any quality that she herself possesses – her virginity is devoid of any moral value. Always sheltered and protected from all temptation, Mary is never even aware of the alternative. It is indicative that Schaberg considers Mary's role in the *Prot. Jas.* to be an 'expansion and elaboration' of her depiction in Luke, while at the same time and in the same document Mary herself is 'reduced and deformed'.⁷⁴ In becoming a divinity, Mary loses her humanity. The icon of the 'ever-virgin' represents, at best, the degradation of the human woman, at worst, her complete rejection.⁷⁵

71 With these words generations of Eastern Christians have sung praises to the icon of the ἄειπαρθενος ('ever-virgin') Mary in the Akathistos Hymn to the Mother of God.

72 Over 150 known Greek MSS containing the *Prot. Jas.*, and the numerous translations into Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, etc., witness to the popularity of this document in the East. And although the *Prot. Jas.* was banned by the Gelasian Decree, its teachings were made available in the West through popular documents such as the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.

73 See Schaberg's excellent and insightful discussion of the character of the apocryphal Mary, 'Infancy of Mary', pp. 721–22. In my 'Annunciation', pp. 671–74, I also detected the same generally flat character of the figure of Mary in the early non-canonical annunciation story.

74 Schaberg, 'Infancy of Mary', p. 721. Schaberg speaks of 'a deforming constriction of the Lukan character of Mary, the dehumanizing of Jesus, and the despotization of God'.

75 On a practical level, the moral standards for women represented by the *Prot. Jas.* represent a quantum leap forward even beyond that of pre-marital virginity. It no longer suffices for a woman to forgo sex before marriage in order to remain 'pure' for her husband, or, in the case of Mary, to remain pure for the birth of the Messiah. Now the woman is measured against the ideal of virginity as a permanent state.

Was this object of reverence bordering on idolatry for so many generations nothing but a shadow, a gross fabrication by unidentified individuals who impressed their myth upon countless millions? Is it possible that so many Christians have worshiped this icon in vain? If so, much could be said for the benefits that women – and men – might derive from the fall of this dehumanized, asexual idol. If this myth is exposed as a fabrication of dubious origin, women would have nothing to measure themselves against but themselves. And they could not but find themselves in a more favorable position for their effort. And were men to attend to the needs of real women – many of whom have no choice concerning the bearing of children or submission to suffering – so much the better. What is so wrong with the mother of Jesus being a normal woman, an unwed mother, a single parent, a rape victim, or even an adulteress? In short, what is wrong with Mary being human, especially if her becoming human has the effect of elevating, instead of degrading, humanity? If Mary becomes human again, so much the better for all of us. Her apotheosis was largely brought about in support of the apotheosis of Jesus himself. If Jesus also can be more closely identified with humanity – as he was before the canonical Gospel writers and the editor of the *Prot. Jas.* transformed him and his mother into objects of worship and models of an unattainable ideal – then those who claim to follow him can perhaps also become more humane.

Epilogue

I recently inherited a small stone house on a tiny Greek island. This was the house of my maternal great-grandmother, Crystallo, who shared its 500-square-foot, single room with five children and an abusive alcoholic husband. There were no ‘women’s rights’ in that society, so she had no legal recourse against her verbal, physical and mental maltreatment at the hands of the violent man with whom she was destined to live in such painfully close quarters.⁷⁶ There was little support from family or neighbors who knew what was happening but usually would not intrude because such behavior was accepted, even expected, in that culture. She could not seek relief from the Church. Divorce was not an option. Paul himself had stopped just a few miles away on the next island. But Paul’s own misogynistic tendencies would only further amplify those already existing. For it was Paul’s authority behind the words read to women such as my great-grandmother at their wedding sacrament in Church: ‘Wives should . . . subject themselves to their husbands . . . because the man is the head of the woman . . . so women should be (subject) to their husbands in all things.’⁷⁷ These negative Christian perceptions regarding women were intensified by the even more extreme layer of misogyny imposed on Greek society by the five centuries of Islamic Ottoman rule. Century after century, successive waves of patriarchal religions held these women in bondage.

⁷⁶ The terrible toll that the years of private and public abuse and humiliation took on unfortunate women such as these is well illustrated in the two existing pictures of my great-grandmother, in which she is depicted as wearing a robe with a cowl over her head. In the first, as a young woman, she is serene and dignified. But in the second, from her later years, her gaunt face betrays a haunting sadness and weariness.

⁷⁷ Eph. 5.21–24. The woman’s obligation to be obedient was not predicated upon whether or not her husband loved her as set forth in the following verses, 5.25–33.

Traditional Greek Orthodox women⁷⁸ knew their place.⁷⁹ They were socialized to serve, to take care of the needs of everyone else first, and their own last, to be the submissive wife, the selfless mother, the churchwoman, the virginal icon. When their husband died, they would wear black for the remainder of their lives. Remarriage was frowned upon. Whereas Roman Catholic girls in the West learned their station in Christian society through very well-organized, efficient Catholic schools run by priests and nuns, Greek Orthodox girls were trained by their family, their parish priests and church community, but, most especially, by the example of preceding generations of female ancestors. Thus was the tradition perpetuated generation after generation, passed down from mother to daughter until only recently, when Greek women living in modern progressive societies have begun the long, painful process of liberation from the fetters of the patriarchal religions. My great-grandmother Crystallo taught my grandmother, Charikleia, who was born in the Ottoman Empire but emigrated to the United States in 1920. The colony of Greek islanders in which she lived in Tarpon Springs, Florida, was insulated from developments in American society. My grandmother taught the old ways to my mother, Crystallo (Dolly), who herself lived impeccably by the traditional customs. But it was my mother who broke the mold by insisting that my sister, Charikleia (Harriet), obtain an education so as to be able to support herself and not be dependent upon her husband for her sustenance.

The system that robbed women of their lives was – and in many places still is – so deeply ingrained in society that it is not easily overturned. The image of Mary as the archetypal self-sacrificing woman functioned within this system partially as a mechanism of control over women. For it was this image, worshiped and emulated by women throughout their lives, that also taught them to be submissive: ‘Let it be done to me according to thy word’ (Lk. 1.38). But one might also argue that this image of Mary served women well as a model of dignified acquiescence in the face of the overwhelming power wielded by the patriarchal religions. As more fortunate women who have been liberated from this authority strive to construct their new icon of the feminine ideal – that is, if they want an icon at all – high on the list of virtues should be the exemplary fortitude displayed by their courageous predecessors under the most difficult circumstances. This inner strength enabled them to survive, keep their families together and raise their children. The search for a new female model of divinity will discover no more godlike quality than this very human virtue. If women seek a new goddess to worship, they need look no further than themselves.

78 The term ‘Greek Orthodox’ is used here by convention only. Hellenism and what is known as ‘Orthodox Christianity’ are, in fact, two mutually exclusive ideologies. There is little similarity between the free scientific investigative spirit of Hellenism and the rigid, oppressive tradition of ‘Orthodoxy’, an inflexible, dogmatic system that countenances no change, no questioning of its teachings and authority.

79 On a recent visit to Greece I attended a traditional service in a church dedicated to the ‘Virgin’ Mary, in which the women typically were seated on the left side of the church and the men on the right. During the common recitation of the Nicene Creed and the Lord’s Prayer – the only opportunities that the priests offer the laity to speak during the service – it was the women who, in unison, spoke loudest, proudly confessing the tradition that represses them. At a Clergy–Laity conference of the American Greek Orthodox Church I heard a priest exclaim how fortunate we were that ‘our women’ were not participating in the women’s liberation movement and were not agitating for equality as were their counterparts from other faiths and cultures.