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 (Prot. Jas.), is a NT Apocryphon whose primary concern is the person of Mary. The other document, the Ascension of Isaiah (Ascen. Isa.), is commonly categorized as an OT Pseudepigraphon² 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 Ascen. Isa. and the Prot. Jas. 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 Prot. Jas. has resulted in the entrenchment and perpetuation of an older scholarly consensus of opinion with regard to its date and compositional character⁴ that has effectively neutralized the perceived importance of this document for the study of early Christian thought. Hence the Prot. Jas. 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

---

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.
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 non-canonical document \textit{vis-a\-vis} its canonical and, in this case, non-canonical counterparts. This writer has been a φωνή βοῶντος ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ in just such a process for the past two decades with regard to the \textit{Prot. Jas.}\(^6\) In the present paper I will support the position that the \textit{Prot. Jas.} (or one of its source documents), which has been ignored as a factor in the critical assessment of the Marian traditions in the \textit{Ascen. Isa.}, could constitute the "missing link" that may hold the answers to some of the questions posed by the advanced Mariology of the \textit{Ascen. Isa.}

In contrast to the \textit{Prot. Jas.}, the \textit{Ascen. Isa.} 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 \textit{Ascen. Isa.} 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 \textit{Ascen. Isa.}\(^8\) However, the most recent scholarly investigations of

---


\(^7\) These include a comprehensive critical edition of the text of the \textit{Ascen. Isa.}, Paolo Bettiolo, et al., \textit{Ascensio Isaiae: Textus} (CCSA 7; Brepols: Turnhout, 1995), with accompanying exhaustive commentary by the foremost of the team, Enrico Norelli, \textit{Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius} (CCSA 8; Brepols: Turnhout, 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 \textit{The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses} (NovTSup 93; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 363-65.

the \textit{Ascen. Isa.} 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 previous researchers viewed the \textit{Ascen. Isa.} as a composite work made up of earlier source documents that were joined together by a later editor,\(^9\) the latest trend among scholars has been to emphasize the unity of the \textit{Ascen. Isa.} as a whole and especially that of chapters 6-11.\(^10\) The \textit{Ascen. Isa.} 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,\(^11\) section of the \textit{Ascen. Isa.} narrates the birth of the Lord Christ by Mary (including the important Marian witness in \textit{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.”

The newly acquired scholarly respect for the \textit{Ascen. Isa.} necessitates a reassessment of the significance of the advanced Marian traditions presented in \textit{Ascen. Isa.} 11:2-16. The first step in such a reassessment occurred at the 2001 Annual Meeting of the SBL in Nashville, Tennessee, in a session of the Christian


\(^12\) See discussion with references in Bauckham, "Ascension," 365-71.
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" 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 non-canonical. Knight rightly called attention to the sensitive ecclesiastical and dogmatic issues that may have impeded such a venture in the past and concluded that "the time is ripe for the reconsideration of Mary’s place in the contours of early Christian theology."

Unfortunately, the Marian witness of Ascen. Isa. 11:2-16 is part of a section of the document that is plagued by textual problems. Ascen. Isa. 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. The primary argument in favor of the authenticity of 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., wherever it is extant, generally supports the Ethiopic text, thus suggesting that the papyrus might also verify the Ethiopic witness of Ascen. Isa. 11:2-16.

Most scholars accept the authenticity of the Marian material in Ascen. Isa.

---

13 Pp. 91-105 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 Ascen. Isa. with "the obvious corollary that the Ascen. Isa. ranks among our earliest non-canonical Christian literature." Knight, "Mary," 93.
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., 91).
16 Ibid., 91.
11:2-16 in spite of the textual issues involved. Jonathan Knight has been a persistent proponent of the originality of *Ascen. Isa.* 11:2-22, and of its Marian witness in verses 11:2-16, 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. Knight concludes: "It is very substantially easier to see 11:2-22, with all its warts, as part of the original apocalypse than to treat it as later, and indubitably Marian, hagiography."

The probable existence of an authentic passage containing advanced Mariological material which 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 *Ascen. Isa.* 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 *Ascen. Isa.* was influenced by Matt, while others ascribe the relationship to a mutual dependence upon earlier traditions. Knight also discusses in detail the work of Bauckham on the phenomenon of "kerygmatic summaries" in early Christian literature. 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.

Bauckham describes "kerygmatic summaries" as a new, more flexible, genre of Christian traditions characterized by their mythological quality in presenting

---

21 "Mary," 97; *idem*, *Disciples*, 66.
22 Knight, "Mary," 97.
23 See Knight's summary and references in "Mary," 98-99.
25 "Summaries," 191-204.
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 non-canonical documents, and in other early Christian writers, 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 Ascen. Isa. "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."  

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, 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," Bauckham himself admits that in 11:2-15 the author of the Ascen. Isa. "has broken out of the form of kerygmatic summary altogether, and told this part of the history of Jesus in full narrative form." Thus, the passage in the Ascen. Isa. 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

---

26 "Summaries," 191-213 contains numerous specific references.
27 "Summaries," 201.
29 "Summaries," 195, 199.
early kerygmatic summary we have (1 Cor. 15:3-7)."\(^{31}\) However, Bauckham seems to have used later sources, such as the *Kerygma Petrou*, Justin, and Irenaeus, to delineate the parameters of his "kerygmatic summary" tradition of Jesus (coming - birth - suffering/death - resurrrection - assumption to heaven).\(^{32}\) But 1 Cor. 15:3-7 only refers the death, burial, resurrection, and post-resurrection 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

---

\(^{30}\) "Summaries," 203.
\(^{31}\) "Summaries," 211.
\(^{32}\) "Summaries," 211.
\(^{33}\) "Summaries," 211.
\(^{34}\) "Summaries," 213.
\(^{35}\) "Summaries," 215.
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.

In his own evaluation of the relationship between Bauckham's "kerygmatic summaries" in the *Ascen. Isa.* and the "crystallizing Gospel tradition as witnessed by the New Testament itself," 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 *Ascen. Isa.* "kerygmatic summaries."\(^{38}\)

While not ruling out the possibility that the author of the *Ascen. Isa.* may have known Matthew's Gospel, Knight takes a strong position that "there is most certainly a connection between *Ascen. Isa.* 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 absolutely essential 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 pre-dated, and perhaps was even used by, the canonical Gospels themselves. Knight concludes:

(extract)

"the evidence of 11.2-22 in the Ethiopic version (not least in the wake of Norelli's careful study) is that he used a pre-Matthean source which Matthew also utilized. This is an important conclusion for the study of the Marian traditions in the apocalypse. It shows that, even if chapters 6-11 come from

---

\(^{36}\) "Summaries," 215.


\(^{38}\) Knight, "Mary," 97-98. See also his discussion in *Disciples*, 276-78, 288, where he seemed closer to accepting such influence.

\(^{39}\) Knight, "Mary," 99. In an earlier study 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')." *Ascension*, 15.
the second century CE, 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, non-Gospel sources of at least some of the Marian material in Asc. Isa. 11:2-16. He identified an "evident seam" between Asc. 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

This source, however, is never identified, much less associated with the Prot. Jas. It seems to be a given among scholars that the Prot. Jas. is irrelevant to any discussion about traditions of the late first and early second centuries C.E. The Prot. Jas. 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 Ascen. Isa. and the Prot. Jas. 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 Prot. Jas. is not even mentioned in Knight's 355-page comprehensive treatment of the Ascen. Isa.44

In the following discussion of Knight's assessment of the Marian traditions in the Ascen. Isa., 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 Prot. Jas. 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 Prot. Jas. which I presented to the Christian Apocrypha Section.

---

40 Knight, "Mary," 100.
41 Disciples, 68. Cf. 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."
42 See, for example, Hall, "Ascent," 483.
43 Knight, Ascension, 88.
44 Knight, Disciples.
45 Knight, “Mary, “ 100.
in 1994 and 1997.\textsuperscript{46} Valuable insights concerning the subject at hand may be gained from consideration of the possibility that one of the source documents of the Prot. Jas., which I called the \textit{Genesis Marias}\textsuperscript{47} in my 1997 paper,\textsuperscript{48} was already in existence as early as the late first or early second centuries CE. As a result of this research, the position of Knight and the other scholars who advocate an early date for the \textit{Ascen. Isa.} would gain strong support from the existence of another early witness to the same Marian themes that distinguish the \textit{Ascen. Isa.}.

It was mentioned above that there were certain elements in the Marian material in \textit{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 \textit{virginitas post partum}. It was partly on the basis of the existence of two such non-canonical elements in the \textit{Ascen. Isa.} that Knight rejected the exclusive dependence of the \textit{Ascen. Isa.} on Matt alone.\textsuperscript{49} The first was the “unusual description of the resurrection in 3:16-17, with parallels in \textit{Gos. Pet.} 34-42.” The second concerned the absent midwife in 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 \textit{Ascen. Isa.} 11:14, is an important contact with Prot. Jas. 19 that 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 19:12-15, the child has already appeared. This is the first of the striking parallels between the \textit{Ascen. Isa.} Marian materials and the Prot. Jas.

A second extra-Matthean Marian element contained in the \textit{Ascen. Isa.} is that Mary is a descendent 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

\textsuperscript{46} Published in the SBL Seminar Papers in 1994, Zervos, "Dating,"; and 1997, \textit{idem}, "Annunciation."

\textsuperscript{47} This is part of the actual title of the Prot. Jas. in the third or fourth century papyrus Bodmer V, which contains a complete text of this document.

\textsuperscript{48} "Annunciation," 666, 686-88.
qualifications. I agree that this appears to represent an attempt to improve over Matt’s genealogy but question why it has to be placed as late as the second century. However, the relationship between Matt and Ascen. Isa. must be revisited first. If, as Knight seems to have concluded above, the author of Ascen. Isa. did not know Matt, then how could he know and respond to Matt's genealogy? And even if, against Bauckham himself, Ascen. Isa. 11:2-22 is a “kerygmatic summary” from pre-existing 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.

Since this second non-Matthean element in the Ascen. Isa. also occurs in Prot. Jas. 10:2, there are solid grounds for regarding the Davidic descent of Mary to have been part of an early tradition or source that informed the Ascen. Isa., Ignatius, and the Prot. Jas. Assuming that Ignatius himself did not create the idea of Mary's Davidic descent, it would be difficult to demonstrate definitively whether the Ascen. Isa. or the Prot. Jas. 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," then what other such source would have existed that early, i.e., before Ignatius and the Ascen. Isa., and with the specific content of Mary's Davidic ancestry, other than the Genesis Marias, the document that was later incorporated into the Prot. Jas.?

The next element to be examined in the Ascen. Isa. Marian text is “that Joseph is dissuaded from divorcing Mary through an angelophany and that he had no sexual relations with her before the birth of Jesus.” Knight quickly dispenses with this passage as being Matthean in thought, although he accepts the language

---

49 Knight, "Mary," 99.
50 Ibid., 100-101.
51 Ign. Eph. 18:2; 20:2; Trall. 9:1; Smyrn. 1:1.
52 "Summaries," 203.
used as being peculiar to the Ascen. Isa. 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 Prot. Jas. But any comparison of the two texts is problematic because the corresponding section in the Prot. Jas. 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. The purpose of the later Prot. Jas. editor was precisely to bring his source document, the Genesis Marias, into conformity with the Matthean Joseph story.

However, the Ascen. Isa. story contains some interesting affinities with the vestiges of the Genesis Marias tradition that are still discernible in the Prot. Jas. First, Ascen. Isa. 11:2 refers to Joseph as a carpenter, which is not a particularly Matthean concept. Matt 13:55 also describes Joseph as a carpenter, but this is not original to Matt and is not associated with Matt's birth story. This information has been taken and modified from Matt'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 Prot. Jas. narrative which presents Joseph very strongly as being employed in construction. Even more significantly, Ascen. Isa. 11:9 shares with the Prot. Jas. the important non-Matthean element of the virginitas post partum. Quite interesting also is Ascen. Isa. 11:3 which states that "Joseph came into his portion." 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 Prot. Jas. and the Ascen. Isa. 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 Ascen. Isa.

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

---

53 Knight, "Mary," 101.
55 See discussion below.
56 Knibb, "Martyrdom," 174, translates this as "lot."
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 *Ascen. Isa.* 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 *Ascen. Isa.*, 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 *Ascen. Isa.* 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 *Ascen. Isa.*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 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 *Ascen. Isa.*, but it is also true that in the birth narrative of the *Prot. Jas.*, 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 *Ascen. Isa.* may have taken an element from the source of the *Prot. Jas.* 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.

⁵⁷ Knight, "Mary," 101.
⁵⁸ Ibid., 102.
In evaluating the Marian material in the *Ascen. Isa.* 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 which 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 principle focus of the *Prot. Jas.* 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 *Prot. Jas.*, which is decidedly written for the advantage of Mary, with the *Ascen. Isa.*, 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 *Prot. Jas.* can be most instructive. Why should the author of the *Ascen. Isa.* 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 *Ascen. Isa.* I would agree with Knight that the author of the *Ascen. Isa.* 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 *Ascen. Isa.*. I would look to a document, or a tradition, independent of the not yet canonical gospels, which had as its purpose precisely the enhancement of the person of Mary. I would look to a document that contained all the elements in the *Ascen. Isa.* representing a departure from, or a development of, the Matthean Marian elements in this apocalypse. I would look to

\(^{59}\) Ibid.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 103.
the *Prot. Jas.* 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 *Ascen. Isa.* is earlier than the *Prot. Jas.*" which he dismisses as later "apocryphal Marian hagiography." This "given" reflects the perception of most contemporary scholars that is based upon an outdated, but still well-entrenched, scholarly consensus that views the *Prot. Jas.* 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 *Ascen. Isa.* was branded with a similar set of misperceptions only a few short years ago. The *Prot. Jas.* 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 *Prot. Jas.* 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 *Ascen. Isa.* 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 *Prot. Jas.*, *Ascen. Isa.* 11:2-16, and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch.

---

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 104.
63 Ibid., 105.