

Mary Magdalene in the *Acts of Philip*

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1. *The Name Mary*

Sura 19 of the Qur'an gives Mary, Jesus' mother, the honorary epithet "sister of Aaron."¹ A few Jewish texts of late antiquity and the Middle Ages merge the Virgin Mary with Mary Magdalene.² Such connections were made possible and even attractive because of the similarity in names. First I would like to reflect on the several forms of the name Mary and then examine the persons of that same name.

Miriam is the Hebrew name.³ It is applied to the sister of Aaron and Moses. The Septuagint regularly translates this name with Μαριάμ. Philo follows this usage,⁴ while Josephus never uses this term and instead calls the sister of Aaron and Moses Μαριάμμη.⁵ The New Testament manuscripts do not witness the name Μαριάμμη, preferring Μαριάμ or Μαρία for Jesus' mother, the woman from Magdala, and the several other Marys.⁶ We have,

¹ See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 72–73.

² See R. Travers Herford, *Christianity in Talmud and Midrash* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1903), 355, 358. I thank my colleague Jon Levenson, who helped me in this matter. One finds the same assimilation in a Coptic homily probably from the sixth century C.E.; see Pseudo-Cyril of Jerusalem, *Homily on the Dormition* (E. A. Wallis Budge, *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt* [London: British Museum, 1915], 630). I thank Dr. Ann Graham Brock for this information.

³ On the Hebrew name, its origin, structure, and meaning, see Scott C. Layton, *Archaic Features of Canaanite Personal Names in the Hebrew Bible* (HSM 47; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 183–86. I thank Professor Jo Ann Hackett for this reference.

⁴ See Philo of Alexandria, *Leg.* 1.76; 2.66; 2.103; *Agr.* 80–81; *Contempl.* 87.

⁵ Or Μαριάμη according to manuscript evidence; see Abraham Schalit, *Namenwörterbuch zu Flavius Josephus* (suppl. 1 of *A Complete Concordance to Flavius Josephus*; Leiden: Brill, 1968), s.v. Besides the sister of Moses and Aaron, Josephus knows six different Μαριάμ(μη). He mentions also once a Μαρία (*War* 6.201).

⁶ The author of Luke-Acts uses Μαριάμ for Jesus' mother. In the only genitive use of this name he prefers Μαριάς; he calls Mary Magdalene Μαρία, and the sister of

therefore, three different spellings in Greek. The Coptic authors, translators, and scribes use the same three forms of the name known from the Greek. The Latin translators of the Bible used only the name Maria when they refer to the sister of Aaron and Moses, Jesus' mother, or Jesus' friend.

I spent an afternoon in the Widener Library poring over the venerable Pape, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Eigennamen*, Bechtel, *Personennamen*, and Preisigke, *Namenbuch* (with its supplement *Onomasticon alterum papyrologicum*), the more recent *Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* according to regions (two volumes so far), Kajava's *Roman Female Praenomina* as well as Kajanto's *Onomastic in the Early Christian Inscriptions of Rome and Carthage*, Jones and Whitehorne's *Register of Oxyrhynchites*, and Tcherikover and Fuks's *Corpus papyrorum judaicarum*.⁷

What I found was an intriguing thread. In Jewish inscriptions and papyri the names Μαρία and Μαριάμ are attested in the time of the Roman Empire.⁸ With variations in Greek spelling, the name Μάρεια can be applied

Martha Μαριάμ. But we must be careful: the textual evidence can vary from one manuscript to the other. Matthew can use Μαριάμ or Μαρία for the same person. The same is true of John.

⁷ Wilhelm Pape and Gustav Benseler, eds., *Wörterbuch der griechischen Eigennamen* (2 vols.; repr. of 3d ed.; Orbis litterarum; Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1959); Friedrich Bechtel, *Die historischen Personennamen des Griechischen bis zur Kaiserzeit* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1917); Friedrich Preisigke and Enno Littmann, *Namenbuch* (Heidelberg: Selbstverlag des Herausgebers, 1922); Daniele Foraboschi, *Onomasticon alterum papyrologicum: Supplemento al Namenbuch di F. Preisigke* (TDSA 16, Serie papirologica 2; Milan-Varese: Istituto editoriale cisalpino, 1971); Peter Marshall Fraser and Elaine Matthews, eds., *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987–); Mika Kajava, *Roman Female Praenomina: Studies in the Nomenclature of Roman Women* (AIRF 14; Rome: Institutum romanum Finlandiae, 1995); Iiro Kajanto, *Onomastic in the Early Christian Inscriptions of Rome and Carthage* (AIRF 2/1; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1963); Brian W. Jones and J. E. G. Whitehorne, *Register of Oxyrhynchites 30 B.C.—A.D. 96* (ASP 25; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983); Victor A. Tcherikover and Alexander Fuks, eds., *Corpus papyrorum judaicarum* (3 vols.; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957–64); see also August Fick, *Die griechischen Personennamen nach ihrer Bildung erklärt mit den Namenssystemen verwandter Sprachen verglichen und systematisch geordnet* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1874); Olli Salomies, *Die römischen Vornamen: Studien zur römischen Namengebung* (Commentationes humanarum litterarum 82; Helsinki: Societas scientiarum fennica, 1987). I would like to thank Eldon J. Epp, who gave me the titles of some of these works.

⁸ The name Μαρία is present in two Jewish papyri of the beginning of the second century C.E. and one Egyptian grave inscription; see Tcherikover and Fuks, *Corpus papyrorum judaicarum*, vol. 2, nos. 223 and 227, vol. 3, no. 1535: Μαρία

to the Lake close to Alexandria (Lake Mareotis) and to the city on its shore. Μαρία appears also as the name of an island along the African coast of the Red Sea. Μαριαμμία (sometimes written Μαριάμμη) exists in Syria as a city known later as the metropolis of a bishop.⁹ But as a name for a woman neither Μαρία nor Μαριάμ are Greek. If they are attested as such, it is in later records and under Jewish, Christian, or perhaps Latin influence. Of course Μαρία has been very popular in Greece through the present, but under Christian influence.

One must recall that the Greeks and the Jews had a simpler onomastic system than the Romans, in having no *praenomina* nor *cognomina*. To distinguish between two women with the same name they indicated—as you know—the name of the father or the husband.

Let's turn now to the Latin onomastic. Normally in Rome a woman was named according to her *nomen gentilicium* (name of her *gens*, *grosso modo* our last name): Cornelia for a woman from the *gens* of the Cornelii.¹⁰ If she was of a noble family she could keep the name of her family instead of taking the one of her husband. There was an evolution in the Latin onomastic system. While the *nomen* had been for a long time the only name for a woman, a *praenomen* and even a *cognomen* developed thereafter. The Latin Maria represents the feminine form of the *nomen gentilicium* Marius.¹¹ Incidentally—to complicate the matter—the name Marius existed among the Oscs, a people of South Italy (Campania),¹² conquered early by the Romans.¹³ I cannot discern if the Oscs used *praenomina* and if the feminine Maria as a *praenomen* is attested among the Oscs. The Latin Maria was probably pronounced Mária because Latin cannot accept an accent on the

Ἀβιήτου, who died March 31, 116 C.E. (no. 227); Μαρία Δημάτος, who died February 28, 116 C.E. (no. 223); a Maria from Antinoopolis daughter of Phamsothis (inscr. 1535).

⁹ See Wilhelm Enßlin, "Maria," PW 14:1712–13.

¹⁰ More precision would follow with the name of her father or of her husband or both.

¹¹ In the second century B.C.E. two sisters of C. Marius bore the name Maria; one became the wife of M. Gratidius, the other the mother of C. Lucius; in the fourth century C.E. a Maria is known as the wife of the emperor Honorius; see Ruth Albrecht, "Maria," DNP 7:887–90.

¹² "Peuple de langue sabellique de l'Italie ancienne, établi en Campanie, influencé par les Grecs et soumis par les Samnites, mais qui conserva sa langue jusqu'au ~ 1^{er} siècle" (Paul Robert and Alain Rey, eds., *Le Petit Robert 2: Dictionnaire universel des noms propres, alphabétique et analogique, illustré en couleurs* [Paris: Le Robert, 1991], s.v.).

¹³ See Salomies, *Die römischen Vornamen*, 77–78.

penultimate if this syllable is short.¹⁴ In such cases the accent goes back to the previous syllable. But in the early Roman empire Maria was introduced as *praenomen* under Jewish influence.

Bertrand Bouvier, my co-editor of the *Acts of Philip*, reminded me of a particular piece of philological evidence. When a Greek word ends with a consonant, the consonant can only be ν, ρ, or σ. Any name ending with another consonant therefore sounds foreign or barbaric. And that would be the case of Μαριάμ. This very fact may explain the two other forms of Mary, namely, Μαρία and Μαριάμμη, chosen perhaps to erase the impression of strangeness, the foreign character of the name.¹⁵

In my view, to disentangle the changing usage of the name, more work must be done, and I would suggest that the following criteria be applied. First, scholars should consider the language in which the name occurs; second, they should respect the period in which the text being considered was composed; third, they should establish the geographic location of the document; fourth, researchers should examine the class or social milieu of the author; and fifth, they should understand the prevalent intellectual or religious traditions.¹⁶

Why, for example, does Josephus choose the name Μαριάμμη for the sister of Moses and Aaron, and why does he *not* follow the translation chosen by the Septuagint? Is it because he desires to avoid the barbaric character of that name and perhaps follows a hellenizing Jewish tradition? Or as all the other Μαριάμμη he mentions are Jewish princesses, does he wish to underline the aristocratic character of the sister of Aaron and Moses? The deliberate choice of Μαρία or Μαριάμμη expresses in my view an assimilation into Greek language and culture.

2. The Two Marys

If we turn now from the names to the person,¹⁷ there is evidence that the same person may have received each of the three forms of the name. The mother of Jesus is called Μαριάμ or Μαρία in the New Testament,

¹⁴ If today we say *María* (accent on the *i*) in Italian, it is an exception under Greek influence of the Byzantine period. The same is true for *Lucia*, pronounced today *Lucía*.

¹⁵ It must be added finally that Μαριάμμη was spelled sometimes Μαριάμη or Μαριάμνη, as one can see from the manuscript traditions.

¹⁶ See N. C. Cohen, "The Proper Name 'Miriam' in Greek and Latin Transliteration" [Hebrew with English summary], *Leš* 38 (1974): 170–80; Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Mary and the Discourse of Orthodoxy: Early Christian Identity and the Ancient Dormition Legends" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1997), 170–97.

¹⁷ As it is known from Josephus, *War* 2.439; 5.170; and 7.1, Μαριάμμη was also the name of a tower in Jerusalem.

Μαριάμμη in three passages of the *Protevangelium of James* (according to the most ancient manuscript, P.Bod. V).¹⁸ The assignment of names to Mary Magdalene is identical.¹⁹ She is called Μαρία ἡ Μαγδαληνή in Matt 27:56; Μαριάμ ἡ Μαγδαληνή a few verses later in Matt 27:61; and Μαριάμμη in the *Gospel of Mary*, Hippolytus *Haer.* 5.1.7, Origen *Cels.* 5.62, and, in a Latin form, Priscillian's *Apologeticum* 1.²⁰

Is there a tendency in the *catholica* to call Jesus' mother Μαρία and a pattern in nonorthodox communities for referring to Jesus' friend as Μαριάμμη? Probably not. When Mary Magdalene is designated Μαρία, a reference to her hometown Magdala often clearly identifies who she is.

¹⁸ See Émile de Strycker, *La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques* (SHG 33; Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1961), 315–16.

¹⁹ In recent years the secondary literature on Mary Magdalene has grown enormously; for ancient bibliography, see François Bovon, "Le privilège pascal de Marie-Madeleine," *NTS* 30 (1984): 50–62; in English in idem, *New Testament Traditions and Apocryphal Narratives* (trans. J. Haapiseva-Hunter; PTMS 36; Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick, 1994), 147–57, 228–35; for more recent works, see Renate Schmid, *Maria Magdalena in gnostischen Schriften* (Material-Edition 29; Munich: Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Religions- und Weltanschauungsfragen, 1990); J. Kevin Coyle, "Mary Magdalene in Manichaeism?" *Mus* 104 (1991): 39–55; Maddalena Scopello, "Marie-Madeleine et la tour: *Pistis et sophia*," in *Figures du Nouveau Testament chez les Pères* (CBIpa 3; Strasbourg: Centre d'analyse et de documentation patristiques, 1991), 179–96; Carla Ricci, *Maria di Magdal e le molte alter: Donne sul cammino di Gesù* (Naples: D'Auria, 1991); Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993); Hannele Koivunen, *Madonna ja huora* [in Finnish; based on the author's dissertation "The Woman Who Understood Completely: A Semiotic Analysis of the Mary Magdalene Myth in the Gnostic Gospel of Mary," University of Helsinki, 1994] (Helsinki: Otava, 1995); Antti Marjanen, *The Woman Jesus Loved: Mary Magdalene in the Nag Hammadi Library and Related Documents* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 40; Leiden: Brill, 1996); Ingrid Maisch, *Maria Magdalena zwischen Verachtung und Verehrung: Das Bild einer Frau im Spiegel der Jahrhunderte* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1996); Shoemaker, "Mary and the Discourse of Orthodoxy"; Frédéric Amsler, *Acta Philippi: Commentarius* (CCSA 12; Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 312–17; Silke Petersen, "Zerstört die Werke der Weiblichkeit!" *Maria Magdalena, Salome und andere Jüngerinnen Jesu in christlich-gnostischen Schriften* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies 48; Leiden: Brill, 1999). More bibliography in Petersen, "Zerstört die Werke der Weiblichkeit!" 351–71.

²⁰ There are of course other Marys in the New Testament: Mary, Martha's sister (Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–12:8), merged in the *Acts of Philip* with Mary Magdalene; Mary of James (Matt 27:56; Mark 15:40; 16:1; Luke 24:10; see Matt 28:1); Mary of Joses (Mark 15:40, 47); Mary of Clopas (John 19:25); Mary, mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12); Mary who worked hard (Rom 16:6).

The figure of Μαριάμνη (spelled sometimes Μαριάμμη in one or two manuscripts,²¹ particularly the oldest one, P) present in the *Acts of Philip* cannot be Jesus' mother (mentioned once or twice as Μαρία in the text, *Acts Phil.* 6.13 [V and A], *Acts Phil. Mart.* 35.6 [Γ, absent from Θ and Δ]), because if so, Philip would be Jesus' uncle! This figure is not connected with Jesus' birth but with his ministry and resurrection. The woman, it is my contention, is Mary Magdalene. I will insist on such a presence of Mary Magdalene in the *Acts of Philip* because this evidence has been neglected and because of the new manuscripts recently discovered and edited.²²

3. *Mariamne in the Acts of Philip*

To be clear, I am not interested here in the reconstruction of the historical figure of Mary Magdalene, but in her portrayal in literary texts, particularly in the *Acts of Philip*.²³

3.1. The Presence of Mariamne

Mariamne is quite present in the second half of the *Acts of Philip*.²⁴ Philip the apostle is the leader of the small group of missionaries sent by the resurrected Savior. Twice when the trio, Bartholomew, Mariamne, and himself, meets a formidable dragon, Philip remains calm while Mariamne is frightened (*Acts Phil.* 11.5), and he performs the victorious exorcism (*Acts Phil.* 9.1–5 and 11.6–7). After the governor's wife, Nicanora, has made the acquaintance of Mariamne, it is Philip who takes the leading position (*Acts Phil. Mart.* 11 [V]). On another occasion he celebrates the Eucharist and gives her communion, not the other way around (*Acts Phil.* 11.1 and 10). Nevertheless, as Ann Graham Brock pointed out in her dissertation,²⁵

²¹ I am referring to the sigla used in the edition of François Bovon, Bertrand Bouvier, and Frédéric Amsler, *Acta Philippi: Textus* (CCSA 11; Turnhout: Brepols, 1999). P is the *Parisinus gr. 881*; A is Athos, *Xenophontos 32*; V is the *Vaticanus gr. 824*; G is *Atheniensis 346*; Γ, Δ, and Θ represent the three different Greek recensions of the *Martyrdom of Philip*, the last part of the *Acts of Philip*.

²² See n. 21 above for the reference to the edition.

²³ See Bovon, "Le privilège pascal," 50–62 (in English, Bovon, *New Testament Traditions*, 147–57, 228–35).

²⁴ Mariamne is absent from the first half of the *Acts of Philip* (*Acts Phil.* 1–7), which leads scholars to believe that this work is a composite one and that *Acts Phil.* 1–7 are of another origin, probably related to Philip the evangelist (see Acts 6–8).

²⁵ Ann Graham Brock, "Authority, Politics, and Gender in Early Christianity: Mary, Peter, and the Portrayal of Leadership" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2000), 176 n. 1.

Mariamne is part of the group (see *Acts Phil. Mart.* 7 [V] and 26 [V]) and carries with Philip and Bartholomew the prestigious title οἱ ἀπόστολοι (see *Acts Phil.* 8.16 and 21; 13.1–2.4).

3.2. Mariamne's Healing Activity

At two occasions in this text Mariamne is connected with a healing activity. First, while the apostolic group arrives in the city of Ophiorumos, Philip, like an itinerant physician, looks for a place to exercise his art. He shares with Mariamne the satisfaction of finding an abandoned clinic or dispensary (ἰατρεῖον) and invites her discreetly to install the group in that place that will become, he says, a “spiritual dispensary” (τὸ πνευματικὸν τοῦτο ἰατρεῖον, *Acts Phil.* 13.4).

Second, in the following act, *Acts Phil.* 14, the reader meets an aged man Stachys,²⁶ who has suffered blindness for forty years, but a dream has brought him to the apostles. Imitating Jesus' enigmatic gesture, Philip will use saliva to cure this blindness. But different from the Markan Jesus (Mark 8:22–26), Philip does not use his own saliva but dips his finger into Mariamne's mouth and extracts *her* saliva as a curative unguent. Alas, the first readers of the *Acts of Philip* could not bear that narrative, and the end of the episode has been expurgated in the only manuscript that has preserved this story (A). Like the evangelists Matthew and Luke, who considered Mark's episode too shocking to accept, a reader has torn away the folio between folios 87 and 88.

3.3. Mariamne's Teaching Activity

Philip is the apostle entrusted with preaching the good news, but the reader encounters several episodes in which Mariamne is a powerful, charismatic speaker and not simply an audience. In the martyrdom story, the apostolic group is active in Ophiorumos. The apostles have expanded their mission: they now use the house of Stachys as a gathering place where the guests can hear the Christian message, and Mariamne is represented as being posted at the entrance of the house as a sort of hostess, inviting the public in to hear the good news.

The martyrdom story of the *Acts of Philip* is preserved in three recensions. One recension (Θ) has, in an orthodox way,²⁷ eradicated Mariamne's

²⁶ Stachys's name and story have been preserved till today in the *Synaxarion* of the Orthodox Church for the Feast of Saint Philip celebrated November 14; see Hippolyte Delehay, *Synaxarium ecclesiae constantinopolitanae*, 117 and 1165 (index).

²⁷ As historians we can use these categories for the time of the Byzantine compilers and scribes.

teaching role, while another (Γ),²⁸ more open here to another orientation, recognizes her teaching activity (*Acts Phil. Mart.* 3).²⁹ But even this approbation is not without limitation: the recension Γ restricts Mariamne's role to calling the visitors to enter and to listen to Philip. It is probable that in the original form of the story, Mariamne was the legitimate missionary to women while Philip was the evangelist for men. An invective formulated by future pagan opponents accuses Mariamne of following men and of deceiving women (*Acts Phil. Mart.* 19 [Γ and Δ]), which I understand to mean that Mariamne is guilty both of fraternizing with Philip and Bartholomew and of preaching the encratite private life to women.

There is a confirmation of Mariamne's preaching activity in her encounter with Nicanora, the governor's wife (*Acts Phil. Mart.* 9). Mariamne is not content to relate to Nicanora via Philip's proselytizing, but she herself begins to profess to her listener a serious doctrinal teaching. She communicates the following message to Nicanora: You have fallen away from the divine family house and succumbed to the demonic power of the snake. You are guilty of having forgotten your origins, your Father in heaven, and your spiritual Mother. If you wake up, however, you will receive illumination. Nicanora has two reasons to exult: by Mariamne's κήρυγμα she has been spiritually saved and physically cured (*Acts Phil. Mart.* 10).³⁰

3.4. Mariamne's Liturgical Activity

At several occasions the *Acts of Philip* presents Mariamne sharing ministerial responsibilities in the community. She is said to have prepared the bread and the salt for the communion³¹ while Martha was serving the crowds³² (*Acts Phil.* 8.2; in this ascetical text the wine of the communion is not mentioned).³³ At the very beginning of the Christian movement, at

²⁸ Manuscript V presents the text of recension Γ, manuscript A the text of recension Θ.

²⁹ The third recension Δ starts later in *Acts Phil. Mart.* 17.

³⁰ Manuscript V reads "the preaching of my fathers" and A "your [pl.] preaching." I suggest that the original meaning was the apostolic teaching, delivered here by Mariamne, which coincides with the faith of Nicanora's ancestors, the Jewish patriarchs.

³¹ Women were present and active in the community of the Therapeutae; bread and salt were also the food of the Therapeutae described by Philo of Alexandria, *Contempl.* 37 and 73; see the quotations and summary of Philo's works in Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccl.* 2.17.

³² Is the word "crowds" an ecclesiological expression, like the "many" in the Dead Sea Scrolls (see for example 1QS 6.1–7.27) and in Mark 10:45?

³³ The text presupposes that Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany are the same person.

the time of the sending of the apostles, her actions evoke the Last Supper, and to have participated in the preparation of the Last Supper confers authority and prestige to Mariamne, of course. There is an echo of this claim and at the same time a criticism of it in one of the ancient church orders, the so-called *Ecclesiastical Constitution of the Apostles*.³⁴ In a short narrative the “orthodox” Jesus of the *Constitution* forbids both Mary and Martha to conduct the celebration of the Eucharist.

Similar in importance is Mariamne’s baptismal activity. Twice the text affirms that Mariamne was responsible for the baptism of women, and this does not represent an exception but the rule, as the imperfect tense indicates: “Philip baptized the men and Mariamne the women” (*Acts Phil.* 14.9; see also *Acts Phil. Mart.* 2 [Θ]).³⁵ We know that women were active in the celebration of baptism in the orthodox communities: in some regions of the East deaconesses had the responsibility to perform an unction with oil³⁶ and to hold out the requisite white garments to the newly baptized women at the moment of their ascent from the water.³⁷ But these responsibilities were limited. The baptism itself was performed by a man, the bishop or later the priest. Such is not the case here: Mariamne carries the whole responsibility of the baptism of women.

3.5. Mariamne’s Suffering

Mariamne does not escape the persecution that reaches Philip. Nicanora’s husband, the governor with the terrible name of Tyrannophos, is furious at the new ascetical, enkratite lifestyle of his wife. Not without reason he accuses the Christian apostles for the changes that his wife embraces, and he imagines some magical tricks. The apostolic trio is arrested, taken under custody in a pagan temple, and then subjected to a bodily search (*Acts Phil. Mart.* 14–20). A miracle protects Mariamne from eventual shame during her humiliation: the moment the soldiers try to strip away her clothing, the form of her body is transformed. One recension reads that a discreet cloud took her away from the indiscreet eyes of her enemies [Γ]. The two other forms of the text [Θ and Δ], probably closer to the original, say that her body was transformed to a κιβωτὸς ὑερίνη, a “shrine of glass.” This term κιβωτός is extremely interesting because it is the same term that the Septuagint

³⁴ See *Ecclesiastical Constitution of the Apostles* 26; and Bovon, Bouvier, and Amstler, *Acta Philippi: Textus*, 240 n. 5.

³⁵ Compare Firmilian’s letter to Cyprian in Cyprian, *Epistle* 75.10.

³⁶ See *Const. ap.* 3.16; *Didascalia apostolorum* 16.

³⁷ Aimé Georges Martimort, *Deaconesses: An Historical Study* (trans. K. D. Whitehead; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 43–44, 52–57.

uses for the ark of Noah (Gen 6:14–9:18) and the ark of the covenant (Exod 25:9–21 et passim). It is also the term that the Christian liturgy applies in a typological way to the Virgin Mary, referring to her as the receptacle of God's presence.

For the author of this segment of the *Acts of Philip*, as for many Christians of late antiquity, men and women can appear in three different forms: in the dress of sinful luxury, in the modest clothing of faith, and in the glorious body of the resurrection. What happens for Mariamne is a temporary manifestation of her resurrectional status. Her suffering is therefore not an inexorable ending. During the violent aggression of the governor, she is allowed to put on her dress of light, although for just a short time, but it is time enough to realize the power and the presence of the divine glory. After this transformation from humility to glory there is a return to her human condition; as the Jesus of the canonical gospels is finally back on earth "alone" (Mark 9:8 par.), so too Mariamne recuperates her "first type" (*Acts Phil. Mart.* 25 [Θ] and 32).

Human existence is limited in time, and death remains inexorable. The *Acts of Philip* takes this reality seriously, and without mentioning martyrdom, twice the text announces Mariamne's death. Here the author is concerned with a special form of funeral for Mariamne. An order is given by the agonizing Philip to place her coffin in the River Jordan (*Acts Phil. Mart.* 31 [A] and 36), and this is a mysterious affirmation for two reasons. First, to my knowledge there is no other text locating Mariamne's death in Palestine. The Bible, however, mentions Miriam's burial at Kadesh (Num 20:1), a place that our author may have imagined not far from the River Jordan. Second, the location of her tomb in a river is also exceptional. I know only of one other case, Alaric I, king of the Visigoths, who died at Cosenza (Italy) in 410 c.e. and was buried by his soldiers in the River Busento.

3.6. Mariamne's Manly Faith and Male Clothing

Several ancient Christian texts describe the role of Mary Magdalene during the critical days of Jesus' death and resurrection. Preserved in a Coptic and an Ethiopic version, the *Epistula apostolorum*, for example, underlines the effort of three women to convince the disciples of the reality of their Lord's resurrection.³⁸ Both versions of this text explicitly name Mary in this context (the Ethiopic version underlines the priority of Mary Magdalene). Building on the same tradition, the *Manichaeian Psalms* praise Mary, called Marihama (last letter not clear), for having brought together the fleeing disciples like a fisherman captures fish in his

³⁸ *Epistula apostolorum* 10–11.

net.³⁹ The *Acts of Philip* offers a full picture of this scene and confirms the vitality of this widespread tradition.

I first need to situate this passage of the *Acts of Philip* in the manuscript tradition. We cannot here rely on our major manuscript, the *Xenophontos 32*, because the gesture of a censor has violently extracted twenty-four folios. We possess the short version of the *Vaticanus 824*, but it is not so useful because its scribe also has applied a kind of censorship by avoiding much of the compromising material. The most valuable witness of a more complete version remains therefore the manuscript *Atheniensis 346* (G).

Acts Phil. 8, the beginning of the ancient Acts, depicts the comforting role of Mariamne among Jesus' disciples after the resurrection. The apostles are called together by the resurrected Savior, and Mariamne is among them (as Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene is part of the New Testament resurrection stories). She is said to have carried then the list of countries where the disciples will be sent, the ἀναγραφὴ τῶν χωρῶν (*Acts Phil.* 8.2 [G]), and in this way fills the function of special assistant to the Savior, a kind of chief of staff. Mariamne is also described as the sister of the apostle Philip. Because of this kinship she is asked by the Savior to take care of her brother, who is anxious at the prospect of his dangerous mission to the Greeks. She is even urged to travel with him and to defend virtue, and *Acts Phil.* 8 [G] represents Philip as weak and Mariamne as strong.

This is an ancient concept. One of the ancients, Plato, expressed his conviction that occasionally a man can be weak and a woman strong.⁴⁰ For this philosopher and many after him the categories of male and female were not neutral, the first connoted positively, the second negatively. According to *Acts Phil.* 8 [G] Philip as a man has a female faith and attitude, and spiritually, Mariamne expresses herself like a male facing the hostile world: "And the Savior told her: 'I know that you are good and brave in your soul and blessed among women. A feminine spirit has entered Philip while the male and courageous spirit is in you'" (*Acts Phil.* 8.3 [G]). Mariamne owes these qualities to the Savior's favor, being the object of a special calling (*Acts Phil.* 8.3–4 [G]). Her duty to her faith is also immense. *Acts Phil.* 8.3 affirms that the apostolic mission and her part in it involve nothing less than "the sufferings of martyrdom and the redemption of the whole world."

³⁹ Psalms of Heracleides, "There Were Ten Virgins," in C. R. C. Allberry, ed., *A Manichaean Psalm-Book: Part II* (Manichaean Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Collection 2; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1938), 192 lines 21–22.

⁴⁰ See Plato, *Resp.* 5.1 (453–456, part. 455d). I thank Stanley B. Marrow, who helped me locate this passage.

Few ancient Christian texts describe so vividly what this commissioning implies. In *Acts Phil.* 8 [G] the Savior organizes Mariamne's enterprise and counts on its success. He gives her the following practical advice: "You, Mariamne, change your gown and your outward appearance. Put off all that in your form resembles a woman, in particular your summer dress [a rare word is used here: τὸ θέριστον]. Do not let your fringe be dragged on the ground, do not twist it, but cut it; then walk together with your brother Philip to the city called Ophiorumos, which is understood as the 'promenade of the snakes'" (*Acts Phil.* 8.4 [G]).

A theological explanation is given for the necessity of this change. From the beginning of the world there has been hostility—the text seems to defend an unusual position here—between Adam and Eve (and not between Eve and the Serpent). This hostility gave the Serpent the opportunity to revolt against Adam and to befriend Eve. The result was Adam being deceived by his wife. For Mariamne to lose the feminine form is to abandon Eve's appearance. It can only be beneficial. When Mariamne enters into the city, the snakes will see her transformed (*Acts Phil.* 8.4). The author explains then in an obscure paragraph that the skin of the Serpent has to be identified with its venom—a reality that polluted Eve—and that this kind of original sin was then communicated from generation to generation starting with Cain. The author concludes with a dogmatic sentence: "Therefore, Mariamne, flee away from Eve's poverty and be rich in yourself" (*Acts Phil.* 8.4 [G]).

3.7. Mariamne As Sister and Twin

The notion of sisterhood plays a double role in the plot, first as a physical sister, second as a spiritual twin. Mariamne is introduced as Philip's sister. She is later presented as the twin sister of Nicanora. Behind Mariamne there is another sister, Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses, called Mariamme by Josephus. Even if implicit, such a typology is present in the text. As Miriam, Philip's sister participates in the salvific exodus. As Miriam she has a ministerial responsibility. Just as Miriam leads the choir of the women while Moses sings with the men of Israel after the victorious crossing of the Red Sea,⁴¹ so Mariamne in the *Acts of Philip* baptizes the women while her brother Philip baptizes the men. Interestingly Philo affirms that the community of the Therapeutae has taken over this distribution in their liturgy.⁴²

⁴¹ See J. Doignon, "Miryam et son tambourin dans la prédication et l'archéologie occidentale au IV^e siècle," in *StPatr* 4 (ed. F. L. Cross; TU 79; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1961), 71–77. I thank my colleague Nicholas Constatas for this bibliographic reference.

⁴² See Philo of Alexandria, *Agr.* 80–81; *Contempl.* 87.

Sisterhood is the adequate relationship for ascetic Christians, because it is a feminine companionship without the risk of sexuality. A mother is *per definitionem* the opposite of virgin. A daughter implies the intimate intercourse of her parents.

It is possible that there were two diverging traditions in the first centuries of Christian thought regarding Philip and the women around him, one with his daughters (Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 3.52.5, is very pleased to infer from Acts 21:9 that Philip with his daughters was not opposed to marriage), and another with his sister (this ascetical tradition is present here in the *Acts of Philip*). As Christ of the Fourth Gospel entrusts his mother to the beloved disciple, so the Savior of the *Acts of Philip* entrusts the apostle Philip to his sister. It is not by chance that in the church the terms *sister* and *brother* became terms for several dimensions of a non-sexual relationship between male and female Christians. Spouses in late antiquity who decided to interrupt marital relationship and live ascetically choose the terms *brother* and *sister* to explain their new relationship.

The categories sister and brother did more than eliminate the suspicion of sexual attraction. They were also a convenient metaphor for a spiritual kinship. Beyond the relationship of brother and sister, the term “twin” suggested such a deeper kinship. As an example, Judas Thomas is considered as the twin of Jesus in the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Acts of Thomas*.⁴³ This is the term used in the *Acts of Philip* to represent the spiritual bondage between the elect. Inside the true community, the believers are not only “so to speak” brothers and sisters, but “really” brothers and sisters,⁴⁴ not at the despicable level of the flesh but at the respectable level of the spirit.

Again this theory is not a Christian invention, but the appropriation of a Hellenic concept. The Greeks developed two opposite views on humanity. On one side they claim with Pindar, “different is the race of the humans, different is the race of the God”; on the other they affirm, with Plato, that the true human beings are related as members of the same spiritual family (συγγένεια).⁴⁵ Mariamne and Nicanora feel close to one another not only because they are both of Hebraic origin, speaking the same language, but because they share the same spiritual bondage, they are “twins” in the spirit of the Savior: σὺ ἀδελφὴ μου εἶ· μία μήτηρ ἠγέννησεν ἡμᾶς διδύμους (*Acts Phil. Mart.* 9 [Γ]).

Ann Graham Brock discusses in her dissertation the way in which certain traditions concerning Mary Magdalene have been appropriated by

⁴³ *Gospel of Thomas* Prologue; *Acts of Thomas* 31 and 39.

⁴⁴ On the *virgines subintroductae*, see Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (EKKNT 7; Zurich: Benziger, 1991–), 2:153, 208.

⁴⁵ Pindar, *Nem.* 6.1; Plato, *Prot.* 322a.

orthodox groups and applied to Mary the mother.⁴⁶ The portrayal of Mariamne in the *Acts of Philip* makes evident that a symmetrical appropriation took place in the other direction. Titles, metaphors, and functions applied to the mother in patristic texts appear here as characteristic of Mariamne. *Acts Phil.* 8.3 applies the highest epithet εὐλογημένη ἐν γυναιξίν (see also Jdt 13:18) to Mariamne, while Luke applies it to Mary the mother (Luke 1:42). At a critical moment, as we have seen, she is transformed into a κιβωτός, a “chest,” an “ark,” the place of the divine presence, a category commonly applied to the Virgin Mary.⁴⁷ She is finally the counterpart or the antitype of Eve and through her faith and courage she undoes the sin that Eve has introduced into the world (an argument that Justin Martyr and Irenaeus apply to the Virgin Mary).⁴⁸

4. Mariamne and the Feminine Ministry

What is new in the long text of the *Xenophontos* 32, compared with the short text of the *Vaticanus graecus* 824 [V], is a long tour of hell in *Acts Phil.* 1. A young man resurrected by Philip tells the story of his travels in the underworld. He has been guided to several places of punishment where he can ask his *angelus interpretis* questions. The punishments that are described are those inflicted on orthodox Christians, mainly ecclesiastical leaders, who had criticized the encratite movement. They receive their punishment because they have slandered the ministers of the marginalized community. Lists of the different categories of ministry are mentioned. They must reflect the ecclesiastical and sociological reality of the marginal community. Three categories, each of two pairs, are prominent: the eunuchs and the virgins, the deacons and deaconesses, the priests and the priestesses (*Acts Phil.* 1.12). From this list it is clear that the encratite community that is behind *Acts Phil.* 1 vindicated women's

⁴⁶ See Brock, “Authority, Politics, and Gender,” 183–99; Petersen, “Zerstört die Werke der Weiblichkeit!” 291–94.

⁴⁷ See, for example, *Questions of Bartholomew* 2.8. I thank Ann Graham Brock for this reference.

⁴⁸ Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 100.3–4; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.22.3–4; see Alois Müller, *Ecclesia—Mater: Die Einheit Marias und der Kirche* (2d ed; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag, 1955); Amsler, *Acta Philippi: Commentarius*, 315–18. Actually Hippolytus in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* establishes a similar contrast, this time between Eve and the women at the empty tomb on the day of Easter, particularly Mary Magdalene; see G. Nathanael Bonwetsch, *Hippolyts Kommentar zum Hohelied* 24–25 (TU 23/2; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1902), 60–71. See also in the *Acts of Andrew* 37(5) and 39(7) the pair Andrew-Maximilla reversing the fate of Adam and Eve.

ministry.⁴⁹ Inscriptions from Asia Minor as well as council decisions (Council of Laodicea, canons 11 and 44) also mention or presuppose the presence of women ministers in the encratite communities.⁵⁰ We have here a new and strong confirmation.

What has not been noticed so far is the connection between women's ministry attested in *Acts Phil.* 1 and the ministerial activity of Mariamne described in *Acts Phil.* 8–*Mart.* At least for the compiler of the two parts in the fourth century C.E., but probably earlier already for the authors of *Acts Phil.* 1 and *Acts Phil.* 8–*Mart.*, Mariamne was not only a famous figure of the past. She was also the model and the justification for the present women's ministry. Those women who are called virgins, deaconesses, or priestesses could find an example to follow and to imitate in the figure of Mariamne. They have developed their manly faith and chosen the right type of clothing, not only a modest one, but also a masculine one. Virgins, deaconesses, and priestesses do not have the same function. The highest one, the priestess, must particularly feel a kinship with the apostle Mariamne as the priests identify themselves with the apostle Philip.

Such a daring spiritual ecclesiology combined with a dangerous Christology and an excessive ascetical life (to use the categories of the orthodox adversaries of the encratites of Asia Minor) explain why finally, despite its interest for the apostle Philip, a work like the *Acts of Philip* was rejected (its name is present on the list of the rejected books of the *Decretum gelasianum*, Gaul, sixth century C.E.). It is a miracle that nevertheless the manuscripts *Atheniensis 346* and the *Xenophontos 32* and to a lesser extent the *Vaticanus 824* have saved these stories from a complete shipwreck.⁵¹

⁴⁹ See Bertrand Bouvier and François Bovon, "Actes de Philippe, I, d'après un manuscrit inédit," in *Oecumenica et Patristica: Festschrift für Wilhelm Schneemelcher* (ed. D. Papandreou et al.; Geneva: Metropole der Schweiz, 1989), 367–94, especially 393–94; Bovon, Bouvier, and Amsler, *Acta Philippi: Textus*, 29; Amsler, *Acta Philippi: Commentarius*, 81–82; Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity: Epigraphical and Literary Studies* (trans. L. M. Maloney; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 136. It escaped Karen Torjesen: see Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).

⁵⁰ See Amsler, *Acta Philippi: Commentarius*, 485–87; Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity*, 116–23, 148–52.

⁵¹ This paper was sent for publication when the following article was published: Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Rethinking the 'Gnostic Mary': Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala in Early Christian Tradition," *J ECS* 9 (2001): 555–95. I disagree with the author on several major points.

The Portrait of Mary in the *Ascension of Isaiah*

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It is reassuring to know that the topic of Mary continues to excite interest at the start of the third millennium. Whatever one's denominational affiliation, Mary remains a significant biblical character. She enjoyed a chequered career in biblical scholarship in the course of the twentieth century. Spurned by Protestants through faith in justification, she was "rediscovered" by an international committee of scholars (including Protestants) in 1978.¹ Since then Mary, like other biblical women,² has been the focus of interest, not least for feminist theologians.³

Mary's fate in scholarship is in many ways a test of progress and tolerance in the established denominations. 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. The time is ripe for the reconsideration of Mary's place in the contours of early Christian history and theology. This is what is being done, amongst other things, at this conference.

The adequacy of this broad assessment must be measured by its faithfulness to the early Christian texts. That means looking at *all* the available material, pseudepigraphal as well as canonical, and testing the foundations by collaborative exegesis of the relevant literature. That again is what is being done here. The opportunity to work in conjunction with other scholars is a welcome one indeed.

¹ Raymond E. Brown et al., eds., *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress; New York: Paulist, 1978).

² See J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (JSOTSup 193; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

³ See Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Mary: The Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977). See also Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1976); Edward Schillebeeckx and Catharina Halkes, *Mary: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (London: SCM, 1993); and John Macquarrie, *Mary for All Christians* (London: Collins, 1991).

This paper sets out to examine the portrait of Mary in the early Christian apocalypse known as the *Ascension of Isaiah*.⁴ To do this requires several stages. First, we must examine the nature and date of this neglected text. Second, we must consider the question of what contact the *Ascension of Isaiah* has with Matthew's Gospel and with the traditions that lie behind Matthew. Only then can we consider the apocalypse itself. This examination of the *Ascension of Isaiah* must in turn be followed by the attempt to relate our findings to what is known about Mary from other ancient sources to assess the accuracy and value of the apocalypse for the study of this important topic.

1. The Text

When I first began working on the *Ascension of Isaiah* in the early 1980s, the volume of conference papers edited by Mauro Pesce had just appeared.⁵ It is astonishing to note this was the first significant work on the apocalypse (with occasional exceptions) since R. H. Charles published his critical (and, in places, much criticized) edition of the text in 1900.⁶ The past fifteen years have seen a resurgence of interest in the *Ascension of Isaiah*. This interest includes articles, books, and, above all, a reliable edition of the text in the Corpus Christianorum series apocryphorum produced by the Italian research team.⁷ The time is now ripe to place the *Ascension of Isaiah*

⁴ Critical edition by Paolo Bettiolo et al., eds., *Ascensio Isaiaae: Textus* (CCSA 7; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995); commentary by Enrico Norelli, *Ascensio Isaiaae: Commentarius* (CCSA 8; Turnhout: Brepols, 1995). The English translation cited in this paper is by Michael A. Knibb, "Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah," *OTP* 2:143–76.

⁵ Mauro Pesce, ed., *Isaia, il Diletto e la chiesa: Visione ed esegesi profetica cristiano-primitiva nell'Ascensione di Isaia* (TRSR 20; Brescia: Paideia, 1983). Also from Italy come two books by Antonio Acerbi, *Serra lignea: Studi sulla fortuna della Ascensione di Isaia* (Rome: Editrice A.V.E., 1984); and *L'Ascensione di Isaia: Cristologia e profetismo in Siria nei primi decenni del II secolo* (SPMed 17; Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1989); and two by Enrico Norelli, *L'Ascensione di Isaia: Studi su un apocrifo al crocevia dei cristianesimi* (Origini NS 1; Bologna: Dehoniane, 1994); and *Ascension du prophète Isaïe* (Apocryphes; Turnhout: Brepols, 1993).

⁶ Robert H. Charles, *The Ascension of Isaiah* (London: Black, 1900).

⁷ The new edition is detailed above. Among the articles, see Enrico Norelli, "Il martirio di Isaia come *testimonium* anti-giudaico?" *Hen* 2 (1980): 37–56; idem, "La resurrezione di Gesù nell'Ascensione di Isaia," *CNS* 1 (1980): 315–66; Pier Cesare Bori, "L'estasi del profeta: 'Ascensio Isaiaae' 6 e l'antico profetismo cristiano," *CNS* 1 (1980): 367–89; and Robert G. Hall, "The Ascension of Isaiah: Community Situation, Date, and Place in Early Christianity," *JBL* 109 (1990): 289–306; idem, "Isaiah's Ascent to See the Beloved: An Ancient Jewish Source for the Ascension of Isaiah," *JBL* 113 (1994): 463–84. Among the books, Robert G. Hall, *Revealed Histories: Techniques for Ancient Jewish Historiography* (JSPSup 6; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press,

under the microscope as was done at the beginning of the last century. I begin by asking the standard questions of what the *Ascension of Isaiah* is and when it was written.

The *Ascension of Isaiah* is a composite text that falls, rather obviously, into two halves. Charles assumed that the text was the work of a single hand or at least a single community. Yet Charles also proposed a complicated transmissional history for the work that the Italian team (in company with other scholars) now rejects.⁸ In particular, they criticize the theory that a written *Martyrdom of Isaiah* was included in the work, preferring to think of the author's creative use of Jewish traditions but not of any written document as such. Norelli's view is that chapters 6–11 were written first and that chapters 1–5 were added by a different author, both stemming from the same circle of Christian prophets whose life and experiences the work reflects.⁹ He thinks that chapters 6–11 were written at the end of the first century and that chapters 1–5 were added at the beginning of the second century.

This approach to the text contrasts with Charles's view that the work was finally compiled only at the end of the second or the beginning of the third century C.E. It accords with other recent work on the apocalypse. Relying on the possibility that *Ascen. Isa.* 4.13 alludes to the existence of living eyewitnesses of Jesus, Richard Bauckham dates the whole apocalypse to the decade 70 to 80 C.E.¹⁰ In my own published work on the *Ascension of Isaiah* I have argued that the correspondence between Trajan and Pliny in the second decade of the second century is relevant exegetically. The possibility that the apocalypse stems from either the reign of Trajan or Hadrian seems to me a strong one. This means there is a reasonable consensus, against Charles, that the work comes from an early date, whether this is the period 70 to 80 C.E. or slightly later than that. This conclusion has the obvious corollary that the *Ascension of Isaiah* ranks among our earliest noncanonical Christian literature.

What, then, is the *Ascension of Isaiah*, and what does it reveal about this formative period of Christian history? The *Ascension of Isaiah* by common

1991), 137–47; and Jonathan Knight, *The Ascension of Isaiah* (Guides to Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); idem, *Disciples of the Beloved One: The Christology, Social Setting and Theological Context of the Ascension of Isaiah* (JSPSup 18; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

⁸ See especially M. Pesce, "Presupposti per l'utilizzazione storica dell'*Ascensione di Isaia*: Formazione e tradizione del testo, genere letterario, cosmologia angelica," in Pesce, *Isaia*, 13–76.

⁹ In his *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*.

¹⁰ "The Ascension of Isaiah: Genre, Unity and Date," in his *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 363–90.

consent is an apocalypse. That is to say, it is a revelatory work with a narrative introduction in which heavenly secrets are disclosed to provide assurance of eschatological salvation. Interestingly, the *Ascension of Isaiah* falls into both the categories discerned in the 1979 Collins morphology of the apocalypse genre.¹¹ Chapters 1–5 disclose futurist eschatology but lack a heavenly journey. Chapters 6–11 include a heavenly journey but do not say a great deal about futurist eschatology. While we should not rush to conclude that this difference means the two halves of the apocalypse come from different authors, the differences between them must not be minimized.

I do not feel it necessary (for which my readers may even thank me) to engage in a detailed discussion of the “ins and outs” of a particular literary-critical view of the *Ascension of Isaiah*. I shall content myself with observing the different opinions that have been held and offer a short, and I hope succinct, introduction to the contents of the apocalypse.

The form of chapters 1–5 is strongly reminiscent of the book of Daniel.¹² There is a narrative introduction. This describes the misfortune that occurred when Manasseh acceded to the Judean throne. The essential theme of this narrative is that Manasseh is a lawless king dominated by the supernatural adversary whom the text calls variously Beliar, Sammael, Malkira, and Satan. Manasseh persecutes those who remain faithful to their ancestral religion. Isaiah and his friends withdraw to the desert and found a community there. It is said of them that “all of them were clothed in sack-cloth, and all of them were prophets; they had nothing with them, but were destitute, and they all lamented bitterly over the going astray of Israel” (*Ascen. Isa.* 2.10). At the beginning of chapter 3, Isaiah and community are harassed in their retreat by the false prophet Belkira. Belkira denounces them before Manasseh on a series of charges (evidently false ones). Isaiah is arrested and brought before Manasseh (*Ascen. Isa.* 3.12).

This is the introduction to the first revelatory section of the work. In form, this is a historical review that divides history (as does Daniel) into different representative periods.¹³ The first period is the life of Jesus, which is presented in terms of the descent and ascension of a divine being between heaven and earth (*Ascen. Isa.* 3.13–18). The second period is the apostolic age (*Ascen. Isa.* 3.19–20). This is described as a period inspired by the Holy Spirit and characterized by “many signs and miracles” (*Ascen. Isa.* 3.20). There is a marked sea-change in *Ascen. Isa.* 3.21–31. This is the

¹¹ John J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (*Semeia* 14; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979).

¹² This point is made by Bauckham, “The Ascension of Isaiah.”

¹³ See Hall, *Revealed Histories*, 137–47.

third historical period, in which it is evident that the author himself lives. The author complains that the voice of prophecy is being repressed and that “many wicked elders and shepherds . . . wrong their sheep” (*Ascen. Isa.* 3.24). *Ascension of Isaiah* 3.31 apparently mentions an attempt to silence the author himself.

The construction of this historical review is probably suggested by the Danielic precedent, most obviously by Dan 10–12. There is a shift from present to future reporting at the beginning of chapter 4, much as *Ascen. Isa.* 3.21 witnessed the shift from past to present reporting. Two traditions are fused together in *Ascen. Isa.* 4.1–13 to predict that the demon Beliar will incarnate himself in the person of Nero *redivivus*. The suggestion is that only a faithful remnant of Christians will be left as a result of this appearance (*Ascen. Isa.* 4.13). The remedy for this assault is prescribed by *Ascen. Isa.* 4.14–18. This section predicts that “the LORD will come with his angels and with the hosts of the saints from the seventh heaven, with the glory of the seventh heaven, and will drag Beliar, and his hosts also, into Gehenna” (*Ascen. Isa.* 4.14). The world will then be destroyed and the righteous ascend with their redeemer to enjoy a form of immortality in the heavenly world. Chapter 5 is a narrative conclusion to the first half of the work. It describes how Isaiah was executed by Manasseh for his visionary predictions, attributing this repression to demonic interference.

Chapters 6–11 are markedly different in character. They narrate a mystical ascension in which Isaiah journeys to the seventh heaven to witness the saving action of the descending redeemer.¹⁴ Although both the preparations for the ascension (ch. 6) and the descent through the lower heavens (chs. 7 and 8) are described in some detail, it is clear that the author’s real interest lies in the mediator’s descent, which is narrated in chapters 9 and 10. It lies beyond the purpose of a paper on Mary to explain the problems of this section in detail. I will say only that the death of Jesus on the cross has the effect of pronouncing the fate of the demonic powers in anticipation of their final destruction at the Parousia so that in fact there is a link between the two halves of the work in terms of their eschatological understanding. The Christology can be compared to a parabola in which the redeemer descends from the seventh heaven, appears on earth as Jesus,

¹⁴ This motif was studied classically by Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Himmelsreise der Seele* (1901; repr., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971). Among the recent literature, see Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Adela Yarbro Collins, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

and returns to the seventh heaven. There are significant parallels to this form of belief in Jewish angelology.¹⁵

The major problem chapters 6–11 throw up is the presence of some traditions about Jesus in chapter 11.¹⁶ This is a convenient cue to look back to chapter 3. *Ascension of Isaiah* 3.13–18 also contains some traditions about Jesus whose origin and affinities we shall consider in a moment. Nothing is said there about Mary. Mary, however, features strongly in the parallel traditions in chapter 11. The problem with chapter 11 is that these traditions are found in only one branch of the textual tradition, that represented by the Ethiopic translation (E). The Slavonic and one of the two Latin translations (S and L2) replace them with a short summary of the earthly appearance so that their authenticity—including the Marian material—is disputed.

This is a difficult problem for all serious study of the *Ascension of Isaiah*. Two factors suggest that we are dealing with material that is germane to the *Ascension of Isaiah* and not with a later insertion in chapter 11. On the consensus understanding of the apocalypse, the two halves come from identical or closely related authors.¹⁷ In fact, it is more important to demonstrate the common outlook of the two halves of the *Ascension of Isaiah* than to insist on common authorship throughout. This common outlook is confirmed by the presence of such distinctive ideas as the notion of the seven heavens, the demonology, and, above all, by the title “Beloved One” used for the descending redeemer. It is hardly coincidence that these occur in both halves of the *Ascension of Isaiah*, distinguishing the apocalypse in this respect from all other early Christian literature. The *Ascension of Isaiah* coheres in its present form, whatever the *precise* circumstances of its literary composition.

The presence of the Jesus traditions in chapter 3 makes them difficult to remove from chapter 11. Whilst the Jesus traditions in the two chapters are different in content, they fulfill an identical purpose in the text. They describe the life of Jesus within the wider context of the myth of the descending-ascending redeemer. (This is particularly true if Norelli is right to suggest that chapters 6–11 were composed subsequently to the first half of the *Ascension of Isaiah*.) This mythology is obvious in chapter 11, where the story of Jesus is preceded by the description of how the mediator descended through the heavens in response to his divine commission (ch. 10). It is no less obvious in *Ascen. Isa.* 3.13, where the Jesus traditions are introduced with the words, “that through [Isaiah] there had been revealed

¹⁵ See my *Disciples*, ch. 2.

¹⁶ See my review of this issue in *ibid.*, 26–27.

¹⁷ So, recently, Bauckham, “The Ascension of Isaiah.”

the coming of the Beloved from the seventh heaven, and his transformation, and his descent, and the form into which he must be transformed, (namely) the form of a man.” This common outlook argues strongly that *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–22 in the Ethiopic text is an original part of the *Ascension of Isaiah* and not a later insertion.

This conclusion is supported by a second consideration. *Ascension of Isaiah* 11.2–22 seems to make concessions in a docetic direction, or at least it can be read in that way. It is possible that a later editor found this section either too docetic or possibly insufficiently docetic and removed it for that reason. It is very substantially easier to see *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–22, with all its warts, as part of the original apocalypse than to treat it as later hagiography. In doing this, we must take due account of the mythological context in which this material occurs.

2. *The Jesus Traditions in the Ascension of Isaiah*

The next question to consider is the origin of these Jesus traditions, including the question of whether they have contact with New Testament descriptions of Jesus and Mary.

The Jesus traditions have an inner coherence that suggests they were not created *de novo* by the author(s) of the *Ascension of Isaiah*. This view has been carefully argued by Richard Bauckham.¹⁸ Bauckham compares these “kerygmatic summaries” (as he calls them) with the summaries included in Acts and then again in Ignatius of Antioch and elsewhere. There are three such summaries in the *Ascension of Isaiah*. Besides *Ascen. Isa.* 3.13–18 and 11.2–22 (E), already mentioned, we must notice *Ascen. Isa.* 9.13–18, where it is said of the mediator’s earthly appearance that “the LORD will indeed descend into the world in the last days, (he) who is to be called Christ after he has descended and become like you in form, and they will think that he is flesh and a man.” This is followed in chapter 9 by a prediction of the death and the resurrection of Jesus.

These summaries are not plain narrative descriptions of Jesus. They have a mythological quality in the sense that they describe the appearance of a divine being in the world who dies because he is unrecognized there but rises and ascends back to his exalted position in the seventh heaven. Bauckham identifies verbal points of contact with the other “kerygmatic summaries” mentioned. These reinforce the conclusion that they belong to this particular genre and are not simply individual abstractions made on the basis of the Gospels. Thus the phrase “signs and wonders” (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.18) occurs in

¹⁸ “Kerygmatic Summaries in the Speeches of Acts,” in *History, Literature and Society in the Book of Acts* (ed. Ben Witherington; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 185–217, esp. 191–204.

both Acts 2:22 and *T. Adam* 3.1 but in the Gospels only derogatorily in John 4:48; and the “punishments with which the children of Israel must punish him” occurs in a fragment of the *Kerygma Petrou* preserved in Clement of Alexandria *Strom.* 6.15.128 but not in the New Testament.

The essence of the “kerygmatic summary,” against Martin Dibelius,¹⁹ was its flexibility as an organ of communication in earliest Christianity. In this, it contrasts with the fixed form of the Gospels, especially as the first century went through its course. The variation both in style and in content between the summaries in different works suggests there was a common stock of such material in Christian antiquity from which individual units were composed.

The *Ascension of Isaiah* appears to be a unique work in a number of important respects, the summaries included. One such respect is the idiosyncratic fusion of the “kerygmatic summary” material with the myth of the descending-ascending redeemer in the apocalypse. This was the work of the author himself. It is not necessary to suppose that he derived the mythological element from the “kerygmatic summary” tradition. It was an emerging feature of late first-century Christianity, as we know from the Fourth Gospel (and possibly even earlier, depending on the evaluation of Phil 2:5–11). As with other aspects of his apocalypse, this author shows a creative use of existing material that combines ideas to present them in a new and arresting way.

We must ask how these “kerygmatic summaries” in the *Ascension of Isaiah* relate to the crystallizing Gospel tradition of the New Testament. Even a casual reading of the apocalypse shows that these traditions have contact with Matthew’s Gospel in particular. Thus *Ascen. Isa.* 3.13 blames the “children of Israel” for the suffering of Jesus (see the narrative of Matt 27, esp. Matt 27:25); *Ascen. Isa.* 3.14 mentions the guards at the tomb (see Matt 27:62–66; 28:11–15); *Ascen. Isa.* 3.15 mentions the descent of an angel to effect the resurrection (see Matt 28:2); *Ascen. Isa.* 3.18 makes the disciples “teach all nations and every tongue the resurrection of the Beloved” (see Matt 28:19); and *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–7 tells the story of the conception and birth of Jesus in language that has obvious parallels with Matt 1:18–25.

This relationship with Matthew has been variously evaluated in recent scholarship. Bauckham assigns the material to the “kerygmatic summary” tradition and thus distinguishes it from Matthew itself. He is followed in this by Norelli in more than one publication.²⁰ E. Massaux, on the other

¹⁹ *From Tradition to Gospel* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1934), 16–17.

²⁰ *L’Ascensione di Isaia*, 115–66, esp. 116–42; “Avant le canonique et l’apocryphe: aux origines des récits de la naissance de Jésus,” *RTP* 126 (1994): 305–24; *Ascensio Isaiae: Commentarius*, ch. 1 paragraph 8.

hand, notes special affinities with Matthew in *Ascen. Isa.* 3.17–18a and finds even the possible reminiscence of Matthew in *Ascen. Isa.* 3.18a.²¹ W.-D. Köhler holds more than one passage influenced by Matthew.²² This argument was more recently restated by J. Verheyden, who discerns three elements indicating our author's dependence on Matthew: the guard at the tomb, the descent of the angel, and the mission of the disciples.²³ A *via media* is the hypothesis of B. A. Johnson and J. Denker that there was a tradition common to both Matthew and the *Gospel of Peter* of which the *Ascension of Isaiah* is a third representative.²⁴

It will be helpful to clarify the issues involved in this discussion. First of all, the *Ascension of Isaiah* is an apocalypse and not a Gospel. Secondly, the *Ascension of Isaiah* includes no substantial citations from Matthew that would put the question of Matthean influence beyond possible doubt. Thirdly, there is most certainly a connection between the *Ascension of Isaiah* and Matthew's *special material*. Fourthly, however, this connection does not necessarily mean that the author used Matthew itself. He could have drawn on the source that provided Matthew's special material so that it is not proven to posit direct literary dependence in explanation of the facts in question. The latter argument is accepted as convincing by Norelli in particular.

Were Bauckham's argument about the date of the *Ascension of Isaiah* to be accepted, that would place the issue beyond doubt. The author of the apocalypse cannot have known a text that was not yet written or only just written. Even if the *Ascension of Isaiah* comes from the early second century, however, the hypothesis that the author drew on Matthew itself faces two considerable objections: (1) nothing in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–22 necessarily demands dependence on the text of Matthew as opposed to a common source; and (2) both the strange description of the resurrection in *Ascen. Isa.* 3.16–17 (see *Gos. Pet.* 34–42) and the statement about the absent

²¹ Edouard Massaux, *Influence de l'évangile de saint Matthieu sur la littérature chrétienne avant saint Irénée* (BETL 75; reissued, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1986), 196.

²² *Die Rezeption des Matthäusevangeliums in der Zeit vor Irenäus* (WUNT 24; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 303, 307.

²³ "L'Ascension d'Isaïe et Matthieu," in *The New Testament in Early Christianity: La réception des écrits néotestamentaires dans le christianisme primitif* (ed. J.-M. Sevrin; BETL 86; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989), 247–74.

²⁴ B. A. Johnson, "The Gospel of Peter: Between Apocalypse and Romance," in *StPatr* 16 (TU 129; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1985), 2:170–74; Jürgen Denker, *Die theologisch-geschichtliche Stellung des Petrus-evangeliums: Ein Beitrag zur Frühgeschichte des Docketismus* (Europäische Hochschulschriften: Theologie 36; Bern: Lang, 1975), 151.

midwife in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.14, which have no Matthean parallels, point in favor of the common source theory.

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

3. *Mary in the Ascension of Isaiah*

Now for the real content of this paper. What does the *Ascension of Isaiah* say about Mary, and how does this information cohere with what is known about Mary from elsewhere?

The Marian traditions in the *Ascension of Isaiah* are confined to the disputed passage in the Ethiopic text of chapter 11, which I have held an authentic part of the apocalypse (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–22 E). I shall begin by listing what the apocalypse says about Mary and then proceed to the issue of interpretation.

Ascension of Isaiah 11.2 states that Mary was “a woman of the family of David” and that she was betrothed to Joseph the carpenter who was also a Davidide. *Ascension of Isaiah* 11.3 continues that Mary was found pregnant and that Joseph resolved to divorce her. In *Ascen. Isa.* 11.4 “the angel of the Spirit appeared in this world,” and Joseph gave up his plan. According to *Ascen. Isa.* 11.5–6 Joseph kept Mary a virgin and did not live with her for two months. After this time (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.8) “Mary then looked with her eyes and saw a small infant, and she was astounded.” *Ascension of Isaiah* 11.9 adds that “after her astonishment had worn off, her womb was found as (it was) at first, before she had conceived.” *Ascension of Isaiah* 11.12–13 records popular mystification about the birth of Jesus, some saying that Mary had given birth after only two months but others that she did not give birth because no midwife had attended her. This part of the summary ends with the words, strikingly similar to Ignatius, *Eph.* 19, “it was hidden from all the heavens and all the princes and every god of this world” (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.16).

The first statement (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.2) supplies more information about Mary than does Matthew.²⁵ Matthew 1 makes Joseph a Davidide, tracing Jesus’ ancestry on the paternal side. Luke 1:27 also makes Joseph a

²⁵ For exegesis of the canonical material, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1993).

Davidide, but, although the attempt to do this was occasionally made in the patristic period, it does not seem likely that this reference includes Mary. Indeed, Luke introduces a complication on this very point. He gives Mary Levitical relatives as if she came from a different tribe altogether. The *Ascension of Isaiah* must be compared with such second-century sources as *Prot. Jas.* 10.1; Ignatius, *Eph.* 18.2; and Justin, *Dial.* 44.4, in making Mary a Davidide. The fact that this information is found in second-century sources but not in first-century sources almost certainly makes it suspect historically. The only safe conclusion is that these sources are “improving” what was known about Joseph’s ancestry to include Mary in order to remove any possible doubt about Jesus’ messianic qualifications. Like Luke’s attribution of priestly ancestry to Mary, it is possible—if not probable—that theological motivations have entered the arena at this point. (There is no evidence that the author of the *Ascension of Isaiah* knew the text of Luke.)

The next section of the “kerygmatic summary” (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.3–6) closely resembles the account in Matt 1:18–21. Although the language used is peculiar to the *Ascension of Isaiah*, the thought is the same as Matthew’s. This is that Joseph was dissuaded from divorcing Mary through an angelophany and that he had no sexual relations with her before the birth of Jesus. The *Ascension of Isaiah* leaves no doubt about the virginal conception of Jesus but makes no attempt to explain how this occurred except by implying the “angel of the Spirit’s” role in this matter.

By contrast, the description of the birth of Jesus is strikingly different from Matthew’s account. It seems on the basis of *Ascen. Isa.* 11.8 (E) that Mary gave birth to Jesus after a pregnancy of only two months. The birth itself took the mother by surprise. The implication is that it occurred in Bethlehem, based on the statement that Joseph was a Davidide (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.2), the reference to Joseph’s house (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.7), and the subsequent journey to Nazareth (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.15). Of greater interest than the location is the manner of the birth in question. Mary’s pregnancy is said to have lasted for two months only. It is not easy to explain the origin of this figure, except perhaps to dispute the possibility that it came from the tradition held in common with Matthew. *Protevangelium of James* 13.1 states that Mary gave birth in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Of the Evangelists, only Luke takes an interest in the duration of Mary’s pregnancy (Luke 1:26, 56).

It is probable that, in evaluating this material, we should focus less on the specific duration of the pregnancy than on the supernatural nature of the event as indicated by its brevity. The short pregnancy must be related to the notion of the mediator’s descent from heaven and the other indications of his superhuman ability in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–22, including the implied suggestion that Jesus did not really *need* to suck the breast in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.17 and his “signs and miracles,” which are reported in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.18.

It places beyond any possible doubt the divine hand in the events and states, in chronological terms, the author's conviction that this baby was no ordinary human being. The *Ascension of Isaiab* and the *Protevangelium of James* represent different variations on this theme.

The birth of Jesus in the *Ascension of Isaiab* is apparently a spontaneous event. Again, this must be referred to the author's superimposition of the mythological pattern. The point is that a heavenly visitor needs no human assistance when incarnating himself on earth. The thought is that the Beloved One passes through Mary's womb, although the pregnancy and birth are real events. The infant does not bypass Mary's womb in appearing from heaven. This information must be compared with the other exceptional deeds of Jesus recorded in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.17–18. It is a Christology, not an early Marian adulation.

The final point is historically the most significant. We saw that, in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.9 (E), "after her astonishment had worn off, her womb was found as (it was) at first, before she had conceived." This is the middle term in the fourth-century triad, *ante partum*, *in partu*, and *post partum*.²⁶ Here the *Ascension of Isaiab* differs from Matthew and Luke, which, in that order, state or imply that Jesus was virginally conceived. The *Ascension of Isaiab* not only states that Jesus was virginally conceived but adds that Mary was found a virgin following the delivery. Once again, one wonders whether this element was introduced by the author of the *Ascension of Isaiab* rather than derived from the tradition held in common with Matthew. The point at stake is the confirmation that Jesus was not conceived by human means. In the context of the author's Christology, this is because he is the Beloved One who had descended from the seventh heaven. This evidence should be compared with that of *Prot. Jas.* 19–20, where it is said, somewhat graphically, that the hymen was not ruptured during the delivery of Jesus.

The overriding impression to emerge from this material is that the birth of Jesus, like his conception, was a miracle. That is why no midwife attended (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.14). This was no ordinary baby. The progress of thought in the summary is from the birth to the adulthood of Jesus. The material is set within the context of the wider mythological pattern that describes the action of the descending and ascending redeemer. That is the context in which the Marian material must be interpreted.

4. Evaluation of the Material

The final question to address is how we evaluate this material and what contact it demonstrates with other Christian literature describing the birth of Jesus.

²⁶ See *ibid.*, 517–33.

We have seen that there is both contact with Matthew's Gospel and also obvious differences from Matthew. In places, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that these differences are deliberate and theologically nuanced. The principal differences I have noticed are twofold. First of all, the birth of Jesus is a spontaneous event that escapes even the mother's notice. Secondly, Mary is found a virgin after the delivery. Both of these are christological statements. They reflect the belief that Jesus is the earthly appearance of the Beloved One, the divine mediator who came from the seventh heaven. In both cases, I questioned whether it is plausible to suppose that the author derived them from the tradition held in common with Matthew.

With due allowance to the recognition that ideas do not develop in a strict chronological sequence, I want to place this difference-within-similarity in a trajectory and examine the relation between Matthew and the *Ascension of Isaiah* in that perspective. Matthew itself lives within a trajectory when compared with Mark. Matthew introduced the infancy narrative over against Mark as if to make the point that Jesus was the Messiah from even before his birth. It is plausible to see Luke as to some extent revising Matthew and then to see John as reading back the significance of Jesus to the moment of creation itself. This trajectory within the Gospels cannot be ignored when writing on the Christology of the New Testament literature.

Matthew introduces the idea of Jesus' virginal conception apparently for the purpose of demonstrating that Isa 7:14 has been fulfilled (Matt 1:22–23). The silence of the earlier New Testament writings about the virginal conception is certainly significant theologically, and it may be significant historically. Luke tones down the idea of virginal conception, removing the scriptural "proof" and allowing the reader to *infer* it from his text (Luke 1:34–35). It is not the purpose of this paper to ask why Matthew introduces this idea, but the question is a pertinent one for all study of Mary in early Christian literature. The *Ascension of Isaiah* offers a parallel version to Matthew's, making additions that reinforce the virginal conception whilst omitting the scriptural proof for it. The latter suggests that the scriptural proof is a Matthean innovation.

Cui bono? is a familiar phrase to New Testament scholars. In the present context we must ask to whose advantage these additions are made: to Jesus' or to Mary's. It has occasionally been suggested that the *Ascension of Isaiah* is an early witness to the developing cult of Mary.²⁷ I want to resist that suggestion here. The passage where the information occurs is

²⁷ See F. Buck, "Are the 'Ascension of Isaiah' and the 'Odes of Solomon' Witnesses to an Early Cult of Mary?" in *De primordiis cultus mariani* (Rome: Pontificia academia mariana internationalis, 1970), 4:371–99.

one of three “kerygmatic summaries” in the *Ascension of Isaiah* and the only one where she is mentioned. Moreover, the additions point ultimately beyond Mary to the figure of the Beloved One who passed with such ease through her womb. Nor is there any attempt to describe the miraculous conception of Mary herself, as there is for instance in the *Protevangelium of James*. Significantly also, there is no suggestion of the *virginitas post partum*; the *Ascension of Isaiah* does nothing to contradict the statement of the Gospels that Jesus had brothers and sisters, even though it does not specifically mention it.²⁸

In terms of my proposed trajectory, however rough it may be, the *Ascension of Isaiah* represents a development beyond Matthew in certain respects but not so far as the *Protevangelium of James*. As opposed to Matthew, Jesus’ parents form an element in the kerygmatic summary, not its basic framework. The framework is provided by the myth of the descending-ascending redeemer. That determines the form of the material utilized. The miraculous birth of Jesus and its lack of human involvement point to the influence of the heavenly world, not to the human circumstances of the mediator’s earthly appearance. The summary concludes as it began with a heavenly journey, in this case, the ascent of the Beloved through the seven heavens (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.23–33). Mary features as an actor in the summary, not the central character. The “descent-ascent” scheme provides the framework into which the Marian traditions are inserted in this apocalypse.

The use of Marian traditions in the apocalypse is christologically determined. What is said about Mary supports the miraculous nature of the intervention that the heavenly descent scheme introduces. The *Ascension of Isaiah* both augments the notion of the virginal conception and makes the birth of Jesus take his mother by surprise. This leaves no doubt that Jesus’ person and ministry are conceived in supernatural terms. It is interesting to ponder the question of whether there is a “crypto-docetism” in the *Ascension of Isaiah* that was introduced to support this view.²⁹

We can but ponder the source of the *virginitas in partu*. Given that the *Ascension of Isaiah* is earlier than the *Protevangelium of James*, it is possible—but not certain—that the author was himself responsible for the creation of this idea. In any event the *Ascension of Isaiah* illustrates the way in which Marian ideas were developing around the end of the first century C.E. It shows that christological interest in no small measure prompted this early flowering.

²⁸ On whom see Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990).

²⁹ On this subject, see now Darrell D. Hannah, “Isaiah’s Vision in the Ascension of Isaiah and the Early Church,” *JTS* 50 (1999): 80–101.

The significance of the *Ascension of Isaiah* for our topic lies in its early date and the differences that emerge when it is compared with Matthew. The most likely explanation of this difference is that both authors used common tradition in different ways. We must also contrast the view of Mary in the *Ascension of Isaiah* with the much more developed hagiography of the *Protevangelium of James*. When this is done, and to introduce a crude historical anachronism, I venture to suggest that the *Ascension of Isaiah* has more in common with the beliefs of the later first century than it does with the beliefs of the later second century. The apocalypse lets us “take a level” on Marian belief at the time when the canonical gospels were just about finished. The *Ascension of Isaiah* thereby stands as historical commentary of the very highest importance. In its Marian traditions it goes beyond the *virginitas ante partum*, but it does not yet reach the level of apocryphal Marian hagiography that later texts introduce. It confirms the continuing importance of the pre-Gospel tradition and illustrates the use that was made of such material during the period in question.

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

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

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

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

² The *Ascension of Isaiah* is included in such classic collections of Old Testament pseudepigrapha as Robert H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1913), 2:155–62; and *OTP* 2:156–76.

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

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

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

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

⁵ Ibid., 415–18.

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

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

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

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

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

The newly acquired scholarly respect for the *Ascension of Isaiah* necessitates a reassessment of the significance of the advanced Marian

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹³ Pp. 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 *Ascension of Isaiah* with “the obvious corollary that the *Ascension of Isaiah* ranks among our earliest noncanonical 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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹ Knight, “Mary,” 97; idem, *Disciples*, 66.

²² Knight, “Mary,” 97.

²³ See Knight’s summary and references in “Mary,” 98–99.

²⁴ Bauckham, “Summaries,” 185–217; Knight, “Mary,” 97–98; idem, *Disciples*, 274–78, 288–89.

²⁵ Bauckham, “Summaries,” 191–204.

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

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

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

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

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 195, 199.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 203.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

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

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

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 213.

³⁵ Ibid., 215.

³⁶ Ibid.

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

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

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

the evidence of *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–22 in the Ethiopic version suggests that the author used a pre-Matthean source for the summaries that Matthew also utilized. This is an important conclusion for studying the Marian traditions in the apocalypse. It shows that, even if chapters 6–11 come from the second century C.E., they incorporate earlier material so that we are placed in touch with traditions about Jesus that 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 *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16. He identified an "evident seam" between *Ascen. Isa.* 11.22 and 23 that "is a good indication that the author was drawing on a source in 11.2–22 (as he did in 3.13–18)."⁴¹

³⁸ Knight, "Mary," 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, *Ascension*, 15, he stated that "the ministry of Jesus is described in language which shows knowledge of Matthew's special material (3.13–18) and of broader traditions as well (cf. also '11:2–22 in the Ethiopic text')."

⁴⁰ Knight, "Mary," 100.

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

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

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

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

⁴³ Knight, *Ascension*, 88.

⁴⁴ Knight, *Disciples*.

⁴⁵ Knight, “Mary,” 100.

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

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

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

It was mentioned above that there were certain elements in the Marian material in *Ascen. Isa.* 11 that did not originate in the canonical Gospel tradition. These were Mary's Davidic descent, her astonishment at the miraculous appearance of the infant Jesus, her short two-month pregnancy, the absence of a midwife in the nativity, and Mary's *virginitas post partum*. It was partly on the basis of the existence of two such non-canonical elements in the *Ascension of Isaiab* that Knight rejected the exclusive dependence of the *Ascension of Isaiab* on Matthew alone. The first was the "strange description of the resurrection in *Ascen. Isa.* 3:16–17 (see *Gos. Pet.* 34–42)"; the second concerned "the absent midwife in *Ascen. Isa.* 11:14."⁴⁹ Knight rightly substantiates his first example with a reference to the *Gospel of Peter* but is silent on any non-Matthean parallels to his second example. Actually, the absent midwife in *Ascen. Isa.* 11.14 is an important contact with *Prot. Jas.* 19, which narrates the birth of Jesus. In *Prot. Jas.* 17–18 Mary is about to give birth on the road to Bethlehem. Joseph puts her in a cave and goes out in search of a Hebrew midwife to assist in the birth. By the time they arrive at the cave in *Prot. Jas.* 19.12–15, the child has already appeared. This is the first of the striking parallels between the *Ascension of Isaiab* Marian materials and the *Protevangelium of James*.

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

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

⁴⁹ Knight, "Mary," 99.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 100–101.

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

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

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

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

⁵² Bauckham, "Summaries," 203.

⁵³ Knight, "Mary," 101.

⁵⁴ Zervos, "Annunciation," 422–25.

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

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

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

⁵⁵ See discussion below.

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

⁵⁷ Knight, “Mary,” 101.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

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

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

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

⁶⁰ Ibid., 103.

⁶¹ Ibid.

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

Knight can only arrive at his conclusions concerning the Marian material in *Ascen. Isa.* 11 after taking as a “given that the *Ascension of Isaiah* is earlier than the *Protevangelium of James*,”⁶² which he dismisses as later “apocryphal Marian hagiography.”⁶³ This “given” reflects the perception of most contemporary scholars that is based upon an outdated, but still well-entrenched, scholarly consensus that views the *Protevangelium of James* as a monolithic composition written in the middle to latter part of the second century C.E. whose value for earlier Christology and Mariology is not worth serious consideration. We should remember that the *Ascension of Isaiah* was branded with a similar set of misperceptions only a few short years ago. The *Protevangelium of James* has not had the benefit of international teams of scholars working arduously for decades to produce thorough critical editions of its text with accompanying exhaustive commentaries and volumes of extensive critical evaluations. Should such study of the *Protevangelium of James* come about in the future, this document will doubtless be identified as an invaluable and unique witness to the thought of earliest Christianity and will be recognized, even in its present heavily redacted form, as being at least equal in importance to the *Ascension of Isaiah*. And the *Genesis Marias*, in my opinion, will prove to be the primary source document of the Mariology of the ancient Christian world whose ideas were reflected in such later writings as the *Protevangelium of James*, *Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–16, and the letters of Ignatius of Antioch.

⁶² Ibid., 104.

⁶³ Ibid., 105.

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