

MARIAN TEACHING IN THE 2ND AND 3RD CENTURIES

Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 110)

In Mariology the transition from the canonical books of the New Testament to early patristics is almost imperceptible. About a decade after the Fourth Gospel's composition, Ignatius of Antioch assigns to Mary a modest but important place in the Christology of his seven letters. He mentions Mary by name four times⁶⁷ and once refers to her as "the Virgin."⁶⁸ Mary's name functions in these texts as an anti-Gnostic device, linking Jesus concretely to the human race through his mother as someone "truly born." The adverb "truly," repeated three times, belongs to Ignatius' anti-docetic vocabulary⁶⁹ and remains imprinted as such in the Church's memory.⁷⁰ Also in another detail, Ignatius' thought is very quickly accepted as part of Church tradition: he is the first to combine "from the seed of David according to the flesh" (Rm 1:2) with the virginal conception and concludes, or at least makes the reader conclude, that if Jesus' flesh was "truly from David's race" or "David's seed" (*Smyrneans* 1:1; *Romans* 7:3), then Mary herself was a descendant of David.⁷¹

⁶⁷ *Ephesians* 7:2; 18:2; 19:1; *Trallians* 9:1.

⁶⁸ *Smyrneans* 1:1.

⁶⁹ *Trallians* 9:1.

⁷⁰ It still resounds in a late medieval Eucharistic poem of the 14th century, at a time when the crisis of Docetism was long past: *Ave verum corpus natum de Maria Virgine, vere passum, immolatum in cruce pro homine*.

⁷¹ It is quite possible that Ignatius refers to a tradition already present – although quite discretely – in Luke's Gospel as he reports the Angel's words: "the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father" (Lk 1:32).

In his most important text about Mary, Ignatius refers to her "virginity" (ἡ παρθενία) and her τόκετος (childbearing or "parturition") as two of the three mysteries of salvation history which took place in God's silence, for they were kept hidden from the "prince of this world":

Now the virginity of Mary was hidden from the prince of this world, as was also her offspring (or: parturition, giving birth), and the death of the Lord; three mysteries of proclamation, which had been wrought in silence by God. (*Ephesians* 19:1-2)

Both the thought and the terminology of the passage evoke St. Paul:

We speak God's wisdom, *mysterious*, hidden, which God predetermined before the ages for our glory, which *none of the rulers of this age knew*; for if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor 2:7-8)

In fact, Ignatius names Paul explicitly in this letter as the one who initiated the Ephesians into "the Gospel's mysteries."⁷² One would, therefore, think that the Lord's death, the "third mystery" in this text, elaborates Paul's idea: had "the princes of this world (τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦτου)" known that Jesus was the Son of God, the crucifixion would not have occurred. But this is not Ignatius' main idea. Using Pauline language, Ignatius pursues his own anti-Gnostic agenda: the triple mystery is about God's true Incarnation, supposing true human conception and birth, and leading to a true death. They remained under the veil of secrecy because the Devil (the prince of this world, in the singular) could not penetrate this mystery and perceive what was hidden behind these events in the flesh (conception, birth, and death): the presence of a Divine Person. The truth of these events was made manifest only after they had happened, and only at the time that God chose to unveil their meaning. So although the

language is Pauline, the theological thought is more Johannine than Pauline, as seen more clearly from the way Ignatius continues his meditation on the triple mystery:

How, then, was he manifested to the world? A star shone forth in heaven above all the other stars, the light of which was inexpressible, while its novelty struck men with astonishment. And all the rest of the stars, with the sun and moon, formed a chorus to this star, and its light was exceedingly great above them all. And there was agitation felt as to whence this new spectacle came, so unlike to everything else in the heavens.

Hence every kind of magic was destroyed and every bond of wickedness manifested in human form for the renewal of eternal life. And now that took a beginning which had been prepared by God. Henceforth all things were in a state of tumult, because he mediated the abolition of death. (*Ephesians* 19:2-3)

The allusion to Matthew's story of the Magi is more than highly probable: the star (ἀστὴρ; Mt 2:2), the "agitation" (ἐταράχθη Mt 2:3 corresponding to ταραχή in Ignatius' text) and also the word μυστεῖα corresponding to the "Magi" (μάγοι in Mt 2:1) are no accidental verbal coincidences but closely reproduced keywords, especially if we realize that the martyr bishop is a prisoner without access to his Christian books. Ignatius speaks about the birth of Jesus as a sacred event of cosmic importance and gives a Gentle Christian exegesis of the story. The star signals the appearance of the world's Divine Creator and Ruler, summoning the Magi, who, in fact, come and "do homage" to him (cf. Mt 2:11). The story signifies the abolition of death's regime and the arrival of eternal life. The language and the narrative are here Matthean but the theology is again Johannine: Jesus' birth brings "novelty" (καινότης), i.e., it renews the meaning of human existence as it eliminates the reign of blind destiny.

Mary's unexpectedly "new" kind of motherhood eminently fits

⁷² *Ephesians* 19:2.

into this theological context as a revelatory tool expressing what the *singular reading* of John 1:13 conveys. For it says that the coming of the Logos in flesh is in discontinuity with "generation for procreation," or the practice of human sexual reproduction as a losing battle fought against mortality. When a new generation replaces the previous one, that saves the race but cannot save the person: every individual is born to die. By such birth nothing significantly "new" comes about: everyone who is born is under the law of death. However, through the birth of the Logos "not by man's desire or instinct and not from blood," novelty is sprung from the Word made flesh: death is conquered by life eternal.

Justin Martyr (d. ca. 160)

While Ignatius' *Ephesians* 19:1-3 is little more than a short clip interpreting "the virginal birth," Justin Martyr testifies to a new and original thought in early patristic Mariology. One may even propose that the short text about the parallel between Mary and Eve in his *Dialogue with Trypho* is the most significant patristic thought in the field, from which all subsequent Mariology was suddenly stirred into motion. This is no exaggeration, even if all that Justin seems to do is offer a modest scriptural commentary. At first sight it may appear something of an allegory, with its brief mention of Genesis 3, but at closer examination one sees a concise statement about the emanation of creation and redemption from the single salvific will of the Father that encompasses all mankind, a key concept that unites the two Testaments. We must read this text in full:

And he is written about as Son of God in the memoirs of his Apostles who also call him "Son"; and we understood as the one proceeding by the Father's will and power before all he made. He is also said to be "Wisdom," and "the Day" and "the Orient" and "Sword" and "Rock" and "Shoot," and Jacob and Israel, called in other and other way in the words of the Prophets.

He became man through the Virgin in order that the disobedience caused by the Serpent might be destroyed in the same manner in which it had originated. For Eve, an undefiled virgin, conceived the word of the Serpent and brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary, filled with faith and joy, when the Angel Gabriel announced to her the good tidings that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her and the power of the Highest would overshadow her, and therefore the Holy One would be the Son of God, answered: "Be it done unto me according to thy word."

And, indeed, she gave birth to him... by whom God destroys both the Serpent and those angels and men who have become like the Serpent, but frees from death those who repent of their sins and believe in Christ.⁷³

In the introductory sentence⁷⁴ Justin coins a new way of referring to the Gospel books: "the memoirs (or recollections) of the Apostles."⁷⁵ In the lines that follow he specifically refers to Luke's story of the virginal conception quoting it *verbatim*. We have here the earliest attestation of Luke's work as an *apostolic* Gospel.

Next, a reference is made to "the words of the Prophets" but it designates specifically the first book of Moses, Genesis. In Christian usage, the Old Testament is called "the Law and the Prophets" (see Rm 3:21) or even simply "the Prophets," especially in contexts such

⁷³ *Dialogue with Trypho* 100 (ed. E.J. Goodspeed, 1915).

⁷⁴ The first paragraph of this quotation is usually left out by surveys of Mariology quoting Justin. This is done probably on account of Justin's small but important theological detour, in which he explains that the different "names" of the Divinity in the Scriptures refer to nothing material or corporeal in God but signify a spiritual Being. He takes up this theme in connection with the word "Son," who is generated spiritually, that is, by "will and power." To this he adds a list of metaphors, insisting on the non-physical character of God's eternal Son.

⁷⁵ We must notice that Justin asserts here an "apostolic origin" to the Gospel of Luke. This is not a vague idea for enhancing the book's credentials. Justin is a *younger contemporary* to the heretic Marcion, who accepted no other Gospel but Luke's as authentically apostolic, because he accepted Paul as Jesus' only authentic apostle. Thus Justin's verbatim quotation from Luke as written in the "memoirs of the Apostles" asserts the orthodox understanding of the Lucan Gospel's apostolic origins.

as this, in which "Prophets and Apostles" signify the totality of the Scriptures.⁷⁶ But it can simply be shortened to "the Prophets."⁷⁷

At the center of the text we find a complex comparison between Eve and Mary. It is mainly a proof of parallelism among several compared terms, enhanced by contrasts closely linked to the parallelism. Both Mary and Eve are virgins and mothers, both received a persuasive visit by an angelic creature (Gabriel and the Serpent, a fallen angel), but with opposite results: Eve disobeyed and Mary obeyed God's will.

This contrast of sin and obedience leads to fundamentally opposite consequences for mankind as a whole: life and death. Justin meanders through several issues to arrive to such a conclusion. He mentions several details about Mary by quoting the story of the Annunciation. We must keep in mind that his interlocutor is assumed to be fully familiar with the third chapter of Genesis. Especially relevant is Genesis 3:16, which brings other parallels and contrasts to light. Justin only alludes to it or assumes it implicitly: such is the "joy" with which Mary brings her child to the world; it must be heard as counterpoint to the "sadness" in Genesis 3:16 (LXX: ἐν λύπῃς τέξῃ τέκνα). Just as importantly, we must look to Genesis 3:20. In this verse, according to the Septuagint, Adam calls the woman "Life" (Ζωή), because she becomes the mother of all the living (ὅτι αὕτη μήτηρ πάντων τῶν ζώοντων). Certainly Justin expects his interlocutor to understand the relevance of the parallel between Mary and Eve, because only in Mary does Eve become what she is called, i.e., "life" or "lifegiver," while her act of disobedience led much more immediately to the curse of death pronounced over all children of Adam in the previous verse of Genesis (3:19).

⁷⁶ See Denis Farkasiewicz, "Prophets and Apostles, the Conjunction of the Two Terms before Irenaeus," in *Texts and Testaments*, edited by E.W. March (San Antonio: Trinity, 1980), 109-134.

⁷⁷ It is important to see that Luke's text, since it belongs to the "memoirs of the Apostles," receives from Justin the same respect for normativity that is due to "the Prophets," who also refer to the Son when using various metaphors. Of course, Justin means "Law and Prophets," and eventually begins to refer to Eve and specifically to Gn 3:16, the first book of the Torah, such that our text ends up being an exercise in "opening the meaning of the Scriptures" (cf. Lk 24:44-45).

Reading Justin's text in which Luke's Annunciation story is interpreted in the context of Genesis 3 – a procedure typical for early Christian exegesis – reveals that the Mariology he supposes here is broader and wider than what this snip of the *Dialogue* explicitly says. We are entitled to see this as the tip of an iceberg submerged in the lost Christian writings of the 2nd century, from which, fortunately, some significant further samples protrude to be charted in correspondence with their true context.

Irenaeus (d. ca. 202)

St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons in Gaul (today France)⁷⁸ was from Asia Minor, where he knew the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, to whom one of Ignatius' letters had been addressed. Irenaeus also tells that Polycarp at a young age saw and listened to "John, the Disciple of the Lord," whom Irenaeus recognizes as the "Beloved Disciple" and the author of the Fourth Gospel or the person who stands behind its author as the source and key witness.⁷⁹ Irenaeus is, therefore, firmly rooted in apostolic tradition. He is also recognized as the first systematic theologian of the Church, a man who explores, by copious quotations from both Testaments and by a systematic exposition of the apostolic faith, the essential elements of the Christian doctrine. His theological edifice is consciously constructed upon the Rule of Faith, the basis that he defends as the truth in opposition to the non-truths and half-truths of a large assortment of Gnostic teachings. At his time these teachings more than all else threatened to transform and essentially alter the Christian message. In the five books of his *Adversus Haereses* Irenaeus presents an overview of the various Gnostic systems of his time and responds to them by a systematic use of the Church's scriptural sources and a serious confrontation of

⁷⁸ Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, tr. by Thomas Butler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 51-58.

⁷⁹ In contemporary scholarship this statement of Irenaeus became the subject of heavy debate. I maintain the position that Irenaeus is neither misleading nor misled: he knows that through Polycarp he was personally inserted in a succession of unbroken chain of tradition: Jesus – the Apostle John – Polycarp – Irenaeus.

the philosophical arguments on which his opponents rely.

Irenaeus' importance cannot be overstated in regard to almost any doctrinal issue. On the one hand, he is explicitly aware of the role of tradition in transmitting apostolic doctrine from Jesus' original disciples to the Catholic Christian Church of the 2nd century. On the other hand, he is in firm possession of the Scriptures, both the books that the apostolic generation saw fulfilled in Jesus (Old Testament) and the books that the immediate witnesses of Christ left behind about their teachings and exhortations (the New Testament). In Mariology too he represents a milestone.⁸⁰

Irenaeus is keenly aware of the divine *oikonomia*, a salvation history about which the written sources testify, the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament as well as the fourfold Gospel and other writings with apostolic authority. In Irenaeus' works we can discern the basic form and function of Christian thought, uniting the two Testaments. His exegesis is consciously canonical: not only does he combine arguments from both Testaments, but compares and sees in unity the four canonical Gospels with their common witness, the Pauline Corpus, and practically the rest of our present-day Canon.⁸¹ In this context it is important to observe that Irenaeus relies also on the doctrinal tradition of the Church Fathers who preceded him, like Justin Martyr and Ignatius of Antioch.

In the third book of *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus repeatedly

⁸⁰ See G. Jouassard, "Marie à travers la patristique": Du Manoir, D'Hubert (ed.), *Maria: Etudes sur la Sainte Vierge*, I (Paris: Beauchesne, 1949), 69-157.

⁸¹ Irenaeus' use of the Scriptures was significantly influenced by a certain "technological" innovation impacting biblical texts, most importantly the Gospels and the Pauline Corpus, during the 2nd century. For reasons not entirely clear, books of the Christian Bible, especially those of the New Testament, began to be copied onto pages of codices while the use of scrolls was abandoned. In the biblical texts written in codices you could page, while in scrolls the text had no random accessibility. In a codex one could easily compare and combine texts by paging and thus had to rely less on memory. Also both parallel texts and variant readings were much more easily traced and compared. Falsifications were more easily controlled by paging from passage to passage in a matter of minutes. From Irenaeus on, a "canonical reading" of the Bible became not only a matter of theory but of practice. Similarly it became easy and practical to inquire into the exactness of a quotation and to raise issues about verbal precision or the use of variant readings that, unconsciously or fraudulently, slipped into the text.

underlines Mary's importance in a holistic vision of Christian teaching, in two ways most explicitly. First, in his short summaries of Christian orthodox teaching, containing the so-called *regula fidei*, Mary is always present as the guarantee of a correct Christology and Soteriology. He refers to Mary as "the Virgin," which regularly reappears in his texts, often without the proper name "Mary" but always with a definite article. This usage signals a development that we already noticed in the letters of Ignatius and reaches in Irenaeus its completion: Mary is the Virgin – καὶ ἑξοχὴν⁸² – and the reader is supposed to have become aware of that. Another typical Irenaean expression – which later disappears from patristic usage – is Christ as "the Emmanuel, born from the Virgin," what seems a triple reference to Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23, and Luke 1:32.⁸³ When comparing Mary and Eve, Irenaeus follows in the footsteps of Justin, while significantly expanding his predecessor's thought. The most important and longest passage regarding that topic is found in chapter 22 of the third book of *Adversus Haereses*:

In accordance with this design, Mary the Virgin is found obedient, saying, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word" (Lk 1:38). But Eve was disobedient; for she did not obey when as yet she was a virgin. Even though Eve had Adam as a husband, she was still a virgin. For "they were both naked in paradise and they were unashamed" (Gn 2:25) since they were created a short time previously to become adults, and only then did they begin to multiply. Having become dis-

⁸² Mary is "the Virgin" in AH III, 5 (211, 104), 19, 1 (211, 372), 19, 2 (211, 376), 20, 3 (211, 393), V, 19, 1 (SC 153, 248). What we translate today as "the Virgin Mary" is in Irenaeus' text *Μαρία ἡ παρθένος* ("Mary the Virgin"). See III, 22, 4 (211, 445) and also the places quoted in the next note. Irenaeus' usage shows that the designation of Mary as the Virgin developed from quoting Is 7:14 and talking about her child or offspring by keeping in mind this verse of Isaiah as the context. This is the best explanation for the texts of Ignatius, just as well, although Ignatius hardly ever makes explicit references to passages of the Old Testament.

⁸³ AH III, 4 (211, 47), 5, 1 (211, 53), III, 102 (211, 116), 21, 1 (211, 344), 21, 6 (211, 479), 22, 4 (211, 441).

obedient, she was made the cause of death, both to herself and to the entire human race. So also did Mary, having a man betrothed to her, and being nevertheless a virgin, by yielding obedience, become the cause of salvation, both to herself and the whole human race.

And on this account does the law call a woman betrothed to a man, the wife of him who had betrothed her, although she was as yet a virgin; thus indicating a parallelism in reference back from Mary to Eve. For what was tied together once cannot be loosened except by untying the knot in reverse order so that the second knot be dissolved by untying it first and the first knot be dissolved by untying it second. In this way the former knots become canceled by a latter untying, and the latter ties are set free by the former untying.... In this way the Lord declared that the first will be the last and the last first (cf. Mt 19:30).⁸⁴

At the beginning of this passage we notice the same procedures that Justin used. First, the text of Luke is quoted *verbatim* while the story of Adam and Eve is only presupposed by mentioning the names of the first couple. The reader is expected to know that Eve's transgression caused death – physical and spiritual – for herself and for all mankind. It is also supposed that the reader knows that it was only after the Fall that Adam had relations with Eve and thus, at the Fall, Eve was still a virgin (this is implied in Genesis by the sequence of verses 2:25, 3:21 and 4:1). Quoting Luke's story of the Annunciation, Irenaeus adheres to his "fourfold Gospel canon,"⁸⁵ and knows that Mary's betrothal to Joseph (Lk 1:27) counts for being married, as can be concluded from Matthew 1:20. Furthermore, in *Adversus Haereses* Irenaeus uses the Pauline letters. He knows the Pauline metaphor connecting Adam, the first man, with Christ as "the

second Adam" (cf. 1 Cor 15:45-47). He also uses the Pauline term "recapitulation" meaning "re-assumption" or "reuniting under one head." In the Pauline letters this word occurs only in its verbal form (ἀνακεφαλαιώσθαι in Rm 13:9 and ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι in Eph 1:10), while in Irenaeus we find the noun ἀνακεφαλαιώσις⁸⁶ and the synonymous noun ἀνακύκλισις (re-circulation).⁸⁷ These are used in a particular Irenaeian sense, meaning the "reversing" of the Genesis story of human origins through Adam and Eve by a corresponding chain of events through Mary and Christ.

According to the passage quoted above, Irenaeus sees in this "recirculation" of human destiny two parallels, two antitheses, and a reversal in the sequence of the corresponding events. The first parallel is seen in the paradox between "virginity" and yet "having a man" for both virgins are destined to have a husband. Further antithetic attributes are disobedience/obedience, causing death/life respectively. But the reversal of the order is important. At the beginning of human history, Adam was created first; Eve was created out of Adam only afterward. But on the other side of the parallelism, the creation of the Virgin Mary as well as her act of obedience precede the virginal conception of Christ, the second Adam, who is made from the second Eve. Irenaeus explains this reversal of the order by speaking of two knots tied in succession on a string. Untying the second knot must take place before the first can be untied. Irenaeus does not explain the metaphor of the knots; one presumes he thinks that its application is obvious. But the metaphor hides a deeper insight. Not only does it explain why Eve's creation out of Adam's side corresponds, as a reversed parallel, to Jesus' birth from Mary's womb, but also makes us realize that, in this way, Jesus becomes, through Mary, a child of Adam and Eve, but nonetheless Christ truly constitutes a new beginning, a newly created first man, a true "Adam." He is not born like anybody else from the instinct and purpose of procreation but as the result of new creation. We see here also why the singular

⁸⁴ AH III, 22, 4 (SC 211, 439-443).

⁸⁵ *quadriforme evangelium* in AH III, 11, 8 (SC 211, 168).

⁸⁶ AH III, 21, 10 (211, 429-431), III, 23, 1 (211, 445).

⁸⁷ AH III, 22, 4 (211, 440).

reading of John 1:13, which insists on the novelty and uniqueness of Jesus' birth, is extremely important for Irenaeus. At the same time, he explains at length why in his genealogy Luke goes back all the way to Adam.⁸⁸ This happens in order to demonstrate that, born from a woman, Jesus is thoroughly human, although he was generated in a radically different way: not by a man's instinct and will, not by human initiative, but by God (cf. Jn 1:13 in its ancient variant reading).

The antithetic parallelism by which Irenaeus explains the corresponding roles of Adam and Christ with Eve and Mary with their respective functions, is neither as simple nor as forced as some of Irenaeus' commentators make it appear. Irenaeus' views about the virginal beginning of the Incarnation want to solve an otherwise unsolvable dilemma: the birth of all mankind, issued from a couple in a sinful state of rebellion, renders each and every member of the human race incapable of saving the human race from within. But if man is not saved by man, then what is the value or the importance of man's corporal existence? A virgin receiving both the grace to obey and receiving the Son of God in her womb constitutes for Irenaeus the solution of this dilemma. Adam and Eve first joined forces for an act of disobedience, then, after having lost the gift of immortality, became partners of procreation. They populate the earth but they have already lost the gift of eternal life. Man's battle against death is doomed to failure: all human beings are born in order to die. But man is not removed from God's *oikonomia*, because God interrupts the chain of procreated mortality and obtains the Virgin's obedience. She agrees in one single fiat as she receives her call to a virginal motherhood.

Irenaeus sees that, when God becomes flesh in the Virgin, an act of obedience brings about "re-circulation," opening the flow of life from Christ both forward and backward. For Irenaeus insists that being born from Mary, Christ becomes the principle of salvation not only to his contemporaries and those who come to believe in him later, but also to previous generations, all the way back to the first

ancestors: *a Maria ad Evam*. So at the end he adds: "This is why the Lord said: 'the first will be the last and the last first' (cf. Mt 19:30 and 20:16)." In fact we must keep on reading through the rest of *Adversus Haereses* 22,4 where he uses bold language: "This is how the Lord received into his bosom the 'ancient fathers' [meaning the Patriarchs and other "saints" of the Old Testament] and regenerated them anew to the life of God, becoming for them the source of new life, just as before Adam became for them the source of death." And he adds again about Mary and Eve: "This is how the knot tied up by Eve's disobedience became untied by Mary's obedience, since what the Virgin Eve tied by her unbelief, has been resolved by Mary's faith."⁸⁹

As we see Irenaeus has a much broader outlook than Justin Martyr. In Irenaeus' mind, in the history of salvation sinful mankind goes through some sort of a "rewinding" as it is re-done by a chain of events that resume identical issues with opposite outcomes. Hence Irenaeus finds a more general principle behind Justin's "contrasted parallels" and applies this principle to many other topics of salvation history. In this way Irenaeus is the first Church Father to work on a Mariology: a set of statements about Mary, integrated into his general theological thinking. It is in his brief work the *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*⁹⁰ that Mary's insertion into his system of "recapitulations" is most clearly manifested:

Adam had to be recapitulated in Christ, so that death might be swallowed up in immortality (cf. 1 Cor 15:54) and Eve [had to be recapitulated] in Mary, so that the Virgin, having become another Virgin's advocate, might

⁸⁸ AH III, 22, 4 (SC 211, 440). Here Irenaeus brings us another antithetic element between Mary and Eve in terms of faith and unbelief. This is, of course, fundamental in the scriptural foundations: Eve does not obey God because the Serpent convinces her not to believe what the Lord said about the mortiferous effects of the forbidden fruit (Gn 3:3-4), while Mary's faith is praised by Elizabeth at the Visitation (Lk 1:45).

⁸⁹ Usually quoted under the Latin title *Demonstratio praedicationis apostolicae* this is, besides the 5 books *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus' only extant work. It was preserved only in Armenian translation so that minute philological questions about the text are answered with difficulty.

⁸⁸ In AH III, 22, 3 and again in III, 23, 4 Irenaeus opens and closes his reflection on "recapitulation" by a reference to Luke's genealogy (3:23-38).

destroy and abolish one Virgin's disobedience by the obedience of another Virgin.

The interpretation of the term "advocate" in this text has long been debated. Irenaeus uses it also in the fifth book of his *Adversus Haereses*:

And if she [Eve] disobeyed God, this one [Mary] was persuaded to obey God, so that the Virgin Mary may become the advocate of the virgin Eve. And as the human race was tossed into death by a virgin, so it may be saved by a Virgin, since the virginal disobedience was balanced out by a virginal obedience. And also the first man's sin was made up for by the First-born [Son] undergoing punishment and the Serpent's cunning was defeated by the Dove's simplicity, untying the chain by which we were linked to death.⁹¹

The title "advocate" originally might have meant for Irenaeus a "representative" or "substitute," maybe "counterpart."⁹² But eventually, in the Middle Ages, it was understood as signifying a "spokesperson." However, almost a thousand years after Irenaeus when the *Salve Regina* was composed by Hermanus Contractus, a monk of the 11th century, we see the medieval meanings closely following Irenaeus' usage:

Ad te clamamus, exules filii Evae...
Eia, ergo *ADVOCATA* nostra...

(To you we cry, exiled children of Eve...
Therefore, our Advocate...)

This text may suggest that Irenaeus is a forerunner, or even the initiator of a tradition in which Mary, once seen in a parallelism with

Eve, is therefore called to be our "advocate" or spokeswoman.⁹³ In the *Salve Regina*, Mary is directly addressed in the form of a prayer as an "advocate," a person addressed to intercede for us, while in Irenaeus' text she is only descriptively compared in her role to Eve, as of similar importance in the cosmic drama of salvation seen in terms of recapitulation. Mary acts and speaks in a role that is the counterpart of Eve's role and results in a long-expected reversal of man's destiny.

The Proto-evangelium of James (probably 160-170 A.D.)

Handbooks of Mariology present Irenaeus as the peak of the 2nd century's Mariological reflection. In fact, nobody before Irenaeus outlined with such theological clarity and emphasis the important role of Mary in the history of salvation. Even if Jesus' birth from Mary by the Holy Spirit is explicitly present as a pillar of anti-Gnostic orthodoxy in the letters of Ignatius, only in the writings of Irenaeus do we find a theological system for which the virginal birth is foundational: the mystery provides a doctrinal guarantee of the true birth of a true man who is truly God. In Irenaeus, Mariology obtains growing importance due to its new and rapidly developing theological context: the theology of the Incarnation.

In the 2nd century, however, we find a similarly influential work which had similar impact on the promotion of the Church's Marian devotion, even if it leaves much to be desired in theological depth and acumen. In spite of the controversial assessment that it has received in theology, Catholic and otherwise, as a primary source it reflects the Church's growing interest in Mary and the force which mariological devotion obtained in the 2nd century. We are speaking about a work called today *Proto-evangelium Jacobi*, or the *Proto-evangelium of James*. Although a complete, ancient Latin translation has not survived, it exercised immense influence in both East and

⁹¹ AH V, 19, 1 (SC 153, 248-250).

⁹² The critical edition assumes that Irenaeus used the biblical word *παράκλητος* (Jn 14:26; 15:6; 16:7), but the text was not preserved.

⁹³ In Irenaeus' use Mary speaks on behalf of Eve and thus reverses her disobedience. In the medieval text of the *Salve Regina* Mary speaks on our behalf both when she welcomes the Incarnate Word to "dwell among us," and when speaking on behalf as an intercessor, defending our cause.

West in liturgical texts and sermons, feasts, devotions, and eventually the theological tradition.

A large number of scholarly works classify it as an "apocryphal infancy Gospel," but it is no Gospel, nor does it narrate, beyond the birth alone, anything about Jesus' infancy. It is certainly an apocryphal work for a double reason: the work as a whole is attributed to James as a half-brother of Jesus thus qualifying to be "James, the brother of the Lord," mentioned in Pauline letters and the Acts of the Apostles.⁹⁴ Furthermore some part of the text about Jesus' birth is written in first person singular in the name of Joseph, Mary's husband. The work, however, hardly reflects the knowledge of a Jewish milieu in the early 1st century. Therefore, serious claims to authenticity cannot be supported. But it certainly reflects a surprisingly high degree of interest in Mary's life and person. As most scholars admit today, its original title was not *evangelion*. Rather the traditional title, *Ἐβραϊσὶς Μαρίας* (Genesis of Mary) suits it well: a book about Mary's origins, birth, and early life up to the point where she gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem.

The current title *Proto-evangelium Jacobi* comes from Postel, its 16th century editor who for the first time prepared a printed edition of a Latin translation and re-introduced the knowledge of this text in the West. Postel believed in its authenticity. Although this opinion soon lost credibility, the text, apparently very ancient, drew the attention of many scholars. Such luminaries as Griesbach, Tischendorf, and Harnack studied it. Tischendorf attempted a critical reconstruction of the original text, but could not achieve his goal. For decades Adolf von Harnack's opinions were followed by most scholars, claiming multiple ancient sources from which a secondary compilation was achieved at a relatively late date in the 4th or 5th century.

New light was thrown on the *Proto-evangelium* in 1952 when one of 22 papyrus codices, found in Egypt and purchased by Martin Bodmer, Bodmer papyrus 5, turned out to contain the complete text of the *Proto-evangelium*. A printed edition of the codex quickly followed in 1959 by Michael Testuz, and with the claim of recov-

ering its most ancient textual form, a critical edition was promptly published in 1962 by a Belgian Bollandist, a Jesuit named Émile de Strycker.⁹⁵ Strycker established that Bodmer papyrus 5 originally formed the first forty-nine pages of a 168-page codex, from which the whole codex was reconstructed in its entirety from various other parts of the Bodmer papyri, some already published independently in previous years. The codex is neither a liturgical book nor a book of biblical texts, but a loosely connected collection of texts, including parts of both Testaments, like First and Second Peter, some Psalms (Ps 33 and 34) and even some homilies.⁹⁶ It is best described as a devotional book. Whatever purposes such books might have served, it was certainly not created for public liturgical use, but for private reading by individuals or small communities.

Studies about Bodmer papyrus 5 proved that the various redactional hypotheses, like those of Tischendorf and Harnack, were incorrect. Strycker came to the conclusion that the unity of the work is original. The whole composition belonged together: even the last parts, an account by Joseph about Jesus' birth and the "martyrdom of Zechariah," come from this single original author. Moreover, the publication of the critical text has advanced the debate about the *Proto-evangelium*'s dating, literary genre, and social and ecclesial milieu, and helped in the assessment of the theological meaning of the text. Of course, many critical issues have not been resolved. For example,

⁹⁵ Emile de Strycker, *La forme la plus ancienne du Protoévangile de Jacques* (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1961). A bilingual (Greek/English) text is published in Bart Erman and Zlatko Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels* (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 31-71. It follows de Strycker's edition of the Greek text with only a few changes. As a major addition, it includes chapter 18 which is missing from Bodmer 5. Unless indicated otherwise, Erman's edition is used here for all English quotations and references.

⁹⁶ The pages of the codex are numbered, so that its table of content is now known:

- 1. "The Nativity of Mary" (*Proto-evangelium Jacobi*)
- 2. Two apocryphal letters of Paul to the Corinthians
- 3. The 11th Ode of Solomon
- 4. The Epistle of Jude
- 5. Homilies of Melito of Sardis
- 6. Fragments of Christian hymns
- 7. The Apology of Philaeas
- 8. Psalms 33 and 34
- 9. 1st and 2nd Epistles of Peter

⁹⁴ Gal 1:9. Cf. 1 Cor 15:5; Ac 12:2, 17; 15:13, 18.

the *Proto-evangelium's* possible dependence on Justin Martyr is under continued debate. But Strycker's arguments convincingly indicate that the work is safely dated to the second half of the 2nd century.⁹⁷

What is truly noteworthy in this new critical evaluation of the *Proto-evangelium* can be summarized in a few points.

First, the *Proto-evangelium* is not an apocryphal Gospel, but in many ways it uses and quotes the canonical Gospels. It certainly depends on both Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2, which are quoted frequently and *verbatim*. It contains a substantial narrative about Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, which the *Proto-evangelium* identifies with the martyred prophet mentioned by Matthew 23:35 as "murdered between the sanctuary and the altar." It handles with remarkable freedom the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke, altering rather than harmonizing them for the sake of its own version of Jesus' birth. This amazing sense of freedom and creativity with regard to two Gospels that were already regarded as canonical in the late 2nd century may be the best evidence for its very early origin.

Second, the *Proto-evangelium* is not a Gnostic work, not even in the broadest sense of the term. In fact, it can be characterized as anti-Gnostic because of its insistence on the true corporal nature of Jesus at his birth.

Third, despite the fact that modern exegetes, both Catholic and Protestant, have long shown distaste for the *Proto-evangelium*, it is an excellent source for historical-critical research in 2nd century mariological interests and beliefs. Although the story it narrates deserves no historical credibility, it contains abundant information about the early reception of the first chapters of Matthew and Luke. It shows how the incipient Gospel canon co-existed side by side with divergent non-canonical books representing a larger stream of traditions.

The *Proto-evangelium* constructs a hybrid narrative not only by switching back and forth between Matthew and Luke but also by freely suppressing one or another detail of the canonical narratives in order to make room for its own story line. For example, the *Proto-*

evangelium omits all references to Galilee and Nazareth in order to link Mary's entire childhood to the Temple of Jerusalem, leading up to her wedding to Joseph in Jerusalem, which is immediately followed by the story of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the birth in Bethlehem and the visit of the Magi and finally concludes with the rescue of the infant John the Baptist from Herod's persecution and with the martyrdom of his father Zechariah.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Most puzzling is the following detail, which has so far defied all explanation. According to *Protoev* 13.2, when Joseph finds Mary pregnant and asks of her an explanation, Mary swears that she does not know how her pregnancy came about. Even earlier, as she is visiting Elizabeth, we are told that she did not understand why Elizabeth called her "the mother of the Lord," since "she forgot the mysteries that the archangel Gabriel spoke to her" (12.2). Strycker adds here a note suggesting that with this the author attempts to harmonize his narrative with Lk 2:50. This explanation is not convincing. Only a modern exegete would think that, in the story of the twelve-year old Jesus in the Temple, the parents' "incomprehension" of their child's words would mean that they were unaware of the virginal conception. In fact, already when meeting Elizabeth and when confronting Joseph, Mary fails to recall what happened to her at the Annunciation, so that Mary's "non-remembrance" of her virginal conception is not an afterthought, but an integral part of the *Proto-evangelium's* story line. There must be a better explanation for Mary's "forgetting." It seems to me that it reveals some linkage with a concept of revelation whereby the mystery is not revealed and divulged automatically, but only after additional divine intervention. Without further divine acts not even Mary can tell anyone what happened to her or what she learned from an angel. For Elizabeth John the Baptist's "leaping for joy" in her womb is awaited for the transmission of the mystery of Mary's conception, while for Joseph, in agreement with Mt 1:20, an angel must appear and explain how Mary's pregnancy had its origin from the Holy Spirit. The *Proto-evangelium* aims at showing how John the Baptist is the only human herald of the mystery of the Incarnation. Harmonization with the verse 2:50 in Luke's story of finding Jesus in the Temple is hardly an issue here, for the latter episode is not even mentioned in the *Proto-evangelium*. But there might be something else which helps even further to explain the strange forgetfulness of Mary in the *Proto-evangelium*. The exact wording of the text (XII, 2) is important:

«Ἦθθεν μοι <τοῦτο> ἵνα ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ κυρίου <ποι> ἔλθῃ πρὸς ἐμέ. Ἰδοὺ γὰρ τὸ ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐκτίσθη καὶ εὐδύνσεν σε.» Ἡ δὲ Μαρία ἐπὶ ἀδρόθεο τῶν μυστηρίων αὐτῇ ἐλάλησεν ταῦτα ὁ ἄγγελος.

("How is it that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For see the child in me leaped and blessed you." But Mary forgot the mysteries that the angel Gabriel spoke.)

The first sentence quotes *verbatim* Lk 1:43. The second line switches to a narrative mode as the particle δὲ indicates, rendered by the French translation's "or" in Strycker's critical edition. The third line names the object of Mary's "forgetfulness" as "mysteria." This is the word that Ignatius of Antioch also used when noting that three "mysteries," completed in God's silence, remained hidden from the "Prince of this Age".

⁹⁷ Op. cit., p. 421.

Fourth, in spite of lacking heretical tendencies (either of Gnosticism or Marcionism), the *Proto-evangelium* was always handled with suspicion by the Church Fathers, such that it has never even been tentatively introduced into the canon. Its text practically disappeared from use in the West, although the feast of Mary's Presentation in the Temple "survived" both Trent and Vatican II. It is included in the Roman liturgical calendar up to this day. Some considered this fiction-based apocryphal work dangerous to the faith, since it was certainly endangering the privileged status of the four canonical Gospels by introducing further variation and patently fictitious elements into the Birth Narratives. At the end of the 5th century Pope Gelasius (492-496) went as far as to prohibit its reading even in private.⁹⁹ By then, however, Mary's perpetual virginity was firmly taught by the Church and became, by the influence of St. Ambrose and St. Epiphanius, even a touchstone of orthodoxy.¹⁰⁰ The decree of Gelasius did not stop the general reception of the tradition about Mary's childhood, but explains why early Latin translations had poor chances of surviving.¹⁰¹

Finally, I mention as a fifth issue the ecclesial background against which the *Proto-evangelium* was written. Articles in patrol-

καὶ ἔλαθεν τὸν ἄρχοντα τοῦ αἰῶνος τοῦτον ἡ παρθενία Μαρίας καὶ ὁ τοκετός αὐτῆς, ὁμοίως καὶ ὁ θάνατος τοῦ κυρίου· τρία μυστήρια κρῶνῆς, ἅρτια ἐν ἡγουσίᾳ θεοῦ ἐμπέχθη.

"And Mary's virginity and her childbearing escaped the notice of the Prince of this age, similarly also the Lord's death. These are three mysteries of proclamation, which had been accomplished in God's silence." (*Ephesians* 19:1).

The first two of the "mysteries" are Mary's virginity and her "childbearing," meaning Mary's virginity *ante partum* and *in partu*. As it seems the *Proto-evangelium* applies to the story in a simplified and possibly crude way the same theology of revelation: what happened at Mary's virginal conception (and later at her miraculous childbearing) belongs to the divine mysteries originating in silence and becoming "proclamation" (κρῶνῆ) only by divine intervention. The crucial words are close to identical: ἔλαθεν... μυστήρια in Ignatius and Μαρία ἐνεδέχθη τὸν μυστήριον in the *Proto-evangelium*.

⁹⁹ Also Pope Innocent I already in a letter from the year 405 to Exsuperius, bishop of Toulouse, about the canon of Scripture mentions a book attributed to "James the Minor," telling that it must be rejected (Denzinger-Schönmetzer 213).

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Charles W. Neumann, *The Virgin Mary in the Works of St. Ambrose* (Fribourg: University Press, 1962), 142-146.

¹⁰¹ Strycker published Latin fragments found in late medieval codices originating from lectionaries or other secondary sources.

ogy textbooks and lexicons usually say that this work was produced and promoted for the sake of providing tangible historical witness to Mary's perpetual virginity. This is not quite correct. After Jesus' birth, this document describes how, indeed, one of the midwives attempted to verify Mary's physical virginity. But the proof is anything but "tangible." At best it is indirect: her hand is burned off as she attempts to touch the private parts of the Virgin. The *Proto-evangelium* is not as pre-occupied with empirical proofs for Mary's enduring virginity, as demonstrating the sacred character of Mary's virginity and childbearing. We see here the continuity with Ignatius of Antioch, who called the virginal conception and birth a "mystery," lying beyond human reach.¹⁰² Thus, even when pointing out Mary's virginity *in partu*, the focus of the *Proto-evangelium* rests on Mary's virginal motherhood as something sacred, consecrated by the God who chooses to be born from a Virgin. Therefore, the readers for whom the *Proto-evangelium* was written (and copied into the devotional book preserved by Bodmer papyrus 5) were quite probably groups of ascetics, both men and women, who, around the beginning of the 2nd century, launched the early monastic movements in the Church. Specifically, I refer to the so-called *virgines subintroductae*, unmarried women, dedicated to prayer and ascetic practices and living under the tutelage of ascetic men, whose authority provided them patronage and legal existence in a society otherwise obliging women to marry and to live under the authority of their husbands. In the *Proto-evangelium*, Mary is represented as a virgin entrusted to a respectable elderly man of proven virtue who guaranteed her virgin-

¹⁰² I think that we have here in this scene of the *Proto-evangelium* the best explanation of the ancient antiphon used since patristic times: *Rubrum quem videt Moyses incombustum, tuam agnovimus virginitatem, Dei Genitrix...* ("In the bush that Moses saw burning but not consumed by the fire, we recognize your virginity, holy Mother of God...") Translated from Greek, this antiphon was used at "the most ancient Marian feast in Rome, January 1st." See B. Capelle, "La liturgie mariale en Occident" in D. du Manoir, *Maria*, I, 221. This antiphon remained in the Roman Breviary until the reforms after Vatican II. It closely compares God's self-disclosure to Moses with his appearance in the flesh at his birth from Mary. Justin Martyr's Logos theory is transparent: in the burning bush the incarnation of the Logos is pre-figured.

ity and supervised her behavior. This framework is the *Sitz im Leben* in which the author applies and expands, with fictional re-interpretation, the data of the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke.

Tertullian (ca. 160-220)

It would be quite tempting to treat Tertullian after Origen, but chronologically Tertullian's works antedate Origen and, if there was dependency between them, only Origen could have depended on Tertullian, not the other way around. Moreover, Carthage in Latin Africa, where Tertullian lived, was under the influence of Rome rather than Alexandria, so that Tertullian, who wrote all of his works in Latin, is rightly considered the first major theologian of the Latin Church of the West and is inserted only with some difficulty into the developmental family tree of Eastern, Greek theology. This we must keep in mind in order not to stretch the truth about the development of Mariology by either favoring or discrediting Tertullian.

In many respects Tertullian is a worthy successor to both Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, both of whom wrote in Greek but lived in the West. Tertullian takes over from them the Mary/Eve parallelism and in *De carne Christi* 17 builds strict parallelism between the first Adam and Eve, created from a virginal earth, and the second Adam born from the Virgin. Then, in a separate paragraph he compares the two Eves by antithesis: the first Eve disobeys by listening to the Serpent; Mary obeys by believing in the Angel. The first Eve leads to perdition, by introducing death; the second Eve allows the life-giving Word to enter the world and thus erases the fault that the first Eve had introduced. The text is more logically crafted than that of Irenaeus, but the idea of recapitulation disappears. Nor does Tertullian mention that the order between Eve and Adam (the woman formed from the man's body) is reversed when the second Adam's body is born from Mary, the second Eve: Tertullian's text is apparently more logical, but lacks the same depth.

Similarly powerful is Tertullian's insistent apologetics on behalf of Jesus' virginal conception by Mary: an anti-Gnostic barrage.

He does not just attack and ridicule Marcion and the Valentinian Gnostics, but literally demolishes them by his wit and sarcasm. His best publication on this matter is *De carne Christi*, a book that kept Tertullian on the reading list of Western Christology and Mariology. In this book he defends the doctrine of the Incarnation against the Ebionites (Jewish Christians who did not believe in Jesus' divinity), different Hellenistic groups of Gnosticism, and Tertullian's chief enemy, Marcion. For Tertullian is best known through his five books *Adversus Marcionem*, which also managed to preserve most of our present-day information about Marcion. From this book we know how, at the end of the 2nd century, the exact form of biblical texts and their exegesis, sometimes down to the minute details, became important for both sides of the disputes. In any case, Tertullian offered a lasting portrait (or caricature) of Marcion. It was partly through the debate he was leading against Marcion that Pauline exegesis and theology obtained new motivation and importance.

With respect to Jesus' virginal conception by Mary, Tertullian seemingly says nothing new. Yet he might have been the first of the Church Fathers for whom Jesus' virginal origin is explicitly linked to two particularly important issues. On the one hand, against the Gnostics and especially Marcion, it demonstrates Jesus' true human nature; on the other hand it shows that Jesus' origin was not tainted by a man's passion or carnal impulse. For proving the latter, Tertullian uses the western text of John 1:13 and reads it in the singular, passionately arguing that the plural reading is a falsification initiated by some Gnostic editors of the Fourth Gospel.¹⁰³ He offers

¹⁰³ "Quid est ergo, Non ex sanguine nec ex voluntate carnis nec ex voluntate viri sed ex deo natus est? Hoc quidem capitulo ego potius utar, cum adulteratores eius obduxeror: sic enim scriptum esse contendunt, Non ex sanguine nec ex carnis voluntate nec ex voluntate viri sed ex deo nati sunt, quasi supradictos credentes in nomine eius designet, ut ostendant esse semen illud arcanum electorum et spirituum quod sibi imbuunt." *De carne Christi* XIX: E. Evans (ed.), SPCK, 64. ("What is it then: 'He was born neither of blood, nor of the will of the flesh nor a man's will, but of God'? This text I prefer to use rather than quoting those who bastardized it by demanding that it was thus written: 'Neither of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man were we born but from God', as it designed the believers. This they did in order to demonstrate that seed of the elect and spiritual which they drink into themselves.") About this see more above pp. 40-42.