

MARY
AS THE EARLY CHRISTIANS
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THE MOTHER OF JESUS IN
THREE ANCIENT TEXTS

Frederica Mathewes-Green



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Mary As the Early Christians Knew Her

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DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
FR. GEORGE CALCIU,
my spiritual father,
who fell asleep in the Lord on November 21, 2006,
the Feast of the Presentation of the Theotokos

*Her hands steadied the first steps
of him who steadied the earth to walk upon;
her lips helped the Word of God
to form his first human words.*

—ST. JOHN OF DAMASCUS (AD 676–780)

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INTRODUCTION

The Beloved Virgin Mary

Who was she?

IT IS HARD TO SEE MARY CLEARLY, beneath the conflicting identities she has borne over the centuries. To one era she is the flower of femininity, and to another the champion of feminism; in one age she is the paragon of obedience, and in another the advocate of liberation. Some enthusiasts have been tempted to pile her status so high that it rivals that of her Son. Others, aware that excessive adulation can be dangerous, do their best to ignore her entirely.

Behind all that there is a woman nursing a baby. The child in her arms looks into her eyes. Years later he will look at her from the cross, through a haze of blood and sweat. We do not know, could not comprehend, what went through his mind during those hours of cosmic warfare. But from a moment in the St. John's account of the Crucifixion we know that, whatever else he thought, he thought about her. He asked his good friend John to take care of her. He wanted John to become a son to her—to love her the way he did.

It is not surprising that those who, in St. Paul's words, put on "the mind of Christ" would discover that they loved her too. Though we may picture the love of Mary as a medieval

development, it actually goes back to the faith's early days. Those first generations of Christians did not include Mary in their public preaching of the gospel; they did not expose her to the gaze of the world. (Likewise, a celebrity today will object if reporters take photos of his family.) But when believers were gathered together in their home community, there Mary was cherished. As new members were brought into the body of Christ, they would also begin to share in the love the Christ child had for his Mother.

How can we know her the way they did? Our primary source of information about Mary is the Scriptures, of course, but the few passages about her have been so burdened by competing interpretations that they spark more argument than illumination. Just beyond that center, however, there is a wealth of other materials that were embraced by the early Christians. You could think of it as analogous to the materials found today in a Christian bookstore: stories, prayers, artwork, and songs that help enrich the life of faith. By looking at materials pertaining to Mary that were popular in those first centuries, we can learn something about how the early Christians viewed her.

In fact, their viewpoint is valuable whenever we seek to understand Scripture. Not because these early Christians were necessarily smarter or holier than we are, but because they had this practical advantage: they were still living in the culture that produced the Christian Scriptures. The Greek of the New Testament was their daily business language. They lived in the Middle East, or along its gossipy trade routes. Their parents or great-grandparents had been alive when

Christ walked the earth. The history of these things was the history of their backyard, and some things that scholars now struggle to comprehend were as familiar and obvious as their own kitchen table.

And from the first they loved Mary—freely, deeply, and some way instinctively. This can puzzle some contemporary Christians, living as we do on the other side of centuries of controversy over Mary. It is my hope that, as we stand behind these fervent Christians and peer over their shoulders, we will be able to see what they see, and come to love her too.

We'll do that by reading three ancient texts about Mary. In each case we'll begin with some historic background, and then move to consider theological and cultural questions (sometimes, uncomfortable questions) that the document raises, before entering the complete text.

The first work is a “gospel,” or a narrative of Mary's life, which begins with her conception by her mother, Anna, and continues through the birth of Jesus. It provided a kind of “prequel” to the biblical Gospels, and was extremely popular. It was in written form by AD 150, but I suspect that (like the biblical Gospels) it collected stories that were previously in oral circulation.

If these stories were originally passed along orally, we have no way of knowing how far back they might go. We can know at least that we are in the company of Christians who lived during the era of persecutions, and well before the New Testament was given final form. Yet they were already enthusiastically in love with Mary. This book was circulated widely and embraced warmly, and its popularity

is reflected in the unusually high number of ancient copies and translations that have been found.

Scholars know this text by the modern title bestowed by a sixteenth-century translator: the *Protevangelium of James*. The ancient church knew it by a number of different titles, most including a reference to James as its source. I have called it the *Gospel of Mary* because today we expect a title to identify a work's contents, rather than its author. (We'll explain the use of *Lost* later on.)

The second text is a very brief prayer to Mary, found on a scrap of papyrus in Egypt about a hundred years ago. The artifact is dated at AD 250, though (as above) the prayer itself is probably older; the papyrus just represents one time it got written down.

This is the oldest known prayer to Mary. It begins with "Under your compassion . . ." and is still in use. In the Roman Catholic Church it is called *Sub tuum praesidium*, and in the Eastern Orthodox Church it is among the closing prayers of the evening services.

The third text is a lengthy, complex, and beautiful hymn written by the deacon and hymnographer St. Romanos, who was born in Syria about AD 475. This is the best-known of his works, and is regularly cited as the highest achievement of Byzantine Christian poetry. Eastern Christians are familiar with it as the *Akathist Hymn*, and they sing it during Lent, near the March 25 feast of the Annunciation (that is, the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she would conceive a son). Here I am calling it the *Annunciation Hymn*, again with the aim of identifying its contents.

Many Western Christians are unfamiliar with Mary, and somewhat leery of her; they suspect that it's possible for devotion to her to get out of hand, and even eclipse the honor due to God. It is true that, over time and in other lands, praise of the Virgin that had been intended as lovingly poetic developed into something more literal, and consequently less healthy.

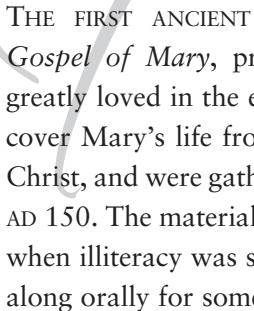
In Europe from the twelfth century on, strains of Marian devotion were arising that held that she could manipulate or even overrule her Son, that he was perpetually enraged but she was merciful, that she could work miracles by her own magical powers, that mechanical repetition of prayers to her guaranteed salvation, and that she had facilitated Christ's work by her presence at the Crucifixion. The effects of these mistaken ideas lingered for centuries, and have not been wholly eliminated.

But, as we will see, the early Middle Eastern church is not the medieval European church. All that sad confusion lay a thousand years from the time of the first love-notes to Mary, the time that we are entering now.

ONE

Telling Mary's Story

James who?



THE FIRST ANCIENT TEXT PRESENTED IN THIS BOOK, the *Gospel of Mary*, provides stories about Mary that were greatly loved in the early church. These engaging narratives cover Mary's life from her conception through the birth of Christ, and were gathered into written form sometime before AD 150. The material itself could well be older, and in a time when illiteracy was still common, it could have been passed along orally for some time before anyone transcribed it.

While today Western scholars call this the *Protevangelium of James*, in the early church it went by several different titles. The common mark was some reference to "James," since that's who claims to be the author in the book's closing words: "I, James, wrote this history."

Who is this James? There are three famous Jameses in the New Testament. The first was a member of the twelve apostles, and even a member of the trio closest to the Lord,

“Peter and James and John.” He’s called James the Greater. Another apostle, James the son of Alphaeus, is usually called James the Less. However, the Greek adjective *micros* may mean “younger” or “smaller,” and since both were members of the Twelve, perhaps their friends called them “Big James” and “Little James” to tell them apart.

The third James is identified in Scripture as “James, the Lord’s brother.” He is called James the Just. This is the James who is claimed to be author of this Gospel.

This James appears several times in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 15, St. Paul tells us that James received a private appearance of the Resurrected Lord. In Acts 15 we see him presiding over the first church council, in his capacity as the first bishop of Jerusalem (likely the first bishop anywhere). In addition to being author of biblical Epistle of James, he is also credited with writing the oldest surviving Eucharistic liturgy, the Liturgy of St. James. This worship service was edited and condensed in the fourth century, and the shorter version, now called the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, is still the standard Sunday worship of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

The church historian Hegesippus, writing about AD 165, says that James was respected by all and that even non-Christians called him “James the Just.” He prayed so much that “his knees became calloused like those of a camel.”

Hegesippus also recounts James’ death. Jewish leaders, concerned at the rise of Christianity, and believing James to be a righteous and reasonable man, brought him to the summit of the Temple to address the populace. But instead

of dissuading them, James preached the second coming of Christ, and many began to cry “Hosanna to the Son of David!” The Pharisees then shoved James off to the ground, where he struggled to his knees and asked God’s forgiveness for those attacking him. As some took up stones to hurl at him, a launderer threw the heavy staff he used to stir the pot of boiling clothes, and it struck James a fatal wound to the head.

Tradition holds that James died in AD 62. At a press conference in 2002, the Discovery Channel and the Biblical Archeological Society presented a startling find: an ossuary that bore the inscription “James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus.” (What’s an ossuary? In Jerusalem of Jesus’ day there was insufficient cemetery space, so bodies were shrouded and placed in caves. When the space was later needed for other burials, the bones would be gathered and transferred into a smaller container, a “bone box.”) If the empty limestone casket had truly been James’ final resting place, it would be the most direct connection yet with anyone who knew Jesus during his earthly life. After examining the box, the Israeli Antiques Authority concluded that it is an authentic ossuary from the era, but that the inscription is a forgery. (Nevertheless, the ossuary still has advocates who claim it is authentic.)

Did our Lord have a brother?

That is, of course, a sticky theological question. Since the Scriptures present us with the virginal conception of

Christ, classic Christianity has never entertained the idea that the Greek term *adelphos* meant that James was Jesus' full brother. There have been three ways of understanding the term. James was either Jesus' step-brother, or his half-brother, or his cousin.

The earliest belief was that James is Jesus' stepbrother, the son of Joseph and a previous wife. This is the view taken by the *Gospel of Mary*, and is still held by Eastern Orthodox Christians. This would mean that James was older than Jesus, though he may still have been a child when Mary came to live in Joseph's home. She would have taken over the care of any motherless children, and they would have grown up alongside Jesus; people who knew the family would have thought of them, for all practical purposes, as Jesus' brothers and sisters. An implied claim in this gospel is that James, as older brother, was a witness to many of the events he describes. In the church known as Chora, near Constantinople, there is a magnificent series of fourteenth-century mosaics illustrating episodes from Mary's life. One shows the family on their way to Bethlehem. Pregnant Mary is seated on a donkey, with white-haired Joseph walking behind her and young James leading the way.

However, many Protestants believe instead that, after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph entered a normal married relationship, and James is a subsequent son. In this case, James would be Jesus' younger half-brother. But the whole topic of Mary's perpetual virginity is a challenging one, and we'll consider it later on. Even if Mary and Joseph had subsequent children, James could still be an older stepbrother

from a previous marriage. That is how the early church knew him.

But Roman Catholics believe that James was not Joseph's son either. They follow a proposal made by St. Jerome in the fourth century, that Joseph also preserved perpetual virginity. Jerome argued therefore that James was a cousin of Jesus, the son of Mary's sister, and identified him with James the Less.

What's Lost About It?

And that brings us to how this work got "lost." Since the *Gospel of Mary* presents Joseph as a father and a widower, rather than ever-virgin, it was not accepted in the West. The history here is hard to trace, what with the *Gospel* being known by different titles, and some supposed letters from historic characters being ancient forgeries. The Gelasian Decree of AD 492 includes the *Gospel of Mary* in the list of books "not to be received," not even for devotional reading. (But did Pope Gelasius actually write that Decree? You see how complicated it gets.)

At any rate, the *Gospel of Mary* was excluded from the Roman Catholic tradition because it shows Joseph as a widower. (And there's another element in the story that so outraged St. Jerome that he termed any work where it appears "ravings"—we'll get to that later on.) But despite official rejection of this text, many of the stories it contains entered Western Christian devotion just the same, through variations and retellings.

So “lost” means that this work was rejected and forgotten by Western Christians (as a friend comments, “Not lost, but tossed”). It doesn’t mean that the scroll was dug up in the desert last week. When it comes to ancient documents, “lost” does not necessarily mean “recently found.” The *Gospel of Judas*, released with much fanfare in April 2006, was actually discovered sometime in the 1970s. And portions of the *Gospel of Thomas*, the supposedly Gnostic document regularly used to challenge classic Christianity, have been around since 1898.

There has been a flood of similar “secret,” “hidden,” and “lost” documents lately, usually presented with the insinuation that they contain material so outrageous that the oppressive early church tried to stamp them out. (Though in the second century, when Gnosticism flourished, Christians had no such power; the oppressive Roman government was still trying to stamp them out.) But many times these ancient documents turn out to be less than the thrill they’re advertised to be. Some may have gotten “lost” simply because the average Christian found them tedious.

The French Egyptologist Jean Doresse was one of the first scholars to examine the trove of Gnostic literature found near the Nile village of Nag Hammadi in 1945. In *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (1958), Doresse writes that these Gnostic works had been previously known only through excerpts quoted by their opponents. It was assumed that defenders of orthodoxy, like St. Irenaeus, had chosen the most ridiculous passages for critique. But “it is as though Fate had been trying to poke fun at the learned,”

because the intact works, now that they've been recovered, turn out to be "the most complicated and surely the most incoherent that Gnosticism ever produced." The ancient orthodox critics of these works now "look almost eulogistic, almost benevolent" in taking them "so kindly and seriously as to do them the honor of refutation."

The ancient Christian writings that rose to the top, and were eventually included in the New Testament canon, were among other things more appealing. In his review of the *Gospel of Judas* for *The New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik writes: "Simply as editors, the early Church fathers did a fine job of leaving the strong stories in and the weird ones out. The orthodox canon gives us a Christ who is convincing as a character in a way that this Gnostic one is not. . . . It is not hard to prefer [the biblical Jesus] to the Jesus of the new [Gnostic] Gospel, with his stage laughter and significant winks and coded messages . . . a know-it-all with a nimbus."

So there is the canonical New Testament on the one hand and the various non-orthodox (Gnostic and otherwise) works on the other. But there is a third category, books that the early Christians enjoyed and circulated widely, but that did not rise to the level of Scripture. (To be included in the New Testament canon it was necessary to make a convincing claim of apostolic origin, and some got in only after a fight. The Revelation of St. John and the Epistle to the Hebrews were not accepted by some communities until the late fourth century.)

This third category of ancient works takes many different forms: biographies, sermons, visions, letters, biblical

commentaries, debates with non-believers, and more. One enduringly popular text, for example, was the collection of seven letters written by the bishop St. Ignatius of Antioch, as he was being taken as a prisoner to his execution in Rome in AD 110. A more colorful text is *The Shepherd*, an allegorical, dreamlike story attributed to St. Hermas and composed around AD 140. The *Didache* (“Teaching”), ascribed to the apostles, gives instructions on Christian behavior and summarizes the rites of baptism and Eucharist; it is often given a date between AD 65–80, roughly the time the New Testament was being written. One of my favorite early works is the prison journal of St. Perpetua, AD 203, in which she recorded the events, miracles, and visionary dreams she and her companions experienced while awaiting their death in the arena.

None of these works are very long, and all of them and many others can be readily found in translation on the Internet. Such early Christian writings open a new window for those who assume that, apart from the Scriptures, we have no record of the early Christians’ lives and thinking. On the contrary, the resources are so vast that it would be a challenge to read them all in a lifetime. The standard collection, containing works from the first six centuries, takes up almost five feet of shelf space in my study: large pages, tiny type, 38 volumes.

Though the *Gospel of Mary* was lost to the Western Christian tradition, it was never lost in the East—on the contrary, it was enthusiastically embraced and widely circulated, and translated into Syriac, Ethiopic, Georgian, Sahidic,

Slavonic, Armenian, and Arabic. When the nineteenth-century scholar von Tischendorf established an authoritative Greek version, he was able to draw on seventeen manuscripts; as more copies have turned up in the decades since, that figure has risen to 140. This was an unusually popular book, and Postellus, the scholar who made the translation into Latin in 1522, thought that in the East it was even being read during worship. That seems unlikely; it was not accepted as Scripture. But it's clear that many of the stories here were taken to heart very early and woven into the faith of the Christian East.

On the other hand, even though this *Gospel* has been available in English for almost 200 years, Western Christians are not likely to encounter it outside a seminary classroom. That is a loss indeed.

To Love a Little Girl

This work is interesting, among other reasons, because it shows that this very early Christian community could cherish a little girl. Throughout history, the most endangered member of any human society is a newborn girl. In most traditional cultures, and some modern ones, there are social and financial advantages to a son, but a daughter is welcome only when enough sons precede her. In too many times and places a little girl has not been welcome at all, regarded as pointless trouble and a waste of food.

The results can be tragic, even today. China has an unnaturally high ratio of boys to girls (no doubt related to that

nation's "one child policy"), and the vanished girls may be lost before birth by forced or sex-selection abortion, or afterwards by abandonment, infanticide, or disease. In India, sex-selection abortion is illegal, but still so prevalent that an estimated half a million unborn girls go missing every year. In the sad history of this world countless little girls have met with tragedy—unnoticed by the passing parade, but never forgotten by God.

Yet in this nearly two-thousand-year-old story from the Middle East, we see a baby girl whose birth is greeted with a cry of exultation rather than disappointment. We are told how she took her first steps, and about the big first-birthday party her father threw for her, and how the neighborhood girls played with her. In the church at Chora, mentioned above, another mosaic in the series on Mary's life expresses the tenderness of this love. It depicts Joachim and Anna seated side-by-side with baby Mary between them, and they are cuddling and kissing her as she reaches up to touch her mother's face. Above their heads the title reads "the Kolakeia of the Theotokos." *Theotokos* means "Birth-giver of God," and is a very early title for the Virgin Mary, while *kolakeia* means cherishing her with sweet, adoring words—a pastime familiar to anyone who ever loved a baby.

Did it really happen?

Whatever we conclude about this story's historicity, its popularity shows us that very early Christians found it easy to believe that a little girl was worthy of love. That alone is

refreshing, and the details that appear as the story unfolds are so charming that we feel a kinship with the story's first hearers across the centuries. When the three-year-old Mary sits down on a Temple step and "dances with her feet," it's no wonder that "all the house of Israel loved her."

What about the historicity of this story? It is certainly marked by miracles and wonders, though no more so than the pages of the New Testament. Scholars today doubt most of what happens, while some earlier generations of Christians accepted it wholeheartedly. If you can put yourself in their shoes, and manage to suspend judgment, you'll enjoy it even more.

But in an important sense historical accuracy is beside the point. The most valuable aspect of these stories for early Christians was that they show how Mary was used by God to complete his plan. These are typological stories, and they set up echoes with prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures.

For example, the *Gospel of Mary* depicts the child entering the temple, and going even into the Holy of Holies. To say that scholars doubt this happened is an understatement. But put yourself in the place of a second-century listener. The Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple was an extraordinary space: a perfect cube, 30 feet on each side. It was concealed behind a heavy embroidered curtain, and only once a year did a human being step inside. Then the High Priest would enter, bringing with him a sacrificial blood-offering. God required that the priest's steps be accompanied by the sound of bells sewn to the hem of his robes (as we're told in the book of Exodus), "lest he die."

Over a thousand years before the birth of Christ, when the children of Israel were still wandering in the desert, God gave Moses detailed instructions about the making and furnishing of the “tent of meeting.” In Exodus we read that there is to be, not just a “holy place,” but also a “most holy place,” separated from it by a curtain. Moses was told to place in this Holy of Holies an elaborately carved and gilded chest called the Ark. Even the interior of the Ark was clad in gold, though that secret place would never be seen. The Ark was designed to hold the “testimony” of God’s care for his people: the tablets of the Law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai; a golden jar of manna; and Aaron’s rod, which had miraculously blossomed.

Above the Ark God commanded that Moses set two carved cherubim covered with gold, facing each other with their wings touching. And in the space above them, invisible on his “mercy seat” (Greek, *hilasterion*), God said that his presence would rest.

(Variations on that Greek term sometimes get translated “expiation” or even “propitiation,” but the underlying image remains that of a place where we meet God to receive mercy. St. Paul writes to the Romans that God put Jesus forward “as a hilasterion by his blood, to be received by faith.”)

We shouldn’t imagine this as a place where a bargain is concluded to the satisfaction of all parties, with handshakes all round. It is a terrifying place. It is like leaning over the edge of a canyon and feeling the wind whip by. Any illusions about your significance are wiped away; you realize how puny and inconsequential you are. And yet the

beauty is so intoxicating that you only crave more. You long to have a bigger heart that could take it all in. That's a taste of what "the fear of the Lord" means.

When Moses finished his preparations, "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Ex. 40:34), with such power that he was not able to enter it. Centuries later, when Solomon dedicated the temple he had built in Jerusalem (as we read in 1 Kings 8:10, 11), "a cloud filled the house of the LORD," and the priests could not endure its presence, "for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the LORD." And when God showed Ezekiel a vision of the future temple, "the glory of the LORD filled the temple of the LORD" (Ezek. 44:4), overwhelming Ezekiel and casting him to the ground.

When God comes to fill his tabernacle, he overshadows it with blinding glory. And when Mary asked the angel how she could conceive a son, the angel replied (in Lk. 1:35), "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

The Ark of Moses did not last. By the time it was carried into Solomon's temple, the urn of manna and Aaron's rod had been lost, and it contained only the tablets of the Law. By the time of Christ, the Ark itself had been lost. When little three-year-old Mary came into the Holy of Holies, all that dark, echoing space was empty. But the Ark it had been designed to hold was only a foreshadowing of the true Ark, who now enters in the form of a little girl.

An ancient Eastern Orthodox hymn in honor of this moment says:

Today is the prelude of God's good will
 and the heralding of the salvation of mankind.
 In the temple of God, the Virgin is presented openly,
 and she proclaims Christ unto all.
 To her, then, with a great voice let us cry aloud:
 Rejoice, O fulfillment of the Creator's dispensation!

While writing this section I was corresponding with a friend who committed a catchy typo: he wrote that in this gospel "Mary enters the temple." That may not be elegant, but it does indicate why these images resounded so much for the early Christians. Mary's parallels to the Ark show how, throughout history, God had been readying Creation for the coming of Christ, the one "destined before the foundation of the world" (1 Pet. 1:20).

Purity

The *Gospel of Mary* emphasizes Mary's virginity—not only in conceiving Jesus, but also throughout the delivery. To be specific, it claims that not just the conception but also the delivery of her child did not violate her physical virginity.

This will strike many modern readers as a strange thing to say. And irrelevant as well: why would it matter? (Note that we're not discussing whether Mary remained virgin all her life, only whether she was virgin after delivering the Christ child.)

The common assumption today is that early Christians fussed about such things because they were uncomfortable with the human body, and particularly touchy about sex.

But that's anachronistic. In the Scriptures as here, material Creation is affirmed; the very idea of the Incarnation shows that a real flesh-and-blood body can bear the divine, as a candlewick bears flame.

We take this concept for granted today, but if you think what it would be like to hear it for the first time, it can be pretty disturbing. Offense at the idea that Christ really became a human being prompted alternative "spiritual" versions of the faith to spring up, the best-known being Gnosticism. (And sometimes even Christians misread St. Paul's distinction between flesh and spirit as meaning "body bad, spirit good." That idea may find a home in neo-Platonic philosophy, but not in St. Paul.)

A high respect for the physical body was why early Christians sought to gather the bloody remains of martyrs, even when it endangered them to do so. The body of a Christian is literally a temple of the Holy Spirit, and because of that it deserves honor. If these believers had been uncomfortable with the human body, they would not have treated these battered remains with such veneration, and not enclosed saint's bones within their altars.

After all, it is not the physical body that is the problem. Jesus taught that it is not what a person eats that defiles him, but rather what comes out of his mouth and heart. He explained that the damage inside a human being is integral, like a sickly tree that cannot bear good fruit. So sin is not so much a culpable deed as a self-inflicted wound. The "passions" that impel us to act out our brokenness are, in Greek, *pathon*, sufferings. The singular is *pathos*.

The way to healing is to “Be transformed by the renewal of your *nous*,” as St. Paul wrote to the Romans. The New Testament word *nous* is usually translated “mind,” but there’s really no good English equivalent. It means the perceiving faculty inside a person, the “eye of the soul,” which is, like a radio, designed to “tune in” to God. When the *nous* is centered in God, the whole person is calm and loving. When your eye is healthy, Jesus said, your whole body will be full of light.

But after Adam’s fall, the *nous* no longer readily perceives the light of Christ permeating all Creation. The darkened *nous* malfunctions, and renders humans fearful and selfish, alienated from this good earth and from each other. It is habitually distracted, and in that scattered state reacts to life like a pinball colliding with silvery bumpers.

The cure is to cultivate a habit of humility and love for others—that is, repentance (in biblical Greek, *metanoia*, a transformation of the *nous*). The classic spiritual exercises—fasting, loving others, and prayer “without ceasing”—are the “workout routine” for reorienting the *nous* to abide in God. (This is explored more fully in my book *The Illumined Heart: The Ancient Christian Path of Transformation*.)

Thus, there is no ancient Christian rejection of our physical bodies or this abundant earth. If anything, that culture was less squeamish about basic functions than we are today. In this story, the priests deliberate matter-of-factly about what to do when young Mary is due to begin having periods. There are plenty of frank references to breastfeeding: “Hear, hear you twelve tribes of Israel: Anna is nursing a baby!” At the

end of her labor, Mary says bluntly, “That which is within me presses me to come forth.” (Compare that with a more fanciful text written about the same time, “The Ascension of Isaiah.” Here Mary, after two months of pregnancy, suddenly sees a baby appear—and then discovers she is no longer pregnant.) Mary’s post-birth virginity is verified the only way it could be, in a passage that apparently did not shock or offend devout original hearers.

And when Joachim and Anna receive separate promises from God that they will have a child, Anna runs to greet her husband with a hug around the neck, and we are told that he then spends the day at home. The image of their meeting, and even franker ones that depict the couple standing and embracing in front of their bed, became popular in Christian art. Mary was, after all, conceived in the usual way.

The custom of celebrating both the conception and the birth of certain figures (for example, the Annunciation of Christ’s conception is observed March 25, and his birth December 25), indicates that early Christians had an adequate idea of how conception takes place and how long gestation lasts. It also shows that they believed that a new individual, a specific person, is present from the moment of conception: a person begins when his body begins. The body is not just a regrettable container. (Aristotle’s view that the body and soul are separate, and that the body receives the soul at 40 or 80 days, was never accepted in the Christian East.)

Privacy was harder to come by in that ancient world, and ordinary body processes were thoroughly familiar—perhaps even more so than today, for there may be some readers

who are not quite sure what “physical virginity” means. (It was no mystery to the ancient Hebrews, as we see from the startling passage in Deuteronomy 22, where a bride’s parents are expected to preserve proof of their daughter’s virginity so they can present it if challenged.)

The virginal conception of Christ was part of Christian preaching from the first, and a difficult part it was. Virginal birth would have no particular appeal to the first audience for the *Gospel of Mary* message, the Jews; they did not expect the Messiah to be born of a virgin, any more than they expected him to die on a cross. When Christians presented this claim they opened themselves to charges that they were fabricating a preposterous and pointless myth.

What’s more, their admission that Mary’s husband was not her child’s father invited the obvious charge that he was “born of fornication” (as Jesus’ challengers jeer in the John 8). There was no rhetorical advantage to claiming a virgin birth for Jesus, and the likeliest reason the early Christians stood by it so stoutly was that they believed it was true.

But why would Mary have to be still virgin immediately after the birth? As above, there’s no rhetorical advantage, and if anything it would have been another tough sell. It seems the Christians simply believed it was true, and tried to understand God’s purpose. Gregory of Nyssa (AD 335–394) proposed that the pain of childbirth is one of the bitter consequences of the Fall (as God warned Eve, “In pain you shall bring forth children”). When God acts to reverse that damage, every element will be joy: “It was indeed necessary

that the mother of life conceive her child with joy, and perfect her act of giving birth in joy.” Gregory sees in this another miraculous proof of God’s sovereignty. Just as the bush Moses saw was filled with the blazing presence of God yet not destroyed, so Mary’s bodily integrity was not altered by childbirth.

Ever-Virgin?

Though the *Gospel of Mary* shows her as a virgin before and after the birth of Christ, it does not comment on whether she remained a virgin all her life. That was the consensus of the early church, however, and it was universally believed until recent centuries. Even some Reformation leaders, including Ulrich Zwingli and Martin Luther, upheld it. Though many Christians today assume Mary and Joseph entered normal marital relations after Jesus’ birth, that belief was not accepted by any orthodox Christian writer for over 1500 years.

In the fourth century, a rare attempt to advance this view was made by a writer named Helvidius. He offered as evidence Matthew 1:25: “[Joseph] knew her not until she had borne a son.” Surely that meant Joseph “knew” Mary after the birth of Jesus, Helvidius said.

We know of Helvidius only through St. Jerome’s indignant rebuttal. Jerome fired back that, if we say, “Helvidius did not repent until his death,” it doesn’t mean he repented afterwards. What’s more (waxing sarcastic, which Jerome could certainly do), if “until” means normal marital relations

began after the birth of Christ, on what grounds could Helvidius allow even a moment's delay? Midwives would have to bustle the child out of the room "while the husband clasps his exhausted wife."

This "until" did not trouble early Christians, who understood it to mean "before." Matthew consistently tells the story of Mary's pregnancy from Joseph's point of view, and is here restating that Joseph had no part in Jesus' conception. Likewise, Luke's reference to "her first-born son" (in Luke 2) is a formula indicating inheritance status, and requires no subsequent sons. "Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord."

The strongest evidence that Mary had no other sons is that the crucified Jesus consigned her to John's care (John 19:26–27). This makes sense if Jesus' death was going to leave her unprotected, but not if it meant wresting her from the home of biological sons.

Apart from Helvidius, only Tertullian (who was less than fully orthodox; Jerome dismisses him as "not of the Church") proposed that Mary entered an ordinary married life with Joseph. Tertullian saw in this a blessing of both the virgin and the married state. But the remainder of the early Christian writers are united in upholding her lifelong virginity—an assertion, similar to the virgin birth above, that would be unnecessary, and awkward to defend, and thus unlikely to be invented, if it were not believed true.