

Protevangelium of James: God's Story Goes On

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The Protevangelium of James (hereafter Prot Jas) is generally counted as one of the apocryphal infancy gospels, and is also known by the name "Birth of Mary." It is predominately (about 75 percent of the preserved text) the story of Mary's conception, birth, and childhood, up until her marriage, and of the virgin birth of her son, Jesus. This writing's interest in Mary is often ascribed to the apologetic intention of the message of the Protevangelium of James: there were "attacks by Jews against the assertion that Jesus was born of a virgin," the opponents alleging that Jesus was an illegitimate child (Rebell 1992, 126; Schaberg 1994, 719-20). The Protevangelium of James reacted to these accusations by a broad unfolding of Mary's undefiled status, bringing forward all kinds of pertinent events. This gives us a way of reading the Gospels that leaves no doubt about the purity and innocence of Mary and about the legitimacy of her son's origin. Others view the document differently, criticizing the assessment that it is a defense against outside attacks on the virginity of Mary. These critics hold that the primary motivation of the work is neither christological nor mariological; rather, it is a (salvation)-historical document (Allen 1991). We will interpret the document in the context of its own time and place, that is, in the framework of disputes in early Christianity about its being part of Judaism. But we also want to take a critical look at the picture of Mary that is given here, with its emphasis on her virginity. We invite the document's readers to set aside for a time their glasses colored by the Mariology in the church's history and find delight in the fullness of biblical images and traditions that is offered in the Protevangelium of James.

In Conversation with Biblical Traditions (1-4)

The Protevangelium of James describes itself as the "Histories of the Twelve Tribes of Israel" (1:1). The reference to First Testament traditions and the verbal quotation of many passages are striking. The stories and quotations from the First Testa-

ment are treated in a manner similar to that used with sections taken from the texts of the Gospels in the New Testament. They are quoted in free form, often fragmentarily, and inserted into the context of new stories. Gaps that were discovered within the traditions being handed down, gaps that clearly evoked questions, were filled in the new accounts. The traditions that were handed down were in this way given currency for one's own situation. This way of dealing with the biblical traditions corresponds to what is known in Jewish scriptural interpretation as midrash: "Midrash rests on the rabbinic conviction that the bible can be made to speak to this very day. If it is our text, then it can and must answer our questions and share our values; when we struggle with it, it will yield meaning" (Plaskow 1992, 82; cf. Stemberger 1977, 83ff.).

The *Protevangelium of James* was written about 150 C.E., in a time of inner-Christian controversy in which some churches and theologians, like Marcion, fought vigorously to distance themselves from their Jewish roots (materials available in Schottroff 1996, 240-42; Allen 1991, 516-17). In opposition to these tendencies, the *Protevangelium of James* sees Christianity rooted in the Jewish tradition, appeals to the common roots, and skillfully brings Old and New Testament traditions together. A salvation-historical model in which Christianity supersedes Judaism as the chosen people cannot be found here anymore than it can in the Gospel of Luke (against Allen 1991; → Gospel of Luke). The connection is made, in the first place, through the characters in the story, in whom figures from the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels come alive. Thus Joachim embodies Abraham (Prot Jas 1:3), Elijah, Moses (Prot Jas 1:4 — Exod 24:18; 34:28; 1 Kings 19:8), Elkanah (Prot Jas 1:1-2 — 1 Sam 1:21), Joachim (Dan 13 [Susanna]), and Zechariah (Prot Jas 4:2 — Luke 1:13). Present anew in Anna are the barren Sarah (Prot Jas 2:2-4 — Gen 18) and Elizabeth (Luke 1), Hannah (Prot Jas 4:1 — 1 Sam 1 and 2) and Judith (Prot Jas 2:1-2 and Jth 8:6; 10). Mary's being turned over to God in the temple calls to mind the story of Samuel (Prot Jas 7 and 8 — 1 Sam 1 and 2); during her pregnancy she repeats the words of Rebekah (Prot Jas 17:2 — Gen 25:23). Zechariah's story (Prot Jas 24) copies that of Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24. This list could be expanded extensively; the biblical references can only be hinted at in this restricted space.

People who heard these stories immediately had in view the images and events of the biblical stories they knew: the fateful experiences of childless foremothers and forefathers, the fortunate turn of events for Israel in the account about Judith, the story of Susanna and the Hannah-Samuel tradition, the fate of Zechariah in 2 Chronicles. They not only hear these stories as accounts of events from the past, but they also draw from them insights and perspectives offering hope for their own present situation. In this way the *Protevangelium of James* aligns itself with conversations with the biblical tradition that make it applicable in the present, something that can also be documented within the Hebrew Bible itself (Butting 1994).

The Temple as a Source of Hope (7–16; 23–24)

The Jerusalem temple plays a major role in the Protevangelium of James. Already in the first chapter, the account of the “Histories of the Twelve Tribes” begins with Joachim coming to the temple to bring an offering (cf. also chapter 5). Mary is consecrated for service in the temple and at age three brought there to live and grow. And when at age twelve she has to forsake the temple as her permanent place of residence, the connection with it nevertheless continues: she is chosen to weave a curtain for it.

The Protevangelium of James also ends in the temple and in this way again connects with biblical traditions. The account of the martyrdom of Zechariah and the hope to go up once again to Jerusalem (23–24) calls to mind the conclusion of the Hebrew Bible (Allen 1991, 513). With the establishment of the canon after 70 c.e., the martyrdom of Zechariah and, following on that, the hope of the return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple are placed at the end of the scriptures (2 Chron 36:23). This hope of a return to Jerusalem is also expressed in this concluding notice of the Protevangelium of James (25:1): “Now I, James, who wrote this history, when a tumult arose in Jerusalem on the death of Herod, withdrew into the wilderness until the tumult in Jerusalem ceased.” It is surely not too much of a stretch to see in these words an important indication of the situation and the hopes of the community in which the Protevangelium of James is recounted. They find themselves in the diaspora (Egypt is quite likely the place of writing, although Syria is also discussed), but hold on to their hope for Jerusalem and the temple. To the city and its temple they attach their longings and hopes, their stories of liberation and their lament over what has been lost.

Traditional Accounts about Mary (5–6; 17–20)

At the center of what the Protevangelium of James is interested in recounting stands Mary, a girl, a woman around whom additional stories about women are told or retold. A major portion of the text tells about her life: her parents and their desire for a child; her conception, birth, and childhood; her growing up as a virgin in the temple and her time in Joseph’s house after she reaches twelve years of age. From the beginning, Mary herself is pictured as a miraculous and eagerly awaited child, her parents as pious Jews. She grows up in complete purity — until she is three she lives at home, in a “sanctuary,” surrounded only by likewise undefiled daughters of the Hebrews (cf. Joseph and Aseneth), and then in the temple in Jerusalem. At her birth, a midwife stands by at Anna’s side. The description of the birth reports things known to women (cf. Gen 25:19–26; 35:16–19; Ruth 4:13–17; Luke 1; Soranus, *Gynecology* 26.70; cf. Janssen 1998). It is mentioned, for instance, that Mary was given her name in the presence of women and that Anna nursed her for

half a year. At the birth of Jesus two midwives also play an important role. In chapters 18 and 19 it is reported how Joseph sought a midwife in Bethlehem, for the delivery was close at hand. The midwife is present at the delivery and utters a word of praise. It is assumed to be self-evident that she will report afterward what she had experienced, without receiving a summons to do so.

The multiplicity of stories about women permits the assumption that, to a high degree, things women know and traditions told by women have been incorporated into this writing. An example can clarify that further: by means of the motif of the barren woman, the stories of the foremothers Sarah, Rachel and Leah, Rebekah, Hannah, and Elizabeth are linked with Anna's lot in the Protevangelium of James. Knowledge about the persistence of God's help in the history of God's people and of God's partiality toward women finds expression here (→ Gospel of Luke; Janssen 1998). It is, of course, unique in stories with this motif that in the Protevangelium of James the barren woman (Anna) gives birth to a girl (Mary).

The Protevangelium of James fills in gaps that can be seen in the infancy narratives of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, gaps that had probably occasioned many questions and diverse interpretations: How is it conceivable that Jesus comes from God or the Holy Spirit? What is the significance of the wondrous conception — is Mary really above reproach with respect to adultery? What was the birth like — did Mary have pain in childbirth as all women do? Doubt with respect to the wondrous conception can come as a reaction to attacks from outside (cf. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.39), but also just through Matthew 1:18-25 alone and differences between the two accounts in the Gospels. By their own interpretations and a new arrangement of the materials from texts at their disposal, the authors attempted to explain to themselves and their community how to interpret these matters so difficult to understand. A good example of how they proceeded is found in Protevangelium of James 11:2-3. Here the angel proclaims to Mary that she will conceive through God's word. "When she heard this she doubted in herself and said: 'Shall I conceive of the Lord, the living God, [and bear] as every woman bears?'" Then the angel gives a more precise explanation: "Not so, Mary, for a power of the Lord shall overshadow you. . . ." Questions and correctives are tied together here and the "proper" interpretation supplied.

According to the interpretation of the authors, the conception takes place through the word and power of God, and it provides no support for the idea that Jesus' origin might be illegitimate (cf. Schaberg 1994, 718). To make it entirely clear that Mary had not committed adultery, the order of events concerning the conception of Jesus, the trial on the charge of adultery — in accord with Numbers 5 — and the wondrous birth is painted in broad detail. The beginning of the Protevangelium of James, with numerous reminiscences of the story of Susanna (Dan 13), is already signaling that in what follows the story concerns the suspicion of adultery, to which an innocent young woman has been exposed. Mary's "undefiled status" after Jesus' birth is actually "proven" through a gynecological exami-

nation by a midwife named Salome. She establishes that the hymen is intact and that Mary is still a virgin. In this way any lingering doubt about the possibility of sexual intercourse is removed — and actually made subject to divine punishment: the midwife's hand is consumed by fire, since she does not want to believe that Mary is still a virgin and puts this to the test. "The flaming hand warns the reader: it is dangerous to doubt Mary's virginity" (Schaberg 1994, 723). As Salome prayed to God, she was healed.

How the Tradition Is Carried Forward in This Writing

Even though the Protevangelium of James positions itself within the history of Israel, many of the things it describes diverge from Jewish practices known to us. It is to be questioned, for example, whether Mary could have grown up in the temple in the manner indicated. Mary's precocious ability to walk and the fact that her steps number precisely seven show her to be a miraculous child. Here, as with the description of her first birthday, Hellenistic customs and motifs appear to have gained entrance. It is interesting to see how unabashedly these are woven into the account. It is not treated as a problem that in the Jewish tradition one's birthday was not celebrated.

It is striking, furthermore, that in comparison with the Gospel texts from which the Protevangelium of James draws its material, prophetic traditions are largely lacking. According to information in the Protevangelium of James, Mary comes from a rich family. Her advocacy of the poor as found in the Gospel of Luke is set aside. The Magnificat, Mary's song of praise, is completely absent and therewith also its political vision about the downfall of the rich and powerful and the exaltation of the lowly. Nor is the adoration of the shepherds mentioned. The lack of a place in the inn as a sign of Jesus' poverty is reinterpreted. In the Protevangelium of James, Jesus is born in a cave simply because the family is traveling, not because they can find no place in the inn. It is also not by reason of poverty that Jesus is laid in a manger; no, he is being hidden from Herod's murderous soldiers. The Protevangelium of James has a primary interest in cultic themes. Questions about purity and events occurring in the surroundings of the temple are extensively discussed. Additionally, the mixing of Hellenistic and Jewish traditions leaves the impression that the resistance to Hellenistic-Roman traditions and customs had been given up in various areas (cf., by contrast, the naming of John in Luke 1:57-66, for example, in intentional opposition to a Hellenistic-Roman practice; cf. Eltrop 1996; 1997).

Undeiled and under Control — Women in the Protevangelium of James

The changes the Protevangelium of James undertakes involve thoroughgoing losses compared with the New Testament tradition. Even the inclusion of traditions handed on by women and the multiplicity of women who are mentioned do not make the Protevangelium of James a writing favorable to women. On the contrary! It has no interest in the life of women who do not stand in the immediate context of their reproductive capabilities and of questions about their sexuality. The emphasis on virginity here also fails to offer women any perspectives for an autonomous and independent life, in contrast to ascetically oriented movements in early Christianity. From many “acts” of apostles and reports of female Christian martyrs that arose at the same time as the Protevangelium of James, it is clear that the practice of living free of marriage ties enabled women, outside of the ordered life of patriarchy, to have a way of life that assured them of freedom and independence (cf. Sutter Rehmann 1994). That the Magnificat was not picked up in the Protevangelium of James shows that it wanted to impart a picture of women that no longer made prophetic-political discourse part of the lives of women or girls. In contrast to the Gospel of Luke, Mary and Elizabeth do not appear as virgins who powerfully proclaim the gospel.

Visions of an empowerment of women are not given in the Protevangelium of James. They live in the background as wives or “undeiled” daughters and virgins, whose sexuality can be controlled. In contrast to men, they do not appear in public. The only apparent life lived outside of normal social and religious paths, that of Mary, is depicted in such a way that it soon becomes clear that she also moves within the way things are ordered. By and large she appears to be passive, with little self-awareness. She moves from the protection her parents provide to that of the priests in the temple and, thereafter, to Joseph’s. She willingly yields to her fate and fulfills the tasks laid upon her. The picture of Mary given in the Protevangelium of James became the foundation for many later mariological sketches that take as their starting point Mary’s perpetual virginity and undeiled status (even though the picture of her in the Protevangelium of James does not speak of this). Especially through the reference to Eve, who, according to Protevangelium of James 13:1 (in accord with 1 Tim 2:14 and in opposition to Gen 3), is depicted as the only one who is deceived (while Adam is cleared), the Protevangelium of James has a decisive role in the development of a tradition that exalts Mary over all other women and their sexuality.

Finally, we would like to esteem the Protevangelium of James primarily as an important document within the discussion process over the identity of early Christianity in the time of upheaval after the Bar Kokhba revolt. It deserves a great deal of credit for keeping alive the memory of the matriarchs and patriarchs and of the other biblical traditions about women in which the community recounting the events in the Protevangelium of James felt itself rooted.

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