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THE VIRGIN MARY'S HIDDEN PAST

From Ancient Marian Apocrypha to the Medieval *Vitae Virginis*

*Stephen J. Shoemaker, PhD**

In light of the enormous significance that the Virgin Mary would come to assume in later Christian piety, the rather leisurely pace with which the early Christians developed memories of her life is perhaps somewhat surprising. As is well known, the canonical gospels offer only very meager details of Mary's life, and despite the considerable narrative and theological importance of her infrequent appearances, these biographies of Jesus reveal frustratingly little about his mother.¹ Paul, for his part, seems to know very little about the mother of the Lord, and other writers of the first and early second centuries seem similarly unconcerned with the events of her life. Although Justin would first explore the theme of Mary as the New Eve around the middle of the second century, only with the near simultaneous appearance of the so-called *Protevangelium of James* do we find a significant break in the silence surrounding the life of Christ's mother.² This early Christian

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¹ See, e.g., Raymond E. Brown, et al., *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

² See, e.g., Hilda C. Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to the Eve of the Reformation* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 32-8.

apocryphon, it would seem, initiated the process of writing the Virgin's biography, beginning with the events of her childhood and her own miraculous conception. In the centuries that followed, other apocrypha would take up different moments from her life, including especially its dramatic conclusion, and collectively these narratives formed the basic building blocks for the medieval *Lives of the Virgin*.

Beginning first with the seventh-century *Life of the Virgin* ascribed to Maximus the Confessor, Mary's medieval biographers sought to weave the strands of these earlier traditions into a comprehensive account of her life. This "Maximus" *Life of the Virgin*, in fact, established the basic pattern for many other *Lives* that would follow, and in transmitting the apocryphal traditions of the early church to the middle ages, it exercised considerable influence on subsequent Byzantine narratives of Mary's life. Whoever its author may have been, this late ancient biography of the Virgin, which survives only in Georgian, is a long-overlooked watershed in the history of Marian literature, and, as such, it deserves more considered study within the history of Marian literature.

Turning first, however, to the oldest Marian biography, the *Protevangelium of James*, one immediately encounters some remnants of an older generic confusion. Although modern scholarship has long classified this "proto-gospel" among the Infancy Gospels, as if it were primarily concerned with the story of the young boy Jesus, this designation is more than a little misleading. Originally titled Γένεσις Μαρίας, or the *Birth of Mary*,³ this apocryphon not only is not a "gospel," as has long been recognized, but also its primary subject is the conception and childhood of the Blessed Virgin, a point partially obscured by its rather odd placement alongside legends of the boy Jesus. Indeed, one wonders how this early biography of the Virgin came to be classified as an Infancy Gospel in the first place. Quite possibly early modern collectors of apocrypha found the *Protevangelium's* intense early interest in the Virgin so incongruous with their views of Mary's place in the ancient church

³ Émile de Strycker, *La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques*, Subsidia Hagiographica 33 (Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1961), 208-16.

that they did not know what else to make of it. They seem to have assumed that such extended focus on the life of the Virgin already during the second century could only have been intended to underscore her son's marvelous infancy, rather than aiming to draw any attention to Mary herself as an emergent focus of Christian piety. By consequence, the significance of this primitive biography of the young Virgin, and more importantly what it reveals about her early emergence as a focus of special theological interest and devotion, can occasionally be obscured by its disguise as an Infancy Gospel.

From the *Protevangelium* we learn that already by the mid-second century some proto-orthodox Christians had come to the belief that not only had the conception and birth of Mary's son been miraculous, but so too was her own.⁴ Like her son, Mary's conception occurred spontaneously in her mother's womb, in the absence of any sexual relations: according to this biography, Mary's mother Anne conceived miraculously at a time when Joachim, her father, had been fasting in the wilderness for forty days and nights.⁵ Moreover, the *Protevangelium* describes Mary's upbringing as a consecrated virgin in the Jerusalem temple, followed by her chaste marriage to the much older Joseph at the onset of menstruation. Likewise, this ancient Christian text reveals early belief in Mary's virginity *in partu*, showing pronounced interest in her physical purity already by this time. Indeed, just over a century after her death, we find here that the canvas of Mary's life had begun to be embroidered with details reaching beyond mere Christological themes to disclose an emergent theological interest in the figure of Mary herself. And while it certainly would be premature to speak of any sort of "cult" of the Virgin at this stage, the *Protevangelium of James* nevertheless appears to bear witness at least to an incipient devotion to the mother of Christ.

⁴ Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991-2), 1:423-4; Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas: With Introduction, Notes, and Original Text Featuring the New Scholars Version Translation*, Scholars Bible (Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1995), 11-12. See also George T. Zervos, "Dating the Protevangelium of James: The Justine Martyr Connection," *SBL Seminar Papers* 33 (1994): 415-34.

⁵ de Strycker, *La forme la plus ancienne*, 64-81; Hock, *The Infancy Gospels*, 32-9.

The *Protevangelium* concludes with Herod's slaughter of the innocents, leaving the remainder of Mary's adult life much of a mystery. A few tantalizing glimpses of the young mother are afforded by the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, or the Παιδικὰ τοῦ κυρίου, which describes the childhood acts of the young Jesus between the ages of five and twelve. Although the date of this apocryphon is somewhat less certain, most scholars are agreed that it probably belongs to the latter part of the second century.⁶ In the first half of the text Joseph appears alone as Jesus' father, but eventually the Virgin emerges in the second half, identified on several occasions as the child's mother. One of these episodes (19) merely expands on Luke's account of the boy Jesus' visit to the Jerusalem temple (Luke 2:42-51), adding here the praises of the scribes and Pharisees for Mary, whom they hail as more blessed than all other women, while in another instance (14) Joseph orders Mary to keep Jesus locked up in their house "because those who annoy him end up dead."⁷ In an earlier scene, however, Mary witnesses one of her son's miracles, as he fetches water with his cloak to replace a broken pitcher: so amazed is she that "she kept to herself the mysteries that she had seen him do," implying here perhaps her knowledge of many other prodigies as well.⁸ Nevertheless, the Virgin is otherwise kept offstage in this account of Jesus' childhood, and with only these few exceptions, Mary's role in raising her young son remains largely unvoiced by the early Christian tradition.

In the third and fourth centuries, Mary's biography continued to expand, moving from the earlier stages of her life as remembered in these two apocrypha to focus instead on the events of her departure from this world, the Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin. Mary's activities during the intervening period, however, from her son's teaching in the Temple through the founding of the Church, remained largely unexplored for several centuries still to come. The ancient traditions

⁶ Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 1:442; Hock, *The Infancy Gospels*, 91-2, 104.

⁷ Hock, *The Infancy Gospels*, 132-3, 140-3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 126-9.

of the Virgin's Dormition open only a few days before Mary's removal from the world, as an angel appears to announce her impending quietus. The story then unfolds with great diversity in the earliest accounts, although two main literary types quickly came to predominate—the so-called “Palm of the Tree of Life” narratives, named for their prominent inclusion of a palm branch from this primeval tree, and the “Bethlehem” traditions, which are distinguished by their location of certain key events from the Virgin's Dormition in Bethlehem.⁹ Only a very few events are related by nearly all of the early narratives, and these include the Virgin's death in Jerusalem, the presence of at least some of the apostles, Christ's reception of his mother's soul, and Mary's transfer to Paradise in body and/or soul. The imagined hostility of the Jews is also a persistent theme, as the Jewish leaders seek to disrupt the Virgin's funeral and to dishonor or even destroy this body that gave birth to “the deceiver.” These latter elements in particular laid important foundations for an often close association between Marian piety and anti-Judaism in the middle ages.¹⁰ As for their origins, the earliest Dormition narratives seem to have first emerged within heterodox Christian communities, although they were increasingly adopted by “orthodox” Christians over the course of the fifth and sixth centuries, eventually becoming a central component of the Virgin's canonical biography.

The oldest Dormition narrative would appear to be an apocryphon known as the *Obsequies of the Virgin*, which survives in several Syriac fragments copied during the late fifth and sixth centuries. The full extent of this earliest narrative, however, survives only in an Ethiopic translation bearing the title *Liber Requiei Mariae*, or the *Book of Mary's Repose*.¹¹ Early versions of this apocryphon circulated as widely as Georgia

⁹ See the discussion of these two literary traditions and their main components in Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 32-57.

¹⁰ Stephen J. Shoemaker, “‘Let Us Go and Burn Her Body’: The Image of the Jews in the Early Dormition Traditions,” *Church History* 68, no. 4 (1999): 775-823.

¹¹ See the description of these and other witnesses in Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 32-7.

and Ireland, and comparison of these late ancient and early medieval Dormition narratives with the complete Ethiopic text confirms the general reliability of this translation as a faithful witness to the earliest extant traditions of the Virgin's Dormition.¹² This ancient Christian apocryphon, dating to the third century in all likelihood, is fairly rife with heterodoxies.¹³ For example, the *Liber Requiei* expresses an Angel Christology, according to which Mary's son was an earthly manifestation of "the Great Cherub of Light."¹⁴ Moreover, the *Liber Requiei* repeatedly emphasizes the soteriological necessity of esoteric knowledge and refers on several occasions to a common "gnostic" cosmological myth that describes the soul's imprisonment by the Demiurge and its need to ascend past his minions after death in order to return to the Pleroma.¹⁵ The Christ-Angel entrusts his mother with a secret book containing the mysteries of heaven and earth, which he revealed at the tender age of five, and she in turn delivers the book to the apostles just before her death.¹⁶ Likewise Mary shares with the apostles a secret prayer that her son had taught her: only by speaking these words just before death is it possible for the soul to escape past the creator of the world and return to the spiritual realm of the Father.¹⁷

¹² Ibid., 153-68; 415-18.

¹³ Ibid., 42-6, 253-6, 278-9, 284-6; Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Death and the Maiden: The Early History of the Dormition and Assumption Apocrypha," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 50 (2006): 59-97.

¹⁴ See esp. *Liber Requiei* 1-3, 52 (Victor Arras, *De transitu Mariae apocrypha aethiopice*, 2 vols., CSCO 342-3, 351-2 [Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus SCO, 1973], 1:1-3, 31 [Eth] and 1-2, 21 [Lat]); cf. Antoine Wenger, *L'Assomption de la T.S. Vierge dans la tradition byzantine du VI^e au Xe siècle. études et documents*, Archives de l'Orient chrétien, 5 (Paris: Institut français d'études byzantines, 1955), 210-15, 226-9; trans. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 290-1, 320, 351-6, 362-4. See also Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 215-20, 239-41.

¹⁵ E.g., *Liber Requiei* 13-17 (Arras, *De transitu*, 1:7-9 [Eth] and 5-6 [Lat]); Wenger, *L'Assomption*, 214-19; trans. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 298-300, 356-8.

¹⁶ E.g., *Liber Requiei* 44 (Arras, *De transitu*, 1:27 [Eth] and 17-18 [Lat]); Wenger, *L'Assomption*, 220-1; trans. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 316, 360.

¹⁷ E.g., *Liber Requiei* 15 (Arras, *De transitu*, 1:8 [Eth] and 5 [Lat]); trans. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 299.

These heterodox elements present important evidence for the relatively early formation of this narrative, almost certainly sometime before the fourth century, as well as bearing witness more generally to the remarkable confessional diversity of ancient Christianity. The peculiar theological backdrop against which this narrative of Mary's miraculous departure from the world unfolds suggests that her earliest veneration may have emerged within a theologically heterodox milieu that understood Christ as a Great Angel and looked to esoteric knowledge for salvation from the Demiurge at death. The more "orthodox" Dormition narratives of the early middle ages frequently express their discomfort with these heterodoxies of the earlier tradition, and their authors explain that in order to appropriate these traditions it was necessary to purge the ancient narratives of their doctrinal errors, an editorial cleansing that is quite apparent in the earliest transmission of these legends during the sixth and seventh centuries.¹⁸

There is, however, in the *Liber Requiei* a rather intriguing scene from the life of the Virgin that occurs outside of the sequence of her Dormition. The story concerns the Holy Family's flight into Egypt, and it relates an episode that is perhaps more familiar from its expurgated form as preserved in the Latin *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew*.¹⁹ Near the opening of the *Liber Requiei*, the Christ-Angel recalls this story for his mother in order to remind her of the full nature of his power.

5) And he [the Christ-Angel] said, 'My mother, you did not understand my power. I first revealed it to you at the spring, where I led Joseph. He was crying, the child who is glorified because he is greater than everything, and Joseph was angry with you, saying, "Give your breast to your child." At once you gave it to him, as you went forth to the Mount of Olives,

¹⁸ Ps.-Melito, *Transitus Mariae*, prologue, in *Ein neuer "Transitus Mariae" des Pseudo-Melito*, ed. Monika Haibach-Reinisch (Rome: Pontificia Academia Mariana Internationalis, 1962), 64-5; John of Thessalonica, *Dorm. BMV A 1*, in *Homélies mariales byzantines*, ed. and trans. Martin Jugie, 2 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1922-1926), 2:376-7 (PO 19.3); Andrew of Crete, *Orat. 13* (PG 97.1072B).

¹⁹ A story similar to the one told in 5-9 is found in the *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew*, 20-1 (Jan Gijssels and Rita Beyers, eds., *Libri de nativitate mariae*, 2 vols., Corpus Christianorum, Series Apocryphorum, 9-10 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1997]), 1:458-70.

fleeing from Herod. And when you came to some trees you said to Joseph, "My lord, we are hungry, and what do we have to eat in this desert place?" Then he rebuked you, saying, "What can I do for you? Is it not enough for you that I became a stranger to my family on your account; why didn't you guard your virginity, so that you would [not] be found in this; and not only you, but I and my children too; now I live here with you, and I do not even know what will happen to my seven children."

6) I say this to you Mary: know who I am and what power is upon me. And then he said to you "There is no fruit that you could eat in the trees. This date-palm is tall, and I cannot climb it. I say to you that there is no one at all who has climbed, and there is nothing that a person will find in this desert. I have been afflicted from all sides because of you, because I have left my country. And I am afflicted because I did not know the child that you have; I only know that he is not from me. But I have thought in my heart, perhaps I had intercourse with you while drunk, and that I am even worse because I had determined to protect [you]. And behold, now it has been made known that I was not negligent, because there were [only] five months when I received you into [my] custody. And behold, this child is more than five months; for you embraced him with your hand."²⁰

Perhaps understandably, this version of the story does not survive in later Marian biographies, no doubt on account of its highly discordant portrayal of the young Jesus' family life. Indeed, one wonders how the original author(s) of this text would have understood Matthew 1.18-25, which relates the angel's visit to Joseph in a dream and Joseph's persuasion that Mary's child had been conceived miraculously by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps one must assume that Matthew's gospel may not have been an authoritative text within the early Christian community that originally produced this peculiar account of the flight to Egypt. In any case, such irreverent portrayal of Mary and Joseph stands sharply at odds with their representation in other early Christian sources, and this dissonance is yet another sign of the *Liber Requitei*'s relative antiquity. Later redactors took decisive steps to soften the episode's impact.

²⁰ *Liber Requitei* 5-6 (Arras, *De transitu*, 1:2-4 [Eth] and 2-3 [Lat]); Michel van Esbroeck, "Apocryphes géorgiens de la Dormition," *Analecta Bollandiana* 92 (1973): 55-75, 69-70 (Geor) and 74 (Lat); English trans., Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 291-3.

The Georgian fragments of the *Liber Requiei*, for instance, eliminate Joseph's suspicions of himself and his corresponding admission of drunkenness, while in the seventh-century *Gospel of Ps.-Matthew*, which preserves the best known version of this story, Joseph is barely allowed to speak at all: when Mary expresses hunger, he calmly notes that water seems to be their more urgent need, and with this minor marital disagreement, harmony is restored to the Holy Family.

The other major literary tradition of the Virgin's Dormition, the Bethlehem tradition, is first evidenced by the so-called "Six Books" apocryphon, a widely circulated text that is first extant in several Syriac manuscripts from the fifth and sixth centuries.²¹ This earliest exemplar of these Bethlehem narratives most likely dates to the middle of the fourth century, if not perhaps even earlier, and it would appear to have some sort of a connection with the "Kollyridians," whom Epiphanius assails (somewhat unfairly it would seem) for their rather precocious veneration of the Virgin at this time.²² Although it was almost certainly composed in Greek, the Six Books apocryphon survives only in Syriac, Ethiopic, and Arabic versions in an as yet unknown number of manuscripts. The Greek original seems to have been lost due to its displacement by the much shorter *Transitus Mariae* ascribed to John the Theologian, a resume of the Six Books that was most likely produced in the late fifth or early sixth-century, presumably with an eye toward greater liturgical efficiency.²³ This early précis of the Bethlehem

²¹ Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 46-51.

²² Stephen J. Shoemaker, "Epiphanius of Salamis, the Kollyridians, and the Early Dormition Narratives: The Cult of the Virgin in the Later Fourth Century," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008): 369-99. Concerning the date, see also Stephen J. Shoemaker, "A Peculiar Version of the *Inventio crucis* in the Early Syriac Dormition Traditions," *Studia Patristica* 41 (2006): 75-81, which updates and corrects Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 286-7. See also Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum, 93 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 358-60; Michel van Esbroeck, "Some Earlier Features in the Life of the Virgin," *Marianum* 63 (2001): 297-308.

²³ Michel van Esbroeck, "Les textes littéraires sur l'assomption avant le Xe siècle," in *Les actes apocryphes des apôtres*, ed. François Bovon (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1981), 265-85, 269; Simon C. Mimouni, *Dormition et Assomption de Marie: Histoire des traditions anciennes*, Théologie Historique, 98 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1995), 124;

traditions was enormously popular in the Christian East: in Greek and Church Slavonic alone it survives in over two-hundred manuscripts,²⁴ as well in Georgian, Ethiopic, and Arabic versions, leading Michel van Esbroeck to describe this text as a medieval "best-seller."²⁵ Together these two apocrypha, the Six Books and the Ps.-John *Transitus*, served as the primary voice for the Bethlehem Dormition traditions during the middle ages.

In comparison with the early narratives of the Palm tradition, these two Dormition apocrypha are theologically quite "orthodox": there is no book of cosmic mysteries or esoteric soteriological knowledge, and their Christology is generally compatible with the Nicene faith. Moreover, in further contrast to the Palm traditions, the Six Books apocryphon and the other Bethlehem narratives that are descended from it appear to have been largely confined to the Christian East. Whereas the Palm traditions spread rather quickly to the west and became the basis for Western Christianity's traditions of Mary's Dormition and Assumption, this alternative account of the Virgin's departure from this world does not seem to have made much of an impact in the Christian occident. The only exception would appear to be a Latin translation of the Ps.-John *Transitus* that survives in a single fourteenth-century manuscript from Florence.²⁶ This late and isolated witness to the Bethlehem

Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 51. Ps.-John's dependence on the earlier Six Books narrative has been compellingly demonstrated by Maximilian Bonnet, "Die ältesten Schriften von der Himmelfahrt Mariä," *Zeitschrift für Wissenschaftliche Theologie* 23 (1880): 227-47. See also van Esbroeck, "Les textes littéraires," 269-75; Édouard Cothenet, "Marie dans les Apocryphes," in *Maria: études sur la Sainte Vierge*, ed. Hubert Du Manoir de Juaye, 8 vols. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1949-71), 6 (1952): 71-156, 119. Regarding the liturgical usage of the Ps.-John *Transitus*, see Simon C. Mimouni, "La lecture liturgique et les apocryphes du Nouveau Testament: Le cas de la Dormitio grecque du Pseudo-Jean," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 59 (1993): 403-25.

²⁴ Wenger, *L'Assomption*, 17; van Esbroeck, "Les textes littéraires," 266-9; Aurelio de Santos Otero, *Die handschriftliche Überlieferung der altslavischen Apokryphen*, 2 vols., Patristische Texte und Studien 20 & 23 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978-81), 2:161-95.

²⁵ van Esbroeck, "Les textes littéraires," 269.

²⁶ André Wilmart, *Analecta reginensia: Extraits des manuscrits latins de la reine Christine conservés au Vatican*, Studi e Testi, 59 (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica Vaticana, 1933), 357-62.

traditions in the West is indeed an anomaly that merely confirms the absence of these traditions otherwise from the Western Marian tradition.

The Bethlehem tradition's main narrative differences from the Palm tradition involve Mary's departure from her house in Jerusalem for a brief sojourn in Bethlehem, where she also owns a house, just prior to her death.²⁷ In response to threats against her from the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem, Mary departs for Bethlehem together with three virgins who were living with her, and there the apostles miraculously join her, conveyed swiftly on flying clouds from the various regions in which they were preaching. While in Bethlehem, Mary works numerous miracles, eventually drawing the attention of the Jews. When the Jews determine to come against her in Bethlehem, enlisting by threats the Roman governor's aid, the Holy Spirit warns Mary and the apostles and transfers them miraculously through the air back to the Virgin's house in Jerusalem. Then, after a Jewish plot to eliminate Mary and the apostles by burning down her Jerusalem house literally backfires, the events of the Dormition ensue, as Christ descends to receive his mother's soul and transfer it to the heavenly realms, in similar fashion to the Palm narratives.

Both of these early Dormition narratives conclude with the Virgin's apocalyptic tour of the cosmos, an episode that more recent versions tend to omit. Although this other-worldly journey does not find a place in the later biographies of the Virgin, these traditions should perhaps also be counted among the efforts of the early Christians to tell the story of the Virgin's life. There are two rather distinct versions of this ancient Marian apocalypse, one that completes the earliest Palm narratives and another that concludes the Six Books apocryphon, both of which follow the Virgin on a trip through the heavenly realms after her death and resurrection, guided by

²⁷ See esp. William Wright, "The Departure of My Lady Mary from This World," *The Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* 6-7 (1865): 417-448 and 108-160; and Constantin Tischendorf, *Apocalypses apocryphae Mosi, Esdrae, Pauli, Johannis, item Mariae dormito: additis evangeliorum et actuum apocryphorum supplementis. Maxima pars nunc primum* (Leipzig: H. Mendelssohn, 1866), 95-110.

her son.²⁸ In both narratives, Mary eventually journeys to visit the places of the damned, and there, in what amounts to a particularly early witness to belief in Mary's intercessory powers, the Virgin effectively pleads with her son to secure his mercy on their behalf.²⁹ After reaching the very presence of the Father, Mary is then returned to the garden of Paradise, where she awaits the final judgment. Presumably, the excision of these cosmic tours from later Dormition narratives (and thus the *Lives of the Virgin*) reflects the eventual emergence of the *Apocalypse of the Virgin* as a separate tradition in the East, and the popularity in the West of the *Apocalypse of Paul*, an early Christian apocalypse whose dependence on the visionary conclusion of the earliest Palm Dormition narratives has not yet been fully recognized.³⁰

So far, however, each of these early Christian writings has treated only a small slice of the Virgin's life, without any signs of an impulse to relate the events of her life from start to finish. The first such efforts to compile a complete *Life* of the Virgin appear to be reflected in the fifth and sixth-century Syriac manuscripts that preserve the earliest extant versions of the Six Books Dormition narrative. The oldest of these manuscripts

²⁸ So far, the only significant study of these Dormition apocalypses is Richard Bauckham, "The Four Apocalypses of the Virgin Mary," in *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 93 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 332-62.

²⁹ See *Liber Requiei* 90-100 (Arras, *De transitu*, 1:53-9 [Eth] and 35-38 [Lat]); William Wright, ed. and trans., *Contributions to the Apocryphal Literature of the New Testament* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1865), 60-1 (Syr) and 47-8 (Eng); Eng. trans., Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 341-46; Charles Donahue, ed., *The Testament of Mary: The Gaelic Version of the Dormitio Mariae together with an Irish Latin Version* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1942), 52-5; Máire Herbert and Martin McNamara, eds., *Irish Biblical Apocrypha: Selected Text in Translation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 130; Wright, "Departure of My Lady Mary," 49 (Syr) and 159 (Eng).

³⁰ On the *Apocalypse of the Virgin*, see now Jane Baun, *Tales from Another Byzantium: Celestial Journey and Local Community in the Medieval Greek Apocrypha* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). On the relation between the *Apocalypse of Paul* and the apocalypse of the early Palm Dormition narratives, see Bauckham, "Four Apocalypses of the Virgin," 344-6; Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 42-6; and Cothenet, "Marie dans les Apocryphes," 6:127-9.

is a fragmentary fifth-century palimpsest that juxtaposes the *Protevangelium of James* with the Six Books apocryphon, bringing together in one volume the earliest Christian traditions of Mary's birth and death.³¹ It seems likely that the purpose of this manuscript was to combine the two most important Marian narratives of early Christianity into a sort of "proto-life" of the Virgin Mary. Other similar collections, reflected in two sixth-century Syriac manuscripts, would add to this sketch of Mary's life the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, presumably including this early Christian apocryphon as the only available source of information about the life of the Holy Family prior to Jesus' ministry.³²

Although these early initiatives in Marian biography survive only in Syriac, it is almost certain that in late antiquity similar biographical manuscripts of Marian apocrypha were circulating in Greek. As much is indicated in particular by the so-called *Tübingen Theosophy*, an apologetic text composed around 500, whose contents are now known only from Byzantine epitome.³³ This summary indicates that the *Theosophy's* author made use of several apocrypha texts, including a work identified as γεννήσεως καὶ ἀναλήψεως τῆς ἀχράντου δεσποίνης ἡμῶν θεοτόκου, "the birth and assumption of our lady the immaculate Theotokos."³⁴ Most likely, this title refers to a similar compilation of the *Protevangelium* and the Six Books (perhaps including the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*?) that was circulating in Greek as well as Syriac translation by the later fifth century. These early collections of Marian apocrypha, it

³¹ Published in Agnes Smith Lewis, ed. and trans., *Apocrypha Syriaca*, Studia Sinaitica 11 (London: C. J. Clay and Sons, 1902).

³² One of these manuscripts has been published in Wright, *Contributions to the Apocryphal Literature* (*Protevangelium of James* and *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*); and Wright, "Departure of My Lady Mary" (the Six Books). The other manuscript is an unpublished sixth-century manuscript in the Göttingen collection that I am preparing for publication.

³³ Pier Franco Beatrice, "Traditions apocryphes dans la *Théosophie de Tübingen*," *Apocrypha* 7 (1996): 109-22; idem, "Pagan Wisdom and Christian Theology according to the *Tübingen Theosophy*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1994): 403-18.

³⁴ *Tübingen Theosophy* 4, in *Theosophorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, ed. Hartmut Erbse (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1995, 2-3).

seems, were the first efforts to codify the Virgin's biography, and they provided an important skeleton for the more complete narratives of Mary's life that would follow, including especially the earliest such *Life of the Virgin*, a seventh-century text surviving only in Georgian that is ascribed to Maximus the Confessor.

Although it has been long overlooked by scholars of early and medieval Christianity, this first complete biography of the Virgin has recently emerged as a pivotal text for understanding the rise of Marian piety and the Virgin's central importance in Christian theology and practice. Among the most eloquent and profound Mariological writings of the ancient church, this earliest *Life of the Virgin* represents a true watershed in the history of Marian literature. The *Life* gathers the Marian traditions of antiquity and moulds them into a comprehensive biography of the Virgin that served as the template for numerous Marian compositions of the Middle Ages. Presumably, a primary reason for the neglect of this important text is its survival only in Old Georgian, a language often vital for its translations of early Christian texts that do not otherwise survive but unfortunately known by very few scholars of ancient Christianity.

According to its manuscript tradition, this earliest *Life of the Virgin* was composed by Maximus the Confessor. Nevertheless, lingering doubts about this attribution seem to have partly contributed to the *Life's* neglect in modern scholarship. Korneli Kekelidze, one of the earliest and most influential scholars of Georgian ecclesiastical literature, first discovered this text in the early twentieth century, and from the beginning he expressed skepticism regarding the authenticity of its attribution to Maximus the Confessor. Kekelidze suggests that this *Life of the Virgin* was probably ascribed to Maximus sometime after his death in order to rehabilitate him against charges brought forth at his trial that he had somehow slandered the Virgin Mary.³⁵ More recently, however, Michel van Esbroeck,

³⁵ Korneli Kekelidze, ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორია (*K'art'uli literaturis istoria [History of Georgian Literature]*), 1st ed., 2 vols., vol. 1, *Zveli mcerloba* (Tbilisi: Gamomc'emi T'oma Č'ik'vnaia, 1923), 192-4. In the most recent edition, Korneli Kekelidze, ძველი ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორია (*Zveli k'art'uli literaturis*

one of the most important scholars of Old Georgian literature since Kekelidze and a specialist on early traditions about the Virgin Mary, has argued that Kekelidze was much too quick in his dismissal of the *Life's* attribution. In several publications, including his critical edition and French translation of the *Life of the Virgin*, van Esbroeck presents an excellent (although by no means decisive) case for the authenticity of *Life's* attribution to Maximus.³⁶

Unfortunately, despite van Esbroeck's impressive work on this text, it has been largely disregarded both by scholars of Marian piety and by many experts on Maximus the Confessor. As a result, some confusion exists concerning the *Life of the Virgin's* authorship. While some scholars of Maximus have ignored the text altogether,³⁷ others have begun to make provisional use of the *Life* as an authentic work of Maximus in

istoria [History of Old Georgian Literature], 5th ed., 2 vols. (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 1980), 1:195-7, esp. 197 n. 1 (this note is not in the first edition). Note that Michael Tarchnišvili, *Geschichte der kirchlichen georgischen Literatur, auf Grund des ersten Bandes der georgischen Literaturgeschichte von K. Kekelidze*, Studi e testi 185 (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca apostolica vaticana, 1955), 133-4, which is based on the 2nd ed. of Kekelidze's history, fails to translate the final section of Kekelidze's entry, and thus does not include or reproduce his remarks concerning the *Life's* attribution to Maximus. See also Korneli Kekeliže, "Сведения грузинских источников о преподобном Максиме Исповеднике (Svedenija gruzinskikh istochnikov o prepodobnom Maksime Ispovednike [Information from Georgian Sources concerning the Venerable Maximus the Confessor])," *Труды Киевской духовной академии (Trudy Kievskoj dukhovnoj akademii)* sentjabr-nojabr (1912): 1-41, 451-86; I have consulted the reprint of this article in Korneli Kekeliže, *ეტიუდეები ძველი ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორიიდან (Etiudebi žveli k'art'uli literaturis istoriidan [Studies in the History of Old Georgian Literature])*, vol. 7 (Tbilisi: Sak'art'velos SSR mec'nierebat'a akademiis gamomc'emloba, 1967), 14-54; here at pp. 35-6, Kekelidze seems initially to allow the possibility that the work is authentic.

³⁶ Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*, ed. Michel van Esbroeck, 2 vols., CSCO 478-479, Scriptores Iberici, 21-22 (Lovanii: E. Peeters, 1986); Michel van Esbroeck, "Euthyme l'Hagiorite: le traducteur et ses traductions," *Revue des études géorgiennes et caucasiennes* 4 (1988): 73-107; van Esbroeck, "Some Earlier Features."

³⁷ Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, Early Church Fathers (London: Routledge, 1996); Andrew Louth, "Recent Research on St Maximus the Confessor: A Survey," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 42 (1998): 67-84; Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Open Court, 1995).

their studies of his thought.³⁸ The *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*, for its part, identifies the *Life of the Virgin* among the authentic works of Maximus, but the issue remains unsettled.³⁹ Regardless of its authorship, however, this text is widely recognized as the earliest complete biography of the Virgin Mary,⁴⁰ and as van Esbroeck and I have both demonstrated, this *Life of the Virgin* was almost certainly written during the seventh century either in Constantinople or its immediate vicinity.⁴¹ Even in the event that Maximus is not the *Life's* author, the text itself remains indispensable for understanding the formation of Marian piety during the early Christian period and the transmission of these beliefs and practices to the medieval church. While the question of the *Life's* authorship remains important, uncertainties in this area should in no way preclude study and interpretation of the text by scholars of late ancient and medieval Christianity. This oldest Marian biography merits in its own right significant study within the broader context of the history of Christianity.

Following some initial praises in the Virgin's honor, the *Life* begins by naming several of its main sources, which include, in addition to the evangelists and apostles, the "holy and pious Fathers," among whom the author names Gregory

³⁸ Aidan Nichols, *Byzantine Gospel: Maximus the Confessor in Modern Scholarship* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 111-19; Jean-Claude Larchet, *La divinisation de l'homme selon saint Maxime le Confesseur*, Cogitatio fidei, 194 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1996); Jean-Claude Larchet, *Maxime le Confesseur, médiateur entre l'Orient et l'Occident*, Cogitatio fidei, 208 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1998).

³⁹ Maurice Geerard et al., *Clavis Patrum Graecorum: Supplementum*, Corpus Christianorum (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 440, #7712.

⁴⁰ Maurice Geerard, *Clavis apocryphorum Novi Testamenti*, Corpus Christianorum (Turnhout: Brepols, 1992), 71; Simon C. Mimouni, "Les Vies de la Vierge: État de la question," *Apocrypha* 5 (1994): 211-48.

⁴¹ Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*, ed. van Esbroeck; van Esbroeck, "Some Earlier Features"; Stephen J. Shoemaker, "The Virgin Mary in the Ministry of Jesus and the Early Church according to the Earliest *Life of the Virgin*," *Harvard Theological Review* 98, no. 4 (2005): 441-67; Stephen J. Shoemaker, "The Georgian Life of the Virgin Attributed to Maximus the Confessor: Its Authenticity (?) and Importance," in *Mémorial R. P. Michel van Esbroeck, S.J.*, ed. Alexey Muraviev and Basil Lourié, *Scrinium* 2 (St. Petersburg: Vizantinorossika, 2006), 307-28; Stephen J. Shoemaker, "The Cult of Fashion: The Earliest *Life of the Virgin* and Constantinople's Marian Relics," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 62 (2009): forthcoming.

the Thaumaturge, Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and Dionysius the Areopagite, among others, presumably referring to various pseudonymous Marian homilies and other writings ascribed to these figures.⁴² In addition, the *Life's* author explains that he has taken "some things from apocryphal writings, namely, that which is true and without error and which has been accepted and confirmed by the above-mentioned holy fathers."⁴³ Gregory of Nyssa's *Homily on the Nativity* provides the patristic warrant for such use of apocrypha, as the author notes its positive reference to the *Protevangelium*, one of the *Life's* main sources.⁴⁴ The *Life* also makes very liberal use of the ancient Dormition apocrypha in its final section, fashioning what appears to be the first effort to synthesize the divergent early traditions that were circulating in late antiquity. Nevertheless, the *Life's* author forcefully rejects the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, insisting that Christ worked no miracles between his arrival in Nazareth and his baptism, declaring further that this apocryphon is "not to be received, because it is alien to the order of the Church and an enemy of the sayings of the holy evangelists and an opponent of the truth that was composed by some foolish men and storytellers."⁴⁵ This judgment is not entirely surprising, given the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas's* rather mischievous portrait of the boy Jesus, whose often malicious behavior, unlike that of other children, could not so easily be ascribed to humanity's inherent sinfulness. Such explicit rejection of "the book that is called the Childhood of Christ" together with prolific use of the *Protevangelium*

⁴² Concerning these pseudonymous homilies, see esp. Roberto Caro, *La Homiletica Mariana Griega en el Siglo V* (in 3 parts), *Marian Library Studies*, New Series, 3-5 (Dayton, OH: University of Dayton, 1971-73), 4:353-9, 380-8, 452-67, 481-522, 533-67, 604-10.

⁴³ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin 2* (Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*, ed. van Esbroeck, 4 [Geor] & 3 [Fr]).

⁴⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homily on the Nativity*, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, ed. Ernestus Rhein et al., vol. 10.2, *Gregorii Nysenii Sermones, Pars III* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 235-69 (the quoted passage is on p. 252), cited at Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin 2* (Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*, ed. van Esbroeck, 4 [Geor] & 3 [Fr]).

⁴⁵ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin 62* (Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*, ed. van Esbroeck, 78 [Geor] and 52 [Fr]).

and the early Dormition apocrypha are likely indicators that the *Life's* author was aware of the earlier "proto-Lives" of the Virgin that had gathered these three apocrypha together: quite probably, his decision to deliberately exclude and condemn the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* reflects his awareness that others before him had proposed its inclusion to fill in the gaps of Mary's biography.

The Maximus *Life's* narrative begins with the story of Mary's parents and her miraculous conception, taken from the *Protevangelium*, and the Virgin's dedication to the Temple inspires an extended Marian exegesis of Psalm 44 (LXX). Then, after her betrothal to Joseph, here again according to the account from the *Protevangelium*, Mary and her new husband travel from Jerusalem to Nazareth.⁴⁶ At this point the *Life* turns to the canonical gospels, relating the events of the Annunciation through a protracted line-by-line exegesis of Luke 1.28-56, followed by an account of the Nativity that is built from a composite of the Lukan and Matthean infancy narratives, interspersed with copious theological reflection.⁴⁷ The Presentation in the Temple ensues, with particular attention to Symeon's prophecy, followed by the Flight into Egypt, here made from Nazareth, in an effort to reconcile the different accounts from Matthew and Luke.⁴⁸ The period between Christ's infancy and his ministry is bridged by Luke's brief notice of the trip to Jerusalem when he was twelve and remained behind to teach in the Temple. Excepting this episode, however, the *Life* otherwise invokes a shroud of silence over the period of Christ's youth, rejecting emphatically, as already noted, the traditions of the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Mary, the *Life* explains, knew full well the significance of the child that she had birthed and was raising, and had been his first "disciple" from the very beginning. Nevertheless, all the things that he did and said as a child "she treasured in her heart" (Luke 2.51) and did not make them known.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 3-18 (ibid., 4-20 [Geor] and 3-14 [Fr]).

⁴⁷ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 19-46 (ibid., 20-56 [Geor] and 14-38 [Fr]).

⁴⁸ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 46-59 (ibid., 57-74 [Geor] and 38-50 [Fr]).

⁴⁹ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 61-2 (ibid., 76-8 [Geor] and 51-2 [Fr]).

Christ's baptism follows, an event from which his mother, following the canonical gospels, is predictably absent, as she is also during his forty day sojourn in the desert. When Christ then returns to Galilee, now with several disciples, he begins his public ministry, and the Virgin Mary is there from the start, at Cana of Galilee. The ensuing narrative of Jesus' public ministry is remarkable partly for its brevity, but also for the fact that it brings Mary and other women to the fore at seemingly every opportunity.⁵⁰ Here the *Life* makes numerous expansions on the canonical gospels that are (to my knowledge) unprecedented in Christian apocryphal literature. Although the origins of these traditions are not entirely clear, and they may simply be the work of the *Life's* author, it is certainly possible that they reflect now lost apocryphal traditions about Mary that once circulated in late antiquity. During Christ's ministry, Mary remains constantly at her son's side and is portrayed as having a uniquely authoritative knowledge of his teachings. She is identified as the leader of those women who followed Christ, and occasionally they are named as being Mary's, rather than Christ's, disciples. "Just as the Lord was the leader of the twelve disciples and then the seventy," the *Life* explains, "she led the other women who followed him as a holy mother. As the holy gospel says, 'There were also many women there who followed Jesus from Galilee and provided for him.' The holy Theotokos was the leader and guardian of them all."⁵¹ Even at the Last Supper, the Virgin takes charge of the female disciples during the sacred meal, serving in a parallel fashion to her son at the institution of this sacrament.⁵²

The Virgin plays a slightly different role in the events of the Passion, to which she is the unique witness: when all of the other disciples flee, Mary alone remains constantly with her son from his arrest through his burial and resurrection. Consequently, Mary is the sole authority for most of what the gospel writers report about the final day of Jesus' life, and their collective

⁵⁰ See esp. Shoemaker, "Virgin Mary in the Ministry of Jesus."

⁵¹ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 74 (Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*, ed. van Esbroeck, 94-5 [Geor] and 63-4 [Fr]).

⁵² Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 74 (ibid., 95 [Geor] and 64 [Fr]).

testimony in fact depends on what the Virgin had taught them.⁵³ Although a handful of Christ's followers are present for the crucifixion itself, as indicated in the canonical gospels, eventually they flee in terror, leaving Mary alone to bury her son. Enlisting Joseph of Arimathea's help, she secures the body from Pilate, and together with Nicodemus, they place him in the tomb.⁵⁴ These others soon depart, however, and Mary alone keeps a constant vigil at the grave. There she beholds the Resurrection itself, unlike Mary of Magdala and the other myrrh-bearing women, who merely find an empty tomb, and the Virgin, rather than the Magdalene, is the first to preach the good news of the resurrection to her son's disciples.⁵⁵ Yet the Virgin's true role in all of this was deliberately suppressed by the gospel writers, the *Life* explains, because they feared that some might "take as reason for disbelief that the vision of the resurrection was reported by the mother."⁵⁶ Thanks to the success of their strategy, the *Life's* author could finally set the record straight.

Mary's leadership role continues even after her son's Ascension, as she assumes a position of authority within the early church, directing the apostles in their prayers and their preaching.⁵⁷ Although she initially set off with John to serve in the mission field, she is turned back by a divine command "to lead the people of faith and to direct the church of Jerusalem with James the brother of the Lord, who had been appointed as bishop there."⁵⁸ Leadership of the nascent church thus remains within Christ's family, as it is shared by his mother and his brother, who direct the church in tandem. But his mother in particular is singled out as the one who directs the apostles in their ministries, offering them spiritual guidance as well as teaching them how and what they should preach.⁵⁹ Mary's

⁵³ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 76 (ibid., 97 [Geor] and 65 [Fr]).

⁵⁴ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 86-90 (ibid., 110-16 [Geor] and 74-8 [Fr]).

⁵⁵ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 91-2 (ibid., 116-19 [Geor] and 78-81 [Fr]).

⁵⁶ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 92 (ibid., 119-20 [Geor] and 81 [Fr]).

⁵⁷ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 94, 96 (ibid., 122, 124 [Geor] and 82, 84 [Fr]).

⁵⁸ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 98 (ibid., 127 [Geor] and 86 [Fr]).

⁵⁹ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 99 (ibid., 129 [Geor] and 87 [Fr]).

maternal bond with the Savior and her unique understanding of Christ's person and teaching endow her with an unparalleled authority according to this Marian vision of Christianity's origins. In this way the *Life* brings special focus to Mary's maternal relationship with her son, a theme often characterized as belonging only to later centuries.

Coming to the end of Mary's life, we find that here, as in the beginning, the *Life's* author has made liberal use of apocryphal traditions. In what amounts to one of the most remarkable Dormition narratives to come down from the ancient church, this *Life of the Virgin* effectively combines for the first time the diverse accounts of the early Dormition apocrypha into a synthetic description of Mary's departure from this world that represents the full panoply of traditions that had entered into circulation by the early seventh century.⁶⁰ Drawing from a Greek version of the Six Books apocryphon and what was presumably an early Greek descendant of the *Liber Requiei*, the *Life's* author successfully merges the rather distinct narratives of the Palm and Bethlehem traditions, adding to this composite certain references to the Virgin's Dormition from the Dionysiac corpus⁶¹ as well as the emergent traditions of her relics.⁶² Among the latter stand the so-called "late-apostle" traditions, according to which one of the apostles (in some instances Thomas) arrives too late for the Virgin's death and burial.⁶³

⁶⁰ See esp. Shoemaker, "Georgian Life of the Virgin," 320-6.

⁶¹ See Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 107 (Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*, ed. van Esbroeck, 137 [Geor] and 93 [Fr]). The passage in question is Ps.-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names* 3.2, in *Corpus Dionysiacum*, ed. Beate Regina Suchla, 2 vols., vol. 1, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite De divinis nominibus*, Patristische Texte und Studien 33 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), 141. The fact that Maximus the Confessor, who is the first to comment on this text, identifies this passage as a reference to the Dormition certainly does not hurt the case for his authorship: Maximus the Confessor, *Scholia on the Divine Names* (PG 4, 236C).

⁶² On the relic traditions of the Maximus *Life of the Virgin* and their significance for understanding the early history of these relics, see Shoemaker, "The Cult of Fashion."

⁶³ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 116-18 (Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*, ed. van Esbroeck, 149-52 [Geor] and 101-3 [Fr]). Concerning the late-apostle traditions, see Shoemaker, "The Cult of Fashion," and Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 67-71.

Wishing to venerate the Virgin one last time, this delayed apostle asks his brothers to open the Virgin's tomb so that he too may pay his final respects. His pious request leads the apostles to discover that Mary's remains had vanished from her tomb and had been miraculously transferred into the heavenly realms. All that remained behind were her funeral wrappings and shroud, important Marian relics that played a central role in Byzantine piety and were often identified with the sacred garments binding the Theotokos to her favored city, the imperial capital, Constantinople.

Alongside the late-apostle traditions, the *Life of the Virgin* also includes a rather different set of relic traditions that had developed independently of the early Dormition traditions, namely, the story of Galbios and Kandidos and their pious theft of Mary's garment. These traditions, which appear to have emerged during the later fifth century, are associated especially with the Virgin's shrine at Blachernai in Constantinople, and they offer an alternative understanding of the shrine's relic and its origin.⁶⁴ According to this early legend, Constantinople's revered Marian garment was not a funeral shroud but a somewhat generic article of Mary's clothing that two retired generals, Galbios and Kandidos, had stolen from an unsuspecting Jewish woman in Galilee while on pilgrimage in the Holy Land. Finally, the *Life* also makes passing reference to the Virgin's girdle, a relic that was revered in Constantinople at the church of Chalkoprateia.⁶⁵ In contrast to the previous two relic traditions, which were already well established by the time of the *Life's* composition, this would appear to be the first known reference to Mary's girdle, whose history prior to the *Life of the Virgin* remains something of a mystery. On the whole, in comparison with the *Life's* careful synthesis of Dormition narratives, its author makes little effort to harmonize these divergent

⁶⁴ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 119-24 (Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*, ed. van Esbroeck, 152-60 [Geor] and 103-9 [Fr]). The Greek text was published in Wenger, *L'Assomption*, 294-303. See also the discussion of these traditions in Wenger, *L'Assomption*, 113-36, and Shoemaker, "The Cult of Fashion."

⁶⁵ Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 124 (Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*, ed. van Esbroeck, 160-1 [Geor] and 109 [Fr]).

relic traditions, and such treatment of the Marian relic traditions is one among many indicators this biography was composed sometime during the early seventh century, almost certainly in Constantinople or its immediate vicinity.

The influence of this Maximus *Life of the Virgin* on the later Byzantine tradition was considerable, and the full extent of its impact still remains to be explored. The *Life's* absence from Greek has made its importance easy to overlook, and yet it is almost certainly a direct consequence of this very influence that the earliest *Life of the Virgin* has not survived in the language of its composition: presumably, it was displaced by the more recent biographies of Mary that it inspired. Indeed, many of the most important and influential Marian narratives from the Middle Byzantine period bear the strong imprint of this seventh-century biography. One important exception, however, is the second oldest *Life of the Virgin*, written by Epiphanius the Monk around the turn of the ninth century, which appears to be independent of the Maximus *Life*.⁶⁶ Epiphanius identifies among the sources of his brief *Life* the *Protevangelium*, the homilies on the Dormition by John of Thessalonica and Andrew of Crete, and the *Transitus* of Ps.-John but not the Maximus *Life of the Virgin*.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, in contrast its predecessor, Epiphanius' *Life of the Virgin* seems to have exercised almost no influence on the subsequent tradition of Marian biography, which stands deeply indebted to the Maximus *Life of the Virgin*.

One of the most important Middle Byzantine authors to make extensive use of the Maximus *Life of the Virgin* was George of Nicomedia, whose late ninth-century homilies on the Passion have often been acclaimed for their innovative and transformative influence on medieval Marian art and devotion. Nevertheless, like many other works of this period, George's homilies can now be seen as being largely derivative of this earliest biography of the Virgin from the seventh century. For

⁶⁶ Epiphanius the Monk, *Life of the Virgin* (PG 120, 185-216). On Epiphanius the Monk, see Alexander Kazhdan, *A History of Byzantine Literature, 650-850* (Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, Institute for Byzantine Research, 1999), 307, 396-7.

⁶⁷ Epiphanius the Monk, *Life of the Virgin* (PG 120, 185-8).

instance, among George's supposed innovations is his focus on Mary's role as Christ's human mother, a theme that is believed to have first emerged only in the wake of the Iconoclast controversies, when Mary's divine maternity was newly imagined to have afforded her special authority within her son's ministry and the early church. Owing particularly to George of Nicomedia's influence, so it has been argued, Mary's "motherly aspect" became increasingly important in Byzantine devotion from this time on. Ioli Kalavrezou explains this change as consequent to the defeat of Iconoclasm, proposing that a renewed emphasis on Christ's humanity during this period can account for a parallel emphasis on Mary's humanity and the human relationship between mother and son. In a highly influential study, she charts a transition in art and literature according to which the regal, imposing image of Mary as the Theotokos from earlier centuries gives way to a new representation beginning in the ninth century, which portrays the Virgin as an "ordinary woman" and highlights the "intimacy between mother and child" and their "emotional interplay." From this point Mary's motherly affections are increasingly depicted in eastern iconography, so that rather than appearing "detached and imperturbable," she gazes tenderly upon her son, whom she lovingly embraces in her arms.⁶⁸

This new perspective is credited with marking the beginnings of a major shift toward the "affective piety" of the middle ages, evident especially in the tradition of Mary's laments at the foot of the cross. George of Nicomedia is once again identified as the revolutionary figure who first retold the events of the Passion from the Virgin's point of view, placing the mother's relationship with her son at the center of each event.⁶⁹ Although the rudimentary elements of this literary genre are said to have

⁶⁸ Ioli Kalavrezou, "Images of the Mother: When the Virgin Mary Became the *Meter Theou*," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 44 (1990): 165-72, esp. 165, 172. See also Niki Tsironis, "The Lament of the Virgin Mary from Romanos the Melode to George of Nicomedia" (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1998), 215-20, 243; Henry Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 97.

⁶⁹ Tsironis, "Lament of the Virgin Mary," 241-91; Niki Tsironis, "George of Nicomedia: Convention and Originality in the Homily on Good Friday," *Studia Patristica* 33 (1997): 573-77; idem, "From Poetry to Liturgy: The Cult of the Virgin in the Middle

existed in an "embryonic state" prior the Iconoclast period, George's homilies on the Passion have been hailed as a "landmark" in the development of Marian lament, which marks the true beginning of this literary tradition. Suddenly, the human sufferings of Christ's mother caught the imagination of her devotees and transformed the nature of Marian piety: George's homilies dramatically portray the Virgin's sufferings with great emotion, inviting the audience to experience the events of the Passion for themselves by witnessing them through a mother's eyes. The impact of these homilies on the later Orthodox tradition was extensive: in the monastic liturgy they were quickly adopted as readings for Holy Friday,⁷⁰ and they are alleged to have exercised considerable influence on subsequent Marian art and literature.⁷¹ In fact, a medieval hymn still in use for the

Byzantine Period," in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 91-102, 97-8; Maria Vassilaki and Niki Tsironis, "Representations of the Virgin and Their Association with the Passion of Christ," in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Milan: Skira, 2000), 453-63, 457-61; Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium*, 97-9; Kalavrezou, "Images of the Mother," 169-70; Margaret Alexiou, "The Lament of the Virgin in Byzantine Literature and Modern Greek Folk Song," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 1 (1975): 111-40, 121.

⁷⁰ Charles Barber, "The Monastic Typikon for Art Historians," in *The Monastery of the Theotokos Evergetis and Eleventh-Century Monasticism*, ed. Margaret Mullet and Anthony Kirby, Belfast Byzantine Texts and Translations 6.1 (Belfast: Belfast Byzantine Enterprises, School of Greek, Roman and Semitic Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast, 1994), 198-214, 204-5. See also the list of manuscripts containing the homily in Tsironis, "Lament of the Virgin Mary," 308-10.

⁷¹ See esp. Demetrios I. Pallas, *Die Passion und Bestattung Christi in Byzanz: der Ritus, das Bild* (Munich: Institut für Byzantinistik und neugriechische Philologie der Universität, 1965), 30-1; R. Cormack, "Painting after Iconoclasm," in *Iconoclasm: Papers Given at the Ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies at the University of Birmingham*, ed. A. Bryer and J. Herrin (Birmingham: Centre of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, 1977), 147-63, esp. 151-3; Henry Maguire, "The Depiction of Sorrow in Middle Byzantine Art," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 31 (1977): 125-74, esp. 161-3; Hans Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter: Form und Funktion früher Bildtafeln der Passion* (Berlin: Mann, 1981), 146-56; Hans Belting, *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Ages: Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion*, trans. Mark Bartusis and Raymond Meyer (New Rochelle, N.Y.: A. D. Caratzas, 1990), 96-100; Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium*, 91-108; Barber, "The Monastic Typikon," 204-5; Kalavrezou, "Images of the Mother," esp. 169-70; Vassilaki and Tsironis, "Representations of the Virgin," 457-61.

service of the Burial of the Lord in the Orthodox churches repeats almost verbatim certain lines from the Virgin's lamentations in George's homilies.⁷²

The Maximus *Life of the Virgin*, however, has now been identified as the actual source of George's supposed innovations. Many of the most influential ideas and rhetoric from George's homilies are not in fact his own but rather were borrowed from this late ancient *Life of the Virgin*, whose contents he has only lightly reworked.⁷³ By consequence, this means that many of the alleged hallmarks of medieval Byzantine devotion, which for a generation have been viewed as marking a rupture with the piety of late antiquity, are in fact elements of the late ancient cult of the Virgin, attested by this seventh-century biography. The emphasis on Mary's maternal relationship with her son, her affectionate devotion to him, and her painful travails at his death are not the product of the Iconophile triumph, but rather these family ties formed part of the basic grammar of late antique piety. Like the Christians of the Middle Ages, late ancient Christians similarly expressed their devotion through reflection on the emotional bonds between Mary and her son. Mary's divine maternity had already suggested to them her privileged status within the early community, and her inconceivable sufferings at witnessing her son's crucifixion helped late ancient believers to imagine the horrible events for themselves. And the witness of Mary's maternity to Christ's true humanity was certainly not a discovery born of the Iconoclast controversy. Such maternal piety apparently had already blossomed by the seventh century, as evidenced by the Maximus *Life of the Virgin*.

Likewise, as van Esbroeck was the first to discover, the tenth-century *Lives* of the Virgin by John the Geometer and

⁷² Vassilaki and Tsironis, "Representations of the Virgin," 457; see also Tsironis, "Lament of the Virgin Mary," 279, 292.

⁷³ See Stephen J. Shoemaker, "A Mother's Passion: Mary's Role in the Crucifixion and Resurrection in the Earliest Life of the Virgin and Its Influence on George of Nicomedia's Passion Homilies," in *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Mary Cunningham (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), forthcoming. See also Shoemaker, "Virgin Mary in the Ministry of Jesus," esp. 458-60.

Symeon the Metaphrast are both deeply dependent on this seventh-century *Life of the Virgin*. Scholars had long recognized a literary relationship between these two tenth-century *Lives*, often debating as to which author had made use of the other,⁷⁴ but van Esbroeck's publication of this Georgian *Life* has now resolved the problem by identifying their common source, which each author seems to have made use of independently.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, John the Geometer's *Life of the Virgin* has yet to be published in its entirety, and only its concluding section, which treats the Virgin's Dormition and the traditions of her relics, has been published by Antoine Wenger.⁷⁶ Although van Esbroeck had prepared an edition of this important text, which was to appear in the *Sources chrétiennes* series, its whereabouts are currently unknown, and with his untimely passing, it seems unlikely that an edition will be forthcoming any time in the near future.⁷⁷ Consequently, it is somewhat difficult at present to compare the Maximus *Life* with the full extent of John the Geometer's biography: for this we must rely largely on the excerpts from the Bollandists' copy of the Genoa manuscript of this text published in Jean Galot's article on Mary's role as *coredemptrix* in John's *Life*,⁷⁸ as well as the observations of

⁷⁴ See, e.g., the divergent opinions in Martin Jugie, "Sur la vie et les procédés littéraires de Syméon Métaphraste. Son récit de la vie de la Sainte Vierge," *Échos d'Orient* 22 (1923): 5-10; Martin Jugie, *La mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge, étude historico-doctrinale*, Studi e testi 114 (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944), 320; Wenger, *L'Assomption*, 193-5.

⁷⁵ Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*, ed. van Esbroeck, 2:xix-xxix; cf. Shoemaker, "Georgian Life of the Virgin"; Shoemaker, "Virgin Mary in the Ministry of Jesus," 460-65.

⁷⁶ Wenger, *L'Assomption*, 364-415.

⁷⁷ Michel van Esbroeck himself showed me the completed edition of this text at his home in Louvain-la-Neuve in August 2003, just before his passing. He said that he wanted to compare his translation one more time with the Latin translation by Balthasar Cordier before publishing the text (*Bibliotheca Bollandiana* 196, f. 59-182v; see *ibid.*, 187-8). Efforts to locate the edition among Fr. Michel's various computer files have proven unsuccessful. Presumably, the hard copy of his edition can be found with the rest of his papers and his library, which I understand were taken to the Bollandist library after his death.

⁷⁸ J. Galot, "La plus ancienne affirmation de la corédemption mariale: Le témoignage de Jean le Géomètre," *Recherches de science religieuse* 45 (1957): 187-208.

van Esbroeck, who edited both texts.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, comparison of the published final section makes it quite clear that John the Geometer's *Life of the Virgin* is largely derivative of the seventh-century *Life* ascribed to Maximus. The borrowings are unmistakable, and simple chronology excludes the possibility that the Maximus *Life* depends on John the Geometer's text.⁸⁰ Moreover, various passages from the Maximus *Life* that appear in John's biography but are lacking from Symeon's metaphrase ensure that John's biography has drawn independently on this seventh-century source. It is not entirely clear, however, whether Symeon may have made use of John the Geometer's *Life of the Virgin* when preparing his own biography: in the absence of a complete edition of John's *Life* it is difficult to resolve the question decisively. Nevertheless, comparison of the published sections of all three texts once again favors Symeon's independent usage of the Maximus *Life of the Virgin*: in particular the compositional order at the beginning of Symeon's Dormition narrative as well as his version of the Galbrios and Kandidos legend strongly suggest his direct use of this seventh-century biography.⁸¹

The process of compiling the Virgin's biography was thus a slow and gradual one, evolving over the course of several centuries. From rather patchy beginnings in the apocryphal

⁷⁹ Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge Marie*, ed. van Esbroeck, 2:xix-xxvi.

⁸⁰ Euthymius the Hagorite translated the Maximus *Life* from Greek into Georgian between 980 and 990, while John the Geometer's *Life* seems to allude to contemporary political events that would place its composition between 976 and 989, and a possible allusion to the revolt of Bardas Phocas would indicate a date after 987. See Tarchnišvili, *Geschichte der kirchlichen georgischen Literatur*, 133-4 (which follows Kekelize, ძველი ქართული ლიტერატურის ისტორია, 1:195-7, esp. 197, n. 1); Wenger, *L'Assomption*, 193.

⁸¹ Cf. Maximus the Confessor, *Life of the Virgin* 106-8 (Maxime le Confesseur, *Vie de la Vierge*, ed. van Esbroeck, 137-9 [Geor] and 92-4 [Fr]; John the Geometrician, *Life of the Virgin*, 11-17, in Wenger, *L'Assomption*, 370-7; and Symeon the Metaphrast, *Life of the Virgin*, 39 in *Menologi anonomi byzantini saeculi X quae supersunt*, ed. Basilus Lathysev, 2 vols. (Saint Petersburg: [Akad. nauk], 1912), 2:373-4. See also Shoemaker, "Virgin Mary in the Ministry of Jesus," 463-5; Shoemaker, "Georgian Life of the Virgin," 326-7.

writings of the second and third centuries, the Virgin's biography slowly grew to encompass the full span of her life. Early efforts reflected in the *Protevangelium* and the Dormition apocrypha drew initial focus to the beginning and end of her life, but it would be several centuries before a concerted effort was made to fashion a narrative that would bridge these two events. In this respect, the *Life of the Virgin* attributed to Maximus the Confessor stands as a pivotal text in the tradition of Marian biography, and despite its present obscurity, the historical significance of this earliest *vita Virginis* is immense. The author of this seventh-century text took the apocryphal fragments of the ancient church and fashioned them together into a coherent whole that formed the template for many of Byzantium's most widely circulated and influential Marian narratives. George of Nicomedia's Passion homilies, for instance, which depend heavily on the Maximus *Life of the Virgin*, were included in the influential typikon of the Evergetes monastery in Constantinople, and thus became widely used as liturgical readings for Holy Friday.⁸² While many experts on Byzantine culture have ascribed considerable influence to these homilies, particularly in the development of Byzantine art and piety, it is now clear that many of the most influential ideas and rhetoric from George's homilies are not his own but rather were taken from this late ancient *Life of the Virgin*. Likewise, Symeon the Metaphrast's *Life of the Virgin*, which is largely an abridgement of the Maximus *Life*, was even more broadly disseminated. Symeon's collection of the *Lives* of the saints, which included his *Life of the Virgin*, achieved a near canonical status in the East and was widely used in monastic liturgies to supply readings for major feasts.⁸³ At present, Symeon's menologion

⁸² Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium*, 97-8; Barber, "The Monastic Typikon," 204-5.

⁸³ Albert Ehrhard, *Überlieferung und Bestand der hagiographischen und homiletischen Literatur der griechischen Kirche von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts*, 3 vols., *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 50-52 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1936-9), 2:307; see also Christian Høgel, *Symeon Metaphrastes: Rewriting and Canonization* (Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 2002).

survives in at least 693 manuscripts, and thus the ubiquity of his *Life of the Virgin* is no doubt at least partially responsible for the disappearance of its much longer archetype from Greek.⁸⁴ It remains to be seen whether this Maximus *Life of the Virgin* may have been similarly influential on aspects of the medieval Western tradition, but given the profound impact that Eastern Mariology had on the medieval West in general, one certainly would not be surprised to find traces of this late ancient biography of the Virgin also surfacing in Western memories of the Virgin Mary's life.⁸⁵ Certainly, this is an area that merits further exploration in future research.

⁸⁴ Claudia Rapp, "Byzantine Hagiographers as Antiquarians, Seventh to Tenth Centuries," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 21 (1995): 31-44, 32.

⁸⁵ Graef, *Mary*, 1:201-2.