

Mary's Honour in *The Protoevangelium of James*

by

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This thesis will argue that the *Protoevangelium of James* was an apologetic text written to demonstrate Mary's ascribed and acquired honour. By establishing Mary's honour the text also defends the honour of Jesus and early Christians. The text indirectly addresses the charges about Jesus' illegitimacy and Mary's sexual behavior by emphasizing Mary's purity and virginity, before and after the conception and birth of Jesus. Such an emphasis would have served to redeem Mary's honour.

The *Prot. Jas.* first establishes Mary's honour through her parents, Anna and Joachim. They are portrayed as wealthy and respectable people who are very concerned with purity and righteous behaviour. Anna closely monitors Mary as a young child and takes precautions to ensure that Mary does not do anything that would be considered impure as a young girl, including turning her bedroom into a sanctuary, controlling what she ate, and only allowing Mary to be in the company of other pure people. Mary is then cared for by the temple priests, and finally Joseph becomes her guardian. The *Prot. Jas.* portrays Joseph as Mary's caretaker instead of husband to ensure that it is clear Mary and Joseph did not have a sexual relationship.

The *Prot. Jas.* then establishes Mary's acquired honour through her actions as a young woman to remain pure and celibate for the entirety of her life. When Mary becomes pregnant she must proclaim her innocence multiple times throughout the text, every time promising that she has never been with a man. After the birth of Jesus she endures an exam to prove that even post-partum, Mary is still a virgin. In the *Prot. Jas.* Mary becomes the two most honourable things a woman could be in Mediterranean antiquity, mother and virgin.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The *Protoevangelium of James* (*Prot. Jas.*) is a non-canonical Christian text believed to have been written in the second century.¹ It has been called by a number of different names, including *The Infancy Gospel of James*, which remains popular today. Both the “*Protoevangelium of James*” and “*The Infancy Gospel of James*” derive from the Latin *Protoevangelium Jacobai*.² However, there are plenty of other titles this book has been addressed by throughout its hundreds of years of circulation. The earliest name known, the *Birth of Mary, Revelation of James*, dates back to the 4th century.³ Some still debate if this was the original title, while others believe only the first half of its original name, and the latter half is a later addition.⁴ Regardless, the *Prot. Jas.* has been and is still addressed by a number of different titles, all of which are trying to best label the text’s content. The designations are also trying to convey the message that this is the “first” or “prior to” gospel. When the *Protoevangelium* was written, many Christians would have been aware of Jesus’ birth narratives found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The *Protoevangelium* was the story of Mary before she became the chosen mother of God, and served, in part, to explain why she was given such a privilege.

The *Prot. Jas.* is an infancy gospel because it describes the birth and early life of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. The text uses James, understood as the brother of Jesus, as a pseudonym for its authorship, and therefore presents itself as an “eye-witness account.”⁵ The *Prot. Jas.* was a

¹ Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, “The Proto-Gospel of James: The Birth of Mary, the Revelation of James,” in *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 35.

² Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas: with Introduction, Notes, and Original Text featuring the New Scholars Version Translation* (Santa Rose: Polebridge Press, 1995), 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ Ehrman and Pleše, “The Proto-Gospel of James,” 33.

⁵ Hock, *The Infancy Gospel of James and Thomas*, 4.

popular and well-known text for many years. It is believed that the Western church only chose to stop using the text because, although Mary is depicted as a virgin after the birth, Joseph is not.⁶ Richard P. McBrien states that it remains a non-canonical text because “the author posed as James, the brother of Jesus,” which alludes to the fact that Joseph was not a virgin and had a wife and children before Mary. McBrien also states that there is no clear evidence that any of this material is “reliable historical tradition” since it cannot be found in the canonical texts.⁷ The belief that Joseph is not a virgin does not coincide with the ascetic views held by Jerome, who thought that “not only was Mary a perpetual virgin, but Joseph—the earthly father of Jesus—was as well.”⁸ Jerome was an influential Christian scholar and theologian in the late fourth and early fifth centuries who is best known for translating the Bible to Latin. Many of Jerome’s writings focused on morality, which included living an ascetic and celibate lifestyle. Jerome believed that Joseph was also chosen by God because of his commitments to living a pure (celibate) and righteous life.⁹ By the late fourth and early fifth centuries a text that did not depict Joseph as a virgin could not be accepted. The *Prot. Jas.* would also be condemned by Pope Innocent I in *Letter 6 to Exuperius to Toulouse* 7:30 in 405 CE and by the *Gelasian Decree* in the sixth century.¹⁰

Despite the fact that the *Prot. Jas.*’ is not canonical, Tony Burke observes that the text survives in over 150 Greek manuscripts.¹¹ It has played a much larger role in Eastern traditions

⁶ Ehrman and Pleše, “The Proto-Gospel of James,” 32.

⁷ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism: Completely Revised and Updated* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 1082.

⁸ Ehrman and Pleše, “The Proto-Gospel of James,” 32.

⁹ Jerome, *Against Helvidius* 3.

¹⁰ The *Gelasian Decree* is a document formed in the sixth century that dictates a variety of things including what writings are canonical and those that are apocryphal. In the document the twenty-seven books of the New Testament canon are found as acceptable, and a list of apocryphal texts, including the *Prot. Jas.* are rejected. See Ehrman and Pleše, “The Proto-Gospel of James,” 32.

¹¹ Tony Burke, *Secret Scriptures Revealed: A New Introduction to the Christian Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 46.

than in the West, and according to Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, there are a “range of eastern versions as well, including Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, and Slavonic.”¹² David R. Cartridge and J. Keith Elliott offer several examples of the *Prot. Jas.* being depicted in art for several centuries after Pope Innocent I and the *Gelasian Decree* declare the text rejected. Two examples of artistic renditions of the *Prot. Jas.* are “The Miracle of the Flowering Rod,” a fresco found in Istanbul depicting the story of Joseph being chosen by God to be Mary’s guardian (*Prot. Jas.* 9:1), as well as “The Virgin’s First Steps,” a fresco also found in Istanbul, depicting Mary’s first steps (*Prot. Jas.* 6:1).¹³ Another very impressive illustration of the *Prot. Jas.* can be found in an Eastern church known as the Church of the Monastery of the Chora, in Istanbul. It contains an eighteen scene depiction of the life of Mary.¹⁴ The stories portrayed in these works of art are stories of Mary only found in apocryphal texts about Mary, specifically the *Prot. Jas.*

Some think that the *Prot. Jas.* is likely an apologetic text written in reaction to Celsus’ claims in *True Doctrine*. *True Doctrine* was written in 176 CE and depicts an imaginary Jew who makes various accusations against the Christian traditions.¹⁵ The original form of the text has not been found, but it is thought that seventy percent of the text is embedded within Origen’s *Contra Celsus*, a document written to address the accusations made by Celsus.¹⁶ H. R. Smid writes that the *Prot. Jas.* “has a strong apologetic tendency in order to contribute to Christian

¹² Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, “The Proto-Gospel of James,” 31. The first Greek edition of the book was published by M. Neander in 1563, and the first Latin version in 1552 by Th. Bibliander, translated from the Greek MS (see H. R. Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, trans. G. E. van Baaren-Pape [Netherlands: Royal VanGorcum, 1965], 16; Ehrman and Pleše, “The Proto-Gospel of James: The Birth of Mary, the Revelation of James,” 3.) In this thesis, I examine two different English translations: that of Ehrman and Pleše, and that of Ronald F. Hock. Throughout the thesis, when I give specific text references I am using Hock’s translation. When citing scripture, I will be using the New Revised Standard Version.

¹³ David R. Cartridge and J. Keith Elliott, *Art and the Christian Apocrypha* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁵ P. van Stempvoort, “The Protoevangelium of Jacobai, the Sources of its Theme and Style and their Bearing on its Date” in *Studia Evangelica III*, ed. F. Cross (Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1964), 423; Jane Schaberg, “The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth,” in *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 45.

¹⁶ Stempvoort, “The Protoevangelium of Jacobai,” 423.

apologetic activity against Jewish and pagan slander... The most important specimen of this slander in the second century is Celsus' *True Doctrine*.¹⁷ Celsus claims that Mary is not the virgin mother of Jesus, but instead a woman who gave birth to an illegitimate child by a Roman soldier named Panthera.¹⁸ Origen states:

He [Celsus] represents the Jew [a fictional character according to Origen] as having a conversation with Jesus himself and refuting him on many charges, as he thinks: first, because he [Jesus] *fabricated the story of his birth from a virgin*; and *he reproached him because he came from a Jewish village and from a poor country woman who earned her living by spinning*. He [Celsus] says *she was driven out by her husband, who was a carpenter by trade, as she was convicted of adultery*. Then he says that *after she had been driven out by her husband and while she was wandering about in a disgraceful way she secretly gave birth to Jesus*.¹⁹

As I will argue, these claims would have dishonoured Mary, as well as Jesus and all those who identified with Christianity.

Although the *Prot. Jas.* has received some scholarly attention, sustained studies of this text are not plentiful. Lily Vuong's work on the *Prot. Jas.* focuses on the fact that this text is not only a work within the Christian Apocrypha, but is also a Jewish-Christian text. She looks at the purity rituals found within the story and examines how they are "continually and significantly shaped by a concern for the Jerusalem Temple, the temple priesthood and sacrificial cult, and Jewish ritual purity laws in general."²⁰ Her work concentrates on the theme of purity within the text, but she not only examines Mary's virginity as a subcategory for her purity, but the acts around the Temple described in the text as demonstrations of Jewish purification rituals. Vuong

¹⁷ H. R. Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobai: A Commentary*, trans. G. E. van Bauren-Pape (Assen: Van Gorcum and Comp. N. V., 1965), 15.

¹⁸ Celsus, *True Doctrine* I:28.

¹⁹ The italicized words are those of Celsus; Origen, *Contra Celsum* (henceforth *CC*) I:28, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1965), 28.

²⁰ Lily Vuong, "Let Us Bring Her Up to the Temple of the Lord," in *Infancy Gospels: Stories and Identities*, eds. Claire Clivaz, Andreas Dettwiler, Luc Devillers, and Enrico Norelli (WUNT 2/281; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 419-20.

sees ritual purity unfolding in two stages: the first in Anna's conception of Mary, and the second in the portrayal of Mary's birth and infancy.²¹ Vuong states that correct temple sacrifice is very important from the beginning of the *Prot. Jas.*, especially for Mary's parents who are seen as "righteous and pious Jews."²² It is only because of this dedication that they conceive Mary, although they were previously barren. The second stage presents Mary as a representation of Temple sacrifice.²³ Mary is so pure in her conception, birth, and actions that she is a metaphor for the Temple sacrifice.

Mary F. Foskett has also written on the purity of Mary within the *Prot. Jas.* She explains that the key to Mary's purity is actually her status as a virgin.²⁴ Mary needed to uphold the status of purity that was expected of any Jewish woman at that time, and one facet of that purity was a woman's sexual status as a virgin. Therefore Foskett states that "the nature of the sexual status they [the author of the *Prot. Jas.*] ascribe to her is easily among the most striking."²⁵ It is Mary's virginity that magnifies her purity. Foskett goes on to argue that it is Mary's virginity that allows her to belong to the Lord, stating that her virginity "is a good that must be maintained."²⁶ Foskett's work demonstrates that it is Mary's sexual status as a virgin that makes her unique and pure enough to be claimed as the Mother of God.

This thesis seeks to examine Mary's honour within the *Prot. Jas.* I will argue that Mary's virginity was used as a tool to emphasize her exceptional purity and conformity to social norms of the time. In doing so, this text would have re-established Mary's honour, both ascribed to her

²¹ Lily Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protoevangelium of James* (WUNT 2.358; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 70.

²² *Ibid.*, 71.

²³ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁴ Mary Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 5.

²⁵ Mary Foskett, "Virginity as Purity in the *Protoevangelium of James*," in *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine with Maria Mayo Robbins (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 67-68.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

by her family, and acquired by her through her behaviour. Because of the collective nature of honour in the ancient world, Mary's honour will also be ascribed to Jesus and to early Christians.

Although still addressing the cultural and historical significance of Mary's virginity and purity in the *Prot. Jas.*, methodologically, this thesis will include the lens of cultural anthropology in the examination of the *Prot. Jas.* It will focus on the ways in which the values of honour and shame work themselves out in the text. Mary's purity is maintained throughout the text to ensure her honour, as well as the honour of her son, and of early Christians.

According to Bruce J. Malina, honour is defined "as socially proper attitudes and behavior in the area where the three lines of authority, gender status, and respect intersect."²⁷ It is a marker of one's social status in the community. "For a person in a society concerned with honour, there is a constant dialectic, a thinking back and forth, between norms of society, and how the person is to reproduce those norms in specific behavior," says Malina.²⁸ In the ancient Mediterranean world, a woman's honour was strongly linked to her morals and conduct of behaviour. It was very important that a woman not be sexually promiscuous for that would bring shame upon her and her family and/or household.²⁹ One's honour was not only based on his or her actions, but on the actions of one's family and community because, as Malina explains, "honour has both individual and corporate or collective dimensions."³⁰ There are natural groupings in the Mediterranean world, such as family, and village.³¹ A person's natural grouping directly affects his or her status, therefore he or she will always have the same social ranking as that group with regard to honour and shame. The *Prot. Jas.* portrays Mary in such a way that she

²⁷ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World Today: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 30.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁹ J. G. Peristiany, "Introduction," in *Honor and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 9.

³⁰ Malina, *The New Testament World Today*, 53.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

can be both mother and virgin, making her embody the two stereotypical feminine ideals in antiquity. As such, she becomes the perfect model of purity, and honour, which then extends to her son, and to the larger Christian community.

The *Prot. Jas.* emerges from the cultural context of the second century Greco-Roman world. Such a culture was characterized by honour and shame. Therefore, I will focus the first significant chapter on honour and shame and the influence of the ancient Mediterranean world's view of purity, with attention to virginity as a dimension of purity, as they pertain to a woman's honour and shame. According to Carolyn Osiek and Jennifer Pouya, a woman's purity was tied to her virginity and "the virtuous woman was continually concerned about her honour as reputation for properly controlled sexuality."³² These notions were not only important to the Greco-Roman world, but before long, "the female figure of the virgin was the cultural icon by which they [Christians] broadcast their message."³³ The chapter will also explain the collective nature of identity in antiquity. The people of this time did not understand themselves simply as individuals, but as connected to a group (family, village, and people). Therefore, their social status was not only based on their own actions, but also on those of the family and communities of which they were a part. One person's actions directly affected the honour of their family and community. So, a woman's honour was not only measured by her morals and conduct of behaviour, but also by the actions and morals of her family and community. Mary's honour had implications not only for her, but for her son, and for the Christian community.

³² Carolyn Osiek and Jennifer Pouya, "Constructions of Gender in the Roman Imperial World," in *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, eds. Dietmar Neufeld and Richard E. De Maris (New York: Routledge, 2010), 46.

³³ Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), x.

The third chapter will turn to the *Prot. Jas.* itself, examining more closely the description of the purity and specifically, virginity, of Mary in the *Prot. Jas.* and the implications for her honour. The book as a whole wants the audience to view Mary as an honourable woman, worthy of bearing the Son of God. She is portrayed as the daughter of a wealthy man who is so righteous that his barren wife conceives a child, a story comparable to that of Abraham and Sarah.³⁴ The child Mary is so pure that she is able to go and live in the temple with the priests, who only allow her to be in the presence of the virgin temple maids. All of this leads up to the moment when Mary is finally chosen by God to bear God's child, even though she has never been with a man. Mary conceives and gives birth as a virgin. Mary's post-partum virginity is also very important to the author; so much so that Mary receives a gynecological exam after the birth of Jesus to prove she remains a virgin. The virginal conception is present in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, but those two gospels do not refer to her virginity after she gives birth. The *Prot. Jas.* stresses that this is a virgin birth insofar as it provides explicit detail about Mary's virginal physical condition after the birth. Mary thus becomes the ideal woman by being both a perpetual "virgin" and a "mother."

Chapter four will apply the insights from chapter two to chapter three, and demonstrate that by Mary being both virgin and mother she is the most honourable woman possible. Mark McVann states that "honour-shame and status are closely allied aspects of the social reckoning of a person's standing within the group."³⁵ There were people, such as Celsus and Jewish critics questioning Mary's status as a virgin and even accusing her of having Jesus illegitimately at the time of this book's completion. Such accusations would have placed her honour in jeopardy.

³⁴ Lily Vuong, "Purity and Piety, and the Purpose of the Protoevangelium of James," in *"Non-Canonical" Religious Texts in Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James H. Charlesworth (New York: T & T Clark, 2012), 210.

³⁵ Mark McVann, "Reading Mark Ritually: Honor-Shame and the Ritual of Baptism," *Semeia* 67 (1994): 179.

Moreover, questions about Mary's purity would have greatly affected the way in which people viewed her, as well their perceptions of Jesus, and by association, early Christians in general. The author of the *Prot. Jas.* would have recognized this and told a story of Mary that would put to rest any doubts about her virginity after the birth of Jesus. Therefore, one of the functions of this text would have been to redeem the honour of Mary, of Jesus, as well as that of early Christians.

In the conclusion I will address how Mary gaining honour through being both virgin and mother would have had very real implications for Christian women then and today. The *Prot. Jas.* was written to glorify Mary as the epitome of purity and honour in the ancient world. However, such glorification would mean that Christian women would be held to unachievable standards.

In sum, this thesis will argue that the *Prot. Jas.* was an apologetic text written to demonstrate Mary's ascribed and acquired honour. By establishing Mary's honour the text also defends the honour of Jesus and early Christians. The text addresses the charges about Jesus' illegitimacy and Mary's extra-marital relations with a Roman soldier. Therefore, the author focuses on Mary's purity and virginity, before and after the conception and birth of Jesus, to redeem Mary's honour.

In the *Prot. Jas.* Mary's honour is first established through her parents, Anna and Joachim. They are portrayed as wealthy and respectable people who are very concerned with purity and righteous behaviour. Anna closely monitors Mary as a young child and takes precautions to ensure that Mary does not do anything that would be considered impure as a young girl, including turning her bedroom into a sanctuary, controlling what she ate, and only allowing Mary to be in the company of other pure people. Mary is then cared for by the temple

priests, and finally Joseph becomes her guardian. The *Prot. Jas.* portrays Joseph as Mary's caretaker instead of husband to ensure that it is clear Mary and Joseph did not have a sexual relationship.

The *Prot. Jas.* then establishes Mary's acquired honour through her actions as a young woman to remain pure and celibate for the entirety of her life. When Mary becomes pregnant she must proclaim her innocence multiple times throughout the text, every time promising that she has never been with a man. After the birth of Jesus she endures an exam to prove that even after the birth of Jesus, Mary is still a virgin. In the *Prot. Jas.* Mary embodies the two most honourable things a woman could be at that time; that is, mother and virgin.

This thesis will also argue that the collective nature of honour allows for the *Prot. Jas.* to establish not only Mary's honour, but also that of Jesus and of early Christians. As Mary is ascribed honour through Anna and Joachim, so Jesus is ascribed honour through Mary. Therefore, any of the accusations made about Jesus' illegitimacy were false. Likewise, Jesus' and Mary's ascribed honour would support the notion that early Christians were honourable in the second century, even while they suffered for their faith.

Chapter 2

Honour, Purity, and Virginity in the Mediterranean World

The goal of this chapter is to identify and explain purity, virginity, and honour in the ancient Mediterranean world, specifically in the first and second centuries of the Common Era. Hellenistic Jews and Gentiles had much in common culturally during this time. They shared some traditions and their cultures overlapped in many ways. The significance of a woman's purity and particularly her virginity are attitudes that both cultures would have shared. Throughout the chapter I will identify and explain how honour in the ancient world was directly connected to purity and virginity for Jewish and Gentile women, and subsequently how virginity became important for Christians. Honour, as I will demonstrate, was a core value of ancient Mediterranean peoples.

Honour in the Ancient World

The ancient Mediterranean world was a collectivist society in which social structures and relationships were determined by an honour-shame system. Honour is defined as the way in which a person is valued by him or herself and others.¹ It is one's "reputation in the eyes of the public."² Honour refers not only to having pride in oneself, but the right to have pride in oneself.³ The honour-shame system was much more than an economic phenomenon; rather, it was a value system that encompassed the standing of the whole person in society, and it was a determining factor in one's future prosperity. A person's lifestyle greatly depended on how he or she was ranked within this social system, and concerns about honour determined "how one behaved,

¹ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 30.

² Richard L. Rohrbaugh, "Honor: Core Value in the Biblical World," in *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, 109.

³ Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," in *Honour and Shame*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), 21.

interacted with others, dressed, ate, married, even what happened at the time of death.”⁴ Honour was based on how well one performed his or her roles in society. For example, if a man could control his household and children, then he was an honourable father. On the other hand, if a man did not have control over his household and his children disobeyed him, then he was not an honourable father.⁵ Ben Sira 22:3, for example, states: “It is a disgrace to be the father of an undisciplined son.” Every aspect of one’s life could influence one’s honour, from daily decisions regarding household management, to one’s trade or career, or even the family into which one was born. This means that it was very difficult to gain honour, but often easy to lose it.

Malina explains honour in the ancient world as being analogous to a credit score today in the sense that those with honour had money, status, and quality of life available to them.⁶ This comparison makes it clear that honour and shame were directly connected to one’s social status in antiquity. One’s reputation and social standing were just as important as, if not more important than, one’s monetary value because, according to Julian Pitt-Rivers, “status [was] established through the recognition of a certain social identity.”⁷

As the correlate to honour, shame played two roles in the ancient world. Shame was seen as both positive and negative, for “having shame” was considered to be a good and positive trait, also called positive shame. However, “to be shamed” was deemed as bad, and called negative shame. To further explain, “to have shame” meant that one was particularly aware and conscious of the social norms and standards set in the world around him or her. Maintaining a healthy and functioning social system was a priority for many in the ancient world. Being aware of social norms and fearing what may happen if they were not upheld was perceived to be a demonstration

⁴ Rohrbaugh, “Honor: Core Value in the Biblical World,” 109.

⁵ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 44.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷ Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” 22.

of positive shame. Positive shame was essential to life in antiquity; it served as a kind of checks and balances system for public life. For example, a woman should have been constantly aware of and concerned about her reputation in the community. She needed to be sure to maintain the standards of the time, such as being a good and submissive wife to her husband. A woman was known “to have shame” if she was cognizant of these social norms and lived in such a way that she conformed to them, which would have been considered to be a positive thing.⁸ One example of this can be seen in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* when Sibyl credits her ability to withstand seduction because of her shame to Aeneas.⁹

There was also a very real negative side of shame. Just as honour had social dimensions, so did shame. If one was “shamed” it meant that the individual, as well as family and social circles, would “lose face” in the eyes of the public.¹⁰ The public saw them as people who did not understand or conform to the social norms of the time and who were ultimately chaotic and untrustworthy.¹¹ Because maintaining a functioning society was so important, anything seen to be outside of the norm would have carried a degree of danger. For example, if a woman was not a good and submissive wife to her husband, she would not be aware of or compliant to the social norms of the time, and therefore she would “be shamed.” In this sense, to be shamed was the opposite of honour in the ancient world. In all the ways that honour made one’s life better, especially in the social arena, shame made life more difficult. If someone was shamed in antiquity it was a social disaster. As Philo states, “shame is a sign that he feels his conduct to be disgraceful, for only disgraceful actions are followed by shame.”¹²

⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁹ Ovid, *Metam.* 14:129-154.

¹⁰ Rohrbaugh, “Honor: Core Value in the Biblical World,” 112.

¹¹ Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights for Cultural Anthropology*, 50.

¹² Philo, *Spec.* 4:6 (trans. F. H. Colson; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937).

Honour and shame were in a constant flux, and although a person may have honour, it is not certain how long a person would maintain that honour. J. G. Peristiany explains that an individual is “constantly forced to prove and assert himself.”¹³ The constant tug of war that took place between honour and shame in one’s life meant, to a certain extent, that it had to be something that a person was constantly conscious of and thinking about in one’s everyday life

In a sense, honour and shame had gendered roles. Honour was associated with the male and positive shame associated with the female. Gestures in the public sphere contributed to the maintenance and augmentation of honour, while positive shame was an inward concern to not lose the respect one had already been given. Positive shame required the recognition that everyone had a particular role in society, and the submission to and acceptance of those roles in the same way that a woman was to be submissive and to acknowledge her role in the household. Honour was the more dominant of the two terms, for it demanded the active, public acknowledgement of one’s value, just as the male was the outward and public face for the family’s honour. So although honour and shame functioned as opposites, honour being positive and shame being negative, in reality both played a very important role in the balance of everyday life for those living in the early centuries of the Common Era.

It was impossible and even foolish to try to claim honour for one’s self. Honour could only be possessed after the community and public opinion had bestowed it upon someone. Public perception and status were everything. Malina explains that “honour is not only a claim of worth, but the public acknowledgement of that claim.”¹⁴ The public atmosphere of honour made it necessary for altercations to take place within the community and with witnesses. A person could only gain honour if others observed the exchange of words in a confrontation and the public

¹³ J. G. Peristiany, “Introduction,” in *Honour and Shame*, 11.

¹⁴ Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights for Cultural Anthropology*, 31.

decided on a winner. Therefore, the man who bested the other in private could not receive honour from the exchange.¹⁵ One example of this can be found in Luke 4:16-30 when Jesus reads in the temple. The crowd in the synagogue asks an insulting question, to which Jesus responds accurately. However the confrontation continues to build from there. Jesus is the one with the last word because the crows cannot respond, therefore Jesus “wins” the confrontation.

Just as wealth could be ascribed and acquired, so could honour. Ascribed honour was what someone born into a well-to-do family would have received, similar to an inheritance of money or property.¹⁶ Acquired honour was what a person would gain throughout his or her lifetime. To further explain, honour came differently to different people. Some were born into the right family and because of that they were simply given honour. A person could also work to acquire honour, although it was much more difficult.

Often when one sought to acquire honour, it meant that another stood to lose it, and because of this balancing, honour was what George M. Foster and Richard L. Rohrbaugh call a “limited good.”¹⁷ Like most things in the ancient world, honour was perceived as a limited good because there was not an endless amount to go around. Both Malina and Rohrbaugh explain acquired honour as something bound up in challenging another in public. In order to gain honour one must best another in a public setting, without the situation escalating to violence. It would have been a risky decision to make. Ultimately the victor would have been the person who did not give up, accidentally admit failure, or lose control of the situation. Most commonly, a man would challenge another man who had equal social standing. If a man of higher social rank confronted a man of lower social standing, he would have been perceived as bullying. If a man

¹⁵ Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” 27.

¹⁶ Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights for Cultural Anthropology*, 31.

¹⁷ Rohrbaugh, “Honor: Core Value in the Biblical World,” 115; George M. Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of *Limited Good*,” *American Anthropologist* 67 (1965): 296.

of lower social rank were to challenge a man of higher social standing, the act would have been perceived as though he did not know his place in society.¹⁸ Seneca's *Epistles* states that "the man who has offended you is either stronger or weaker than you: if he is weaker, spare him; if he is stronger, spare yourself."¹⁹ Both situations were unfavourable.

Because so much of the honour-shame system was based on one's public reputation, honour was ultimately given to the person who was interpreted positively by those witnessing the exchange. Pitt-Rivers explains that an interpretation of said exchange/challenge was very important. A misinterpretation by onlookers could lead to disaster as the court of public opinion was so important.²⁰ A decision to challenge another person for his or her honour would not only be risky for those involved, but also for their families and social circles.

Therefore, a key aspect to understanding honour was its social dimension. The ancient world as a whole was a collectivist society, meaning that no one person thought about him or herself purely as an individual, rather as a part of a larger group, such as one's family, village, or trade.²¹ Being unique meant understanding what makes the group he or she is a part of unique.²² Being a member of a collectivist society meant taking on the priorities, concerns, beliefs, and desires of the group. Ultimately, the betterment of the group was one's top priority, not personal gain. Understanding the ancient Mediterranean world as a whole in this way helps to better understand how honour and shame worked.

Honour was never simply individualistic, it was always collective. This collective dimension meant that the actions of one would have implications for many. As previously

¹⁸ Rohrbaugh, "Honor: Core Value in the Biblical World," 115.

¹⁹ Seneca, *Ep.* 76 (trans. Richard M. Gummere; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1917).

²⁰ Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," 27.

²¹ Malina, "Collectivism in Mediterranean Culture," *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, 17.

²² *Ibid.*, 19.

mentioned, there was ascribed honour given to those who were part of an honourable family, and this is because honour was passed down through family lineages (the family was a person's closest social circle). Therefore, if one's family had been honourable in the eyes of society, then the descendent was also honourable. Aristotle describes a good birth as one in which both parents are free and they are both notably virtuous or wealthy.²³ For example, Cicero refers to Caecilia as a lady who has a prestigious father, uncle, and brother. Her honor is drawn from their dignity.²⁴ However, once one's family member proved him or herself to be dishonourable, then the rest of the family suffered as well.²⁵ For example, if one's daughter did not follow through with a betrothal, the action would bring shame to her and to the rest of her family, in addition to the fact that she would remain a financial burden on her father.²⁶ Halvor Moxnes states it best when he says "the family is the main source of honour. The history of the family and its lineage become important. Outside the family one belongs to the wider group of kin, village, tribe, or people. A person derives honour from the group, and, conversely this person's conduct also reflects on the group and its honour."²⁷

Family was understood to be one's most important responsibility in the ancient world; often family was all that one had, and therefore it was the centre of one's world. Malina states that "honour is in the blood."²⁸ There was always a level of honour within the family, for honour and trust could always be given to blood relatives. In contrast, anyone outside of the family must prove his or her honour and trustworthiness.

²³ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.5.5

²⁴ Cic. *Rosc. Amer.* 147.

²⁵ Jill Dubisch, *In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender, and Politics at a Greek Island Shrine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 197.

²⁶ Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996), 49.

²⁷ Halvor Moxnes, "Honor and Shame," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 23 (2015): 172.

²⁸ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 31.

Although family was one's closest social circle and most of one's reputation and worth was based on the family's actions, other circles would heavily influence a person's honour ranking as well. For example, Malina points out that teaching was an honourable profession; therefore, when students respected and believed what was taught, the teacher would receive honour. However, if the students did not trust what the teacher taught them then the man would be shamed because not even his students had confidence in him.²⁹ Others who had learned from this man in the past would be affected by the public knowledge of his shame, and they too could lose honour because their former teacher lost honour.³⁰ This is just one example of the ways in which honour was collective.

Gender Roles and Honour

Although both men and women were concerned about their honour in the ancient world, they were not competing for the same honour. The world was separated by gender, and therefore there never would have been a discussion about a male/female honour challenge. There was always an exception to the rule, however, and some women with status were able to publicly challenge a man to gain honour such as the Queen of Sheba in 1 Kings. In this story, the Queen of Sheba travels to Solomon to "test him with hard questions" in order to see if he was as wise as she had heard (1 Kings 10:1). However, the majority of women did not have such an option and were often not even considered to be a part of the male honour system. Women were seen as honourable only in comparison to other women, and men were seen as honourable only in comparison to other men.

²⁹ Ibid., 31.

³⁰ The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*' portrayal of Zacchaeus is an example of a shamed teacher. Within the story, Zacchaeus is Jesus' teacher, and he is shamed by Jesus because the student knows more than the teacher (*Inf. Gos. Thom.* 6-7).

Gender roles were very important, and there were sets of obligations and entitlements that came along with them.³¹ Gender in the ancient world was not necessarily based on anatomy, rather on masculinity and femininity.³² For a man to be masculine was a lofty goal, but often masculinity was necessary to gain honour. A person could be born male, but not be considered to be a man because that designation was reserved for those who achieved honour through self-control and moral qualities, such as courage.³³ Doing anything that strayed from these qualities would have made others question one's masculinity and honour.

Scott Rubarth describes masculinity in association with terms such as active, hard, courageous, hairy, political, law, outside, produce, powerful, rational, consumer of beauty, hunter, attacker, and lover.³⁴ A man was to exhibit these traits in his everyday life, physique, and actions in order to gain honour, because honour was only given to masculine men. A good example is a soldier, who would have exhibited these qualities of courage and power every day, while still being able to maintain and run a functioning household as a patriarch to his family. Being an effeminate man would have been dishonourable and even a shameful thing. Effeminate men were associated with the opposite of the aforementioned words; they were "passive, soft, fearful, smooth, domestic, nature, inside, spenders, weak, emotional, objects of beauty, prey, victim, and beloved."³⁵ Often these terms would describe men on the outskirts of society, associated with things such as dancing or acting.

The Greco-Roman world had constructed clear guidelines for the ideal female as well. Femininity was very important for women to uphold. Just as being seen as an effeminate man

³¹ Ibid., 29.

³² Carolyn Osiek and Jennifer Pouya, "Constructions of Gender in the Roman Imperial World," in *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, 46.

³³ Ibid., 47.

³⁴ Scott Rubarth, "Competing Constructions of Masculinity in Ancient Greece," *Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts* 1 (2014): 30.

³⁵ Ibid., 30.

was shameful, so too was being seen as a masculine woman. The ancient construction of femininity was similar to that of the effeminate male, meaning it was everything the male was not. Women would have been soft, passive, and ultimately subordinate.

The ultimate goal for a woman would have been to be the ideal wife and mother because the female was meant to be “faithful, an obedient wife, a good mother, and a good manager of the home.”³⁶ Some of the qualities seen in a good woman were things like being emotional, physically weak, gullible, and susceptible to flattery and deception,³⁷ but it was understandable for a woman to possess these qualities because she could not help it, for they were simply feminine characteristics. For example, when asked why the serpent chose to persuade Eve instead of Adam, Philo explains that the woman, Eve, was chosen by the serpent because she would have been more accustomed to being deceived than the man, Adam.³⁸

Although the previous examples would be perceived as negative today, these characteristics were not necessarily negative for a woman to possess in antiquity. They also meant that women received honour differently than men. A man received honour publicly, but a woman did not. Osiek and Pouya explain that a woman was seen as honourable if she was simply not spoken about in the community.³⁹ The public arena, for the most part, was for the man. In *Flaccus*, Philo describes that the ability to stay inside and away from the public eye was a privilege of wealthy women. He states “that their women kept in seclusion, never even approaching the outer doors, and their maidens confined to the inner chambers, who for modesty’s sake avoided the sight of men, even of their closest relations, were displayed to eyes, not merely

³⁶ Osiek and Pouya, “Constructions of Gender in the Roman Imperial World,” 47.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁸ Philo, *QG* 1:33.

³⁹ Osiek and Pouya, “Constructions of Gender in the Roman Imperial World,” 47.

unfamiliar.”⁴⁰ A woman’s honour was also tightly bound to the honour of her father, husband, or whoever the patriarch of her household was. This was because a woman was either under the “legal or economic authority” of her husband or father, which will be discussed later in the chapter.⁴¹

A good wife was important to a man’s role in society. A wife brought the proper stability that the ancient world was looking for a man to have. For example, in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 the author gives specific qualifications for the bishops in the church, including being married only once, and managing his household. Part of being an honoured person was meeting the social standards, and a man needed a good wife to meet those standards.

Women, Honour, and Shame in the Ancient World

A woman was expected to be one of two things: a virgin or a mother. A young girl’s menstruation was “understood in antiquity as a sign of a girl’s arrival at sexual maturity.”⁴² Once a woman reached that point in her life marriage arrangements would soon follow. After marriage, a woman’s highest priority was to conceive a child because “infertility is intolerable in a world in which one of the framing notions is that the sole purpose of marriage is to produce offspring.”⁴³

For Jewish women in the ancient world, to be barren or infertile was a disaster. The *Apocalypse of Enoch* 98:5 states that “Why is a woman not given (a child)? On account of the deeds of her own hands would she die without children.”⁴⁴ Tal Ilan explains that “a barren

⁴⁰ Philo, *Flacc.* 89 (trans. F. H. Colson; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954).

⁴¹ Margaret Y. MacDonald, “Kinship and Family in the New Testament World,” *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, 35.

⁴² Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, 100.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴⁴ The *Apocalypse of Enoch* is called by a number of different names, including *The Book of Enoch*. The translation used in this thesis is from James H. Charlesworth, ed., trans.; *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 78.

woman is a sinner, and there is no need to discover the actual sin; the fact that she is unable to bear children is a strong enough witness to this.”⁴⁵ A woman who could not become a mother could not perform one of the most basic callings for Jews at that time, to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28). Infertility was something that brought women great shame, which is why there are biblical examples of righteous and prayerful women who are infertile, but who finally become pregnant after years of patience and trust in God, such as Sarah (Genesis 21) and Elizabeth (Luke 1-2).

As previously stated, a woman in the ancient world had a very specific place in the household as wife and mother. These tasks would have included running the household, managing the children and slaves (if they had any at that time), and caring for the patriarch of the house. An honourable family was one that functioned properly because it was believed that a well-ordered family would contribute to a healthy and functioning society.

The New Testament touches on this ideology a few times in what is referred to as the Household Codes.⁴⁶ Often these codes address three dyads of the Greco-Roman family: husband-wife, father-child, and master-slave. Scholars believe that the Christian community at the time that these codes were written was trying to prove that it was not a threat to the Greco-Roman lifestyle, and therefore conformed to the patriarchal hierarchy.⁴⁷ Ephesians 5:21-6:9 speaks specifically about all three dyads. Ephesians 5: 21-22 begins by stating “wives, be subject to your husbands... For the husband is the head of the wife.” Ephesians goes on to state “children, obey your parents... Honour your father and mother” (6:1-2). And finally, Ephesians states,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 111. Ilan uses these words to describe the *The Apocalypse of Enoch*'s stance on infertility.

⁴⁶ The New Testament household codes are found in Colossians 3:18-4:1, Ephesians 5:21-6:9, 1 Timothy 2:9-15, Titus 2:2-10, and 1 Peter 2:13-3:7.

⁴⁷ Clinton E. Arnold, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 380.

“slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart” 6:5. The same three dyads are mentioned in Colossians 3:18-4:1. Colossians 3:18 begins “wives, be subject to your husbands as is fitting in the Lord...” The children are then instructed “obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord” (3:20). And finally “slaves, obey your masters earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord” (3:22). Such codes are evidence that for some early Christians, proper submission and authority took place within the family.

Women in the ancient world were expected to be submissive to their husbands. Osiek explains that “to submit or be subordinate is a common concept in a hierarchical society. Good social order is impossible without it.”⁴⁸ Ilan states that “it appears that the essence of a woman’s wisdom, and perhaps also the kind of intelligence and understanding befitting her, lies in her fulfillment of the natural order of the world, by which a woman is subordinate to a man.”⁴⁹ Although the husband and wife would have interacted primarily in their private lives, honour and shame rules still applied and affected the honour and shame of the family in the community. A woman’s behaviour affected the honour of her husband. Therefore the wife and the rest of the household were also heavily influencing the honour and/or shame ascribed to their families, including the patriarch of the household.

Purity in the Ancient World

In addition to submission to authority, there are other standards a woman would have been expected to uphold, including purity regulations. The term purity refers to a culmination of different actions that made one able to function properly in society and, if speaking about a

⁴⁸ Carolyn Osiek, “The Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33): A Problematic Wedding,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 32 (2002): 31.

⁴⁹ Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, 59-60.

religious context, with God. These actions can include one's hygiene, properly performed rituals, and even sexual morality.⁵⁰

Purity in the ancient world would have dictated one's ability to interact and perform one's function in society. Mary Douglas explains that at a very basic level, purity was the way in which the cultural beliefs influenced the social norms of that time.⁵¹ Sometimes these purity laws and codes were created out of fear or simply a desire to understand why things occurred, such as disease and death. They were also created to deter anyone from transgressing from social norms. If one believed breaking social norms would result in severe consequences, chances of deviant behaviour were lower.⁵²

Purity was heavily dependent on order and place.⁵³ In antiquity, everything had a place and function in society. When something did not fit into its place, or serve its function properly, it became dangerous. An anomaly in the pattern or social system would be met with one of two reactions, either positive or negative. First, one could negatively respond by ignoring or condemning it, and ultimately cutting it out of one's life. Next, one could positively respond to the thing that was out of place by finding a way in which it fit into his or her life.⁵⁴ However, comparable to most activities in the ancient world, this process would have been done communally.

Mary Douglas lists five ways people react to ambiguous occurrences in society: (1) settling for an interpretation, even if it is questionable; (2) eliminating the anomaly all together; (3) avoidance of the anomaly; (4) simply labeling the ambiguous occurrence as dangerous,

⁵⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁵¹ Mary Douglas, *Collected Works: Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ritva H. Williams, "Purity, Dirt, Anomalies, and Abominations," *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, 208.

⁵⁴ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 38.

calling all to stray away from it; and (5) using the anomaly in a ritualistic way to make it one with an existing pattern.⁵⁵ There are examples in which all of these scenarios are used, and all of them filter into some form of understanding purity and impurity. With this framework it is easier to understand the ancient purity laws and rituals surrounding hygiene, diet, and even religious taboos.

Hygiene is the basis for many of the pure/impure boundaries. Douglas explains that “the old definition of dirt is matter out of place.”⁵⁶ She writes that dirt is the basis for all systems to grow, for “where there is dirt there is system.”⁵⁷ Dirt in itself is not impure; it is when dirt is placed in an area it does not belong that dirt becomes impure. It is not a matter of removing dirt from all aspects of one’s life, but controlling it. This understanding of dirt is then applied broadly to all things. Therefore, anything that is out of its place in the system is considered to be “dirt.” Along with purity comes the understanding of disease and plague because most of the time disease and illness were misunderstood as forms of divine punishment, whether that be from sin or failure to remain pure. Hygiene laws were upheld because one wanted to remain free from the possibility of acquiring such things.

Since one was susceptible to disease and illness was through conduct, or participating in acts that were considered to be unclean, such as adultery or incest. Therefore, hygiene and appropriate behaviour were two ways to remain free from disease. Douglas explains that “at this level laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code: this kind of disease is caused by adultery, that by incest, etc.”⁵⁸ Sexual purity and impurity laws will be explained in more detail

⁵⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 35; Williams, “Purity, Dirt, Anomalies, and Abominations,” 207.

⁵⁷ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 35.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 3.

later, but they are important to introduce here in order to emphasize the fact that society held these things to be true to maintain order.

Dietary laws are more difficult to understand. Many historians have argued that dietary laws stem from understandings of hygiene. For example, the eating of a pig is considered impure by Jews and Muslims. Nicole J. Ruane argues that this issue has less to do with diet and disease, rather more to do with all the ways the pig does not fit into specific categories and labels of that time. She states that pigs did not fit the “normal” categories of procreation and therefore were considered to be unclean because they are anomalies.⁵⁹

Anything perceived as unclean and contagious is what Douglas calls “pollution.” Pollution is not simply the fact that something is seen as impure, but that it has the potential to affect those who come in contact with it. One example of this can be found in a story within the Babylonian Talmud in which a man dies despite his study of Scripture and Mishnah. The man’s wife explains that although he never touched her when she was menstruating, he did not obey the purity laws during the time in between her menstruation and cleansing rituals. She indicates that her husband ate and drank with her, and often touched her but never had sex with her during menstruation.⁶⁰ Her husband did not need to engage with her sexually to be contaminated by her menstrual cycle, therefore he was punished. This uncleanliness also applies to anything that came into contact with the woman during her menstruation. Ilan explains that “bloodstains on objects with which woman regularly came into contact made those objects suspect of having been polluted with menstruation blood.”⁶¹ Therefore, both the menstruating women and the items

⁵⁹ Nicole J. Ruane, “Pigs, Purity, and Patrilineality: The Multiplarity of Swine and Its Problems for Biblical Ritual and Gender Construction,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134 (2015): 492.

⁶⁰ bShab. 13a-b; as cited by Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, 102.

⁶¹ Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, 103.

with which they came into contact were perceived as pollutants and were considered capable of transferring impurity to whomever they were in contact.

The term pollution can also refer to the ways in which social norms control social behaviour. The collective saw unwanted deviation from social morals and norms as pollution in society.⁶² All forms of pollution needed to be monitored and regulated through social order.

Honour and purity are connected in the sense that if one was seen as pure and followed social norms then he or she brought honour to the family. If one was perceived as someone who spread pollution and impurity within society, he or she would be shameful. In the same way, positive shame would have played a very important role in this lifestyle, because one needed to be aware of the ways in which purity was upheld and pollution could be spread. One example is illustrated by the story mentioned above from the Babylonian Talmud. The woman was shamed because her husband died through the spread of “pollution;” she was held partly responsible for her husband’s uncleanness and death.

Jewish Purity Laws

In Second Temple Judaism, people respected purity laws, many of which derived from the First Temple period and were found in the book of Leviticus, commonly known as the Holiness Code.⁶³ There are a couple of different ways to understand the laws. They could be understood as a set of rules that allowed the Israelites to become closer to God, or as a set of laws that set them apart from all other nations.⁶⁴ According to James E. Bowley, the term used for holiness in the Hebrew Bible “might best be translated with something like ‘distinct, apart,

⁶² Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 3.

⁶³ James E. Bowley, *Introduction to Hebrew Bible: A Guided Tour of Israel’s Sacred Library* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2008), 151.

⁶⁴ James D. G. Dunn, “Jesus and Purity: An Ongoing Debate,” *New Testament Studies* 48 (2002): 449.

separate, to distinguish, to differentiate.”⁶⁵ This definition of the Jewish Holiness Code and purity laws fits, for they both seek to set boundaries and differentiate one group from another.

Jewish purity laws ranged from dietary restriction to cleansing rituals. As previously mentioned, there were strict restrictions against eating pork. Such restrictions may have been the Jews’ way of setting themselves apart from the Gentiles, who believed the pig was associated with Demeter, the goddess of fertility and harvest.⁶⁶ Removing it from their diet would have made the Jews different from the rest of the world.

There was also a sense of some things being ritually pure or impure, which had less to do with everyday activities, but concerned one’s religious and temple life.⁶⁷ Ritual purity was what one had to maintain in order to participate fully in the temple. It was not considered sinful to be ritually impure, because events like giving birth, sexual discharge, disease, and contact with the dead are all things that would render one ritually impure.⁶⁸ The defilement was considered only temporary until appropriate purity rituals took place.

Moral purity, on the other hand, was much more serious. The nature of this impurity would have been inherently sinful, and included actions like sexual sins, idolatry, and bloodshed.⁶⁹ These defilements would not only affect one’s ability to take part in religious life, but also affect one’s relationships with others. One who performed such an act would have been considered defiled for months or even years, depending on the act, and there would be a

⁶⁵ Bowley, *Introduction to Hebrew Bible: A Guided Tour of Israel’s Sacred Library*, 151.

⁶⁶ Ruane, “Pigs, Purity, and Patrilineality,” 501.

⁶⁷ Jonathan Klawans, “Moral and Ritual Purity,” in *The Historical Jesus in Context*, eds. A.J. Levine, Dale C. Allison, and John Dominic Crossan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 266; Lily C. Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protoevangelium of James* (WUNT 2/358; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 64.

⁶⁸ Klawans, “Moral and Ritual Purity,” 268.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 269.

breakdown in social life as well as in religious life. Moral impurity, unlike ritual impurity, was not contagious but was subject to punishment.⁷⁰

Gender and class did not play significant roles when it came to purity and impurity laws. Both men and women of all class statuses could become impure and would have experienced discharge, disease, and even exposure to the dead equally.⁷¹

Temple Purity

There were also specific practices that took place inside and outside the temple to ensure that purity within the temple was upheld. Offering sacrifices in atonement for sins was a common ritual to maintain purity. However, there were different expectations of the offerings depending on one's state of cleanliness or from what he or she was cleansing him or herself. For example, a woman was to offer two turtledoves or pigeons when cleansing herself from her menstruation, but an offering of a lamb and turtledoves was required when cleansing herself from childbirth. One must know the laws of purification to truly become cleansed.⁷²

Ritual pollution relies upon the belief that impurity can be contagious. This understanding greatly affected temple worship because one could not fully participate if one was unclean. Taking the necessary actions to maintain ritual purity also included staying away from those who were unclean, such as not sitting in the same seat as a woman who was menstruating.

⁷⁰ One example of moral impurity is found in John 8; the narrative of the woman found guilty of committing adultery. Within the story the Pharisees explain that in the Law of Moses the appropriate punishment would have been to stone the woman to death. This is because such an act was a moral impurity, and a sin. However, the act did not make her contagious to others. Only the woman, and possibly the man she was found guilty with, would have been affected by such an act.

⁷¹ Klawans, "Moral and Ritual Purity," 272.

⁷² Two Old Testament examples of this can be found in Leviticus 12:6 and 16:29. Leviticus 12:6 states: "When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering." Leviticus 16:29 states: "This shall be a statute to you forever: In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall deny yourselves, and shall do no work, neither the citizen nor the alien who resides among you."

Just as there were purification rituals for those who were experiencing ritual impurity, there were also purification rituals for those who experienced ritual pollution.

Ritual Purity and Cleansing for Women

As previously stated, purity and impurity were not gender or class specific. Some impurities only applied to women such as childbirth and menstruation, because they are natural parts of being a woman, they were not regarded as sinful in any way. However, they were considered unclean and steps needed to be taken for a woman to once again become pure after these natural processes took place.

In general, women posed more of a threat to purity than men, whether that was during menstruation, post-partum, or at other times. Such perceptions were at least as ancient as during the time of Hesiod, who wrote, “let a man not clean his skin in water that a woman has washed in. For a hard penalty follows on that for a long time.”⁷³ Leviticus 12 and 15 give specific instructions for women concerning post-partum cleanliness and purification, as well as monthly menstruation. As mentioned, a woman was ceremonially or ritually unclean for the seven days, or the time that she was bleeding (Lev. 12:2). Women had to be particularly concerned about purity rituals and laws concerning child birth and post-partum. The new mother was unclean for seven days, and all the same rules applied as though she was menstruating. Depending on the sex of the child, however, the rest of her purification ritual was different. According to Leviticus 12:4-5, a woman who gave birth to a male was impure for thirty-three days, while a woman who gave birth to a female was impure for sixty-six days. After she waited the thirty-three or sixty-six days she then must take the priest an offering of a lamb in its first year as a burnt offering, and a

⁷³ Originally found in Hesiod, *Work and Days*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (1914). The quote is taken from Anne Carson, “Dirt and Desire: The Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity,” *Constructions of the Classical Body*, ed. James I. Porter (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1999), 77.

pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering.⁷⁴ It is not until this was complete that she was clean again.⁷⁵ Post-partum impurity was also a pollutant. Therefore, anyone who touched the bed in which the mother had lain or sat in a chair in which she had sat during her time of uncleanness was unclean as well. Leviticus describes the ways in which a person who came into contact with such an impurity must go through the cleansing process. One who was contaminated must wash his or her clothes, and bathe, then he or she would be clean that evening.⁷⁶

Sexual Sins

Purity laws and the Holiness Code also had very specific standards for one's sexuality. Acts like adultery and incest were unclean, but they were also sinful. Leviticus 18 spends a great deal of time explaining sexual misconduct, and how these sins not only affect those who participate in them, but that they defile even the land in which the sin takes place. The New Testament also speaks to the severity of adultery in John 8:4-5: "'Teacher,' they said to Jesus, 'this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her....' If a woman was found committing adultery she could have been stoned to death for her sexual transgressions. Such was the gravity and severity of sexual sin in the ancient world. Showing restraint from such actions was honourable, because to lose control could mean defilement for those involved, those they were associated with, and the community and land of which they were a part.

⁷⁴ Leviticus 12:6 states "when the days of her purification are completed whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtle-dove for a sin offering."

⁷⁵ Ilan points out that the *Beit Shammai* and *Beit Hillel* do not agree on the post-partum cleansing rituals of a woman, therefore cleansing rituals may have varied. See Tal Ilan, *Integrating Women into Second Temple History* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001), 64.

⁷⁶ Seen in Leviticus 15:22-23 when it states: "Whoever touches anything upon she lies during her impurity shall be unclean; everything also upon which she sits shall be unclean. Whoever touches her bed shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and be unclean until the evening."

For the most part, men and women experienced and were expected to follow the same purity laws and standards. However, sexuality and sexual sins would vary between men and women, because it was important for men to be masculine and women to be feminine in the ancient world. Masculinity and femininity held very different sexuality standards. A pure, feminine woman had to be modest and chaste. Sex before marriage was unacceptable for women because it would mean that they had no shame or concern for their role within society. Women were honourable when they conformed to the appropriate purity laws and societal standards. Men were not held to those same sexual standards because a male's sexuality was so closely tied to masculinity. Therefore, in order to remain honourable, a male had to assert his sexuality, while at the same time demonstrate his self-control.

Gender and Virginity

The definition of a virgin in antiquity included the notion that one had never taken part in sexual intercourse or activity. As previously stated, the ability to control oneself and one's actions was honourable. This was also true when it came to one's sexuality. Men and women were to exercise sexuality in very different ways. Diana Swancutt states that "the Greek or Roman woman was by definition the penetrated, empty vessel that her husband filled (1 Thess 4:4), while the male citizen was legally free and expected to penetrate inferior sex partners: his wife, slaves, prostitutes, and occasionally actors or dancers."⁷⁷ The male and female were seen as opposites, especially in terms of sex and sexuality. A woman's purity was closely linked to her sexuality. A woman was expected to be a virgin until she was married; this was vital because sexuality was so closely connected to honour.

⁷⁷ Diana Swancutt, "Sexy Stoics and the Rereading of Romans 1:18-2:16," *A Feminist Companion to Paul*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2004), 54-5 as found in Osiek and Pouya, "Constructions of Gender in the Roman Imperial World," 45.

Ancient society perceived women as constant temptations to men, which made women dangerous. One example of this is seen in the story of David and Bathsheba. David seduced Bathsheba, a married woman, and decides that he has to have her as his own. Despite having many other wives of his own, he is too tempted by the sight of Bathsheba and commits adultery with her. The Lord is angered by his decision and punishes David.⁷⁸ Additionally, women were held to very high sexual standards. As Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch state, “virginity before marriage is a girl’s highest duty and greatest value.”⁷⁹ Parents, particularly fathers, claimed ownership of their daughters until the time of marriage. After the marriage took place, the girl’s father transferred that ownership to the groom. Typically, the family of the bride would also receive money or something of value when this took place, known as the bride price. If a girl lost her virginity before she was married, her chances of becoming a wife became very slim. Once the daughter was no longer eligible for marriage, regardless of the reason, she “has lost all market-value, and turns into a bothersome worry.”⁸⁰ Therefore, her family also lost the opportunity to receive the bride price and she remained under her father’s care; he remained financially responsible for her. An unmarried woman thus had to remain a virgin in order to maintain her honour and the honour of her family.

As previously mentioned, men and women were both held to purity laws in the ancient world. However, virginity would have been seen as an aspect of purity for women, but not necessarily for men. Biology plays a large role in this. Ilan explains:

One of the main and most obvious biological differences between men and women is that the woman is the one who bears children. As a result, a woman can always be sure that the children she is raising are her own, whereas the identity of the father is theoretically never certain. But there is one part of a woman’s

⁷⁸ 2 Samuel 11:1-12:15

⁷⁹ Carolyn Osiek and David L. Balch, *Families in the New Testament World: Households and House Churches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 89.

⁸⁰ Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, 91.

anatomy which can serve as a fairly sure indicator of paternity – her hymen. If a woman is a virgin when married, her husband can be sure at least that his wife was not pregnant before the wedding.⁸¹

In a patriarchal society where the male claimed the family as his property, women bearing the children caused many problems. One problem would have been the question of paternity for the child, especially if the husband questioned his wife's fidelity. Therefore, a woman needed to remain a virgin in order that there would be no question about paternity when it came time for child bearing. Therefore, the sexual sins that were referred to in the previous section would have encompassed a woman's sexuality, but not necessarily a man's in the same way. Pitt-Rivers states that the "honour of a man is involved therefore in the sexual purity of his mother, wife, and daughters, and sisters, not in his own."⁸² Sexual rules and norms were drastically divided by gender. Virginity was so important that if a girl died unwed it would be noted on her tombstone.⁸³

It is helpful to appreciate what the ancient world believed about gender and the two sexes in order to understand the great difference in standards and expectations for male and female sexuality. First, the differences in the male and female body were not understood as different, rather "the woman has inside them what the man has outside them" as Hippocrates and Galen believed.⁸⁴ Aristotle is one of the first to say that women and men are not intrinsically made of the same phallic system, rather they had to be different in order for procreation to take place. He reasoned that in order for a woman to not procreate by herself, she had to be different from the man.⁸⁵ From these beliefs stems the idea that the male was believed to have the correct and

⁸¹ Ibid., 97.

⁸² Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," 45.

⁸³ Ibid., 98.

⁸⁴ Giulia Sissa, *Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World*, trans. George Staunton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 86.

⁸⁵ Aristotle, *Gen. An.* 722:10-15.

perfect body, once again making males the dominant sex. The female then was left to be understood as a deformed or less perfect male.

Men were not simply seen as masculine because they fit the part anatomically, they had to assert their masculinity, once again establishing honour. One way to do this was by asserting their sexuality. Kate Cooper explains that men were to “father legitimate heirs as vigorously as they could.”⁸⁶ This led to the male having the right and even expectation to penetrate those who were considered to be below them, such as their wives, prostitutes, and slaves. There were, of course, other ways to establish masculinity, but sexuality and power were so closely aligned that sexual dominance played a role. Such an emphasis on sexual power did not mean that men could engage in sexual acts indiscriminately, however, and thus a certain degree of self-restraint had to be upheld.

Women were perceived as the opposite, as their femininity was closely tied to their ability to control their sexuality. It was important for women to be modest and not a temptation to men, because a woman’s sexuality and virginity were her greatest value in the ancient world. Virginity and purity, especially sexual purity, were important ways young women upheld their honour. Seneca recalls a woman who received no bids at the sale because she had been a pirate’s slave, therefore it was known that she was not a virgin.⁸⁷

Such women needed to remain chaste until marriage to ensure not only their honour, but also their future. Ilan says it best when she states, “in antiquity, virginity was a commodity with a price.”⁸⁸ Virginity was key to ensuring a suitable marriage for young women. By saving oneself

⁸⁶ Kate Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealized Womanhood in Late Antiquity*, ix.

⁸⁷ Sen. *Controv.* 1.2.4-5.

⁸⁸ Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, 97.

for marriage, the woman gained honour for herself and also for her family.⁸⁹ Virginity, along with the social status of the family, would determine the value of the monetary gift for the bride-price. However, if virginity was questioned or proven false, the young woman would no longer be eligible for marriage, even if she were seduced or had been raped. Either way, it was believed that the woman's value was decreased to that of a slave girl.⁹⁰ She was seen as someone who did not have a sense of shame, and therefore was shamed herself. One example of this can be seen in the Book of Revelation through the warning to Jezebel. Revelation 2:22 states: "Beware, I am throwing her [Jezebel] on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into distress, unless they repent of their doings; and I will strike her children dead." Revelation gives warning to all those involved in adultery; all are found guilty and punished, even the offspring!

As Malina explains, husbands and wives were not intended to be companions and comforters because marriage was a bonding of two honourable families.⁹¹ A woman would have only been a positive addition to the family if she could bring honour to her new family, which only a virgin bride could do. Jewish women were held to the same standards in these matters as Gentile women in the Greco-Roman world.

Shame played an important role in virginity as well. A woman wanted to be known by the community as modest, which meant that she would be "continually concerned about her honour as reputation for properly controlled sexuality."⁹² Being modest, shy, and aware of the importance of controlled sexuality would have been a high priority for young, unmarried females, as seen in the previous example of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. There was a perception that

⁸⁹ Mary F. Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 61.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁹¹ Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights for Cultural Anthropology*, 144.

⁹² Osiek and Pouya, "Constructions of Gender in the Roman Imperial World," 46.

if all these steps were taken, the chances were much higher that a young woman would remain a virgin until marriage.

Christian Standards for Virginity

As previously stated, Mediterranean Jews and Gentiles had much in common. However, when Christianity began to spread, Christian standards were not always as closely aligned to those of Greco-Roman society. Cooper recognizes that Christians began to call for sexual denial and even asceticism. She does not claim that the ancient world did not see the value of virginity, especially for women, but does recognize that there is a greater call and emphasis upon sexual morality after the spread of Christianity. She observes that sex and power were always connected in a way; men were to be sexual beings who were to “father legitimate heirs as vigorously as they could.”⁹³ Once sexual restraint and “otherworldly families” were desired by Christians, some in the ancient Mediterranean world shifted to see the positive side to asceticism and celibacy as well.

Some members of the early Christ movement thought that virginity was not only important for females to maintain before marriage, but something valuable for all people to maintain as a lifestyle. Paul was clearly an advocate of the celibate lifestyle. 1 Corinthians 7:25-28 states:

Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy. I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you marry, do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet, those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that.

⁹³ Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, ix.

With the growing popularity of Paul's letters, some people within the early churches were beginning to believe that a chaste lifestyle was not only meant for unmarried young women, but for all people who wanted to live as followers of Jesus.

Aristotle had rationalized sex and sexuality as something natural and as necessary for procreation.⁹⁴ He believed that because humans reproduce through sexual intercourse, rather than by independent generation, they are the perfect animals. Giulia Suissa explains that humans “occupy the highest position of hierarchy of nature, [by] displaying the most extreme sexual dissimilarity.”⁹⁵ Understanding sexuality and procreation as a natural part of life helps provide perspective on the drastic shift Christians eventually effected when emphasizing virginity more than their Jewish predecessors. Some Christians were taking on a lifestyle that would have seemed unnatural at the time.

Christians also began to turn the concept of life on its head by referring to earthly life as temporary. Therefore, sex and even procreation became temporary pleasures. 2 Corinthians 5:1 states: “For we know that is the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” Some Christians believed that all that happens in this life is only in preparation for a life after death. One must live a virtuous and holy life here on earth to reach eternal life after death. Christians thus began to practice virginity and chastity because they were awaiting eternal pleasures in the afterlife. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Cooper explains that Christians used “the female figure of the virgin as the cultural icon by which they broadcast their message.”⁹⁶ And with that, women would be held to

⁹⁴ Sissa, *Sex and Sensuality in the Ancient World*, 12.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹⁶ Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, x.

an even higher standard because the female figure of the virgin manifested the epitome of womanhood.

A good example of this transition is the apocryphal text, the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Within this text Thecla wants to be a follower and disciple like Paul, however she is also pressured by her mother to be married. Throughout the story there are two men who wish to make her their wife, one of whom imprisons her when she turns him down in order to remain a pure and chaste virgin so that she can better serve God as a disciple.⁹⁷ In order to fully do God's work, Paul believes Thecla, a woman, as well as himself, a man, must be unmarried and chaste. This story is an example of how virginity is an honourable status within the church.

As discussed, a woman's purity was heavily dependent upon her status as a virgin. However, as Cooper has pointed out, many early Christians began to value virginity as a lifestyle choice, not simply for unmarried women. Virginity then takes on a whole new level of purity and honour. The virgin is now seen as someone who is qualified for discipleship, as seen in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*.

As Christianity emerged, honour was not only a measurement of one's ability to maintain social norms and expectations in society, but there was also honour in exceeding those

⁹⁷ "The Acts of Paul and Thecla," *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts*, ed. Patricia Cox Miller; trans. J. K. Elliott (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 156-165, from *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, trans. J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Another example of this can be seen in the *Gospel of Thomas*. The *Gospel of Thomas* states "blessed is the womb that has not conceived and the breasts that have not given milk" (*Gos. Thom.* 79). Later in the text, when Simon Peter requests that Mary no longer be able to travel with them, the *Gos. Thom.* states "Jesus said, 'Look, I am going to guide her in order to make her male, so that she may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven'" (*Gos. Thom.* 114; trans. Ehrman and Pleše, "The Gospel according to Thomas," *The Apocryphal Gospels*, 329, 335). This can also be seen in the *Acts of Andrew*. The women within the text have committed sexual sins and are suffering because of it. In the *Acts Andr.* three women, Lesbios' wife, Calliopa, and Trophima are all offered forgiveness and a second chance for their sins if they pray and believe in Christ (*Acts Andr.* 23-25). It is clear that they were seen as sinful because they did not live chaste, celibate lifestyles before Andrew converted them. Translation found in J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M. R. James* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 231-302.

expectations. What was originally expected of women was to live a chaste and pure lifestyle until one was married. Now, for some Christians, it was even more honourable for women to be able to maintain the status of virginity for a lifetime, in order to better do the will of God.⁹⁸

Conclusion

In ancient Mediterranean society a woman had two very important roles in life: first to maintain the reputation of virgin until married, then to become a good wife and mother. Aristotle believed that humanity occupied the top position in the animal hierarchy because sex led to procreation. A man and woman were married to join two honourable families and to procreate and maintain an honourable household and family. Therefore, a woman was most honourable when she held the title of “virgin” or “mother.” One of the most well-known examples of “virgin” and “mother” is Mary, the mother of Jesus. With the spread of Christianity and a new emphasis on virginity as a way to do the will of God, Mary became the epitome of what a woman should be, both “virgin” and “mother” simultaneously. The following chapter will explore the ways in which Mary holds the titles of “virgin” and “mother” at the same time. In doing so, Mary becomes the pinnacle of female honour in the ancient Mediterranean world.

⁹⁸ Another example of this can be found in the *Acts of Andrew*. In this story, Maximilla, wife of Aegeate, becomes ill. She prays for healing and that she may be able to live a chaste and pure life after she is healed. Once she is well again she does not allow her husband to kiss her anymore because she does not want to defile herself in that way again. Sex is not seen as something natural between a husband and wife in this story, but instead as something “filthy” in which Maximilla should not be forced to engage. Translation found in Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 231-302.

Chapter 3

Mary's Purity and Virginitly in *The Protoevangelium of James*

In this chapter I will examine the ways in which the *Protoevangelium of James* focuses on Mary's purity and virginitly and why this would have been so important for the author at the time of composition. First, I will look at Mary's family and her life as a child living in the temple. Next I will explore Mary's relationship with Joseph and why he is seen as her guardian rather than her husband. Finally, I will discuss the significance of Mary's virgin birth to Jesus. All of these dimensions of the story demonstrate that the author's depiction of Mary is one that emphasizes her purity and virginitly.

The Protoevangelium of James: Authorship and Date

Before turning to the topics of Mary's purity and virginitly, however, it is important to discuss in more detail the historical background to the *Prot. Jas.* The last chapter of the text is unusual because it explicitly states its origins: "Now I, James, am the one who wrote this account at the time when an uproar arose in Jerusalem at the death of Herod."¹ This one line is written in the text to indicate author and date of completion. Using these signifiers the audience is led to believe that the author is James, presumably the son of Joseph and step-son of Mary, and thus an eyewitness account to these events. James is addressed as the brother of Jesus in Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3, and Paul calls him a "pillar" in Galatians 2:9, therefore the Christian community at the time would have known him to be a man with authority.²

¹ *Prot. Jas.* 25:1; Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 77.

² James, the brother of Jesus is also mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. He is first introduced in Acts 12:17 when Peter is delivered from prison. Peter goes to the men at the gate and tells them to relay the information to "James and to the believers." Once again James is mentioned in Acts 15:13-21. Here James is asking that all those Gentiles who are turning God be welcomed. In this passage James is seen quoting Amos 9:11-12.

If one was to date the text from the death of Herod, as the *Prot. Jas.* signals, the text would have been written around 4 BCE, long before the canonical gospels were written. Such a date does not seem likely because the text exhibits knowledge of the infancy stories found in Matthew and Luke, and it is attempting to fill in the gaps found within the two canonical stories.³ Matthew and Luke both furnish narratives of Jesus' birth, but neither one addresses the question of why Mary and Joseph were chosen to be parents to the Son of God. Next, the Lukan narrative explains that John the Baptist and Jesus are cousins who are only a few months apart. In Matthew, Mary and Joseph are forced to flee with Jesus because of Herod's edict to kill the male infants. Matthew does not refer to the parents of John or his birth, and the Gospel of Luke, although it has the story of John's origins, does not indicate what happens to John, Elizabeth and Zechariah after the Edict of Herod takes place. However, the *Prot. Jas.* assures the audience of John's safety in chapters 22 and 23 when it describes Elizabeth and John fleeing to the hills.⁴

Given that the *Prot. Jas.* strategically addresses gaps in the canonical stories, the text was not likely composed before the other canonical texts were circulated. Luke was probably written between 85-90 CE and Matthew between 80-85 CE.⁵ Therefore the date of this text must be sometime after 80-90 CE. James likely died in approximately 62 CE, so even if other evidence

³ Michael K. W. Suh and Vernon K. Robbins claim that this text is not only filling in the gaps within the canonical gospels; rather, it "establishes and maintains its own agenda in an overall context of the agenda of the Lukan account... Therefore, it should not be surprising to discover that the four programmatic hymns in Luke 1-2 have been appropriated in unexpected ways in the *Prot. Jas.*." They are arguing that this text re-uses the Lukan hymns in appropriate ways to make its own argument. See Michael K. W. Suh and Vernon K. Robbins, "From Prophetic Hymns to Death at the Altar: Luke 1-2 and Protoevangelium of James," *Jesus and Mary Reimagined in Early Christian Literature*, eds. Vernon K. Robbins and Jonathan M. Potter (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 129-130.

⁴ Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 9.

⁵ Dennis C. Duling, "The Gospel According to Matthew," *The HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated: New Revised Standard Version*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (San Francisco; HarperOne, 1989), 1666; Christopher R. Matthews, "The Gospel According to Luke," *The HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated: New Revised Standard Version*, ed. Harold W. Attridge (San Francisco; HarperOne, 1989), 1760.

led one to think James were the true author, the dependence of the *Prot. Jas.* upon Matthew and Luke makes it very unlikely that James could have written it.⁶

The earliest manuscript of the *Prot. Jas.* dates to the early fourth-century, meaning that this is the latest possible date of the text.⁷ There are also third century theologians such as Origen and Clement of Alexandria who appear to have knowledge of the *Prot. Jas.*, referencing details like Jesus' brothers from Joseph, and Mary's midwife proclaiming proof of Mary's virginity.⁸

Other scholars have used the date of Celsus' *True Doctrine* to date the *Prot. Jas.*. If the author was writing *Prot. Jas.* as an apologetic work against Celsus' criticism of Mary's virginity and purity, the text must have been written after the attacks made on her by Celsus in *True Doctrine* in 178 CE, or shortly after.⁹ As previously explained, it is also clear that the author was aware of the canonical texts, Matthew and Luke, so most scholars confirm that the *Prot. Jas.* is a late second century text.

Since it is safe to assume that James is not the author of the *Prot. Jas.*, the pseudonymous author remains intriguing. There are no other names offered in the text to suggest an alternative author, but there are several clues from within that offer a profile of who he may have been. First, although the subject matter is Mary, a female, the author is likely a man. There is no attention to female perspectives within the text, and in general the female is always discussed in relation to the male, even a male God.¹⁰ Mary's sexuality is not really her own; rather, it is controlled by men for God, which suggests that the author is more likely male than female. Next,

⁶ Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 9.

⁷ Burke, *Secret Scriptures Revealed*, 46.

⁸ Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 9; Ehrman and Pleše, "The Proto-Gospel of James," 32.

⁹ P. van Stempvoort, "The Protoevangelium of Jacobai, the Sources of its Theme and Style and their Bearing on its Date" in *Studia Evangelica III*, ed. F. Cross (Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 1964), 423; Schaberg, "The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth," 45.

¹⁰ Schaberg, "The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth," 45.

the author clearly had some “literary talent and training.”¹¹ The story is about innocence and birth and the author has tried to make the narrative clear, in “simple koine Greek, marked by parallel treatments of persons and events.”¹² Although there were literate women in antiquity, men were much more likely to receive an education than women.

Vuong makes a strong argument that this narrative could be a Jewish purity text because so much of it centres on Jewish customs and Second Temple Purity laws, while at the same time it is a very Christian text because of its focus on Christian tradition.¹³ Yet, there is a general “consensus that the author was not a Palestinian Jewish Christian, because of his ignorance towards the temple in pre-70 Judaism, and unfamiliarity with Palestinian geography.”¹⁴ The author is very familiar with Jewish apocryphal traditions.¹⁵ Therefore, the author is working within both Jewish and Christian traditions and backgrounds. However, his emphasis on Joachim, Anna, and Mary’s attention to Jewish tradition does indicate that the author himself is most likely a Jew, and presumes that there are some Jews in his audience.

Ehrman and Pleše also think that the author formed the narrative from oral tradition, like most Christian stories from that time. This formation makes it particularly difficult to trace the origins of the text.¹⁶ Therefore, based on what can be seen in the story as it exists presently, it is clear the author is a male, with some literary training, who is very interested in offering a Jewish-Christian narrative about Mary’s birth and life.

Purpose

¹¹ Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas: with Introduction*, 10.

¹² Schaberg, “The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth,” 44.

¹³ Lily Vuong, “Let Us Bring Her to the Temple of the Lord”: Exploring the Boundaries of Jewish and Christian Relations through the Presentation of Mary in the *Protoevangelium of James*” in *Infancy Gospels: Stories and Identities*, eds. Claire Clivaz, Andreas Dettwiler, Luc Devillers, and Enrico Norelli (WUNT 2/281; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 419-420.

¹⁴ Schaberg, “The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth.” 45.

¹⁵ Schaberg, “The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth,” 45.

¹⁶ Ehrman and Pleše, “*The Proto-Gospel of James: The Birth of Mary, the Revelation of James*,” 33.

There have been a number of theories discussing why the *Prot. Jas.* was written. First, as previously discussed, this text seeks to answer many of the questions prompted after Matthew and Luke were circulated. As Meredith Elliott Hollman explains, Mary takes the stage in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and then fades into the background with many unanswered questions.¹⁷ Most importantly, why was Mary chosen? Who was she? What qualified her to bear the child of God? This text seeks to give the audience a sense of who Mary was, establishing that she was a woman who came from a wealthy and honourable family, worthy of bearing the child of God. The *Prot. Jas.* even goes back to Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, establishing that they too were righteous and wealthy people concerned with honour and purity laws.

Celsus wrote a document known as *True Doctrine*, however the only trace of the text that remains is found within Origen's *Contra Celsum*.¹⁸ In *True Doctrine*, Celsus' fictitious Jew claims that Jesus himself engineered the story of Mary's virgin birth. The text claimed that "Jesus came from a small village, and was born of a poor country woman" who had to work to earn a living and was not even known by her neighbours.¹⁹ *True Doctrine* asserts that after she was married or betrothed to a carpenter Mary was seduced and impregnated by the Roman soldier, Panthera. Once she was discovered and convicted of adultery her husband or betrothed threw her out. Celsus asserted that "when [Mary was] hated by her husband, and turned out of doors, she was not saved by divine power, nor was her story believed."²⁰ It is after all of this that she secretly gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child.

¹⁷ Meredith Elliott Hollman, "Temple Virgin and Virgin Temple: Mary's Body as Sacred Space in the Protoevangelium of James," in *Jesus and Mary Reimagined in Early Christian Literature*, eds. Vernon K. Robbins and Jonathan M. Potter (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 103.

¹⁸ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 34.

¹⁹ Schaberg, "The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth," 46; Mary F. Foskett, "Virginity as Purity in the Protoevangelium of James," *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 67.

²⁰ Origen, *CC* 1:39.

The *Prot. Jas.* is also likely a rebuttal to the accusations Celsus and others made against Mary in the late 2nd century. Origen counters Celsus' account, as indicated above, that Mary did not conceive of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, but Mary had an illegitimate child.²¹ Schaberg states "the author [of the *Prot. Jas.*] was anxious to insist as explicitly as possible that the Christian Testament accounts must be read to mean that Mary was a biological virgin who had intercourse with no one."²² Celsus' statement would nullify the claim that Mary was a virgin during the time of the conception of Jesus, upheld although not in explicit detail by the accounts in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

An illicit sexual relationship between a young Jewish woman and a Roman soldier would have been a scandalous and shameful act. This immorality would have brought shame not only to Mary, but also Jesus, because he would have been seen as an illegitimate child. Honour, as the previous chapter explained, is collective, so all those involved in the Christian movement would have felt the ramifications from this accusation about Mary and Jesus. These allegations would have prompted many Christians to feel the need to re-address who Mary was and why she was considered to be an honourable woman, worthy of bearing the child of God, while at the same time exposing the lies that Celsus and others were spreading about her. The author of the *Prot. Jas.* intended Mary to be seen as a woman with a noble background, chosen by God from the beginning, who had always been known by those around her as a pure and honourable woman.

Vuong thinks that the *Prot. Jas.* would have been read as a Jewish-Christian purity narrative, with Mary's virginity before and after the birth of Jesus as only one aspect of her

²¹ Origen, *CC* 1:32, 31.

²² Schaberg, "The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth," 36.

purity.²³ She explains that Mary's purity is the primary focus of the text, not only her purity as a virgin, but Mary's concern for ritual purity as a whole.²⁴ There are many instances when Mary and her parents are portrayed as the epitome of ritual purity and Vuong may be correct in saying that describing the importance of purity as a whole may be a significant reason for this book's formation. Establishing the importance of purity to Mary, as well as to her family, would have given them all honour in the eyes of their community. By establishing that Mary is a woman from an honourable family and is honourable herself, the text addressed many of the accusations made against her. The stress on Mary's ascribed honour and purity would have been in contrast to any assertions that Mary had a poor upbringing and lacked sexual purity.

Who is Mary?

Within the canonical texts Mary is portrayed as a woman chosen by God to bear God's son. There are few defining characteristics about Mary. For example, she is already betrothed to Joseph in what appears to be an average marriage arrangement. She is a regular woman from a typical family. The angel Gabriel appears to her in Luke 1:26-38 explaining that she will bear a child despite being a *παρθένος* or "virgin" (Luke 1:27). Hearing the message, Mary responds in Luke 1:38, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word." After accepting the privilege of hearing that she will bear the Son of God, she goes to visit Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. Mary gives birth in Bethlehem and Jesus is presented in the temple in Luke. Then, there is one story of Jesus at age twelve in the temple where Mary appears as a worried mother after Jesus is lost for three days. Within this story Mary is simply addressed as *μήτηρ αὐτοῦ* or "his mother" saying, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your

²³ Lily Vuong, "Purity, Piety, and the Purpose of the *Protoevangelium of James*," in *"Non-Canonical" Religious Texts in Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, eds. Lee Martin McDonald and James H. Charlesworth (Jewish and Christian Texts in Context and Related Studies Series; New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 206.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

father and I have been worried searching for you in great anxiety” (Luke 2:48). After this story takes place, Mary comes into view one other time in Luke 24:10 when Jesus appears to the women after his resurrection, and Mary is one of those women. Overall, very little is known about Mary from the Gospel of Luke.

The other canonical texts offer even less about Mary. The story in the Gospel of Matthew is presented from Joseph’s point of view, for Gabriel visits him instead of Mary. Joseph is in the line of David and is betrothed to the virgin, Mary.²⁵ Mary is the woman through whom Jesus must be born to become Joseph’s earthly child and to be in the line of David. Mark and John offer even less information; neither offers a birth narrative of Jesus. Mary is mentioned only a few times in Mark, most of which she is only addressed in relation to Jesus.²⁶ In the Gospel of John, Mary is never addressed by name, rather only referred to as Jesus’ mother.²⁷

In summary, throughout the canonical gospels, all that is known about Mary is that she is a virgin of child-bearing age, who is betrothed to Joseph, and who becomes a concerned mother. Therefore, the *Prot. Jas.* offers a narrative of Mary as a woman who was not unique only because she was chosen to bear Jesus, but, pure and set apart from the very beginning by God to give birth to Jesus.

Purity in the *Prot. Jas.*

Mary is the central character throughout most of the *Prot. Jas.*, but more specifically, Mary’s purity is the focus of the text, ultimately highlighted through her virginity before and after the birth of Jesus. Her parents, Joachim and Anna, are wealthy Israelites who had not yet borne an Israelite child.²⁸ This barrenness leads the priests and other righteous Israelites to

²⁵ Found in Matthew 1:2-16.

²⁶ Mark 6:3 “Jesus, the son of Mary...”

²⁷ In John 2:1-2 (Wedding at Cana) and John 19:25 (Crucifixion of Jesus) Mary is called the “mother of Jesus.”

²⁸ *Prot. Jas.* 1:5

believe that Joachim is not a righteous man; therefore, he is not allowed to offer sacrifices at the temple. Joachim then leaves home to fast in the wilderness. According to Vuong, the depiction of Joachim fasting and praying is used to “reinforce his characterization as a pious Jew,”²⁹ and Anna alone at home, barren and widowed. Through this narrative, the author is comparing Anna to the matriarchs of the Old Testament, specifically Sarah. Sarah was also barren and waiting for God to bless her with a child. The author is constructing Mary’s unknown narrative “by analogy with that which is known,”³⁰ aligning Mary and her family with righteous and honourable Israelites.

This is important because Joachim is proving himself to be a righteous man, who would not go against the temple rules of making a sacrifice if he was not worthy. Joachim is proven righteous in the text, making him unique in the sense that he is both wealthy and righteous. H. R. Smid explains that Joachim “being rich does not lead to iniquity and sin, but to piety and the serving of God” which is in contrast to Luke 2:24.³¹ Already Mary’s family is set apart from the rest, and receiving both material wealth and spiritual favour from God.

Joachim and Anna are both visited by messengers from God, who bring the good news that they shall bear a child, just as Mary and Joseph are both visited by messengers from God in Luke 2:9-10 and Matthew 1:20-12. Joachim is so overjoyed that his righteousness has been restored that he does not go home to his wife, instead goes straight to the temple to offer generous offerings of ten lambs, twelve tender calves, and one-hundred goats.³² This sacrifice exceeds any offering necessary, and it shows just how important bearing a child was to Joachim. It is a sign that Joachim is both wealthy and generous, two characteristics that did not necessarily

²⁹ Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protoevangelium of James*, 72-73.

³⁰ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 40.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³² *Prot. Jas.* 4:5-7

go together in the ancient world.³³ Making this sacrifice is ultimately illustrating that Joachim has been acknowledged as a righteous man by those in the temple. Previously in the text Joachim was confronted by a man named Reubel who told him that “you are not allowed to offer your gifts first because you have not produced an Israelite child” according to *Prot. Jas.* 1:5. Joachim found this to be true when he read “the book of the twelve tribes of Israel” and discovered “all righteous people in Israel did indeed have children” (*Prot. Jas.* 1:6-7). Once Anna is pregnant with Joachim’s child, he is then proven righteous and honourable.

Anna immediately says in *Prot. Jas.* 4:2: “as the Lord God lives, whether I give birth to a boy or a girl, I’ll offer it as a gift to the Lord my God, and it will serve him its whole life.” These words are reminiscent of Hannah in 1 Samuel, who makes a similar promise to God, only wishing to bear a male. However, there is no condition like this made in the *Prot. Jas.*. Anna’s promise also ensures that Mary will not be able to experience a real marriage; her life will always belong to the temple.³⁴ Mary’s pure and chaste lifestyle is one that was chosen for her from the very beginning.

Anna gives birth to Mary and there is careful detail explaining that all post-partum cleansing rituals have been maintained and that Mary is in no way impure. *Prot. Jas.* 5:9-10 even states “the prescribed days were completed, Anna cleansed herself of the flow of blood. And she offered her breast to the infant and gave her the name Mary.” As chapter 2 described, a woman needed to undergo specific purity rituals before she was clean again. In this case Anna needed to wait sixty-six days because the infant is a female, and make proper sacrifices at the temple, as explained in Leviticus 12:1-8. Smid draws attention to the fact that Anna becomes the focus of the story for a moment. It is Anna who names the child, and, most interestingly, it is Anna who

³³ Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 39.

³⁴ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 39.

chooses to wait to feed her from her breast until after purification.³⁵ Mary's purity becomes Anna's primary focus.

Anna's constant concern for Mary's purity continues into her childhood. Mary takes her first steps at the very young age of six months. It is in this moment that Anna vows that Mary will not walk on the ground again until she goes to the temple, as illustrated in *Prot. Jas.* 6:4: "And so she turned her bedroom into a sanctuary and did not permit anything profane or unclean to pass the child's lips." *Prot. Jas.* 6:4 is referring to Mary's purity with regard to her diet. There has been debate over this translation. The "child's lips" is a translation from the pronoun αὐτῆς or "it" in the stanza, and could also be translated to mean "the bedroom."³⁶ However, this translation is problematic because "it" or αὐτῆς is a feminine pronoun. Therefore, the translation most scholars believe to be correct is "child's lips."³⁷ To read αὐτῆς as "child's lips" makes it clear that the text is referring to dietary laws, which Anna would have been monitoring.

While in the bedroom the "undefiled daughters of the Hebrews" (θυγατέρας τῶν Ἑβραίων τὰς ἀμιάντους) come to keep Mary company (*Prot. Jas.* 6:5). Little is known about who the undefiled daughters of the Hebrews were. In *Judith* 10:10 *Judith* describes herself as a "daughter of the Hebrews;" yet, it does not appear that the author is referring to the same meaning. It is likely that this was a contemporary word for Christian virgins at that time, with which the author was familiar.³⁸ Once again the author is not concerned with portraying accurate details, rather "the point is to underscore that Mary's first years were spent in the purest

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁶ Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 43; Ehrman and Pleše, "The Proto-Gospel of James," 46.

³⁷ Hock, and Ehrman and Pleše agree with this translation of the Greek pronoun αὐτῆς. See Hock translates αὐτῆς as "child's lips," whereas Ehrman and Pleše translate αὐτῆς to "her lips," both of which are referring to Mary's lips. See Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 43; Ehrman and Pleše, "The Proto-Gospel of James," 47. Smid's *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary* focuses on the holy sanctuary, which could indicate that he believes αὐτῆς is in fact referring to the holy sanctuary, not to Mary's lips. I chose to use Hock's translation because it enhances Mary's purity, which is a primary focus for the author.

³⁸ Hock *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 43.

seclusion of her mother's bedroom."³⁹ The author uses specific details to convey the fact that Mary is kept away from the rest of the world in "holy seclusion."⁴⁰ He is trying to show that from the very beginning of Mary's life she is too holy to be a part of the ordinary world; she is destined for much more.⁴¹

Joachim throws a banquet for Mary's first birthday, where he invites the "high priests, priests, scholars council of elders, and all the people of Israel" (*Prot. Jas.* 6:6). It is here that Mary receives two blessings: first from the priests, then from the high priests. Traditionally, birthdays were not celebrated by Jews at this time, so it is likely the author was connecting Mary's birthday with the feast of the weaning of the child, seen in Genesis 21:8.⁴² It is clear at this point that the author was uncertain about Jewish traditions, or the even the names of various Jewish groups. However, it also indicates that portraying these details correctly was not the author's goal. The intent was to provide a narrative for Mary's childhood that proves she is always presented as an exceptionally pure child, and recognized as holy by all. The two blessings within this chapter do just that: she is blessed by the priests and they state in *Prot. Jas.* 6:7: "God of our fathers, bless this child and give her a name which will be on the lips of future generations to come." The priests' blessing is then followed by the high priests blessing her a second time in *Prot. Jas.* 6:9: "most high God, look on this child and bless her with the ultimate blessing, one which cannot be surpassed." It is by this blessing that "Mary becomes the most important among men."⁴³ Anna's steps for purification have paid off and Mary is established as a holy and blessed child of the Lord.

³⁹ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁰ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 50.

⁴¹ Ibid., 50.

⁴² Ibid., 52.

⁴³ Ibid., 53.

At three years old Mary is taken to the temple to fulfill the promise Anna made the day she was told of Mary's conception. Mary is once again left in holy seclusion away from the world. The priests welcome her in *Prot. Jas.* 7:7-8 saying, "the Lord God has exalted your name among all generations. In you the Lord will disclose his redemption to the people of Israel during the last days." *Prot. Jas.* 7:7, in particular, states Ἐμεγάλυνεν κύριος ὁ Θεὸς τὸ ὄνομά σου ἐν πάσαις ταῖς γενεαῖς, which sounds very similar to what Mary says about herself in Luke 1:48-49: ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν μακαριοῦσίν με πᾶσαι αἱ γεωεαὶ ὅτι ἐποίησέν μοι μεγάλα ὁ δυνατός or "surely from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name." In the *Prot. Jas.* the author is making the claim that Mary did not need the birth of Jesus to make her blessed, for she was blessed from the very beginning, in contrast to Luke when the virgin birth makes Mary blessed.⁴⁴ Thus the *Prot. Jas.* emphasizes that Mary was not chosen randomly to bear the son of God, rather, she has been unique her entire life, making her worthy of such a privilege.

Mary's response to her new home at the temple is only positive, for she dances and never looks back at her parents as they leave.⁴⁵ According to E. Burrows, the author is comparing Mary's life to that of Samuel. First, her parents are similar to that of Samuel's mother, Hannah. In 1 Samuel 1:7 Hannah is criticized for her childlessness and then refuses food, just like Joachim. Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:27 and Anna in *Prot. Jas.* 4:2 both dedicate their child to God before the birth. Also, Samuel in 1 Samuel 1:24-28 and Mary in *Prot. Jas.* 7:4-6 are both presented at the temple and both live their lives there.⁴⁶ Samuel anointed Saul and David, and

⁴⁴ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁵ Schaberg, "The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth," 48.

⁴⁶ E. Burrows, "The Gospel of the Infancy," *The Bellarmine Series* 6 (1945), 38; Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 62.

Jesus is often compared to David. Therefore, Mary bringing Jesus into the world would have been comparable to Samuel raising David up as a king.

In *Prot. Jas.* 8:1 it states that Mary's "parents left for home marveling and praising and glorifying the Lord God because the child did not look back at them." Mary is so righteous that she chooses God over her parents by not looking back at them as they leave. This detail may be reminiscent of the story of Lot and his wife in Genesis 19. Sodom and Gomorrah are going to be destroyed and thus the angels told Lot, his wife, and two daughters to leave the city. However, Lot's wife looks back at the city rather than continuing to move forward as God has told them to do, and when she does "she became a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19:26). Looking back at what has been, rather than embracing the blessings given by God, is the reason Lot's wife is found guilty. Mary does not turn back to her parents, rather she embraces her holy seclusion in the temple; a righteous decision similar to the one that Lot makes by not looking back at the city.

There is also imagery used within the *Prot. Jas.* that alludes to Mary herself as the temple sacrifice. While in the temple, Mary is "fed there like a dove, receiving her food from the hand of a heavenly messenger" (*Prot. Jas.* 8:2). The dove is the only bird that would have been accepted as a sacrifice in the Old Testament (Lev. 1:14).⁴⁷ Comparing Mary to a dove could be comparing her to a sacrifice. Vuong believes that Mary is treated as the temple sacrifice from the very beginning because her purity is Anna's primary concern. To recall a few examples: Anna has promised to give Mary as a "gift" to God prior to conception, then her withholding of breast feeding Mary goes beyond what is expected to ensure Mary's purity according to Levitical law. Anna subsequently turns Mary's bedroom into a sanctuary, ensuring that she would be pure and without blemish when she entered the temple.⁴⁸ Joachim appears at the beginning of the narrative

⁴⁷ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 63.

⁴⁸ Vuong, "Purity, Piety, and the Purpose of the *Protoevangelium of James*," 426-427.

going above and beyond what is necessary in terms of sacrifice, not only to atone for his sins, but also for the sins of Israel.⁴⁹ The author is trying to convey the message that Mary herself is a sacrifice on behalf of her parents.

In either case, Mary is so pure that a “heavenly messenger” feeds her (*Prot. Jas.* 8:2), reiterating that nothing impure would ever touch Mary’s lips, just as in *Prot. Jas.* 6:4. By the end of this pericope it is clear that Mary is “living in the temple, eating a special diet and interacting only with religious elite.”⁵⁰ All of this is done to emphasize that Mary is different from the other children. She is holy.

It is assumed that Mary lives in the temple harmoniously and without altercation with others through her childhood. However, once she reaches the age of twelve the temple priests become concerned about Mary polluting the sanctuary, stating in *Prot. Jas.* 8:3-4, “Mary has turned twelve in the temple of the Lord. What should we do with her so she will not pollute the sanctuary of the Lord our God.” This concern is because a girl would become impure at the time of her menstruation, and age twelve is a common age for this to take place. If Mary were to stay in the temple through her time of menstruation she would pollute the temple. Therefore, it is time to find Mary a new home.

Typically, a girl reaching the age of menstruation would be married, but Mary is not meant for marriage; she is unique. Her mother’s promise at the beginning of the narrative ensures that Mary would live her life as a gift to God. Mary and her parents are not part of the decision making process; the priests decide amongst themselves that a traditional marriage is not to take place. Instead, Mary will be in the care of a widower.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 422.

⁵⁰ Foskett, “Virginity as Purity in the Protoevangelium of James,” 75.

Joseph is chosen by the priests to be Mary's "betrothed" through lots. The priest takes the staff of each widower, prays, and waits for a sign from God to determine Mary's guardian.

Joseph is the last to receive his staff and "suddenly a dove came out of [the] staff and perched on Joseph's head" (*Prot. Jas.* 9:6). Choosing a care-taker through casting lots would ensure that the man chosen is the will of God. In doing this, the priests find a widowed man who will not treat Mary as his wife, instead a man who will protect her, as well as her purity and virginity.

Joseph is portrayed differently within the *Prot. Jas.* than he is within the canonical gospels. In the canonical texts Joseph is seen as Mary's husband, and there is no mention of Joseph's background or previous wife and children. Within the *Prot. Jas.* it is important that Joseph is a widowed man with a family. In this way, he would not be perceived as the husband of Mary, but a man who cares for her. Mary is "simply given to Joseph as his ward; he becomes her guardian and is obligated to give her his care and protection."⁵¹ This relationship is very different than if Mary were Joseph's wife. Joseph as care-taker also ensures Mary's virginal status, for with this Mary can hold the title of *παρθένον κυρίου* or "virgin of the Lord" even though she reaches the age when this is most under threat.⁵² However, in the first chapter of Matthew Joseph is of the line of Abraham and David, and therefore a very important character within Jesus' story. Joseph needs to be seen as Jesus' earthly father so Jesus can be in the line of David. According to the *Prot. Jas.*, Mary is the one who is in the line of David, with noble blood. The difference between Joseph as care-taker and Joseph as husband changes the perception of Mary as well. If Joseph is her husband and is in the line of David, Mary's virginity after the birth of Jesus can be questioned, as well as her status in society. But, if Joseph is not seen as her

⁵¹ Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 49; Foskett, "Virginity as Purity in the Protoevangelium of James," 75.

⁵² Foskett, "Virginity as Purity in the Protoevangelium of James," 75.

husband, and she is in the tribe of David herself, she gains honour through her purity and virginity on her own, and ascribed honour because of her lineage.

When the priests decide to make a veil for the temple they call on particularly pure and holy women. *Prot. Jas.* 10:2 states: “And the high priest said, ‘Summon the (παρθένους τὰς ἀμιάντους) ‘true ‘virgins’ from the tribe of David.” Mary is among those holy and pure women called to sew the veil because she is in the line of David. With this one line the author is making a bold statement about who Mary is. She is not only a pure girl who comes from a wealthy family, she is also in the tribe of David, qualified to sew the veil of the temple. The text also claims that although Mary is in the care of Joseph, she is still a virgin.⁵³ Throughout all of Mary’s childhood and life before she becomes the mother of Jesus, the author is establishing that “Mary was not poor, but was born of wealthy parents, of the noble line of David. She was not from a Jewish village, but from Jerusalem or the Jerusalem area; not an unknown nobody, but known and loved by all of Israel.”⁵⁴ Being one of the few women eligible and then chosen to sew the veil would have been seen as a privilege, only bestowed on those who are in the line of David. It is Mary’s ancestry that allows her this honour, not her purity.

After Mary’s purity and honour have been established multiple times throughout the narrative, the author begins to talk about Mary’s pregnancy and birth of Jesus while maintaining Mary’s purity. *Prot. Jas.* 11:1-2 tells the story of the angel foretelling Jesus’ birth to Mary stating: “Suddenly there was a voice saying to her, ‘Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women.’” This is a combination of Luke 1:28 and 1:42. Mary leaves this interaction afraid, and once again Mary embodies purity by going directly home to continue to sew the veil of the Lord. “Going outside puts a girl in danger” because any time a woman is

⁵³ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 77.

⁵⁴ Schaberg, “The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth,” 47.

alone there is always a risk of something happening that would jeopardize her reputation and honour.⁵⁵ The story of Susanna is an excellent example of such behaviour. Susanna chooses to bathe herself on a hot day, in the privacy of a garden (*Susanna* 15). Two elders then appear from hiding after she sends her maids away, and therefore Susanna is alone with the men in the garden (*Susanna* 6; 17; 18). The men threaten to “bear witness against” Susanna if she does not “lie with them” (*Susanna* 20-21). Ultimately Susanna chooses to be right in the eyes of God, rather than give in to the elders. Therefore, even though Susanna is in the privacy of her garden, being alone causes her to be at risk. Being an honourable woman and having shame meant not putting one’s self in those situations. Mary returning home as soon as she hears the voice of the angel confirms that she had shame, as she removes herself from any situation that could compromise her honour.

Mary’s Virginitly in the *Prot. Jas.*

From here the primary concern of the author becomes Mary’s virginitly. The heavenly messenger appears to her once again, this time saying “Do not be afraid, Mary. You see, you have found favour in the sight of the Lord of all. You will conceive by means of his word.”⁵⁶ These words are once again reminiscent of what is found in Luke 1:30-33. However, the author is very clear about the means by which Mary will conceive Jesus. There is no question about Mary conceiving a child by any other man, or heavenly being. She will conceive by the word of God. The attention is on Mary and the fact that her conception will set her apart.⁵⁷ It has been clear throughout the text that she has always been “different,” but a virginal conception and divine motherhood show that she is truly “preserved for the Lord.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 53.

⁵⁶ Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 53.

⁵⁷ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 85.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 85.

The author uses terminology that is found in Exodus and Luke when talking about the literal presence of God. He is able to make a triple-reference by using dark cloud imagery, Gabriel's prediction to Mary, the transfiguration, and the Exodus/Sinai clouds.⁵⁹ The LXX and New Testament use the word "overshadow" or ἐπισκιάζω when talking about the Ark of the Covenant and Mary's conception of Jesus. When the Israelites are in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant and it is "overshadowed" by the cloud, it means that God is present with them, therefore they could not travel with the Ark (Exodus 40:34-35). It is also used in Luke 1:35 when the angel Gabriel comes to Mary saying "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow (ἐπισκιάσει) you." Every time this word is used in the canonical gospels it is referring to the literal presence of the Lord.⁶⁰ The *Prot. Jas.* is no exception for the author would have been aware of this usage and intentionally uses the same word to describe Mary's conception of Jesus in the narrative.

As in Luke, Mary also visits Elizabeth within the *Prot. Jas.* The beginning of their interaction is very similar to Luke 1:39-45. Elizabeth humbles herself asking why Mary would choose to visit her when she bears the son of God. In *Prot. Jas.* 12:5, Elizabeth states, "the baby inside me has jumped for joy and blessed you." This description varies slightly from Luke, making Mary the centre of this interaction, as opposed to Jesus or even God, as evident in the canonical text.⁶¹ Once again, the *Prot. Jas.* emphasizes Mary as one who is worthy of praise and honour all on her own.

Mary's response to Elizabeth differs drastically from the canonical text. From this point on Mary cannot remember how she became pregnant. *Prot. Jas.* 12:6 states: "But Mary forgot

⁵⁹ Schaberg, "The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth," 44.

⁶⁰ Matthew 17:5, Mark 9:7, and Luke 9:34 are all narratives about of the Transfiguration of Jesus. Luke 1:35 is the story of the angel Gabriel announcing Jesus' birth to Mary.

⁶¹ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 88.

the mysteries which the heavenly messenger Gabriel had spoken, and she looked up to the sky and said, ‘Who am I, Lord, that every generation on earth will congratulate me?’” She confesses once again in *Prot. Jas.* 13:8-10 when Joseph returns home to find Mary pregnant that “I am innocent. I have not had sex with any man... As the Lord my God lives, I do not know where it came from.” Despite her losing her memory about Gabriel’s visit, she is very aware that her virginity is still intact. Jane Schaberg thinks that Mary’s memory loss is in contrast to “disobedient Eve.”⁶² This motif re-iterates the fact that Mary is not the one in control of her body or even her actions. Her parents, then the temple priests, and finally God are the ones making decisions for Mary. Mary never acts autonomously. Therefore, the memory loss sets Mary apart from Eve, because she cannot make a poor decision like Eve. Memory loss also allows for Mary, and her virginity, to remain the focus of the story.⁶³

In *Prot. Jas.* 14:5-6 Joseph is visited by the messenger from the Lord as well, as in Matthew 1:20-23. The *Prot. Jas.* states, “Don’t be afraid of this girl, because the child in her is the Holy Spirit’s doing. She will have a son and you will name him Jesus—the name means ‘he will save his people from their sins’” (14:5-6). This is a paraphrase of what is seen within Matthew 1:20-23. What Joseph does after the visit from the messenger of the Lord is quite different in the *Prot. Jas.* compared to the canonical texts. In the *Prot. Jas.* Joseph praises God and continues to protect the girl.⁶⁴ In Matthew Joseph then takes Mary to be his wife “but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son.”⁶⁵

The *Prot. Jas.* and Matthew portray Mary and Joseph’s relationship very differently. In Matthew, Joseph is Mary’s husband, and her virginity is only specified *until* (ἕως) Mary gives

⁶² Schaberg, “The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth,” 49.

⁶³ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 97.

⁶⁴ *Prot. Jas.* 14:7

⁶⁵ Matthew 1:25

birth to her son, as seen in Matthew 1:25. There is no indication that Joseph and Mary did not take on the traditional roles of husband and wife after Jesus is born, including a sexual relationship. Yet, in the *Prot. Jas.* it is clear that Mary and Joseph did not have marital relations. Joseph is portrayed as her protector and care-taker, not Mary's spouse. The author of the *Prot. Jas.* defines Mary and Joseph's relationship differently from the canonical gospels to emphasize Mary's virginity before and after the birth of Jesus. Smid states that "the [canonical] text does not suit the author's design! According to the *Prot. Jas.* Joseph is not the husband, but the keeper, the guardian of Mary: any kind of conjugal relation is avoided!"⁶⁶ Mary's purity throughout the story has built up to this moment when she becomes pregnant without having relations with a man.

In the *Prot. Jas.* Annas visits Joseph and while there, discovers that Mary is pregnant. He tells the high priest, who then sends for Mary and Joseph. The priests discover that Annas was honest and Mary is in fact pregnant. Both Mary and Joseph are under suspicion; Mary for becoming pregnant and Joseph for apparently violating her or not protecting her. The high priest asks her, "Why have you humiliated [ἐταπείνωσας] yourself? Have you forgotten the Lord your God, you who were raised in the Holy of the Holies and were fed by heavenly messengers? You of all people, who heard their hymns and danced for them—why have you done this?" (*Prot. Jas.* 15:10-12). In this one pericope, the priest has identified that Mary is held to higher standards than any other woman, because she is different and chosen by God from the beginning. The high priest is also pointing out that because Mary has lost her virginity and become pregnant, she would be humiliated, or shamed for her actions. The author uses ἐταπείνωσας, a form of the word ταπείνωσις, to convey this message. According to William D. Mounce it means "low in

⁶⁶ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 103.

situation.”⁶⁷ Mary is “low in situation” because she has lost honour in this act. Losing one’s virginity before marriage is a loss of honour for any woman, but especially for Mary after she has been chosen by God and set apart from the beginning.

This accusation leads Mary to state, once again, that she is a virgin and has not had sex with any man.⁶⁸ Joseph is then questioned, and he responds in *Prot. Jas.* 15:15, saying, “as the Lord lives, I am innocent where she is concerned.” When questioned further, Joseph’s response is silence.⁶⁹ In this interaction Joseph no longer acts as Mary’s protector and care-taker; it is one of the few times Mary is addressed and expected to answer for herself. Mary’s response is direct stating, “As the Lord God lives, I am innocent before him” (*Prot. Jas.* 15:13). The author is using this interaction to emphasize that Mary’s relationship toward God is pure, through her virginity. She does not reveal the secret of her pregnancy, showing “Mary’s steadfast trust in God.”⁷⁰ Joseph taking a silent and even passive role allows Mary to become the centre of the narrative.

Joseph’s silence may also be a time to show that Joseph too has faith in God. By not answering the high priest’s questions, the author may be trying to demonstrate that “Joseph feels no need to justify himself to the priest, as God will vindicate him and Mary.”⁷¹ Another theory is that the author is trying to parallel Joseph’s silence with Jesus’ silence in Mark 14. In this pericope Jesus is before the council, where the high priest, chief priests, elders, and the scribes are assembled.⁷² When the high priests are interrogating Jesus before he is sentenced to death, Jesus does not respond to their questions in Mark 14:61. The author could be making parallels

⁶⁷ William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 444.

⁶⁸ *Prot. Jas.* 15:13

⁶⁹ *Prot. Jas.* 15:18

⁷⁰ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 109.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷² Mark 14:53

between the high priest questioning Jesus, as well as questioning Mary and Joseph. In both instances Jesus and Joseph do not respond to indicate faith in God and God's plans.

When the high priest does not get answers from Mary and Joseph he orders them to do what the author calls a drink test. The "drink test" is to prove that no sin, specifically of adultery, has taken place. Smid points out there are some inconsistencies with the *Prot. Jas.*' description of this test compared to the drink test that is seen in Numbers 5, as well as in Flavius Josephus' *The Antiquities of the Jews*. According to Josephus, if a woman is accused of adultery she would have been brought to the temple, and there she would state whether the accusations made against her are true or false. If she claims that they are not true, and she has not committed adultery, she would be asked to take an oath.

Now when these oaths were over, the priest wiped the name of God out of the parchment, and wrung the water into the vial. He also took some dust out of the temple, if any happened to be there, and put a little of it into a vial, and gave it her to drink; whereupon the woman, if she were unjustly accused, conceived with child, and brought it to perfection in her womb: but if she had broken her faith of wedlock to her husband, and had sworn falsely before God, she died in a reproachful manner; her thigh fell off from her, and her belly swelled with a dropsy.⁷³

As this excerpt explains, only women are expected to be a part of this ceremony. In addition, there is also no mention of an oath taken by Mary or Joseph within the *Prot. Jas.*, as indicated in Josephus' writing. Finally, Mary and Joseph are sent into the desert after they drink the bitter water; another addition to the ceremony that is not seen anywhere else. Smid points out that "the mountain is for the author to show solitude where God's miracles take place."⁷⁴ Two Old Testament examples of this are: Elijah experiences solitude with the Lord in 1 Kings 19:8-11,

⁷³ Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, Book III, Ch. 11:6 (272). I am using the translation found in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 1987), 97.

⁷⁴ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 115.

and Moses in Exodus 24:18. Both of which are experiencing a time of trial. Therefore, the author may have made this change so that Mary and Joseph would have the experience of holy seclusion during this time of trial. This holy seclusion would be reminiscent of when Mary was in holy seclusion as a child, making her unique and different once again.

Smid explains that the inconsistencies are not necessarily showing the author's ignorance; rather, he sees "an opportunity in this drinking of the bitter water to obtain an official declaration of innocence for Joseph and Mary."⁷⁵ It is another instance where the author is focusing only on proving Mary's purity and virginity, not on the details of the tradition or ceremony taking place.

Once Mary and Joseph return from the wilderness unharmed after they drink the bitter water, the high priest has no choice but to proclaim their purity and righteousness to the public. The high priest states in *Prot. Jas.* 16:7 that "if the Lord God has not exposed your sin, then neither do I condemn you," which sounds very similar to John 8:11 when Jesus says a similar statement to the woman who commits adultery. Hock explains that with these words "the high priest publicly exonerates Joseph and Mary and implicitly assents to the claim that the child to be born is of the Holy Spirit."⁷⁶

The next few chapters tell the story of Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem, all of which follows the canonical gospels' account fairly closely. The largest difference is when Joseph begins to look for a midwife to help Mary with the birth. Once he finds a midwife, Joseph explains to her in *Prot. Jas.* 19:8-9 that "she is Mary, who was raised in the temple of the Lord; I obtained her by lot as my wife. But she is not really my wife, she's pregnant by the Holy Spirit." These two lines re-establish everything the author has been trying to state about Mary all along.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 113.

⁷⁶ Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 61.

First, Mary is well-known, so Joseph can state that she is “Mary, who was raised in the temple of the Lord” and the midwife would know who she was. Next, Mary is different, she belongs to God, not Joseph, and he cannot claim her as his true wife. Finally, Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit, and therefore she is still a virgin.

The author focuses so much on Mary’s virginal conception that it is clear Mary’s virgin birth to Jesus is the climax of the *Prot. Jas.*. The author emphasizes Mary’s purity throughout her childhood and through her holy seclusion, and her title of “virgin” or παρθένος appears several times throughout the book. Mary demonstrates repeatedly that she is deserving of that title, despite disbelief from Joseph and the temple priests. In *Prot. Jas.* 19, Mary proves that she is in fact giving birth to a son, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. The author emphasizes the fact that Mary’s birth is not a natural child-birth, just as the heavenly messenger has promised her through the imagery of the cloud and light. The author describes Mary’s birth as a dark cloud overshadowing the cave while Mary is in labour. However, when it comes time for Mary to give birth “suddenly the cloud withdrew from the cave and an intense light appeared inside the cave, so that their eyes could not bear to look. And a little while later that light receded until an infant became visible” (*Prot. Jas.* 19:15-16). The cloud and light allude to the fact that this birth is miraculous, and Mary does not give birth naturally just as she is promised in *Prot. Jas.* 11:7, meaning her virginity is still intact. The cloud is recalling the same imagery seen previously in *Prot. Jas.* 11:7 and Exodus 30:34-35, as well as the cloud of light during Mary’s Annunciation in Luke 1:31-34. In Matthew 17:2 during the Transfiguration, Jesus “was transfigured before them [Peter and James], and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.” Jesus

is light when he shows them his glory, just as Mary is consumed by light during the birth, because she is giving birth in a miraculous way.⁷⁷

Mary begins to breastfeed Jesus immediately after the bright light has receded, which is in contrast to Anna waiting an extended time after the cleansing process to breastfeed Mary. As previously stated, purity laws indicated that Mary is to wait the prescribed number of days for cleansing to take place and proper sacrifices are made before breastfeeding a child. However, Mary does not undergo natural childbirth, therefore those purity cleansing laws do not apply. The author is emphasizing her exceptional purity through this detail.⁷⁸

Following the birth, the midwife leaves and tells Salome⁷⁹ of the miraculous birth she has witnessed. Just as Thomas doubts Jesus' resurrection in John 20:24-31, Salome doubts Mary's virgin birth. Salome states, "unless I insert my finger and examine her, I will never believe that a virgin has given birth"⁸⁰ just as Thomas did with Jesus' marks on his hands. Mary participates in the gynecological test, and Salome is proven wrong when Mary's post-partum virginity is proven in this test. However, when Salome doubts Mary's virginity and inserts her finger into Mary, Salome is punished for her doubts by the loss of her hand as it is consumed by flames, unlike Thomas. The author wants to assert that Mary's virginity is not something to be doubted or

⁷⁷ Mary's conception and birth of Jesus has many parallels to Jewish (pseudepigraphal) texts, such as 2 Enoch, that should be highlighted. In 2 Enoch 71-73 the birth of Melchizedek to Soplanim and Nir is explained. This text and the *Prot. Jas.* share five motifs: first, the husband accuses the wife of adultery/defilement; second, the narratives show the wife insisting she is innocent and pure; third, the woman in the narratives becomes ignorant of how she became pregnant; fourth, the author uses the motif of conception by "word" of God; and finally, the children in the stories appears rather than the woman experiencing a natural child-birth (see Schaberg, "The Infancy Narrative of Mary," 48.) Through this comparison the author of the *Prot. Jas.* is establishing authority through knowledge of Jewish pseudepigraphal texts, while at the same time emphasizing that Mary experienced miraculous conception and childbirth without sexual intercourse.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷⁹ According to Hock the author may have used the name Salome from Mark 15:40 (Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 69).

⁸⁰ *Prot. Jas.* 19:19

tested. This could be directed toward those who were followers or believers of Celsus or those who made accusations against Mary similar to the ones indicated in *True Doctrine*.

It is also a clear statement about Mary's claim of virginity after childbirth. Julia Kelto Lillis argues that this gynecological exam is not to determine virginity in the way that it is thought about today, because the ancient world did not understand virginity as the presence of the hymen.⁸¹ Rather she recognizes that virginity could be determined based on age, marital status, and even the lack of childbirth. Therefore, Lillis suggests that in the *Prot. Jas.* "Mary's birthing is remarkable and virginal not because a hymen is present, but because the ordinary signs of childbirth are absent: her body does not release the usual materials and fluids, her labor and delivery are not painful, and her genitals have not needed to expand, stretch, or tear."⁸² Mary would have been considered a virgin in every sense of the word if her childbirth was miraculous and pain free, like the metaphor of the "light and cloud" would suggest.

The author uses a form of the word παρθένος or "virgin" several times throughout the text, and Smid recognizes that at least eight of those times are in reference to Mary.⁸³ After examining this further, five of these times the author addresses Mary as τὴν παρθένον or "the virgin" rather than using her name (*Prot. Jas.* 9:6; 10:2; 13:3; 15:6, and 16:1). The priests and Joseph often talk about her in this way, as though it is who she is. Mary becomes "the virgin who lived in the temple," rather than "Mary." The title of virgin holds true beyond childbirth as well, because her midwife as well as Salome never address her by name, rather only as παρθένος or "a virgin" who has given birth (*Prot. Jas.* 19:18, 19:19). Mary does not lose that title even after she becomes a mother, and it is a title still used for her today.

⁸¹ Julia Kelto Lillis, "Paradox in Partu: Verifying Virginity in the Protevangelium of James," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 24 (2016): 1-28.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁸³ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 187.

The rest of the narrative takes place after the birth of Jesus. As previously mentioned, the author addresses Herod's edict. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus flee as they did in the canonical texts, but unlike the canonical texts the *Prot. Jas.* also offers an explanation for Elizabeth and John the Baptist during this time. Elizabeth and John flee to the "hill country" where a "mountain was split open and let them in" and they are protected by a messenger of God (*Prot. Jas. 22:5-9*). The narrative ends with the death of Zechariah and anointing of Simeon who "is the one who was informed by the holy spirit that he would not see death until he laid eyes on the Anointed in the Flesh" (*Prot. Jas. 24:14*). The author indicates that the prophecy of Simeon is true, and therefore the story he has told is true. Jesus is the Anointed One, son of God, born of a virgin.

Conclusion

As previously stated, it is likely that the author is addressing the accusations made about Mary, which stated that Mary was not a virgin, but a woman who had an illegitimate child with a Roman official named Panthera. These claims would have put Mary's virginity, purity, and honour in question. However, retelling Mary's story offering more detail about who she was and how she came to bear the son of God would have put those accusations to rest. The author not only offers an account of who Mary is, but uses this narrative to emphasize that she is the personification of purity and virginity worthy of honour.

The following chapter will further discuss the way in which Mary's actions and reputation, specifically her purity and virginity, would have been seen as honourable according to the ancient Mediterranean honour-shame system. Being a collectivist society, her honour would have greatly affected Jesus' honour, as well as the honour of all early Christians. Therefore, the author of the *Prot. Jas.* seeks to restore the honour of Mary, Jesus, and early Christians through this narrative account.

Chapter 4

Mary's Honour in the *Protoevangelium of James*

The *Protoevangelium of James* tells the story of Mary's early life in order to give the audience a sense of who she is growing up and why she is chosen to bear the son of God. Portraying Mary as abstaining from impurity and behaving appropriately assists in the characterization of her as an honourable female. The author first establishes Mary's ascribed honour through her family; then he explains how her childhood is monitored and regulated by those in charge of caring for her, ensuring her purity. Finally, the author emphasizes Mary's virginity before and after the birth of Jesus, clearing up any questions prompted by the canonical texts of Matthew and Luke. These aspects of the narrative furnish Mary with acquired honour. This chapter will elaborate upon how the *Prot. Jas.* defends Mary as a woman of worthy of honour. In addition, because of the collective nature of honour and shame in antiquity, it will demonstrate how it would have extended to Jesus and to early Christians, despite the accusations made by Celsus and others.

Mary's Ascribed Honour

The author wants the audience to perceive Mary as a woman who has both ascribed and acquired honour. When Celsus accuses Mary of being a "poor country woman who earned her living by spinning," he is attacking her honour, as if she came from a lowly background.¹ In order to depict Mary as a woman who comes from an honourable family, her parents, Anna and Joachim, are mentioned early in the text. Joachim is a wealthy and righteous man, and Anna is a woman deeply concerned with purity laws and positive shame. Mary, by extension, receives the

¹ Chadwick, "Preface," *Origen: Contra Celsum*, 28.

same honour her parents earn because of its collective characteristics. Joachim proves his righteousness to the Temple priests through Anna's conception of a child and by giving a generous sacrifice afterwards.² Anna proves her purity through her post-partum cleansing rituals and dedication to Mary's purity throughout the text. Ultimately, the priests come to celebrate Mary's birthday at a banquet held by Joachim and Anna, revealing that her parents are honourable enough to host such an event.

In the ancient Mediterranean world meals were a socially significant event and the people one ate with indicated one's social status and honour. In Matthew 9:10-13 and Luke 5:29-32 the Pharisees ridicule Jesus for choosing to eat with sinners and tax collectors. Fred Craddock explains that "in the culture and subcultures of that time and place, table customs were identifying markers of a group, whether philosophical, literary, or religious."³ If one eats with a certain group or type of person, it is believed he or she must share the same views, and, above all, the same social status. Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners leads others to believe that he shares the same values and social status as those people. The Pharisees see this situation as an excuse to shame Jesus publicly, drawing attention to these actions and, therefore, hoping others will feel the same way.

A person's life was severely affected by a public shaming. Douglas R. A. Hare explains that "it is characteristic of human communities everywhere to shun members who disregard accepted standards of behavior."⁴ According to J. E. Lendon, "the fear of public shaming was internalized to a large degree."⁵ The accepted standard of behaviour at the time would have been

² *Prot. Jas.* 4:6-7; and Smid, *Protoevangelium of Jacobai*, 43.

³ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 78.

⁴ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 102.

⁵ J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: CLaredon Press, 1997), 41.

for Jesus to eat and socialize with people of the same social standing. Therefore, one of two things are assumed and publicized by the Pharisees: (1) Jesus too is a sinner, or (2) Jesus does not follow the standards set within the community and now receives shame because of it.

Applying the same social standards to the *Prot. Jas.*, it is clear that Joachim and Anna are honourable individuals. The temple priests and high priests join them for a banquet and eat with them to celebrate Mary's birthday. If Joachim and Anna were not honourable people, they would not have done so. The priests must have thought that Joachim and Anna were of the same beliefs or of high social standing.

On the other hand, Joan P. Alcock explains that "eating in groups implies the understanding of a code. Even the act of giving pleasure to people implies that the giver expects something. This might be gratitude or social acceptance as equals."⁶ Joachim has just had his honour questioned by those at the temple. By hosting a meal for the priests, Joachim was seeking public acknowledgement that he is an honourable and righteous man worthy of their company. The banquet itself was Joachim's reclaiming of the honour that had previously been in question. Either way, it is clear that Anna and Joachim are unquestionably aware of the social standards of a shared meal at the time.

The only qualities known about Mary's parents are that they are wealthy, righteous, and honourable people who sacrifice and take appropriate actions to maintain their honour. The author displays their honour prominently through their attention to appropriate cleansing and purity rituals and their sharing of meals with other honourable people. Knowing who Anna and Joachim are is essential to understand who Mary is because family in the ancient world is basic to one's identity, status, and honour. Celsus' claim that Mary is an unknown poor woman would

⁶ Joan P. Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2006), 187.

have meant that Mary's parents were of low status, but the *Prot. Jas.* emphasizes that Mary is from a wealthy and honourable family. Establishing Joachim and Anna's wealth and honour also establishes that of Mary.

The *Prot. Jas.* also indicates that Mary is in the line of David. In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke,⁷ Joseph is in the line of David, thereby placing Jesus in this line. However, *Prot. Jas.* 10:2-4 states that Mary is one of the women chosen to sew the temple veil because she is one of the "true virgins from the tribe of David." There are several prophecies within the Old Testament proclaiming that the messiah will be in the line of David.⁸ God promises David that his ancestors will be established and they shall rule his kingdom (2 Samuel 2:12-17). Therefore, Mary coming from the line of David is the author's attempt to give her the ascribed honour, not Joseph.⁹ This ascribed honour of Mary is then extended to Jesus and he too will be in the line of David through her, fulfilling prophecy.

Mary's Acquired Honour: Dietary Laws

Mary's purity and virginity are tremendously important in the *Prot. Jas.* The author goes out of his way to convey that Mary is not only worthy of honour because of her family, but also because she conforms to all social norms, including dietary, ritual, and sexual purity rules. At the beginning of the text Anna makes Mary's purity her main concern. Anna takes appropriate actions to be sure Mary only eats, walks, and abides in the presence of all things holy and pure, seen specifically in *Prot. Jas.* 6:4-5: "so she [Anna] turned her bedroom into a sanctuary and did not permit anything profane or unclean to pass the child's lips. She sent for the undefiled

⁷ Matthew 1:20 and Luke 2:4

⁸ 2 Samuel 7, Isaiah 7:13-14, and Jeremiah 33:14-15, to name a few.

⁹ Hock (*The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 51) explains that there are some problems with this reference to the "tribe of David." First, within Luke 1:5, 36 Elizabeth is claimed to be a daughter of Aaron, and she is a relative of Mary. Also, the author's use of the word "tribe" instead of "line" is concerning. It is once again establishing that the author is not concerned with the details, but instead that the audience understands that Mary is the one with the ascribed honour, not Joseph.

daughters of the Hebrews, and they kept her amused.” She lives in a “holy seclusion” that keeps her apart from contamination from the outside world.

Dietary laws are not explained and elaborated upon within this text; however, the author is clearly aware of their significance. As previously mentioned, the author knew the significance of eating socially, but he is also aware of the importance of daily eating habits and diets. The *Prot. Jas.* shows concern for what Mary consumes, including Anna’s breastmilk, and her diet is under constant supervision. Even the way Mary eats is significant, for in the Temple she eats food from the hands of a heavenly messenger.

Post-partum cleansing rituals are important within the text, both for Anna when she gives birth to Mary, and then for Mary when Jesus is born. In an effort to keep her promise to God, Anna keeps Mary pure from the very start of her life, beginning with the nursing of the infant Mary. Nursing would have been necessary for the survival of a newborn; however, the author shows that Anna did not breastfeed Mary until her post-partum cleansing was complete, stating “when the prescribed days were completed, Anna cleansed herself of the flow of blood. And she offered her breast to the infant and gave her the name Mary” (*Prot. Jas.* 5:9-10). Anna’s concern for Mary’s purity prevents her from nursing Mary before she, Anna, has been cleansed.

Dietary purity is also mentioned when it comes to what Mary ate as a child. Anna is concerned about what Mary eats as a little girl. When she turns Mary’s bedroom into a sanctuary, she monitors everything that passes through the “child’s lips” so that she does not eat anything unclean.¹⁰ When describing what Mary does not consume, *Prot. Jas.* 6:4 uses the terms κοινὸν καὶ ἀκαθάρτον, which literally mean “profane and/or unclean.”¹¹ Once again, the author is not

¹⁰ *Prot. Jas.* 6:4

¹¹ William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 257-285.

concerned with details, such as what foods were considered pure and impure, instead he mentions only that her diet is pure. Chapter two explained that eating unclean food hinders one's ability to take part in religious ceremonies and temple life. Knowing that Mary would one day go to live in the temple, her dietary purity becomes an important concern. However, the author does not elaborate on what Mary does and does not eat. Although it is not specified, it would have been assumed that pork and any other food deemed unclean by Jews would have been avoided, as discussed in chapter two.

The manner in which Mary eats is also mentioned within the *Prot. Jas.* One of the most interesting statements that the author makes about Mary as a child is that she is fed from the "hand of a heavenly messenger."¹² According to Smid, the author "does not say what food it is. Far more important to him, the aim is a total avoidance of the world."¹³ The author includes dietary restrictions to emphasize Anna and Mary's commitment to purity, but does not find it necessary to describe what foods Mary could and could not eat. Being able to take part in all of the religious and temple activities, as well as keeping the company she does while in the temple, would have been honourable. The diet itself is not essential to the story; rather, diet is a necessary step to ensure that Mary retains her honour.

Mary's Acquired Honour: Hygiene and Purity

As previously stated, throughout the entirety of the *Prot. Jas.* Mary is portrayed as the epitome of purity. This purity extended to every aspect of her life including her menstrual cycle. Women in the ancient Mediterranean world were subject to very specific rules and rituals when it came to menstruation and post-partum purity laws. These rituals are seen clearly in the *Prot. Jas.* for both Mary and Anna. Chapter two explained that people in this context thought that

¹² *Prot. Jas.* 8:2

¹³ Smid, *Protoevangelium of Jacobai*, 65.

impurity was contagious or a form of “pollution.” Menstruation and post-partum bleeding were considered to be two of these contagious impurities. Anna is so concerned with Mary’s exposure to this impurity that she goes beyond the requirements and withholds nursing until after cleansing herself from the flow of blood.

Anna’s actions are in contrast to how the *Prot. Jas.* describes Mary’s “birth” of Jesus. Mary does not have a natural childbirth; therefore, the post-partum requirements are not applicable. *Prot. Jas.* 19:15-16 states: “Suddenly the cloud withdrew from the cave and an intense light appeared inside the cave, so that their eyes could not bear to look. And a little later that light receded until an infant became visible; he took the breast of his mother Mary.” The author includes this detail intentionally to further draw attention to Mary’s exceptional purity. Mary, having never experienced childbirth, does not have to wait the appropriate number of days to be cleansed. If she would have, Mary would have delayed nursing until she had cleansed herself from the blood, like Anna.

Mary’s menstruation becomes an important aspect of the narrative within the *Prot. Jas.* Because Mary is a woman, menstruation is one impurity she could not avoid. When a woman was experiencing menstrual bleeding she was no longer welcome to interact with other people or to take part in temple life.¹⁴ According to Vuong, separating menstruants from all things considered sacred or holy becomes common practice for early Christians as well.¹⁵ Therefore, a woman would wait the required number of days and go through the traditional cleansing rituals, then she would go back to life and religious practices as normal. This cleansing ritual creates a difficult situation for Mary because at age three she begins to live in the temple. Thus, once she reaches child bearing age, she can no longer live there. Mary knows these purity laws and

¹⁴ Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protoevangelium of James*, 113.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

everyone involved is concerned that she not break them. The constant attention to hygiene and ritual purity brings honour to Mary because she is abiding by all social norms.

Mary's coming of age, or menstruation, marks a turning point in the *Prot. Jas.* because this is when Joseph becomes important to the story. He takes her in his care because she can no longer live in the temple. As previously stated, Joseph becomes her caretaker and protector, which ensures her sexual purity.

Defending Honour

A young girl's value could be measured in part by her sexual status. If she is a virgin before marriage, she brings honour to herself and to her family. If a young girl is not a virgin, she and her family are shamed. Chapter two explained that it is very unlikely for a young woman to be married if she has previously been sexually active with a man, by choice or otherwise. Mary is identified as a virgin or παρθένος numerous times throughout the *Prot. Jas.* Repeatedly referring to Mary in this manner may have been to address the accusations made in the *True Doctrine*, which claim that Mary does not have Jesus as a virgin, but rather Jesus is an illegitimate child from a Roman soldier, Panthera. Celsus may have learned this story about Mary from Jewish sources that attacked the notion that Mary gave birth to Jesus as a virgin.¹⁶ The fact that the author of the *Prot. Jas.* is so aware of Jewish purity laws may indicate he is conscious of these Jewish opponents, and thus he is defending her in a matter that would be meaningful to them. Whatever the precise, historical scenario, the accusation that Mary had an illicit relationship with a Roman soldier resulting in an illegitimate child would have brought shame upon Mary, her parents, and Jesus, as well as those who adhered to the Christian faith.

¹⁶ Lincoln Blumell, "A Jew in Celsus' *True Doctrine*? An Examination of Jewish and Anti-Christian Polemic in the Second Century C.E.," *Studies in Religion* 36 (2007): 297-315. Seen through Celsus' use of his Jewish source in *Contra Celsum* 1:28.

Mary's virginity and the virgin birth of Jesus were thus another means of upholding Mary's honour.

The word *παρθένος* or "virgin," appears regularly throughout the *Prot. Jas.* (9:1; 10:1, 13:1; 15:1, 2; 16:1, 2; 19:3).¹⁷ Vuong explains this regularity as an indication that just as Mary's ritual purity is a focal point of the text, her sexual purity is equally as important once she is of childbearing age.¹⁸ However, Foskett believes that it is unclear what this term would have actually meant at the time this narrative was written because there is debate whether the term indicates a woman of a marriageable age or specifically dictates one's sexual status.¹⁹ Guilia Sissa states,

the word *parthenos* [*παρθένος*] tends to arouse skepticism in nonreligious interpreters and to call for cautious handling, it is not easy to capture the meaning of the abstract noun *parthenia* [*παρθένια*] with a purely sociological definition. It is something subject to seizure, a treasure that one guards, a value that must be respected... it is not easy to understand the point of the image if virginity refers to nothing more than an age group.²⁰

To clarify, *παρθένος* refers to a girl who is old enough to be married who has not yet had sexual intercourse, and *παρθένια* seems to encompass more than just sexual status, but purity.²¹

Similarly, Lillis explains that "'virgins' can variously denote all girls of a certain age range, girls characterized by youthful innocence and inexperience (including sexual inexperience), young women who are not yet married and thus not yet 'tamed' and civilized through submission to a husband's authority, and young brides who have not yet produced children."²²

¹⁷ Smid, *Protoevangelium of Jacobai*, 187.

¹⁸ Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protoevangelium of James*, 149.

¹⁹ Foskett, "Virginity as Purity," 68.

²⁰ Sissa, *Greek Virginity*, 77.

²¹ Foskett, "Virginity as Purity," 69.

²² Lillis, "Verifying Virginity," 16.

Recognizing the difference between *παρθένος* and *παρθένια* makes it difficult to explain a women's status in society in antiquity. However, using these two understandings of "virginity" in the Greek world can help uncover what the author was trying to convey about Mary. It is clear that Mary would have been recognized and identified as a *παρθένος* due to her age and marital status, but the author is also attempting to communicate that Mary's behaviour and demeanor were what truly made her pure and unique; she possessed *παρθένια*.

The author of the *Prot. Jas.* emphasizes that Mary did not have sexual intercourse before or after she gave birth to Jesus. As Foskett states, "the narrative presents virginity as neither an obstacle nor a problem, but as a good that must be maintained—even after giving birth."²³ First, Mary "maintains" her virginity by dwelling in holy seclusion for most of her childhood. Mary lives separate from the world and the temptation to act inappropriately. Anna watches her closely as a child and subsequently so do the priests in the temple. Finally Joseph cares for her. It is clear that he is not her husband but her guardian.

Several times throughout the text her virginity is questioned, and every time she proves to be honest and pure. First, Joseph accuses her, but then God sends him a message. Second, the temple priests do not believe her and she and Joseph are forced to take the bitter water test. Finally, Salome does not believe she gave birth as a virgin and she is subject to a gynecological exam.

Joseph's disbelief is not unlike that within the canonical gospels. He does not believe her until he is told by the messenger of the Lord. Mary's word is not enough; Joseph must have proof that she is a virgin. He is also afraid to be found guilty of defiling the virgin himself, or not protecting her like he has promised he would. Although Mary seems to be the main character of

²³ Foskett, "Virginity as Purity," 68.

the narrative, the text reflects an androcentric perspective. Mary rarely speaks on her own²⁴ and she forgets how she becomes pregnant. Therefore, it is Joseph who is aware of Mary becoming pregnant by the power of God, as evident in *Prot. Jas.* 14.

Jews commonly used the bitter water test in the ancient world to determine if a woman had committed adultery when she had become pregnant. Ilan explains that often it is married women who are tested because their husbands are concerned that the unborn child is not their own.²⁵ As explained in chapter three, the author is not concerned about the details of the practice, instead that Mary is a virgin by having passed the test. The priests ask Joseph to take the test, once again to prove he is not guilty of defiling Mary, another deviation from the common practice. Typically, it was not necessary for the man to take the test. The priests determine that both Mary and Joseph are innocent and then they are free to leave (*Prot. Jas.* 16).

Finally, Mary's virginity remains in question after she gives birth to Jesus. Chapter three discussed Lillis' observation that Mary's virginity is not simply about whether she has had sexual intercourse before she gives birth, but if her body remains pure and scar free because only then could she claim the title of virgin.²⁶ When Salome questions her virginity this final time, her hand is consumed by flames (*Prot. Jas.* 20:4). This act proves that not only is Mary's body in virginal condition, but also that it should no longer be questioned. The author is likely making a statement to all those who believed Celsus' and others' accusations against Mary.

Foskett and Lillis' understanding of "virginity," παρθένος or παρθένια, sheds light on the *Prot. Jas.*' portrayal of Mary. It is not enough that Mary is a "virgin" in the sense that she is a

²⁴ Mary only speaks eight times in the text (*Prot. Jas.* 11:6, 9; 12:6; 13:8, 10; 15:13; 17:9-10).

²⁵ Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine*, 137.

²⁶ Lillis, "Verifying Virginity," 16.

young woman who has not had sex, but that she is so pure that even after childbirth she remains free of scars and blemish. Mary retains the title of virgin, while gaining the title of mother.

Mary as a Mother

As previously mentioned, infertility was perceived to be a result of sin; therefore, it was shameful. One of the primary reasons for marriage, especially for Jews, was to produce offspring.²⁷ A woman's primary function was to be a good daughter, wife, and mother. Chapter two explained what being a good wife and mother looked like in Mediterranean antiquity. Women were in charge of maintaining the daily affairs of the house, including controlling the children, slaves, and managing the property. Suzanne Dixon explains that the matron of the home had a "certain status of respectability... which enhanced if she became a mother."²⁸ One way the author could give Mary more honour than any other woman was to give her the two titles no other women could hold simultaneously: "virgin" and "mother."

Within the *Prot. Jas.*, Mary is in the unique position where she can possess all the purity and innocence that comes with holding the title of virgin, yet she is also a respectable and responsible woman because she is a mother. With these titles, the author transforms Mary into one of the most honourable women of all time. Because of the collectivist nature of ancient Mediterranean society, Mary's honour would be ascribed to Jesus and early Christians as they were all associated with Mary.

Opposition to Christians

Christians were suspect in the second century. The persecutions of Christians by Romans, and sometimes by Jews are evident in the first to third centuries. According to Geoffrey Ernest

²⁷ Most clearly seen in the command to "be fruitful and multiply" found in Genesis 1:28.

²⁸ Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 44.

Maurice de Ste. Croix, the majority of the persecutions took place between 64 CE and 250 CE.²⁹ 64 CE marks the fire in Rome, which Nero blamed on the Christians.³⁰ Pliny references the fire in *Natural History* while describing notable trees on a Roman estate that lasted until the large fire in Rome.³¹ Christians were originally tried for the fire, but eventually they were victimized for being Christian. “First, those who admitted being Christians were prosecuted, and then, on information provided by them (doubtless under torture), a great multitude were convicted, not so much... [for] the crime of incendiarism [the act or practice of arsonist] as because of their hatred for the human race,” says de Ste. Croix.³² De Ste. Croix also explains: “Tacitus, like his friend Pliny... detested the Christians; and although he did not believe they caused the fire he does say they were ‘hated for their abominations’ and he calls them ‘criminals deserving exemplary punishment.’”³³ By the end of Nero’s reign, Christian membership meant “an anti-social and potentially criminal conspiracy.”³⁴ Trajan, emperor of Rome and persecutor of Christians in the late first and early second centuries, believed that one could be charged for simply being a Christian. However, thought Trajan, if a person “denied he is a Christian, and proves it by offering prayers to our [Roman] gods he can go free.”³⁵

De Ste. Croix states: “Christians were picked on as scapegoats, then, because they were already believed by the populace to be capable of horrid crimes, *flagitia*, [shameful acts].”³⁶ The “shameful acts” were originally the fire in Rome, but there were many other things Christians

²⁹ Geoffrey Ernest Maurice de Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, eds. Michael Whitby, and Joseph Streeter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 108.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

³¹ Pliny, *Nat. XVII*, 1.5.

³² De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy*, 108.

³³ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

were accused of at the time, such as magic, cannibalism, and illogical beliefs. Evidently, there were a variety of different accusations, but only a few will be discussed here.

Pliny was governor of Bithynia-Pontus with ambitions of becoming a writer, but most of the writings he is known for today are the letters he wrote.³⁷ He believed Christians to be depraved and uneducated individuals who were in a strange cult. Around this time local butchers complained that sales of sacrificial meat were down, due to the fact that fewer people were sacrificing, which may have meant an influx of Christians to the area.³⁸ This situation caused friction between Christians and the local community members. Therefore, other rumours about Christianity and Christian practices spread. Pliny asserts that there were rumours that Christians “practiced ritual intercourse... celebrated the Eucharist without clothes, or participated in a ritual in which human semen was offered to God and consumed.”³⁹ In one letter to Trajan, Pliny writes that “Christians only ‘took food of an ordinary, harmless kind’ suggesting that he may have heard rumors of sinister activities in the Christian gatherings.”⁴⁰ All of these rituals were seen as criminal acts. Pliny began arresting and executing Christians for identifying as Christian, whether they were found guilty of crime or not.

Early Christian traditions and believers were also under criticism by Celsus and his “Jew” in *True Doctrine*.⁴¹ *True Doctrine* “refers to periodic disputes between Jews and Christians” found within Origen’s *Contra Celsum* 3:1-4; 4:23; and 6:29.⁴² In *True Doctrine* “Celsus invokes a character of a rhetorical Jew to Jesus and then his followers.”⁴³ Within the text Celsus criticized many things about the early Christians. First, he claimed that Christians were

³⁷ Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴¹ Blumell, “A Jew in Celsus’ *True Doctrine*?” 303.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 299.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 299.

uneducated and illogical because they simply could not give a reason for what they believed so they called it “faith.”⁴⁴ It is Celsus’ Jew who attacks the idea that Jesus, the son of God would have suffered a dishonourable death of crucifixion and that Christians would have venerated a cross after the fact. Lincoln Blumell states that “while Celsus never raises an objection to Jesus’ divinity based on crucifixion, for his Jew this is an important argument against the divinity of Jesus and was perhaps telling of the Jewish position.”⁴⁵ Crucifixion was a shameful way to die. Therefore, Celsus’ Jew could not comprehend why God, or the son of God, would come to earth just to suffer a death on a cross.⁴⁶ Celsus explained that even the way in which Jesus died was shameful; a god would not have endured a death of crucifixion.⁴⁷

Celsus also says that many of the miracles performed by Jesus are nothing more than “magic.”⁴⁸ Robert L. Wilken states that “not only did the Gospels present Jesus in the guise of a magician, that is, of one who does wonders, but Christians had begun to use the name of Jesus in spells and incantations.”⁴⁹ Magicians were very common at this time, and Celsus is not the only one to state that Jesus was performing magic. Josephus “identifies Jesus as a ‘wonder worker’ (*Jewish Antiquities* 18:63)... and Justin says that the Jews who first witness Jesus’ miracles charged him with practicing ‘magical arts’ and considered him a magician (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 69).”⁵⁰

As previously discussed, Celsus’ major accusation was about Mary’s virgin birth and Jesus’ illegitimacy. He sought to demonstrate that she was just a poor woman who had extra-marital relations with a man who was not her husband that resulted in an illegitimate child.

⁴⁴ Celsus, *True Doctrine* 1:9.

⁴⁵ Blumell, “A Jew in Celsus’ *True Doctrine*?” 303.

⁴⁶ Celsus, *True Doctrine* 2:44; Blumell, “A Jew in Celsus’ *True Doctrine*?” 303.

⁴⁷ Celsus, *True Doctrine* 2:39.

⁴⁸ Celsus, *True Doctrine* 1:28; Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 99.

⁴⁹ Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 99.

⁵⁰ Blumell, “A Jew in Celsus’ *True Doctrine*?” 304.

Celsus also claimed that although it was Mary who had the affair with the Roman soldier, it was Jesus who fabricated the narrative about the virgin birth.⁵¹ In doing so, Celsus was saying that Jesus is nothing more than an ordinary man. Wilken explains that

Celsus said that any informed person knows there are countless legends told about men and heroes, and the stories told about Jesus have no greater claim on historical truth than other legends. Since the account of the baptism, [as well as other stories found within the New Testament,] come only from Jesus and his followers, one should be suspicious.⁵²

The idea that Jesus lied about who he was and where he came from was shameful. Malina states, “to lie really means to deny the truth to one who has a right to it.”⁵³ In this case, Jesus was lying to everyone about his background and acquiring honour when he was not worthy of it. Chapter two explained that honour was a limited-good in the Mediterranean world, therefore acquiring honour for oneself meant another stood to lose it.⁵⁴ By accusing Jesus of lying, Celsus’ Jew is also accusing him of acquiring honour that does not belong to him.

Clearly some Jews shared Celsus’ concern that Jesus was an illegitimate child. Attacks on Mary’s virginity and honour are evident in Jewish texts as well. Daniel C. Harlow believes traces of these accusations can be seen in the Babylonian Talmud, specifically *b. Sabb. 104b* and *b. Sanh. 67a*.⁵⁵ In these texts, Harlow explains that Mary has a husband whose name is Stada but also a lover whose name is Padera. The “last sentence in the discourse evidently explains that the name Stada is an epithet from the Aramaic/Hebrew word (‘to turn away from, go astray, commit adultery’) that slanders Mariam (Mary) as an adulteress.”⁵⁶ This defamation is similar to the

⁵¹ Celsus, *True Doctrine* 1:28.

⁵² Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 110.

⁵³ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 42.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁵ Daniel C. Harlow, “Born of Fornication: The Jewish Charge of Jesus’ Illegitimacy in John, Celsus, and Origen,” in *Portraits of Jesus*, ed. Susan E. Meyers (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 345.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 346.

claims made by Celsus against Mary and Jesus. In this tale, Mary is an adulteress who gives birth to an illegitimate son called Ben Pandera, but Harlow believes it is another name for Jesus.⁵⁷

Again, these Jewish charges against Mary and Jesus and Christians in general help us to understand why the *Prot. Jas.* stresses Mary's adherence to Jewish purity laws. The author of the narrative may well have envisioned some hostile Jews in his audience and thus he seeks to portray Mary and her family such that her honour and righteousness cannot be questioned.

Pliny's letters, Celsus' *True Doctrine*, and Jewish texts and traditions are just a few examples of the accusations made against Jesus, Mary, and early Christians in the early centuries of the Common Era. All of the allegations made against them would have brought shame to Christianity at the time.

Jesus and Early Christians' Honour

The persecution of Christians and continued suspicion of their beliefs would have shamed Jesus and all those who followed him. As mentioned in chapter two, honour is collective; the honour of one is connected to the honour of many. Harry C. Triandis explains that "in collectivist cultures people are interdependent within their in-groups (family, tribe, nation, etc.), give priority to the goals of their in-groups, shape their behaviour primarily on the basis of in-group norms, and behave in a communal way."⁵⁸ That is why individuals always represent the groups in which they are a part.⁵⁹ What one thought of Jesus, he or she also thought about all who believed in or was a part of Jesus' "cult." The same can be said about any one Christian. What someone thought about an individual Christian, he or she thought about all members of the Christian faith.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁵⁸ Harry C. Triandis, "Individualism-Collectivism and Personality," *Journal of Personality* 69:6 (2001): 909.

⁵⁹ Bruce J. Malina, "Collectivism in Mediterranean Culture," *Understanding the Social World of the New Testament*, 17.

Family was the most important group of which a person could be a member. Mary and Jesus' honour would have been deeply connected and dependent upon one another. Jill Dubisch states "disgrace is thus familial, for honor, while it can be lost through the behaviour of individuals, is collective in its attribution and maintenance. A man's honor depends both on his own actions and the actions of other[s]." ⁶⁰ An accusation made against one family member had great impact upon all others. Therefore, Mary's honour would have influenced the honour of Jesus, as well as the honour of all those who choose to follow and believe in Jesus.

As previously mentioned, Origen writes against the ideas found in Celsus' *True Doctrine*. Origen does not believe that Jesus was born under any illegitimate circumstances; however, his main concern is establishing that Jesus "rose above his situation to become a popular, persuasive speaker and leader... despite being raised in humble circumstances." ⁶¹ However, the *Prot. Jas.* addresses the rumours of Jesus' illegitimacy through Mary's ascribed honour. The author focuses on Mary's familial heritage through Anna and Joachim. In doing so it also establishes Mary's and thus Jesus' ascribed honour. As Malina explains, this is because "honour is always presumed to exist within one's family." Outside of the family a "good name and family reputation are also central." ⁶² By establishing Anna, Joachim and Mary as wealthy and righteous people, Jesus can no longer be seen as a man who comes from poor beginnings, but instead someone who comes from a wealthy family with a mother so righteous that she is chosen by God to give birth as a virgin.

The *Prot. Jas.* also addresses Celsus' accusation that Jesus fabricates the story himself because there are no witnesses of the account in the canonical texts. The statement that James,

⁶⁰ Jill Dubisch, *In a Different Place*, 197.

⁶¹ Harlow, "Born of Fornication," 346.

⁶² Malina, *The New Testament World*, 36-37.

the step-son of Mary wrote the narrative in the *Prot. Jas.* 25:1 implies that it is an eyewitness account of the events. Therefore, the *Prot. Jas.* not only establishes Mary's honour, but Jesus' honour as well because it testifies, through an eyewitness account, that the circumstances surrounding his miraculous conception and birth are true.

Malina explains that secondary groups can form outside of one's family. These groups "take on a secondary identity based on fictive birth rite, thus constituting a fictive kin group of brothers and sisters."⁶³ The Christian community became one of these secondary groups. Malina points out that "[t]he worth of a person is measured by familial status, social position, class and caste; birth, family, prestige, heritage, or traditional prominence are more important than personal accomplishments."⁶⁴ The group to which one belonged became a major identifier and greatly influenced the person's honour. Therefore, the ordinary Christian's honour was directly connected to the honour of Jesus, and by association, Mary.

The notion of collective honour is similar to the example given in chapter two about the teacher. If the teacher is listened to and believed by his students, the teacher is honourable. However, if a teacher is not listened to and his students no longer believe what he teaches, the teacher is shamed. All those who previously learned from him lose honour as well, because what they have been taught is no longer seen as credible. Early Christians were being accused of not knowing what they believed, or even that they believed an untruth told by Jesus. However, the *Prot. Jas.* was written to prove that the belief in Jesus' birth to the virgin was true. By demonstrating this was true, the narrative gives validity to the rest of Jesus' life, teachings, ministry, death, and resurrection. As a result, all those who believe Jesus is the son of God regain their honour as well.

⁶³ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 22.

Conclusion: Mary's Honour in the *Prot. Jas.*

In conclusion, the Greco-Roman world was a collectivist society in which honour and shame were not solely possessed by individuals. The author of the *Prot. Jas.* was part of this world and wrote Mary's narrative in such a way that would illustrate her ascribed and acquired honour through her family, purity, and virginity. In doing so, the *Prot. Jas.* exposes the claims of Celsus and others to be false. Mary is not a poor woman who gives birth to an illegitimate child out of wedlock; rather, she is a woman born into a wealthy family who lives a pure and celibate life. This means that Jesus is honourable as well, because Mary's honour becomes his. Because collectivism extends to groups outside of one's family, early Christians receive the same honour as Jesus.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Prot. Jas.* establishes Mary's honour by depicting her as attentive to purity and committed to living a celibate life while also holding the title of mother to Jesus. The *Prot. Jas.* was written, in part, to address the allegations made by Celsus and others about Mary's adultery and Jesus' illegitimacy, that had significant implications for Jesus and early Christians. Early Christians suffered persecution for many of their beliefs, which may have been related to, at least indirectly, a lack of respect for Jesus and Mary. The belief that Jesus was an illegitimate child was shameful to Mary, to Jesus, and to all those who followed his teachings.

The *Prot. Jas.* tells the story of Mary's birth and her life before she became pregnant with Jesus. Celsus' claim that Mary was a poor country girl who had an illegitimate child with a Roman soldier cast her in a shameful light. In order to establish that Mary was not a lowly woman, the author of the *Prot. Jas.* presents her parents, Anna and Joachim, as wealthy and honourable people. Mary is raised in a home that conforms to all social norms and exceeds all necessary standards in terms of purity.

Mary also lives a life dedicated to God in the *Prot. Jas.* The moment Anna is told of her pregnancy, she dedicates the unborn child to God. When Mary learns to walk, Anna builds her a sanctuary in her bedroom and eventually Mary goes to live in the temple. Mary does not move out of the temple until she reaches the age of menstruation, and then she must leave so she does not contaminate the temple. All of these actions illustrate that purity is a priority for Mary.

When girls reach child-bearing age in the ancient Mediterranean, they are usually married. However, in the *Prot. Jas.* Mary is not married to Joseph, but instead Joseph becomes

her guardian or caretaker. He is depicted as a widower with a previous wife and children and there is no doubt in the *Prot. Jas.* that his relationship with Mary is not sexual. Mary continues to live a pure and celibate life. I argue that Mary's virginity becomes the author's main concern because it ensures that Mary is worthy of honour.

There are several times throughout the text when Mary's virginity is questioned: first by Joseph himself, then by the temple priests, and finally by a midwife named Salome. Every time Mary is questioned about her virginity the author confirms that Mary's virginity is true; Joseph is visited by the angel about the coming of Jesus, Mary and Joseph pass the bitter water test, and finally Salome's hand is burned when she tries to give Mary a gynecology exam after the birth of Jesus. The text goes out of its way to confirm that Mary was a virgin before and after the birth of Jesus, whereas the Gospels and Matthew and Luke do not provide all this information and questions could arise. Any shameful accusations of Mary's adultery would have been addressed and Mary would have received honour for her virginity and motherhood.

As explained, the Mediterranean world to which Mary belonged was a collectivist society. One's honour did not come solely from the behaviour of the individual, but one received it based upon the actions and reputation of the group of which he or she was a member. The most important group a person was embedded in was the family. Therefore, Mary's honour was ascribed to Jesus, her son. Just as the claims of illegitimacy affected her honour, they also had a great impact on Jesus' honour. The *Prot. Jas.* defended the honour of Jesus by establishing that his mother was worthy of honour, which extended to him.

Early Christians were shamed and often punished for their beliefs because some outsiders claimed that what Christians believed was untrue and even illogical. The *Prot. Jas.* brought honour to early Christians by giving them further evidence for some of their beliefs. No longer

can Celsus or anyone else claim that the early Christians followed a man, Jesus, who made up his own birth story to cover up his illegitimacy. Rather, Christians were a group of people who followed a man born of a woman so pure and honourable that God chose her above all other women. Therefore, by solidifying Mary's honour through her purity and virginity, the *Prot. Jas.* also establishes the honour of Jesus and early Christians.

An Androcentric Perspective

While upholding the honour of Mary, Jesus, and early Christians, the *Prot. Jas.* also affected the standards to which a woman was held. It is important to examine the positive and negative ways Mary's virginity and motherhood affected Christian women subsequent to the creation of this text. Mary becomes an icon and role model for women; however, the standard this sets is one that no other woman can achieve because no one else can hold both titles of "virgin" and "mother" simultaneously.

As previously explained, the author of the *Prot. Jas.* establishes that Mary is pure, holy, and a virgin before and after the birth of Jesus. However, there are a few other aspects of this text that should be examined. First, Mary does not have autonomy throughout the narrative and she does not choose the lifestyle that she leads. Second, Mary's story is told from the male perspective. Finally, Mary's virginity belongs to God. This lack of autonomy greatly affects the tone throughout the narrative. The author describes Mary's virginity in a way that presents her as more pure and holy than any other woman; however, this purity and holiness were not attributes that she herself chose. What does it mean that Mary does not choose the pure, virginal lifestyle, but instead it is one that is determined for her?

The *Prot. Jas.* portrays Mary's mother and father as wealthy and righteous people who mourn that they do not have a child. As previously mentioned, once they bear a child, both

Joachim and Anna are so excited that they, specifically Anna, promise the child to the Lord stating “I’ll offer it as a gift to the Lord my God, and it will serve him its whole life.”¹ In that moment Mary loses autonomy over her life. She is in constant care and guardianship from birth, starting with Anna, then the Temple priests, and finally Joseph. Foskett states that “Mary emerges less as a moral agent who must actively resist threats to her virginity, and more as a sacred object that is dedicated to Lord, celebrated by the people and protected (mostly) by men.”² Mary has become objectified.

Although Mary is a unique woman, she is not one who pushes the boundaries of social norms and standards of the time. The author portrays Mary as a woman who is completely submissive to those who are considered to be an authority in her life, especially the males. In Mediterranean antiquity a woman received honour for being feminine, which meant upholding feminine characteristics such as being soft, passive and submissive. By portraying Mary as completely submissive to authority figures, the author is upholding Mary as an honourable woman, at least from an androcentric perspective. In doing so, Mary loses her voice within the text. She only speaks eight times throughout the story. As observed, within the *Prot. Jas.*, Mary’s narrative is told from a male perspective, and “her relation to men is that of protected to protectors -- father, priests, and Joseph representing God’s authority,” says Schaberg.³ She does not even remember how she becomes pregnant in *Prot. Jas.* 12:6. As previously stated, Smid believes this act makes the story more about Mary and less about the angel Gabriel who relays the information to her.⁴ However, it also reduces her autonomy and ability to make decisions within the story. Joseph becomes aware that Mary has conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit

¹ *Prot. Jas.* 4:2

² Foskett, “Virginity as Purity,” 75.

³ Schaberg, “The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth,” 49.

⁴ Smid, *Protoevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary*, 85.

after the angel visits Joseph in *Prot. Jas.* 14:5-6. Once again, a man is in control of Mary's life and more aware of what is happening to her than Mary is herself.

Mary's memory loss within the *Prot. Jas.* is also a reminder that God is in control of Mary's virginity. Schaberg states that "she does indeed consent in obedience to Gabriel's word about conception, but the motif of her forgetting makes this a moment that passes and turns her into a bewildered victim, ignorant of the causes of her pregnancy."⁵ God exercises the ability to impregnate her and to make her forget God has done so. A celibate lifestyle is not chosen by Mary; it is thrust upon her. From the beginning Mary is to bear the son of God and therefore she has to live a pure and chaste lifestyle.

Schaberg states that these features of the story could be the result of a male author who simply does not care about the fullness and depth of the character of Mary.⁶ Joseph has a wide range of emotions within the narrative that Mary is not given. However, the lack of Mary's autonomy in the story does not lessen the impact her pure and virginal lifestyle has on Christianity, especially for young women.

A Woman's Honour and Shame

As mentioned in chapter two, there are two concepts of shame: positive and negative. Positive shame, or "to have shame," was necessary for women in the ancient world because it indicated that they were always concerned with the social standards of the time. In the *Prot. Jas.* the author wants Mary to be shown as a woman who "has shame," whether it is regard to her own decisions and behaviour or the decisions that have been made for her.

Mary meets all the purity, dietary, social, and feminine standards of her time. It is clear that she has never eaten anything that is not considered to be pure because Anna and the temple

⁵ Schaberg, "The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth," 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

priests are controlling her diet. She adhered to the appropriate hygiene and purity laws. She is not seen outside the home without being in the presence and care of a man. In one example, as we saw, Mary is outside gathering water before she is visited by the heavenly messenger and after she hears the voice “she became terrified and went home.”⁷ The action of removing herself from the situation and returning home right away was proper behaviour for a woman. Anytime a female was alone in public or outside the house was a risk to her safety and reputation. Mary even takes on proper feminine tasks, like spinning thread. She is constantly depicted as an honourable woman within the text because of her concern for positive shame.

In contrast, the men within the story are seen as masculine, bearers of honour, and less concerned with positive shame. First, Joachim is an example of masculinity within the text because he is concerned with his outward appearance to the temple priests. Joachim wants them to bear witness to the sacrifices he makes at the temple, and then he holds a proper banquet to celebrate the birth of his child, re-establishing his honour. Next, Joseph is a widowed man concerned with the outward appearance of taking in such a young woman when he is chosen to care for Mary. These men’s actions are much more outward and concerned with the public. Mary’s actions, however, are much more inward and focused on the personal/private. Mary as a female carries her honour very differently than the males depicted in this narrative.

As observed earlier, an honourable woman should not be not the subject of discussion.⁸ This is one situation where Mary does not seem to fit the traditional standards for honour and shame. In *Prot. Jas.* 19 Joseph searches for a midwife while on their way to Bethlehem. In his search Joseph begins to explain to the midwife that he is with “Mary, who was raised in the temple of the Lord.” In this moment the author wants the audience to know that Mary is famous

⁷ *Prot. Jas.* 11:4

⁸ Osiek and Pouya, “Constructions of Gender in the Roman Imperial World,” 47.

for her origins. Schaberg states “the motif of her fame is ironic, since she herself hardly speaks, never prays. What will be spoken of is her virginity.”⁹ Mary’s honour is entirely dependent on her virginity, so much so that it is all anyone knows about her.

Virginity and Motherhood and its Enduring Impact

At first glance the story of Mary’s virginity told within the *Prot. Jas.* seems to be one that would empower young women. Mary becomes the face of young virgins because she is able to be both maternal and pure. Nonetheless, one could argue that this text and Mary’s virginal reputation have both positive and negative effects on women within the ongoing Christian tradition.

Schaberg explains that the celibacy movement within early Christianity originally empowered women. In the second and third centuries Christian women looked at Mary as a model of strength and used this to choose a life of virginity, no longer allowing men to control them.¹⁰ This was an empowering movement for women at first; it allowed them to live lives that were not dependent on men or restricted by the call to submission. As discussed in chapter two, Cooper explains that this idealized celibate movement was not only appealing to Christian women, but possibly to men as well.¹¹ This dimension of the movement is evident in Paul’s first century undisputed letters, such as 1 Corinthians, as well as in the later *Acts of Paul and Thecla* and *The Acts of Peter*. Virginity became a spiritual discipline for all. 1 Corinthians 7:38 states, “so then, he who marries his fiancée [or in some translations “a virgin”] does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do better.” The *Acts of Paul and Thecla* says, “Blessed are the bodies of the virgins, for they shall be well- pleasing unto God and shall not lose the reward of their

⁹ Schaberg, “The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth,” 49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹¹ Cooper, *The Virgin and the Bride*, ix.

continence, for the word of the Father shall be unto them a work of salvation in the day of his Son, and they shall have rest, world without end.”¹² Schaberg observes that “before the development of Christian monastic communities, virgins lived with their parents at home or in small groups, or with continent men in spiritual marriages.”¹³ This celibate lifestyle was growing and it was influencing Christianity, at least in some regions. In the beginning it was especially popular for women, as a means to control one’s sexuality and be seen as a devout Christian, but eventually this idea of being “married to God or Christ” is used only when talking about male clergy.¹⁴ Rather than seeing celibacy and virginity as a woman taking control of her life and body, Patricia Cox Miller explains that such lifestyles turned into the notion that women had “the power to overcome the disadvantages of the female gender.”¹⁵ This disadvantage was simply being a female.

Miller explains that by the fourth century the female must lose her femininity to be viewed as a virtuous follower of Christ. For example, Gregory of Nyssa writes about his younger sister, Macrina. He raises her up to be an example of the female ascetic lifestyle. Named after the ascetic heroine, they call her “Thecla.”¹⁶ As previously explained, Thecla is an example for all women because of her commitment to the virginal lifestyle and discipleship to God, so much so that she chops off all of her hair and dresses like a man.¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa describes his sister as so virtuous that he “wondered whether ‘woman’ was really a proper name for her, given her

¹² *Acts of Paul and Thecla* 6; trans. J. K. Elliott in *Women in Early Christianity: Translations from Greek Texts*, ed. Patricia Cox Miller (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 156.

¹³ Schaberg, “The Infancy of Mary of Nazareth,” 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵ Miller, “Introduction,” *Women in Early Christianity*, 8.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 2; trans. Kevin Corrigan; in *Women in Early Christianity*, 193.

¹⁷ *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, 18.

supremely righteous character.”¹⁸ In order for Thecla and Macrina to embody what it means to be a moral follower of God, they must lose their femininity.

With the growing concern for virginity and chaste lifestyles within the Christian community, the idea of marriage would have to change as well. Not all people could choose a life of celibacy. Only women who came from wealthy families would have had this option. This concept of virginity drawing one closer to God, however, was still in the mind of many; therefore, sex within marriage became appropriate for procreation alone.¹⁹ If a woman was not a virgin, she had little choice but to be a mother.

In the late fourth century the need for women to be seen as both virgin and mother is still evident. John Chrysostom’s *On the Priesthood* speaks fondly of his own mother. He talks about how she excelled at motherhood, despite being widowed shortly after he was born. She took care of all household duties despite the fact that she was “suddenly hurled into unrestrained grief and... [had to] necessarily bear cares beyond her years and sex.”²⁰ She also chose not to marry again, even though it would have been easier for her to manage. Chrysostom praises his mother for running a home, and taking on roles that only her male counterpart would have been thought capable of adopting. He also acknowledges that after the death of her husband, she chose not to remarry. Hence, in the later years of her life she remained chaste. Chrysostom’s mother became honourable in his eyes after she became more like a man, took on tasks that a man would normally perform, and practiced chastity. He saw her as both “virgin” and “mother.”

Macrina is another example of a woman called to be both virgin and mother. As a young girl, Macrina chooses a life of celibacy after her fiancé died.²¹ Gregory of Nyssa explains that

¹⁸ Miller, “Introduction,” 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁰ John Chrysostom, “On the Priesthood;” trans. Elizabeth A. Clark in *Women in Early Christianity*, 285.

²¹ Cox Miller, *Women in Early Christianity*, 192.

although her parents wanted her to marry “she strongly insisted that the young man who had been joined to her accordance to her parents’ decision was not dead, but that, in her judgement, he was living in God because of the hope of resurrection was simply away from home on a journey and not a dead body; and it was improper not to keep faith with a husband who was away on a journey.”²² Gregory continues to glorify Macrina for her choice to be a celibate and virtuous woman. However, despite that lifestyle she still acts as mother to her younger brother, Peter, who is in need of “special assistance.”²³ After his birth she “snatched him right up from the woman who was nursing him... [and] became everything for the child, father, teacher, guide, mother, counselor in every good...”²⁴ Despite choosing to be a virgin, it is still necessary for her to be a mother in some capacity.

Early Christian women experienced a call to live honourable and holy lives. However, the standards to which they were called were difficult to obtain. Through examples like Mary in the *Prot. Jas.* and Thecla in the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*, virginity or motherhood seem to be the only ways to obtain honour. Yet, if a woman was one of these things, virgin or mother, she was still, in some ways, deficient because she lacked the other characteristic. The call for women at this time was unobtainable, and there are some aspects of this standard that remain today, especially the focus on motherhood.

For example, Juliet du Boulay offers an account of women in Greek villages who are experiencing tensions in the expectations of women in a modern context. She explains that “the accepted cultural evaluation of women is that they are inferior, on the ‘left’-hand side of men, and from the devil, nevertheless the realities of daily life in rural Greece make clear that in

²² Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*, 2.

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina*, 12.

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina* 2.

practice they have a great deal of power and influence.”²⁵ The concept of women being the weaker sex derives from Eve, she was “inferior, impure, and close to the devil,” and women in these villages are believed to have the same characteristics.²⁶ However, such women are also expected to be caretakers of the house and “Mothers of God,” because it is believed that although sin comes from woman, so does salvation.²⁷ Women can only achieve this title after they have proven to be good wives and mothers; they gain power in the household through living a life of submission.

In conclusion, many would have been affected by *Protoevangelium of James* when it was first written, especially Christian women. There is evidence that women’s roles and questions of marriage and virginity were debated even before the *Prot. Jas.* was written. We see statements such as “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man, she is to keep silent” (1 Timothy 2:11-12) that demonstrate a desire to limit a woman’s freedom and place in the church. But some of Paul’s letters appear to be open to the idea of female leadership in some capacity, and we observe such freedom in the subsequent *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. However, the understanding of virginity eventually shifted from women gaining control over their bodies to men using virginity and celibacy as a tool to control women. Evidence of such control at work are in the valuing of a woman based on her sexual status, as we see in the *Prot. Jas.*, and only allowing sex as a means of procreation. The *Prot. Jas.* was written in part to be an apologetic text to claim that Mary is a woman worthy of honour, which turned into a call for all women to imitate her in some ways. However, the author gave Mary qualities that no other woman could embody, specifically being both a virgin and mother. The *Prot. Jas.*

²⁵ Juliet du Boulay, “Women: Images of Their Nature and Destiny in Rural Greece,” *Gender and Power in Rural Greece*, ed. Jill Dubisch (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986), 144.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

did exactly what it strove to do, bring honour to Mary, Jesus, and early Christians through emphasizing Mary's purity and virginity. However, it also had negative consequences for women in the subsequent centuries that can still be felt by women today.

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