CHAPTER 6

The *Life of the Virgin* and Its Antecedents

The scene that most clearly explains why Mary was depicted as a high priest, as well as being paired with her son on liturgical utensils, is preserved only in Tbilisi A-40, the oldest manuscript of the *Life of the Virgin*.¹ The *Life of the Virgin* is a biography compiled from much older texts, whose author detailed Mary's entire life—not only her birth and death as told in ancient recensions of the popular *Protevangelium* and Dormition narratives but also a nearly lost account of her activities during her son's ministry. This account is by far the longest, fullest, most detailed narrative about Mary and other women during the ministry of Jesus—and more than found in any other surviving Christian text, its author remembered a discipleship of equals, such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza hypothesized.²

This author elevated not only Mary, but also the other women and described a Second Temple Jewish community around Jerusalem where the impulse toward gender parity was strong.³ For example, in stark contrast to theologians who emphasized a chain of male apostolic authority, the *Life of the Virgin*'s author also called women “apostle” and portrayed Mary Magdalene “as an apostle equal in rank to Peter.”⁴ In an echo of the Six Books, which described Mary giving women small books to take

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around the Mediterranean, this text describes Mary, after her son died, teaching the apostles, both male and female, closely supervising their preaching, and sending them forth to evangelize.⁵

Mary was inseparable from her son, this author repeatedly said, and she was present at all his healings and miracles, as were the women disciples.⁶ This author called the women “disciples,” seemingly unaware, despite repeatedly quoting scripture, that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John never call the women disciples “disciples.”⁷ Sometimes this author reported women disciples where the canonical gospels were silent about who was present, and sometimes even where the canonical author remembered only men. For example, Matthew and Luke are silent on who was present when Jesus healed Peter’s mother-in-law, but Mark 1:29–31 depicts only male disciples present. By contrast, the *Life of the Virgin*’s author remembered only female disciples there: “When the Lord entered Peter’s house and healed his mother-in-law, who was confined to her bed because of a fever, his all-holy and blessed mother, the Virgin Mary, was with him as well as the women who were disciples of the Lord.”⁸ This author’s identification of women specifically as “disciples” affects how the term “disciples” is understood in the rest of the narrative. For example, when the *Life of the Virgin* says that the “disciples” baptized people, this does not mean that only male disciples baptized.⁹ It means that women disciples were baptizing people also, just as the *Acts of Philip* described Mariamne baptizing, and just as the other long narratives about women apostles described those women baptizing people.¹⁰

According to this account, Mary and the women disciples were at the last supper along with the men. The institution of the Eucharist at the last supper has been used as an excuse to exclude women from officiating, because supposedly only men were at the meal, but the author of the *Life of the Virgin* described both men and women there, as if Jesus’s first-century followers had participated in a gender-parallel meal similar to that of the first-century Therapeutae Jews of Judea.¹¹ The very oldest manuscript of the *Life of the Virgin*, the eleventh-century Tbilisi A-40, preserved yet one more scene of gender parity at this shared meal. During the meal, first Mary, and then her son, modeled a ritual of female and male co-priesthood. According to the text, Mary was the teacher of the women and, “for this reason,” at the supper, “she sacrificed herself as the priest and she was sacrificed, she offered and she was offered.”¹² Then, Jesus offered his body and blood:

She was always inseparable from the Lord and king her son, and as the Lord had authority over the twelve apostles and then the seventy, so the holy mother had over the other women who accompanied him, as the holy evangelist said, "There were there many women who followed Jesus from Galilee and who served him." The holy Theotokos was their leader and teacher. For this reason when the great mystery, the supper, took place, she sacrificed herself as the priest and she was sacrificed. She offered and she was offered. Then the Lord Jesus presided over the twelve apostles and those he wanted, and he delivered the sublime mysteries and signs of God's Passover, he gave them some of his precious body and blood as the bread and the drink.¹³

This supper scene would appear to explain why Mary was widely portrayed as a Eucharistic officiant, for example, wearing the episcopal pallium or holding the Eucharistic cloth, as well as why she and her son were paired on Eucharistic utensils. When was this supper scene originally conceived or composed? Was it derived from first-century memories of a ritual meal?

In analyzing this passage, it is important to know that leading scholars of first- and second-century Jesus followers are of nearly one accord that these groups met more or less exclusively in small reclining meal groups.¹⁴ The leadership patterns of these groups were relatively informal, featuring a bevy of symposiarchs (presidents) who alternated every meeting,¹⁵ and various hosts when the groups were able to meet in a home.¹⁶ This was all in the context of great conviviality and informal rules for a long and festive gathering.¹⁷ There is much evidence that women and men led such groups regularly.¹⁸

Almost certainly no one who was actually at Jesus's final meal wrote about it. Later memories, passed down through oral tradition until finally pen was put to papyrus, and then edited again, provide our clouded window onto the distant event itself. Even the canonical gospel writers did not agree what day the supper took place, or what events led up to it. The supper, especially as told in John, could easily encompass women as well as men being present. Here then the proposal for a strong relationship between the supper scene in the *Life of the Virgin* and the first-century "last supper" is textual in that the *Life of the Virgin's* text has a strong content and literary connection to 1 Corinthians, Markan, Matthean, and Johannine first-century texts. It may also have a theological connection to Galatians 3:28, because

Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 310–403) reported that some Jesus groups used that verse to justify female as well as male officiants: “They have women bishops, presbyters and the rest; they say that none of this makes any difference because ‘In Christ Jesus there is neither male nor female.’”¹⁹ This Pauline gender theology would appear to be consistent with Mary and Jesus officiating together at the meal ritual described in the *Life of the Virgin*.

The meal ritual in the *Life of the Virgin* also appears to have a strong content parallel with Philo’s description of an early first-century Judean meal ritual among the Therapeutae, which is the most detailed first-century liturgy that has survived from any Jewish or Christian community. In addition to men and women being present at the ritual meal, Philo likewise described two leaders, a male, and a female. Among the Therapeutae, the male represented Moses and the female, Miriam. Other parallels include the names *Mariam* and *Miriam* and that both women were considered prophetesses.²⁰ Most revealing is that for both Mary and Miriam, her leadership of the other women was given as the reason for why she was paired with her son or brother during the meal ritual.²¹ Although distant from Jerusalem, the liturgy of the Therapeutae signified the Temple, complete with raised arms, two choirs, bread as holy food, a time of libation, an altar table, and priests.²² Joan E. Taylor says, “Ultimately, both men and women saw themselves not only as attendants or suppliants but as priests in this Temple.”²³ Brootten’s study of stone epigraphs that memorialized Jewish women with titles such as “Head of the Synagogue,” “Mother of the Synagogue,” “Elder,” and “Priestess,” suggests that the Therapeutae’s gender-parallel ritual, or similar, may have continued in some synagogues in the Mediterranean diaspora.²⁴ Some Jesus groups, especially those about whom we know very little because their writings were later anathematized, potentially also may have had such rituals. For example, there were “ebionite” and other Jesus groups around Jerusalem, who were embedded in the culture of Israel and Judea.

A Judean meal ritual that signified the Temple liturgy evokes Mary’s own association with the Jerusalem Temple, including the way that she sometimes was depicted as a Temple priest. Perhaps just as significant in interpreting this ritual meal, Lily Vuong has detailed how the *Protevangelium*’s author repeatedly described Mary as a Temple sacrifice.²⁵ Here, Mary appears to have arrived at the sacrifice foretold. She sacrifices herself as the priest and she is sacrificed.

In searching for the source of this narrative, the *Life of the Virgin*'s scribe left us a clue. This scribe claimed to have compiled the text from canonical gospels and patristic teachings, but also, "from apocryphal writings that were also true and without error and had been accepted and confirmed by the saintly fathers."²⁶ In this chapter and the next, I demonstrate that some of the literary antecedents behind the *Life of the Virgin*, including especially antecedents behind its scene of Jesus and Mary presiding together at the last supper, appear to have been writings from the earliest centuries of the Jesus movements.

THE OLDEST TEXT OF THE *LIFE OF THE VIRGIN*

Originally penned in Greek, the *Life of the Virgin* survives in an Old Georgian manuscript tradition that unanimously identifies its composer as Maximus the Confessor (580–662), although he probably was not its author.²⁷ Perhaps his name was later added to protect the text, for he was revered in Georgia. Shoemaker proposed that it was written not long after the seventh-century Avar siege of Constantinople, a time when Marian appreciation blossomed along with the legend that Mary had run along the city walls and killed the enemy herself, thereby ensuring victory and saving the city.²⁸ Recently, however, Phil Booth proposed that the *Life of the Virgin* was composed as late as the tenth or even eleventh century, a proposition Shoemaker attempted to rebut.²⁹

My primary concern with Booth's argument for a tenth-century dating of the *Life of the Virgin*'s compilation is that Booth essentially argues that all the texts which the compiler of the *Life of the Virgin* used in this composition were available in the tenth century. Yet Booth overlooks some important early narrative elements found solely in books that by the tenth century had been lost or severely censored. For example, narrative elements found only in the fifth-century palimpsest text undergird the post-Passion Dormition narrative that concludes the *Life of the Virgin*—yet Booth asserts that there is "no evidence at all that the author of the text translated in the *Georgian Life* has before him a version of the *Six Books*, and ... there are no narrative elements within the *Georgian Life* which are absent from the *Transitus* but present in the *Six Books*."³⁰ On this, Booth is incorrect. As an analysis of Booth's footnotes demonstrates, he unfortunately made his claim looking only at the shorter sixth-century *Six Books*; he did not cite the long fifth-century *Six Books* palimpsest.³¹ As the chart in Fig. 2.9 illustrates, four important narrative

elements, or motifs, are found in both the *Life of the Virgin* and the long fifth-century Six Books palimpsest—but not in the sixth-century Six Books nor in the later Six Books Greek homily (Booth’s “*Transitus*”). These four narrative elements are Mary preaching, Mary teaching women, Mary sending evangelists out from Jerusalem, and Mary raising her hands in the context of blessing people besides the Twelve.³² Across the eight manuscripts that I analyzed, the only ones to preserve all four of these narrative elements together are the fifth-century palimpsest and the Georgian *Life of the Virgin*. Furthermore, in most cases, the *Life of the Virgin* preserves the most detailed narrative associated with these four motifs, which, given the trajectory of redaction demonstrated in Chapter 2, strongly suggests that its compiler had access to an even longer and older narrative than preserved in the fifth-century palimpsest. It thus seems likely that the *Life of the Virgin* was compiled well before Booth proposes, because even the fifth-century Six Books text itself was concealed in the eighth century when a scribe scrubbed and wrote over it, making it into a palimpsest. Regardless, the particular century in which the *Life of the Virgin* was compiled is not of great importance to my argument; I am more focused on the ancient books—“apocryphal writings that were also true and without error and had been accepted and confirmed by the saintly fathers”³³—upon which the compiler claimed to have relied when compiling it.

In 1986, Michel van Esbroeck, a Jesuit scholar who had already published an Old Georgian dictionary and over two dozen Georgian texts, published the critical edition and French translation of the oldest surviving manuscript of the *Life of the Virgin*, the eleventh-century Tbilisi A-40. He apparently anticipated questions about its supper scene with Mary sacrificing, because he analyzed the passage at length, both from within the text itself and also across variants in other manuscripts.³⁴ For example, van Esbroeck noted that later in the narrative, Mary was called “a second sacrifice,” which tends to affirm the reading “she sacrificed herself as the priest.”³⁵ Van Esbroeck also extensively compared Tbilisi A-40 to Jerusalem 108, a later manuscript of the *Life of the Virgin*, as well as to John Geometrician’s tenth-century revision of the *Life of the Virgin*.³⁶ Both of their meal scenes omitted Mary’s role as an officiant, but with different variants, and van Esbroeck therefore concluded that both variants were differently censored versions of the text preserved in Tbilisi A-40.³⁷

In 2012, in his first published Georgian translation, Shoemaker presented what he purported was a new translation of the *Life of the Virgin*, which he said would correct what he called van Esbroeck's "mistakes," "unintelligibility," and "hyper-literalism."³⁸ Shoemaker, surprisingly, did not retranslate Tbilisi A-40. He instead relied upon three different manuscripts, the first being Jerusalem 108³⁹—the same manuscript that van Esbroeck said contained a censored Last Supper. Shoemaker mentioned neither van Esbroeck's claim that Jerusalem 108 was censored, nor that it was dated thirteenth to sixteenth century, up to five hundred years later than Tbilisi A-40.⁴⁰

Most directly relevant to the thesis of this chapter, Shoemaker's edition erased the scene of Mary sacrificing as the priest at the supper. Where van Esbroeck's translation read that Mary sacrificed herself, Shoemaker's was identical except for its gender; Shoemaker's reads "*he* sacrificed *himself*"⁴¹—the very same variant in Jerusalem 108 that van Esbroeck called censored.⁴² Shoemaker briefly justifies his gender change in a footnote, primarily by citing one of his own articles.⁴³

In that article, Shoemaker admitted that van Esbroeck's translation is plausible: "On a rhetorical level, then, it seems rather plausible that Mary should, in fact, be understood as this sentence's subject who somehow at the Last Supper offered herself as a reconciling sacrifice"—but, he added, a text that actually elevated Mary that far was, for him, "rather difficult to imagine."⁴⁴ Shoemaker then ended his discussion of the passage with the argument that van Esbroeck's translation was undermined by John Geometrician's variant⁴⁵—yet he neglected to mention that van Esbroeck himself had at length argued the very opposite. Van Esbroeck, as mentioned above, argued that John Geometrician's complex variant, together with Jerusalem 108's simple variant—two variants, each of which eliminated Mary's priesthood, but in different ways—validated van Esbroeck conclusion that both later scribes had censored the original text preserved in Tbilisi A-40.⁴⁶

Shoemaker's translation contains other changes to some of van Esbroeck's descriptions of female religious authority. Sometimes Shoemaker footnotes these changes. For example, where van Esbroeck called the women who evangelized with John "apostles," Shoemaker calls them "co-apostles"⁴⁷—but footnotes a minor spelling correction, concluding, "Of course, the meaning is the same in either case."⁴⁸ In other instances, and despite that he footnotes dozens of small one-letter

changes to van Esbroeck's Georgian text, Shoemaker does not footnote some of the far more significant changes that his text makes to van Esbroeck's edition, changes that in some cases erase ancient descriptions of female authority preserved in Tbilisi A-40. Following are three of the most important.

THE ANNUNCIATION TO MARY IN THE TEMPLE

The first important change that Shoemaker does not footnote is where Tbilisi A-40's text describes an Annunciation scene that took place while Mary was praying "between the doors of the altar."⁴⁹ A bright light lit up the Temple and "from the altar" a bodiless voice said, "Mary, from you my son will be born."⁵⁰ Mary's proximity to the altar in this scene suggests her priesthood—but Shoemaker's edition removes her from the altar area. His edition, instead, says Mary was praying "in front of the doors of the sanctuary" and that the voice came "from the sanctuary."⁵¹

Indicating the plausibility of van Esbroeck's reading of Tbilisi A-40—that the Annunciation took place while Mary was at the Temple altar—the third-century *Gospel of Bartholomew*, sometimes called the *Questions of Bartholomew*, preserves an Annunciation to Mary at the Temple altar.⁵² This gospel describes a great angel, who made the earth tremble, partaking of bread and wine with Mary at the Temple altar. When they finished their Eucharistic meal, the angel announced: "Three years more, and I shall send my word and you shall conceive my son."⁵³

The antiquity of Tbilisi A-40's Annunciation scene is further affirmed by the text of Papyrus Bodmer 5, the oldest manuscript of the *Protevangelium*, the narrative about Mary's early life. Papyrus Bodmer 5 was penned during the third or fourth century and is one of the oldest Christian manuscripts, but according to its editor, Émile de Strycker, its text already contained evidence of having been shortened as well as the "corrections" of a second redactor.⁵⁴ George Zervos provided an extensive analysis of Bodmer 5 and demonstrated that its oldest layer described an Annunciation to Mary by a bodiless voice while she was in the Temple⁵⁵—much as in the Tbilisi A-40 narrative, where a bodiless voice spoke to Mary from the Temple altar. In the *Protevangelium* narrative, the voice of the initial Annunciation to Mary is through a bodiless voice, at which Mary, getting water, looks this way and that for the source of the voice. Zervos identified the bodiless voice that spoke to Mary as the voice of God in the Temple, which in rabbinic

tradition was known as the *Bath kol*.⁵⁶ According to Bodmer 5's text, after the Annunciation, Mary went and sat on the throne—*thronos*.⁵⁷ Zervos assessed that the "throne" upon which Mary sat originally must have been the throne of God in the Holy of Holies,⁵⁸ where the Protevangelium twice says Mary resided.⁵⁹ Zervos concluded that this Annunciation in the Temple "was one of the primary concerns of the ancient redactor."⁶⁰

Building on Zervos's analysis of Bodmer 5, Michael Peppard recently argued that the Annunciation to Mary in the Temple by the *Bath kol* also appears to have been known to the artist who painted what is likely the oldest art of the Annunciation, a wall painting in the third-century Dura-Europos church baptistery. Peppard identified this wall painting as the Annunciation to Mary by the *Bath kol*.⁶¹ The core iconography of this wall painting is almost identical to later iconographic analogues of the Annunciation to Mary at the well⁶²—a woman looking over her shoulder in front of a water source⁶³—and both Peppard and Zervos concluded that the water source may have represented the spring or laver in the Temple courtyard.⁶⁴ All later art of the Annunciation to Mary at a water source includes an angel, but this angel may have been added in order to harmonize the scene with the angel Gabriel who speaks in the Annunciation story of Luke 1:26–38. No angel is in the Dura-Europos painting, however, and a line drawing of the painting made in situ shows two rays pointing toward the woman's back; Peppard concludes that these rays perhaps visually represented the voice of God, the *Bath kol*.⁶⁵

Tbilisi A-40 preserves an Annunciation to Mary by the *Bath kol* in the Temple as witnessed in Bodmer 5 and the Dura-Europos fresco. It also preserves that Mary was at the Temple altar, as witnessed in the *Gospel of Bartholomew*. Tbilisi A-40's Annunciation scene suggests that the compiler either had very early manuscripts of both texts and combined the Annunciation scenes, or, had access to an even earlier gospel, the gospel behind both the *Protevangelium* and *Gospel of Bartholomew*. This gospel source would appear also to be behind the Six Books palimpsest text, which says that after the Annunciation, Mary set out the censer of incense to God, which again invokes the Temple location of the Annunciation. While Shoemaker's edition preserves the Annunciation by the *Bath kol*, it omits that the voice came from the altar, and also, that Mary herself was at the altar. Only the text of Tbilisi A-40 preserves all these ancient narrative elements.

MARY AT THE BAPTISM OF HER SON

The second important way that van Esbroeck's edition differs from Shoemaker's is where the text of Tbilisi A-40 first suggests that Mary was at her son's baptism, and then subsequently affirms that she was there.⁶⁶ Mary's presence at her son's baptism, like her presence at his last meal, is a strong marker of her own ecclesial authority, including her right to baptize, such as seen in the palimpsest text, which described her sealing and sprinkling water on people in what appears to be an early baptismal ritual.⁶⁷ Luigi Gambero concluded that van Esbroeck's edition of Tbilisi A-40 depicted "Mary's presence at the baptism of her Son."⁶⁸ Shoemaker's edition subtly obscures this reading.

The canonical gospels are silent on whether Mary was at her son's baptism, but the *Life of the Virgin* places her there. First, the text internally places her there, because, as mentioned earlier, the text repeatedly states that she was inseparable from her son.⁶⁹ Second, additional passages further suggest she was there. One of these passages is in both van Esbroeck's and Shoemaker's edition. This passage states that before his baptism, Mary became "a disciple" of her son and never forgot anything he said or did.⁷⁰ This passage suggests that she was present with him in the next scene, the baptism. Shoemaker's edition has subtle differences that harmonize its account with the canonical baptismal account. For example, Shoemaker's edition states that Jesus taught his disciples "after his baptism."⁷¹ Van Esbroeck's edition of Tbilisi A-40, by contrast, states that Jesus taught the disciples "with his baptism"⁷²—a phrasing that implies his disciples were at his baptism, disciples that included his mother since the narrator had just stated that she had become his disciple. Teaching his disciples *after* his baptism, per Shoemaker's text, suggests that they were not with him at his baptism. Teaching his disciples *with* his baptism, per Tbilisi A-40's text, strongly implies that they were there. Finally, when introducing Mary's role at Cana, Tbilisi A-40's text says that she "was there also"—*also*. This "also" signifies that she was with him at his baptism and in the desert—and *also* at Cana.⁷³ Shoemaker's edition omits the "also," and again does so without a footnote.⁷⁴

Did ancient antecedents also portray Mary at her son's baptism? The only art of which I am aware that depicts Mary at her son's baptism is very old, the bottom right frame of the painted reliquary box from Palestine dated to the 500s (Fig. 4.3). Its artist portrayed Mary and a

man standing behind John the Baptist, with angels holding Mary's black maphorion as if waiting to dry off Jesus. This art likely conserves a very old narrative scene, because two early Christian writings that have been lost, the Hebrew gospel and the *Preaching of Paul*, placed Mary at her son's baptism.

Like the estimated 85% of the writings known to have been written by Jesus followers in the first two centuries, but which did not survive,⁷⁵ no copy of either the Hebrew gospel or the *Preaching of Paul* survived. We know about them solely because some early Christian writers who quoted from them named them. For example, in the second to fourth centuries, a variety of patristic writers described, or quoted from, a gospel they usually called the *Gospel According to the Hebrews*, including Papias, Irenaeus, Pantaenus, Clement of Alexandria, Hegesippus, Hippolytus, Origen, Eusebius of Caesaria, Ephrem the Syrian, Didymus of Alexandria, Epiphanius of Salamis, John Chrysostom, and Jerome. Several said it was composed by Matthew in his native language.⁷⁶ Its earliest mention was probably by Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis (ca. 60–130), who reportedly said, “Matthew composed his history in the Hebrew dialect.”⁷⁷ Irenaeus (ca. 130–203) similarly reported, “Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect.”⁷⁸ Some scholars propose that additional second-century writers, such as Ignatius, Polycarp, and Justin Martyr, may have been quoting from the Hebrew gospel when they quoted gospel sayings that are not in any of the canonical gospels.⁷⁹ The dating of the composition of the Hebrew gospel to either the first or the second century appears to largely depend on whether the scholar believes this gospel could be the lost source relied upon by the authors of both Matthew and Luke,⁸⁰ or not.⁸¹

By contrast, the *Preaching of Paul* was mentioned only once, in passing, by a third-century author known as pseudo-Cyprian. Most importantly in this context, according to pseudo-Cyprian, the *Preaching of Paul* contained an expanded scene of Jesus's baptism, a scene which included Mary telling her son what to do (much as she told him what to do at Cana). Pseudo-Cyprian complained that the scene in the *Preaching of Paul* included “both Christ confessing His own sin—although He alone did no sin at all—and almost compelled by his mother Mary unwillingly to receive John's baptism.”⁸²

The Hebrew gospel may have had three recensions used by different Christian communities around Jerusalem. At least, various writers referred to the gospel of the Hebrews, of the Nazareans, and of the

Ebionites. The gospel used by the Nazareans is relevant to the discussion of Mary at her son's baptism, because Jerome (347–420) recorded a passage from it which is similar to the passage in the *Preaching of Paul*. It describes Jesus's mother at his baptism as well as the remission of sins. According to Jerome, this gospel read, "Behold, the mother of the Lord and his brethren said to him: 'John the Baptist baptizes unto the remission of sins, let us go and be baptized by him.'" ⁸³

These two passages are the most explicit to suggest that Mary was at her son's baptism. Another well-known passage in the Hebrew gospel, however, merits consideration because it places Jesus's mother at his baptism, but in a different form. This passage was quoted twice by Origen (ca. 184–254), an influential theologian who lived in Alexandria and Palestine, and three times by Jerome. ⁸⁴ For example, in his homily on the gospel of John, Origen referenced the *Gospel of the Hebrews* in a discussion of how John had "baptized with the Holy Spirit and with Fire," and then Origen quoted Jesus himself speaking of "My mother, the Holy Spirit." ⁸⁵ Origen said: "There is nothing absurd in the Holy Spirit's being His mother." ⁸⁶

Worthy of a note here is that until the end of the fourth-century, "spirit" was grammatically feminine gendered in Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic. In Ancient Syria, scribes described Holy Spirit not only as female, but also as mother. ⁸⁷ Evidence of this is preserved in the *Gospel of Thomas*, ⁸⁸ the *Gospel of Philip*, ⁸⁹ the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, ⁹⁰ the *Odes of Solomon*, ⁹¹ the *Acts of Thomas*, ⁹² the *Acts of Philip*, ⁹³ as well as other writings. ⁹⁴ Even in the Latin West, the femaleness of Holy Spirit was apparently so important that some Latin Christians feminized the masculine-gendered *spiritus*—"spirit" in Latin—making it the feminine *spirita*. In any case, some Christian funeral epigraphs in Latin in the city of Rome and northern Africa, including one dated 291, use *spirita sancta* for Holy Spirit, instead of the grammatically correct masculine *spiritus sanctus*. ⁹⁵ Around the end of the fourth century, however, scribes began to masculinize the gender of Holy Spirit, most notably in Ancient Syria, where "spirit" had always been grammatically feminine. Susan Ashbrook Harvey says when scribes began to change the gender from feminine to masculine, it "did violence to the fabric of the language." ⁹⁶ Sebastian Brock adds that at the same time, "Syriac writers began to become wary about addressing Holy Spirit as Mother." ⁹⁷ No one quite understands

why scribes changed the gender of Holy Spirit, but perhaps it had something to do with the Council of Constantinople in 381, which added that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father” to the Nicene Creed.⁹⁸ This creedal addition essentially defined the Holy Spirit as the same substance as the Father, that is, male.

It is with this understanding of Holy Spirit in Ancient Syria that we return to Origen, who lived in Caesaria on the coast of Palestine. In a second homily, Origen again quoted the same Gospel of the Hebrews passage, but this time he invoked Mary when explaining why the Holy Spirit was Jesus’s mother:

Is he not able to declare as women both soul and Mary? But if a person accepts these words: “My mother, the Holy Spirit, has recently taken me and carried me up to the great mount Tabor,” and what follows, one is able to see his mother.⁹⁹

Origen invoking Mary in this context of the Holy Spirit is reified in yet one more saying attributed to the Gospel of the Hebrews. This saying is in a homily on Mary, purportedly written by Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–386), although quite possibly a later homilist wrote it under Cyril’s name. This homilist described an encounter with a monk who was still using the Gospel of the Hebrews and recorded a saying that the monk quoted from it: “The ‘power’ came down into the world, and it was called Mary, and [Christ] was in her womb for seven months. Afterwards she gave birth to him.”¹⁰⁰ Two additional statements in the homily, one earlier, and one later, help contextualize this saying. Earlier, apparently with this saying in mind, the homilist complained that some Christians believed, “She was a force (or, abstract power) of God which took the form of a woman, and came upon the earth, and was called ‘Mary,’ and this force gave birth to Emmanuel for us.”¹⁰¹ Although the homilist quoted Jesus’s mother as a “power” who came down, and Origen quoted his mother as the Holy Spirit who descended, both were discussing Jesus’s mother according to the Gospel of the Hebrews. Later, the homilist invoked Mary in the role of Holy Spirit in the baptismal ritual, and did so by using the same ritual formula, *in the name of Mary*, which both the liturgical manual embedded in the Six Books, as well as the “collyridian” women priests whom Epiphanius of Salamis described,

used when sacrificing bread to Mary on the altar.¹⁰² The homilist wrote that after he burned the monk's Gospel of the Hebrews, he baptized the monk *in the name of Mary*. He said, "I baptized him in the name of the Lady of us all, Saint Mary."¹⁰³

What is most important at this juncture is that ancient sources, including repeatedly the Gospel of the Hebrews, in one form or another placed Jesus's mother at his baptism. Van Esbroeck's edition of the *Life of the Virgin* based on Tbilisi A-40 preserves the tradition that she was at her son's baptism. Shoemaker's, based on later manuscripts, does not.

THE WOMEN AT THE LORD'S SUPPER

Finally, the third important time that Shoemaker's edition, without any footnote, changes van Esbroeck's, is with respect to the women at Jesus's last meal. Shoemaker's edition replaces van Esbroeck's "twelve apostles" with "twelve disciples."¹⁰⁴ This substitution has the effect of obscuring the women's presence at the meal, despite that the scene is immediately preceded by statements that Mary was inseparable from her son and that she was the leader of the women who followed him from Galilee.

Shoemaker's change essentially harmonizes the *Life of the Virgin's* supper scene with the gospels of Mark and Matthew, both of which present the Twelve—twelve men—as the sole disciples present, with the result that subsequent mentions "of disciples" appear to refer back to those twelve. By contrast, van Esbroeck's edition of Tbilisi A-40 presented the "twelve apostles" as a distinct subset of a much larger group of disciples at the meal, which were both men and women. Affirming that the text of Tbilisi A-40 was original to the *Life of the Virgin's* narrative, John Geometrician's recension of the *Life of the Virgin* is explicit—in both the Greek and the Latin translation—that the "men disciples" and the "women disciples" were at the meal.¹⁰⁵

Further affirming the antiquity of a Last Supper tradition where both men and women were present, as well as Mary and Jesus officiating, three texts—the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, and the *Apostolic Church Order*—suggest that some Jesus followers were familiar with this tradition, or one like it. The following sections detail each of the three texts and how the author, or compiler, of each signaled that they were aware of an even older supper tradition, a tradition about a ritual meal much like the one preserved in Tbilisi A-40.

PARTAKING AT THE TEMPLE ALTAR IN THE *GOSPEL OF BARTHOLOMEW*

The author of the *Gospel of Bartholomew* described a male and female pair partaking at the Temple altar, a pairing which suggests the ritual meal with Mary and Jesus officiating. This author depicted Mary and the great angel standing together at the Temple altar, sharing a loaf of bread and a cup of wine. They are envisioned side by side, because just prior, the angel wipes dew off Mary's robe. At the altar, first the angel eats, and then gives to Mary to eat; the angel drinks wine, then gives the cup to Mary to drink.¹⁰⁶ Chronologically, the pairing of Mary and the great angel at a ritual meal on the Temple altar, which takes place before her son is born, foretells the pairing of Mary and her son at a ritual meal before her son dies.

GENDER PARALLELISM IN THE LITURGY IN THE *DIDASCALIA APOSTOLORUM*

The order of the liturgy in a second text, the third- or fourth-century Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum*, again appears to preserve the cultural memory of Jesus and Mary co-officiating at a ritual meal. This compiler—a compiler because the *Didascalia* also was compiled from even older sources—described a liturgical pair, a male deacon, who stood in for Jesus, and a female deacon, who stood in for the Holy Spirit. As discussed above, Mary herself sometimes appears to have been regarded as a manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Thus the woman deacon potentially was seen as standing in for Mary, but in any case, standing in for a holy female. Originally composed in Greek, the *Didascalia* was widely translated.¹⁰⁷ Some of its elements belong to the early era, but the *Didascalia* subsequently underwent revisions so that its oldest surviving redaction is probably from the early third century, although perhaps later.¹⁰⁸

A relatively large number of scholars have proposed that a fundamental concern of *Didascalia*'s final redactor was to make changes to the text in an effort to increase the perception of the bishop's power, and also, to decrease the perception of the power of women clergy who previously had been described sharing power more equitably.¹⁰⁹ One kernel that survived the final redactor preserves a stunning example of its original gender parity—a liturgical pair, a male deacon and a female deacon:

The bishop is the high priest ... The deacon, however, is present as a type of Christ, and is therefore to be loved by you. And the deaconess is to be honoured by you as a type of the Holy Spirit. The presbyters are also to be reckoned by you as a type of the apostles... Therefore you should make your offerings to the high priest, doing so yourself or through the deacons.¹¹⁰

Notably here, the male and female deacons are described with more authority than the presbyters, who are merely the type of the apostles. According to the text, at the offering table the male deacon stood in for “Christ” and the woman stood in for “the Holy Spirit,” whom in Ancient Syria was considered female and mother. This practice suggests that the community may have followed a liturgical tradition such as seen in the *Life of the Virgin*.

THE RITUAL OF BODY AND BLOOD ACCORDING TO THE *APOSTOLIC CHURCH ORDER*

A third text, the *Apostolic Church Order*, preserves an explicit memory of both men and women at Jesus’s last meal, and an implicit memory of Jesus authorizing the women there like the men, as ministers of his body and blood. This is preserved in a passage compiled sometime between the early third and early fourth centuries.¹¹¹ Its scribe, or compiler, accepted without debate that the women disciples had attended Jesus’s last meal. The memory that the women were also at the meal appears to have been strong in his community, for the scribe repeated it and did not question it. What he contradicted was not that women were at the meal, but the ancillary tradition that Jesus gave the women who were there ministerial authority like he gave the men. Furthermore, consistent with this scribe knowing a tradition that said Mary was the role model for the women at the meal—a tradition consistent with the *Life of the Virgin*—this scribe attempted to discredit the women’s liturgical authority by discrediting Mary’s. Jesus did not give a ministerial role to women, this scribe claimed, because Mary laughed.¹¹²

Regarding this passage, Alistair Stewart-Sykes, its most recent editor, concludes, “The whole point of the discussion is to subordinate women’s participation in the celebration of the eucharist.”¹¹³ Allie Ernst notes that the scribe gave four distinct reasons to exclude women from ministering at the offering of the Body and the Blood: (1) John said Jesus

did not permit the women to stand with the men, (2) Martha said it was because Jesus saw Mary smiling, (3) Mary admitted she laughed, but claimed Jesus had taught that women are weak, and (4) Cephas said it was because women should pray seated on the ground, not upright. This is an exceedingly large number of reasons, especially considering that the same scribe usually gave only one reason for an injunction.¹¹⁴ Ernst argues that such over-wording points to women's Eucharistic authority as a site of ideological conflict in the culture.¹¹⁵ Here is the scene:

John said: You are forgetting, brothers, that when the teacher requested the bread and the cup and blessed them saying: This is my Body and Blood, he did not permit the women to stand alongside us.

Martha said: It was on account of Mary because he saw her smiling.

Mary said: I did not laugh at this. Previously he said to us, when he was teaching, that the weak would be saved through the strong.

Kephas said: Some things should be remembered: that women should not pray upright but seated on the ground.¹¹⁶

Since Martha is mentioned, the Mary in this passage might be thought to refer to Mary of Bethany. Alternatively, François Bovon argued that scribes sometimes added "Martha" to a passage in order to diminish the authority of an important Mary.¹¹⁷ Elizabeth Schrader recently argued the same—that the scribal addition of "Martha" diminished the authority of the important original Mary.¹¹⁸ In the case of the *Apostolic Church Order*, the scribe unquestionably used "Martha" as a literary device to delegitimize Mary. The scribe's accusation, via "Martha," that Mary smiled/laughed during the ritual is a particularly complex accusation, because not only did the scribe give this as the reason why Jesus did not ordain the women like the men, but also the claim itself seriously undermines Mary's credibility as a minister. Unquestionably, a minister smiling or laughing during a sacred ritual would be inappropriate. Furthermore, this scribe made Mary corroborate Martha's accusation that she had smiled—by having Mary correct Martha and say that she had in fact *laughed*—an even greater transgression in a minister—and then this scribe put in Mary's mouth a Jesus saying about women that Jesus never said. Thus, in order to bolster the position that women could not be ministers like men, this scribe first undermined Mary's religious authority—and then turned around and used her authority to validate a fictional Jesus saying that is not in any gospel: "The weak [women]

would be saved through the strong [men].”¹¹⁹ These words appear to have been put in Mary’s mouth to signify, as Jane Schaberg suggests, that it was “unnecessary for women (the weak) to take part in the Eucharist performed by men (the strong).”¹²⁰

This scribe’s focus on repeatedly undermining Mary’s authority suggests that the scribe considered Mary herself a threat. The text itself belies a raging ideological conflict over the role of women officiants. One faction was using Mary to justify women officiants, and the other faction, represented by this scribe, was going to great lengths to try to undermine Mary’s authority. This scribe, thus, was not only aware of a pre-existing tradition that said women had been present at the last supper, and that Jesus had authorized them as ministers there—he also knew that the communities who followed this tradition considered Mary herself the model for these women clergy.

Some scholars have argued that the scribe of the *Apostolic Church Order* was probably familiar with a now lost extracanonical gospel.¹²¹ Given the similarity between Mary’s role at the last supper in the *Apostolic Church Order*’s adverse report, and Mary’s role in the *Life of the Virgin*’s positive report, it seems probable that both compilers had the same lost gospel in mind.

Van Esbroeck’s edition of Tbilisi A-40 preserved that both men and women were at the last supper, including that it was because Mary was the leader of the women that she sacrificed. The *Life of the Virgin*, thus, preserves the clear implication that Mary performed this ritual as a role model for women. The scribe of the *Apostolic Church Order*, through his fanciful edits, inadvertently preserved that he, too, was aware that Mary provided both the model and the justification for women to officiate at the Body and Blood. That was why, in four different ways, he undermined Mary’s authority.

These three ancient texts, the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, the *Didascalia apostolorum*, and the *Apostolic Church Order*, each appear to have preserved a tradition about Mary as a co-officiant at a ritual meal. The *Gospel of Bartholomew* portrayed her at the Temple altar with a Great Angel at a Eucharistic meal. The *Didascalia* preserved two officiants, a male deacon and a female deacon, the male standing in for Jesus and the female for Holy Spirit, who in Ancient Syria was envisioned as female and mother, and, according to Origen, like Mary. The scribe of the *Apostolic Church Order* takes for granted that women were at the last

supper, and, by focusing his attack on Mary's authority, demonstrates that he considered Mary the crucial justification in the competing tradition, a tradition which taught that the women who were at the last supper were made ministers, an alternate view of the institution of the Eucharist.

These three texts together provide significant validation of the antiquity of the last supper tradition preserved in the *Life of the Virgin*, which says that the women were there, and also, that Mary, their teacher and role model, presided with her son at the ritual meal. Shoemaker's edition, based on later manuscripts, preserves neither the women at the supper nor Mary officiating with Jesus. Van Esbroeck's edition of Tbilisi A-40 preserves both, as well as the equally ancient traditions of the Annunciation inside the Jerusalem Temple and Mary at her son's baptism.

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