SEX, BIRTH, PURITY AND ASCETICISM IN THE PROTEVANGELIUM JACOBI

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ABSTRACT
This essay discusses the background of various statements in the Protevangelium Jacobi that have to do with sex, birth, and purity. It first traces the background of the motif that Mary is here a seven-months' child; secondly, the motif that Mary conceives by the Word of God, which is equivalent to her being overshadowed by God's power, is investigated against its ancient pagan background; thirdly, Mary's being removed from the temple is explained in terms of Jewish ideas of sexual purity; fourthly, Mary's perpetual virginity, the testing of her hymen, and, finally, her eating angelic food are studied in the light of ancient pagan, Jewish, and Christian concepts.

1 INTRODUCTION
In his later years Willem Vorster felt more and more inclined to turn away from what he once called a sterile text-immanentism and to draw extra-biblical material within the orbit of his research. One of the extra-biblical writings that had captured his attention for some time was a Christian apocryphon from the middle or second half of the second century which was probably entitled The Birth of Mary but is commonly known as Protevangelium Jacobi. This interest resulted in three publications: a contribution to the South African liber amicorum for Bruce Metzger, an article in the Festschrift for A F J Klijn, and an entry in the Anchor Bible Dictionary. It seemed fitting, therefore, to honour his memory with a contribution in the form of some notes on selected passages in this interesting writing.

1 Private conversation in Louvain, August 1992.
3 The editions used by me are the ones by E. de Strycker, La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques, Brussels 1961, and A. de Santos Otero, Los evangelios
2 THE SEVEN MONTHS MOTIF

In the first chapters of the Protevangelium Jacobi, one of the earliest written and most influential elaborations of the canonical infancy narratives⁴, that deals with the birth, childhood, and virginal marriage of Jesus’ mother Mary⁵, we are told that Mary’s mother is called Anna. Although some scholars have suggested that the anonymous author may have derived this name from the story about Anna in Luke 2:36-38, this is very improbable. The name is most likely inspired by the story of Hannah (LXX: Anna) and Samuel in 1 Sm 1-2. The parallels between these two stories of sterile women are so clear that purposeful imitation seems almost certain. The remark about God’s shutting up Anna’s womb in 2:3 is a clear echo of 1 Sm 1:6. In general her lamentation about her childlessness is very much reminiscent of Hannah’s despair in 1 Sm 1 as is her song to the Lord in 6:2 of Hannah’s song in 1 Sm 2. Moreover, when in 4:1 she says: ‘As the Lord my God lives, if I bear a child, whether male or female, I will bring it as a gift to the Lord my God, and it shall serve him all the days of its life’, we have echoes of no less than 3 passages in 1 Sm: 1:11, 26, 28.⁶ There is a rich web of intertextuality here.⁷ But there is more.⁸

⁴ Vorster, South African Perspective 39: ‘The infancy gospels, and in particular P[rotevangelium] J[acobi] had a tremendous impact in the early church, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance — even greater than the Bible—on literature and art’; see also Vorster’s statements in ABD 3:631-632.
⁷ It was the element of intertextuality on which Willem Vorster focussed in his first two articles on the Protevangelium Jacobi (see note 2). But see already P. A. van Stempvoort, The Protevangelium Jacobi: The sources of its theme and style and their bearing on its date, in F. L. Cross (ed.), Studia Evangelica 3, Berlin 1964, 410-426.
⁸ See also the echoes of 1 Sm 1:21-23 in 7:1. Some of these associations with 1 Sm
In 5:2 we are told that 'her six months were fulfilled and in the seventh month Anna gave birth'. There are a great many text-critical problems here. The old edition by Tischendorf\(^9\) read: 'Her months were fulfilled and in the ninth month she gave birth', here following the majority of the manuscripts. De Strycker, however, rightly defends the readings found in the earliest witness, Papyrus Bodmer V published by M Testuz.\(^10\) There should be little doubt that the *lectio difficilior*, 'six months' and 'the seventh month', is to be preferred here\(^11\), the more so since it makes excellent sense. We find here the motif that Mary was a *seven* months' child born after *six* months of pregnancy.

What is that supposed to mean? Let us begin by making clear that here again we have a reminiscence of the Hannah and Samuel story, but this time not the biblical story but a post-biblical haggadic elaboration.

In some passages of the Babylonian Talmud (*Rosh Hashana* 11a, *Niddah* 38b, *Jebamoth* 42a), we read discussions about Gn 18:14, a verse which in a typically rabbinic way is interpreted as if the angel had said to Abraham that he would return to him at the next festival\(^12\) by which time Sarah would have a son. Now the Jewish year is so full of festivals that it is impossible to find a period of nine months between any of them in unbroken succession. One of the rabbis suggests therefore that the angel may have spoken the words at Sukkoth and referred to Passover. That would leave Sarah six months of pregnancy, which nevertheless would seem to be too short. Another rabbi solves the riddle as follows: We say that a woman bears after nine months even when the ninth month was not yet completed, so it is possible to say that a woman gives birth after seven months even when that seventh month has only just started to be counted. Now in 1 Sm 1:20 the Bible says that Hannah gave birth 'after cycles of days' (*litqufoth ha-yamim*). Since both words are in the plural, one must assume that there had passed at least two cycles, that is, two quarterly seasons (= 6 months), and at least two days before Samuel was born, and that it could therefore reasonably be said that Samuel was a seven months' child, even as Isaac was. It is highly probable that the author of the *Protevangelium Jacobi* 1-2 were already rightly seen by Marina Warner, *Alone of all her sex: The myth and cult of the virgin Mary*, London 1976, 31.


\(^11\) It is also supported by some of the ancient versions.

\(^12\) This interpretation hinges upon the word *mo'ed* in the Hebrew text of Gn 18:14.
knew the tradition that Samuel was such a child and transferred the motif to Mary. But then the question is raised why the author did so. What did it mean to be regarded as a seven months' child in antiquity?13

Samuel and Mary are not the only biblical persons to be presented as seven months' children in post-biblical literature. It is said of Isaac in Pseudo-Philo, Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum 23:8; of Moses in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Ex 3:2 and in Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai p. 6; and of Jesus in a fragment (no 1) of the Gospel according to the Hebrews14 and in a tradition recorded by Epiphanius (Panarion 51, 29, 3).15 None of these traditions has any basis in the biblical text. For an explanation we have to take a look into Greco-Roman sources. It does not suffice to point out that there was a widespread theory among ancient philosophers and physicians to the effect that seven months' children are viable whereas eight months' children are not.16 True though this may be and much discussed as this theory was,17 it cannot explain why some biblical persons were said to have been born after seven (or six) months. To be sure, this Greek theory had become known also in Jewish and Christian circles, as could be demonstrated with many instances,18 but that would not seem to be to the point, since it would not provide us with a solution to the problem why such an early birth is ascribed here to Mary and elsewhere to Samuel, Isaac, Moses and Jesus.

We therefore now turn to evidence of ascriptions of a birth after seven months to concrete persons, be they mythical or historical, in classical litera-

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14 For an English translation of this (Coptic) fragment see Schneemelcher & Wilson, NT Apocrypha I 177. It is left out by Elliott, Apocryphal NT 9-10. For a discussion of these problems see A. F. J. Klijn, Jewish-Christian Gospel tradition, Leiden 1992, 134-137.

15 All these texts are quoted and discussed in my article mentioned above.

16 So, for instance, S. Liebermann, Hellenism in Jewish Palestine, New York 1952, 76-77.


nature, hoping to find some clues there. Then we find out that such an early birth is ascribed to Apollo, Dionysus, Heracles, Eurysteus, as far as the mythical persons are concerned, and to the consul Corbulo, the emperor Gaius’ wife Caesonia, the great dictator Julius Caesar, and the Spartan king Demaratus, as to the historical persons. Now it is relevant that of six out of these eight persons it is also said that they have a superhuman origin, since they had been begotten by Zeus or Apollo or by a (semi-divine) hero. And, not surprisingly, the same kind of traditions can also be found about our five biblical persons. For Jesus we need only refer to Mt 1:18 and Lk 1:35. For Isaac there are traditions about his having been miraculously conceived (Philo even downright states: ‘The Lord begat Isaac’, *Legum allegoriae* 3.219; cf Gl 4:21-31). As to Samuel and Moses, the traditions that Hannah and Jochebed were both of them 130 years of age when they got pregnant, underscore the miraculous (God-wrought) character of these pregnancies. And, finally, for Mary, the *Protevangelium Jacobi* indicates clearly that she was not begotten by her human father. In 4:2 the angel says to Joachim: ‘The Lord God has heard your prayer. Go down from here; behold, your wife Anna has conceived’. And the whole context leaves no doubt that Joachim had no share at all in the begetting of Mary. When Joachim was away in the desert for 40 days, the angel announced to Anna, ‘you shall conceive’, and before his return Joachim hears from the same angel, ‘she has conceived’. We may conclude that in antiquity a birth after seven (six) months is often attributed to persons that were begotten by divine beings or whose conception had been miraculous one way or another. A causal connection between a short pregnancy and the favourable manner of begetting or conceiving is confirmed by some remarks in Greek medical writings (e.g. Ps-Hippocrates, *Peri heptaménou* 6-9). One can hardly imagine a more favourable condition, both physical and mental, than when one of the parents is a god or a hero or an angel or the Holy Spirit. When a child is born after six or seven months and is viable, its conception must have been under very favourable circumstances. No better circumstances than when the father is divine. That was the case with Mary, as it was later with her own son.

One aspect is still in need of more explanation. Except for Jesus, of all other four biblical persons it is said alternately, sometimes even in the same

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19 All the relevant evidence is spelled out in my ‘Seven Months’ Children’ 240-244.
20 Here again there is a text-critical problem because many ms. read a future tense in the announcement to Joachim as well, but that is a lectio facilior that should be rejected, if only because the oldest witness, P. Bodmer V, reads the perfect tense here. For a balanced discussion see De Strycker, *La forme la plus ancienne* 81 n.3. Elliott wrongly still follows the reading with the future (*Apocr. NT* 58). See the note to 4:9 in *The Complete Gospels*, ed. R. J. Miller, Sonomà 1992, 378.
source, that they were born after six or seven months. So is Mary (see the quote from 5:2 above). Here a text from Hippocrates, *Peri oktanemón* 4, is illuminating.²¹ He says that seven months' children are born after 182 days and a small additional part. For if one reckons 15 days for the first month and for the next five months 147.5 days—for two months are completed in 59 days—then for the seventh month—till the half of the year is completed—only slightly more than 20 days are left, another small part of a day being added. This curious way of counting can only be understood if we recognise that 'month' is here used in the sense of lunar month (of 29.5 days) but 'year' in the sense of solar year (slightly more than 365 days); half a year is half a solar year not the sixfold of a lunar month. So the word 'month' can be used in two ways in our sources: those who use it in the sense of lunar month (like Hippocrates) say that a seven months' child is born after exactly half a year, that is: six months in the other sense. Moreover, of the first month only the second half is counted (but counted as a full month!), that is, from the supposed moment of conception onwards. The Talmudic passages on Samuel's birth quoted above demonstrate that this way of reckoning was also known in Jewish circles. *Protevangelium Jacobi* 5:2 proves that the same applies to Christian circles.

3 CONCEPTION BY THE LORD

There is one more Hellenistic aspect to the birth or conception stories in the *Protevangelium Jacobi*. In 11:2 Mary asks the angel, who announces her that she will 'conceive by His Word', whether that implies that she will 'conceive by the Lord, the living God'. Then the angel answers that that is not the case for 'a power of God will overshadow you, wherefore that holy thing which is born of you will be called Son of the Most High, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins' (11:3). Apart from the fact that we have here a curious 'Mischzitat' from Lk 1:35 and 31 and Mt 1:21, we should pause here to try to envisage what the author had in mind when he said that Mary will not conceive from God himself but from his Word which is equated here with his overshadowing power. The 'overshadowing power' is a conception that is already present in Luke 1:35 although there it is not equated with God's Word. Elsewhere I have argued that the ancient concept of 'shadow' is a much more 'filled' or loaded concept than we moderns can imagine.²² What Deutero-Isaiah (55:11) says about the Word of God, namely that it will not return to him empty, *mutatis mutandis* applies to the shadow in

²¹ For a full translation see Grensemann, *Hippocrates* 88-90.
²² See my article 'Shadow' in *ABD* 5 (1992) 1148-1150.
some New Testament passages: When in Acts 5:15 Luke tells that the inhabitants of Jerusalem carried out their sick into the streets in order that the shadow of Peter might fall upon them so that they would be healed, it is apparent that 'shadow' here means much more than the absence of (sun)light—it is a strong and positive power. The idea that the shadow was a vital part of a human being and could exercise influence in bonam et malam partem was widespread in antiquity, not only in Greece and Rome but also in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Israel. The powerful impact that a shadow of a person (or an animal, or even a tree) could have upon other persons (or animals or trees) is certainly at the background of passages such as Acts 5:15. Some late Egyptian texts go as far as to assert that the shadow of a god could even be so powerful as to make a woman pregnant (these texts speak about the seminal emission of the shadow of the deity!). It is not at all improbable that similar ideas played a role not only in Luke's mind but also in that of the author of our apocryphon and that this is the reason why he adopted exactly that expression from Luke's Gospel to express that Mary was indeed impregnated by God in his manifestation of Word or Spirit or Power or Shadow. That all of these terms had the same meaning is stated unequivocally by a contemporary of the author of our apocryphon, Justin Martyr, in his First Apology 33:6: 'It is wrong to understand the Spirit and the Power of God as anything else than his Word (...), and it was this which, when it came upon the virgin and overshadowed her, caused her to conceive, not by intercourse but by power'.

4 SEXUAL PURITY

In Protevangelium Jacobi 7 it is told that Mary's parents bring her to the Temple in Jerusalem when she is three years old and she stays there like the little Samuel (1 Sm 2). Though we are not told what she was doing there all the time, apart from her receiving food from the hand of an angel (8:1, on which see below), she apparently stayed there some nine years. In 8:2 it is said: 'When she was twelve years old, there took place a council of the priests.

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25 Vorster, South African Perspective 49 rightly states: 'Logos would thus refer to or be the same as dynamis theou, a term used for the Holy Spirit'. Note that in 14:2 the angel says that Mary's child is from the Holy Spirit.
26 We need spill no ink on the utter historical improbability of a young girl in temple-service in Jerusalem.
saying: "Behold Mary has become twelve years old in the temple of the Lord. What then shall we do with her that she may not pollute the sanctuary of the Lord". Although there are several variant readings for the number 12—at the first occurrence 14 and 15, at the second 10 and 14—it is obvious that 12 is the correct reading here. At the background is the Jewish rule that a girl is estimated to enter puberty, defined by the appearance of two pubic hairs, early in her 13th year and that for that reason maturity was regarded as beginning legally from the age of 12 years and one day (for boys it was one year later). Till the age of 12 she was regarded as a minor (tīnoqet); from 12 till twelve and a half as a girl or a young woman (na'arah), from twelve and a half as an adult (bogeret). It was in the middle period that she was expected to start menstruating. It is this middle period that Mary has now reached. That is the reason why the priests (a) took council about what to do with her now that she could possibly defile the temple when beginning to menstruate, and (b) decided to look for a suitable husband for her, which they found promptly in the person of Joseph (9:1). The Bible does not tell us anything about the age of Mary when Joseph became her husband. How realistic is it that our author says she was 12? Rabbinic sources generally suppose an average age at marriage of 12, though the epigraphical and papyrological evidence (which is scanty, to be sure) suggests an age of 15 or so. Anyhow, Jewish women entered marriage very early, whereas men did not. The average age at marriage for men most probably was around thirty. It is no wonder then that Joseph, who in our

27 Curiously enough, when Mary gets pregnant she is said to have been sixteen (vv.l.l. fifteen and fourteen), in 12:3. But this is almost certainly due to the author's using different sources without harmonizing them sufficiently; so rightly M. Mach, Are there Jewish elements in the "Protevangelium Jacobi"?, Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division A, Jerusalem 1986, 215.

28 See Mishna, Niddah 5:6-7. Mach, Jewish Elements 221 n. 9 refers to Roman parallels.

29 See B. Z. Barslai, Nidda (Die Mischnah VI 7), Berlin 1980, 94-95. Preuss, Bilsch-talmudische Medizin 146-148. It is striking that for boys one did not distinguish such a middle period: up till 13 they were minors, thereafter adults.

30 Joseph calls her a neanis at 10:2.


apocryphon is said to have been married already before and to be the father of sons, calls himself old: presbytēs eimi (9:2). A presbytēs is not yet a gerōn, but it often indicates a person of about 50 to 55 years. That is to say that the author of this writing suggests that the age-difference between Mary and Joseph may have been some 40 years! One of his reasons to widen the age gap between these persons might have been to suggest the improbability of sexual contact between the two of them, but more probably he was more or less forced to do so because he had to make Joseph the parent of other children before he married Mary so as to be able to explain why brothers and sisters of Jesus were mentioned in the canonical Gospels. In his view, in which the enduring virginity of Mary is of paramount importance (see e.g. 20:1), these brothers and sisters could impossibly be Mary’s children. That is why the author has one of Joseph’s sons led Mary’s ass when she and Joseph set out for Bethlehem (17:2).

5 PERPETUAL VIRGINITY

This brings me to my fourth and last observation. In the passage just referred to it is said that, after Mary has given birth to Jesus, the midwife tells Salome that a virgin has brought forth. Salome says that unless she inserts her finger to test Mary’s condition, she cannot believe this (19:3). She investigates Mary’s hymen but is immediately punished: ‘Behold, my hand falls away from me, consumed by fire!’ (20:1). Apparently she experiences some sort of withering of her hand, but thereafter, when at the command of an angel she stretches out that hand to touch Jesus she is healed at once. A similar story of a hand that suddenly withers and is healed soon afterwards is already found in 1 Kings 13:4-6; and one may also compare the Gospel story about the man with the withered hand (Mk 3:5/Mt 12:13/Lk 6:10). The aspect I wish to draw attention to, however, is that Salome is punished in that part of her body that she used to commit the sinful act, her hand. This idea is also well attested elsewhere. For example, in the Testament of Gad 5:9-11 we read the following statement by Gad:

33 See G. Bornkamm, TWNT 4 (1959) 682-683. It should be added that sometimes the term presbytēs seems to have been used in the wider sense of a person between 30 and 60 years of age; see R. Garland, The Greek way of life from conception to old age, London 1990, 243.
34 Note the striking echo of John 20:25 (on Thomas)!
35 P. Bodmer reads here: ‘Salome investigated her nature (physis)’, but physis is a common term for the female genitals.
God brought upon me a disease of the liver, and without the prayers of Jacob my father my spirit would nearly have departed from me. For by what things a man transgresses, by the same he is also punished. Since, therefore, my liver was set mercilessly against Joseph, I was judged mercilessly, suffering in my liver for eleven months, for so long a time I was at enmity with Joseph, until he was sold. 37

Wisdom of Solomon 11:16 says: 'Those things through which a man sins, through them he is punished'. 38 And in Pseudo-Philo's Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum 44:10, God says: 'To every man there will be such a punishment that in whatever sin he shall have sinned, in this he will be judged'. 39 One could quote many more examples from Jewish pseudepigrapha (e.g. Jubilees 48:14) and also from rabbinic literature (e.g. Mishnah, Sotah 1:7-9; Tosefta, Sotah 3-4; Mekhilta, Be-Shalach 6) to illustrate that the principle of retaliation from the Torah (Ex 21:23ff; Lv 24:18ff; Dt 19:21) was still very much adhered to.

But this was the case not only in Jewish but also in Christian literature from the early centuries, witness not only our passage on Salome, but also several Christian apocalyptic writings from late antiquity. 40 In the Apocalypse of Peter (6-12), the Apocalypse of Paul (31-42), and the Acts of Thomas (55-57), we find detailed descriptions of the tortures of the wicked in Gehenna. One of the most striking aspects of these gruesome pictures is the correspondence between punishment and sin: for example, for speaking falsehood or obscenities people are punished by being hanged by their tongues; for fornication people are hanged by their genitals; women are hanged by the nipples of their breasts for having uncovered themselves in front of others; those who went astray in their looking and gazed with delight at sinfull acts are hanged by their eyes; etcetera. The great Jewish scholar Saul Lieberman has demonstrated that many of these Christian descriptions go back to Jewish, especially Palestinian sources, but he also adds that, although the measure-for-measure principle was perfected by the rabbis for this world, they rarely employed it for the next, 41 probably because they were wary of apocalypses. ‘Tours of hell’ had their most influential history (‘Wirkungsgeschichte’) in

40 See especially the study by S. Lieberman, On sins and their punishments, in his Texts and studies, New York 1974, 29-56.
41 See previous note.
Christianity.\textsuperscript{42} In our text we have a clear early Christian example of this retaliation principle, albeit here in an earthly, non-eschatological context.

Quite apart from the punishment aspect, the story of the testing of Mary's hymen so as to ascertain that after her delivery she indeed still was a virgin, had an enormous influence in Patristic literature till far into the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{43} The fact that it remained not only a motif of the popular imagination (although that was how it started) can well be illustrated by pointing to a passage in a very learned Byzantine work, the \textit{Suda}. The \textit{Suda} is a large lexicon, compiled around the year 1000 in Byzantium, in which, on the basis of older works of a lexicographical and encyclopaedic nature, the unknown compiler presents a treasure-house of data on ancient Greek language and literature in no less than some 30.000 lemmata, most of them very brief\textsuperscript{44}. In earlier days the work used to be called 'the Lexicon of Suidas', but recent research has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that the original title was \textit{Suda}, meaning 'fortress, pallisade, stronghold'\textsuperscript{45}, probably implying that the work is a bastion of scholarship, as indeed it is. In the lemma 'Jesus' we find an interesting anti-Jewish legend containing a passage in which the priests of the Jerusalem temple summon Mary to testify about Jesus' conception and birth. When she has said that she never had intercourse with anyone before her pregnancy and that after having giving birth she still remained a virgin till the present day, the text continues:

When the priests heard that, they ordered that reliable midwives should come to them and they instructed them to investigate whether Mary was really still a virgin. And these women confirmed on the basis of their findings that she was indeed a virgin. Then there also came the women who had been present and had seen her giving birth and they testified that Jesus was her son. The priests were utterly

\textsuperscript{42} See M. Himmelfarb, \textit{Tours of hell. An apocalyptic form in Jewish and Christian literature}, Philadelphia 1985; at pp. 75-105 Himmelfarb presents an extensive collection of materials concerning measure-for-measure punishment in hell.

\textsuperscript{43} See G. Binder, Geburt II (religionsgeschichtlich), \textit{Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum} 9 (1976) 43-171, esp. 151. A great deal of evidence can be found in M. Warner, \textit{Alone of all her sex: The myth and cult of the virgin Mary}, London 1976, passim, esp. 25-49.


astonished at what was said by Mary and by the women who testified to her delivery.46

In a short but illuminating passage in his classic work Das Leben Jesu im Zeitalter der neutestamentlichen Apokryphen, Walter Bauer remarks: ‘Man streitet nicht um die Frage, ob eine Jungfrau empfangen, sondern darum, ob sie gebären könne, ohne den ihr charakteristischen Zustand zu verlieren.’47 This applies both to the Suda passage and to the story in the Protevangelium Jacobi. It would seem to be that the need for a ‘virgin goddess’ was so strong in the ancient world, also among Christians, that the Matthean and Lukan stories of the virginal conception of Jesus gave rise, in less than a century, to the theory of Mary’s perpetual virginity. The motif of Jesus’ mother’s being a virgin when she conceived him played no role at all in the first generation of Christianity, the infancy stories in the two Gospels being relatively late creations. But as is apparent from Justin Martyr, a near-contemporary of the author of the Protevangelium, the question of Mary’s virginity had already become quite an issue within a century after Matthew and Luke. In his Dialogue with Trypho the question of Mary’s virginity comes up time and again, here primarily because his Jewish opponent Trypho said that the LXX translation of Isaiah 7:14 (‘a virgin will conceive’) was absolutely wrong.48 Jewish Christians, too, rejected the theory of Jesus’ virgin birth, as did some of the Gnostics. There raged a controversy between various parties over this issue in the second century.49

Stephen Benko, in his recent monograph on The virgin goddess,50 has argued that the early stages of developing Mariology were deeply influenced by pagan cults of mother-goddesses. There can be little doubt about the basic correctness of this thesis. Indeed, one of Mary’s important titles, ‘Queen of Heaven’ (regina caeli), was borrowed from Isis and other pagan goddesses51, and ‘by the time the Council of Ephesus met in 431, the people on the streets

47 Darmstadt 1967 (= Tübingen 1909), 68.
49 Bauer, Leben Jesu 29-58.
51 See, for instance, Apuleius, Metamorphoses, XI 2.
of the city freely hailed her with the same titles with which they previously had hailed their Artemis.\textsuperscript{52} Benko states that as early an author as the 'James' of our \textit{Protevangelium} aimed at 'elevating Mary to the level of the great virgin-mother goddesses of the Greco-Roman world.'\textsuperscript{53} Why was the condition of Mary's hymen a matter of such concern to this author? This was because 'the mother of the Son of God could have no lesser dignity than the Great Mother of the gods, the favorite subject of popular piety in the East.'\textsuperscript{54} So the author elevated Mary to a goddess-like figure.

That is also the reason why Mary is repeatedly said to have received food from the hand of an angel (8:1; 13:2; 15:2), by which the author undoubtedly implies that she ate angelic food. The motif of angelic food or bread ultimately derives from Ps 78:25 where it is said that God gave the people of Israel in the desert bread of angels to eat (manna). Although this text seems to imply that this heavenly bread was much like earthly bread, it nevertheless gave rise to the (Jewish and Christian) tradition that angels have their own kind of bread or food, much like the ambrosia of the Greek gods: e.g \textit{Sap. Sal.} 16:20; Ps-Philo, \textit{De Sampsonie} 14; B.T. \textit{Yoma} 75b; 5 \textit{Ezra} 1:19; etc. (in \textit{Vita Adae et Evae} [Latin] 4:2 and B.T. \textit{Sanhedrin} 59b Adam and Eve are said to have received food from angels in Paradise).\textsuperscript{55} A corollary of this theory that is sometimes found is that this very special food does not produce excrements (that is the reason why in \textit{Joseph and Aseneth} 16 the angel is said to eat honey, which is wholly absorbed into the body without leaving waste matter). The sheer idea that such holy and pure creatures as angels would have to defecate was unthinkable for many believers. In view our author's excessive fascination and preoccupation with the purity of Mary's bodily condition and his view of her as an angelic and paradisiacal being (the idea of Mary being a second Eve being constantly in his mind), would it be too rash to surmise that this motif is also at the background here? It is undoubtedly for the very same reason that his near-contemporary, the Gnostic Valentinus, stated about Mary's son that 'Jesus ate and drank in a special way, without excreting his solids. He had such a great capacity for continence that the nourishment within him was not

\textsuperscript{52} Benko, \textit{Virgin Goddess} 216.  
\textsuperscript{53} Benko, \textit{Virgin Goddess} 202.  
\textsuperscript{54} Benko, \textit{Virgin Goddess} 202.  
\textsuperscript{55} It has to be added here, though, that there were also voices that strongly objected to the view that angels partake of food; see D. Winston, \textit{The Wisdom of Solomon}, Garden City 1979, 298, and especially F. Siegert, \textit{Drei hellenistisch-jüdische Predigten} II, Tübingen 1992, 253-255 ('Können Engel essen?').
corrupted [i.e. did not become excrement] for he did not experience corruption’ (fragm. 3 ap. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* III 59, 3).  

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