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## MARIAN DEVOTION IN EIGHTH CENTURY BYZANTIUM

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Within the pages of the Bible, the Virgin Mary plays a minimal role. Other than giving birth to Jesus, she is a weak character. Why then, was she so highly venerated in the Middle Ages? Sermons of that time period often told stories of her early life, as well as her death, which were not included in the Holy text. Preachers, therefore, had to seek out other sources which wrote of the Virgin. Although used by clergy, these sources often fell under the category of "apocrypha," a term which describes a vast group of religious texts not approved by the Church.

Marian devotion flourished in eighth century Byzantium where there was a recurrence of sermons utilizing the apocrypha, which will be discussed later in more detail. John of Damascus, a Syrian Christian monk at the time, exemplified this use of apocryphal literature and created a far different image of the Virgin Mary than existed within the pages of the Bible. It was this Mary of the apocrypha, and not the Mary of the Bible, who was presented in sermons and highly venerated.

The presentation and the role of the Virgin Mary in the Bible is minimal. Often times, she is mentioned sparsely and trivially, such as in Acts of the Apostles 1:14, which states, "All these were persevering with one mind in prayer with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren."<sup>1</sup> She is not mentioned again in Acts of the Apostles. In John 2:1-5, Mary is present at a wedding feast in which Jesus also is present. Referring to her son, Mary says to the waiters, " whatsoever he shall say to you, do ye"<sup>2</sup>; thus portraying her as a wise, yet passive figure. Another passage in the Gospel according to John which demonstrates Mary's passiveness occurs when Jesus is hanging from the cross: "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus, his mother... When Jesus therefore had seen his mother and the disciple standing whom he loved, he saith to his mother: Woman, behold thy son."<sup>3</sup> To this statement, a statement which gives her the continued responsibility of a mother at the death of her son, Mary makes no response according to the Scriptures.

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<sup>1</sup> *Douay-Rheims Bible Online*, (DRBO.ORG, 2004), 4 May 2005 <<http://drbo.org>>.

<sup>2</sup> John 2:5, Douay-Rheims.

<sup>3</sup> John 19:25-26, *Ibid*.

Even when she is mentioned with more significance, she never fully develops as a strong character; rather, she remains meek and obedient throughout her role in the Bible. The first chapter of the Gospel according to Luke is the only place in the Bible where Mary is prominent and even here, she is clearly a figure of passiveness and obedience; when an angel informs Mary of her conception, she simply replies, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word"<sup>4</sup> after asking, "How shall this be done, because I know not man?"<sup>5</sup> Given such an immense responsibility, her single question and response demonstrate that she is submissive and in a sense, weak. However, it is hard to develop a character on such little interaction between the Virgin Mary and other biblical characters.

In addition to this minimal character development, not much of Mary's life is included in the holy text. She appears first for the Immaculate Conception,<sup>6</sup> and her last appearance is when Christ ascends to Heaven.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Gospel according to Luke introduces Mary in the following manner: Gabriel came "to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary."<sup>8</sup> No prior information of Mary's life is included in the Bible prior to this portion of Luke, nor is there any information of her early life at any later point in the Scriptures. After the death of Christ, she is mentioned once in Acts of the Apostles, praying shortly after the death of Christ as mentioned above.

Although her character development in the Bible is minimal and she is not a prominent figure, it is possible that Mary is referred to indirectly as in the case of Revelations (also known as the Apocalypse of St. John). In this symbolic and often complex book, the text states, "And a great sign appeared in heaven: A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars."<sup>9</sup> The meaning of these words, however, is left to interpretation, thus leading some to believe it is not referring to Mary. According to Hilda Graef, who addressed this portion of Revelations, "the early patristic tradition unanimously regards this woman as a symbol of the Church."<sup>10</sup> It is not until the fifth century that Mary is interpreted as the "woman clothed with the sun."<sup>11</sup> Revelations 12, with its need for interpretation, thus holds great significance because it has the potential of leading people to desire more direct references to Mary and her life.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 1:38, Douay-Rheims.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:34, *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Luke 1, Matthew 1, Douay-Rheims.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 1, Douay-Rheims.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1:27, Douay-Rheims.

<sup>9</sup> Douay-Rheims, Rev. 12:1.

<sup>10</sup> Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (London: Sheed & Ward Ltd, 1985) 28.

<sup>11</sup> Graef, 28. Graef cites Epiphanius as the first to make this interpretation in the East and St. Augustine as the first to make this interpretation in the West (28). She also cites complicated debates circling around the concept that "the Woman of Apocalypse 12 is Mary in the first and 'literal' sense, and only in the second place the Church" (29-30).

In many instances, church figures also drew upon texts from the Old Testament as symbols and foreshadows of the Virgin. John of Damascus demonstrates an extreme case of reaching into the Old Testament for evidence of Mary, saying:

The burning bush was a figure of thee, and the tablets of the law, and the ark of the testament. The golden urn and candelabra, the table and the flowering rod of Aaron were significant types of thee... And Abraham's tent most clearly pointed to thee... I had nearly forgotten Jacob's ladder. Is it not evident to every one that it prefigured thee, and is not the type easily recognized?<sup>12</sup>

These figures mentioned by John of Damascus are present in the Book of Genesis and the Book of Exodus, the first and second books of the Bible, meaning that there is an immense amount of time and text between this foreshadowing and the appearance of Mary.<sup>13</sup> Reaching so far back in time to interpret such unclear evidence of Mary only expounds the potential of Christians longing for more direct references to the Virgin Mary and her life.

Since the information concerning the life of Mary in the Bible is not all-inclusive, apocryphal literature becomes involved and provides those details. Firstly, what is the "apocrypha" and what does it mean to be "apocryphal?" The term apocrypha itself is derived from the Greek word *apocryphos* which means "hidden" or "secret."<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus (c. 190) was first to apply the term "apocryphal" to these works which he suspected of heresy.<sup>15</sup> In the fourth century, the historian Rufinus described apocryphal texts as, "those which the Fathers would not accept for public reading."<sup>16</sup> However, Church Fathers of the early centuries, such as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine often quoted apocryphal texts just as they would any other canonical text.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps a better way to refer to the apocryphal texts then, would be simply as "un-canonical" since they were used as any other holy scripture was, yet figures such as St. Jerome labeled them as works "outside" the church canon.<sup>18</sup> These "apocryphal" works are texts of both Hebrew origins (Old Testament apocrypha), which refer to events prior to the lives of Jesus and his family, as well as New Testament apocrypha,

<sup>12</sup> John Damascene, *Three Sermons on the Dormition of the Virgin* (Internet Medieval Sourcebook; Paul Halsall, 1998), 160-161. 18 February 2005 < <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/ohndamascus-komesis.html> >.

<sup>13</sup> The *Donny-Rheims Bible Online*, a translation of the Latin Vulgate Bible which was used widely in the Middle Ages, lists 44 books between Exodus and the New Testament.

<sup>14</sup> Hendri Daniel-Rops, *The Book of Mary* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1960), 53.

<sup>15</sup> W. R. F. Browning, "New Testament Apocrypha" *A Dictionary of the Bible* (Oxford University Press; Oxford Reference Online, 1997), 27 April 2005

< <http://www.oxfordreference.com.libezproxy2.syr.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=94,e1331> >.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel-Rops, 54-55. Daniel-Rops quotes Rufinus here, but does not provide a source.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Manning Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 178-180.

<sup>18</sup> Metzger, 179. The "canon" refers to scriptures and doctrines approved by the church.

which refers to the lives of the Holy Family, as well as other figures in the life of Jesus. In some locations, apocryphal scriptures were included within the Bible itself, while in other places they were not, depending on when and where the Bible was copied.

Primarily, there are three early apocryphal texts concerning Mary. These are the *Transitus Mariae*, the *Protevangelium Jacobi* (or The Gospel of James), and the Gospel of St. Matthew, which is often referred to as the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. Partial texts from various locales, such as the Syrian texts, as well as the Infancy Gospels, also include Mary among their characters, but she is not always the focus of the texts as she is in the aforementioned three texts.<sup>19</sup>

The *Transitus Marie* is said to be written by St. John the Theologian (or St. John the Apostle).<sup>20</sup> However, this text was deemed by the Church to be written after the time of St. John. It first appeared on “the official list of the ‘Decretum of Gelasius’ in the fifth or sixth century,” a list of apocryphal works attributed to Pope Gelasius. Thus, it is possible that the *Transitus* was created in the fourth or fifth century.<sup>21</sup> If this is the case, it could not have been written by St. John and was made under a false pretense.

The *Protevangelium Jacobi* also appears to have been written in a similar manner. It was purportedly created by James, brother of Jesus, yet this is problematic because the Church does not recognize any siblings of Christ. Origen (185-232) knew of this text, and there is evidence that St. Justin also was familiar with it.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the text is attributed to some time in the second century.<sup>23</sup> It covers much of Mary’s early life, starting with her parents, Anne and Joachim, and their desire for a child and concluding shortly after the birth of Christ. However, since this gospel is attributed to the brother of Jesus, this gospel was not included in the Bible because it would go against teachings already set down by the Church.

Lastly, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew largely parallels, as well as elaborates on, the stories in the *Protevangelium Jacobi*, starting also with Anne and Joachim’s desire for a child and ending with Jesus as a young boy.<sup>24</sup> Although it was created to appear as though it was written by St. Matthew, apostle of Jesus, St. Jerome appeared to believe otherwise. It was

<sup>19</sup> Daniel-Rops, 139-214.

<sup>20</sup> The Title states, “The *Transitus Mariae*: The Account of St. John the Theologian of the Dormition of the Holy Mother of God.” *The Transitus Mariae*, (K. Knight: The Catholic Encyclopedia, 2004), 18 February 2005, <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0832A.htm>>.

<sup>21</sup> George J. Reid, “Apocrypha,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Volume I, (K. Knight, 2004), 22 March 2005, <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01601a.htm>>, III.1.a.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, III.1.a.

<sup>23</sup> E. A. Livingstone, “James, Book of.” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press: Oxford Reference Online 2000), 27 April 2005  
<<http://www.oxfordreference.com.libzproxy2.syr.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t95.e2999>>

<sup>24</sup> Daniel-Rops, 155-171.

Jerome who translated it into Latin from Hebrew in the fourth or fifth century and although he translated it at the wish of other church figures, he did not approve of the text, saying, "there is much in it that is false."<sup>25</sup>

In covering Mary's life, these three apocryphal sources sometimes parallel not only each other, but also what is known of Mary in the Bible, adding more information to the little that is available in the scripture.

The story of the Annunciation is one such story which takes place within the Bible as well as the apocrypha, although the versions do not fully coincide. The term "Annunciation" refers to the occurrence in the Gospel of Luke where the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and tells her that she will give birth to "the Son of the most High."<sup>26</sup> In describing Gabriel coming to Mary, the Bible reads:

And the angel being come in, said unto her: Hail full of grace, the lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. Who having heard, was troubled at his saying, and thought with herself what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said to her: Fear not, Mary, for thou has found grace with God.<sup>27</sup>

Here, the presentation of the incident is quite simple. There is minimal clarity as to why Mary is troubled and what the manner of salutation is. Thus, portions of this incident are left to interpretation. In the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, however, the occurrence is more embellished:

Again, on the third day, while she was working at the purple with her fingers<sup>28</sup>, there entered a young man of ineffable beauty. And when Mary saw him, she exceedingly feared and trembled. And he said to her: Hail, Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And when she heard these words, she trembled and was exceedingly afraid. Then the angel of the Lord added: fear not, Mary; for thou hast found favour with God.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, ed., Preface to "The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew" From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 8 (K. Knight, 2004), 18 March 2005, <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0848.htm>>.

<sup>26</sup> Luke 1:32, Douay-Rheims.

<sup>27</sup> Luke 1: 28-30, *Ibid*.

<sup>28</sup> The text does not make clear exactly what "the purple" is. It appears to be some sort of fabric: "the high priest gave the silk, and the blue, and the fine linen, and the scarlet, and the purple, and the fine flax." (Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, Chapter 8.)

<sup>29</sup> Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, Chapter 9.

In this case, Mary has an understanding of the manner of the salutation, as this is not her first encounter with an angel according to Pseudo-Matthew.<sup>30</sup> In addition, Pseudo-Matthew presents Mary as doing something when the angel comes to her. In the Bible, Mary is not seen as active as her introduction: she is not even introduced until the verse before the above citation from Luke 1:28-30: Gabriel came “to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.”<sup>31</sup> In this sense, Pseudo-Matthew presents a more holistic view of Mary, treating her as more of a person than does the Bible. However, the two presentations of the character of Mary are not wholly different; concepts from both these passages can be intertwined, such as in the case of sermons. Take for example, the Annunciation in the following excerpt of a sermon:

The angel Gabriel was sent to this true child of God, and saluted her in the words, “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.” ... She was troubled at his words, not being used to speak with men, for she has resolved to keep her virginity unsullied. She pondered in herself what this greeting might be. Then the angel said to her: ‘Fear not, Mary. Thou hast found grace before God.’<sup>32</sup>

While clearly intermixed and related to the Bible version, this sermon draws also from non-Biblical texts to create a more complete image of Mary. In examining all three versions of the Annunciation which have been discussed, it is easier to find more clarity and more of a developed character in the quotations from the apocrypha, as well as the sermon.

The above sermon excerpt is from John of Damascus, also known as St. John Damascene, and is documented in his *Three Sermons on the Dormition of the Virgin*,<sup>33</sup> a series of particularly passionate and powerful sermons given on the Feast of the Assumption.<sup>34</sup> The term “Assumption” here refers to the Virgin Mary leaving the earth and going directly into Heaven at the end of her earthly life.<sup>35</sup> In the Byzantine church, the term “Dormition” carries the same meaning as the term “Assumption,” but is only applied to the Virgin Mary. Oftentimes, the Byzantines referred to the Dormition and Assumption as the “falling asleep” of Mary.<sup>36</sup> Due to references in his sermons, it can be inferred that he gave them, “at some

<sup>30</sup> Chapter 6 of Pseudo-Matthew reads, “The angels of God were often seen speaking with her.”

<sup>31</sup> Luke, 1:27, Douay-Rheims.

<sup>32</sup> John Damascene, *Three Sermons on the Dormition of the Virgin*, 157.

<sup>33</sup> The excerpt on pg. 3 also comes from this work.

<sup>34</sup> Daley, Brian E., S.J., *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 21.

<sup>35</sup> E.A. Livingstone, “Assumption of the BVM.” *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. (Oxford University Press, 2000), *Oxford Reference Online*. 28 April 2005

<<http://www.oxfordreference.com.libezproxy2.svr.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=095.e429>>.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson, ed., “Dormition n.” *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. (Oxford University Press, 2004), *Oxford Reference Online*. 5 May 2005 <<http://www.oxfordreference.com.libezproxy2.svr.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t23.e16423>>.

time in the 730s or 740s, in the Church near Gethsemane traditionally identified as the site of Mary's tomb."<sup>37</sup> John Damascene drew from various sources to praise Mary: the Bible, theological debates, and apocryphal literature. Also in the Byzantine Empire in the eighth century, St. Andrew of Crete and St. Germanus of Constantinople were giving comparable sermons.

Like John Damascene's sermons on the Assumption, which were intended to be a trilogy for an all night vigil, Andrew of Crete performed three sermons on the Assumption for the same purpose.<sup>38</sup> Unlike John Damascene, however, Andrew of Crete emphasized Mary's obedience to God and her "victory over death, through Christ."<sup>39</sup> This did not mean, however, that he did not fully praise the Virgin Mary. He treats her as a very important figure in the lives of everyone:

Let us run, then, all together, to the Mother of God; choirs of fathers and patriarchs, spirits of the prophets and companies of priests, the band of Apostles, the nation of martyrs, the gathering of doctors, the souls of the just, the company of the saints in every age and every rank, kings and potentates, rulers and the ruled.<sup>40</sup>

Of these three men, Germanus of Constantinople was probably the most well-known at the time, as he was the Patriarch of Constantinople for 15 years. His sermons on the Dormition of the Virgin Mary were modeled after the sermons of St. Andrew and St. John Damascene. Thus, Germanus' sermons drew on concepts and methods of praising Mary from both of the previously mentioned men.<sup>41</sup>

In Damascene's sermons he not only concerned himself with the Dormition of the Virgin, but he also addressed much of her life, including that which is in the Bible and that which can only be found in the apocrypha, such as the aforementioned Annunciation. As he spoke of events that occurred within the Bible, he provided many details regarding Mary's life which were drawn from the apocrypha and thus, he created a strong, wiser character. In the passage Luke 1:34, in which Mary is informed that she will give birth to a child, she simply says, "How shall this be done, because I know not man?" She then proceeds to quietly listen to the angel as an answer is explained to her.<sup>42</sup> However, according to the sermon of John Damascene, Mary says, "How is this to be, since I know not man? What you say

<sup>37</sup> Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 21. Gethsemane is in Israel.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew of Crete, "On the Dormition of Our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God: Homily III," In *On the Dormition of Mary*, Brain E. Daley, S.J., trans., 147.

<sup>41</sup> Daley, *On the Dormition of Mary*, 18-20.

<sup>42</sup> Luke 1:31-35, Douay-Rheims.

is impossible, for it goes beyond the natural laws laid down by the Creator. I will not be called a second Eve and disobey the will of my God. If you are not speaking godless things, explain the mystery by saying how it is to be accomplished.”<sup>43</sup> In this case, John’s Mary is demonstrative of the strong, wise character which stems from the apocrypha. Although an intensely different image of Mary is created, John is clearly referring to the same point in time as the passage from the Gospel according to Luke. Although John’s sources here remains unclear because apocryphal texts which were available in the eighth century may no longer exist today, his version of the event unmistakably diverges from (although does not contradict) the actual holy text. Therefore, the text used by John Damascene could not be approved by the church and thus, would fall under the category of apocryphal. Also, as will be discussed later, what most people know of the Bible is gained from hearing sermons; listeners of this sermon would clearly hold a far different image of Mary than is presented in the Bible. Thus, through sermons, congregations would see Mary as strong and knowledgeable, rather than submissive and unknowing.

To the people of eighth century Byzantium, the response which John described Mary as having to Gabriel was significant. Jaroslav Pelikan, who has examined the role of the Virgin Mary throughout time, stated that, “the active response of the Mother of God in the annunciation as she accepted the word and grace of God was a key incident” because of the “characteristically Byzantine emphasis on the active role of free will as it accepted the word and grace freely given by God.”<sup>44</sup> Such a need gave cause for John of Damascus to not only address the situation, but also to embellish the aforementioned words of Mary taken from Luke 1:34. Once again, as will be discussed in depth later, it was these sermons and not the actual text which was known and understood by the laity.

In addition to embellishing the Annunciation to give the Virgin Mary more of an active role, John Damascene also embellishes numerous events in her life which are not included in the Bible, utilizing the apocrypha to create a stronger figure. A stronger view of the character was assistive in furthering the image of the Virgin Mary as an individual worthy of great praise which he had begun to depict in his description of the Annunciation. The non-biblical events such as her birth, early life, and Assumption, as presented by John, as well as the apocrypha itself, emphasize Mary’s perfection, power, and strength.

This concept of Mary’s perfection begins through her parents, Anne and Joachim, even before she was conceived. This of course, is not included in the Bible, but included in Damascene’s sermons as well as the apocrypha. Damascene describes Joachim as near perfect, saying:

Joachim kept as strict a watch over his thoughts as a shepherd over his flock, having them entirely under his control. For the Lord God led him

<sup>43</sup> John Damascene, 158.

<sup>44</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 90.



as a sheep, and he wanted for none of the best things... Joachim ever shepherded by his thoughts. In the place of pastures, dwelling by contemplation on the words of sacred Scripture, made glad on the restful waters of divine grace, withdrawn from foolishness, he walked the path of Justice.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to Joachim, Anne was also described by John Damascene as having much grace for her “name means grace” and “grace in very truth remained sterile, not being able to produce fruit in the souls of men.”<sup>46</sup> God took pity on Anne, for this grace caused her to be barren, and God thus allowed her to produce a child without the assistance of a man – a child “whose equal had never been created and never can be.”<sup>47</sup>

These descriptions as presented by John once again parallel the apocrypha. Joachim is presented as honorable and worthy in Pseudo-Matthew Chapter 1, which states, “[Joachim] was a shepherd of his own sheep, fearing the Lord in integrity and singleness of heart.” This chapter also describes how he freely shared what he produced, “offering double gifts in the fear of God to all who laboured in doctrine, and who ministered unto Him” as well as “gave to the orphans, the widows, the strangers, and the poor.”<sup>48</sup> Surely, John Damascene would see a man such as this as a man who “walked the path of Justice.”

In addition to Joachim’s parallel between Damascene’s words and the apocrypha, there is also an obvious parallel between Anne’s ability to produce a child “whose equal has never been created and never can be”<sup>50</sup> as described by John, and in apocryphal verses concerning Anne’s child, such as, “thy seed shall be spoken of in the whole world”<sup>51</sup> and “all generations even to the end shall wonder at that which shall be born of thee.”<sup>52</sup> These indicate that she is a worthy woman and favored by God, for she has the honor of bearing the mother of the Son of God.

This worthiness, and the honorable position of Mary’s parents contributes to Mary being highly honored, as an angel of the Lord states, “[Mary] will be in the temple of God, and the Holy Spirit shall abide in her; and her blessedness shall be greater than that of all the holy women, so that no one can say that any before her has been like her, or that any after her in this world will be so.”<sup>53</sup> This praise and perfection, however, only begins with her parents; throughout her life, she was perfect not only in the eyes of those around her, but she

<sup>45</sup> John Damascene, 154-156.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 156.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 156.

<sup>48</sup> Pseudo-Matthew, Chapter 1.

<sup>49</sup> John Damascene, 156.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 156.

<sup>51</sup> M.R. James, trans., “Gospel of James or Protevangelium,” from *The Apocryphal New Testament*, (Oxford, 1953), 39-49, IV.1.

<sup>52</sup> Pseudo-Matthew, Chapter 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 3.

too was also favored by God. As John of Damascus stated, “an angel of the Lord foretold her birth. It was fitting that in this, too, she, who was to be the human Mother of the one true and living God, should be marked out above every one else.”<sup>54</sup>

In the Gospel of James, Mary is marked out by her ability to walk at six months old: “her mother set her upon the ground to try if she would stand; and she walked seven steps and returned unto her bosom.”<sup>55</sup> Because of this amazing feat, Anne “made a sanctuary in her bed chamber and suffered nothing common or unclean to pass through it.”<sup>56</sup> Thus, Mary remained perfectly pure until she entered the temple at age three.

Mary’s entrance to the temple at the age of three is represented in both the Gospel of James as well as the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. The descriptions of the event from these two sources help to create the image of a perfect Mary who was “offered in God’s holy temple, and remained there, showing to all a great example of zeal and holiness, withdrawn from frivolous society,” as described by John Damascene.<sup>57</sup> An example of this description is present in Pseudo-Matthew Chapter Six:

And Mary was held in admiration by all the people of Israel; and when she was three years old, she walked with a step so mature, she spoke so perfectly, and spent her time so assiduously in the praises of God, that all were astonished at her, and wondered; and she was not reckoned a young infant, but as it were a grown-up person of thirty years old.<sup>58</sup>

As described here, Mary is perfect in many ways. Her praises of God spoken so perfectly and so assiduously only brought more praise to herself. Even among other virgins in the temple, she appeared to be the perfect virgin.<sup>59</sup> Thus, even in her infancy, she was already a figure to be admired.

Even before entering the temple, however, Mary was loved and revered by many. At the age of one, priests said, “bless this child and give her a name renowned for ever among all generations” and the high priests said, “O God of the high places, look upon this child, and bless her with the last blessing which hath no successor.”<sup>60</sup> Upon her entrance to the temple, her perfection and praise only increased; while others rested from prayer, she did not: “so that in the praises and vigils of God non were found before her, no one more learned in the wisdom of the law of God, more lowly in humility, more elegant in singing, more perfect in all virtue.”<sup>61</sup> As time passed, Mary’s praises and perfections grew: “She did not retire

<sup>54</sup> John Damascene, 156.

<sup>55</sup> Gospel of James, VI.1.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, VI.1.

<sup>57</sup> John Damascene, 156-157.

<sup>58</sup> Pseudo-Matthew, Chapter 6.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 6-8. Gospel of James, VII.

<sup>60</sup> Gospel of James, VI.2.

<sup>61</sup> Pseudo-Matthew, Chapter 6.

from praying until there appeared to her the angel of the Lord, from whose had she used to receive food and thus she became more and more perfect in the work of God.”<sup>62</sup>

The above examples of the pureness, the perfection, and the wonders of Mary have all been drawn from apocryphal texts. Of course, these are from a time in her life which the Bible does not include. Examples of her perfection in the Bible are limited. Even in the aforementioned case of the Annunciation,<sup>63</sup> which occurs in the apocrypha as well as the Bible, Mary was praised as wonderful and perfect in the apocrypha, and the Bible only describes her as: “a virgin,”<sup>64</sup> “full of grace,” “blessed,”<sup>65</sup> and as having “found grace with God.”<sup>66</sup> Any other significant biblical signs of a perfect Mary, however, seem to be absent.

The perfection and praise of Mary in her early life, before that which is included in the Bible, once again resurfaces in apocryphal texts describing the Assumption, or the “falling asleep of Mary.” In John Damascene’s *Three Sermons on the Dormition of the Virgin*, he relies on Pseudo-Matthew and the Gospel of James to describe Mary’s early life (up until the Annunciation) and leans heavily on the *Transitus Mariae* to describe the events surrounding her Assumption.

Actions and events as described in John Damascene’s sermons often coincide with actions and events in the *Transitus Mariae*. The apostles caring for Mary in her last days are described in the *Transitus Mariae* as being lifted up upon clouds and brought to the house in Bethlehem where Mary lay: “and the Holy Spirit said to the apostles: Let all of you together, having come by the clouds from the ends of the world, be assembled to holy Bethlehem by a whirlwind, on account of the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>67</sup>

Shortly after this amazing arrival of the apostles, angels also appear: “there was thunder from heaven, ... and, behold, a multitude of a host of angels and powers... and the seraphim in a circle round the house where the holy, spotless mother of God and virgin was lying.”<sup>68</sup> Germanus of Constantinople also included this in his sermon on the Dormition of the Virgin, saying, “there was suddenly a mighty clap of thunder, and a rush of wind from a cloud that hung low over the earth; like drops of rain, the disciples of Christ appeared from its midst, gathered together to stand as one before the Virgin’s house.”<sup>69</sup> John of Damas-

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, Chapter 6.

<sup>63</sup> See page 9.

<sup>64</sup> Matthew 1:23, Douay-Rheims.

<sup>65</sup> Luke 1:28, Douay-Rheims.

<sup>66</sup> Luke 1:30, *Ibid*.

<sup>67</sup> *Transitus Mariae*, paragraph 4.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, paragraph 7.

<sup>69</sup> Germanus of Constantinople, “An Encomium on the Holy and Venerable Dormition of Our Most Glorious Lady, the Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary: Homily II”, In *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, Brian E. Daley, S.J., trans., (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 174.

cus' sermons also include these events, as he spoke, "angels and apostles minister to thee, O Mother of God, ever Virgin."<sup>70</sup> Not only did angels and apostles present themselves, but people gathered to see the Virgin as well. The *Transitus Mariae* reads, "a multitude of men and women and virgins came together, and cried out: Holy virgin, that didst bring forth Christ our God, do not forget the generation of men." Damascene nicely sums up these passages from the *Transitus Marie* as he praises Mary, saying, "apostles watched over the countless host of the just who were gathered together from every corner of the earth by the divine commands, as a cloud around the divine and living Jerusalem, singing hymns of praise to thee, the author of our Lord's life-giving body." In his praises, Damascene also states, "we may well believe that the angelic choirs waited to receive thy departing soul"<sup>73</sup> which also correlates with the *Transitus Mariae*: "for three days the voices of invisible angels were heard glorifying Christ our God, who had been born of her."<sup>74</sup> John Damascene, thus, takes what is written in story form in the *Transitus Mariae*, and molds it to fit into a sermon of praise.

These parallels between the *Transitus Mariae* and the sermons of John of Damascus are even clearer when examining the instance of a Jew reaching to touch the Virgin as she is carried on a couch to her burial place. Damascene states:

Full of wicked passion and malice, he rushed at the most divine tabernacle, which angels approached with fear, and impiously dragged the bier with both hands to the ground... It is said that he lost the use of his hands... until faith moved him to repentance.<sup>75</sup>

This same instance in the *Transitus Mariae* reads:

a certain well-born Hebrew, Jephonias by name, running against the body, put his hands upon the couch; and behold, an angel of the Lord by invisible power, with a sword of fire, cut off his two hands from his shoulders... And Jephonias... cried out: Holy Mary, who brought forth Christ who is God, have mercy upon me. And immediately, at the word of Peter, the hands... were fixed upon Jephonias.<sup>76</sup>

Although the above passages are slightly different, John Damascene sermon unmistakably resembles much of the *Transitus Mariae*. However, the differences between the sermon

<sup>70</sup> John Damascene, 163.

<sup>71</sup> *Transitus Mariae*, paragraph 8.

<sup>72</sup> John Damascene, 163.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 164.

<sup>74</sup> *Transitus Mariae*, paragraph 12.

<sup>75</sup> John Damascene, 190.

<sup>76</sup> *Transitus Mariae*, paragraph 11.

and the text are also important to note because what is said by Damascene is what will be recalled by those hearing the sermons. For example, the *Transitus Mariae* specifies a particular Jew who was misguided while Damascene did not name a particular person, but rather noted that it was a Jew “full of wicked passion and malice”<sup>77</sup> This implies that any Jew could simply do, in the eyes of a Christian, such a terrible thing, perhaps furthering the Christian contempt for Jews. Damascene also shortens the text to say, “faith moved him to repentance.”<sup>78</sup> In this case, his rewording of the text is significant because he transforms the story into motivation for his listeners to have faith; his sermon demonstrates faith leading to salvation, even for a Jew “full of wicked passion.” If *he* can reach salvation by simply repenting, then it is implied that it would be even easier for Damascene’s Christian listeners to reach salvation.

Damascene’s listeners are also presented with an image of a powerful Mary who possesses the ability to give blessings and cure the sick. This of course, comes from the apocrypha. The power to heal and cure the sick in the New Testament comes only from the power of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. However, in the apocrypha, Mary exerts this power, even at an early age and continues to do so until the time of her death. As a child and a virgin in the temple, “if anyone touched her, the same hour he went home cured.”<sup>79</sup> She was blessed by the Holy Spirit as prophesized and even when she could not care for herself, she could still care for others:

The blind seeing, the deaf hearing, the lame walking, lepers cleansed, and those possessed by unclean spirits cured; and every one who was under disease and sickness, touching the outside of the wall of the house where she was lying, cried out: Holy Mary, who didst bring forth Christ our God, have mercy upon us. And they were straightway cured.<sup>80</sup>

Not only does the Virgin Mary have power here, but even the concept of going straight to Heaven gave Mary power, as Jesus himself did not receive that honor.

It was all of these occurrences; her perfection, her honor even as an infant, her wisdom, her active role of free will, and so on, which gave way for John Damascene’s praises, as well as the praises of Andrew of Crete and Germanus of Constantinople. The praises of Andrew of Crete and Germanus of Constantinople, however, appear to be more confined to the topic of their sermons. Take for example, sermons on the Dormition which all three have produced. Andrew of Crete and Germanus of Constantinople spend more time simply explaining and telling the story of her Dormition and spend less time outright praising her.

<sup>77</sup> John Damascene, 190.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 190.

<sup>79</sup> Pseudo-Matthew, Chapter 6.

<sup>80</sup> *Transitus Mariae*, paragraph 7.

Unlike Andrew and Germanus, however, John Damascene did not hold his passion for the Virgin Mary back in any way, speaking things such as, “thou art our light, life-giving ambrosia, true happiness, a sea of grace, a fountain of healing and of perpetual blessing. Thou art as a fruitful tree in the forest, and thy fruit is sweet in the mouth of the faithful.”<sup>81</sup> In addition to simple praise, he gives her credit for events which the Bible gives her little credit for. Take for example, the birth of Christ. John Damascene states, “Make us worthy of future happiness through the sweet and face-to-face vision of the Word made flesh through thee.”<sup>82</sup> If he had simply drawn from the Bible to praise her, he would likely not ask her to “Make us worthy” nor would there be anything about her “face-to-face vision.”<sup>83</sup> These statements, instead, take their roots in the apocrypha and draw from these scriptures which are not acceptable for the Bible. Such unacceptable statements also include any praise stemming from Mary’s earlier life as well as her Assumption, such as John Damascene stating, “it was thou who didst break the force of death, paying its penalty, and making it gracious.”<sup>84</sup>

Considering the descriptions of Mary’s parents, her early life, the Annunciation, and the Assumption as depicted in the apocrypha, there is much to praise Mary for. Since John clearly had an understanding of the apocrypha and he used it to shape his sermons, it is reasonable to say that his praise for Mary truly stems from the apocrypha. This is easily recognizable when, as he expressed the events of the Annunciation to his congregation, he strayed from the texts of the Bible to include a vision of a more powerful and wise Mary.<sup>85</sup>

The early Middle Ages were not by any means a time of literacy and most of the laity could not read, nor could they afford to own books which were painstakingly hand written. The most common of these books was not even a common book; the Bible was not only hard to create, but hard to read, as they were written most commonly in Latin, although it was possible to have a Bible in Greek or Hebrew as well.<sup>86</sup> Laity also did not have access to the Holy Scripture. Thus, an average lay person gathered in congregations to hear sermons from such figures as John of Damascus, Andrew of Crete, or Germanus of Constantinople. What these men said with regard to Mary in their various sermons on the Assumption and Dormition of the Blessed Virgin is what the people then learned about Mary. They would not have a concept of the meek and mostly silent Mary of the Bible unless that was told to them. As has been demonstrated thus far, the Virgin Mary of the Bible was not the Mary passionately praised by John Damascene, nor by the other men who used apocryphal literature in their sermons.

The Virgin became a highly venerated figure and throughout the Middle Ages, many miracles were attributed to her. John of Damascus himself was one such figure which

<sup>81</sup> John Damascene, 165.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid*, 170.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 167.

<sup>85</sup> See page 9.

<sup>86</sup> It was St. Jerome who translated the Bible into Latin from both Hebrew and Greek texts. (Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, ed., Preface to “The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew”).

attributed a miracle to her: when his hand was severed unjustly, the Virgin Mary was said to have restored it for him.<sup>87</sup> Such miracles attributed to her, however, would not have become common or widespread had it not been for these apocryphal works. The people grew to know and love the Mary of the apocrypha and that is the Mary which they venerated. The Mary of the Bible never performed any miracles, as she was nothing more than a lowly mortal. The Mary of the apocrypha, however, was able to perform miracles even in her youth and with her kind, humble, and loving ways, she helped many people.<sup>88</sup> St. Germanus of Constantinople addressed her ability to perform miracles and her inability to forget the race of man when he stated, "For just as when you led your life in this world, you were no stranger to heavenly ways, so now, after your passing there, you have not been removed in spirit from your associations with men and women."<sup>89</sup>

Although he used the apocrypha as a source for his sermons, John of Damascus altered some of his information from the apocrypha. While his reasoning for doing so can not be deduced, various outcomes can result. As discussed on pages 16 and 17, Damascene presented a harsh image of a Jew who touched the body of the Virgin Mary. This image is harsher than that of the *Transitus Mariae*, from which it was drawn, and thus, has the power to create a poorer image of the Jewish community in the eyes of John Damascene's congregation.

There is no doubt that sermons were powerful in the Middle Ages, for the sermons functioned as a classroom for learning about God and Christianity. Passionate men such as John of Damascus were able to spread their enthusiasm and infatuation with religious figures in these classrooms of God. Thus, his use of the apocrypha in his passion spread apocryphal teachings to the members of the congregation. Instances such as John Damascene's *Three Sermons on the Dormition of the Virgin* may have then contributed to the Medieval lack of differentiation between what is apocryphal and what is not, as church figures often quoted apocryphal works as any other canonical text.<sup>90</sup> In *The Book of Mary*, Daniel-Rops states, "the enemies of Christianity have very often used [the Apocrypha] as artillery in their war against Faith."<sup>91</sup> Damascene, however, did the opposite; he used the apocrypha to further the Faith. To him, the apocrypha was not a bad thing, but simply a tool which, with his passion, only fed the Faith. It is through this mind-set that the Virgin Mary truly became a prominent figure within the church and within the lives of Christians. Since the Bible never fully developed such an important character, Christians learned about the Virgin Mary of the apocrypha and loved that perfect, impassioned, wonderful Mary, not the silent, meek Mary of the Bible.

<sup>87</sup> John B. O'Connor, "St. John Damascene," In *The Catholic Encyclopedia* Volume VIII (Online edition, 2003) 18 February 2005 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08459b.htm>>.

<sup>88</sup> See pages 17-18.

<sup>89</sup> Germanus of Constantinople, "On the Most Venerable Dormition of the Holy Mother of God: Homily I", In *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, Brian E. Daley, S.J., trans., (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 156.

<sup>90</sup> Metzger, 178-180.

<sup>91</sup> Daniel-Rops, 74.