

New Series

Volume 1

Issue 1

July 2021

Pages 1- 3



Maria

A Journal of Marian Studies

Published by the Marian Centre for Studies

Author: Catherine O'Brien

Title: Review of Alexander Toepel, *Das Protevangelium des Jakobus*

Review article:

Alexander Toepel, *Das Protevangelium des Jakobus. Ein Beitrag zur neueren Diskussion um Herkunft, Auslegung und theologische Einordnung* (Frankfurter Theologische Studien, 71), Aschendorff Verlag, 2014. ISBN: 9783402160596. Pp. I-VII, 1-321.

The second-century *Protevangelium of James (PJ)* – in which the pseudographical author combined scenes from the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke with non-canonical episodes about Mary to produce a flowing chronicle – enjoys the dual status of being apocryphal and influential. While its merits (or otherwise) have been vigorously debated, *PJ* provided material for homilies preached during the Patristic era and has served as inspiration for religious art (including Mary's entry into the Temple as a child; Joseph's depiction as an elderly widower; and the location of the Nativity as a cave). The naming of Mary's parents as Joachim and Anne and the attestation of the *virginitas in partu* are also key elements found in the manuscript.

In the opening sections of Alexander Toepel's scholarly study there is an overview of *PJ*'s cultural and theological importance in the West since Guillaume Postel (1510-1581) brought a Greek version of the text to Western Europe in 1551 and translated it into Latin. For Marian specialists, the account of increased interest in *PJ* in the twentieth century, when it played a role in research into the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and Mary's Perpetual Virginité, is of particular note. Toepel makes reference to the range of different translations, although an attempt to assess the relationship between these various versions is a complicated task and beyond his remit here. With regard to the age of the manuscript, whose existence is acknowledged in the writings of Origen and Clement of Alexandria, Toepel settles on a timeframe of 180-200 CE, and he narrows down the place of origin to Syria or Palestine (although he admits that Egypt – as once argued by Émile de Strycker – cannot be completely ruled out). Maintaining that the real focus of the text is the birth of Jesus, he asserts that *PJ* may be most usefully categorized as an 'aretalogy' (a sacred biography), despite the fact that it does not follow the traditional format of the genre in which a divine character's miraculous actions are summarised. Nevertheless, given that Mary is the Mother of God, Toepel remarks on the logical relevance of *PJ* for Marian feasts and iconography.

However, these opinions about the history and classification of the text generate only a small part of the overall publication. Toepel's major contribution to *PJ* studies lies in the extensive commentary that forms the main content of his book (pp.43-260). Although the individual points may not be original (as the lengthy footnotes and the multi-lingual



bibliography scrupulously acknowledge), Toepel has carefully probed secondary literature on *PJ*, brought together observations from scholars across the centuries, and presented an in-depth, line-by-line analysis of the Greek text.

While striving to take into account the Hellenic and Jewish contexts, Toepel ponders over the choice of individual names or the selection of specific vocabulary as he follows an intriguing path through Scripture, history, and linguistics. For example, the opposition to Joachim's sacrifice at the Temple (because he has no offspring) is uttered by a character called Reuben – a detail that the casual reader might have noticed only in passing. In contrast, Toepel seizes upon the opportunity to focus on the reputation of the identically named first-born son of Jacob (Gen. 29:32) and his descendants. Reuben is the child of Leah, whose motherhood (seven children) calls to mind the initial childlessness of her sister Rachel. Having drawn attention to Rachel and her designation by Irenaeus as a type of the Church, Toepel discusses the idea of the New Covenant. There is a brief aside to mention medieval legends that suggested that a man named Reuben was the father of the apostle Judas, providing a link to the theme of treachery. Then the topic of infertility within Judaism is debated. Consequently, a number of potential avenues are explored in the paragraphs that concentrate solely on verse 1:2 of *PJ* (pp.51-56) – and the remainder of the commentary follows this detailed pattern.

There are, unsurprisingly, many occasions when Toepel highlights parallels between *PJ* and the Septuagint. The maid's attitude towards Anne evokes Hagar's disdain for Sarah (Gen.16:1-5), while Anne herself is compared to the heroines of Israel such as Judith and Esther. Salome, whose doubts about Mary's virginity play a significant part in the description of the birth of Jesus in *PJ*, is discussed in relation to the apostle Thomas in the New Testament (Jn 20:25). However, not only biblical allusions are considered. The possibility that Anne's pregnancy lasted six months (as one of the variants of the text indicates) leads to an analogy with the gestation of Julius Caesar; or the seven steps that Mary takes as a child are compared to incidents recorded in the life of the Buddha – a story which might have been heard by the author of *PJ* although it has not been proved, as Toepel concedes.

Vocabulary used to portray Joseph has marked him out as a τέκτων (traditionally translated as 'carpenter') but *PJ* implies that he is an 'architect' by profession. When Joseph is the last to take his rod during the ceremony to choose Mary's 'guardian' (rather than 'husband'), Toepel ponders over the significance of the word 'last' in the New Testament: 'For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted' (Lk. 14:10). Joseph identifies himself as an 'old' man (the word used reportedly indicates that he was aged between 50 and 56) to provide more evidence to support the belief in Mary's virginity. Or the fact that Mary was weaving the Temple veil with purple thread at the time of the Annunciation (as recorded in *PJ*) may be regarded as a symbol of the Incarnation and a reproof to Celsus, who alleged that Mary did only menial handiwork and came from a lowly background.

A warning: translations of the Greek words are not provided, so knowledge of that language as well as German is necessary for the complete appreciation of Toepel's project. More understandably (given the word count), prolific references to Scripture are presented in the form of chapter and verse rather than full quotations, so readers (without photographic memories) will obviously need to have a Bible to hand to analyse all the connections. However, the effort is certainly justified. Toepel has carried out a comprehensive scrutiny of *PJ* that succeeds in collating an impressive wealth of material into an often fascinating commentary, whether or not the reader agrees with all his hypotheses. He has joined a number of twenty-first century academics (including Thomas O'Loughlin in the current volume of this journal) who have succeeded in demonstrating that *PJ* remains worthy of serious investigation.

Catherine O'Brien