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Title: The many feasts of Mary in the contemporary Catholic liturgy: a study of the persistence of the *Protevangelium of James* within liturgical memory

Abstract:

The *Protevangelium of James (PJ)* has been widely diffused among the churches: there is evidence of its use by many of the fathers and it survives (wholly or in part) in Greek, Latin, Syrian, Coptic, and Armenian, and in many later versions. While it is often stated that, in the west at least, it was condemned in the *Decretum Gelasianum*, this did not lessen its significance. The embarrassment of the source is more than made up for by the long continuity of recollection. The persistence of the feasts derived from the *PJ* shows that the ritual memory of the Christian church is still a much more complex phenomenon within Christianity than any body of material which might be labelled 'early Christian history'. This complexity is seen most clearly in that the feasts are still celebrated while *PJ* has been discarded. Ritual memory functions in a more all-embracing way in Christian society than historical reconstruction. While the popularity of *PJ* from the second century onwards shows that the historical form has always been part of Christian identity, it is as a wondrous tale, with its convenient miracles to reinforce its religious preferences, that it became influential.

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The *Protoevangelium of James*¹ (*PJ*) has never been part of the canonical memory of the Church regarding the life of Jesus.² However, given that it dates from the mid-second century,³ and some would argue that many of its traditions are earlier than that time, it is a significant witness to the memory of Christians.⁴ Indeed, one cannot tell many parts of the Christian story – for example that of the nativity of Jesus – without an appeal to its synthesising structures.⁵ Moreover, despite little formal interest in it at any level today, it is not an obscure document but has been widely diffused among the churches: there is evidence of its use by many of the fathers and it survives (wholly or in part) in Greek, Latin, Syrian, Coptic, and Armenian,⁶ and in many later versions.⁷ While it is often stated that in the west it – or a similar text – was condemned in the *Decretum Gelasianum*,⁸ this should not be overestimated as the actual impact of such decretals in the historical situation of the churches was far less than its significance within the memory of canon law; and the text was not actually condemned in the tradition of schoolbooks or in the liturgical memory. Indeed, the

¹ The text of the *Protevangelium* used is that of Oscar Cullmann (trans. A.J.B. Higgins) in Edgar Hennecke & Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. Robert McLachlan Wilson, London: SCM Press, 1963, 370-88; with constant reference to the Latin text in Rita Beyers (ed.), 'Latin Translation of the Protoevangelium of James in MS. Paris, Sainte-Geneviève, 2787', *Corpus Christianorum: Series Apocryphorum* 14, 2001, 881-957. This edition has been used because of its widespread availability in academic libraries, but two more recent editions (both providing a Greek text) deserve notice: Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, Santo Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1995; Bart D. Ehrman & Zlatko Pleše, *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 31-71. We await the new critical edition with translation that is promised from J.K. Elliott & G. Geréby (2021) in the Brepols Library of Christian Sources.

² Cf. Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000, 8-33.

³ George T. Zervos, 'Dating the *Protevangelium of James*: The Justin Martyr Connection', in E. Lovering (ed.), *Society of Biblical Literature 1994 Seminar Papers*, Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994, 415-34.

⁴ Patricia M. Rumsey, *'Lest She Pollute the Sanctuary': The Influence of the Protevangelium Iacobi on Women's Status in Christianity*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2020.

⁵ Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The *Protevangelium Jacobi* and the Emergence of the Notion of Consistency as a "Principle" within Christian Theology', in J.N. Bremmer, J. Andrew Doole, Thomas R. Karmann, Tobias Nicklas & Boris Repschinski (eds), *The Protevangelium of James*, Leuven: Peeters, 2020, 206-216.

⁶ Hennecke & Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 370-2.

⁷ Martin McNamara, *The Apocrypha in the Irish Church*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975, 46-7.

⁸ See, for example, Cullmann's comment (Hennecke & Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 372); but the case is inconclusive. The current title, *PJ*, is first found in the west in the sixteenth century, and what is condemned by the *Decretum Gelasianum* is a work – we have no details – attributed to James the Younger (cf. Mk 15:40), and it is assumed that this is our text. But this is only a well-founded assumption rather than a definite identification, itself based on the *Decretum*: the argument is circular. I refer to the text as *PJ* as this is the most widely used name and 'more accurate' designations such as 'the Book of James' (as in 'James, Book of' in F. L. Cross & E.A. Livingstone (eds), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd rev. edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 863) are liable to cause additional confusion rather than aid understanding.

best evidence of the limitations of such formal condemnations is the fact that the liturgical year, in all the churches both eastern, western, and African (e.g. among the Copts), celebrates ‘the events’ narrated the text so fulsomely.

It is also frequently stated that *PJ* is the earliest work that was written in praise of Mary,⁹ and this aspect of the work has naturally attracted attention from mariologists¹⁰ – albeit sometimes with a certain hesitation given its ‘apocryphal status’.¹¹ However, it stands apart from other apocryphal/pseudepigraphical works in that its contents overlap to a significant extent the liturgical memory of the western church; and continue to do so even at a time when consideration of the value of traditions relating to the times of Jesus is probably less sympathetic than at any time in the past.¹² This continuing influence raises an intriguing question for the liturgist/historical theologian about the complexity of the community’s memory – especially within ritual contexts – whereby we no longer remember the texts (indeed we systematically devalue them or to declare them to be peripheral) that provide our earliest witness for certain memories, yet we continue to keep the festivals. This question also raises certain other aspects of how we view the historical sources that normally remain below the horizon of consideration. It is these questions of the complexity of our memory that this article wishes to address.

1. *PJ* and the 1970 Roman Calendar’s formal memory.¹³

Four feasts owe their origin to a tradition of devotion that is first witnessed in *PJ* and, furthermore, it is clear that it was the value attached to those stories as conveyed through *PJ* that directly led to the development of the cult. These feasts will be examined in the order in which they occur in the calendar rather than in their narrative sequence in *PJ* for while they

⁹ Hennecke & Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 373.

¹⁰ L.M. Peretto, ‘La Virgine Maria nel pensiero di uno scrittore del secondo secolo’, *Marianum* 16, 1954, 228-65.

¹¹ Michael O’Carroll, *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1982, 39-40.

¹² John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: The Roots of the Problem and the Person (Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol. 1)*, New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991, 115-6, 130.

¹³ See Rumsey, ‘*Lest She Pollute the Sanctuary*’, 153-76, for an overall survey of this topic.

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are connected to one another in the overall cult of Mary, each feast needs also to be seen as a distinct part of the whole liturgical year. I am not concerned with the heortological problem of why these particular days were selected as this would take me too far from my present concerns.

a. The feast of Saints Joachim and Anne (26 July).

The always circumspect historical note in the 1971 Roman Liturgy of the Hours states the following in the official translation:

An old tradition going back to the second century gives these names to the parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The veneration of Saint Anne dated from the sixth century in the East and spreads throughout the West in the tenth century; that of Saint Joachim is more recent.¹⁴

The omission of any mention of *PJ*, or how we might have any witness to this information, is neatly sidestepped by the use of the phrase ‘an old tradition’. There seems a positive reluctance to mention *PJ* by name, while at the same time an illusion of historical fact is created that the actual names of Mary’s parents just might have survived and it is simply that the earliest evidence we have for this historical survival is to be found in a second-century document. However, there is careful hesitation built into the wording: it does not say these *are* the names of Mary’s parents – for it is certain that they did have names – but the names ‘tradition ... gives’ to her parents. Turning to the Latin text we see this strategy far more explicitly: ‘*Ex antiqua traditione, iam saeculo II invecta, his nominibus appellati sunt parentes ...*’.¹⁵ Here the tradition is so old that it is simply found in the second century (literally: ‘already being carried in the second century’) and so is, at least, older than its earliest witness: the unnamed *PJ*. Here *PJ* is irrelevant; it is the tradition that is important. However, the hesitation is also more explicit: it is by the names ‘Anna’ and ‘Joachim’ that the father and mother of

¹⁴ *Divine Office*, Dublin: Talbot, 1974, III, 133*.

¹⁵ *Liturgia Horarum*, The Vatican: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1971, III, 1290.

Mary are 'labelled'. This is the equivalent of the circumlocution used for texts where there has been an expression of scholarly doubt about authenticity: 'the so-called X' or '*der Soganannt X*'.

If the historical note has avoided mention of *PJ*, then the rest of the liturgy is silently even more dependent upon it. The second reading of the Office of Readings is a much-edited homily by John Damascene (c.660-c.750) for the feast of the nativity of Mary (*Oratio 6 in nativitatem Beatae Mariae Virginis, 2, 4, 5, 6*)¹⁶. The text in the liturgy concentrates upon praises on Anna and Joachim, but makes a reference to Anna's sterility (*Laetare, Anna 'sterilis, quae non parit: erumpe et clama, quae non parturis'*) in a quotation from Isaiah 54:1.¹⁷ However, when the whole homily is read we find that this is but a conclusion to a long passage devoted to the question of 'why the Virgin Mother had to be born from sterile parents'.¹⁸ This is taken as a fact and then is explained as being the fulfilment of prophecy. In what is a homily to sing the praises on Mary on her birthday, the text turns again and again to find new titles for Mary, and Joachim and Anne play a very small part. But what is significant about Joachim and Anne is that both are sterile, therefore the birth of Mary is a miraculous event (*o miraculorum miracula*). Indeed, because of their sterility and the miraculous nature of Mary's conception, John imagined that these parents are far less involved in the conception than is normally the case. Hence Joachim and Anne are to be praised not for their actions, but as the *locus* of the miracle; and as such their act of copulation is exempt from John's normal depreciation of sexual activity in contrast to continence. John is even prepared to address the purity of Mary's conception in a manner that brings to mind the later western notion of the Immaculate Conception:

O lumbos Joachim beatissimos, ex quibus mundissimum semen iactum est! O preclaram Annae uuluam, in qua tacitis accrementis ex ea auctus atque formatus fuit fetus

¹⁶ PG 96.663,667,670.

¹⁷ The NRSV renders Isa. 54:1: 'Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labour.' In reading John Damascene we should not imagine that this Marian interpretation of Isaiah is in any way specifically noteworthy: it belongs to a long and widespread tradition of reading Isaiah in terms of the birth of Jesus.

¹⁸ PG 96.613.

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*sanctissimus! O uterum, in quo animatum coelum, coelorum latitudine latius conceptum fuit!*¹⁹

Joachim and Anne are, therefore, in a passage read in today's liturgy: 'The most pure couple for they maintained the chastity prescribed by the law of nature ... yet gave birth.' This is an indirect reference to the fact that their sterility was known – hence they must refrain from intercourse because of this sterility – yet divine assistance intervened.

John made no reference to the text we call *PJ* nor are there any latent quotations from it in his homily, yet he knew as 'facts' the sterility of both parents, the names Joachim and Anne, and that they and those around them knew of this sterility. The *PJ* describes the sadness of each parent separately for the fact that she/he has no offspring. Joachim believes that he is the only male in the history of Israel who had not had a child (1:3) and hence his gifts are rejected (1:2). Hence Joachim goes away without seeing his wife (1:4) and prays with fasting (1:4)²⁰ that he be granted a son just as God granted Isaac to Abraham (1:3). Meanwhile, Anna too is sad for she realises that 'God has shut up her womb' (2:3 quoting 1 Sam. 1:6) like an earlier Anna [Hannah]; so, she too prays that she will be like Sarah. It is significant, however, than unlike the Genesis story (Gen. 18) there is no implication that Joachim is without offspring because his wife is barren: in *PJ* each is sterile. Then an angel appears to each separately (4:1 and 4:2) announcing that Anna has conceived, and she promises that whether the child is a boy or a girl, it shall be a gift to the Lord (4:1 quoting 1 Sam. 1:11). Then Joachim and Anna meet again (4:4), they rejoice at the pregnancy, and eventually the child, Mary, is born (5:2). While it is not stated explicitly in *PJ* that Mary's conception was virginal, the text does suggest that the conception of Mary is by the Holy Spirit in the same way as that of Jesus in Luke's gospel. But a virginal conception or not, *PJ* is explicit that the conception is wholly miraculous as a deliberate divine intervention.

¹⁹ PG 96.663.

²⁰ On the significance of this in early Christian communities, see Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The *Didache* as a Source for Picturing the Earliest Christian Communities: The Case of the Practice of Fasting', in K. O'Mahony (ed.), *Christian Origins: Worship, Belief and Society*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003, 83-112.

Given what we read in *PJ* it is clear that when later generations celebrated the feast-day of this barren couple it was not simply sanctity by association, but the feast of two saints who were miraculously involved in the divine plan in a far more significant way than most. Moreover, just as the earthly miraculous exploits of other saints indicated their appropriate area of heavenly intercession, so too with Anna and her role – still found in popular cult in many places in the twentieth century – of intercessor for those seeking husbands, and of the childless seeking to conceive.

b. The feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple (21 November).²¹

When Anna learns in *PJ* that she is going to have a child she vows that whether it is male or female it will be given as a gift to the Lord to serve the Lord all its days (4:1). Then on Mary's first birthday the temple priests meet her for the first time at a special birthday party (6:2). Then on Mary's second birthday Joachim wants to give her to the temple lest God might not be pleased with a delay in making the gift, but Anna persuades him to wait another year so that the child will no longer long after her parents! (7:1). Then on her third birthday, amidst a formal ceremony involving 'the undefiled daughters of the Hebrews each carrying a lamp' (cf. Mt 25:1-10), Mary is offered to the temple by being laid by Joachim on the 'third step of the altar' and God put his grace upon the child and Mary danced for joy and 'the whole house of Israel loved her' (ch. 7; the final phrase is a quotation from 1 Sam. 18:16).²² Mary remains in the temple until she is twelve (8:2) and is even preserved from worldly food by being fed by an angel (8:1). Throughout the *PJ* the basic religious categories of the pure/impure are at work: Mary as the pure virgin must, from her earliest days, be kept away from world and even from its food. She cannot be allowed to walk upon common ground, but only on the holy ground of the temple (6:1), so even while at home she must live in her bedroom which

²¹ This section should be seen as but a token introduction to the exploration of this story in Rumsey, 'Lest She Pollute the Sanctuary', 93-124.

²² Given what we can reconstruct about the second temple from ancient sources (e.g. Josephus) or archaeology, many modern readers question how it could be that the author of *PJ* was so wholly ignorant of the facts of the temple's regulations that he could imagine a woman being admitted to the priestly area of the temple. It is as impossible to answer because it conflates the realms of history and myth, but it does serve to remind us that *PJ* is to be read as Christian myth – not as in some comments in liturgical books as quasi-history.

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becomes a special type of 'sanctuary' (6:1 and 2), nothing 'common or unclean' is let near her, and only 'the undefiled daughters of the Hebrews' can play with her (6:1). However, at the age of twelve, even Mary could pollute the temple (8:2). The text assumes that there are intimate links between being a woman, being in touch with the world, and being unworthy of contact with the holy or with the pure service of God; therefore, all such contacts have to be controlled and special provision made lest impurity infect the holy. Mary is only fit for her contact with the holy because of her virginity; her 'mission' requires separation not only from sexuality, but from all impurity and this includes her own womanhood.

Turning to the modern liturgy we find several of these ideas are still making themselves felt, despite some major changes in emphasis. The historical note in the Liturgy of the Hours has three main elements:

- [1] On this day, which was the dedication in the year 543 of the Church of Our Lady near to the Temple in Jerusalem,
- [2] together with the Christians of the Eastern rites we celebrate that
- [3a] dedication which Mary made to God from her very childhood
- [3b] under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who
- [3c] filled her with grace
- [3d] at her Immaculate Conception.²³

The Latin text modifies this slightly by simply calling the day 'the dedication' and having it refer to that dedication she exhibited rather than implying an act on Mary's part as with the English text: ... *celebramus << dedicationem >>, quam sui ipsius Deo ab infantia exhibuit Maria* ...²⁴ However, the shift from the traditional story as found in *PJ*, and the often depicted scene in traditional religious art, is startling.

²³ *Divine Office*, III, 408*.

²⁴ *Liturgia Horarum*, IV, 1279.



The heortological statement that this is the day when a church was dedicated to Mary in Jerusalem is presented as the sole basis of the feast: it is not a feast of Mary but a commemoration of a church building, simply the analogue of the feast of dedication of St Mary Major in Rome on August 5. Then having a feast of a church dedicated to Mary in Jerusalem we are put in mind of an abstraction: how dedicated Mary was to God – a simple concomitant of her holiness. And, in that dedication it is Mary's own self-dedication that we recall: not the act of dedicating her to the temple. This self-dedication is not explicitly held to be an act of Mary but simply a consequence of the action of the Spirit, itself a consequence of 'her fullness of grace' (this is based on the Latin rendering of Lk 1:28 as *gratia plena*) which is then further explained as a consequence of her Immaculate Conception.

Two forces are at work here: first, a definite desire to resist any hint at the traditional meaning/narrative of the feast so that a deliberately legally precise language is employed limiting what is actually stated – even if on casual reading that might not appear to be the case; and, second, lest anyone doubt this self-dedication (either as action or as state of being), then it is defended by a sorites of ideas which are seen as logically entailed with one another and cumulatively conclusive (3b, c, d above). In effect, since one cannot doubt the Immaculate Conception (proof-quality: '*de fide definita*'), nor that she was '*gratia plena*' (proof-quality: 'scripture'): Mary must have been in a state of dedication from her infancy! Note that here there is an implicit rejection of an act of dedication such as took place when she was three years old according to *PJ*. In these few sentences, in what is, in effect, a rubric, in the Liturgy we have a stunning display of propositional gymnastics. As the liturgy now formally tells us about itself in the Liturgy of the Hours, what we have is a wholly new feast in its content and memory, but simply sharing a title and a date with the older feast of the Presentation.

This new feast's theme – Mary's commitment to the divine will rather than a commemoration of an event in her life – is then taken up in the other materials supplied for the day. The reading from Augustine is a praise of Mary's faith and commitment; the hymn, in the Latin text only, praises her holiness without any hint of a dedication ceremony and refers to her as '*puella carens macula*' and '*O margarita candida*', while the prayers and

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antiphons refer to her as herself ‘the temple of the Lord’ and ‘holy place of the Spirit’. Every trace of *PJ*, or even its ‘traditions’, has been removed. We are left with another memorial, whose sole *raison d’être* as a distinct memorial is that there was a church building dedicated in Palestine in 543. And, that event is worthy of recall partially for ecumenical reasons as ‘the eastern Christians’ keep this day (see [2] above).

c. The feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (8 September).

This feast celebrates an obvious fact: Mary’s birth, yet the sole early source for any ‘information’ on this event as to why it should be celebrated – as opposed to the heortological question of why this day out of all the available days in the calendar – is the account of the wondrous birth of Mary contained in *PJ*. There the birth is due to the wondrous intervention of God, as we have already noted, and the actual birth is described in passing: when Anna’s time for birth came she bore a girl and on learning this she named her ‘Mary’ (5:2). This event is given much greater significance in much later documents but these come from a time when the celebration of Mary’s birth was already well established in Christian memory and they may indeed be a response to this feast.²⁵ However, given the unique place of Mary in the history of the Christian cult it could also be argued that, unlike a feast like that of Joachim and Anne whose content depends on a narrative tradition, this feast could have arisen simply as a consequence of the general regard in which Mary was held, and if the nativity of Jesus was celebrated, then the nativity of the greatest saint should be celebrated! However, given that only three nativities are celebrated – and in the case of Jesus and John the Baptist we have references to these moments in basic narratives (the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke, and Lk. 1:57-66) – it is significant that there was a narrative, *PJ*, which mentioned the event as part of its larger story.

²⁵ Thomas O’Loughlin, ‘The cult of Mary within the structures of human time: a reading of some early mediaeval Irish martyrologies’, *Maria* 3.2, 2003, 135-69, 161.



The liturgy takes advantage of the fact that there must have been a date of birth and so dispenses with the historical note: the fact of Mary's birth is presented as the sufficient reason for the feast, and there is no curiosity about how, where, or when in the year she was born. Mary's birth is significant as it is a parallel with the moment of the creation of Eve. Eve was the first mother of the living, now Mary is the new Eve and the mother of the redeemed. With this theological agenda in mind the first reading at the Office of Readings is Gen. 3:9-20. The second reading, from Andrew of Crete's *Sermon 1*²⁶ reinforces this approach for it is primarily concerned with explaining the typological view of salvation history: the old foreshadowed the new; the new completed and transformed the old. In this sermon focussed to the Old Adam – New Adam parallel, the feast of Mary's birth is mentioned in passing: this is the prelude to the coming of the New Adam when the Word is united with a human nature. Nothing in the rest of the liturgy for the day mentions the actual moment/day of her birth, but concentrates on what it sees as the significance of her birth. As the liturgy presents it, it is a festival recalling Mary as the New Eve rather than a birthday!

d. The feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (8 December).

At some time in the early middle ages a series of feasts began to appear celebrating various moments in the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The actual day that was held to be that of her birth varied from region to region, as did the date of her death or falling asleep (dormition) and assumption. Gradually, 15 August emerged as the most widely favoured date for her death (the day of death is normally the feast day of a saint) and 8 September as her birthday. However, just as 25 March was then celebrated as the conception of Jesus followed nine months later by his birth, so the logic of celebrations dictated that if 'we know' the birthday – and 'we must know it for we have been celebrating it for generations!' – then we can easily know yet another feast of Mary that we can celebrate: her conception feast's date being calculated, with the most basic knowledge of biology, to be nine months before her birthday. Moreover there were traditions about Mary's wondrous conception to barren parents – which we have already noted – so the conception was a miracle worthy of

²⁶ *Divine Office*, III, 237-8*.

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recollection as such. Hence this feast, and hence its falling on this day. When St Bernard said, 'Of Mary, there is never enough!', he was not merely stating his own interest in writing about Mary, but expressing a more general attitude: if we could find another Marian feast to celebrate, then let us find it, and celebrate it!

However, at the time this feast is first evidenced in surviving calendars (eighth century), what was being celebrated was simply the day of Mary's conception because that was itself a significant moment to recall in the life of the all-holy Mother of God; it was not yet a feast in terms of that conception being 'immaculate' (i.e. conceived free of the infection of Adam's sin) as that notion had not yet been imagined. Today we celebrate it because that conception was, in the belief of the western Catholic Church, unique; but the feast began simply as one more joyful anniversary relating to the life of Mary. Here lies the major difference between the origins of the feast and what we are now celebrating: yet, it is the actual celebration of the day of conception, not its specific 'theological' quality, that, first of all, marks the long-standing tradition of the church, and, secondly, it was the interest in this annual major feast that prompted the theological speculation that eventually resulted in the notion that Mary's conception must have been unique. Liturgy was the generator of doctrine, rather than being the manifestation of some doctrinal 'fact' of belief. Of course, there is a specious apologetic that unless Christians knew there was 'something' special about the conception then the feast would not have been celebrated. Then eventually, after sufficient 'development' it was realized that the this 'something' was the 'immaculate conception'. This sort of reasoning – and it can still be found in polemical textbooks -- makes a nonsense of the actual notion of the 'mind of the church' it seeks to defend, for that 'mind' is thereby given 'mindlessness' as its chief characteristic (since there is no abuse that could not be developed out of an 'inchoate something'); and secondly, it fails to take account of modern historical scholarship which has been at the forefront of the liturgical renewal of recent decades and that can trace the development of interest in the 'immaculate-ness' of Mary's conception as a way of justifying the already existing feast.

It was the actual celebration of the feast of the conception – the wondrous event found



in *PJ* modelled on the infancy narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus that we find in Luke – that was the starting point of the theological dispute. The theology of ‘immaculate’ conception, its perception of the mode of transmission of Original Sin, its inherent view of sexual activity, its implicit view of what constitutes holiness, and the celebration of this feast are intimately intertwined. Once the feast was established and annually celebrated with ever-greater solemnity and exuberance, speculation about what the feast entailed took on a life of its own within formal theology. Indeed, we have here an almost textbook example of how theology follows liturgical praxis. Could one actually celebrate a moment of conception since that was glorifying an instant of carnal passion in which was transmitted the stain and effects of the Fall? This in itself constituted a specific reading of *PJ*: the conception of Mary was not virginal, and as it was supposed that Abraham was the biological father of Isaac, so it was assumed that Joachim was the father of Mary. It was not open to these theologians to ask ‘should one so celebrate’ as the actual celebration was a datum; it came with the must significant of ritual sanctions: a place in the calendar. One can imagine this as the clash of a dour Augustinian theology of Original Sin of the academic clerical few, with the simpler joy of the many wanting as many Marian fiestas as possible upon which to celebrate, relax and make merry on a happy anniversary. However, using a lawyerly approach to the discovery of truth more suited to maths than theology, it was easy to observe that both festival and theology were part of the tradition (hence neither could be wrong for that would imply that the tradition could err) yet were contradictory (so one must be false). The conundrum was solved by holding that Mary was so totally holy and pure that she *must have been* free from the stain of Original Sin in the moment of her conception. Thereby one could still preserve the doctrine of Original Sin in its common western form, yet celebrate the feast with even greater fervour. Only subsequently, did the questions emerge of explaining the how and why of Mary being so preserved. That debate which lasted from the thirteenth century until 1854 (at least officially that was when debate ended) produced the preaching that then became the focus of interest in this feast. It was no longer a celebration of a moment in Mary’s history, but a celebration of what made her uniquely distinct from other humans (Jesus excepted). It is this uniqueness of Mary and her ontological status vis-à-vis every other human that became the focus of most preaching on this feast and in its popular celebrations, for instance, the Virgin’s title in Lourdes: ‘I am the Immaculate Conception’. For the perspective of this paper, once the focus and concern had moved from the conception as a moment in Mary’s existence to an

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interest in its nature as ‘immaculate’, then also there was no need to have any concern with its miraculous nature as narrated in *PJ* – and that narrative disappeared from the memory as irrelevant. In the present liturgy there is no reference to any details of any historical moment. The sole legacy of *PJ* is the fact of the feast and interest in the moment of conception. Without *PJ*’s account of the miraculous conception, and the angels appearing to Joachim and Anne, the celebration would not have occurred and there would have been no need for the ‘theological development’ of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. In this case the memory of *PJ* is buried under the mighty edifice for which it provided a foundation.

2. *PJ* and other less-defined liturgical memories.

It is in connection with the feasts relating to the life of Mary that *PJ* has had its greatest impact, and directly or indirectly continues to have an impact. However, the liturgical memory is not simply the formal festivals of the calendar, the official statements about the liturgy, nor its appointed readings and prayers. Before ever a celebration takes place there is the mental image which is made up from all the official sources, half remembered stories, pictures in catechisms, chance remarks in sermons, statues in churches, and general memories in the environment. Such ‘general memories’ are probably less present in western European culture today than in the past, but that does not challenge my main point: people do not come to the liturgy with a memory that is a *tabula rasa*, but one already built up on images and their own imagination’s working. In several of these cases there are present images that can first be found in *PJ*.

a. The liturgical presentation of Joseph (19 March).

Joseph was celebrated until recently as the patron of a ‘happy death’ and many paintings show him dying as an old man with a young Mary and a youthful Jesus at his bedside. Statues show him with a lily representing purity, and in the ‘divine praises’, still sometimes used

(commonly recited during Benediction), he is referred to thus: 'Blessed be St Joseph, her spouse most chaste'. This image of Joseph as being the guardian of the young Mary rather than her husband in the normal sense of the word is first found in *PJ* – significantly for our perceptions of those apocryphal texts even biblical scholarship that is explicitly Roman Catholic in its origins now assumes that the Joseph mentioned in the gospels was Mary's real husband, albeit the putative father of Jesus.²⁷

However, *PJ* presents Joseph as an aged widower, with sons from a previous marriage who is miraculously chosen so that the High Priest can commit Mary to his care (8:3); and he is warned of the terrible fate that will befall him if he defiles her (9:2). It is clear that already by the time that *PJ* was written, the fact of the brothers of Jesus was becoming a problem for the cult of Mary; and *PJ*'s solution was the common one until Jerome advanced the 'brothers = cousins' theory.²⁸ While we may now ignore *PJ* as apocryphal, it is noteworthy how widespread became the notion, first attested there, that there was no sexual contact between Joseph and Mary.

b. The image of the Annunciation scene (25 March).

The *PJ* has two details about how Mary was occupied between the time of her being given into Joseph's protection and the time of the annunciation as told by Luke. She was engaged in weaving a veil for the temple in rich yarns and colours (ch. 10); and that at the moment angel appeared to her she was out drawing water with a pitcher (11:1). Both images have been used in so many works of art that they still form the imagined scene of Lk. 1:26-38.

²⁷ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Companions and Competitors (Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol. 3)*, New York, NY: Doubleday, 2001, 616.

²⁸ See John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975, 200-54, and especially his 'detached note' on 'The Brothers of Jesus in Apocryphal Writings and the Influence of the Protoevangelium of James', 451-2; Bruce Chilton, Bruce & Jacob Neusner, *The Brother of Jesus: James the Just and His Mission*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

c. The image of the Christmas scene (25 December).

The crib scene most people are familiar with from churches or Christmas Cards imagines the place of birth either as a stable (supported by Luke's statement that there was 'no room in the inn' and there was a feeding trough – *hē phatnē*, 'the manger') or as a cave on the outskirts of Bethlehem. While this might appear simply as variation due to artistic licence, the cave on the outskirts of Bethlehem goes back to a story in *PJ* (18:1). Moreover, the author of *PJ* was aware that his cave would have been unlikely to have a feeding trough, so that detail was re-introduced later into the story as the place where Mary hides Jesus from Herod's soldiers (22:2) after the events of Mt. 2:13-21.²⁹

These images, backdrops that operate when we hear or read narratives, are not of any great significance in themselves, but they do testify to the influence, and longevity of influence, of *PJ*; and, more importantly for our appreciation of the liturgy, remind us of how many-layered is our liturgical remembering.³⁰

3. *PJ* and the perpetual virginity of Mary.

From what has already been said about *PJ*'s narrative of Mary's life before she was entrusted to Joseph, and about Joseph himself and his sons, it is clear that the text has a very definite views on (1) the value of virginity as purity before God; and (2) the notion of Mary's virginity which would later be referred to as 'the perpetual virginity' of Mary. Indeed, in a text, which is structured in so many ways on Luke's infancy narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus,

²⁹ Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The *Protevangelium of James*: a case of gospel harmonization in the second century?', in M. Vincent (ed.), *Studia Patristica: Papers Presented at the Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2011* (*Studia Patristica* 65), 2013, 165-173.

³⁰ Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Losing mystery in history: the challenge of recalling the Nativity', in Jeremy Corley (ed.), *The Theology of the Nativity Today*, London: Continuum, 2009, 180-99.

this notion of the on-going virginity of Mary marks one of *PJ*'s major departures from its sources because Lk. 1:27; 2:7; and 3:23 only imply the virginal conception of Jesus; Luke's acknowledgement of the brothers of Jesus indicates that he had no notion of perpetual virginity. However, in addition, the *PJ* contains an account of a miracle that stands behind much later speculation about the *uirginitas in partu*: the midwife leaves Mary and tells a woman called Salome the wondrous sight she has seen of a virgin giving birth. Salome says she will not believe this unless she can test Mary's virginal condition and so proceeds to do so (19:3-20:1). At this her hand withers, but Salome prays for forgiveness for tempting God, and an angel appears and restores her hand (20:2-4).

The liturgy uses phrases such as 'blessed Mary, ever-virgin' with little concern: it is just a Marian honorific that parallels with 'Blessed Virgin Mary' or 'Our Lady'; however, it is in this now forgotten text that that notion is first encountered within the tradition.³¹

4. Contemporary attitudes to pseudonymous texts.

This survey of attitudes to the *PJ* and its legacy reveals several features of the contemporary ecclesial memory.

First, there is a general reluctance to see any aspect of the cult as having its basis in that text or in traditions that are heavily dependent upon it. This appears in several ways over the various feasts. In the case of the feast of Joachim and Anne it is used but anonymously, it is formally avoided as in the case of the feast of the Presentation, ignored as superfluous as in the birthday of Mary, or ignored completely as now irrelevant to what is the feast's focus as in the case of 8 December. Nowhere is *PJ* acknowledged, and everywhere it is airbrushed from the record: it is clearly a source of embarrassment.

³¹ See McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus*, 343-7.

Second, while the memory of *PJ* is expunged with great care, there is ambivalence to its content: *PJ* is abhorred but it may be the witness to early traditions. So *PJ* is apocryphal – a term that is implicitly condemnatory – but the names of Mary’s parents can still be celebrated, as there is such early attestation. However, the debate on the historical Jesus should warn us of the difficulties of separating a tradition’s content from its transmission. But no such separation is possible regarding the *PJ*’s material on Mary’s presentation in the temple; therefore, that tradition is dismissed (presumably, because it seems typical of the ‘legends’ one can expect from a pseudepigraphical apocryphon).

The rejection of *PJ* is so complete that we must assume that there are a number of factors at work. First, there is the canonical notion that *PJ* is apocryphal in the technical sense, and as such it is rejected because it claims to belong to the period of apostolic writing but has never been accepted within the canon. This begs the question of how the canon itself arose. Second, there is the scholarly position that there is no material of historical worth in any pseudepigraphal text that is later than the period to which it claims to refer. This follows a basic principle of hagiographical research that a text may be a witness to the period of its production but not of the time of its subject; but lurking within this principle, when applied to early pseudepigrapha, is often the assumption that those texts not in that category (e.g. the canonical gospels) are, by contrast, historically reliable. Third, there is a more general cultural rejection of any text that is pseudonymous. A pseudepigraphon is, for our culture, a forgery, a deliberate deception, or simply a pack of lies – and anything from such a source is tainted. This is an attitude that earlier generations seem not to have known. There are two assumptions at work here: firstly, if there is no genuinely named author, then it contains no true accounts, and consequently its content is rubbish; and, secondly, that there is rigid and easily recognisable distinction between history and fiction that can be easily policed. History equals facts equals truth; fiction is amusement if announced as such, otherwise it is an attempt at deception. These assumptions function together thus:

	Genuine Author	'False author' / Forgery
History	An Academic Text	Hitler's Diaries
Fiction	A Novel	<i>PJ</i>

The most reviled place is the overlap of categories in which *PJ* falls. Given this attitude, the care with which the liturgy tries to distance itself is understandable. It seems that if we were to acknowledge the role of *PJ* in a feast like that of Joachim and Anne, then the very survival of the feast might be seen as simply the product of a forged deception; so the books of our liturgy respond by hiding that dependence, thereby pretending that the information exists independently of our source! This perception of *PJ* in comparison with the canonical books, especially the gospels, is not without a certain irony in that *PJ* dates from a transitional period, in the second century, between when the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were given a special status in the liturgical memory but before that status was seen as being equivalent to 'the scriptures' (i.e. canonical), and the harmonised stories of *PJ* probably contributed to those four gospels gaining the canonical status.³²

5. The ritual and historical memories.

The actual memory of any group is larger than the evidence that can be assembled using the categories of the historian. Some years ago a German historian went to great lengths to show that Martin Luther did not nail his theses to a door, and implied that the little ritual that takes place in so many German churches on Reformation Sunday was therefore based on a falsehood and a misinterpretation of the case.³³ The fact is that this annual ritual was far more

³² Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The *Protevangeliium of James*: a case of gospel harmonization in the second century?', in M. Vinzent (ed.), *Studia Patristica: Papers Presented at the Sixteenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2011* (*Studia Patristica* 65), 2013, 165-173; Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The *Protevangeliium Iacobi* and the Status of the Canonical Gospels in the Mid-Second Century', in G. Guldentops, C. Laes & G. Partoens (eds), *Felici Curiositate: Studies in Latin Literature and Textual Criticism from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century: In Honour of Rita Beyers* (*Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia* 72), Turnhout: Brepols, 2017, 3-21.

³³ Erwin Iserloh, *The Theses Were Not Posted*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969.

The many feasts of Mary in the contemporary Catholic liturgy

significant than simply a reminder of an event on 1517: it expresses attitudes (both cultural and theological), group identity, and a deeply held perspective on religious authority.

Equally, actual recollections become the justification of the memories that are believed to lie at the origin of the celebrations. Having recalled an 'event' in the past, the presence of that annual celebration in the cult is a sufficient basis for the memory. So in a case such as *PJ*, the embarrassment of the source is more than made up for by the long continuity of recollection. The ritual memory is larger than the sum total of our historical evidence; and that ritual memory functions in a more all-embracing way within the society than historical reconstruction. This memory lives by making links between people, events, places, while simultaneously drawing in cultural values, religious assumptions, and, occasionally, elements of doctrine. We see it at work in our celebration of the lives of Jesus, Mary, her parents, other figures such as John the Baptist and Joseph, and many others. While the historical evidence for the earliest Christians forms a narrow base, the ritual memory is rotund: linking people, adding colour, filling out human details. This ritual memory also likes repeated patterns: just as there were wondrous events surrounding the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, so similar events surround the birth of Mary; just as Jesus' parents became models of holiness, so did Mary's; just as Jesus was presented in the temple, so too was Mary.

The persistence of the feasts examined in this article – in whatever form they are currently officially presented – shows that the ritual memory of the Christian church is still a much more complex phenomenon within Christianity than any body of material which might be labelled 'early Christian history'. This complexity is seen most clearly in that the feasts are still celebrated while *PJ* has been discarded. Meanwhile, the popularity of *PJ* from the second century onwards shows that the historical form has always been part of Christian identity as that identity is explained and celebrated, but it is as a wondrous tale, with its convenient miracles to reinforce its religious preferences, not as an historical monument, that it became influential. Is this simply because those early generations were credulous, while we are not?



Such an approach is too blunt to be any more than a truism. The answer seems to lie in the very phenomenon of ritual itself: with these stories it became possible to encounter the people and events around Jesus in the everyday world with its details, complexities, and intrigues; while by way of the miraculous to engage with not just ‘a family down the road’ but characters that obviously belonged to the dimension of the holy and stood at the centre rather than the periphery of history. In this duality, these stories resembled the liturgy itself: at once the everydayness of the actual event of the ritual, but also the sacramental encounter with the divine. Read as such a ritual tale, *PJ* may tell us far more about the development of the theological imagination, both generally as well as specifically with reference to such matters as the growing cult of Mary, than has hitherto been recognised. In that examination we may have to confront some awkward memories. Firstly, how appropriate are memories that perpetuate particular cultural values of past societies, for example: about what constitutes holiness for a woman? And, secondly, in a society today which cherishes as one of its values the notion that historical obfuscation is deceitful³⁴ – a value discovered following a century of slaughter often underpinned by historical deceits – then the notion that one can simply air-brush out a source may be seen as more disreputable than facing it, warts and all, even when the consequences of such a confrontation may seem most ‘offensive to pious ears’.

³⁴ E.L. Krasevac, E.L., ‘Questing for the Historical Jesus: Need We Continue?’, *Doctrine and Life* 51, 2001, 590-604.