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Author: Sarah Jane Boss

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Review article:

Patricia M. Rumsey, *'Lest She Pollute the Sanctuary': The Influence of the Protevangelium Iacobi on Women's Status in Christianity*, Brepols, 2020. ISBN 978-2-503-59036-3. Pp. I-X, 1-244.

The argument of this monograph is that the second-century Gospel of James, or *Protevangelium of James* (because it narrates events immediately prior to the accounts of the Gospels), has had a strong and malign influence on the situation of women in Christianity, from the earliest centuries until the present day. Specifically, Rumsey contends that the depiction of Mary as a girl in the Temple has given rise to the Catholic hierarchy's excessive concern with controlling the lives of contemplative nuns, and that the narrative of Mary's removal from the Temple when she reached the age of puberty has led to a taboo on women's participation in ritual action—especially within the eastern Orthodox churches—and to women being excluded from the priesthood.

Rumsey contends that the Gospels and, to a considerable extent, the Pauline Epistles do not favour male superiority: on the contrary, she says that Jesus acts towards women in ways that run counter to the male dominance of the society in which he lived. She also contends that there is nothing in the Gospels or in Paul that favours celibacy over marriage (with no reference to Mt. 19: 12, or 1 Cor. 7: 8-9). By contrast, *PJ* presents Mary as a girl who makes no choices of her own, and who is a perpetual virgin, dwelling in the sacred space of the Temple, protected from external pollution, and living a life of asceticism. This image of Mary, says Rumsey, then became a monastic ideal that was imposed upon women, and which has continued to be imposed by the Catholic Church's official teaching, or embraced by some religious women, down to the present day.

Rumsey also argues that, at its best, Christianity has had no tradition of menstrual separation. Nevertheless, menstrual taboos have operated in some Christian communities, partly under the influence of *PJ*, which tells of the Temple priests finding alternative accommodation for Mary (by betrothing her to Joseph) when she was twelve years old, 'lest she pollute the sanctuary'. Rumsey considers that the notion that menstrual blood is ritually impure has contributed to the ban on women being ordained to the priesthood.

Over all, Rumsey argues that *PJ* has had a detrimental effect on the position of women in Christianity: it has given rise to an unreasonable ideal of female perfection, and has led to



women being treated as children, incompetent to make decisions for themselves. It has also been associated with a contempt for sex and marriage.

Rumsey associates this negative attitude to women's bodies with a general disdain for the bodily world. She sees it as tied to a dualism of spirit and matter, which denies the goodness of God's whole creation.

Now, Rumsey is surely right to draw attention to the history of the Catholic Church's excessively restrictive attitude towards nuns, which is quite unlike its attitude towards monks. Similarly, the idea that some latent, if not manifest, menstrual taboo underlies the prohibition on women's ordination is one that has been broached by a number of scholars, but still requires further consideration. The association between the subordination of women and the domination of the natural world is also one that has been well documented, and whose ethical implications have not yet been fully worked out. On all these points, Rumsey is raising important questions. However, the case against *PJ* is not well made. By this, I do not mean that *PJ* was not influential: through liturgy, popular belief and the history of art, the stories that it tells became universal in the Christian world. But Rumsey wants us to believe that its influence was felt quite specifically in Christian attitudes towards the female sex. It is precisely this that she fails to demonstrate.

A demonstration of the influence of *PJ* in this regard would require a careful analysis of texts through the ages. For example, we might expect to see a close reading of the Infancy Gospel of Matthew, or Pseudo-Matthew, since this seems to be the principal source from which the stories contained in *PJ* were disseminated in the West. It is generally agreed that Pseudo-Matthew was written after the Benedictine reform—perhaps in the early seventh century—since its account of Mary's life in the Temple corresponds to the new monastic rule; so this would be a good starting point from which to examine whether or not the stories that were first written down in *PJ* did indeed go on to influence attitudes to monastic women. We might then expect to see a study of, for example, medieval preaching on the relevant feast days, e.g., Our Lady's Birthday, the Conception, and the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple. Is medieval preaching on these themes concerned with female purity, or with quite other themes? Unfortunately, Rumsey does not present this kind of detailed textual study.

Rather, she quotes authoritative sources (influential theologians and official Church documents) which insist that it is necessary for nuns to live in the strictest enclosure, and she then claims that these texts echo *PJ*. This is hardly a demonstration of influence.

Rumsey does provide evidence that *PJ* is used to support menstrual separation in contemporary Orthodox churches, but even here, the text is used to support the teaching, without evidence that the teaching takes its origin from the text.

PJ can, in fact, be interpreted in various ways, and may be the source of a variety of devotional traditions. For instance, when the priests declare that Mary should move out of the Temple precincts, 'lest she pollute the sanctuary', this turns out to be deeply ironic; for Mary, as the Godbearer, becomes herself the new Temple—one which exceeds and fulfills the Temple in which she spent her childhood. The fact that many later authors have failed to recognise this irony is not due to the text, but to the culture in which it was received and interpreted. Likewise, conventions of religious life for women have varied considerably according to geographical region. In Catholic southern Europe, strict enclosure was the general practice, and corresponded to the widespread custom by which women's domain was restricted to the household. In the equally Catholic north, by contrast, there were houses for Béguines and others, who lived in community but also went out into the world. Yet there is no reason to think that *PJ* was less popular in the north than it was in the south, so it is hard to see it as a decisive influence on any precise form of female religious life.

Furthermore, in the sixteenth century, the cult of St Anne was phenomenally important, and was strongly associated with celebration of the bourgeois family. Early modern images of the Holy Kinship show St Anne and her legendary relatives, along with the Virgin Mary and her legendary half-sisters, lined up with their husbands and offspring, looking like an Edwardian family photograph. These traditions of Jesus' kin could probably have their origins traced to the story of Anne and Joachim in *PJ*, but they clearly favour the institution of marriage. This all suggests that *PJ* has been a rich source for the Christian imagination, and that it has been interpreted in a number of different ways.



Rumsey's book provides a useful overview of the English-language literature on *PJ* (though it omits M.R. James's translation, which had dozens of re-printings over a period of fifty years). It also presents important points for further investigation concerning the use of *PJ* in the later Christian tradition, but it does not demonstrate what is meant to be its central argument.

Sarah Jane Boss