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Mary and the Jews: The Gospels and the Early Church

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MARY AND THE JEWS: THE GOSPELS AND THE EARLY CHURCH

*Lawrence E. Frizzell**

1. Introduction

In his *Theotokos*, a major work dedicated to the study of Mary, the Mother of Jesus of Nazareth, the author has an entry on "The Jews" in which he notes that the Second Vatican Council stressed the continuity between ancient Israel and the Church (See the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* 9). "She is a unifying bond and a symbol in Judaeo-Christian history and consciousness. The terrible tragedies of recent times were in some way the occasion, if not the cause, of the statement of Vatican II on the Jews."¹ There are entries for the biblical phrases "Daughter of Zion" and "Poor of Yahweh (Anawim)" but none for Israel or Synagogue; few are the hints of the long and sad history of the pejorative discussions of Mary and the Jewish people.

The intention of this essay is twofold: to extend the time period of my earlier essays on Mary and the biblical heritage,² and to sketch the developments in the early Church, in spite of their burdens of motifs relating to the Jewish people, so that we can understand our history with an insight into the

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¹ Michael O'Carroll, *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1982), 197-98.

² See my essays, "Mary and the Biblical Heritage" and "Mary's Magnificat: Sources and Themes," *Marian Studies* 44 (1995): 26-40 and 50 (1999): 38-59. In *Marian Studies* 50 (1999): 31-53, I present my conviction that the *Magnificat* draws not only on biblical themes but also from the Eighteen Benedictions of the daily synagogue service.

Church's roots and prepare for a better future in Christian-Jewish relations.

2. The Gospels

The fourfold Gospel places Jesus of Nazareth firmly within the heritage of the Jewish Scriptures and the people of Israel; in the Second Temple period they were reduced to the three tribes, Judah, Benjamin and Levi. The Mother of Jesus was imbued with the rich and varied ways in which Jews of her time interacted with the Word of God. She knew that God filled the hungry with great benefits and she rejoiced to be called into his service, incorporating her life into the worship of Israel his servant (see Lk 1:53-54).

The theme of contradictory tensions in the interaction between God and human beings in the second part of Mary's hymn (1:51-53) is developed in the words of Simeon after he has proclaimed that Jesus embodied the divine gift of salvation for the world, for Gentiles and the people of Israel (2:29-32). Then an ominous message is addressed to Mary:

Behold, he is set for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be contradicted. Indeed, a sword will pass through your own soul, so that the inmost thoughts of many may be revealed (2:34-35).³

A thorough discussion of Luke 2:35 was offered by Tiburtius Gallus, S.J.; he drew upon the riches of the patristic and medieval commentators and presented the general and negative assessment of Jews and Israel common in many of them. I present a translation of a section of his work, summarizing at points. The child set for the fall of many, presupposing the

³ Translation of Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1993), 435. Brown's extensive commentary offers a careful review of the passage in its relation to the entire thrust of Luke-Acts. For a wide-ranging study of this text, see Johannes Heil, "... 'auch durch deine Seele wird ein schwert dringen,' Zur Auslegung von Lk 2, 34-35 in der exegetischen und homiletischen Literatur von der Patristik zum Hochmittelalter," in *Maria Tochter Zion? Mariologie, Marienfrömmigkeit und Judenfeindschaft*, ed. Johannes Heil and Rainer Kampling (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2001), 37-57.

perfidia of the chosen people.⁴ This sign of contradiction applies only to the people of Israel. "The term 'fall' expresses the future infidelity of the Jews, by which Jesus is betrayed and denied before Pilate, judging him to be condemned (Acts 3:14). Simeon, as it were, takes up the prophecy of Isaiah, in which the Lord will become 'a snare and a stumbling block to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem' (see Is 8:14)."⁵ The death on the cross was inflicted by the chosen people itself, so that this shameful act would manifest the consummation of Israel's prevarication (perhaps in the sense of the Latin "straddling the fence"), with a "deicidal" intention.⁶

This text is an example of what one would find in many popular-level sermons and theological-exegetical treatises of the Middle Ages. The application of charges of perfidy, probably in the very negative sense of treachery and even deicide, was made exclusively against the Jews in the transgenerational context. The corrective of the Second Vatican Council was so necessary because such concepts had entered the vernacular in many lands. In the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* #4, the Council interpreted the Gospel evidence to indict both Jewish and Roman leaders for collusion in bringing about the condemnation of Jesus to death. However, this crime was not deicide and must not be blamed on all Jews of that time nor on Jews of later periods of history.

The coming of Jesus would challenge the people of Israel who heard his message and witnessed his works to a decision for or against him (see Lk 12:51-53) as well as in regard to the witness of the apostles and other teachers of the early generations (Acts 28:23-28). The tendency to consider that those who

⁴The term *perfidia* is usually translated "faithlessness, treachery, dishonesty," even though usually the prefix "per" intensifies the meaning of the root word, as in *perfidels* meaning "very faithful or loyal." John M. Oesterreicher, "Pro perfidies Judaeis," *Theological Studies* 8 (1947): 80-96, presented the case for the meaning "unbelieving (in regard to Jesus as the Christ)" in the heading of the solemn oration on Good Friday, "pro perfidis Judaeis." The adjective was removed by Pope John XXIII.

⁵Tiburtius Gallus, "De sensu verborum Lc 2, 35 eorumque momento mariologico," *Biblica* 29 (1948): 220-39, at 231-32.

⁶Gallus, "De sensu verborum," 233-34.

heard the Gospel were all well-informed and rejected Jesus out of malice or stubbornness should be set aside. Rather, the judgment in application of this dimension of the Gospel should be left to God. Luke 9:49-50 and 11:23 present two reactions to Jesus; these texts teach that neutrality is not a valid option for those who encounter God's work, but good will and co-operation may well be present in those who have not become disciples.

The tension between continuity and newness, between the covenants of Abraham and Moses, on the one hand, and the New Covenant, on the other, is expressed in Luke's version of the parable of garments and wine. Matthew 9:14-17 and Mark 2:18-23 do not contain the following verse: "No man after drinking old wine immediately desires new; for he says, 'The old is better'" (Lk 5:39). In a major commentary we read: "[This verse] is merely another way of commenting on the incompatibility of the 'old' and the 'new'; it expresses the negative attitude of Jesus' opponents."⁷ Rather, this statement may preserve an acknowledgment that those who were imbued with the spirituality of the Pharisees and had learned only superficially the synthesis of Jesus' teaching would prefer to retain the values of their tradition. Their attitude need not be merely negative, but they may have been testing and holding fast to what they found to be good (see 1 Thess 5:19-21). The interpretation that their minds were hardened and that a veil remains when they read the Old Testament (2 Cor 3:12-18) is linked to faith in the person of Jesus as the Christ. However, as Paul wrote to the Christians of Rome, these Jews are elect, "beloved for the sake of their forefathers" (Rom 11:28), so their continuing role in the divine plan is to be evaluated in a benign rather than judgmental manner. This should be developed in a spirit of collaboration so that Christians can learn the depths of Jewish insights into *their* Sacred Scriptures, then the Christian scribe and teacher would be "like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Mt 13:52).⁸

⁷ See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I-LX): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible 28 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981-83), 597.

⁸ See the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC), *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2002).

Following a principle of modern scholarship, the difficult passages in any Gospel should be interpreted in the context of that work. Thus, Brown pointed to Luke 8:19-21, showing "that the natural Mother and brothers [of Jesus] passed the test of hearing the will of God and doing it and are thus part of Jesus' true family of disciples . . . In the fall and rise of many in Israel, Mary will stand with the lesser number who rise . . . (Acts 1: 12-15) but only because like the others she has passed the test and recognized the sign."⁹ Fitzmyer notes that Luke thus expressed the scandal of the cross; the evangelist developed the point of Jesus being rejected by his people in 4:29; 13: 33-35; 19:44, 47-48; 20:14, 17.¹⁰

From the tendency of the Church Fathers to harmonize the Gospels into one narrative, the liturgy and popular piety linked Simeon's prophecy with the presence of Mary at the foot of the cross. Luke had developed the theme of a crowd following Jesus on pilgrimage, beginning with 9:51-62; he noted that among the multitude who accompanied Jesus on the way to Calvary were women "who bewailed and lamented him" (23:27). The evangelist linked this presence with Jesus' words of warning that Jerusalem and its inhabitants would suffer greatly (23:28-31). Was Mary in this group? Christians often presuppose that Mary was among them, but only John 19:25-27 answers this question. However, in the Infancy Narratives, just as the shadow of suffering was caused by Herod (Mt 2:1-12), so Simeon points to the way in which Mary would be taken into the drama of her Son's life and work. The Pontifical Biblical Commission comments:

This good news is well received. But a future negative reaction to God's gift is glimpsed, for Simeon predicts to Mary that her Son will become a "sign of contradiction" and foretells that "a fall" will precede "the rising up" (or the resurrection) "of many in Israel" (2:34). Thus he opens up a deep perspective in which the Savior is at grips with hostile forces.¹¹

⁹ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 464-65.

¹⁰ Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke (I-IX)*, 422-23.

¹¹ PBC document, 185.

The collect for the feast of the Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin, now celebrated on September 15, immediately after the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, referred to the prophecy of Simeon (Lk 2:35) explicitly until the Roman liturgy was reformed after the Second Vatican Council. Now it only recalls John 19:25. "God, who willed that the compassionate Mother stand by your Son raised on the cross, give to your Church that, having become sharer in the passion of Christ, she may deserve to participate in his resurrection."¹²

The role of Jesus in relation to "the fall and rising of many in Israel" should be considered in light of the three canticles in Luke's Infancy Narrative. Each refers to the title Israel in the context of worship, consistent with the name Israel and its parallel "House of Jacob" in Jewish prayer. Mary's personal act of praise culminates with assurance of God's help for "his servant Israel" (1:55), a phrase related to Temple worship. Zechariah's ascending blessing of thanksgiving for God's mercy is addressed to "the Lord God of Israel" (1:68). Again in the Temple where Zechariah was rendered mute, Simeon saw and experienced God's gift of salvation as the consolation of Israel (2:25) prepared for all peoples, "a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (2:30-32). The glory of God, which is the enlightening manifestation of the divine presence (see 2:9), descended upon the people of Israel from the time of their sojourn in the wilderness (see Ex 40:34-40).¹³ This illuminating presence over the worshipping community was the source of Israel's capacity to bear witness to the one God and his marvelous guidance of history. However, this requires human cooperation, so Simeon's words to Mary point to the tensions within the community. Will those who

¹² This is my literal translation. The Roman Missal reads: Father, as your Son was raised on the cross, his Mother Mary stood by him, sharing his sufferings. May your Church be united with Christ in his suffering and death, and so come to share in his rising to new life. See Philippe Beitia, "La Vierge Marie dans les Martyrologues Latins," *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 109 (2008): 162-63.

¹³ The seven privileges of Israelites, listed in Rom 9:4-5, include "sonship, glory, the covenants . . ." The absence of a verb in the Greek text implies the present tense; until recently translations into English often used the verb "were." The Declaration on the Jewish people (*Nostra Aetate*) of the Second Vatican Council quotes this passage.

encounter Jesus find his teaching and deeds to be a stumbling block or a foundation upon which to develop a new dimension to faith? Mary is a paradigm of the faithful servant Israel, but the struggles of others will bring acute anguish into her mature years.

The inclusion of Gentiles in the divine plan of salvation is a new element in Luke's development of this theme. "Simeon says that not only are the Gentiles to be included, even the house of Israel will be divided over this matter. Those who fall and then rise will be the Jews who, after an initial rejection of Jesus, accept him as Messiah; those who speak against the sign are those who completely reject the Messiah."¹⁴ There are no indications in the Gospels that Mary shared the great sorrow and anguish expressed by Paul of Tarsus (Rom 9:1-3), but one might speculate that this dilemma would have been at least as intense for her as for Paul, except for the hypothetical wish to be anathema.

The image of a sword-thrust in Luke 2:35 may be related in the Gospel to the statement that Jesus came not to give a peace of compromise on principles but division, even among the members of a family (Lk 12:51-53; see Mt 10:34-39, where the term "sword" is used rather than "division").¹⁵ As in the family circle, not all sharp differences of opinion within the people of Israel should be attributed to malice on the part of those who refuse to follow Jesus.

The tendency for Christian teachers over the centuries to extend the responsibility and blame for the rejection of Jesus to all the Jewish people was rooted most often in a universal application of the statement "His blood be on us and on our children" (Mt 27:25), rather than on Simeon's words to Mary.¹⁶

¹⁴ Steven F. Plymale, *The Prayer Texts of Luke-Acts* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 44.

¹⁵ Mt 10:34 uses *machaira* (as does Heb 4:12), whereas Lk 2:34 has *rhombphia*. In Hebrews the image is to a scalpel for a delicate surgery. St. Ambrose, in his "Treatise on the Gospel according to Luke" (II. 61), referred Heb 4:12 to Mary: "The OT background of the saying (Lk 2:35) is the idea of the sword of discrimination . . . (as in) the LXX of Ezekiel 14:17 . . . Thus, with the imagery of the sword piercing Mary, Simeon hints at the difficulty she will have in learning that obedience to the word of God will transcend even family ties." Fitzmyer, *Gospel according to Luke (I-IX)*, 429-30.

¹⁶ See J. Heil, in *Maria Tochter Zion?*, 30, n. 6; he notes that, over the centuries, Mt 27:25 is quoted ten times more frequently than Lk 2:35 in indictments of "the Jews."

Simeon seems to draw on the image of a stone set in place by God; it may cause people to fall and also be the foundation of God's building (see Is 8:14; 28:16). "But are we to think of one group of people who fall and then rise . . . or are there two different groups of people who fall and rise respectively? . . . On the whole, . . . the former view is preferable. In any case, the reference is to the people of Israel, since Simeon is thinking of Jesus' own ministry and its effects on Mary."¹⁷ Brown reacted negatively to Marshall: "Rather, in my judgment it means some will fall and others will rise (so also Fitzmyer, Bovon)."¹⁸

A group of Catholic and Protestant scholars, who reviewed Luke's Infancy Gospel, offered this conclusion to Simeon's words to Mary (2:34-35):

If the meaning of 2:35a is to be deduced from references to Mary within Luke/Acts, then the sense is that she, as part of Israel, must be judged by her ultimate reaction to the child who is set for the fall and rise of many in Israel. Although a woman from the crowd will bless her as physically related to Jesus, he will insist that the criterion of blessing which applies to others applies to her also: "Happy [*makarios*], rather, those who hear the word of God and keep it" (11:27-28). If Mary will be ultimately brought into the eschatological family of those who respond to God's word (Acts 1:14), that will be because of the judgment uttered by Jesus: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (8:21). Presumably, by the imagery of a sword passing through Mary's soul, Luke describes the difficult process of learning that obedience to the word of God transcends family ties. If thus far he has shown Mary as passing the test of obedience (1:38, 45), he has also hinted that the learning process is an ongoing one (2:19); here he insists that it is a process that is not without its perils and its suffering.¹⁹

Development in the various facets of Mary's maternal role is indicated in the Lukan Infancy Narrative with the statements

¹⁷ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 122.

¹⁸ Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*, 687. Another possibility is that, like Saul of Tarsus, some may fall and then rise, while others would seem to stand by their stand against Jesus' claims.

¹⁹ Raymond E. Brown et al., eds., *Mary in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 157.

that she kept pondering events in her heart (2:19 and 51). Her anguish in the Temple scene when Jesus was about to enter manhood and its responsibilities shows that the challenges of parenthood included surprises. These must have continued throughout her life, to which she would have responded in prayerful pondering.

3. The Early Church

By the early second century the majority of Christians were of Gentile origin. They heard the Gospel traditions as signs, not of inner family debates, but as evidence of a total rupture between the Jewish community and the Church. The accusation became widespread that the Jewish people were rejected by God because their leaders had a prominent role in the death of Jesus, interpreted to be decisive. Already in the second century the Church was declared to be the "new Israel." Pilgrims to the Holy Land came to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and, like Melito of Sardis, who died about 185, to see the devastating effect of divine judgment on the Jews.²⁰

From this time and for many centuries preachers of the Gospel often portrayed the Jewish people as condemned to wander the earth without a homeland. This was seen by many as a curse, attributing all their woes to be a sign of divine wrath. Unfortunately, these teachers failed to recognize that Christian civic and religious leaders in Europe often stirred up the populace against the Jews in their midst for economic and other reasons.

The development of piety and doctrine regarding the role of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was accompanied in some places by debates with those who denied that Mary is *Theotokos*, the Bearer or Mother of God. Some of these belonged to Jewish-Christian communities which continued to exist in the Holy Land down to Jerome's time (332?-420). Deep devotion can often be accompanied by intolerance and impatience toward those considered to be "unenlightened," so the commitment of

²⁰A. E. Harvey, "Melito of Sardis," *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (1966): 401-404; see Urban von Wahlde, "The reference to time and place of the crucifixion in the *Peri Pascha* of Melito of Sardis," *Journal of Theological Studies* 60 (2009): 556-69.

orthodox Christians to the Gospel and the adherence of Jews to the Torah led on occasion to confrontations. In general, polemical literature is destined for the community of the given teacher so members of the other group may receive only garbled versions of various arguments. However, Jerome acknowledged that the Hebrew original of the Jewish Bible should be available in Latin garb so that discussion or debate could be on the common ground of the shared heritage of God's Word. In earlier times, the Greek translation used by the Church was the Septuagint (LXX), from which the Old Latin version came. From the time of Justin Martyr (110?-167) debates with Jews included a focus on many discrepancies between the Greek and Hebrew texts.

This section of the study will focus on theology and teaching about Mary, the Virgin-Mother, in selected sermons and treatises from the early Church. In another context our focus will include some popular legends and dramatic productions of the Middle Ages in which Mary and the Jews are protagonists.

The North African convert from a Gentile background, Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullian (160?-220), offered insights into Mary's role in the biblical doctrine of salvation, especially regarding the Virgin Birth of Jesus. However, the narrative of Mary and the brothers of Jesus outside the house calling for him (Mt 12:46-50; Mk 3:31-35; Lk 8:19-21) became the basis for him to state that Jesus separated himself from his family in order to do God's will. "In (his) Mother, whom he pushed aside, mother is the symbol of the Synagogue, and the unbelieving brothers refer to the Jews. Israel is outside in them; the new disciples, however, hearing and believing from within are co-adherents of Christ. They delineate the Church, which he proclaimed to be more powerful than the mother and more worthy brothers after the brotherhood of flesh has refused. Finally, in the same way he responded to the woman; without denying the womb or milk of his Mother, he presents as more blessed those who hear God's word (Lk 11:27-28)" (*De carne Christi* 7, 13).²¹

²¹ *Corpus Christianorum series latina* (CCsl), 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), 889.

For Tertullian, in this passage Mary is an example of unbelief; “the rejection of the bond of the flesh” referred to the lot of the Jews after Christ came. Implicitly he understood that God had rejected the Covenant and Jews lost the right to be God’s people. For him the narrative of Mary and the listeners in the house did not take into account the fact that all those inside and outside the house, were Jews, but rather understood that these Jews were unbelieving. This opinion regarding Mary did not gain a following but Tertullian’s indictment of all Jews became a pattern for many Christian teachers.²²

Eusebius of Caesarea (264?-339?) lived at a time and place in Palestine where Jews and Christians interacted frequently. For him there was not special Marian interest, except in relation to the Christological controversies. The Virgin Birth bore witness to the true human nature of Jesus against Docetism, the teaching that Jesus only appeared to take on human nature. Although Eusebius had no clear role in developing a theology of Mary, he contributed to the theological and historical devaluation of Judaism through Christian theology. Anti-Jewish stereotypes found in his work are less important than the link between anti-Judaism and his political theology during the time of Emperor Constantine.

For the modern reader, teachings of early Church leaders concerning Mary can be found in unusual places! For example, Eusebius offered a Marian reflection and theological anti-Judaism in the interpretation of Psalm 69:8 (LXX 68:9): “I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother’s sons.” As a commentator he read the entire Psalm as Christological salvation history, so he understood the first part of the verse to mean Jesus’ disciples and saw that their flight during the Passion made him a stranger. He used the words of Jesus after the resurrection, “Go to my brothers” (Jn 20:12), to identify them as “brothers.” The second half of the verse referred to Mary and the brothers of Jesus. Eusebius could not acknowledge that the biblical tradition spoke of alienation of Jesus

²² See Rainer Kampling, “... die Judin, aus deren Fleische der geboren wurde ...’ Zu einem antijüdaistischen und antimarianischen Modell der patristischen Auslegung,” in *Maria-Tochter Zion?*, ed. J. Heil and R. Kampling (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2001), 19-22.

from his own family. After all, Eusebius reported that James, the Lord's brother, became an Apostle and was the first to sit on the chair of the Jerusalem Church. This meant that the brothers soon came to faith. He interpreted Mark 3:31-35 and parallels in light of Acts 1:14, describing the gathering of disciples with Mary after Jesus ascended to heaven. He remarked: "Jesus was dear to his brothers." In the second half of Psalm 68:9 (LXX), the mother stands for "the Synagogue and every bond according to the flesh to those of the circumcision." The sons in Psalm 69 stand for the Jews, who did not desire to listen to him and denied him. Although Jesus' family belonged to the Church of the circumcision, Eusebius did not present them in a negative way, so he introduced the Synagogue of the Jews to represent those outsiders who did not respond positively to the Gospel.²³

St. Ambrose of Milan (333-397) made such a contribution to the development of Marian piety and ecclesial Mariology that he has been called "the father of Marian devotion." This appears not only in his commentary on Luke but also in works on virginity and in controversy with those attacking Mary. He also used his capacity as Bishop of Milan and his rhetorical skills to argue against Jews and Judaism in the Roman Empire, as in his confrontation with the Emperor Theodosius regarding a synagogue in Callinicum which has been destroyed by a Christian mob (Epistles 40-41).

Because of correspondence between Mary and the Church Ambrose declared that she is type of the Church. "She was betrothed indeed yet virgin because she is type of the Church, which is immaculate yet wedded" (*Comm. Lucam* 2.7, CCsl 14 [1987], 1433). He also found a correspondence between Mary and Judaism, though in a weaker way. In his interpretation of Luke 8:19-21, the thought that Jesus was brusque with his family or was offensive to filial piety is excluded. Jesus placed the religious bond before that of the family, but Ambrose denied categorically that Jesus had offended Mary. "He acknowledged her from the cross (Jn 19:26), but above the bonds of the flesh he presented the rule of the heavenly commandments"

²³ Kampling, in *Maria-Tochter Zion?*, 22-24.

(*Comm. Lucam* 6.38). Ambrose did not wish to suggest that the tension between Jesus and his family would be a type of the relationship between Judaism and the Church.

In their teaching both Ambrose and John Chrysostom (349?-407) emphasized that, after the Fall of Jerusalem in 70, Jewish worship is diabolical. The phrase "*Synagōgē tou satana*" (assembly of Satan) in Apocalypse 2:9 and 3:9 was linked to John 8:44 as a basis for this accusation, which became a common theme of Christian polemics. An example of the motif's intrusion into stories is the Theophilus legend, which dates to the seventh century in Greek. It is depicted on the outside of Notre Dame cathedral in Paris.²⁴

St. Jerome, who learned Hebrew in his youth, had scholarly contacts with Jews in the area of Bethlehem, where he lived from 386-420. Jerome's work is primarily exegetical, so Mariological themes are found in commentaries and exegetical works. As defender of Mary's virginity he wrote two works against Helvedius and Jovinian.²⁵ In his commentary on Matthew he offered two approaches: antiheretical (against Marcion and the Manichaeans) and salvation-historical. He commented on Matthew 12:46-50 as follows: "Then someone announced to the Savior that his Mother and brothers were outside seeking him. It seems to me that the one announcing was not doing so simply, but to ask insidiously whether Jews preferred spiritual works over flesh and blood . . . Therefore it is not according to Marcion and Manes that he denied his Mother, that he would be thought to be born as a phantasm." Jerome then took a salvation-historical approach to this passage. "The Savior speaks to the crowds." Thus, on the inside he instructs the nations. "His Mother and his brothers, that is, the Synagogue and the Jewish people, stand outside and they desire to enter and will be unworthy of his teaching; and when they ask him, seek and send a messenger, they accept the

²⁴ See O'Carroll, *Theotokos*, 341-42, and Jerry Root, "A precarious quest for salvation: The Theophilus legend in text and image," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 34 (208): 43-69.

²⁵ In the commentary on Ez 44:1-3 (on the closed Eastern gate to the Temple) in CCsl 75 (1964), 646, he declared that Mary remained a virgin after Christ's birth.

answer that they are free also to enter, if they wish and believe him. But they cannot enter unless they have asked others" (Comm. on Matt., CCsl 77 [1969], 101). Here Jerome disregarded the literal sense and saw in the (Jewish) listeners inside the house representatives of the nations, hinting at the worldwide proclamation of the Gospel and he saw the Mother and brothers to be the Jews . . . In this view, the family of Jesus as type of the Jews is unable to come "into the house." This statement is sharpened; they are "unworthy" of Jesus' preaching. This comes not from the text but from Jerome's anti-Jewish viewpoint. The criterion for fulfilling the Father's will in Matthew 12:49 cannot apply to the Jews because Jerome denied every one of their religious insights and practices. Because, as Jews, they do not believe and do the work of the Father, they are unworthy with regard to the proclamation of the Gospel.

In a similar way Jerome read Matthew 15:24 ("lost sheep of the house of Israel"), not in a sense of priority in salvation history, but as a statement that the crossing of the Gospel proclamation to the Gentiles was justified! When in Matthew 10:5f Jesus told his disciples to seek only Jews, Jerome stated that it was only so that Jews would have no ground for excuse that they did not follow the Gospel. In Jerome's view, Judaism is totally without salvation, which it knows but cannot attain. Jerome held that the end-time redemption of Israel according to Romans 11:25ff to be unlikely; he described here no real possibility but a dilemma of no salvation.²⁶

A document known as "Opus imperfectum in Matthaicum" is the work of an Arian theologian; it survived due to the fact that it was ascribed to John Chrysostom, one of the Fathers of the Greek Church. It is from the fifth century in the Danube area. The commentary on Matthew 12:46-50 is as follows:

In a spiritual understanding this . . . is Mary, who not through carnal intercourse but by believing the grace of faith became the Mother of Christ. Hence we understand the Mother and brothers of Christ to be doing the will of God not the Synagogue which gave birth to Christ (Rom 9:5)

²⁶ Kampling, in *Maria Tochter-Sion?*, 26-28.

according to the flesh [and the rest of the Jews]: but we understand that Synagogue to be mother who is saved believing in Christ, not crucifying him. Similarly it is to be understood of the brothers who according to the spirit (Rom 2:28; 1 Cor 10:18; Gal 6:16) were Jews, not according to the flesh, who were doing the will of Christ. (*Patrologia Graeca* 56, col. 791)

This text took Mary's Jewishness positively and integrated the typology in a salvation-historical view. It must be noted that the author could also use anti-Jewish stereotypes. "By these words what does Jesus hint to us except that he gathers many from paganism who follow his commandments and the Jewess, from whose flesh he was born, who does not know, stands outside because the Synagogue is not recognized by its author, and because holding to the observance of the Law, she lost spiritual understanding and remained outside for the keeping of the letter."²⁷

The interpretation that Jesus' listeners are understood to be Christians from the nations is also found in the work of St. Gregory I, Pope from 590-604. Drawing on the reading from Matthew 12:46-50, Gregory stated:

What does Jesus wish us to understand by these words if not that he gathers in great numbers the Gentiles docile to his commandments, and that he does not recognize Judaea (the Jewess), whence he came in the flesh? This is why his Mother, who he seems to ignore, is presented as standing outside; if the Synagogue is not recognized by its own Founder, it is simply that, while now keeping the observance of the Law, she has lost the spiritual understanding and is established outside in the adherence to the letter (see 2 Cor 3:3-6).

That the one who does the Father's will be called "sister" and "brother" is not surprising because the faith gathers both sexes; but that he says "mother" is very surprising ... He makes us know that if someone is brother and sister of the Lord in believing, he becomes his mother in preaching. Because in a certain way he gives birth to the Lord when he introduces him into the heart of the one who listens. He becomes his mother if, by his voice, love of the Lord is born in the soul of his neighbor.²⁸

²⁷ Kampling, in *Maria Tochter-Sion?*, 28-30.

²⁸ Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia*, in CCsl 141 (1999), 20-21, my translation.

That he here speaks without further details of Jesus' commandments is clarified easily from the Risen Lord's speech to the disciples according to which the nations are to be given his commandments (Mt 28:20). Gregory transferred the post-resurrection speech to the earthly ministry of Jesus.

An important element of his interpretation is the understanding that, at this point, Jesus did not wish to acknowledge his Mother. In Gregory's sense, Mary is the object of the fate that lies before the Synagogue, she falls victim to non-observance. It is to be taken that Gregory and his listeners have the correct understanding that the Jewishness of a child is known through the mother. In the least it is implicit that Jesus is Jewish . . . *ex carne*. The renunciation of Jesus from being Jewish and from the Jews Gregory stressed through the especially sharp emphasis on *Judaea* ("Jewess"). Jesus placed on the Mother in anticipation that which Judaism after Christ's resurrection presented in its totality. Gregory remained astonishingly consistent in the picture of the relationship. Thus he designated Jesus as the founder, the author of the Synagogue. One here can see the election of Israel by God; *Synagoga* is for Gregory a synonym for Judaism and does not stand for an institution of prayer and learning for the Jews.²⁹

4. The Dormition of Mary

We recall that on November 1, 1950, Pope Pius XII defined the Church's teaching that the Mother of Jesus, at the end of her life, was taken body and soul into heaven. Did she die? The long tradition of the Church has been that, in imitation of Jesus, Mary did die and was buried. Pope Pius did not focus on this point but defined only the doctrine of the Assumption. The accounts of Mary's funeral are important for our study.

In the Church of the Middle East and the Byzantine Empire there are ancient narratives of the events linked to the death of Jesus' Mother. These have been studied thoroughly.³⁰

²⁹ See Kampling, in *Maria Tochter-Sion?*, 30-32, for the source of these comments.

³⁰ Brian E. Daly, *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998) and Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Dr. Shoemaker has published a detailed examination of a tradition about a Jewish intervention during the procession to the burial place of Mary.

Of the over sixty narratives of the Virgin's Dormition surviving from before the tenth century, only one omits the canonical anti-Jewish scenes, which invade even the Dormition's iconography. With the notable exception of the homily *On the Dormition* attributed to Modestus of Jerusalem, the ancient Dormition legends persistently attack the Jews and Judaism, casting them as enemies of both the Christian faith in general and the Virgin in particular through a variety of anti-Jewish episodes. Although some of these scenes are peculiar to only a single narrative, others have permeated large segments of the early Dormition traditions, including particularly the story of "Jephonias," as he is often named, a Jew who attacks the Virgin Mary's body as the apostles transport it to her tomb. This episode appears in every early Dormition narrative but two and has even found its way into the iconography.

Although the details of this story vary somewhat from version to version, the overall structure is remarkably uniform, suggesting its incorporation at a very early stage. The episode takes place as the Virgin's funeral procession passes along the outside of the Jerusalem city walls from Sion to Gethsemane, when the apostles' singing and the general commotion attract the attention of the Jewish leaders, who plot to seize her body and burn it. As they start out of the city, the Jews are suddenly stricken with blindness, except for one, Jephonias, who rushes the Virgin's bier and grabs it in an attempt to upset it. Immediately, however, an angel with a flaming sword appears to defend her body and cuts off Jephonias's hands, leaving the unfortunate man writhing in pain while his severed hands remain clinging to the bier. When Jephonias begs the apostles to heal him, they reply that only the Virgin can help him, suggesting that he pray for her aid. When he does, he is healed and consequently becomes a Christian, which in some texts prompts a damning confession, in which Jephonias explains how the Jewish leaders conspired to turn the Temple into a money-making racket. When they recognized Christ as the son of God, they killed him to protect their avaricious scheme. Afterwards, the apostles send Jephonias back into the city to heal the Jews of their blindness, as a result of which many convert to the Christian faith, thereby regaining their sight.³¹

³¹ Stephen Shoemaker, "Let Us Go and Burn Her Body': The Image of the Jews in the Early Dormition Traditions," *Church History* 68 (1999): 788-790.

Dr. Shoemaker has continued his research into the Greek literature; in this volume he has an essay on apocryphal literature of the early centuries of the Church.

The opposition to Jesus' work and teaching recorded in certain Gospel passages has been studied in the previous section of this essay. We noted their interpretation by several Church Fathers and theologians as the total alienation of Jesus from his roots. Now this theme was taken into the accounts of Mary's funeral showing a pervasive anti-Jewish attitude in some Christian communities from a rather early period. This was seen to be on the theological level, incorporating into the narrative an expectation that opponents of Mary would be converted. In a similar way, the accounts of Helena's discovery of the True Cross in Jerusalem indicate that it was hidden by Jews and revealed to the mother of Constantine by one of their number, who later converted to Christianity.³²

St. Bede (673?-735?), in his *Retractatio* on the Acts of the Apostles, noted that in a source attributed to Melito of Sardis, Mary spoke to the Beloved Disciple: "Behold, when I have been called I shall enter upon the way of all the earth. I have heard the councils of the Jews, who are saying: 'Let us await the day when she dies who bore Jesus of Nazareth and let us burn her body in fire.' And so now attend to my funeral rites." Bede doubted the credibility of this source regarding the time of Mary's death, given as the second year after the Lord's Ascension. This led him to question other details.³³ However, another account has been found in the *Vita SS. Willibaldi at Wynnebaldi* by Hygeburg, an Anglo-Saxon nun in Heidenheim, a monastery in the diocese of Eichstatt, founded by Willibald about 752. The translation of the Latin is by C. H. Talbot.³⁴

³² On the earlier history, see H. A. Drake, "Eusebius on the True Cross," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985): 1-22; Josef Vogt, "Helena Augusta, the Cross and the Jews," *Classical Folia* 31 (1977): 141-151. This was developed by Berengosus, abbot of St. Maxim Abbey in Trier, who died in 1125. His treatise, *De Lauda et inventione sanctae Crucis (Patrologia Latina, 160, cols. 935-1036)*, used Joseph, Isaac and Moses as types of Christ; he stated that, just as Joseph hid a cup in Benjamin's sack (Gn 44:15), the Jews hid the Lord's cross.

³³ Bede, CCsl 121 (1983), 134.

³⁴ See Mary Clayton, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 18-19, and 235.

For when the eleven Apostles were bearing the body of Holy Mary away from Jerusalem the Jews tried to snatch it away as soon as they reached the gate of the city. But as soon as they stretched out their hands towards the bier and endeavoured to take her their arms became fixed, stuck as it were, to the bier, and they were unable to move until, by the grace of God and the prayers of the Apostles, they were released and then they let them go. Our Lady passed from this world in that very spot in the centre of Jerusalem which is called Holy Sion. And then the eleven Apostles bore her, as I have already said, and finally the angels came and took her away from the hands of the Apostles and carried her to paradise.³⁵

Dr. Shoemaker mentioned that the assault on Mary's funeral procession by Jews was incorporated into paintings of her funeral. An example of this motif was brought to our attention in the following way. For a few months the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., had a large beautiful triptych from L'Aquila in eastern central Italy, which suffered a severe earthquake on April 16, 2009. The triptych has a central panel showing the Madonna and Child; the left panel depicts the Nativity and the right shows the burial of the Virgin, with the upper panel showing her Coronation in heaven. The unknown artist from the early fourteenth century painted it for the Church of Beffi, a village in the Abruzzo region.

The right panel features scenes from the Dormition, or Death of the Virgin, who lies on her funeral bier, surrounded by the twelve apostles. John the Evangelist holds a palm frond that was given to the Virgin by an angel to announce her coming death. Other angels scent the air with incense from censers incised in the gold background, giving the scene a heavenly aura. In a scene rarely depicted in Italian art, the seated figure in the foreground represents the disbelieving priest who, according to an apocryphal story popularized by Jacopo da Voragine's *Golden Legend*, attempted to overturn Mary's bier, but whose hands were frozen when he tried to commit that sacrilege. The Assumption of the Virgin is depicted above the Virgin and apostles, with Christ holding Mary's soul, which traditionally takes the form of a swaddled infant. At the top, Christ crowns Mary as Queen of Heaven.³⁶

³⁵ C. H. Talbot, *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954). The text is cited in Clayton, *The Cult of The Virgin Mary*, 19.

³⁶ From the two-page essay distributed during the exhibit: National Gallery of Art, "The Beffi Triptych: Preserving Abruzzo's Cultural Heritage," June 15-September 7, 2009.

Although the story of Jewish interference at the funeral of Mary is recounted more frequently in the Christian communities of Asia Minor and Greece, a play from Germany in 1391 has an extensive version of the story.³⁷ Rather than one Jew losing his hands, the offending hands were stuck to the bier; this punishment was easier to insert into dramatic presentations.

This play, like all such entertainments in the cathedral squares in major towns, would teach the people. This follows the venerable biblical practice of offering education through narrative and drama. Sadly, at times such an interpretation of the Church's teaching added elements of anti-Jewish bias which could lead to prejudicial or bigoted actions on the part of those who were entertained.³⁸

This study has explored the way in which certain passages of the Gospel have been understood in the early centuries of Christianity. Because the focus has been on the Blessed Virgin and the Jewish people, this work takes for granted the riches of the biblical message and Church teachings regarding Mary are kept in mind by the reader. In a fresh look at the record concerning Mary and her people, we acknowledge the evidence of polemics on the part of some Jews in the Middle Ages, to which certain Church writers may be making a sharp response. These unsavory debates may continue in some circles, but the Second Vatican Council has called for another path to be explored in the Church.

As Holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation, nor did the Jews in large number accept the Gospel; indeed not a few opposed its spreading. Nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear

³⁷ Cora Dietl, "The Virgin, the Church, and the Heathens: The Innsbruck 'Ludus de assumptione beatae Mariae virginis,'" *European Medieval Drama* 10 (2006): 187-205. It might be noted that the Mariacki Church in Krakow Poland preserves Europe's largest Gothic altarpiece, created by a German artist, Viet Stoss, between 1477-89. The middle section depicts the Assumption; the various figures in the lower section do not include any hostile Jews. See Herbert Genzmer, *100 Sacred Places: A Discovery of the World's Most Revered Holy Sites* (New York: Parragon, 2010), 78-79.

³⁸ The developments of Christian texts about Mary and the Jews in the Middle Ages have been studied in several essays collected in Heil and Kampling (eds.), *Maria Tochter Ston?* (p. 15, n. 3) and will continue to be part of my own research.

for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues—such is the witness of the Apostle. In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and “serve him shoulder to shoulder” (Zeph 3:9; see Is 66:23; Ps 65:4; Rom 11:11-32). (*Nostra Aetate*, 4)

A complementary passage on Mary’s role as intercessor with Jesus was expressed already in the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Church:

[May Mary] intercede with her Son in the fellowship of all the saints. May she do so until all the peoples of the human family, whether they are honored with the name of Christian or whether they still do not know their Savior, are happily gathered together in peace and harmony into the one People of God, for the glory of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity. (*Lumen Gentium*, #69)