FOREWORD
BY DR. SEBASTIAN BROCK

Already in the second century a need was felt for more information about Mary, the mother of Christ, than was available in the Four Gospels. Over the course of the following centuries this challenge was met in a number of increasingly imaginative ways. The earliest text to provide a narrative concerning the childhood of Mary was the ‘Protogospel of James’, a work of the second century which claims (at the end) to have been written by the Apostle James in Jerusalem. Oral traditions about Mary’s early years may well have still been circulating in the early second century, but how reliable these were, and whether or not they were reflected in the information provided in the Protogospel of James is something we shall never know.

The text translated here from Malayalam by Sarah Knight is The Life of the Virgin Mary in Syriac, in Six Books. This was put together, probably in the middle ages, by combining together a number of separate texts which are all much older in date, and adding new material here and there. The Syriac manuscripts which transmit the work all date from the fifteenth century or later. The sources of the different books can readily be identified as follows:

Books 1 and 2: these are closely based on the Protogospel of James. This work had been translated from Greek into Syriac at an early date, and this translation survives independently in manuscripts of the sixth century onwards. The Protogospel of James proved to be an extremely influential work, in both the Christian East and in the Christian West, and many of its episodes came to
be featured in art, especially in medieval Europe. The compiler of the Life has added a certain amount of extra material, and of this the most interesting concerns traditions about the Magi: unlike the western tradition, where their number was deduced (from the number of gifts, Matthew 2:11) to be three, several Syriac writers also know a tradition that they were twelve in number, and indeed their names, and their fathers’ names, are even provided. In the present text the forms of the names are corrupted, but they seem to be closest to the list given in an interesting early narrative about the Magi which is preserved in the so-called ‘Chronicle of Zuqnin’, composed in the late eighth century.

Book 3: this is in fact the latest in date of the Six Books; it was composed in Egypt, perhaps in Coptic in the early centuries of Arab rule, and was then translated into Arabic, which is evidently the source of the Syriac. The work claims to be a record of a vision that Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria (385-412) is supposed to have had of the Virgin Mary, in which she related some of her experiences during the Flight into Egypt (in the Gospels, only a brief allusion is given to this, Matthew 2:14). Quite a number of localities in Egypt today still claim to have been resting points for the Holy Family, and it was probably monks at the monastery associated with one of these at Qusqam (south of Ashmunein) which composed the narrative for the benefit and edification of pilgrims. At the end, the narrative claims to have been taken down by ‘Cyril’, and no doubt the famous St Cyril of Alexandria, Theophilus’ successor as Patriarch (412-444), was intended.

Book 4: this is closely based on the ‘Infancy Gospel of Thomas’, a work composed in Greek, but which was already known in both Latin and Syriac translation by about AD 500. It tells of Jesus’s school years, and is full of miracles of a folkloristic character, and it is intriguing that some parallels have been found in legends about the youthful Buddha and Krishna.

Books 5 and 6: these two books are based on a narrative about the death of the Virgin Mary which survives in sixth-century Syriac manuscript where it is also divided up into six books, the first three of which correspond to the present Book 5, and the last three to the present Book 6. In the course of the fifth and
sixth centuries there grew up a very large literature about the last
days and death of Mary; these take many different forms, and it
so happens that some of the earliest of these are preserved best in
Syriac. As was the case with the Protogospel of James, so too
these legends describing the gathering of the Apostles around the
bed of the dying Mary ad her death caught the imagination of
artists, above all in the Middle Ages. The traditions about the
actual fate of the body of Mary differ, and whether or not it was
assumed into heaven.

The Syriac manuscript from which the Malayalam transla-
tion was made in 1924 cannot be precisely identified, but it was
evidently very close to the text of the History of Mary in Six Books
which the late Mor Julius Y. Çiček published in 2001 (Tash’itho
d-Yoldat Aloho Maryam men mawlodoh ādam l-shunoyoh [Hist-
tory of the Bearer of God, Mary, from her birth up to her depar-
ture]; Barhebraeus Verlag, Monastery of St Ephrem, the Nether-
lands).

Sarah Knight’s translation of the Malayalam constitutes the
first complete English translation of the History of the Virgin
Mary in Six Books. For the reader who wishes to explore further,
and go back to the various earlier sources upon which the pr
esent History is largely based, there are some older English translations
(mostly not easily available), as follows:

Protogospel of James (for Books 1-2): W. Wright, Contribu-
tions to the Apocryphal Literature of the New Testament (London,
1865), pp.1-5 (as the beginning of the Syriac manuscript he used
is lost, his translation covers only Book 2). A translation of the
complete Syriac, based on different sources, is given by A.S.
Lewis, Apocrypha Syriaca (Studia Sinaitica 11; London, 1902),
pp.1-12.

Vision of Theophilus (for Book 3): A. Mingana, Vision of The-
ophilus; Apocalypse of Peter (Woodbrooke Studies 3; Cambridge,
1931). Contemporary traditions in the Coptic Orthodox Church
about localities connected with the Flight into Egypt are de-
scribed by O.F.A. Meinardus, The Holy Family in Egypt (Ameri-
can University in Cairo, 1963). A helpful discussion of the circles
which probably produced the Vision of Theophilus can be found

Infancy Gospel of Thomas (for Book 4): W. Wright, Contributions, pp.6-11.


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