INTRODUCTION

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‘Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary’ is a compilation of six books narrating the major events in the life of the Mother of God from birth to death arranged in six books, each book presenting a simple narrative similar in style to those seen in the Synoptic Gospels, brief and succinct.

THE ‘SIX BOOKS’

The ‘Six Books’ of the present volume are not to be confused with the arrangement into ‘Six Books’ of earlier recensions that are identified by the general term *Transitus Mariae*, or, *The Departure of Mary*, because these latter Six Books contain only the last two events in the Life of Mary, that is, her growing indisposition at the relentless persecution by the Jewish authorities, and her departure from this world. In the present volume however, the ‘Six Books’ are constituted by six important episodes in the Life of Mary: her Nativity, the Nativity of Jesus, the Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt, Childhood of Our Lord, Mary’s persecution, and, her death. Consequently, this present version is a rather more amplified version of earlier recensions, supplying material that helps complete some lacunae in the earlier texts.

AUTHORSHIP

The author of Books 1 and 2 containing the *Nativity of Mary* and the *Nativity of Jesus* identifies himself as James, who is referred to as the ‘Brother of Jesus’ and who in the Syrian Orthodox tradition is regarded as one of the sons of Joseph by his earlier marriage.

In a colophon at the end of Book 2, the writer denotes the time of writing as: ‘When there was rioting in Jerusalem and Herod had died a most tragic death...’, and he sets the context of the return of the Holy Family to Judea from their sojourn in Egypt, to this period.

A certain Cyril (*Coorilos*) identifies himself as the author of Book 3 *The Vision of Theophilus*, and this is thought to be the same Cyril of Egypt who later became the 5th Patriarch of Alexandria. Cyril attributes the source of the account contained in Book 3 to Patriarch Theophilus himself, stating that ‘I heard all this from the mouth of that Holy Father and wrote it down.’ While Book 4 *The Infancy of Our Lord* is generally attributed to St. Thomas the Apostle, all the twelve Apostles affirm themselves as the authors of Books 5 & 6 as stated towards the end of Book 6.

PROVENANCE

We do not know who put these separate books together in the present form or when to produce this fairly continuous and coherent narrative. What we do know is that prior to 1925, there was in the possession of His Grace Mor Severius, Metropolitan of the Knanaya Diocese of the *Malankara Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church of Kerala* (India), a book in the present form written in Syriac under the title ‘*Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary*,’ and dated to 401 AD.

This Syriac manuscript was translated into Malayalam by one of the scholarly priests of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Kerala, Fr. Kuriyakos Pallikkapparambil, and published by Mr. Abraham Joseph of Onattu family in 1925.

The present volume is a translation of this Malayalam version. The Malayalam translator does not supply extensive punctuation to the text which gives it a flavour of antiquity, and I have tried to retain this by adding only essential, but minimal punctuation. The Malayalam text does not use paragraph-divisions in the conventional way either signifying a single whole unit of an event, but with divisions occurring randomly in the middle of events. It is unclear whether this was a reflection of the original Syriac text, or not. I have altered the paragraph structure into sense-units to add coherence to the text.

DATE AND AUTHORSHIP OF THE SYRIAC ARCHETYPE

The Malayalam text does not have an overall colophon, the only reference to a date and author in the Syriac original being given in the first translator's Preface. He says: 'This translation has been made from an original written by a Christian from abroad by the name of *Danaho*, in the Year of Our Lord 401, in the Syriac language.' The identity of this *Danaho* remains obscure.

TRANSLATIONS AND CONTENT

Books 1 & 2

Translations of these two books, known as 'Proto-evangelion of James', are already well known to the English readership, but the current translation is richer because of the additional material it contains. Apart from giving the commonly known parts of the story such as the birth of Mary, her being presented to Temple in Jerusalem at the age of three, her being entrusted to the care of the aged widower Joseph at the age of twelve, and subsequently the Annunciation by the Archangel Gabriel and the birth of Jesus, this book also tells us of other details such as the vision Joseph saw at the birth of the Son of God. It also treats the arrival of the Magi to Bethlehem differently, here their number being *twelve*, as opposed to the *three* of the Gospels. However, the story adds that 'King Herod called three of them to his palace'. They are treated as 'Princes of Persia', and they arrived with great fanfare, accompanied by thirty-thousand of their 'best armed warriors,' which makes it unsurprising that their arrival caused a great stir in Jerusalem and to what extent it alarmed King Herod.

The second book ends with the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt in fear of Herod.

Book 3

Book 3 is a long address given by Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria in around 390AD, after the triumph of Christianity in Egypt under the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius. It was transcribed by Cyril, 'who was with the Holy Father at that time'.

In his address, Patriarch Theophilus, in the words of the Mother of God herself, retells the story of the Holy Family's

sojourn in Egypt, the many trials they faced and how they finally found refuge in a house on *Mount Qusqam* 'for a period of three years and six months,' having had them revealed to him in a vision. The address was given to the congregation that had gathered in the Holy House on '*Mount Qusqam*' in Egypt 385 odd years later.

It ends with Mary's account of how the Lord consecrated the Holy House on Mount Qusqam as the first church.

Book 4

Book 4 does not state a specific authorship but bears close resemblance to what is already well known as '*The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.' But this version is much longer and fuller in detail. It is a most extraordinary set of stories of the young boy Jesus, who, as we see in Book 3, even from his infancy is endowed with terrifying divine power, and here is treated as using it with tragic consequences. We read how at times it flows from him inadvertently, and how at others he appears not mature enough to use it with discretion and in a manner the humans around him could endure. For instance, we see the child Jesus in his annoyance causing a playmate to wither up and die in an instant, another who had fallen down and died being brought back to life straight away by his word, and teachers who struck him or tried to discipline him dropping dead.

In the force of his character, the child Jesus is treated as someone who is confident and fully aware of himself and his powers. He operates as the Master of this physical world and the Lord of its laws. For example, when the parents of the dead child accuse Jesus of having caused his death, it is without a moment's hesitation that Jesus climbs down to where the dead boy lies and calls to him: 'Zenon! Zenon! Was it I who pushed you?' at which the dead child comes back alive.

After many teachers had failed in disciplining him, we see Jesus again with a new teacher, reading with confidence and authority out of a scroll of scripture handed to him. It is to the consternation of the teacher that he discovers that Jesus was reading things that were *not* in that scroll.

It also gives account of other events that defy the laws of nature, such as when Jesus fetches water for his mother in the cloth of his cloak, apparently least doubting the efficacy of this mode.

In all these instances we see Jesus as a child with divine power and very much aware of it, though he was not using that power in a well-considered manner as he did as an adult. Jesus is seen in due course, growing into a much more self-restrained and respectful twelve-year-old who enthralled the Scribes in the Temple of Jerusalem with his expounding of the Law.

Book 5

The first half of this book contains an account of the loss of ‘The Apostles’ Book of the Departure of the Mother of God’, and its eventual discovery in Ephesus, but its authorship is nowhere indicated.

The earnest search for and the finding of this Book, its translation into Syriac, and a copy being taken to Mount Sinai etc. makes interesting reading, which even if we reject the stories as unhistorical, provide glimpses of the workings of the ancient Church with its wide network and communications among the scattered Christians. It is with precise instructions that the emissaries are sent from the monastery in Sinai to look for the Book of the Departure: ‘Go to Rome where Peter and Paul are buried, or to Ephesus where John lives.’ They are told.

In the second half we see the treatment of the subject of continuing persecution suffered by the Virgin Mary at the hands of the Jewish authorities in the last days of her life, and an account of the discovery of the True Cross after a lively debate between the ‘Confessors of the Messiah’ and the ‘Unbelievers’ before the Roman Procurator. The unhistoricity of several details such as the conversion of the Roman Procurator of Jerusalem at such an early date as 33-34CE, and the story of the finding of the True Cross in contrast to the received tradition of the Empress Helena’s discovery of it are challenging to the reader, but they nevertheless add to the romance of the narrative.

Book 6

It is asserted that Book 6 was written by the Apostles with the statement: 'When Mary departed from this world, six *sepros* (books) were written of her. Two by two, the Apostles wrote each of the *sepros*.' It also gives a date unambiguously: 'In the year 315 (of the Egyptian Year, 345 of the Greeks, and 33 of the Year of Our Lord), when all the Apostles were gathered together, those alive as well as those departed, the Blessed Virgin Mary departed from this world.' It is also stated that they wrote it in the three important languages of the time, Greek, Hebrew and Latin, and, as stated in Book 5, when this Book was discovered in Ephesus, it was translated into Syriac and a copy taken to the recluses on Mount Sinai.

Book 6 can rightly be described as the most triumphant part of this set of Apocryphal stories. In it is given an account of the *Departure* the Virgin Mary in the presence of all the Apostles, Angelic Hosts and the Lord Himself. The Apostles find words inadequate to describe the awe-inspiring events that they witnessed when the Son of God descended from heaven to receive the soul of Lady Mary. What they had seen and heard so overwhelmed them that they pledged straight away to 'write everything down,' and from what we can see, taking great pains to underpin their story with names of persons and locations, and dates in three different calendar eras.

The last quarter of Book 6 gives an account of how after the *Departure*, the Lord arrives in Paradise with attendant angles, and takes Lady Mary to heaven to show her the glories there. It is interesting to see where 'Mary brought John to see this Heavenly Jerusalem and showed him all that the Messiah had shown her,' and later: 'the Lord and Mary with the Heavenly Hosts came to the Paradise of Eden,' there is a striking similarity with what St. John has written of it in the Book of Revelations.

PRAYER OF THE VIRGIN MARY

The two prayers at the end, '*The Prayer of the Blessed Virgin Mary*,' and 'Prayer for the Sick,' are claimed to have been taught the Apostles by Mary. The first is a powerful, penetrating and intense prayer the Virgin Mary is purported to have addressed to her Son

who is also Lord of the Universe. Its treatment as the prayer by which the Holy Mother freed St. Mathew from prison where he had been in iron chains, when the 'iron was undone and flowed like spilled water' indicate the immediate power and efficacy of Lady Mary's intercession. The phraseology and sentence structure of this prayer are rather unconventional, and appear to enhance its antiquity as though no translator or copyist down the centuries was inclined to change them. I too have retained the same at the risk of the sense of some parts of it remaining obscure.

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS AT THE *DEPARTURE*

According to this story, all the events of the Dormition took place during the months of November and December in the year 33CE. They can be summarised as follows:

33CE:

25 th November	Mary goes to the tomb of Jesus to pray
End of the month	The Jews force her to leave Jerusalem and go to Bethlehem
December (no date)	The Apostles arrive in Bethlehem from wherever they were, carried by Angels on fiery chariots.
For 3 days	Fiery Angels surround Mary's house.
The next day	Soldiers are sent to Bethlehem to quell the uproar concerning the miracles happening around the Virgin Mary's house in Bethlehem.
The next day	Angels carry Mary and the Apostles back to Jerusalem over the heads of the soldiers going in the opposite direction.
The next five days	The Apostles and Mary remain in the Upper Room of her house in Jerusalem.
Friday at dawn	Terrible sights are seen over the house. The house is bathed in light and massed Angels stand in ranks above and around the house. The people of Jerusalem are terrified.

Friday, later	Jews attempt to burn down the house, but Fiery Angels stand at the door and beat them back.
Saturday	The Governor holds a debate between the Jews and the Confessors of Christ. The true Cross is found and re-buried.
Sunday morning	The Governor visits Mary, and his son is healed. He believes in Christ and returns to Rome.
Thursday	Instructed by the Holy Spirit, the Apostles carry the Virgin Mary on her bed to a cave near the Mount of Olives. Jephonias tries to tip Mary out of the bed. An Angel strikes him and cuts off his hands. Mary heals him. The Virgin Mary is laid in the cave.
Saturday	The Apostles prepare for the Lord's arrival.
Sunday, the day of Jesus' birth	The Lord arrives at His mother's bedside and her soul is received.

SECONDARY CHARACTERS

While these Apocryphal stories, especially Books 5 & 6, are focused mainly on the Divine, semi-divine or ethereal characters, they are further enlivened by introduction of some secondary characters who are very much human.

Emperor Theodosius, the fourth in succession of the 'True Believer' kings of the New Rome or Byzantium after Emperor Constantine, and Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria, who at the Emperor's orders oversaw the destruction of the pagan temples of Egypt in 391AD, are two such figures. Interesting details are attached to the occasion of the meeting of these two historical figures, such as the breaking open the seals of the treasure-room in Alexandria that had been set in place 'from the time of Alexander', that is, from 332-331 BC.

Another true-to-life character is the Roman Procurator of Judea at this time. Although the historicity of this individual is questionable, his humanity is enhanced by his natural scepticism and openness in the face of the miraculous events he witnesses, and the manner in which he proceeds to check the evidence. Later, he

presides over the debate between the ‘Confessors’ and the ‘Unbelievers’, where when the argument becomes heated, he admonishes them: ‘do not argue and shout at each other. Speak in a gentle voice quoting from your books, for I wish to see your cleverness.’

OTHER RECENSIONS

Several earlier translations into English, often presented as separate Books, were consulted and checked against in preparing this translation. Foremost among these are William Wright’s, *Departure of my Lady from this World* (1865), Agnes Smith Lewis’ *The Protevangelium Jacobi and Transitus Mariae* (1902), and Alphonse Mingana’s *Vision of Theophilus* (1931), all of which were translated from Syriac originals. The one exception is Wallis Budge’s *Legends of Our Lady Mary* (1922) which was translated from the Amharic.

While the above works each contain only parts of the present volume, Wallis Budge’s earlier work: *The history of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (1899) is notable because the different stories are assembled as one continuous story as in the present work. Budge notes that the Syriac archetype he used for this work was copied from earlier Greek and Latin works which constituted together: ‘a careful selection of the most important of the stories concerning the Virgin and Child which were current in Syria and Palestine as early as the end of the IVth century of our era, as well as some which were incorporated with them at a later date’. Budge’s work bears striking resemblance to the present translation in the order of arranging the Books and the details treated in the narrative. Budge’s Syriac archetype is a manuscript of the same name which is listed in William Wright’s *A Catalogue of the Syriac manuscripts preserved in the library of the University of Cambridge* (1901:487-9).¹

While Budge and the Malayalam translator have called their volumes ‘History’, they are properly speaking Apocryphal stories containing and arranged sequentially, the Birth of the Virgin

¹ Add.2001, containing 173 leaves of small regular Jacobite Serto script, dated 1481.

Mary, the Annunciation, the Flight to Egypt, the Childhood and education of Our Lord, and the Death and translation of the Virgin Mary to Paradise.

Although the present volume runs near-identically to Budge's with only slight variations, it amplifies the text in several instances, such as the discovery of a certain Dittan's 'note' in Jerusalem concerning the martyrdom of James the Just, as treated in Book 5.

THE SYRIAN CHRISTIANS OF KERALA AND THE SYRIAC ORIGINAL

It remains a mystery as to how a copy of this little book found its way to Kerala, and when. It is probable that at some point between 401 and 1599, copies of it found their way to Kerala, most probably by the agency of one of the visiting Syrian bishops.

It appears that at least one other copy of the Syriac original was extant among the Syrian Christians of Kerala in the 16th century, as, included in the list of 'heretical' books that were destroyed at the Synod of Diamper in 1599, is a volume titled 'The History of Our Lady'. The contents of this book are given in detail in The Acts Decrees of the Synod of Diamper (Ed. by Scaria Zachariah 1994:98), indicating that this book was identical to the present volume. The original Syriac copy from which the Malayalam translation was made in 1925 appears to have been the only copy that survived the vicissitudes of the Syrian Christians of Kerala over the past 500 years. A thorough search to find this original is yet to be undertaken in the archives of the Knanaya Diocese of the Malankara Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church in Kerala.

On the spread of the literary and oral traditions on the Life of Mary in the Egypt-Syria-Palestine region, and indeed as far as Kerala, Prof. Fatim Guirguis Morris observes: 'The Vision (of Patriarch Theophilus) was dispersed via oral routes of transmission to nearby cultures and societies that shared the Coptic faith, specifically both the Ethiopic and Syriac cultures. These churches shared the non-Chalcedonian faith and professed miaphytism in the AD 451 Council of Chalcedon; further, both Ethiopian and Syrian monks pursued ascetic life with the Egyptian desert fathers inside Coptic monasteries. Through their interaction with the

Coptic monks, they came to know about The Vision's tradition and in turn transmitted it to their respective cultures.'²

CONCLUSION

I owe a great debt of gratitude to Prof. Fatin Guirguis Morris of Polk State College, Florida, USA. Her PhD thesis titled: *The Vision of Theophilus: Resistance through Orality among the Persecuted Copts* (Florida Atlantic University, 2010) giving comprehensive tabulations comparing various versions of *Theophilus' Vision* helped to disentangle the diverse events, characters, and change of scenes in Books 3 and 5. Prof. Morris also kindly helped me identify the names of Egyptian calendar months where some corrupted versions of them were used by the Malayalam translator, and gloss some other terms such as *H'bishoy* (= Ethiopians).³

Equally, I would like to thank Rev. Dr. Kuriakose Corepiscopa Moolayil in Cheeranchira, Kerala, for permitting me to submit this revised manuscript to Gorgias Press for publication, and offer my immense thanks to Dr. George Kiraz and Gorgias Press for bringing this volume out to a wider readership. Last but not least I would like to thank Dr. Brice Jones, Acquisitions Editor at Gorgias Press, for smoothing the process along the way.

After showing His Holy Mother the splendour of the Heavenly Jerusalem, the Lord also shows her the catastrophes that are to befall the earth and humanity at His Second Coming. Then when the Virgin Mary prays for His mercy on them, Jesus comforts her: '*O Mary! Blessed are you. What your eyes have seen and ears heard are great indeed. When their tribulations multiply, humanity will call upon you and they will be saved in your name.*'

May we be counted worthy to receive this grace.

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² Fatin Guirguis Morris: PhD thesis (2010:58)

³ From *Habasha*, meaning Ethiopia, which was for a time governed by the Patriarchs of Alexandria.