

A Short Examination of the Mariology of the Eastern Orthodox Church

«Theological Reflections»

2013. Vol. #14. Pp. 232-248

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Data about Mary in the history of New Testament documents is meager. In view of this, evangelical Christians pay little attention to the mother of God. Apart from Christmas spectacles (where Mary appears on a scene with Joseph), evangelical experience and practice deal with her only minimally. God and his son Jesus play a central role in their theological work. Therefore, any Protestant who writes about Mary breaks in some sense an ecumenical codex.^[1] C.S. Lewis wrote in this regard:

The Roman Catholic beliefs on that subject are held not only with the ordinary fervour that attaches to all sincere religious belief, but (very naturally) with the peculiar and, as it were, chivalrous sensibility that a man feels when the honour of his mother or his beloved is at stake. It is very difficult so to dissent from them that you will not appear to them a cad as well as a heretic.^[2]

Both belief and practice of the Eastern Orthodox church (and to some extent of Roman Catholicism) pay much attention to the mother of Jesus. This doctrine does not seem to play a secondary role in Orthodox theology. Along with the saints, Mary is adored everywhere in Eastern Orthodoxy. This veneration, as we can see in three statements by Bulgakov, involves not only a cult of saints, but also Christology and

^[1] Billy Graham non-officially played a central role in controversies like this one. Southern Baptists from time to time harshly criticized him for his silence on issues of ecumenism. It seems that Graham tried to maneuver as delicately as possible; it would have been a serious step for him to lose an audience such as the American and European Catholics with whom he could freely collaborate in many projects of evangelism.

^[2] C.S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity* (1952).

Soteriology. Bulgakov, for example, reproaches possible Protestant readers:

A faith in Christ which does not include His virgin birth and the veneration of His Mother is another faith, another Christianity from that of the Orthodox Church. Protestantism is this other sort of Christianity, with its strange and deeply-rooted lack of feeling for the Mother of God, a condition which dates from the Reformation. In this lack of veneration for the Virgin, Protestantism differs in almost equal measure from both Orthodoxy and Catholicism.^[3]

Further along, Father Bulgakov becomes even harsher when he asserts:

Here the Incarnation is only a means of Redemption, it becomes a bitter necessity because of sin – and hence the Virgin Mary is only an instrument for the Incarnation, inevitable, but still something external, an instrument which is laid aside and forgotten when the need has passed. This forgetfulness of the Virgin Mary is often found in Protestantism even in such extreme beliefs as that the Virgin might have had other children by Joseph, or even a denial of the virgin birth itself.^[4]

Finally, in his third statement, Bulgakov becomes radical. In this case, however, he is not really addressing Protestants, whom he condemns among other things for their insensibility to the cult. He instead makes some paradoxical statements in regard to Jesus:

We are conscious, at one time, both of the immediate nearness and dearness of Christ and of the presence of our Lord and Judge. It is naturally necessary to hide ourselves in awe before the Judge of all, and here we take refuge beneath the protection of the Virgin and the Saints. For they belong to *our* race and kind. With them we may speak in our language of human frailty, and thus, in mutual comprehension, stand shoulder to shoulder with them before the terrible judgment seat of God.^[5]

Bulgakov's radicalism, as we mentioned above, appears not in the statements about Protestants, but rather about Mary. On the other hand, the practice of Orthodox believers, especially in the sphere of popular Orthodoxy, as Orthodox priests confirm, does not know clear theological borders. Though some Orthodox insist that Mariological doctrine should be interpreted in view of its Christological aspects, we see in practice that there are noticeable extremes. There could be found another Orthodox observer who can oppose Bulgakov's statement, quoting, for instance, the theologian Florovsky. The latter states, "Sometimes, however, this Christological perspective has been obscured by a devotional exaggeration, by an unbalanced pietism. Piety must always be guided and checked by dogma."^[6]

Inasmuch as we speak about Mary's role in Christian theology, it is necessary to consider first of all Mary's place in Christian teaching on the basis of the New Testament documents. We do so in the context of a dialogue with Orthodox apologists ("missionaries") of Mariological doctrine. Then we will study Mary's historical significance

^[3] Sergei Bulgakov. *The Orthodox Church*. Internet Abridged Version, 41.

^[4] *Ibid.*

^[5] Там же.

^[6] Georges Florovsky, "The Ever-Virgin Mother of God," in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, vol. 3: Creation and Redemption (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland Publishing Company, 1976), 173.

in the context of early Christianity, observing also the social role of Mary within the framework of religious and family mindsets in the Mediterranean area. Mary's place in the modern theology of Orthodoxy is considered as well. Finally, we will draw some conclusions in the last chapter of our analysis.

New Testament

The New Testament speaks little about Mary. We learn almost nothing about her character, piety and inclinations from the first chapters of Matthew's Gospel, which could have shed some light on the personality of Mary. In Acts, Mary plays no role. She is only *mentioned* there (Acts 1:14).^[7] Beverly Gaventa makes a note in this regard:

Mary is, throughout her appearances in Matthew 1 and 2, primarily an endangered figure. We learn nothing of her own thoughts, opinions, judgments, actions, desires; all we know of Mary is that she remains under threat of destruction.^[8]

Therefore, as some conclude, the roots of this veneration and worship can be found in the cultural setting of the Mediterranean world. Family relationships played an important role there.^[9] Though even in this case, as some scholars assume, we can learn almost nothing about Jesus' kinship.

Jesus' father is mentioned amazingly seldom. Joseph appears only in the birth narrations of Jesus (Lk. 3:23; 4:22; Jn. 6:42). In Mt. 13:55 we learn only about the social status of Joseph — he was a carpenter. In other places, when Mary appears along with Jesus' brothers and sisters, Joseph is not mentioned anymore (Mt. 12:46; Mk. 3:31; Lk. 8:19; Jn. 2:12; Acts 1:14). This disappearance could be attributed to an early death of Joseph. However, the authors of the New Testament do not make any clear statements in this regard.

As Jesus was born, Mary appears in the narrations of the Gospels, although sometimes the authors do not speak of her by name, simply saying "mother" (Mt. 12:46; 13:55; Mk. 3:31; 6:3; Lk. 8:19; Jn. 2:1-5, 12; 6:42; 19:25-27). And again, in view of her significance in Orthodox teaching, one can only wonder and make various hypotheses about why, for instance, Luke mentions her in his second volume only once (1:14). He speaks of other, less significant figures in the earliest church (first seven ministers, names of some evangelists and prophets, some occasional heroes of his stories, etc.), but Luke does not even attempt to unfold his "Mariology."

The earliest New Testament document which speaks about Mary is the Epistle to the Galatians, which is written in the early 50's A.D. Paul writes, "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a *woman*, born under the law" (Gal. 4:4). There is no doubt that Paul would have known Mary's name. However, he decided to

^[7] Some authors seem to create a whole dogmatic sketch simply in view of this brief verse. Referring to Acts 1:14 Ware calls Mary "the hidden heart of the Apostolic Church." See Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (NY.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 77.

^[8] Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 46.

^[9] Bruce Malina, "Mother and Son," in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1990), 54.

mention her only in the context of soteriological economy and Christology. It becomes clear that Paul does so within a framework of fulfilled promises. He emphasizes that the Messiah is born of a Jewish woman (see Rom. 1:3; 9:5).

It is also necessary to refer to the anthropological factor, which is vital for an understanding of parental relationships in the Mediterranean world. In general, it was assumed that the seed of the man, and not the woman, identified the genealogical lineage. A woman was just a field, a fertile soil, which furthered the growth and ripening of the seed. On the other hand, Polynesians conceived of a human birth not as a consequence of sexual intercourse between male and female, but rather as a gift and mercy of ancestral gods, as an answer to a male's prayers.^[10] The situation in the New Testament was still different. Mary knows that she cannot give birth without male participation (Lk. 1:34). A lack of fundamental biological knowledge^[11] created a situation in which all the merits of procreation were attributed to men, not to women (only fathers "give birth," i.e., see Mt. 1:1-16). A "man" was a continuator and founder of lineage, while a "woman" belonged to a concrete man and furthered a growth of the seed without providing any substance for it.^[12] Moreover, Mary had religious views which enabled her to easily accept the fact that she could become pregnant without male participation thanks to the activity of the Holy Spirit.^[13] Thus a dramatization of her agreement: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord" (Lk. 1:38) can be viewed in the context of the social and religious settings of that time as a serious exaggeration.

Hence, we can note not only the understandable silence of the evangelists (in this case of Matthew and Luke) with regard to the biographical details of Mary's life, but also to the stress which is placed on the work of the Holy Spirit. Precisely God is the Father of Jesus Christ, whereas the "merits" of Mary are less significant. "No other seed entered her womb. Jesus continues *this* God's patriline."^[14]

From a number of the Gospels, the earliest is the Gospel of Mark allegedly written at the end of the 60's A.D., Mark says (3:31) that Jesus' family came to take him away, thinking that he had gone berserk (Mt. 12:46-50; Lk. 8:19-21 softens the situation significantly). Jesus' reaction seems even more strange when he, instead of displaying reverence for his mother and siblings, emphatically "denies" them saying: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mk. 3:35). Jesus, of course, does not neglect his family connections, but rather (as in Matthew) uses this situation to emphasize the intimate relationship with his disciples. In this instance, however, the role of Mary is not highlighted.

In Mk. 6:3 (cf. Mt. 13:53-58) people in Nazareth being full of surprise exclaim: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and

^[10] See in greater detail Maryanne Stevens, "Paternity and Maternity in the Mediterranean: Foundations for Patriarchy," in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1990), 48.

^[11] See John J. Pilch, "Marian Devotion and Wellness Spirituality: Bridging Cultures," in *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 20, no. 2 (Summer 1990), 88. Pilch writes, "The Annunciation also illustrates Mary's culturally appropriate conviction

that human beings are *subject to nature* and not in charge of it. The simple biological facts of conception so familiar to contemporary people were unknown in the Mediterranean world. Instead, a few dominant beliefs prevailed."

^[12] Stevens, 50.

^[13] Pilch, 88.

^[14] Stevens, 50.

Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” Local inhabitants quickly identified Jesus calling his relatives by their proper names: both his mother and siblings. Thus those identifying Jesus and those in his household try to emphasize: If he claims to be someone special, then his outstanding public activities are not to be explained by his family origins. In this situation, Mary’s role is in no way distinguished.

Though Luke has the longest prologue-introduction in the childhood narrative of Jesus, he, nevertheless, does not offer other pieces of information about Mary. That is also true for Mark and Matthew. Only the Lukan introduction has some details about who Mary is. As in the case of Matthew, Luke also softens Mark’s narrative in chapter 3.

When an exalted woman’s cry comes from the crowds, “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!”, Jesus simply reacts: “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!” (Lk. 11:27-28). One hardly can imagine that Jesus would deny his biological mother. As always, Jesus draws readers’ attention not to his family, but to his words.

When Mary’s encounter with Gabriel is examined closely (Lk. 1:26-38), we note that in Lk. 1:30 the archangel emphasizes the *gracious* character of Mary’s election.^[15] The phrase “you have found favor with God” does not refer, of course, to any special status. It is common terminology, as occurs in Gen. 6:8 (LXX): “Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord.”^[16] Nothing is said about some preceding actions and works of Mary, whether they involve Mary’s obedience or some extraordinary merits. Gaventa, however, points out that Mary with her actions and words responds to the very important question as to whether she will become Jesus’ disciple in the future.^[17] It is not an issue whether Mary deserves the title of “the second Eve.” In this situation, we need to remark that Mary’s response, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord”, can in fact be understood in quite another way. If this story is interpreted in the context of patriarchal relations between men and women in the Mediterranean world, when the rights of the latter are defined mainly by the father and then by the husband, then it is probable that the phrase “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” can be interpreted simply as: “as you like”.^[18]

The criterion of discipleship, as Raymond Brown asserts, in relation to both his real siblings and his own disciples, defines his eschatological and genuine family.^[19] Otherwise, Mary should be content only of the fact that she is the mother of Jesus. In the second volume of Luke (Acts 1:14), a reader receives the answer: Yes, she really became a disciple among other disciples, which included her younger children.

Another interesting question pertains to the Gospel of John. Mary’s name occurs in the narration of the fourth Gospel several times. It is curious that John consciously avoids calling the mother of Jesus by her name. He calls her “the mother of Jesus”

^[15] Thus, Florovsky seeks to solemnly extend the interpretation of Mary’s response, “Behold, I am a servant of the Lord,” by trying to add: “The obedience of Mary counterbalances the disobedience of Eve,” though Luke, of course, does not explicitly mention Eve. See Florovsky, 179. Thereby, a scantiness of biblical exegesis is skillfully counterbalanced with a broadened typology.

^[16] Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1993), 299.

^[17] Gaventa, 74-75.

^[18] Malina, “Mother and Son,” 55.

^[19] Brown, 343.

(Jn. 2:1) and “his mother” (Jn. 19:26). In 6:42, Jews also identify Jesus’ parents, but they mention only Joseph by name. As in the case of Mark, John ignores the childhood of Jesus. He mentions Mary only at the wedding and at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion.

This wedding is preceded by a prologue in which Jesus is portrayed as a divine, cosmic Word that subsequently becomes flesh. Then, in 1:45, Jesus is identified *only* as a son of Joseph from Nazareth. In the second chapter it can be learned that Jesus had his mother and other members of the family were with him at the wedding. Thus the evangelist wants to demonstrate that Jesus is both the only begotten Son of God and a son of Joseph and Mary.^[20] The appearance of Mary can be interpreted in this manner not only in the second chapter, but also in chapter 19. Both passages are difficult to interpret. That was probably intentional on the Evangelist’s part, because an incomplete depiction of events forces the reader to use his or her imagination. Let us consider such a phrase as “τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί γύναι”, which means literally “What to me and to you, a woman?” While many translations reflect Jesus’ nonchalance in relation to his mother (as if Jesus asks her not to place too much pressure on him), it is likely that the author’s intention was to emphasize this enigmatic episode more strongly.

Addressing his mother as a “woman” does not imply harshness or indifference, because Jesus in this Gospel refers to other female characters in the same manner (4:21; 20:15). Jesus is instead insisting on his own authority and the independence of his mission. Hence, he refers to his mother’s status as the status of a disciple.^[21] Recognizing a specific style and genre, it is necessary to admit that John first of all refers to two aspects: Jesus’ connection with the Father who is in heaven, and his connection with his earthly parents. Therefore, Jesus’ parting with Mary has a symbolic meaning: John hereby wants to show completion of the earthly part of the story of God’s Son.

Apart from other things, the situation with members of Jesus’ family also reveals an implied story: After her betrothal and marriage to Joseph, Mary gave birth to Jesus and then to those other children listed by Mark. Both Catholics and Orthodox believers insist that these children are the children of Joseph from his first marriage. But in fact, these assertions are not connected with the canonical texts of the New Testament. Neither Paul nor Mark pay any attention to the piety of Mary or her special virtues. She is a typical Jewish maiden of the second temple time period possessing the qualities and traits of a loving and caring mother. If Joseph really was older and Mary just a young maiden (within the Platonic context of relationships), how then can the issues be explained which result from this situation? For example, if Mary was about twelve (according to the Protoevangelium of James) and Joseph about sixty (men have a longer reproduction period than women), then James should have been about forty. When Jesus started his teaching ministry, James should have been about seventy. The latter died admittedly in 62 A.D. However, tradition says nothing about his elderly life.

^[20] Gaventa, 82

^[21] D.M. Scholer, “Women,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 885.

It is difficult to imagine the following situation: A group of elderly people headed by Mary comes to take a young preacher back home. If Jesus would disregard them in this situation, then he would be showing great disrespect. Therefore, it makes more sense to consider James and his brothers blood siblings of Jesus.

Mary in the Early Church

In later antiquity, Mary's role as the mother of God is viewed mainly in the context of her counterpart, i.e., Proto-mother.^[22] Mary became for many Christian writers in the second century a "second Eve", whose status, as Gaventa describes, went through the following stages: "motherhood", "virginity", "perfection."^[23] These three stages were owed to three historical contexts respectively. They were due first to the external attack of Gnostics (who insisted on a virtual incarnation of Jesus), second, to aesthetics and the refinement of the Greek and Latin fathers of the church (en-cratism), and, third, folk-piety (Mary was then viewed as a new mediator and Mediterranean patron).

Irenaeus of Lyons in his treatise "Proof of the Apostolic Preaching" draws a parallel between Eve and Mary: "A virgin should be a virgin's intercessor, and by a virgin's obedience undo and put away the disobedience of a virgin" (virginalem inobaudientiam per virginalem obaudientiam).^[24] Thereby one provided a connection between obedience of "proto-mother of all living" and "proto-mother of all believing." Though Paul speaks in Rom. 5:19 mainly about Adam and Christ, it sufficed for Irenaeus to broaden this construction and its images and apply them to Eve and Mary. It is hard to understand whether Irenaeus refers to some unknown to us tradition ("deposit of faith"), or whether he simply invents this concept, as Pelikan concludes.^[25] Irenaeus does this with the self-consciousness of an apologist who in the rhetoric customary for his time develops a concept supporting him in his defense of the Orthodox faith. Thus Pelikan believes that in Irenaeus' thinking of Adam and Christ, so also do Eve and Mary rebuff the antique worldview of a cyclic understanding of history onto which the apologist juxtaposes a biblical completion and recapitulation.^[26] Therefore, in Irenaeus, Mary becomes a suitable rhetorical and even poetic symbol enabling him to juxtapose an antique cyclic and biblical worldview of recapitulation through Christ.

Moreover, Early Christianity spoke about Mary chiefly in the context of Christological controversies. In other words, in retrospect it remains for us a mystery as to how a doctrine of Mary would have developed if the fathers had not paid so much attention to the humanity of Jesus. In some Gnostic documents, Mary is granted less attention

^[22] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 39.

^[23] Gaventa, 101. The limits of our analysis do not allow us to consider all significant Early Church sources. However, it should be noted that such a formation of cult starts with Justin the Martyr (100-165 A.D.) and his accent on virginity and the motherhood of Mary. It ends, as we will see below, with the complete holiness

and ritual sinlessness of Mary. This comes from the Protoevangelium of James. See also Gaventa, 119.

^[24] Iren., *Dem. Apost.* 33. *The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, tra. by A. Robertson, CCEL. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/irenaeus/demonstr.txt> (2.05.2013)

^[25] Pelikan, 43.

^[26] *Ibid.*, 46.

than another Mary, i.e., Mary Magdalene.^[27] However, when Christological controversies went in a more dramatic direction—and this happened in the church’s pre-Nicene period^[28]—Mary started to receive greater attention. Gnostics believed that Jesus was born not *from* the Virgin but *through* the Virgin,^[29] using her as a channel. Meanwhile, the fathers of the church believed that Jesus derived his flesh from her nature. He was born from her, and in so doing, he became a man. John Damascene writes:

For the holy Virgin did not bare mere man but true God: and not mere God but God incarnate, who did not bring down His body from Heaven, nor simply passed through the Virgin as channel (ὠζ διὰ σωληῆνος), but received from her flesh of like essence to our own and subsisting in Himself.^[30]

In fact, the New Testament does not provide concrete evidence as to whether Mary had children from Joseph after giving birth to Jesus. This question can be raised in view of the siblings of Jesus, as was already have seen in the New Testament survey. As a matter of fact, hermeneutical tendencies compel a reader to look at this data quite differently. Yes, imagination and logic can drive the reading in such a way that the reader locates data bringing him to the conclusion that, say, James and Jude are the blood brothers of Jesus. The same logic and imagination can compel others to create a scenario in which Mary could not have had sexual intercourse with Joseph. Thus, Mary is interpreted only in light of the encratic worldview of second-century authors.

While church fathers had very serious objections in this case, contemporary historians and exegetes, according to Jacques Duquesne, do not sense any problem.^[31] Even some Catholic New Testament scholars (Pesch) stand on the side of Protestants regarding the matter of the “brothers and sisters of Jesus,” who are viewed as his blood brothers and sisters.^[32]

Mariology acquires a more sophisticated shape in subsequent centuries, primarily in apocryphal and patristic literature.^[33] While some biblical authors and church fathers stressed only the motherhood of Mary with regard to Jesus,^[34] later writers already spoke of her perpetual virginity,^[35] sinlessness and absolute holiness. At that time,

^[27] Though some identify Mary (or Mariam) in a number of apocryphal writings as Mary the mother of Jesus, it is nevertheless normal to conclude that Gnostic writers are more concerned about Mary Magdalene. See discussion in Anti Marjanen, “The Mother of Jesus or the Magdalene? The Identity of Mary in the So-Called Gnostic Christian Texts,” in *Which Mary? The Marys of Early Christian Tradition*, ed. F. Stanley Jones (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 32.

^[28] J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960), 139-140.

^[29] Tert., *De Carn. Chr.* 20.

^[30] Jean Damas., *De Fide Orth.* 56 (III.12). *An Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, tra. by E. Watson and L. Pullan. New Advent. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/33043.htm> (2.05.2013).

^[31] Jacques Duquesne, *Maria. Die Mutter Jesu*

(Munchen: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: 2005), 95.

^[32] See Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 19-32.

^[33] Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, John Reumann, *Maria im Neuen Testament: Eine Okumenische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981), 36.

^[34] Kelly notes that Tertullian was not confused that she lost her virginity after Jesus’ birth. See Kelly, 150, quoting Tert., *De Carn Chr.* 20.

^[35] Esp. Jerome among other things insisted on perpetual virginity of the Mother of God and on the superiority of singleness over marriage. See Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 184. See also Kelly, 488.

early church authors started to write about different encratic and ascetic ideas. These views come into view in the apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thecla. When Paul came to the house of Onesiphorus in Iconium, the author of the Acts states: “There was great joy, and bowing of knees and breaking of bread, and the word of God concerning abstinence and the resurrection (ἐγκρατείας καὶ ἀναστάσεως).”^[36] Ἐγκράτεια, is encratism, a term which characterizes an ascetic tendency and self-control in a wider sense of the word. And it also refers to a denial of sexual desire in a narrow sense of the word. A young girl, Thecla, denied her bridegroom (*Acta Pauli* 10-11) and she received self-baptism (34.7). Later she dressed herself in a male clothing? (40) and accompanying Paul on his missionary trip, she returned to Iconium (41-43). Subsequently, as Tertullian writes in his treatise “About Baptism,” the author of the Acts of Paul was caught and denounced. Though the book was exposed as a fake, its ideas expressed some tendencies of the era in which Mariological aspects were crystallized and “refined.”

The main document showing readers a completely-formed apotheosis of Mary as the mother of God is nevertheless the Protoevangelium of James.^[37] Origen referred to this writing in his commentary on Matthew,^[38] what allows us to think that it was written in the second half of the second century, i.e., about 200.^[39] Other references to the document can be found in John Damascene.^[40] It was also popular in Medieval times when it was translated into many languages including Armenian, Coptic, and Syrian. Even when the author brings quotes from the Old Testament (LXX), it is very difficult to believe that he is the type of Christian whose ideas and views are oriented to the religious mindset of Judaism. In this book, the author mentions Mary’s parents: Ioachim and Anna. They deeply regret their incapacity to beget children (an allusion to the situation of the prophet Samuel’s parents in the Old Testament). Anna, as a mother of Samuel, gives an oath to God: If she has a child, she will dedicate it to God. The claim that Mary lived in a temple from childhood on is not supported by evidence from the New Testament and does not stand in a harmony with the practice of second-temple Judaism. The claim that a woman, even a child, could live in the holy of holies is an absurdity. According to many commentators, it is a serious contradiction in view of the author’s strong familiarity with the LXX text. The ancient author allows some exaggeration in his book in order to draw readers’ attention to the special status of the future mother of Jesus.

The writer says that until Mary was twelve, she stayed in the temple. Mary ate only food which was brought by an angel. When she becomes twelve, a priest calls elders so that one of them would become Mary’s husband. In the course of this story, we learn how Mary’s pregnancy became public. She was called to the temple along with Joseph and had to undergo a temptation involving “the water of the ordeal.” According to this

^[36] *Acta Pauli* 5.14 (Lipsius, p. 238). *The Acts of Paul*, tra., M.R. James, Early Christian Writings, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/actspaul.html> (2.05.2013)

^[37] A. Roberts, J. Donaldson (eds.), *Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, and Revelations*. Ante-Nicene Christian Library, tra. Alexander Walker. Vol. 16.

Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870. Internet link: <https://archive.org/stream/antenicenechris19donagoog#page/n10/mode/2up> (3.05.13).

^[38] Or., *Comm. Matt.* 10.17.16 (tra. Girod, p. 216).

^[39] Gavena, 107.

^[40] Jean Damas., *De Fide Orth.*, 87 (IV.14).

practice, a man who is jealous of his spouse shall give her water mixed with soil (Num. 5:24). If she drinks this and remains in good health, then she is declared innocent. However, in this *Protoevangelium*, both Mary and Joseph drink this beverage and both survive.

It is remarkable that the author of this writing tries to fill those gaps which provoked interest among the readers of the Scriptures at that time: Where is Joseph when Jesus starts his ministry? Were the brothers and sisters of Jesus his blood brothers and sisters, or cousins? Or were they his stepbrothers and stepsisters? These questions in the minds of readers were natural. Even a contemporary reader is curious about the answers. The encratic philosophy of that time stimulated further imagination. According to that worldview, Mary could not possess any sexual lusts or desires before and after Jesus was born. Although the canonical Gospels are silent in this regard,^[41] the author of the *Protoevangelium* creates a narration in which Joseph is quite old. At the same time, it is noticeable that the author is not particularly concerned about staying in harmony with the other canonical Gospels. For instance, according to the Gospel of Luke 2:24, Mary was from a poor family. In the *Protoevangelium*, we discover that that she stemmed from a wealthy family. In the *Protoevangelium*, she marries when she is twelve. Jesus is born when she is sixteen. It means that four years had passed after Jesus' conception. In the Gospels, however, Mary becomes pregnant before her betrothal.

We may conclude therefore that the destiny of the *Protoevangelium of James* is conditioned by the internal intentions of its author and external testimony of the church fathers. At the same time that Origen was working with an aid from some Apocrypha to confirm the perpetual virginity of Mary,^[42] Tertullian, on the contrary, does not demonstrate any passion regarding Mary in his writings. It was as if he had never been concerned about such things.^[43]

By the time of the final formation and crystallization of Eastern Mariology, the Eastern Church in the works of John of Damascus declared that Mary is:

1. The lady of all created things,
2. She preserved both her virgin soul and body,
3. Servant and mother of the Creator,
4. As a perpetual virgin, she was a virgin even after the birth of Jesus and had no sex with her husband.^[44]

Addressing those who supposed that Mary might have had intercourse with her husband, John gives a stern warning: "God forbid! It is not the part of a chaste mind to think such thoughts, far less to commit such acts."^[45] In view of the exegesis and methodology of this work, it appears that by the beginning of the eighth century, this *Exposition of Orthodox Faith* had absorbed the popular hopes and tendencies of Eastern theology regarding Mary.

^[41] The author explains exactly in this way the lack of any information about a further relationship between Mary and Joseph.

^[42] R.P.C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early*

Church (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1962), 227.

^[43] *Ibid.*, 259.

^[44] Jean Damas., *De Fide Orth.* 87 (IV.14).

^[45] *Ibid.*

The Contemporary Eastern Orthodox Church

Orthodox theologians, as Gaventa noted, have written little about Mary little in comparison with the Catholics because, as the former admit, they have never regarded teaching about the Mother of God as something separate from Christological teaching.^[46] Among Orthodox thinkers, thus, there is some “hesitation” in this regard – a fact which we cannot project on Catholics. Among them there are some who call Mary a “co-redeemer” or *Co-Redemptrix* of all humankind. George Florovsky in his essay about Mary makes a kind of reservation when he says that he does not claim to be adequate when attempting to shed light on this issue.^[47] He states further that in view of some of misuses in regard to Mariology, “all the Mariological doubts and errors of modern times depend in the last resort precisely upon an utter Christological confusion. They reveal a hopeless «conflict in Christology».”^[48] Uspensky, however, when he asserts that Mary “reigns along with Christ over the destinies of the world”, apparently exposes this conflict.^[49]

It becomes understandable in the process of time why Mariological doctrine even in view of the Christological aspect has received an inadequate place in the teaching and practice of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. In fact, there is a close correlation between the salvation of men in Christ and the role of the Mother of God. Florovsky says:

In the Incarnation the “new man” was born, the “Last Adam”; he was truly human, but he was more than a man: “The second man is the Lord from heaven” (1 Cor. 15:47). As the Mother of this “Second Man”, Mary herself was participating in the mystery of the redeeming re-creation of the world. ... Yet, she is the only human being for whom the Redeemer of the world is also a son, her own child whom she truly bore.^[50]

It is noteworthy that the logical consistency of his thought is not questioned among theologians. At the same time, it is clear that Mary’s significance against the background of what was said about her in the New Testament accumulates new force through Florovsky’s rhetoric.

A reader already familiar with a book by Donald Fairbairn^[51] knows from its descriptive and rather non-polemical character that for Orthodox Christians the Christian life has primarily a collective, communal and ecumenical (“soborniy”) meaning. One does not achieve his or her salvation alone, but only together with other saints. While this position is not argued here and elsewhere, we can question some of its theological and philosophical presuppositions. Thus, Mariology often is interrelated with other doctrines, and precisely with a teaching about saints and their role in Orthodox Christianity.

^[46] Gaventa, 15.

^[47] Florovsky, 171.

^[48] Florovsky, 172.

^[49] L.A. Uspensky, *Bogoslovie ikoni v pravoslavnoy tserkvi. Ch. 2. Pervye ikoni spasitelya i bogomateri*. Library «Pravoslavnyaya Beseda».

<http://www.pravbeseda.ru/library/index.php?page=book&id=748> (6.08.12).

^[50] Florovsky, 176-177.

^[51] Donald Fairbairn, *Eastern Orthodoxy through Western Eyes* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

In fact, the problem is not that an Orthodox Christian venerates his or her saints. It is not a problem when people use such a word like “poklonyatsa” (in Russian it means both “to worship” and “to bow”). The word “poklonyatsa” contains the concept of a literally understood act of bowing.^[52] Therefore, it is necessary to recognize that physical bowing or worshipping (in the Old Testament they go hand-in-hand: “You shall not bow down to them or worship them”)^[53] do not always mean what the Ten Commandments do (Ex. 20:4). Bowing down (as in worship)^[54] can be done in a circle of friends, it can be a part of etiquette or it can be done out of respect. The bowing can be done with regard to parents, a lover, or some high state officials. One can also force another person to bow. Another question regards the true meaning of bowing and worship.

It makes sense therefore to point out that worship and bowing have an existential meaning. If a man relies in his being and with all his hopes on something or somebody apart from God, then such a man commits spiritual apostasy and ultimately worships in an existential sense some physical object, including other men, or even values.

It seems however, that Orthodox theologians encountering scanty evidence about Mary intentionally romanticize and idealize Mary’s cult. Vladimir Lossky, for example, attaches great importance to the fact that Mary “agreed” to become part of the Christological plan.^[55] He writes in the same text:

In the person of the holy Virgin, humankind agreed that the Word might become flesh and live among people, because, as in accordance with tradition of the fathers, “if one divine will created man, it cannot save him without cooperation with human will.” All the drama of freedom is being solved in these words, “Behold, I am a servant of the Lord.”

Florovsky says approximately the same: “Mary was voicing this obedient response of man to the redeeming decree of the love divine, and so she was representative of the whole race.”^[56] Kallistos Ware adds that incarnation is not only the work of the Spirit, but the work of the free will of Mary.^[57] It becomes clear that the Virgin who agreed to become a part of incarnation, as the Orthodox claim, is therefore already worthy of devotion. At first glance, it cannot be said that this position should be denounced as exaggeration. On the other hand, as the reader may ask, what could this young Jewish girl say when addressed by an angel in the context of the *patriarchal system* of the Mediterranean world?^[58] We would be surprised if Mary could even contemplate doubt regarding her opportunity to become part of a divine plan. Mary satisfies God’s will in the way in which any other Jewish woman satisfies her husband’s or father’s will.^[59]

^[52] Abraham bowed (προσεκύνησεν) to the Hittites (Gen. 23:7). The same verb προσεκυνέω is used with regard to theophania (Gen. 18:2), also Jacob to Esau (Gen. 33:3), Joseph to Israel (Gen. 48:12) etc.

^[53] Ex. 20:5; 23:24; Deut. 5:9; 30:17.

^[54] See Deut. 28:48. While προσεκυνέω is used with regard to God and men, λατρεύω is used mainly in the context of Yahweh’s service or with regard to a prohibition to serve other gods. Thus, veneration, bowing/worship and serving are blurred.

^[55] Vladimir Lossky. *Ocherk misticheskogo bogosloviya vostochnoy tserkvy*. Ch. 7. Domostroitelstvo

Sina. Library of Jacob Krotov. http://krotov.info/libr_min/1/lossk_v/H07-T.htm (19.07.12).

^[56] Florovsky, 181.

^[57] Ware, 35.

^[58] Here it is not meant that Jewish patriarchy is more severe than the surrounding patriarchic system of the Graeco-Roman world. See Kathleen E. Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2002), 20. We state only the fact of patriarchy.

^[59] Gaventa, 10. Malina, “Mother and Son,” 57. Pilch, 87: “Such resignation to or acceptance

Orthodox theologians, on the contrary, conceive of Mary as “an ideal believer.” For example, even Saul, who was completely inclined against Christians until he experienced an encounter with the divine, humbly went to Damascus to await the coming of Ananias (Acts 9:4–6). Other theophanies can be also taken into consideration. But we can in a few words affirm that any pious Jew of the first century would react with an ultimate sense of privilege to any angel suggesting his participation in God’s plan of salvation.

Theological Analysis

The typical initial reaction of Protestant theologians is that the New Testament does not place Mary in a prominent position. They add, secondly, that the main focus in New Testament theology is on the meaning of Christology, not Mariology. The author of 1 Timothy states unambiguously: “For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind (μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων), Christ Jesus, himself human” (1 Tim. 2:5). Even liturgical, hymnal reverence addressed to Mary can lead a believer astray. Thirdly, Protestants state that the election of Mary occurred only because of God’s sovereign grace, not because of any special merit.^[60] At the same time, as Florovsky writes, some references to Mary provoke in a context of grace some additional questions: “The fullness of grace was truly bestowed upon the Blessed Virgin and her personal purity was preserved by the perpetual assistance of the Spirit.”^[61] Although in this instance the Orthodox theologian distances himself from the Catholic doctrine of Mary’s “immaculate conception”, his formulations force the question of “whether incomplete grace exists at all?”^[62] How is the grace offered her different from the grace offered to others? Was Mary chosen by God on the basis of his sovereign decision and love (and this, by the way, should precisely be counted as grace) or did she in some way deserve the “fullness of grace?” Thus, in the context of Christian-Judean monotheism, bestowing Mary with theological attributes such as omnipotence and omnipresence “is simply repugnant to reflective, educated persons”.^[63]

It has been noted with reason that the logic of cult formation followed a simple algorithm calculated by the Greek philosophers of antiquity. Bruce Malina writes:

It is proper and fitting to call Jesus God. Therefore it is proper and fitting to call Mary the Mother of God, which she must have been and therefore was Mother of God. But what good is her being Mother of God if she is dead and buried? So it is proper and fitting for Mary to have been raised after her death; therefore she must have been raised after her death, and she in fact was raised after her death.^[64]

Then he continues,

Once the principle of propriety was accepted, it produced a large number of facts that allowed any inventive and intelligent Marian devotee to seek out parallels in Jesus’ life and status for the life and status of Mary. If Jesus was poor and suffered, so

of life as it comes is very normal for Mediterranean peoples.”

^[60] See Gaventa, 16.

^[61] Florovsky, 182.

^[62] Kallistos Ware asserts that Orthodox do not accept Catholic dogma about the immaculate conception of Mary and one of the reasons is the

Orthodox rejection of the Augustinian understanding of inherited sin. See Ware, 77.

^[63] Bruce Malina, “From Isis to Medjugorje: Why Apparitions?” in *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1990), 76.

^[64] Malina, “Mother and Son,” 56.

too Mary. If Jesus healed, so did Mary. If Jesus was Lord, then Mary must have been a Lady of sorts. If Jesus is King, so Mary is Queen. Mary thus becomes the feminine side of Jesus.^[65]

Strangely enough, any reference to a special status for Mary only in connection with her agreement to become the mother of God's Son – the agreement which became a unique aspect of her piety and godliness – already casts a shadow on her. It reminds one of a certain form of Nestorianism. At the council of Ephesus in 432, Mary was named the Mother of God – a term much debated by Nestorius.^[66] Already in the fourth century, people began to address her as “Ever-Virgin” because she remained a virgin before Jesus was born (*ante partum*), at the moment of his birth (*in partu*) and afterwards (*post partum*). The Greek word Θεοτόκος can provoke negative associations among Protestants who are not familiar with fascinating aspects of the Christological controversy.^[67] However, the issue at stake is not that of Mary giving birth to God, but rather whether Jesus was of theandric nature – not just a being in whom two persons found their moral unity, a unity of Logos and the son of David.

Thus Nestorius believed that Mary gave birth to a man, not to God.^[68] According to this simplified metaphysical view of Nestorius, the same simple ideas were involved: the finite (a man) cannot beget the infinite (God). At the same time, of course, Nestorius did not want to deny the Christological dogma that God became man. He therefore asked a question: “When did the moment of incarnation happen?” For him the main Christological issue was not primary – rather the fact that Mary conceived the man Jesus (son of David) while the Word entered him only in the process of the embryo's development. In other words, the Word descended on a man and lived in him as God's glory in a tabernacle on the basis of a moral union. There was no hypostatic union, as Cyril of Alexandria would teach.

Another issue asks: What kind of the union is this? Why did God's Spirit descend on a concrete person, the Son of David? Why not on any other? Nestorius argues on this basis that the Christ is precisely the Son of David. The incarnation was realized on the basis of some of Jesus' merits. In this case, his merit was the fact that he maintained continuity with King David. If Jesus “deserved” such a grace, then our salvation would be understood in the context of merit before God. Cyril, however, thought that the Holy Spirit descended on Mary to conceive a child not because of the past or future merits of her son, but rather on the basis of God's grace. God, the Word, did not descend upon a human being because he was an off-spring of the king, David, but instead because he became flesh when he accepted a human body as his own body. In other words, Divine Logos did not indwell a son of David, it instead became a descendant of David, i.e., a man appropriating as his own all of human nature.

^[65] Ibid.

^[66] See greater detail about all the aspects of this Christological controversy in Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 40-62.

^[67] It is remarkable if we keep in mind what happened in Ephesus, in Acts, with the cult of Artemis (Acts 19:25-28). As comes from the

book, Demetrius headed the uproar against Paul as he cried: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” By the time of the III. Ecumenical Council, this city had citizens who fervently venerated a new cult of Mary. In 553, the V. Ecumenical Council accepted such a term as *Ἀειπάρθεος*, Ever-Virgin.

^[68] See also Jean Damas., *De Fide Orth.* 56 (III.12).

Note again a distinctive point of Nestorius' statement: God the Word descended upon a concrete man and indwelt in him on the basis of moral unity; because his future merits and deeds were envisioned. The same happened in the practice of Mary's veneration. She is not simply human, but as mentioned before, an "ideal believer," i.e., the human who could in her life-time undergo theosis (divinization)^[69], thus achieving union with God. She is without any stain (achrantos), all-holy (panagia), without any vice (panamomos). What is more, Orthodox believe that she ascended to heaven after she died.^[70]

Florovsky says in a solemn manner:

Her existential situation was unique and peculiar. She had to be adequate to the unprecedented dignity of this situation. This is perhaps the very essence of her particular dignity, which is described as her "Ever-Virginity." ... Now virginity is not simply a bodily status or a physical feature as such. Above all, it is a spiritual and inner attitude, and apart from that a bodily status would be altogether meaningless. The title of Ever-Virgin means surely much more than merely a "physiological" statement. It does not refer only to the Virgin Birth. It does not imply only an exclusion of any later marital intercourse (which would be utterly inconceivable if we really believe in the Virgin Birth and in the Divinity of Jesus). It excludes first of all any "erotic" involvement, any sensual and selfish desires or passions, any dissipation of the heart and mind. ... Her soul was governed by God only (θεογυβέρνητον), it was supremely attached to him. All her desire was directed towards things worthy of desire and affection (St. John says: τεταμμένη, attracted, gravitating). She had no passion (θύμον). ...The climax of this virginal aspiration is the holiness of the Virgin Mother, all-pure and undefiled.^[71]

It seems that Florovsky started his essay with an emphasis on the Christological aspect of Mariology (here we did not provide any critique). However, he ends with a quite different emphasis creating solemn and fervent verbal constructions regarding Mary. He applies flowery rhetorical garlands, epithets; he is romanticizing Mary using poetic exaggerations when addressing her. Nevertheless, Florovsky does not support his theses in the above quotation with even scanty biblical data. Such questions like: Was Mary perfect? Did she conduct an ascetic life? Why was her life interpreted through the prism of encratism? etc. These questions are not addressed by the New Testament authors. Many ideas come from *the Protoevangelium of James*, which cannot be considered a trustworthy document.^[72] If Mary was ascetic and impassionate since her childhood, if she is Ever-Virgin, then her election is conditioned by her moral qualities (to which also Catholics refer by insisting that she was born sinless). Therefore God could give her the grace of the Holy Spirit. If Mary's election is a gracious act of God, then what about other common people? As a result, we have some form of Nestorianism. Thanks to her moral condition, a moral union between God and man was established. Orthodox theologians, however, are not concerned about the critical

^[69] Uspensky: "In the icon of God's Mother we have an image of the first human who realized the goal of incarnation – theosis." See Uspensky, *Bogoslovie ikoni*. Op. cit.

^[70] Ware, 78.

^[71] Florovsky, 184-185. See also Malina, "From Isis to Medjugorje," 77.

^[72] Brown, 288.

aspects of this matter. Protestants tend to consider critically not only their own doctrines, but the Bible as well (form-criticism, redaction-criticism, two source hypothesis, documentary hypothesis, etc.) Orthodox scholars barely apply critical, i.e., scholarly methodology, to their church tradition.

It seems plausible that Mary's cult was quickly accepted into the system of patronage common within the beliefs of Mediterranean people. According to their thinking, it is normal that a son cannot reject his mother's request; therefore, it is logical to approach divinity through the mother.^[73] In the process of time, Mary starts to function as a certain "female divinity," a goddess who provides access to her detached son. In time, Mary was approached by people precisely in this way. Bruce Malina properly notes:

Given the social control and power Mediterranean mothers wield over their sons, it was a short theological step to outfit Mary with the full status and role of patroness, mediatrix, cosmic and heavenly favor dispenser. As every Mediterranean knows, mothers simply cannot be refused by their sons!^[74]

Thus Mary's cult grew naturally into a religious system of beliefs common among the Mediterranean peoples.

Summary and Conclusions

Theological reflections, like juridical materials, should as much as possible reflect preciseness and avoid ambiguity in their expressions about God. While the Bible hardly claims to be a kind of theological dictionary, theologians are challenged to talk about God plainly and clearly. It is also a creative task. The Bible contains many loci that do not allow interpreters to have a clear understanding of the text and its history. Questions involving Mary and other biblical characters cannot be solved without work and hard exegesis.

In the case of juridical literature and the law (as well as in the case of theological reflection), it becomes clear that ambiguity within juridical texts can create a situation in which a man is unjustly convicted. It was shown here that the ambiguity of lexica and reflections about Mary can lead a reader to an inadequate reception of this teaching, especially on the level of popular piety. As we have seen, even classical Christological views do not help in such instances to clarify Mariology for common people. Academic articulation of this doctrine with reference to patristic texts seems "Greek" to most people in the church. The most important thing among individuals looking for popular piety is to receive healing from sterility or a blessing regarding particular goals.

It thereby becomes understandable that Mary's cult in the context of patriarchal relationships in the Mediterranean world was conditioned by cultural and social factors and expectations. Exactly this can explain a lack of interest in the personal life of Mary in the New Testament. We suggest that this interest in her personality was not stimulated by simple curiosity. Her elevated position can be explained without difficulty by viewing the divergent systems of pagan patrons and their cults challenged by the first Christian missionaries. Now it was no longer the goddess cult ("*Great is Artemis of the*

^[73] Malina, "From Isis to Medjugorje," 77.

^[74] *Ibid.*, 78.

Ephesians.” Acts 19:28). Instead, the cult of the Mother of God started to symbolize a new patron – a divine matron who could satisfy the religious expectations of any semi-converted Christian.

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