Virginity, the Temple Veil, and their Demise: A Hypothetical Reader’s Perspective on Mary’s Work in the Protevangelium of James

Eric M. Vanden Eykel
Ferrum College

Bruce Metzger once wrote of the tendency of early Christian authors to name the nameless characters in New Testament narratives: characters like the magi, the Syrophoenician woman, the individuals crucified alongside Jesus, the wife of Pontius Pilate, and others. “As nature abhors a vacuum,” Metzger argued, “so early Christians were reluctant to leave unidentified this or that person who is mentioned but not named in the pages of the New Testament.” We can apply Metzger’s insight easily to those characters who are named but whose profiles are perhaps not sufficiently developed for the reader’s taste.

At some point in the mid- or late-second century of the Common Era, an anonymous author sought to fill out the meager portrait of Jesus’ mother in our earliest written sources by penning an account of her early life. This narrative—which we now call the Protevangelium of James (and that we now for the sake of time will refer to lovingly as PJ)—achieved a quasi-canonical status in many circles. It appears even today in various liturgies and it has exercised an enormous influence on artistic representations of Mary. Part of why this text achieved such a level of renown is its subject matter: There’s something about Mary, or so they say. But its author also achieves a masterful balance between filling in the details of Mary’s early life and leaving just enough intrigue to keep the reader curious.

Texts that leave nothing to the reader’s imagination can be tedious. But texts that leave too many unaddressed or unanswered questions can be equally frustrating, and not always in a bad way. Such narratives prompt readers to fill in the gaps for themselves and to thereby participate in the

---

1 My thanks to the steering committee of the Ancient Fiction and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative section of the Society of Biblical Literature for the opportunity to give this paper, as well as for the questions and comments that came from those who listened to it.

formation of meaning and, on occasion, the authoring of new texts. As the late Umberto Eco reminds us: "A text is a lazy machine that expects a lot of collaboration from the reader."\(^3\)

In this paper I would like to explore some of these dynamics of authorship, reading, and meaning-construction in PJ by means of a heuristic device, that of the hypothetical reader. First, I’ll lay a bit of methodological groundwork by introducing the concept of the so-called hypothetical reader and by commenting briefly on what I see as its value for the study of early Christian literature in general. Next, I’ll say a few words about PJ, but with a focus on one of its more curious claims: namely, that the mother of Jesus was a spinner who helps create the veil in the Jerusalem Temple. Finally, I will use the hypothetical reader to explore this scene and attempt to convince you that the interpretive fruit borne here is worth sampling.

I suggest that the reader may understand the temple veil in this text as a figuration of Mary’s own virginity, which the author of PJ implies remains undisturbed even after the birth of Jesus. But I argue that the reader of this text is also prompted to look past the bounds of its narrative and toward the iconic scene of the veil’s destruction at Jesus’ crucifixion. This connection, I suggest, prompts the reader to see the tearing of the veil as the moment where Mary’s own innocence is at least symbolically torn asunder.

The Hypothetical Reader

The hypothetical reader is one name for a heuristic device that is present in nearly every hermeneutical endeavor, at least to some extent. Whenever we, as empirical readers, make a judgment about how this or that text might have been understood by a reader other than ourselves, the hypothetical reader is at work. In modern and postmodern literary theory, this reader operates under a variety of placards: the “model reader” in Umberto Eco, the “informed reader” in Stanley Fish, the “implied reader” in Wolfgang Iser, the “authorial audience” in Peter Rabinowitz,” etc.\(^4\) Important nuances distinguish these readers one from the other, and these nuances are outlined elsewhere in great detail so I won’t tarry on them here. What I do wish to highlight, however, is a point on which


\(^4\) See also Michel Riffaterre’s “superreader” and Erwinn Wolff’s “intended reader.”
these readers converge, namely, on the idea that texts can and will be interpreted differently depending on who is doing the interpreting.

All hypothetical readers are constructs that can be imbued with any number of characteristics to test hypotheses formulated by the empirical reader. One could, for example, propose a hypothetical reader whose identity is more or less consonant with the author of whatever text she is reading. Such a reader may be helpful for those empirical readers who are interested in tracking, say, that magnificent albatross known as authorial intent. Alternately, one could construct a hypothetical reader who postdates the text she reads by hundreds of years, who knows how that text has been interpreted by others before her, and who brings all of her knowledge, however anachronistic it may be, to the task of interpretation. Such a reader is common in projects dealing with the history of interpretation, reception history, or so-called theological exegesis.

At the heart of this idea of the hypothetical reader is an assertion and a judgment. The assertion is that every reader necessarily brings a certain amount of baggage to the task of interpretation, and that this baggage is frequently different than the baggage that a text’s author could have foreseen. Perspective always affects how we makes sense of what we read, and this is the case regardless of who is doing the reading. The judgment is that this is not necessarily a problem; it’s OK for a reader’s perspective to affect how they understand what they are reading, even if it does so in ways that may surprise the author. It can become a problem when it is not acknowledged, when you have a reader who is piled over with baggage but who doesn’t believe that they have any. This is to say that interpretive problems arise not when we have baggage but when we pretend that we don’t. So what the concept of the hypothetical reader does is, first, to acknowledge that the reader brings baggage to the task of interpretation but, second, to insist that this is acceptable and, in fact, that it can even aid in that task. What the hypothetical reader does is ask us to catalogue the baggage of the reader. What precisely is the reader traveling with? And how does this affect how they make sense of what they are reading.

So construed, the hypothetical reader allows us to approach early Christian literature from a variety of theological and ideological perspectives. It allows us to ask questions of texts that their authors may not have anticipated and, in some cases, that their authors may not be able to answer.

---

5 They are not “real” readers in any sense of the term, although that certainly does not mean that someone who resembles one’s hypothetical reader couldn’t have existed.
Although it is certainly possible to do so, we need not frame this exercise in terms of whether a reader's interpretation will be “right” or “wrong,” or whether it will be true to what the author intended or not. As E. D. Hirsch once remarked: “Every interpretation begins and ends with a guess.” Some guesses are better than others, but when dealing with hypothetical readers of any sort—especially perhaps those whose identities are somewhat “playful” in terms of the knowledge that they bring to the table—one’s interpretation should be judged on the basis of whether it is possible from the hypothetical reader’s perspective. Given the parameters outlined for them, could the hypothetical reader proposed by the empirical reader have arrived at such an interpretation? When we frame the matter in this way, we allow ourselves the freedom to explore the various perspectives that any reader brings to a text, and to see with greater clarity how those perspectives impact what the reader will and will not see as they read.

**Mary, the Virgin Spinner**

Mary’s character in PJ is meant to mirror the prophet Samuel as we find him in the Hebrew Bible (1 Sam 1-2). Mary is born to wealthy and generous parents, and her previously-barren mother (not-so-subtly named “Anna”) dedicates her to the service of God before she is even born. Mary’s portrait in PJ is a caricature in almost every sense of the term, and many of the claims that the author makes about her occupy an interesting ground between the slightly exaggerated and the utterly insane. Mary doesn’t just grow up serving God, for example, she grows up in the Jerusalem temple. And she doesn’t just grow up in the Jerusalem temple; she grows up within the Holy of Holies.

One of the more fascinating details that the author includes about Mary is the type of work that she does after she leaves the temple. For those unfamiliar with this narrative, Mary’s parents bring her to the temple when she is three, and the priests show her to the door when she turns twelve because they are afraid that her soon-to-be young adult body is going to begin experiencing the normal monthly process that an adult female body begins experiencing around this time in its life. Because the author of this text upholds Mary as essentially the purest creature who has ever lived, and because it gives no impression that this status changes at any point in her life, this fear that she will somehow

---

pollute the temple may be intended as an ironic jab at the temple officials. Nevertheless, after Mary leaves she still works for the temple. And she does so as a spinner of thread. In keeping with the author’s penchant for the absurd, what Mary spins is no run-of-the-mill thread. She’s not in the business of making throw blankets or sweaters. No, the thread she spins is to be used in the καταπέτασμα, the veil that will cordon off the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple.

With this detail the author of PJ almost certainly alludes to that iconic scene at Jesus’ crucifixion where the veil of the temple is torn in half. Because this author imagines his or her reader as one familiar with “gospel narratives” broadly construed, the linking of Mary’s role in the creation of the temple veil with the destruction of the veil at the death of Jesus is a connection that only the most uninformed reader would miss. This connection is in many ways the paradigmatic low-hanging intertextual fruit: subtle as a sledgehammer, and about as quiet.

The function of Mary’s spinning within the narrative of PJ itself, however, is more nuanced. She spins her thread during the angel’s annunciation of her impending pregnancy, and when she presents her thread to the high priest, he responds: “Mary, the Lord God has magnified your name, and you will be blessed among all the women of the earth” (PJ 12:1). Compare this with Elizabeth’s words to Mary in the Gospel of Luke: “Blessed are you among women” (3:42). The author of PJ here adapts Luke’s words in order to establish a correspondence between the work of Mary’s hands—her thread—and the work of her womb—Jesus. You can see this correspondence in iconography of the Virgin, wherein she is frequently depicted as grasping red thread. It is also not uncommon in patristic exegesis, Proclus of Constantinople referring to Mary’s womb as a “workshop” within which “a human body was gracefully woven into a garment befitting the Word made flesh” (Hom. 1.1.21). So in this regard, the crucifixion of Jesus destroys two pieces of Mary’s handiwork: the body of her son and the fabric of the veil.

I would like to suggest here another interpretation of Mary’s spinning, one that I’m not convinced was necessarily on the author’s radar, and that is that Mary’s spinning is a device that protects her purity and virginity, and that the thread she spins is in some way emblematic of this purity and virginity. As a side note: the author of this text seems to more or less equate Mary’s purity with her virginity. So when I use those terms here, I am more or less using them as synonyms.

7 See Nicholas Constas’ fine work on this and other homilies of Proclus (Nicholas Constas, Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Homilies 1-5, Texts and Translations [VCSup 66; Leiden: Brill, 2003]).
Throughout the narrative the theme of Mary’s purity is stressed via the author’s emphasis on boundaries, and separation. From the moment of her conception, Mary is a creature set apart. We catch our first glimpse of this in the dedication that Anna makes after she receives word that she will have a child. “Whether I give birth to a boy or a girl, I will offer it as a gift to the Lord my God, and it will serve him its whole life” (PJ 4:2). Also after Mary is born, Anna refrains from nursing her until she is able to purify herself in accordance with Levitical law. Mary is therefore separated from her mother in order to protect her from impurity (PJ 5:9). As she grows, and she begins walking miraculously at the age of six months, Anna turns her bedroom into a sanctuary (ἁγίασμα) so that the young Mary will be protected from the outside world (PJ 6:4). When Mary turns three and her parents bring her to the temple in fulfillment of their vow to God, her father Joachim hires a moving party: “undefiled Hebrew daughters” who stand alongside the road with lamps, so that Mary’s eyes will not be captivated by the outside world (PJ 7:4–6). And, when Mary arrives in the temple she is whisked away by the priests to what will become her home for around nine years: the holy of holies itself, and the summit of purity (PJ 8:2; 15:11).

The first time we do not see a protective mechanism around Mary is after the priests assign Joseph as Mary’s caretaker, a position that he refuses initially on the grounds that he is an old man and has children older than her (PJ 9:8). When Joseph brings her home from the temple, he abandons her. He says: “I’m going away to build houses … The Lord will protect you” (PJ 9:12). For the reader of PJ, who has watched everyone in Mary’s life shelter and protect her from everything, this is a shocking moment. For the first time in this narrative, she is vulnerable. And it leaves the reader searching for something to guard her, something to replace that protective mechanism.

But I would argue that the reader does not have to search long, for immediately after Joseph departs, this is when the priests call Mary back to the temple and assign her the task of spinning thread for the veil (PJ 10:1). And it is notable here that she is summoned alongside other virgins, which signals to the reader that Mary has remained pure even despite her irresponsible husband. But there is also a practical level to her spinning, and that is that the task keeps her occupied, or that it distracts her in some way. “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop” comes to mind. And distraction of this sort is present elsewhere in the narrative, most notably when Mary is “distracted” by the young virgins her mother and father hire to play with her when she is an infant (PJ 6:5), as well as those virgins who line the road.

---

6 See close parallel in 1 Sam 1:11.
to the temple when she is three to distract her from the things of the outside world (PJ 7:4). But narratively speaking, Mary’s spinning in PJ forms a tangible connection with the temple, and it ensures that she is going to remain as she is, namely, virginal and pure.

**The Rending of the Veil and the Loss of Innocence**

Mary remains in this state of utter purity for the entirety of PJ’s narrative. The clearest affirmation of this comes in the wake of Jesus’ birth, which takes place in a cave outside of Bethlehem. In this scene, Joseph and a Hebrew midwife are prevented from entering the cave by a dark cloud that overshadows it. But when the cloud recedes, and the midwife sees Mary nursing the infant Jesus, she turns and remarks to a previously-unmentioned character — Salome — that “a virgin has given birth, but her nature (φύσις) cannot prove it” (PJ 19:18). Salome refuses to believe this without proof, so she enters the cave and inserts her finger into Mary, specifically, into her φύσις, here understood as a reference to the Virgin’s vaginal opening. As soon as she does this Salome’s hand bursts into flames and she immediately regrets her decision.

The Salome episode is modeled after the so-called Doubting Thomas pericope in the Gospel of John (ch. 20) wherein the resurrected Jesus appears to all of the disciples except Thomas. They convey the message to Thomas, “We have seen the Lord,” but Thomas insists that he will not believe it until he sees it for himself. “Show me the body.” The Thomas episode ends with a very real affirmation of the disciples’ message, for when Jesus appears to Thomas and presents his body for examination, the disciples’ words to him are validated as trustworthy. So too does Salome’s examination serve to confirm the message of the midwife: “A virgin has given birth, but her nature cannot prove it.”

The Salome episode makes clear that the author of PJ understands female virginity in physical terms, at least in part; just as Thomas wishes to examine Jesus’ physical body, so too does Salome examine Mary with the goal of discovering something tangible. But while there is a physical component to Mary’s virginity in this text, what that physical component is remains unclear. Many modern interpreters of this scene have framed the matter in terms of the search for Mary’s hymen. Yet a recent article on this topic suggests that this is probably not what the author of PJ has in mind. In the spring edition of the *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, Julia Kelto Lillis points out that the hymen as an indicator of physical virginity is almost entirely absent from our ancient gynecological manuals.
Soranus alone references it (Gyn. 1.3.17) and then only to refute the idea. Lillis’s article is remarkable on a number of levels. One of its chief contributions, on my read, is to problematize the notion that there was a dominant or “normal” view in antiquity of what constitutes “virginity.”

So what precisely is Salome searching for when she performs her test of the Virgin’s φύσις? We aren’t sure, and the author of PJ might not be sure either. Neither the object of Salome’s search nor its results are ever made explicit. One thing that is clear is that this test should not be understood as determining whether Mary had engaged in sexual intercourse. There is no question in the reader’s mind that Jesus’ conception has occurred outside of the “normal” means, as Joseph is away building houses when Mary is visited by the angel and then subsequently and miraculously impregnated.

What the test is more likely determining is the status of Mary’s body after the birth of Jesus. For the ancient reader, conception of a child outside of normal, natural means would have been more understandable than the idea that a woman’s physical integrity could be maintained through the act of giving birth. As Walter Bauer so famously remarked: “One does not argue the question whether a virgin can conceive, but whether she can give birth without losing her characteristic condition.” Or, as Ryan Byrne has suggested more recently, the Salome episode “acknowledges the reader’s assumption that what goes in, whatever its means, must come out … Just as intercourse could deflower a woman, so too could the vaginal delivery of a fetus. Direction of the intrusion is irrelevant.”

What Salome is looking for is evidence that Mary’s body shows no signs of having borne and delivered a child, something that would certainly be incredible in any sense of the term. And the outcome of her examination would certainly suggest that she finds exactly that. We might frame this in terms of the boundaries that I spoke of earlier. Such boundaries are present at the birth of Jesus — the cloud that blocks the entrance to the cave in which he is born, for example. But the clearest and most serious boundary, it would seem, is the Virgin’s φύσις, and the Salome episode, her burning hand in particular, illustrates the point that this territory remains uncharted.

---

The birth narrative of PJ is, in this regard, a rather frustrating one. Here you have a woman who has given birth, but who kinda hasn’t, and a baby who has been born, but who kinda hasn’t. For all its specifics, there is little in this scene to suggest that a birth has, in fact, taken place. I would argue that this produces a sort of “hanging” feeling for the reader, prompting them to look past the bounds of the narrative for satisfaction. And I would like to suggest that the temple veil is one point of contact that the reader can use to bridge this narrative to another with which they are likely familiar, namely, the crucifixion of Jesus.

In the Synoptic passion narratives — and again, I am painting here with a rather broad brush and allowing these stories to bleed together in many ways — in these narratives the reader witnesses the destruction of the temple veil. There is nothing inherently “Mariological” about this tradition, and it is doubtful that the Synoptic evangelists conceived of it as relating in any way to Jesus’ mother. But for the reader of PJ, the matter is quite different. What the reader of PJ sees destroyed in these narratives is a textile that the mother of Jesus helped to create. And if I’m correct that the reader of PJ has come to see Mary’s spinning and its product as a figuration of her own virginity, then this reader might also conceive of the veil’s tearing in light of the innocence of the one who helped create it.

The rending of the veil, then, is more than a bitter irony or a neat coincidence. From the reader’s perspective, it could be interpreted as a loss of innocence, and a loss of virginity. The crucifixion of Jesus thus becomes for the reader a sort of “birth,” but unlike the birth that we find in PJ, here there is pain, there is blood, and there is tearing. The reader who was expecting Jesus’ birth in PJ to in some way alter the physical status of his mother finds some level of narrative closure at the cross. The connection prompts a certain reflection in the reader on the nature of virginity and purity in PJ. As stated before, I think that the author of PJ does intend the reader to see Mary’s purity and virginity as linked and mutually dependent. But if this is a legitimate connection that can be made on the part of the reader, I wonder if it doesn’t undercut this equation proposed by the author. Is it actually the case that Mary is pure because she is a virgin? If the reader construes the tearing of the veil as the loss of Mary’s innocence, is it also the case that Mary is no longer a pure creature? I think the answer to that is probably “no.” I don’t think the reader is led to see Mary as anything but pure, but I do think that the reader may be prompted to rethink what they earlier assumed about the relationship between her purity and her virginity.
Conclusions

Umberto Eco once claimed that there are two ways of walking in the woods. The first is to walk with the aim of finding the clearest path and the quickest exit. The second is to deviate from the path and “get lost just for the hell of it.” The second way, he argued, allows you to discover what the woods are really like. This is a good way, I think, of summing up the type of reading that I’ve tried to do in this paper. I hope that the connections proposed here provide more questions than answers, because I think that ultimately this is what good fictional narratives are supposed to do for their audiences. Keep them reading, and keep them guessing. My goal here has been to propose one way of playing with a curious facet of an ancient text, and to allow my hypothetical reader to jump down into a few rabbit holes. I think the value of such a playful exercise is to introduce new vantage points from which to see the text, and to see if these vantage points might give rise to new questions, or at least new answers to old ones.