“Then Suddenly, Everything Resumed Its Course”: The Suspension of Time in the *Protevangelium of James* Reconsidered

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No person who has witnessed the birth of a child would describe it as a serene or quiet process. To the contrary: childbirth is an arduous affair, filled with noise, blood, and distress. As the ever-insightful Carol Burnett once remarked: “Having a baby is like taking your lower lip and forcing it up over your head.” Many have accused Burnett of understating the matter. Even in our era of modern medicine, childbirth is supremely dangerous for mothers and infants (as well as fathers, depending on their decorum, or lack thereof). In 2015, for example, UNICEF estimated that for every 100,000 births worldwide, around 200 mothers and 2,000 infants perished. And that’s an enormous improvement from 1990—only twenty-five years previous—where the statistics are nearly twice as bad.\(^1\) Measuring maternal and neonatal mortality rates in the ancient world is infinitely trickier, of course, but estimates in the 20-30% range seem comfortably within in the realm of possibility.

The infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke may well reflect the grizzly nature of birth in general and in the ancient world in particular. The notion that these birth accounts are vague is standard scholarly fare that you can find in nearly any commentary. For all the detail that Luke gives to the time leading up to Jesus’s birth, he passes through the birth itself without fanfare: “Mary gave birth to her firstborn son” (Luke 2:7). And in Matthew the birth of Jesus is practically an afterthought, providing little more than the context for the naming of Jesus and the visit of the magi (Matt 1:25-2:1).

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It is almost as if these authors wish to suggest: “Jesus was born, and all that this implies <wink wink, and let the reader understand.>”

Disappointment with the brevity of accounts like these was a factor that contributed to the production of Christian apocryphal literature; if you don’t like the way a story is told, then write your own and fill in the gaps. One of the most important apocryphal texts to survive from antiquity is the second-century *Protevangelium of James*, a collection of tales about the birth and childhood of Mary the Virgin, her parents Anna and Joachim, and of course, Joseph and Jesus. PJ’s account of Jesus’s birth and the events surrounding it is far more detailed than anything we find in Matthew and Luke. Yet for all this detail, the author of PJ frames the birth in about as unnatural of terms possible, describing it in terms of a brilliant light that flashes and then dissipates, revealing an infant safe and nursing in the arms of his mother (PJ 19:15-16). Where the canonical accounts shy away from even mentioning the act of parturition at all, the author of PJ seems to imply that a birth hasn’t even taken place. Yet the once-pregnant Mary is holding a baby once the process is complete, so something has happened, but whatever it may be, it’s neither normal nor natural.

**Joseph’s Vision**

The author uses the character of Joseph to make another point that further underlines the unusual nature of Jesus’s birth, and that is the so-called vision of Joseph. In this vision he witnesses the complete cessation of time and the utter stillness of all created things. And he tells the reader about all that he sees in the first person. Joseph’s vision has the effect of slowing the fast-paced narrative of PJ to a stop, beckoning the reader to pause in wonder at what is taking place back in the cave, in his (and the reader’s) absence. It is by far one of the most confusing and beautiful scenes in the narrative, and there are few quite like it cognate literature from the time period.
For those less familiar with the narrative as a whole, a bit of stage-setting. In PJ 17, Joseph and Mary are on their way to register in the census. When they are not far into their journey, Mary goes into labor and asks Joseph to help her down from the donkey (PJ 17:10). Joseph then does what any responsible husband would do when his wife is in labor: he finds an abandoned cave and leaves Mary there so that he can go fetch a midwife (PJ 18:1). Up to this point in the story everything has been narrated in third person. But as soon as Joseph sets out from the cave, the perspective shifts, and he begins sharing the details of his vision directly with the reader:

“Now I Joseph was walking and yet not walking. And I looked up to the pole of heaven and I saw it fixed, and I saw the air utterly astonished, and the birds of heaven resting. Then I gazed upon the earth and I saw a bowl sitting there, and workers reclining, their hands in the bowl. And the ones chewing were not chewing, and the ones taking [food] did not take, and the ones raising [food] to their mouths did not raise, but their faces were all looking up. And I saw sheep being driven, but the sheep were still. And the shepherd was raising his hand in order to strike them, but his hand was stuck, raised. And I observed the torrent of the river and saw little goats, their mouths hovering over the water, but not drinking. And then, in an instant, everything resumed its course” (PJ 18:2-11).

The shift in narrative aspect—third to first person—persists halfway into next chapter, as Joseph finds a midwife and speaks with her, and it will return to the third person as abruptly as it switched in the first place. This seemingly-clumsy adjustment in perspective has been used in the past as evidence that the vision was not part of the original Protevangelium. Such a case is possibly bolstered by the absence of the vision from a few MSS, including the Bodmer V codex, which contains our oldest extant copy of the text.² Yet others have argued that the presence of the vision in all other MSS of PJ suggests that it was part of the narrative from the beginning, and as such, those MSS that do not have

² Others that exclude it are Vaticanus graecus 455 and 654.
the vision have simply chosen to exclude it for whatever reason. There are a number of MSS that include the vision but adjust the narrative perspective to the third person throughout, which certainly makes the vision itself less jarring.

Most who believe the vision to be an original part of PJ consider the first-person perspective to be the original reading, and such perspective serves an important function within the narrative world of the text. First, like the so-called “we passages” in the canonical Acts, the shift in perspective has a way of “validating” the contents of the vision for the reader; this is not secondhand, but from the source itself. The shift also has a way of slowing the reader down and thus encouraging them to marvel along with the rest of creation at the importance of the events transpiring in the cave. But perhaps most significantly, Joseph’s “I” draws the reader away from the cave with him, forcing them to follow Joseph as he leaves Mary to labor alone.\(^3\) As I’ve already noted, it’s an uncomfortable thought, the man who would leave his pregnant wife in this condition. The author of PJ knows that this will unsettle his readers, and he plays with this dynamic in the way that he crafts Joseph’s vision. The reader judges Joseph for leaving Mary alone, but then suddenly they are traveling away from the cave with him. And as they begin to witness the stilling of creation alongside Joseph, they find themselves drawn into that eager expectation.

Revisiting François Bovon on Joseph’s Vision in PJ 18

In the early 1990s, François Bovon published a short chapter on this curious scene in a Festschrift for his colleague Helmut Koester. Entitled “The Suspension of Time in Chapter 18 of *Protevangelium Jacobi*,” this deceptively short piece (which is just over twelve pages) is both characteristically dense and frequently cited in PJ scholarship. His aim in this chapter is to specify how the vision of Joseph is supposed to function within the author’s worldview. And when he wrote
this almost thirty years ago it was certainly the case that the focus of scholarship to that point had been on issues of the text’s integrity or lack thereof. As he frames it: “Scholars have preferred to study the origin and growth of the text rather than the coherent meaning of its structural content.”

Bovon’s chapter could be read as an ironic illustration of this tendency, as his lament about the tendency of scholars to focus on origins and growth of the text comes about three quarters of the way into his argument and follows nearly eight pages of admittedly brilliant text-critical throat-clearing. But I digress.

Bovon’s argument in this chapter is twofold. First, he suggests that the vision of Joseph is supposed to correspond in some way to the Lukan shepherds who are at rest in the field when the angels come to announce the birth of Jesus. Second, and more significantly, he argues that the suspension of time in Joseph’s vision signifies the dawning of a new eschatological era. “The created world is immobilized,” he maintains, “because God is about to act.”

Noting that the pause in time is only temporary, Bovon suggests that Jesus’s birth here is understood only as the first stage in God’s eschatological action. That is: the birth of Jesus for this author is but glimpse of the end, and not the end itself. Bovon argues that the author uses the suspension of time in order to signify the belief that in the eschaton there will be neither day nor night. But why have the vision from the perspective of

My aim in this paper is not to demolish what Bovon has done in this piece. Rather, I would like to suggest that he fundamentally correct in what he argues, but that his argument needs filling out. At several points Bovon dumps handfuls of primary sources into parenthetical citations, but often it is unclear precisely what he wants his readers to do with them. In some cases the references seem to be wholly irrelevant to the point he is trying to make, or if they are relevant, then perhaps they just

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3 Joseph has left his sons to stand guard at the cave, so Mary is not entirely alone, but she is clearly supposed to be the only one inside the cave.

seem irrelevant to the reader who lacks understanding. (Take that for what it’s worth.) But in more cases than not, the sources he cites are quite rich, but simultaneously underutilized. What Bovon has done in this chapter is gather the pieces of a complicated jigsaw puzzle and begin assembling the edges of that puzzle.

**Shemot Rabbah**

The first source from Bovon’s chapter that I want to examine here is from *Shemot Rabbah*, an aggadic midrash on Exodus. It is a significant outlier, dating to several hundred years after the composition of *PJ*. Because this text is so much later than the vision of Joseph, I should state unequivocally from the outset that by addressing it here I am not claiming here any sort of literary dependence. Bovon’s citation of it likewise is not a claim of this sort. After all, it is a basic rule of composition that authors do not cite texts that have yet to come into existence. However, I think it is fair to say that while the author of *PJ* is certainly not reading a midrash that doesn’t exist yet, she or he is almost certainly familiar with this type of reading practice, and it is also the case that ideas can and do often exist long before they are written down.⁶ As a professor of mine in graduate school was fond of saying: “There’s a lot of stuff in the air.” While admittedly imprecise, the sentiment affords us a bit of flexibility to play with connections and determine if any of them are worth pursuing in greater depth. Some will undeniably short-circuit, but others may reveal currents in places that we did not expect to find them.

The 29th chapter of *Shemot Rabbah* is a commentary on the giving of the Torah to Moses and the people at Mount Sinai in Exodus 20. The focus of this chapter is on the first words of the decalogue: “I the LORD am your God.” In this chapter are a series of reflections on the theophany in Exodus 19:18, in

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⁵ Bovon, “Suspension,” 403.

which Mt. Sinai is covered with smoke and is trembling, with the voice of God speaking in the distance to Moses as the sound of thunder. For this author, the earth and the people quake not because they fear punishment, but because through the giving of the Law, God is giving new life to creation. And there’s also a sense here that what happens at the giving of this new life will happen again at some point in the future. The commentary continues: “If the earth trembled when He gave life to the world, how much the more so when he comes to punish the wicked for transgressing the words of the Torah?” (Shem. Rab. 29:9).

Perhaps the most significant portion of the Shemot Rabbah for the purposes of this paper, and certainly the portion that Bovon was likely most interested in, is what happens near the end of this chapter, when the ground stops quaking and God begins to speak: “When God gave the Torah no bird twittered [or flew], no ox lowed, none of the Ophanim stirred a wing, the Seraphim did not say ‘Holy, Holy’, the sea did not roar, the creatures spoke not, the whole world was hushed into breathless silence and the voice went forth: I am the LORD your God” (Shem. Rab. 29:9).

The utter stillness of the natural world is interpreted here not only as an expression of fear or awe, but of the oneness and uniqueness of the God of Israel. The story of Elijah and the prophets of Ba’al in 1 Kings 18 is cited as an illustration. In the Shemot Rabbah, it is not just Ba’al who doesn’t respond to the wailing of his prophets; the natural world quiets as well: “God silenced the whole world, both those in heaven and those on earth, and the whole world became waste and void, as if no creature was in the world” (Shem. Rab. 29:9). Connecting this back to Exodus, the point is made: “How much more natural was it then that when God spoke on Mount Sinai, the whole world became silent, so that all creatures might know that there is none beside Him” (Shem. Rab. 29:9).

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7 The authors of this commentary connect the theophany with the prophet Amos: “A lion has roared, who can but fear? My Lord GOD has spoken, who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8). The sense here is that the presence of God in general and the speech of God in particular induces a degree of respectful fear.
Two suggestions for ways that we might understand Joseph’s vision in light of this midrash. First, perhaps it is the case that the stillness of creation is a commentary on the identity of the one being born in the cave while Joseph is away. The reader of PJ is already aware that Jesus will not be a regular human child; at the annunciation scene, Mary is told that he will be “son of the Most High” (PJ 11:7). But I wonder if the stillness that precedes his birth could also be read as the author’s attempt to affirm this divine identity while also maintaining a sense of God’s oneness. Second, might the author of PJ be framing the birth of Jesus as an event similar to what happens in Exodus? Is Jesus for this author a sort of “new law”? Or, perhaps the author is here echoing the Pauline sentiment that Jesus is the τέλος νόμου, the law’s “completion” or “goal” (Rom 10:4). This claim is at best half-baked right now, but I think it’s one that might be worth exploring at some point. In general, scholars of Christian apocrypha like myself who focus on narrative texts have a tendency to neglect the Pauline corpus as a source of intertextual play. This is a lacuna that we would do well to address.

4 Ezra

The next scene that I’d like to examine from Bovon’s chapter is from 4 Ezra, which is significantly closer to PJ in terms of chronology. At two points Bovon notes a specific passage from the seventh chapter of this apocalypse in which the author describes the day of judgment: “It has no sun or moon or stars or cloud or lightning or thunder, or wind or water or air, or darkness or evening or morning, or summer or spring or harvest, or heat or frost or cold, or hail or rain or dew, or noon or night, or dawn, or shining or brightness or light, but only the splendor of the glory of the Most High, by which all shall see what has been determined for them” (4 Ezra 7:39-43). This passage dovetails nicely with Bovon’s thesis that Joseph’s vision in PJ is an eschatological one, and that PJ’s view of the eschaton is a world in which “there will be no more day or night.” Bovon makes a compelling case for
this argument, but his fixation on it seems to have led him away from another relevant passage in 4 Ezra, just before this one, that on my read both reinforces and provides valuable nuance for his thesis. At the start of his discourse on the final judgment, the author of 4 Ezra describes the beginning of the eschaton that is inaugurated by the death of the Messiah:

“Behold, the time will come, when the signs which I have foretold you will come, that the city which now is not seen shall appear, and the land which now is hidden shall be disclosed. And everyone who has been delivered from the evils that I have foretold shall see my wonders. For my Messiah shall be revealed with those who are with him, and he shall make rejoice those who remain for four hundred years. And after these years my servant the Messiah shall die, and all who draw human breath. And the world shall be turned back to primeval silence for seven days, as it was at the first beginnings; so that no one shall be left. And after seven days the world, which is not yet awake, shall be roused, and that which is corruptible shall perish” (4 Ezra 7:26-31).

The idea that silence precedes the creation of the natural world is not unique to 4 Ezra. In his Hermeneia commentary on this text, Michael Stone notes a parallel to the Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo, in which the author writes that: “There were darkness and silence before the world was, and the silence spoke, and the darkness became visible” (LAB 60.2).

Here I’d like to propose a couple of possible ways to build on Bovon’s thesis that Joseph’s vision is an eschatological one, but that it is only a foretaste of what’s to come. First, I want to suggest that the author of Joseph’s vision may use the stillness and silence of the natural world in order to signify that the birth of Jesus brings a sort of new creation, or perhaps that it foreshadows a new creation that will come at some point in the future. Such conceptual language may echo Paul’s claim in 2 Corinthians that “anyone in Christ is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). Or, second, we might also frame the

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8 Translations of 4 Ezra are from Michael E. Stone and Matthias Henze, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch: Translations,
matter not as an assertion about followers of Jesus in the future, but as a theological claim about the body of Jesus itself when it is born. Without leaping too far into the authorship rabbit hole, perhaps the stillness preceding Jesus’s birth is meant to echo a theological claim made in the Pauline letter to the Colossians, namely, that Jesus is the “the image of the unseen god, firstborn of all creation” (εἰκών τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως) (Col 1:15). The sense would be that in order to make this claim about Jesus, the author of PJ must in some way recreate the primordial silence that precedes the original creative act.

**Apocalypse of John**

One final passage that I’d like to draw attention to is one that Bovon does not mention. The passage in question is from the eighth chapter of the Apocalypse of John, in which the Lamb opens the final seal of the scroll that has been the focus of the author for about three chapters. When he opens the seal, the visionary maintains, “there was silence (σιγή) in heaven for about half an hour” (Rev 8:1). This reference to silence is so brief that it is both easily missed and easily forgotten. But I do not think that is why it is absent from Bovon’s references. Maybe this is optimistic, but I have a hard time believing that a walking encyclopedia like François Bovon would have simply forgotten about a passage like this. I think it far more likely that he didn’t include it because he didn’t find it relevant for the point that he was trying to make. Of course, by including it here I would like to suggest that it is, in fact, relevant.

Craig Koester has suggested a number of ways of understanding the significance of this silence, ranging from an expression “awe and reverence at the presence of God,” to providing a “context for prayer.” Koester also argues that it may serve as an “anticipation of a new creation,” and as part of his evidence for this he cites the passage from 4 Ezra mentioned above (specifically, 6:39). Koester is not

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*Introductions, and Notes* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).
alone in this reading. Brian Blount argues similarly: “The relationship between the moment of silence and the breaking of the seventh seal is reminiscent of the silence that preceded God’s creation of heaven and earth. In this case, following the cataclysms of the final judgment, God will create a new heaven and a new earth. As at the beginning (cf. 4 Ezra 6.39; 2 Bar 3.7), so here at the end (4 Ezra 7:26-44), the creative moment is set up by quiet” (158).  

But in the context of the Apocalypse as a whole, the new creation will not arrive for quite a few more chapters, and it is preceded by a fairly lengthy period of judgment, destruction, and death. So while this moment of silence may well indicate that a new creation is en route, even imminent, it also may indicate that God is about to begin judging the current one. And on my read this juxtaposition of judgment = now, new creation = later actually fits well within the narrative of PJ. Immediately after Jesus is born, for example, an enigmatic woman named Salome shows up on the scene and doubts that Mary has remained a virgin through the process of giving birth, which is a claim that the text unequivocally affirms. She enters, and attempts to perform a gynecological exam on the Virgin, at which point her hand bursts into flames and she exclaims: “Curse my lawlessness and my faithlessness, for I have put the Living God on trial” (PJ 20:1)! She begs for mercy, at which point an angel instructs her to pick up the child, and when she complies, she is healed and leaves the cave “having been made righteous” (δεδικαιωμένη) (PJ 20:11).

Like the Apocalypse, then, perhaps the silence that we find in PJ signals to the reader that the new creation is on its way, but that before it arrives, there will be a period of judgment like that experienced by the unfortunate Salome. If we wanted to stretch the “Jesus as new law” imagery mentioned earlier, then it is noteworthy that Salome here decries her “lawlessness” (ἀνομία), and

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9 So also Jürgen Roloff: “For the end-time one has to expect the superseding return of the events of primeval history (cf. 2:7; 21:1; 22:22); thus, an overwhelming silence will once again precede the new creation: ‘And the world shall be turned back to primeval silence’ (4 Ezra 7:30).” (101-2)
that the body of Jesus serves as the antidote for it. This fits quite nicely with Bovon’s thesis that the birth of Jesus in PJ inaugurates a sort of liminal period in time that will precede the eschaton.

Conclusions

This paper ended up quite a bit different than I had originally intended it. It was always my intention to comb through Bovon’s references in this chapter, because for years it has puzzled me why he chose to focus on some to the exclusion of others. Although I suppose the “you can’t do it all” mantra is always an important one. What I’ve suggested here is that Bovon’s thesis is nuanced significantly by considering the language of new creation and new law, and that both of these may inform how the author of PJ may have understood Joseph’s vision. The alleged parallels with the Pauline letters were a bit of a surprise to me, and when they first popped into my head I chocked it up to having just taught a seminar class on Paul. “Seek and ye shall find.” But the more I’ve considered them, the more I think that perhaps a more careful consideration of Pauline themes in PJ may be warranted. In that spirit I welcome any thoughts that you might have on that.