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Sophia Gilmour  
*Loyola Marymount University*

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*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

## **The Protoevangelium of James: Mary, Purity, and Womanhood**

By Sophia Gilmour

**Abstract:** Despite its somewhat misleading title, *The Protoevangelium of James* is an unofficial gospel about Mary, the mother of Jesus. Although many contemporary Christians may not know it, this text is where we find many ideas surrounding Mary. Like many early Christian writings, the identity of the author is unclear, but based upon the writing, it would seem the author had firsthand knowledge of the events recorded. *The Protoevangelium of James*, also known as *The Infancy Gospel of James*, outlines the divine circumstances surrounding Mary's birth and upbringing and reports that she lived a very holy childhood. In this paper, I analyze how the *Infancy Gospel of James* has shaped Mariology: her holy status, her perpetual virginity, her interaction with the midwife Salome after Jesus is born, and the overall significance of the narrative for Christians today. Labeling *The Protoevangelium* a fully Feminist text proves difficult due to its contribution to the harmful cultural dichotomies about women within the church. Despite this, I will argue that the text retains meaning for contemporary readers, particularly because of its egalitarian qualities, which are relevant for a twenty-first-century Christian audience that yearns for more representation of marginalized groups, including women.

**Keywords:** Mary, Gender, *Protoevangelium of James*, *Infancy Gospel of James*

Despite its somewhat misleading title, *The Protoevangelium of James* is an unofficial gospel about Mary, the mother of Jesus. Although many contemporary Christians may not know it, this text is where we find many ideas surrounding Mary. Like many early Christian writings, the identity of the author is unclear, but based upon the writing, it would seem the author had firsthand knowledge of the events recorded. *The Protoevangelium of James*, also known as *The Infancy Gospel of James*, outlines the divine circumstances surrounding Mary's birth and upbringing and reports that she lived a very holy childhood.

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In this paper, I analyze how the *Infancy Gospel of James* has shaped Mariology: her holy status, her perpetual virginity, her interaction with the midwife Salome after Jesus is born, and the overall significance of the narrative for Christians today. Labeling *The Protoevangelium* a fully Feminist text proves difficult due to its contribution to the harmful cultural dichotomies about women within the church. Despite this, I will argue that the text retains meaning for contemporary readers, particularly because of its egalitarian qualities, which are relevant for a twenty-first-century Christian audience that yearns for more representation of marginalized groups, including women.

The text describes Mary as being born to a well-endowed and perhaps even wealthy Jewish family, and at age three she is dedicated to the temple where she receives blessings and an overall grand welcome.<sup>1</sup> Mary undoubtedly serves as a holy figure for many Christians. But we must acknowledge that *The Protoevangelium* story is one of grand and unattainable privilege, beginning with her mother Anna's pregnancy (which came about miraculously, without her father Joachim). Anna is unable to conceive and prays for a child, promising she will dedicate them to the temple and later rejoicing at the birth of a girl; her rejoicing is unusual in a society where male children were most desirable. According to *The Protoevangelium*, Mary's twelfth birthday moves the priests to reconsider her living arrangements as she could no longer live in the Jerusalem temple as a menstruating woman.<sup>2</sup> Purity laws and rituals are not the subjects of my inquiry; however, it is important to note the reason Mary is forced to leave the temple because it is a central plot of *The Protoevangelium*. The double standard of excluding women from the temple points to a universal taboo about menstruating women, particularly in religious traditions where they may be deemed 'unclean.' As Simone De Beauvoir so eloquently points out, "the girl who has not yet gone through puberty does not pose a threat, she is not the object of any taboo and has no sacred characteristics; she becomes impure the day she might be able to procreate."<sup>3</sup>

For Mary, menstruation occurs at age twelve, and according to *The Protoevangelium*, a husband is immediately chosen for her: Joseph. The text portrays Joseph as an older and reluctant widower who already has children from a previous marriage but is chosen by the High Priest as Mary's husband. He acts more as her guardian than her husband within this framework of an arranged

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 179.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer A. Glancy, *Corporeal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 109.

<sup>3</sup> Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 2011), 167.

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marriage.<sup>4</sup> Betsworth's point sheds further light on the dynamic of Mary and Joseph's relationship, which was hardly uncommon at the time.

Piecing together background information on *The Protoevangelium* proves complicated but enlightening to the purposes of our study, for which we must understand the context of the document. One genre to which *The Protoevangelium of James* belongs to is Infancy Gospels, of which there are others, including the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas* and canonical *Gospel of Luke*. Infancy Gospels narrate the events prior to and immediately following the birth of Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Some consider *The Protoevangelium* to be apologetic, asserting Mary's purity above all else to defend her from disbelief and ridicule faced by early Christians, while some scholars have determined the text to be an Encomium, a standard subject for Greco-Roman students at the time, giving background on someone of importance to praise them.<sup>6</sup>

Longstanding tradition claims the text was written by James of the New Testament or "James the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:19 and Mark 6:3), shortly after the death of King Herod in 4 B.C.E. This claim remains unsubstantiated, and the author of *The Protoevangelium* can no longer be determined.<sup>7</sup> Despite lacking information on the author of *The Protoevangelium*, research on the text has helped reconstruct rough dates and a general sense of the authorial background, including their resources. It appears that the author of *The Protoevangelium* had access to both Matthew and Luke and depends on scriptural traditions found within them. Matthew and Luke were written towards the end of the first century, placing *The Protoevangelium's* date of composition after Matthew and Luke around the middle of the second century, when references to it begin to emerge in other early Christian writings.<sup>8</sup> Finally, many modern Christians are not aware of the text at all, and due to its apocryphal status, some may critique its relevance.

Although popular attitudes toward the apocryphal gospels are often dismissive, insisting they were of importance only to small and isolated early Christian communities, such is not the case with *The Protoevangelium*. The wide geographical circulation of *The Protoevangelium* is shown by Greek

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<sup>4</sup> Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 180.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Foster, *The Non-Canonical Gospels* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008), 138.

<sup>6</sup> Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 172.

<sup>7</sup> Robert J. Miller, *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version* (Salem: Polebridge Press, 1992), 374.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *The Complete Gospels*, 375.

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manuscripts as well as versional evidence in many other ancient languages such as Sahidic Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Slavonic, and Arabic. This may have also potentially influenced the Qur'anic and later Islamic understandings of Mary in the Muslim tradition.<sup>9</sup> *The Protoevangelium*, in addition to drawing on the canonical gospels, also draws upon a variety of sources that would have been well known to the Jewish audience reading or hearing the story, including the Septuagint and Mishnah, particularly by drawing parallels between the character of Anna and multiple women in the Old Testament.<sup>10</sup> *The Protoevangelium*, therefore, has been influential not only to Christianity's understanding of Mary, but also to Islam's which deems her in some regard a Prophet in her own right.

One of the most relevant concerns raised by the text is Mary's virginity, which was examined and confirmed by the midwife, Salome. Additionally, this narrative has potentially become the source of apologetic narratives within the Christian tradition. Although the author likely did mean to assert Mary's purity and virginity, I would argue that the most salient component of the story for contemporary Christians is the allusion to the Hebrew Scriptures, validating Mary's place among other religious figures, both heroes and heroines alike.

However, I would raise caution towards treating the text as unproblematic, as it contains an apparent dichotomy between purity and impurity, virginity and promiscuity, and Mary, the mother of God, against the rest of womankind. Salome's hand erupts in flames upon examining Mary's womanhood (something which many of us laywomen may wish to conjure when facing judgment about their sexual activity or lack thereof). Upon inspection, Mary's postpartum intactness implies an ethical and aesthetic judgment on other bodies, specifically on female orifices that gape in childbirth.<sup>11</sup> Calling the text empowering would be easier without the focus on Mary's unique vulval state after childbirth and power to conceive a child without sexual intercourse, both of which make her simultaneously hard to relate to and easy to look up to as a holy, otherworldly figure.

*The Protoevangelium of James* reveals meaning for contemporary Christians because it asserts the importance of Mary among characters of the Hebrew Scriptures as a monumental biblical woman. Mary's position as the product of divine conception and upbringing raises her status, through this text,

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<sup>9</sup> Foster, *The Non-Canonical Gospels*, 112.

<sup>10</sup> Betsworth, *Children in Early Christian Narratives*, 170.

<sup>11</sup> Glancy, *Corporeal Knowledge*, 108.

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essentially to a holy figure, like Jesus. Although Mary's equality with other holy figures in the Christian tradition may bring hope to an increasingly Feminist church, her remarkable faith, obedience, and body may inevitably remind us of our own imperfections.

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