

Mary, the New Ark of the Covenant: Mary’s Houses, the Temple, and the People in the Protoevangelium of James¹

Natsumi KAWAGOE

Rikkyo Univ.

1. Introduction

“So who gave birth in the cave?”

Καὶ τίς ἐστὶν ἡ γεννώσα ἐν τῷ σπηλαίῳ;

(Protoevangelium of James, 19:5)²

-
- 1 This article is an English version of my previous paper in Japanese (in *Seisho Gaku Ronshu* 52 [2021, 93–112]).
 - 2 Although there is much variation and fluidity among the manuscripts of the Protoevangelium of James, and many different readings exist, previous studies have referred primarily to the following editions. Before the discovery of Bodmer Papyrus V (1952), the oldest extant manuscript of the Protoevangelium of James, C. von Tischendorf’s edition based on 50 Greek manuscripts known at the time (C. von Tischendorf, *Evangelia Apocrypha: Adhibitis Plurimis Codicibus Graecis et Latinis Maximam Partem Nunc Primum Consultis atque Ineditorum Copia Insignibus* [Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1876]), was accepted as the definitive work. Much research after 1961, however, has used the edition of É. de Strycker, which was prepared with reference to Bodmer Papyrus V (É. de Strycker, *La forme de la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques: Recherches sur le papyrus Bodmer 5, SH 33* [Bruxelles: Société des Bollandistes, 1961]). A later edition by R. F. Hock, based on de Strycker’s edition and partly supplemented by Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 3524 (a Greek fragment of the 6th century discovered in 1896–1897) (R. F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and*

This is a question posed concerning Mary in chapter 19 of the Protoevangelium of James (hereafter P.J.). Joseph, who is looking for a midwife to help Mary give birth in a cave, is asked this question by a woman he encounters. The name of “the one who gave birth (ἡ γεννώσα)” is indeed Mary (Μαρία). Who, then, is this Mary?

Joseph is unable to clearly define “who” Mary is in response to this question. The conversation between Joseph and the midwife continues as follows (19:6–9).

I answered. “My betrothed.”

She said to me. “Is she not your wife?”

I said to her. “She is Mary who grew up in the temple of the Lord. I won her as my wife by lot. But she is not my wife. She was conceived by the Holy Spirit.”

According to this conversation, Mary is Joseph’s “betrothed” (ἡ μεμνηστευμένη) and “not his wife” (οὐκ ἔστιν γυνή). Yet Joseph also says that he received Mary as his “wife” (γυνή). In other words, Joseph is unable to give a clear answer to the midwife’s question, “Who gave birth in the cave?”

In the conversation between Joseph and the midwife quoted above, Joseph attempts to define “who” Mary is by describing her relationship to himself. Similarly, in many classical and ancient Mediterranean literary works, the female characters are described as someone’s daughter, wife, or mother.³ To describe

Thomas: With Introduction, Notes, and Original Text Featuring the New Scholars Version Translation [Salem, Oregon: Polebridge Press, 1996]) has also been published. This paper is based on R. F. Hock’s reconstruction and translation of the text.

3 M. F. Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 50–51.

“who” a woman is, then, she is often described in terms of her relationship to a certain man of a certain house. This manner of defining a woman’s identity also appears in the Bible. In the Old and New Testaments, a woman’s first appearance in a text is usually accompanied by the name of her father, husband, or son.⁴ In other words, women in these texts are depicted as belonging to a patriarchal “household” in principle.

How, then, is Mary’s relationship to her house described in P.J.? Mary’s custody is transferred from her father Joachim’s house to the temple, and then to Joseph’s house. As will be shown below, however, none of these places in which Mary finds herself can be said to function as a house for her in the patriarchal system.

Among previous studies analyzing the role of Mary in relation to Joachim and Joseph in P.J. are those by L. C. Vuong⁵ and B. R. Gaventa.⁶ Vuong notes that neither the relationship between Mary and Joachim nor that between Mary and Joseph in P.J. can be said to be a patriarchal father or husband relationship.⁷ Vuong believes that Joachim and Joseph hold custody of Mary from the temple only temporarily.⁸ Similarly, Gaventa points out the peculiarity of the marriage between Mary and Joseph in that it does not presuppose sexual intercourse.⁹ Gaventa further analyzes the difference between the virginity of Mary in P.J. and

4 For example, Sarai, Abram’s wife (Gen 11:29); Rachel, daughter of Laban (Gen 29:6–10); Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam and wife of Uriah (I Sam 11:3); Mary, mother of Jacob the Less and Joses (Mark 15:40) and many others.

5 L. C. Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protevangelium of James*, WUNT II/358 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 88–103, 133–146, 162–163, 176–182.

6 B. R. Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 100–125.

7 Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protevangelium of James*, 88–103, 136–146, 176–182.

8 Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protevangelium of James*, 103, 140–146, 176–182.

9 Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, 113–114.

the chastity of women in the Apocryphal Acts (such as Thecla in Acts of Paul).¹⁰ According to Gaventa, the image of a chaste woman in the Apocryphal Acts is presented as an exemplary one for women believers, whereas the virginity of Mary in P.J. cannot be imitated by ordinary believers and therefore does not offer a model for other women to follow.¹¹ Rather, according to Gaventa, Mary is part of the sacred realm of the temple.¹²

Both Vuong and Gaventa attempt to define Mary in P.J. as “belonging to the temple.” The temple, however, which at first appears to be the place of Mary’s belonging in place of a home, also distances her with her first menstruation (8:4) and pregnancy (chap. 11 onward), eventually “liberating/disengaging” (ἀπολύω) (16:7) her. It is therefore difficult to define who Mary is according to her place to which she belongs. Accordingly, this study instead focuses on “the Ark of the Covenant” motif as an auxiliary line for analyzing how the character of Mary functions in P.J.

2. “The Ark of the Covenant” and Mary

The phrases “Ark of the Covenant” and “Ark of God” do not themselves appear in the text of P.J. On the other hand, in the Fathers’ discourses and in the tradition of the Catholic Church, there are many references to Mary as “the Ark of the Covenant” or “the Ark of God.” The earliest reference to Mary linking her to “the Ark of God” may be that found in a fragment of a sermon by Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373).¹³ Athanasius refers to Mary as “the Ark of God” and “the

10 Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, 120–122.

11 Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, 121–122.

12 Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, 119–120.

13 See Athanasius, *Homily of the Papyrus of Turin*; L. Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*, trans. T. Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 106–107.

vessel that contained the incarnate God.”¹⁴ In John of Damascus’s Sermon on the Assumption, “the Ark of God” is likewise mentioned along with Jacob’s ladder as a foreshadowing of Mary.¹⁵ “The Ark of the Covenant” (foederis arca) also appears among the titles of Mary in the *Litaniae Laurentianae*.¹⁶

P.J. does not explicitly refer to Mary as “the Ark of the Covenant” as in the above examples. Nevertheless, two similarities may be observed in its depictions of Mary and “the Ark of the Covenant”: first, the nature of Mary as the place of God’s manifestation, and second, her ineffable nature. These qualities of Mary are most clearly expressed in the scene of her giving birth to Jesus in the cave (chap. 19 onward). The similarities between Mary and “the Ark of the Covenant” in the description in chapters 19–20 may be elucidated as follows.

2.1. The Cave as a Place of God’s Manifestation

The order of events surrounding Jesus’s birth in P.J. is as follows. In the wilderness on the way to Bethlehem with Joseph, Mary gives birth (17:10). Joseph finds a cave, takes Mary there, and goes to search for a midwife (17:11). While searching, Joseph witnesses the cessation of all things (18:3–11). Joseph then finds the midwife and tells her of Mary’s pregnancy by the Holy Spirit (19:8). Joseph and the midwife go to the cave and see a dark cloud covering it (19:13). When the cloud recedes, a light shines in the cave, and when the light disappears, they finally see Mary breastfeeding Jesus (19:16).

In this episode, the cave where Mary gives birth to Jesus is surrounded by “clouds” (νεφέλη) followed by “light” (φῶς). These are both motifs that are used

14 Athanasius, *Homily of the Papyrus of Turin*, 216–217.

15 Johannes Damascenus, *Homilia I in Dormitionem B. V. Mariae*, VIII, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XCVI (Paris: J. P. Migne, 1864), 711.

16 *Liber Usualis* (Tournai: Desclée & Co, 1962), 1857f.

for the place of God's manifestation.¹⁷ In the LXX, especially in Exodus, the "cloud" (νεφέλη) appears at God's manifestation in the tabernacle or temple (Exod 16:10; 19:16; 24:15–16; 33:9–10; 34:5; 40:34–35; 1Kings 8:10–11; 2Chr 5:13–14, etc.). Light (φῶς) also symbolizes the manifestation of God in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, light is used in scenes of God manifesting and leading the Israelites (Exod 10:23; Isa 2:5; 9:2, etc.). In the New Testament, light appears as a metaphor for the incarnation of Jesus (John 1:4–5; 7–9) and God (1John 1:5; Rev 21:23; 22:5).

From the above, we can assume that chapter 19 of P.J. depicts the cave as a place of the manifestation of God as though it were the tabernacle or temple of God's Presence. At the moment of God's manifestation on earth, the birth of Jesus (19:13–15), the only person in the cave is Mary, who gives birth to him. Even Joseph and the midwife cannot enter the cave until the clouds and light recede. Who, then, is Mary at the center of the place of God's manifestation? A clue to the answer lies in the episode immediately after the cave is enveloped in cloud and light (19:13–15).

2.2. Impenetrability

In the scene following Mary's birth of Jesus, the midwife tells Salome, an acquaintance, about the miracle she has witnessed (19:18). Salome, however, does not believe in the virgin birth and visits the cave with the intention of testing Mary (19:19). Salome puts her finger into Mary's genitalia to confirm the presence of virgin membrane (20:3). Salome's hand is burned off (20:4), but it is quickly healed as she lifts up Jesus and praises Him as being "born to be King of Israel" (20:10–11).

This episode of Salome's medical examination has been associated in pre-

17 E. M. Vanden Eykel, *"But Their Faces Were All Looking Up": Author and Reader in the Protevangelium of James*, (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 145.

vious studies with the episode of Thomas' doubt (John 20:25).¹⁸ If we assume, however, that the cave was transformed into a temple or tabernacle of the Presence, the description of Salome's hand touching Mary being burned away (20:4) can be interpreted differently.

In the Old Testament, the punishment of bodily disfigurement is often inflicted on people in the place where God is revealed. Miriam, Moses' sister, suffers a severe skin disease as punishment for her disobedience to Moses "before the tabernacle of the presence" and "at the entrance of the tabernacle" (Num 12:4–5; 10), where the Lord descends in a pillar of cloud. Moses' hands are likewise subjected to a severe skin disease on "holy ground" before the bush that utters the voice of God on "Horeb, the mountain of God" (Exod 3:2–5; 4:6).

Furthermore, there is a parallel case in the Old Testament of an object placed in the tabernacle of the Presence and in the temple, the place of God's manifestation, which invites disaster if touched. This object is the Ark of the Covenant, which was with the Israelites and upon which God was said to be present. The Ark of the Covenant was placed in the tabernacle of the Presence during the wilderness wanderings (Exod 26:33–34), brought into the tent in Jerusalem by King David (2Sam 6:12), and placed in the sanctuary of the Jerusalem temple by King Solomon (1Kings 8:6), making wherever it went a place of divine manifestation.

The Ark of the Covenant also often brings disaster. The Philistines of Ashdod, struck by death and havoc, argue with each other, saying, "the ark of the God of Israel shall not remain in us," and, "what have we done with the ark of the God of Israel?" (1Sam 5:6–8). When the Philistines bring the Ark of the Covenant into the temple of Dagon, the statue of Dagon falls repeatedly on its face, and its head and hands are cut off from its body (1Sam 5:1–5).

The danger of touching the Ark of the Covenant is more clearly illustrated

18 Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 69; Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protevangelium of James*, 189.

in the following episode from 2 Samuel. When David is about to bring the “ark of God” into the new capital, Jerusalem, Uzzah and Ahio, sons of Abinadab, are in charge of an ox cart (2Sam 6:1–4). The oxen pulling the cart stagger, however, and Uzzah touches the “ark of God” (2Sam 6:6). Uzzah incurs the wrath of God and loses his life (2Sam 6:7).

The Ark of the Covenant is thus described as having both the nature of a place of God’s manifestation and that of an untouchable object. In comparison with the above narratives, Mary’s body in chapter 19 of P.J. can be said to be like the Ark of the Covenant, bringing misfortune to those who touch it. The cave in which Mary rests is enveloped in clouds and light and becomes a place of God’s manifestation on earth, like the tabernacle or temple of the Presence. Mary, at the center of the Cave of the Presence, is indeed “the Ark of the Covenant” placed in the tabernacle.

3. “The Ark of the Covenant” Mary, the House, the Temple, and the People

As Vuong and Gaventa point out, the relationship between Mary and her father Joachim cannot be defined as a patriarchal father-daughter relationship, nor can the relationship between Mary and Joseph be defined as husband and wife. Mary does not belong to either of these families, neither during her childhood in Joachim’s house nor during the time she spends in Joseph’s house. If, however, we assume that P.J. portrays Mary as the Ark of the Covenant, the following explanation of the relationships between Mary and her father Joachim and Joseph is possible.

3.1. “The Ark of the Covenant” Mary and the Two Houses

As stated above, the relationship between Mary and her father Joachim can-

not be defined as a patriarchal father-daughter relationship. Early in the story, Joachim and Anna, accused by other characters of being considered unrighteous by God due to their childlessness (1:5; 2:6), pray to God for a child (1:8; 2:9). In doing so, the couple become analogous to Abraham and Sarah, who had their son Isaac in their later years (Gen 21). The sequence of events leading up to Mary's birth also displays parallels with the story of Samuel's birth in 1 Samuel (1Sam 1–2).¹⁹ Nevertheless, some differences between these birth narratives and the story of Mary's birth in P.J. are apparent. Abraham wanted a legitimate son, but Joachim does not show interest in the gender of the child being born. Similarly, while Samuel's mother Hannah prays for the birth of a boy (1Sam 1:11), Anna does not specify whether the child is male or female (4:2). This suggests that the couple wanted a child to prove their righteousness rather than a legitimate son to carry on the family and genealogy. Mary is then nurtured (chaps. 5–7) as an offering to the temple (4:2) and is repeatedly called “δῶρον” by her parents (4:2; 7:1), consistent with Anna's vow at the time her pregnancy was announced (4:2) that she would strictly keep the child away from all uncleanness. Joachim thus treats Mary not as his own daughter, but as a sign of his righteousness and an offering to the temple (chaps. 5–7). Furthermore, Joachim disappears from the story as soon as he sends Mary to the temple (8:1), and thereafter does not interfere in her life at all. One of a father's responsibilities as a patriarch was to marry his daughter, delivering her to another man.²⁰ Joachim, however, has no

19 Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 21; P. A. van Stempvoort, “The Protevangelium Jacobi, the Sources of its Theme and Style and their Bearing on its Date,” in *Studia Evangelica Vol. their Bearing on its Date*,” in *Studia Evangelica Vol. III: Papers Presented to the Second International Congress on New Testament Studies Held at Christ Church, Oxford, 1961*, Pt. 2: *The New Testament Message*, ed. F. L. Cross, TU 88 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1964), 415–419.

20 Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protevangelium of James*, 103. M. S. Berger, “Judaism,” in *Sex, Marriage, and Family in World Religions*, ed. D. S. Browning, et. al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 6–7.

part in handing Mary over to Joseph's household. Joachim is thus only a temporary nurturer of Mary.

Mary takes herself into the house of Joseph (chaps. 9 onward), but their relationship cannot be described as that of husband and wife. As noted earlier, although Joseph describes Mary to the midwife as his "betrothed" (19:6), there are no other features within P.J. that serve as support for understanding their relationship in that way. In light of the Mishnah's description of marriage, the relationship between Mary and Joseph can hardly be described as either betrothal or marriage.²¹ Joseph was only delegated by the priests of the temple to "receive" (παραλαμβάνω) Mary (13:3, 15:6, 16:1), to place her under his "protection" (τήρησις) (9:7, 9:11), and to "protect" (φυλάσσω) her (13:3, 14:8). Rather,

21 In light of the Mishnah, it is difficult to define Mary and Joseph's relationship in chapter 19 as an engagement. In the Qutbot, the period between the betrothal and the nuptials is 12 months (Qut 5.2). In P. J., when the priests began to fear Mary's first menstruation, she was 12 years old (8:3–4). The next time Mary's age is explicitly mentioned is during a visit to Elizabeth, shortly after her pregnancy (12:9). At this point, Mary would have been 16 years old. Based on this, if Mary and Joseph's relationship in chapter 19 was an engagement, their engagement would have lasted four or five years. Certainly, if the betrothed woman was very young, the betrothal could have lasted several years; M. L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 166. But Mary does not fall into that category. Mary was 12 years old when she was transferred to Joseph's house, an age at which marriage was possible (12.5 years old; see Berger, "Judaism," 29). It is also unnatural in light of the Mishnah to view their relationship as a marriage. The Kiddushan says that "a man acquires a woman to be his wife by a gift of money, a written contract, and sexual intercourse" (Kiddush 1.1). None of these apply to the relationship between Mary and Joseph. In particular, it is clear from the episode of the trial they undergo (chaps. 15–16) that sexual intercourse is not implied in Mary and Joseph's relationship. Furthermore, the Mishnah lists the wife's duties to her husband as milling, baking bread, spinning, etc. (cf. Ct 5.5–8.). There is no depiction of Mary performing these tasks for Joseph within the text of P. J. Instead, Mary performs spinning for the Temple (chap. 10).

the temple appears to have substantial control over Mary even after chapter 9, when it transfers her to Joseph's house. In the following chapter 10, the high priest himself, who deported Mary from the temple, calls her back to the temple (10:5). The expression "the virgin whom [Joseph] took from the temple of the Lord" (13:3; 15:6; 16:1) appears repeatedly in reference to Mary. Mary is still a member of the temple, even though she lives in Joseph's house until chapter 16.

If we assume that P.J. portrays Mary as the Ark of the Covenant, the relationships between Mary and her father Joachim and Joseph may be explained as follows. For Mary, as the Ark of the Covenant, Joachim and Joseph were not her father and husband as patriarchs, but simply her custodians until she was transferred to a proper place. They were, in a sense, like Abinadab's sons El-Azar (1Sam 7:1) and Obed-Edom (2Sam 6:10–12), who temporarily kept the Ark of the Covenant at home in the Old Testament.

The strict measures taken by Joachim in bringing up Mary are not unnatural if we consider her to be the Ark of the Covenant. Mary is nurtured by her parents in "a sanctuary [τὸ ἁγίασμα τοῦ κοιτῶνος] in her chamber" (6:4), isolated from all uncleanness (6:3–5). The Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament is similarly isolated by a hanging curtain at the far end of the tabernacle of the Presence (Exod 26:33). Also, "the spotless daughters of the Hebrews" are chosen to serve as Mary's caretakers (6:5) and to lead her to the temple (7:4–6). This can also be explained without difficulty if Mary is understood as the Ark of the Covenant. Just as only Levites could carry the Ark of the Covenant (Deut 10:8; 1Chr 13:2–3), those who came in contact with Mary, the Ark of the Covenant, must also be specially selected.

Furthermore, the motif of the sign coming out of the staff that appears in the selection of Joseph as Mary's guardian (9:5–6) parallels the selection of Aaron as the keeper of the Ark of the Covenant and of the tabernacle of the Presence (Num 17:16–26).²² This also serves as an indication of Joseph's role in the administration of Mary as the Ark of the Covenant.

3.2. “The Ark of the Covenant” Mary and the Temple

As mentioned earlier, Joachim and Joseph are merely temporary protectors of Mary’s person, like the people who often took care of the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament. The temple, however, which seems to exercise dominion over Mary in place of a household, gradually distances Mary with her first menstruation (8:4) and pregnancy (chap. 11 and following), finally “liberating/disengaging” (ἀπολύω) her (16:7). This section will examine the implications of Mary’s “liberation/disengagement” from the temple in view of Mary’s role as the Ark of the Covenant.

3.2.1. Before “Liberation/Disengagement” (ἀπολύω) (16:7)

If Mary in P.J. is regarded as the Ark of the Covenant, the relationship between Mary, the temple, and the people of Israel can be explained as follows.

In 7:10, when Mary moves to the temple, she and the Ark of the Covenant are depicted as overlapping. Mary is placed by the priest on the third step of the altar staircase (7:9) and “dances” (7:10a) with joy. By “dancing,” Mary appears to be celebrating the completion of her transfer to the sanctuary. This motif of dancing to celebrate the completion of the transfer also appears in the episode in which David “danced” (2Sam 6:14) to celebrate the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant to the new capital, Jerusalem.²³ Mary is shortly thereafter described as being loved by “all the house of Israel” (7:10b), further recalling David, who was also loved by his people (1Sam. 18:16), even if she does not share his military accomplishments.²⁴

One could point out that the relationship between Mary and the temple has

22 Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protevangelium of James*, 134, 139–140.

23 Vanden Eykel, *But Their Faces Were All Looking Up*, 88–90.

24 Vanden Eykel, *But Their Faces Were All Looking Up*, 76–77.

similarities with that of a Vestal Virgin (priestesses of Vesta) in Rome. Mary, like a Vestal Virgin, is separated from the authority of patriarchs, directly subordinate to the temple and the people, and required to maintain her virginity.²⁵ Unlike a Vestal Virgin, however, Mary does not officiate ritual. Mary has no office and is allowed only to dwell in the sanctuary. Mary is thus hardly a female priestess like a Vestal Virgin, and she is better understood as portrayed like the Ark of the Covenant.

It is not unnatural that Mary, a child with no achievements or position, was loved by her people and was able to take her place in the sanctuary, in view of her portrayal as the Ark of the Covenant. Mary, like the Ark of the Covenant, was herself the center of the people and the place where God would later manifest himself.

Mary eventually reaches sexual maturity and is transferred from the sanctuary of the temple to Joseph's house, but shortly thereafter she is called back by the high priest to weave the temple's draperies (10:1–5). The weaving of the curtains occurs just between Mary's departure from the temple at her first menstruation (9:11) and the Annunciation (chap. 11). The connection between the act of weaving the drapery and Mary's physical transformation therefore needs consideration.²⁶

The words used to refer to Mary's work in the weaving of the drapery are

25 Aulus Gellius, *Night of Attica*, 1.12; S. B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 213; J. P. Hallett, *Fathers and Daughters in Roman Society: Women and the Elite Family*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 86.

26 There are other examples of the association of the act of weaving with female sexual maturity. At the Pan-Athenaia festival in Athens, virgins called Ἀρρηφόροι wove peplos of Athena. This practice is said to have had an aspect of initiation, of transition from girls to women of marriageable age; see W. Burkert, *Savage Energies: Lessons of Myth and Ritual in Ancient Greece*, trans. P. Bing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 47–49; S. I. Johnston, "A New Web for Arachne," in *Antike Mythen*:

“spinning” (véω) (10:7) and “weaving” (κλώθω) (10:10). These two words also appear in the LXX to as refer to weaving. In LXX Exodus, “spinning” (νήθω, derived from véω) (LXX Exod 26:31; 35:25) and “weaving” (κλώθω) (LXX Exod 26:36; 35:6; 36:9, 31; 37:3, 5, 16) are both activities associated with the tabernacle of the Presence and appear in the context of creating the Most Holy Place where the Ark of the Covenant is placed.²⁷ Taking into account the usage of these two words in the LXX, Mary may be viewed as preparing the place for the manifestation of God through the act of weaving the drapery.

The motif of the temple drapery is also found in the Synoptic Gospels. In the canonical Gospels, the temple draperies appear in the scene of Jesus’ crucifixion. In these passages, the tearing of the temple draperies at Jesus’ death is described (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). In other words, the Synoptic Gospels depict the physical death of Jesus and the tearing of the curtains as linked. In P.J., on the other hand, Mary receives the Annunciation (chap. 11) during the period of the weaving of the drapery (chaps. 10–12). The growth of Jesus in Mary’s womb and the weaving of Mary’s curtains are thus linked in P.J. It can therefore be assumed that both texts have in common the superimposition of the state of the temple’s drapery and the physical state of Jesus’ body. The curtain that Mary weaves while pregnant with Jesus is later torn in two at the time of Jesus’ death.

In view of the above, it can be said that Mary was becoming a place of the manifestation of God, or the Ark of the Covenant, through the sexual development symbolized by the act of weaving and physical change of pregnancy.

3.2.2. The Trial and “Liberation/Disengagement” (ἀπολόω) Associated with Pregnancy (16:7)

Mary in P.J., chapters 1–16, belongs not to a house-by-house community

Medien, Transformationen Und Konstruktionen, ed. U. Dill and C. Walde (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 13–14.

27 Vanden Eykel, *But Their Faces Were All Looking Up*, 111–114.

ruled by patriarchs, but to the temple, and by extension, to the entire Israelite people centered on the temple. The discovery of Mary's pregnancy, however, creates a rift in the relationship between Mary and the temple.

Mary's pregnancy becomes known to Annas the scribe (15:3) and the high priest (15:6), and she and Joseph are brought to trial. Mary and Joseph are subjected to a divine trial by the high priest, who gives them "the water of the Lord's trial" and drives them away to a mountainous region, but they eventually return in good health (16:4–5). The high priest then "releases" (ἀπολύω) them (16:7).

The word ἀπολύω appears elsewhere in P.J. in the scene where Joseph, upon learning of Mary's pregnancy, is at a loss for a response and murmurs that he will "divorce" (ἀπολύω) Mary (14:4). The text uses the word ἀπολύω in both scenes: the "liberation" of Mary and Joseph by the priests (16:7) and Joseph's "divorce" (14:4) of Mary. P.J. 16:7 may thus be understood as using ἀπολύω with both "liberation" and "disengagement" nuances.²⁸ In other words, the high priest was declaring to the pregnant Mary a de facto "liberation/disengagement" from the temple.

3.2.3. Loss of "the Ark of the Covenant" Mary from the Temple

If we consider Mary as the Ark of the Covenant in P.J., it is possible to explain what happens in the temple after the priests "liberate/disengage" her. This section will analyze the description in the conclusion of P.J. (chap. 23)

After the manifestation of God in the cave and the burning of Salome's hands reveal Mary's nature as the Ark of the Covenant, a serious incident occurs that defiles the temple. The high priest Zacharias is murdered by King Herod in the temple (23:9). This incident can be interpreted as confirmation that Mary's

28 If chapters 15–16 are considered in isolation, understanding ἀπολύω to mean "release from trial" is more natural. In light of what happened to the temple after Mary's ἀπολύω (discussed in detail in 3.2.3.), however, the interpretation of a separation between the temple and Mary is also plausible.

“liberation/disengagement” (16:7) by the priests was the loss of Mary, the Ark of the Covenant, from the temple.

The priests of the temple once removed Mary from the temple for fear that the blood of her first menstruation would defile the sanctuary (8:4). Mary, raised as an offering to the temple, is also isolated from the hemorrhage that followed her mother Anna’s birth (5:9–10). These passages express the extent to which the temple was averse to the uncleanness caused by hemorrhage. Numbers also describes death in the sanctuary and contact with corpses by those who enter the sanctuary as defiling through uncleanness (Num 19:13–18). Bloodshed, much less murder, should never have occurred in the temple. Yet, in the temple after Mary’s “liberation/disengagement” (16:7), Zacharias is murdered (23:9) and an indelible bloodstain is left beside the altar (24:4–5).

If one views P.J. merely as a document intended to complement other accounts by elaborating the story of Mary’s birth and childhood and the story of Jesus’ birth, the episode of Zacharias’ murder in the temple appears to be a mere afterthought. If, however, Mary, the Ark of the Covenant, is considered to have undergone “liberation/disengagement” from the temple, i.e., to have been carried out of the temple, then the later murder in the temple can be understood as a consequence. In other words, the cave where Mary gave birth was transformed into a new place of God’s manifestation, and the temple, which had been the place of God’s presence on earth, lost its function.

In the Old Testament, the people’s mistreatment of the Ark of the Covenant invariably leads to disaster. The aforementioned death of Uzzah during the transportation of the Ark of God (2Sam 6:1–7) is attributed in Chronicles to the Israelites’ mishandling of the Ark of God (1Chr 15:12–13) in addition to Uzzah’s direct contact with it. Chronicles attributes Uzzah’s death to the fact that the Ark of God was carried in an ox cart by Uzzah and his brothers, who were not Levites, and that the Ark of God should have been carried by consecrated Levites.²⁹ When the Ark of God was taken by the Philistines in Samuel (1Sam 4–5), the

people of the cities of Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron, into which the Ark of God was brought, suffered from boils (1Sam 5:6–12). Also, when the Philistines, fearing the plagues that the Ark of God would bring, returned it to the Israelites, the people of the border town of Beth Shemesh looked into the Ark of God and lost their lives as a result (1Sam 6:19).

In P.J., the priests also mishandle Mary as the Ark of the Covenant. The priests of the temple do not understand that Mary's physical change signifies a change into the Ark of the Covenant, the place of God's manifestation. The priests therefore do not believe Mary's words and put her on trial for "defiling herself" despite the fact that she is "the virgin of the Lord."

Both of these events (the retreat from the temple in 8:4, and the "liberation/disengagement" in 16:7) are triggered by Mary's physical femininity, her first menstruation and pregnancy. In the worldview expressed up to chapter 16 of P.J., women's reproductive functions are considered important, but at the same time women are considered unclean because of the bleeding that accompanies them (menstruation and parturitional bleeding).³⁰ For this reason, women are not allowed to set foot in the sanctuary, with the exception of Mary, and even she is forced to leave the temple upon her first menstruation (8:4).

The priests, therefore, cannot understand that Mary's physical change signifies her transformation into the Ark of the Covenant. The traditional practices of the temple and its people do not allow for a proper evaluation of Mary as both a woman and an important figure for the temple. As a result, the temple and its people lose Mary, the Ark of the Covenant, and the temple is defiled. Meanwhile, in the cave that has become the new temple, two ordinary women, a midwife and Salome, enter and bear witness to the miracle. In this new temple, Mary

29 M. Haran, *Temples and Temple-service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Wiona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 80; Vanden Eykel, *But Their Faces Were All Looking Up*, 89.

30 Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protevangelium of James*, 126–129.

breastfeeds Jesus immediately after giving birth (19:16), in contrast to Anna, who was not allowed to touch Mary until she had been cleansed of her post-birth uncleanness (5:9–10).

The above observations allow for the interpretation that Mary is the Ark of the Covenant carried out of the temple, and that her transfer symbolizes the shift in the place of God’s manifestation and the center of the people of Israel. Like the Ark of the Covenant, Mary is transported through the homes of the people, Joachim and Joseph, and her destination is the new temple. In parallel, the old temple loses its function as the place of God’s manifestation and the center of the people. Until Mary’s “liberation/disengagement” by the priests (16:7), she was a member of the temple. Now, however, the place where Mary, the Ark of the Covenant, goes beyond the temple, and Mary has become the place of God’s presence.

3.3. “The Ark of the Covenant” Mary and the “People of Israel”

If we view Mary as the Ark of the Covenant, how can we interpret her relationship with her people after the “liberation/disengagement” (16:7)?

The births of Isaac and Samuel, the paradigms of the Mary birth narrative, both form milestones in the history of the Israelite nation. Likewise, David (1Sam 18:16), the paragon of Mary, “beloved of all the house of Israel” (7:10), is a figure that marks a turning point in the history of the nation. The Ark of the Covenant, of which several similarities with Mary have been observed above, also moves at turning points in national history, such as wars, the building of new capitals, and the erection of the temple. From this, it can be inferred that Mary is also a turning point in the history of her people.

Mary, until her “liberation/disengagement” by the priests (16:7), is a figure who belongs to the temple as well as to the people of Israel. Mary’s “liberation/disengagement” from the temple, however, appears to have excluded her

not only from the temple, but also from the Israelites who were associated with it. Until Mary's "liberation/disengagement," the Israelites were subordinate to the temple. Mary, who was also directly subordinate to the temple, was at the center of the people who followed the priests of the temple. To the extent that this "people of Israel" refers to the "record of the Twelve Tribes" (ταῖς ἱστορίαις τῶν δώδεκα φυλῶν) (1:1, 6), it is a kinship group whose legitimacy is guaranteed by a written genealogy. The people observed the Torah, especially its purity regulations. For example, the law (Lev 12:1–5; 15:19–30 et seq.) regulated contact with bleeding, and women after childbirth and menstruating women were considered unclean (5:9; 8:4). Because of its observance of these customs, the temple misjudges Mary's value and "liberates/disengages" her as the Ark of the Covenant. As a result, the temple loses its function as the place of God's manifestation and as the center of the people.

Where, then, are the Israelites, who were subordinate to the temple, headed? In considering the people after Mary's "liberation/disengagement" (16:7), Mary's vision of "two peoples" (δύο λαοῦς) (17:6–9) in chapter 17 is significant. An outline of the vision is as follows.

As Mary and Joseph are on their way to Bethlehem, Joseph sees Mary looking distressed (17:6). When Joseph next looks at Mary, however, she is smiling (17:8). When Joseph asks the reason, Mary replies that she had a vision of "two peoples, one weeping and mourning, the other rejoicing and leaping" (17:9).

In previous studies, this "two peoples" has been interpreted as referring to Jews and Gentiles, or to followers and non-followers of Jesus.³¹ There is no evidence in the text, however, to support these simple explanations. What these "two peoples," one weeping and mourning and the other leaping for joy, refer

31 Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, 63; van Stempvoort, "The Protevangelium Jacobi," 421–422; Vuong, *Gender and Purity in the Protevangelium of James*, 183.

to is clear from the development of the narrative after Mary's "liberation/disengagement." If Mary is considered the Ark of the Covenant carried out of the temple, the "two peoples" in this vision refer to (1) the "Israelites" who are still subordinate to the temple and the old customs, and (2) the new "people" who have Mary, the Ark of the Covenant, and Jesus at the center. In other words, the identity of the "people" to which Mary belongs changes, with the "liberation/disengagement" of chapter 16 as the turning point. By being "liberated/disengaged" from the temple, Mary moves outside of the Israelite ethnic community centered on the temple. The first to enter the new community, which can also be called Mary's people, are the midwife, Salome, and Joseph, who witness God's manifestation in the cave.

The place of the new divine manifestation, the cave to which Mary goes, is where Jesus is born and where he is praised by Salome as "King of Israel" (20:10). The place where Mary happened to stop is the place where the coronation of the King of Israel is proclaimed. In Jerusalem, on the other hand, King Herod orders the slaughter of infants (22:1) and even defiles the temple by killing Zacharias (23:9). Thus, a new king is born to Mary, who becomes the site of a new manifestation of God, and the temple and its people, which Mary has left, are brought to grief and confusion by the tyranny of another king. The priests once blessed Mary, calling her "the vindication of the people of Israel" (7:8). That promise is fulfilled, however, not in the "people of Israel" centered in the Jerusalem temple, but in a new community centered on Mary. The new "Israel" is not defined by the old temple, but by Mary, the Ark of the Covenant.

The new "people" with Mary at the center as the Ark of the Covenant are no longer fixed in a place with the temple as its axis. From this point forward, wherever Mary and Jesus go, wherever their feet stop, can be the place of God's manifestation. As odd as it may seem, the progression of Mary as the Ark of the Covenant in the story parallels the history of the Israelites from the Exodus to the

establishment of the temple in Jerusalem as described in the Old Testament as a reverse recapitulation. The history of the Israelites progresses from the wilderness wanderings to the journey to settle in Canaan, the establishment of the Law, the establishment of the temple in Jerusalem, and the placement of the Ark of the Covenant. In P.J., however, Mary, the new Ark of the Covenant, which seemed to be placed in the temple for a time, leaves the temple and moves with the “people” like the Ark of the Covenant in the wilderness wandering period.

4. Conclusion

Using the Ark of the Covenant motif as an auxiliary line of inquiry, this paper traces the progression of Mary’s relationship to the house, temple, and people, and analyzes how the character of Mary functions in P.J.

Mary, the Ark of the Covenant, was the one who, through her bodily flux, ends the role of the temple in Israel’s history and brings about a paradigm shift in the history of the nation. The story of P.J., which begins with a reference to the book of “the record of the Twelve Tribes” (ταῖς ἱστορίαις τῶν δώδεκα φυλῶν) (1:1) and is narrated by a man named Jacob who calls himself the author, ends with a blessing for “all who fear the Lord” (πάντων τῶν φοβουμένων τὸν κύριον) and for “the author and reader” (τῷ γράψαντι καὶ τῷ ἀναγινώσκοντι; 25:4). As far as purity regulations are concerned, the isolation of the newborn due to the uncleanness associated with postpartum hemorrhage at Anna’s birth of Mary (5:9) no longer applies to Mary and her child Jesus. Mary breastfeeds Jesus immediately after giving birth (19:16). In other words, the law does not continue to function in the world that follows from Mary’s “liberation/disengagement” from the temple (16:7).

The “people” who will be the object of redemption after the “liberation/disengagement” from the temple (16:7) are thus not the people depicted in the first half of the P.J., that is, the old “people of Israel” centered in the temple, related by

blood to the “genealogy of the twelve tribes,” law-abiding, with Herod as king. The new “people” are Mary, the new Ark of the Covenant, and all those who are with Jesus, “the Lord” (25:4), “born to be king of Israel” (20:10), whom Mary begot, and “the readers” (25:4) of P.J.