



GLORIOUS MYSTERIES:

THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE DORMITON OF THE HOLY VIRGIN MARY IN THE ORIENTAL ORTHODOX TRADITION



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urprisingly, the first centuries of Christianity maintain a profound silence regarding the end of the life of the Holy Virgin Mary.¹ While the early fathers rapidly constructed narratives of the Virgin's early life, they were not as swift in furnishing accounts of her death.² Origen (†253 AD), St. Ephrem (†373 AD), St. Gregory of Nyssa (†c. 395 AD), and St. Ambrose († 397 AD) all casually affirm her death when speaking of her ever-virginity.³ Preliminary remarks regarding her death by the *Protoevangelium of James*, St. Justin, and St. Irenaeus are expanded by St. Ephrem the Syrian in the mid-fourth century.⁴

Even at the end of the fourth century, many like St. Epiphanius of Salamis are reticent to speak of her death and burial, due to the Scriptural silence in this regard. In his handbook of heresies called the *Panarion* (c. 377 AD), he writes:

[If one searches Scripture carefully, he] will find neither the death of Mary, nor whether she died or did not die, nor whether she was buried or was not buried...Scripture is simply silent, because of the exceeding greatness of the Mystery, so as not to overpower people's minds with wonder...If the Holy Virgin died and was buried, her falling-asleep was honorable and her end holy; her crown consisted in her virginity. Or if she was put to death, according to the Scripture, 'A sword shall pierce her soul,' her fame is among the martyrs and her holy body should be an object of our veneration, since through it Light came into the world. Or else she remained alive; for it is not impossible for God to do whatever He wills. In fact no one knows her end.⁵

By the fifth and sixth century, *transitus* literature in Coptic, Syriac, and Ethiopic explain that her body was *translated* to heaven sometime after her death.⁶ Lack of mention in Scripture regarding

¹ Stephen J. Shoemaker, *The Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

³ Origen, *Comm. in Ioannem*, frag. 31 (GCS 10, 506); Ephrem, *Hymni de beata Maria* 15.2 (ed. Lamy 2, 583); Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 14 [13], ed. J.P. Cavanaugh, in W. Jaeger, *Gregorii Nysseni opera* 8/1, 306 (PG 46:377); Ambrose, *De institutione virginis* 7, 49 (PL 16:333). For a brief summary, see W. J. Burghardt, *Testimony of the Patristic Age concerning Mary's Death* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957), 3-5.

⁴ Brian E. Daley, "Introduction," in *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998): 1-45, 2.

⁵ St. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 78.11 (Griechische christliche Schriftsteller, Epiphanius 3.462, 474); Daley, "Introduction," 5-6.

⁶ H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, Joseph A. Burgess, eds., *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 89.



when and how the Virgin departed, combined with the variation of texts, led to a variegated tradition of celebration and veneration.

Much later, however, we find language about her assumption or bodily resurrection., which eventually resulted with the dogmatic declaration in modern times in the Catholic Church. This paper will evaluate the Oriental Orthodox tradition of the dormition of the Virgin in terms of the historical development, the theological underpinnings, and the liturgical traditions.

For clarification and consistency, this paper will use *Dormition* to refer to the Virgin’s “falling asleep” (κοίμησις, ἀναπαύσις), her death or her departure from this life. *Assumption* will be used to refer to her bodily resurrection or ascension, which is often likened to that of Christ. Alternatively, *Translation* will refer to the moving of her body, usually describing Christ carrying her soul to heaven while the angels move her body to Paradise.⁷

I. HISTORY OF CELEBRATION

By the close of the fourth century, a common celebration of Mary just before or after the Feast of Nativity can be apprehended, one which seems to have its origins in Egypt.⁸ By the fifth century, several dates emerge in commemoration of the Virgin. The Armenian lectionary—which correlates to the Jerusalem liturgical practice between 420 and 440⁹—evinces that a Marian feast was celebrated on the road to Bethlehem, three miles from Jerusalem.¹⁰ In the same time period,

⁷ In Syriac, *shoonoyo* and *intiqāl* express the change of locality, the transfer, the transition and transit of her body. Joseph Azize, “The Shoonoyo, the “Assumption,” and the intiqāl,” <https://livingmaronite.com/resources/feast-days/the-shoonoyo-the-assumption-and-the-intiqal/>

⁸ Daley, “Introduction,” 4.

⁹ Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 82.

¹⁰ Ignazio M. Calabuig, O.S.M., “The Liturgical Cult of Mary in the East and West,” in *Handbook for Liturgical Studies, Volume V: Liturgical Time and Space*, pp. 219-97, Anscar J. Chupungco, O.S.B., ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press,

Atticus of Constantinople († 425 AD), the successor of St. John Chrysostom, instituted a December 26th Marian celebration,¹¹ later observed in Syria.¹² The Georgian tradition had a quadrivium from August 14th to the 17th, which included a special commemoration on August 16th for her deposition from Zion to Gethsemane, and an ancient memorial on August 17th at the Nea Church, built by Justinian in 543.¹³

Most probably, the August 15th commemoration of her dormition was first celebrated in the east after the declaration by Emperor Maurice around the year 600,¹⁴ and in the west by Pope Sergius (687-701).¹⁵ In the early sixth century, Patriarch Theodosius of Alexandria explains a dual celebration with her departure on 21 Tobe¹⁶ and the translation of her body on 16 Mesra.¹⁷ Today, this tradition is reflected in the modern Coptic and Ethiopian calendars.¹⁸

Marshalling any comprehensive and coherent account of this development is plagued by our unfamiliarity concerning the provenance and rationale for these various celebrations (December 26, August 17, January 29/30, etc.). Some of these dates were simply dedicated to the

2000), 253; Simon Mimouni, *Dormition et Assomption de Marie: Histoire des traditions anciens, Théologie historique* 98 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1995), 429-33; P. Jounel, in A.G. Martimort, I.H. Dalmais, P. Jounel, *The Church at Prayer IV: The Liturgy and Time*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986), 130; Walter Dean Ray, *August 15 and the Development of the Jerusalem Calendar* (PhD Dissertation, Notre Dame, IN: April 2000), 40.

¹¹ Nicholas P. Constan, "Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos, and the Loom of the Flesh," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3 (1995):169-94, 172.

¹² Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 115.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 259-60.

¹⁴ Daley, "Introduction," 4. Alternatively, Calabuig dates this to 650. Calabuig, "Liturgical Cult," 262.

¹⁵ "Assumption of our Lady, The," in *Theotokos: A Theological Encyclopedia of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, pp. 55-8, Michael O'Carroll, C.S.Sp., ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1982), 57.

¹⁶ This coincides with January 16 in the Julian calendar, and January 29 in the modern Gregorian calendar. A Coptic Calendar from Oxrhynchus (dated to 535) assigned the date to January 17 in the Julian, which results in January 30 as the day of "holy Mary." See Joseph Crehan, "The Assumption and the Jerusalem Liturgy," *Theological Studies* 30:2 (1969): 312-325, 321; H. Delehay, *Analecta Bolandiana* 42 (1924): 83-99.

¹⁷ This coincides with August 9 in the Julian calendar and August 22 in the modern Gregorian calendar. However, the references in Theodosius' homily do not necessarily need to have been invented by later forger. See Shoemaker, 260.

¹⁸ Peter Jounel, "The Veneration of Mary," in *The Church at Prayer IV: The Liturgy and Time*, pp. 130-50, A.G. Martimort, I.H. Dalmais, P. Jounel, eds, Matthew J. O'Connell, trans. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986), 132.



eneration of the *Theotokos* while others honor her departure, the translation of her body, the mystery of the Incarnation, or the dogma formulated at the Council of Ephesus. Certain regions expanded the veneration to a weekly celebration ending with an octave, while others celebrated *both* her dormition and her translation/assumption. Although it is very difficult to describe this development in detail, we can broadly identify three phases: an early phase, from the second century to 431, originating in Egypt that was focusing on the Incarnation; a middle period influenced by Jerusalem, from 431 to roughly 600 which focused on the *dormition* and *transitus*; and a third stage which elaborated on the *assumption* narratives in much more detail.

1. Initial Celebrations of the Incarnation (Before 431 AD)

The initial veneration of the Holy Virgin is centered around the celebration of the Incarnation. While many scholars disagree as to when and where the Feast of Nativity was first celebrated, virtually all acknowledge the intimate correspondence between the celebration of the Incarnation of the Savior and the Marian liturgical piety that emerges in relation to it. The earliest Marian commemorations were most likely connected with the Feast(s) of Nativity/Epiphany, and are especially influenced by the Council of Nicaea and related dogmatic proclamations of the third and fourth centuries.

As many liturgical scholars have concluded, Egypt seems to be the location for the earliest commemoration of the Virgin Mary, with Clement of Alexandria († c. 215 AD) and Origen being among the first to mention Marian veneration.¹⁹ Others have pointed to two letters of St.

¹⁹ Clement of Alexandria delivers praise for her as Mother of the Lord and Virgin Mother, whom he loves to call the Church. *Paedagogus* 1, 6 (PG 9:300-301; GCS 12, 115); Origen, *Commentary on John*, 1.4, 10.6, 20.30, 32.16 (PG 14:32, 316, 641-44, 784), *Commentary on Galatians* (PG 14:1298), *Homilies on Luke*, 8.1-4 (PG 13:1820-1), *Contra Celsum*, 1.39 (PG 11:733), *De Oratione*, 14.6.

Athanasius of Alexandria, in which he argues that if Christ did not take flesh from Mary, then her commemoration (μνήμη) would be superfluous.²⁰ Scholars such as Maxwell Johnson have argued that this μνήμη is most probably a feast or celebration in Egypt, which is known and acknowledged by the two bishops he writes to Epictetus of Corinth, and Maximus of Constantinople (who was probably consecrated by Egyptian bishops).²¹ Thus, Corinth and Constantinople are at least somewhat knowledgeable of this Egyptian practice, and could have been influenced by it.

This pre-Nativity commemoration of the Virgin persisted in Egypt for several centuries. A seventh century monk in Wadi Habib recounted how clergy and congregation went to “celebrate the praises of the Lady and Virgin” on the 28th of Kiahk in the church devoted to the Virgin, the day before the Feast of Nativity.²² This specific mention of the praises to the Virgin and the date suggest that this was a unique event in the liturgical cycle, far more than the customary midnight psalmody existing in fourth century Egypt. A similar Marian veneration took place in Antioch during the time of Patriarch Severus (512-518 AD), sometime between the Feast of Theophany and the Great Fast (Lent).²³

²⁰ Maxwell E. Johnson, “Sub Tuum Praesidium: the Theotokos in Christian Life and Worship Before Ephesus,” *Pro Ecclesia* 17:1 (2008): 52-75, 70. Writing to Epictetus, St. Athanasius argues “if the Word is coessential with the Body, the commemoration and the work of Mary are superfluous.” *Letter to Epictetus* (Letter 59), 4. Again, St. Athanasius writes c. 371, saying, “And at this also I am much surprised, how they have ventured to entertain such an idea as that the Word became man in consequence of His Nature. For if this were so, the commemoration of Mary would be superfluous.” *Letter to Maximus the Philosopher*, 3.

²¹ Ibid. “Introduction,” *Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church*, 72. Maximus was a problematic figure disowned by the Council of Constantinople, but accepted by some like St. Ambrose. See also L.W. Barnard, “Athanasius and the Meletian Schism in Egypt,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 59 (1973): 181-189

²² “... When I was in my city of Alexandria, having found a time of peace and deliverance from persecution and from the warfare of the heretics, the festival of the Nativity of the Lord Christ arrived on the 28th of Kiahk, and we assembled in the church of the Pure Lady Mary, the Mother of the Light, which is called the Porch of the Angels. And we offered many prayers, in the presence of the clergy, and of the chief men of the city, and of all the people old and young, to celebrate the praises of the Lady and Virgin, who brought forth God the Word, the truly Incarnate in this world, the Lord of Lords and King of Kings, to whom is due glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the One God...” Severus of Hermopolis, *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, vol. 2: On Benjamin I, 38th Patriarch (622-661 AD), p. 504. See also Canon 1 of Pope Theophilus, which speaks of a preparation fast (*Paramon*) for the Eve of Theophany.

²³ Severus, *Homily 67* (PO 8, 349); Crehan, “The Assumption,” 321.



Just before the Council of Ephesus, Proclus delivers his renowned Marian sermon in the presence of Nestorius during the Christmas season of 429 or 430.²⁴ During this same period, Atticus established December 26 as a Marian commemoration, most likely the result of the early Egyptian tradition. Before his ordination as patriarch, Atticus was an Armenian monk born in Sebastia.²⁵ Alternatively, Jounel argues for an East-Syrian tradition, which places December 26 as the “Feast of the Congratulation of the Mother of God.”²⁶

In Syria, the poetic homilies of St. Ephrem (+ 373) and St. Jacob of Sarug (+ 521) were delivered on the Feast of the Nativity, and the Sunday immediately prior.²⁷ Among the hymns of Severus of Antioch (delivered between 512 and 518), six are devoted to the Theotokos and several refer to her in the context of the Nativity.²⁸ Antipatrus of Bostra (+ c. 557) also delivered a homily on the Sunday before Christmas.²⁹ Such praises were often granted toward the perfect temple of her body as the “golden vessel” of manna, as in the Hymn on the Dormition by St. Nerses the Armenian:

Unsullied temple heavenly light enshrining,
God’s Mother true, and still a pure Maiden;
Prophets of old prefigured and foretold you:
The Tree of Life in God’s fair garden planted.
In Abraham’s tent was heard the gladsome tidings,
From God’s own Word your motherhood foretelling.
Hail bush of Moses unconsumed by burning!
Hail golden vessel filled with heavenly Manna!
Hail Gideon’s Fleece, the gentle dew containing!
Isaiah sang of you, the Maid conceiving;
The lightsome cloud, the book made fast with sealing.

²⁴ Proclus, *Hom. 1* (PG 65:680); Crehan, “The Assumption,” 321.

²⁵ Walter Dean Ray, “August 15 and the Development of the Jerusalem Calendar,” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2000), 237-245, 49, note 32. His Marian devotion could partly be due to his close alliance with Theophilus of Alexandria, especially at the Synod of the Oak.

²⁶ Jounel, “Veneration,” 132.

²⁷ Calabuig, “Liturgical Cult,” 257-8.

²⁸ Serafim Seppälä, “‘New Sinai’ – Severus of Antioch on Virgin Mary,” *Begegnungen in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Münster/Berlin: Verlagskontakt, 2015), pp. 137-146; Peter Farrington, “The Virgin St Mary in the Hymns of St Severus of Antioch” (Unpublished paper, 2008).

²⁹ Calabuig, “Liturgical Cult,” 258 (PG 85:1175-92).



Ezekiel saw the gate shut and bolted;
Daniel, the mount from where the great stone was taken.³⁰

2. Dormition Accounts

The influence of the Council of Ephesus on Marian piety and veneration is incontestable and incalculable. Marian commemoration emerged from the incarnational homilies related to the Council of Ephesus by St. Cyril of Alexandria and Proclus of Constantinople.³¹ Public veneration of the Virgin expanded with an unprecedented fashion in liturgical, artistic and architectural dimensions. During this post-Ephesian era, many churches were dedicated and rededicated to the Virgin. After restoring and expanding the basilica erected by Pope Liberius (+366 AD) on the Esquiline hill, Pope Sixtus III (+440 AD) rededicated it in honor of the Theotokos as “Santa Maria Maggiore.”³² In Constantinople, at least three major churches were consecrated after Empress Pulcheria’s name in 475 AD.³³ The majority of these churches, however, focused on the role of the Virgin Mary in the Incarnation.

Yet, around 420 AD Jerusalem’s primary celebration of the Virgin Mary was established as August 15th, as evidenced in the Armenian Lectionary. While most scholars agree that August 15th was a Christian adaptation of an earlier date in Israel’s history, they disagree as to its origin.³⁴ It is most probable that August 15 commemorated the consecration of the *Kathisma* Church. While it seems to have always been regarded as an important location since its consecration, there are three

³⁰ *Tearn Nersesi Shenorhalvuh Ban’kh Tchaphau*, 409.

³¹ Ignazio M. Calabuig, O.S.M. “The Liturgical Cult of Mary in the East and West,” in, *Handbook for Liturgical Studies, Volume V: Liturgical Time and Space*, pp. 219-97. Anscar J. Chupungco, O.S.B., ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 259; Giamberardini, *Il culto mariano in Egitto*, 1:139-49, 162-9, 203-4.

³² Calabuig, “Liturgical Cult,” 244.

³³ Daley, “Introduction,” 4.

³⁴ For Ray, Jerusalem transformed the conception of Isaac in the Jubilees calendar into the conception of Christ. Ray, “August 15,” 237-245. Alternatively, Verhelst asserts that August 15 was a commemoration of the Nativity in opposition to the reconstruction of the Jewish temple under Julian the Apostate. *Ibid.*, 189. Moreover, Jounel maintained that Jerusalem celebrated the Incarnation on that date in order to distance itself from Constantinople.

various traditions as to what event(s) took place there. Bethlehem narratives (like the *Protoevangelium of James*) understood the *kathisma* (κάθισμα)³⁵ as the resting place for the Holy Family on the way to the inn (καταλύμα; Lk. 2:7). Alternatively, Coptic traditions favored the *kathisma* as the place of her rest during the Flight to Egypt. At the same time, the Palm narratives identified the *kathisma* as the place of rest along the way to Gethsemane, her burial place, or the place where Christ sat on the rock as the Virgin delivered her soul.

In any case, the *Kathisma* church became the bedrock for a Hagiopolite tradition that commemorated the Lord's birth on the third millstone outside of Bethlehem, following the *Protoevangelium of James*.³⁶ A monastic community was situated adjacent to this basilica and proved instrumental in expanding and bolstering her veneration.³⁷ A large Marian cult and affiliated monastic orders soon emerged around the shrines of the Kathisma and tomb of the Virgin. Just as the Jerusalem church building project (*Martyrium*, the *Anastasis*, the *Eleona*, the *Lazarium*, etc.) was propagated by the discovery of the Cross in fourth century Jerusalem, a similar building program emerged after the Council of Ephesus honoring the Blessed Virgin. Both building projects influenced the liturgical celebrations and calendars throughout the world.

Therefore, during this second phase, Jerusalem became the primary location of development for these Marian celebrations. Scholars believe August 15 became linked with the "Old Kathisma" church built by Bishop Juvenal and the exiled Princess Eudoxia near the necropolis

³⁵ κάθισμα comes from καθίξειν, generally meaning "to cause to sit" or "to place," intransitive "to sit."

³⁶ Stéphane Verhelst, "Le 15 Août, Le 9 Av e le Kathisme," *Questions Liturgiques* 82 (2001): 161-191, 166-169. However, the rock associated with this tradition is not identified until 530, which may have been the impetus for building other churches. Shoemaker, 97.

³⁷ Lampe, *Lexicon*, 690. Ray suggests that the *kathisma* may also signify the settlement of monks in that location, while Vincent and Abel suggested it was a way station for caravans. This is based on the secondary meaning of κάθισμα, which means to "set up." This is often related to Mary's rest during the Nativity or her session in the Dormition narrative. Ray, "August 15," 58. Cyril of Scythopolis uses the term "Church of the *Session* of the Theotokos."

at the Mount of Olives,³⁸ where the Virgin rested before giving birth in the cave, as mentioned in the *Vitae* of Cyril of Scythopolis and Theodore of Petra.³⁹ Just as August 15 was based on the *Protoevangelion of James* and related to the consecration of the Kathisma church, two additional dates also mentioned in the *Protevangelion* seem to have inspired the building of Jerusalem churches: her nativity on September 8, and the Presentation on November 21—which are still venerated today in the Armenian tradition.

By the end of the fifth century, the August 15 celebration is expanded into a five-day stationary Marian liturgy from August 13-17.⁴⁰ This encouraged the medieval Georgian capital (Mtskheta) to mimic the liturgical stations of Jerusalem, not only by celebrating her dormition on August 15, but also by gathering on August 13 in a way that “looked for” the assumption.⁴¹ This Jerusalem tradition also influenced the Roman Feast on 7th century January 1 as the Christmas octave, inspired by the *Natale S. Mariae*.⁴²

Before the mid-seventh century, around 40 Dormition texts survive, which contain considerable diversity in their various manuscripts. One sixth-century pseudo-epigraphal sermon attributed to Cyril of Jerusalem preserved in Sahidic speaks of the life and death of the Holy Virgin

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 83-4; citing “Theodore of Petra, v. Thds.,” in, H. Usener, ed., *Der heilige Theodosius, Schriften des Theodoros und Kyrillos* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1890), 13-4; Cyril of Scythopolis, “v. Thds.,” in *Kyrillos von Skythopolis*, Eduard Schwartz, ed., TU 49.2 (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1939), 236.

⁴⁰ Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 120-40.

⁴¹ Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 120-1; Crehan, “The Assumption,” 322.

⁴² Jounel, “Veneration,” 133.



Mary.⁴³ After mentioning several traditions regarding Mary, it says this regarding her departure and burial:⁴⁴

After a final prayer of the Virgin, 'the Lord Jesus Christ arrives, carried by the cherubim and preceded by the angels.' He said to his mother, 'Do not be terrified by death. The life of the whole world is (standing) in front of you.' When Mary saw Him, 'her soul jumped into the arms of her Son, who covered her with a celestial mantle.' Then Jesus gives instructions to the apostles for the burial of Mary's body in the Valley of Jehoshaphat. Meanwhile the Jews hear of the death of Mary and try to burn her body. The apostles flee, but the Jews do not succeed in finding the body because of a divine intervention. A voice from heaven is directed to the Jews 'No one should seek the body of the Virgin until the great day of the advent of the Savior.'⁴⁵

The sermon concludes with a note that the Virgin departed on the 21st of Tobe, corresponding to January 29.⁴⁶ As Mimouni notes, the establishment of the new feast celebrated on the 16 of Mesore (22 August) did not result in the removal of the original feast of 21 of Tobe, approximately 206 days earlier.⁴⁷ True, the feast continues to be celebrated till the present day in the Coptic Orthodox Church.

3. *Transitus* Literature

Instead of the post-Ephesian homiletics which focused on the person of the Virgin and the incarnation, a plethora of *transitus* literature emerges that speaks about the moving or carrying of her body into heaven. One of the earliest documents that attests to the death of the Virgin is the *Transitus Mariae* (*The Passage of Mary*), attributed to Bishop Melito of Sardis († c. 200). This

⁴³ A. Campagnano, *Ps. Cirillo di Gerusalemme. Omelie Copte sulla Passione, sulla Croce e sulla Vergine* (Testi e Documenti per lo Studio dell'Antichità 66), (Milano 1980), 152–195.

⁴⁴ For example, the sermon explains how her parents, Joachim and Anna, who implore God at the Temple to grant them a child that will be dedicated to the Temple, a vow they fulfil when Mary reaches the age of three. It goes on to discuss the Annunciation, Nativity, and subsequent flight to Egypt, accompanied with several miracles and wonders performed during that period. Following the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, Mary goes on to live ten years with St. John the Beloved.

⁴⁵ Sheridan, *Mary in the Early Coptic Tradition*, 231-232.

⁴⁶ Mimouni classifies two other manuscript lines from the same time period along with the aforementioned, namely, the Gospel of Bartholomew and Pseudo-Evodius of Rome. That which is ascribed to Evodius is preserved in three versions, one in Sahidic preserved entire in a manuscript of the Monastery of St. Michael, fragments of another Sahidic one and a Bohairic version from the Monastery of St. Macarius.

⁴⁷ Sheridan, *A Homily on the Death of the Virgin Mary*, 137.

document narrates that Mary died in the presence of the apostles in Jerusalem, and then (depending on the version) her body disappeared immediately, or after burial.

Most scholars agree that one of the oldest extant witness to her departure, burial, and translation comes from a set of Syriac fragments in the British Library dating to the second half of the fifth century.⁴⁸ The Syriac document inspired more expansive Greek versions that date to the late fifth or early sixth century.⁴⁹ Many of those expansions are also found in the earliest known Coptic text: the Bohairic discourse, “On the Falling Asleep of Mary,” attributed to Patriarch Theodosius of Alexandria.⁵⁰ However, its date of composition varies as early as 507, to as late as 567.⁵¹

In his homily on August 14 of 489 in Nisibis,⁵² St. Jacob of Sarug (†521 AD) makes only brief mention of the *transitus* after the dormition.⁵³ He first examines the fate of Mary who undertakes the same “way” as from Adam to the Lord Christ.⁵⁴ Then, he speaks about the death of the Virgin and how the apostles prepared her body for burial, even accompanied by the angels, cherubim, seraphim, Michael and Gabriel. Then, he mentions the rejoicing of the righteous because she is with them.

On this day Adam rejoices and Eve his wife,
because their daughter rests in the place where they are gathered.
On this day the righteous Noah and Abraham rejoiced
that their daughter has visited them in their dwelling-place...
On this day all the prophets lifted their heads from their graves,
because they saw the light which shone forth on them.

⁴⁸ Daley, “Introduction,” 7, citing W. Wright, *Contributions to Apocryphal Literature of the New Testament* (London, 1865), 11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Burghardt, *Testimony*, 15.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*; Daley, “Introduction,” 9.

⁵² The date and location is found in the superscription in the manuscripts. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 63-65 (with English translation at 408-414).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, citing C. Vona, *Omèlie mariologiche di s. Giacomo di Sarug* (Rome: Lateran University Press, 1953/1970).

⁵⁴ In his account, Jacob includes Adam, Seth, Noah, Shem, Japheth, Ham, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the 12 patriarchs, Joseph, Ephraim, Judah, Moses, Hur, Joshua, Aaron, David, Daniel, Jephthah, Gideon, and Samson.



They saw that death is disquieted and flees from within them;
and [that] the gates of heaven are opened again and the depths of the earth...
In heaven, the watchers; and the depths, man; in the air, glory:
when the Virgin Mary was buried as one deceased.
A light shone on that company of disciples,
also on her neighbors and her relations and her kindred.

The heavenly company performed their “Holy, Holy, Holy,”
unto the glorious soul of this Mother of the Son of God.
Fiery seraphim surrounded the soul of the departed and raised the loud sound of their joyful shouts.
They shouted and said: “Lift up, O gates, all your heads,
because the Mother of the King seeks to enter the bridal chamber of light.”⁵⁵

In this way, Jacob speaks about her departure and journey as the righteous prophets and patriarchs who came before. Her soul is praised by the angels, and enters into the “bridal chamber.” Interestingly, Jacob states that the Seraphim cite Psalm 23 as her soul departs. This is the very same psalm used for the Feast of Ascension since the early centuries. However, he makes no specific reference to a bodily ascension—very distinct from the modern Catholic dogma of the Assumption.⁵⁶

It is in the time of Pope Theodosius of Alexandria, we witness the first citation of the double feast of the dormition and *transitus*.⁵⁷ This is also echoed in the Ethiopic hymn:

I salute the translation of your body which the human heart can never conceive. Doubly surrounded with grace and clothed in a like glory, O Mary, your flesh was like a pearl, and death itself was shamed when with wonder it saw you ascending resplendent through the clouds to heaven. I salute the *translation* of your body truly worthy to be praised, which outshines in beauty the splendor of the sun and the glory of the moon.⁵⁸

4. Assumption

According to the historian Nicephorus Callistus, Emperor Mauritius (582-602) ordered that the feast of the Assumption should be celebrated solemnly.⁵⁹ By the seventh century, although

⁵⁵ Jacob of Serug, *On the Mother of God*, trans. Mary Hansbury, *Popular Patristics Series #19*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), pp. 89-100.

⁵⁶ Stephen J. Shoemaker, “Death and Maiden: The Early History of the Dormition and Assumption Apocrypha,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 50:1-2 (2006) 59-97, 80.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 233-234.

⁵⁸ Wedasse Mâryam, in Archdale King, *Rites of Eastern Christendom*, v. 1 (Rome: Catholic Book Agency, 1948), 542.

⁵⁹ Nicephorus Callistus, *Historia ecclesiastica*, t.17, 28 (PG 147:292).

many Marian themes are fairly consistent in the various texts,⁶⁰ we also witness divergent explanations relating to her bodily resurrection, ascension, or assumption.

Many of our ancient texts remain in disconnected fragments.⁶¹ These popular and continually edited texts make it extremely challenging for us to reconstruct the textual history. More than 40 Dormition texts before the mid-7th century “present a complex tangle of traditions whose early history has proven particularly difficult to unravel.”⁶² For example, John of Thessalonica’s homily is found in 30 Greek and 35 Slavonic manuscripts, but with 12 distinct conclusions.⁶³ This accounts for numerous variations in the sources involving the nature of her death, the ultimate fate of her body and soul, and even the location of her house.⁶⁴

Many scholars have taken problematic approaches to prove or disprove a theological narrative, while distorting or misrepresenting the literary relations and historical development within those texts.⁶⁵ According to Shoemaker, the recognized expert on these narratives:

According to many early Dormition narratives, for instance, the Virgin’s body and soul were separated only temporarily, usually for three or four days,⁶⁶ after which she was, like her son, resurrected and taken bodily into Paradise, where she presently exists as a living witness to the reward awaiting all the just at the end of time. This conclusion is of course rather amenable to the modern dogma of the Virgin’s bodily Assumption, and many scholars of the Dormition traditions have understood these narratives as espousing something more or less equivalent to the 1950 dogma. Yet other early narratives omit any mention of Mary’s resurrection or bodily Assumption, and these generally conclude simply with Christ’s descent to receive his mother’s soul, followed by the transfer of Mary’s body to a hidden place where it awaits reunion with her soul at the end of time. This outcome, by way of contrast, seems to contradict the modern Assumption dogma, and consequently, much previous scholarship has sought to divide up the early Dormition traditions according to whether or not they espouse the Virgin’s bodily Assumption. Once the various narratives have been classified

⁶⁰ Themes include her perpetual virginity, the title Mother of God (*Theotokos*), prayer requesting the intercession of the Virgin, Mary venerated as queen of all, the celebration of the Nativity, of the Dormition and Assumption and the memory of the journey of the Holy Family in Egypt. See Sheridan, *A Homily on the Death of the Virgin Mary*, 236.

⁶¹ Shoemaker, “Death and the Maiden,” 59-60.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 61-62.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 63, citing Martin Jugie, *Homélies mariales byzantines (II)*, 401-5, 431-38. Although Jugie judged one of these endings to be the earliest, his choice seems somewhat unlikely in light of subsequent discoveries. Jugie’s “primitive” ending concludes with Mary’s burial and the disappearance of her body. However, Shoemaker (n14) believes that the original may have included her resurrection and miraculous transfer in the body to Paradise.

⁶⁴ Shoemaker, “Death and the Maiden,” 67.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ An obvious exception is found in the Coptic homily of Theodosius, where you have the 206 day difference between 21 Tobe and 16 Mesra.

as either "pro-Assumption" or "no-Assumption," their differences are frequently explained according to a developmental model of either dogmatic evolution or decline over time. In such a view, the theological positions represented by the early Dormition narratives correspond to a related progression in the history of Christian thought, according to which one interpretation of the end of Mary's life is replaced by another to match changing Christian beliefs regarding the Virgin's death and Assumption... [All too often] clear evidence of literary relations is frequently ignored in favor of an analysis based primarily in dogmatic categories produced by modern Roman Catholic theological discourse.⁶⁷

Thus, we cannot ignore any theological bias in approaching these texts. Nor can we ignore that a majority of the scholars examining these texts—Jugie, Baldi, Mosconi, and Cothenet—were all Roman Catholic priests.⁶⁸ Due to this complex literary history and theological bias, Shoemaker has categorically rejected any sense of “developmental” typologies. These texts all arise in the fifth century at almost the same exact historical moment, yet are diverse from the beginning.

Mimouni even classified the Sahidic and Bohairic texts which speak about only the dormition (the Sahidic *Gospel of Bartholomew*, the Sahidic homily of Cyril of Jerusalem and the Sahidic homily of Evodius of Rome), only the assumption (Theophilus of Alexandria), and those which refer to both (Sahidic *Transitus Ordinarius*, the Bohairic sermon of Evodius, and the Bohairic sermon of Theodosius). This reveals that during this period strict “copies” of manuscripts were not being done without editing them based on theological perspectives relating to the dormition and/or assumption. Others would intentionally adjust the contexts of these texts to suit the particular circumstances or theological taste of their audiences.⁶⁹ As Paul Bradshaw has claimed these texts belong to a category of “living literature...which circulates within a community and forms a part of its heritage and tradition but which is constantly subject to revision and rewriting to reflect the changing historical and cultural circumstances.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Shoemaker, “Death and the Maiden,” 68-69, 76.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 60-61.

⁷⁰ Ibid., citing Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1-20, at 5; see also idem. “Liturgy as ‘Living

Such opinions made many of these ancient writings targets of ecclesiastical opposition, as in the so-called Gelasian decree.⁷¹ This demonstrates how the church was critical of these texts. Modern historians have not always fared better. Some scholars who were convicted that Mary remained immortal, argue against uncontroverted evidence regarding the early date of her tomb, and dismiss or twist hundreds of apocryphal texts because they unanimously testify to her death.⁷²

Moreover, in the Coptic tradition we notice evidence of an early development, at least of the celebration and veneration of the Virgin, which begins with a simple celebration of the Incarnation, to that of the Dormition and translation. In other traditions, we witness references to her bodily resurrection appearing as well, most probably as a later development. In fact, new texts were not always made, but “revisions were made to the conclusions of already existing narratives, updating them to include the Virgin’s resurrection and Assumption.”⁷³

II. THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

The Oriental Orthodox Church has never officially accepted the assumption of the Virgin as dogmatic truth. There are no clear references in Scripture to the fact that the Virgin would be raised in the spiritual body, as with our Lord.⁷⁴ Like the Oriental Orthodox, the Eastern Orthodox

Literature,” in *Liturgy in Dialogue: Essays in Memory of Ronald Jasper*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw and Bryan Spinks (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 139-154, esp. 141-143.

⁷¹ Shoemaker, “Death and the Maiden,” 60 n3, citing Ernst von Dobschütz, “Das Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis,” in *Text und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur* 38.4 (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs, 1912).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 71, citing Martin Jugie, *La mort et l’assomption de la sainte Vierge. Étude historico-doctrinale* (Vatican City, 1944), 70-76, 85-92, 507-582, 681-87; Duggan, “Assumption Dogma,” 13, 57-63; M. F. Cavallera, “À propos d’une enquête patristique sur l’Assomption,” *BLE* 27 (1926): 97-116; and Bernard Capelle, “Les homélies liturgique de prétendu Timothée de Jérusalem,” *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 63 (1949): 5-26.

⁷³ Shoemaker, “Death and the Maiden,” 80-81.

⁷⁴ When it comes, for example, to St. Paul’s description of the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4, our church figures the Holy Virgin to be in the category of those who have fallen asleep and shall rise first, but not with “those who will be caught up together with them in the clouds.”



Church simply asserts that after she reposed, her body was taken to Paradise miraculously, and her tomb was found empty, while a difference results in the length of interval between them.⁷⁵

Christian doctrine is inherently coherent. Just as Christology affects one's understanding of Holy Scripture, the Eucharist, and the saints, the understanding of about the Holy Virgin will impact other aspects of theology.

While Pius IX and XII argued for inner, logical and harmonious coherence of the Marian doctrines within themselves and to the rest of God's revelation,⁷⁶ the doctrinal assertion of the assumption remains problematic not only in of itself, but has profound implications on the doctrines related to Paradise, the immaculate conception, and original sin.

1. Paradise

While a majority of the early dormition accounts agree rather remarkably that Mary's body and/or soul are transferred to Paradise, we can identify a great diversity regarding the references and understandings of her assumption, as well as a broad and multi-faceted understanding of Paradise that lacks any unilinear process of dogmatic development.⁷⁷

Early accounts of her dormition often had fluid depictions of Paradise. While some ancient writers portrayed Paradise as the final resting place of the righteous where the elect receive their final reward, others considered it as the waiting place where disembodied souls await the general

⁷⁵ "The Menaia – 15 August – Commemoration of the Falling Asleep of our Most Holy Lady, the Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary."

⁷⁶ Paul E. Duggan, "The Assumption Dogma: Some Reactions and Ecumenical Implications in the Thought of English-Speaking Theologians," (Ph.D. Diss.: University of Dayton, 1989), 72, citing Kilian J. Healy, "The Assumption among Mary's Privileges," *The Thomist* 14:1 (1951): 72-92, 91-92.

⁷⁷ Shoemaker, "Death and the Maiden," 86.

resurrection.⁷⁸ The former coincides readily with modern Catholic dogma of the assumption, where paradise is more fully linked with heaven as the eternal dwelling place; and the Virgin's presence there anticipates the bodily resurrection of all the righteous. Alternatively, the latter opinion views Paradise as a waiting place for the souls. This opinion was asserted by several patristic writers, including Tertullian, Hippolytus of Rome, St. Hilary of Poitiers, St. Ambrose of Milan, and St. Jerome.⁷⁹ Thus, for the Orthodox, the Virgin awaits the reunion with her body along with all the souls.

It is most interesting to note that a significant portion of the earliest Dormition narratives is found in Coptic, which uniquely and consistently portray the carrying of her soul, and the translation of her inanimate body to Paradise.⁸⁰ Even these early documents do not confuse her dormition from the translation of her body but distinguish the two.

Some scholars, in attempts to promote the Catholic dogma, have asserted that patristic writers such as St. Epiphanius of Salamis, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Ephrem the Syrian believed that Paradise was part of the ultimate destiny of the elect.⁸¹ However, many of these arguments are exaggerations of vague texts, often taken out of context. Even if these texts do argue that paradise was equated with heaven, they do not represent a *consensus patrum*. As Shoemaker concludes:

The ambiguous status of Paradise often makes uncertain the significance of Mary's presence there, and consequently, we should not be altogether surprised in finding that the ancient Dormition apocrypha do not fit well at all within the sharp lines drawn by modern Roman Catholic theological discourse about the Assumption.⁸²

⁷⁸ For a more thorough analysis of these opinions, see Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 179-203.

⁷⁹ Tertullian, *An.*, 55-6; see Jean Delumeau, *History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1995), 28; Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 182-183.

⁸⁰ Simon C. Mimouni, "Genèse et Évolution des traditions anciennes sur le sort final de Marie," *Marianum* 42 (1991): 69-143, 116.

⁸¹ Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 184-185; Epiphanius, *Haer.*, 64.47.

⁸² Shoemaker, "Death and the Maiden," 86.



2. Original Sin and Immaculate Conception

The dogmatic declaration of the Assumption in 1950 is directly related to the 1854 declaration of the Immaculate Conception, which declared that the Virgin was conceived free from original sin. Pius IX doctrinally asserted that Mary was preserved from sin and corruption in a unique way as a unique privilege of overcoming sin. Likewise, Pius XII declared the assumption as the crown of Mary's privileges, directly citing Pius IX.⁸³ "These two privileges are most closely bound to one another," and are considered "exemptions" from the general rules that apply to the rest of humanity.⁸⁴ Thus, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that the Immaculate Virgin "was preserved free from all stain of original sin."⁸⁵

While the Fathers of the Church spoke often of the Virgin's holiness and purity, they did not speak in such specific terms of her as being free from original sin. "For, who shall be pure from uncleanness? No one. Even if his life is but one day upon the earth." (Job 14:4-5). The testimony of the Church Fathers is quite clear that the only exception to this rule is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. As St. Ambrose of Milan, states, "Of all those born of women, there is not a single one who is perfectly holy, apart from the Lord Jesus Christ, Who in a special new way of immaculate birth-giving, did not experience earthly taint."⁸⁶ Likewise, St. Epiphanius of Cyprus (c 315-403) proclaims that she was born from Anna and Joachim "normally by the man's seed and a woman's womb like everyone else ... Mary is to be held in honor, but You, Lord, are worshipped!"⁸⁷

⁸³ Duggan, "The Assumption Dogma," 3-4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 1, Section 2, Article 9, Paragraph 6, §966.

⁸⁶ St. Ambrose, *Commentary on St. Luke*, chapter 2.

⁸⁷ St. Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion*, Vol. 2, transl. Frank Williams (1994), "Against Collyridians," pp. 625-629.



According to St. Ambrose, the Holy Virgin appeals to God as her Savior (Lk. 1:47) because she “would be the first to receive the promised fruit of salvation.”⁸⁸ St. Ephrem also believes that before the Incarnation, God purified and prepared her, but did not allow her to become immortal.

As lightning illuminates what is hidden, so also Christ purifies what is hidden in the nature of things. He purified the Virgin also and then was born, so as to show that where Christ is, there is manifest purity in all its power. He purified the Virgin, having prepared Her by the Holy Spirit... having been born, He left Her virgin. I do not say that Mary became immortal, but that being illuminated by grace, She was not disturbed by sinful desires.⁸⁹

Others like St. Gregory of Nyssa seems to ascribe a unique grace of purity granted to her when Christ was conceived within her, but makes no such mention preceding the Annunciation.⁹⁰

It is perhaps at the direction of Augustine’s words that the West developed a varied understanding concerning Mary. In his *Treatise on Nature and Grace*, Augustine writes:

We must except the Holy Virgin Mary, concerning whom I wish to raise no question when it touches the subject of sins, out of honour to the Lord; for from Him we know what abundance of grace for overcoming sin in every particular was conferred upon her who had the merit to conceive and bear Him who undoubtedly had no sin. Well, then, if, with this exception of the Virgin, we could only assemble together all the forementioned holy men and women, and ask them whether they lived without sin whilst they were in this life, what can we suppose would be their answer?⁹¹

Augustine is willing to make the concession that Mary is free from actual sin, though he does not inquire into whether this is true of her status of original sin, a topic that is largely absent from the mind and writings of the Eastern Fathers. In fact, the Eastern Fathers do not speak of her as being distinct from the rest of humanity as relates to “original sin,” death and corruption, even though they often refer to her exceptional life of holiness with titles of “All-holy,” “pure” and “Ever-Virgin.”

⁸⁸ St. Ambrose, *Expositio in Lucam*, 2.17 (PL 15:1640)

⁸⁹ St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Homily Against Heretics*, 41.

⁹⁰ “It was, to divulge by the manner of His Incarnation this great secret; that purity is the only complete indication of the presence of God and of His coming, and that no one can in reality secure this for himself, unless he has altogether estranged himself from the passions of the flesh. What happened in the stainless Mary when the fulness of the Godhead which was in Christ shone out through her, that happens in every soul that leads by rule the virgin life.” St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, 2; NPNF 2, Vol. V, 344

⁹¹ St. Augustine of Hippo, *A Treatise on Nature and Grace*, chapter 42 [XXXVI]; NPNF s. 1, Vol. V.



The early sixth-century, anti-Chalcedonian bishop, Julian of Halicarnassus from Asia Minor claimed that Christ's body was prevented from death even before His Resurrection, since He was free from Adam's original sin and its effects (which includes the corruption of the body). Simon Mimouni has demonstrated that some of his followers, Julianists, asserted that if Christ was free from corruption at birth, then so must the Virgin as well so that she would not transmit any corruption or contagion to her Son.⁹² These Julianists argued that the Virgin was granted freedom from this corruption, not only when she bore Christ, but also prevented her death since she lacked the cause of human mortality.⁹³ This seems to have motivated the celebration of August 15 as a single commemoration of her dormition and translation/ascension, without any interval.⁹⁴ They refused to venerate at the "tomb of Mary" in the basilica of Gethsemane,⁹⁵ and opted for the basilica at the Mount of Olives.⁹⁶

We condemn Julianism, primarily through the writings of St. Severus of Antioch. He insisted that just as Christ died, the Virgin Mary also was mortal and died.⁹⁷ Although they recognized her purity and perfect humanity, they affirmed her death and bodily translation. So, the *transitus* could be then included into the literature, as well as its liturgical celebration 206 days after her dormition.⁹⁸

⁹² Simon C. Mimouni, "Genèse et Évolution des traditions anciennes sur le sort final de Marie," *Marianum* 42 (1991): 69-143, at 119-122.

⁹³ *Ibid.*; Mimouni, *Dormition* 666-668; Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 263-265.

⁹⁴ Mimouni, "Genèse," 116.

⁹⁵ M. Jugie, *La mort et l'assomption*, 172-212; B. Capelle, "L'Assunzione e la liturgia," *Marianum* 15 (1953): 241-276; Bagatti, "Nuove scoperte," 236-244; Calabuig, "Liturgical Cult," 253.

⁹⁶ Daley, 4; Simon Claude Mimouni, *Dormition et assomption de Marie. Histoire des traditions anciennes* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1995), 532.

⁹⁷ Daley, "Introduction," 10.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*



CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the fifth century, the Gallic monk Vincent of Lérins († c. 445-450 AD)⁹⁹ laid down a maxim as a standard that could reliably distinguish truth from falsehood in the Tradition of the *catholic* faith: “*Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est,*” or “What has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” This logic has often been revered in the West, and could also be applicable for Eastern Christians. By this standard, while the doctrines related to the departure and possibly translation of her body would fit into this standard, we cannot say so for that of the assumption.

Yet, for centuries Christian writers had various opinions relating to her dormition, translation and assumption, which demonstrates that the doctrine of assumption was not accepted by everyone, everywhere, as Vincent’s maxim would require. We witness this variation not only in the sixth century texts included above, but even in the Catholic tradition of the Immaculate Conception. For example, Thomas Aquinas wrote that “the Blessed Mary did indeed contract original sin,”¹⁰⁰ although he seemed to have changed his opinion twice.¹⁰¹ Moreover, Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153 AD) marveled at these extra dignities and pushed for greater discernment.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Commemorated by the Eastern Orthodox on May 24. His pseudonym was Peregrinus. He was born possibly Toul, Belgica (now in France). This Gallo-Roman saint is the chief theologian of the Abbey of Lérins and is known especially for his heresiography *Commonitoria* (“Memoranda”), which is available in English by R. *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 7 (1949). He was accused of being a Semi-Pelagian, and his surviving works are included in PL 50.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIIa, Q. 27, A.2, ad.2.

¹⁰¹ Terence Quinn, “St. Thomas’ Teaching on the Immaculate Conception,” *Dominicana* 38:4 (1953): 297-303, 302. On at least two other occasions (*Com in I Sent*, d.44, q.1, ad.3; Sermon in 1270s), Thomas asserts she was exempt from original and actual sin.

¹⁰² “I am frightened now, seeing that certain of you have desired to change the condition of important matters, introducing a new festival unknown to the Church, unapproved by reason, unjustified by ancient tradition. Are we really more learned and more pious than our fathers? You will say, ‘One must glorify the Mother of God as much as Possible.’ This is true; but the glorification given to the Queen of Heaven demands discernment. This Royal Virgin



After decades of researching the issue for the Vatican, Martin Jugie promoted the dogma of the assumption and immortality of the Virgin Mary. While much research had been conducted into the writings of the fathers, it was clear that the first four centuries found little support for this declaration. Despite the striking absence of early historical evidence, the Vatican nonetheless declared the Assumption as a dogma by Pope Pius XII on November 1, 1950 (*Munificentissimus Deus*), based on a dogmatic rather than historical basis. However, the Vatican deliberately left open the question of the Virgin's actual departure from this world.

Alternatively, the Coptic Orthodox Church has never officially proclaimed such belief as dogma. While we boldly assert the departure of the Virgin and silently reflect upon the moving of her body into heaven, the Catholic tradition has opted for a relative silence relating to her death, and a dogmatic proclamation relating to her assumption. The difference has impacted not only belief in her assumption, but also relates to the doctrines of Original Sin, Immaculate Conception, and Paradise.

Orthodoxy has never proclaimed the Assumption as a dogma, nor would it ever wish to do so. Our early fathers such as St. Epiphanius felt it better to be commemorated and awed in silence. The Eastern Orthodox theologian, Vladimir Lossky, called for the same silence concerning the teachings related to the Virgin, since they are distinct from the doctrines of the Holy Trinity,

Incarnation and Redemption:

It is hard to speak and not less hard to think about the mysteries which the Church keeps in the hidden depths of her inner consciousness... The Mother of God was never a theme of the public preaching of the Apostles; while Christ was preached on the housetops, and proclaimed for all to know in an initiatory teaching addressed to the whole world, the mystery of his Mother was revealed only to those who were within the

does not have need of false glorifications, possessing as She does true crowns of glory and signs of dignity. Glorify the purity of Her flesh and the sanctity of Her life. Marvel at the abundance of the gifts of this Virgin; venerate Her Divine Son; exalt Her Who conceived without knowing concupiscence and gave birth without knowing pain. But what does one yet need to add to these dignities?" Bernard of Clairvaux, *Epistle 174*.



Church... It is not so much an object of faith as a foundation for our hope, a fruit of faith, ripened in Tradition. Let us therefore keep silence, and let us not try to dogmatize about the supreme glory of the Mother of God.¹⁰³

It was for these same reasons that the Pope Gelasius I (492-496 AD), finding the Assumption doctrine unreliable and unacceptable, required that the following statement would be read each year in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

The Falling Asleep of Mary the Holy Mother of God. Though her most sacred body is not to be found on earth, still Holy Mother Church celebrates her venerable memory with no doubt that she has left this life. But as to where the venerable temple of the Holy Ghost has been hidden by divine Providence, the sobriety of the Church prefers pious ignorance to any frivolous or apocryphal doctrine.¹⁰⁴

This decree was made for eleven centuries, from the decree of Gelasius to the reform of the Roman Martyrology by Baronius in 1584.¹⁰⁵

After Ephesus it was common to identify the Ark of the Covenant as a type of the Virgin. And just as the precise whereabouts of the ark are generally unknown and uncertain,¹⁰⁶ so too the precise location and means of her existence remains a mystery. What is the precise understanding of the Ark and Woman clothed with the sun in Revelation 11 and 12? In what form does she appear to the faithful in East (Zeitoun-1968, Assiut-2001-2, Warraq-2009) and West (Guadaloupe-1531, Lourdes-1858, Fatima-1917, etc.)? She usually appears in the heaven, in spiritual visions, with heavenly light—not in the body. Even when she appeared in 1947 in France as a young beautiful lady with long blonde hair, she was accompanied by an angel (presumably Gabriel) at her side. This suggests that it is not a bodily apparition, but again in the spirit. Perhaps this even states too

¹⁰³ V. Lossky, "Panagia," in E. L. Mascall, ed., *The Mother of God: A Symposium by Members of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius* (London: Dacre Press, 1949), 35.

¹⁰⁴ Jugie, *La Mort*, 208, 361, 428.

¹⁰⁵ Duggan, "The Assumption Dogma," 18.

¹⁰⁶ With the exception for the Ethiopian Orthodox tradition which claims that the Ark of the Covenant is under guard in a treasury near the Church of our Lady Mary of Zion, in Axum.



much relating to our knowledge and understanding of how she moves, appears and exists. Rather, it is best to approach in silence.

This silence is best depicted by the 8th or 9th century icon of St. Anne (the mother of the Virgin Mary) discovered by a Polish archaeological team in the 1960's during an excavation of the Faras cathedral in old Nubia (present day Sudan). In this, St Anne has her right index finger raised to her lips. This gesture should be understood to refer not only to the silence of prayer, but the dogmatic silence which we should give to the conception of Mary and her departure from this earth. It was this silent obedience which she taught the disciples in Cana of Galilee, perhaps the most important paradox for us today—to loudly praise the Lord and Virgin, while preserving a necessary silence relating to the glorious mysteries surrounding the Holy Virgin. Or, as St. Severus of Antioch says:

When a man looks toward you, God-bearer and Virgin,
and at the divine mystery, wrought in you by a miracle,
he is silenced because of the ineffability,
and wonder is stirred to utter praise,
because of the greatness of Him who helped us so much.¹⁰⁷

Not only silence, but trepidation:

When I would like to turn my gaze towards the Virgin Mother of God and form some simple thoughts concerning her, in the very beginning of my path I encounter something like a voice from God coming to me, saying and crying powerfully in my ears: 'Do not approach here. Remove the shoes from your feet, for the place you are standing at is a holy ground' (Ex 3:5)...What *theoria* could there be more divine than that of the Mother of God? What would be higher than this? To approach her is, for a man, like approaching holy ground and reaching heaven."¹⁰⁸



¹⁰⁷ Severus of Antioch, *Hymns* § 120 (PO 6, p. 159), transl. Seppälä, "New Sinai," p. 139.

¹⁰⁸ Severus of Antioch, *Homiliae* 67 (PO 8, p. 349–350).

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