

# Mary in the *Protevangelium of James*: A Jewish Woman in the Temple?

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SINCE THE *PROTEVANGELIUM OF JAMES* was reintroduced to the West in the middle of the sixteenth century, it has attracted significant scholarly interest. The bulk of this attention has focused on critical analysis of the text, which was greatly advanced in the last century by the discovery of *P. Bodm. V*.<sup>1</sup> Additional work has examined the date and genre of *Prot. Jas.*, its place in the corpus of early Christian writings, and its role in the development of Mariology. While the popularity and wide distribution of *Prot. Jas.* in antiquity are clear, its date, authorship, and provenance remain uncertain. Most scholars hold that it was the work of a Christian whose knowledge of Judaism was problematic. Questionable descriptions of Jewish practice and Palestinian geography are frequently catalogued to argue that the author's acquaintance with Judaism was limited to the Septuagint.<sup>2</sup> In this article I investigate one aspect of *Prot. Jas.* that is among the most frequently cited errors in the text: the depiction of a young Mary living in the

<sup>1</sup> Michel Testuz, *Papyrus Bodmer V. Nativité de Marie* (Geneva 1958). Unless otherwise noted, Greek quotations of *Prot. Jas.* will follow this text.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Emile Amann, *La Protévangile de Jacques et ses remaniements latins* (Paris 1910) 209; Edouard Cothenet, "Le Protévangile de Jacques: origine, genre et signification d'un premier midrash chrétien sur la nativité de Marie," *ANRW* II.25.6 (1988) 4252–4269; Oscar Cullmann, "The Protevangelium of James," in Wilhelm Schneemelcher (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha* (Louisville 1991) 424; J. K. Elliott and M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford 1993) 49; Michael Mach, "Are there Jewish Elements in the 'Protevangelium Jacobi'?" in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies I* (Jerusalem 1985) 215.

temple of Jerusalem. Through a careful reexamination of Mary's time in the temple, I will challenge this conventional hypothesis and argue that the author structures his narrative to evoke three groups of Jewish women who were given special privileges in the temple cult. Rather than betraying an ignorance of Judaism, Mary's relationship to the temple artfully weaves together the unique position in the Jerusalem temple allotted to accused adulteresses, to girls who wove the temple curtains, and to female Nazirites.

The position held by young girls in the temple is somewhat difficult to evaluate, as our knowledge of female participation in Jewish rituals is frustratingly sparse. In the Hebrew Bible we read of women who brought offerings (1 Sam 1:24–5), who danced (Jgs 21:19–23, 1 Sam 18:6–7), who played instruments (Ps 68:26), and who took part in Ezra's reading of the Torah (Neh 8:2–3, 10:1–30). We also have ambiguous references to women who assembled or who served at the tabernacle in Ex 38:8 and 1 Sam 2:22. However, the Masoretic text of 1 Sam 2:22 indicates that such women had a distinctly negative reputation, as evidenced by their illicit relationships with the sons of Eli. In light of their questionable repute in the Masoretic text, it is noteworthy that the evaluation of these women underwent rehabilitation in later tradition, even attributing to them the disciplines of prayer and fasting:

He made the laver of bronze and its base of bronze from the mirrors of bronze of the chaste women, who, when they came to pray at the entrance of the tent of meeting, stood beside their offering of elevation, praising God and giving thanks. Then, when they were purified from the uncleanness of their blood, they returned to their husbands and bore righteous children. (*Tg. Ps.-J.*, Ex 38:8)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Transl. from Martin McNamara et al. (eds.), *The Aramaic Bible II Targum Neofiti I and Pseudo-Jonathan: Exodus* (Collegeville 1994). See also these passages in *Targum Onqelos* and *Targum Neofiti*.

This one made the bronze washbasin and its bronze base from the mirrors of the women who fasted, who fasted by the doors of the tent of witness, in the day he pitched it. (LXX Ex 38:26)<sup>4</sup>

These later traditions in the targums and the Septuagint suggest that during the Second Temple period there was a group of pious women associated with the temple, whose reputation for chastity was read back onto the women described in the Masoretic text of Ex 38 and 1 Sam 2.<sup>5</sup> As to the post-biblical literature, Susan Grossman emphasized that the rabbis of the late second century believed women had an active role in the life of the temple through their participation in festivals and regular sacrifices.<sup>6</sup> One manifestation of female presence at the temple is the existence of the ‘women’s court’, mentioned for the first time in the reconstruction of the Second Temple under King Herod.<sup>7</sup> This court, as well as the massive porticoes lining the perimeter of the temple platform, provided ample space for women congregating at the temple, both during the festivals and in the daily rhythm of the temple cult.

The participation of ordinary women in the temple cult is assumed in both the Hebrew Bible and the Tannaitic material, but there are few details about the nature of their involvement. In contrast to this silence regarding the typical experience of women in the temple, we have considerable evidence regarding several exceptional categories of women. Remarkably, the atypical women singled out in the ancient sources as having special roles in the temple cult correspond exactly to three groups of women that the author of *Prot. Jas.*

<sup>4</sup> Transl. from Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York 2007).

<sup>5</sup> See also the LXX of 1 Kgdms 2:22, which omits the reference to these women’s illicit relationships with the sons of Eli.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Grossman, “Women and the Jerusalem Temple,” in Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (eds.), *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue: A Survey of History, Halakhah, and Contemporary Realities* (Philadelphia 1992) 20–21.

<sup>7</sup> Jos. *Bḥ* 5.199; *m. Sukkah* 5:4.

uses to structure his narrative of Mary's life in the temple: accused adulteresses, virgins who made the temple curtains, and female Nazirites. By integrating these groups into his framework for Mary's life in the temple, the author betrays a familiarity with Jewish customs that has been overlooked.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> I argue that Mary's relationship to the temple can largely be understood in light of these three groups of Jewish women. Nevertheless, two peculiar aspects of her time in the temple do not fit into these models and deserve special notice. The first is the idea that Mary was placed on the steps of the altar (*Prot. Jas.* 7.3), which the priests alone used to offer sacrifices. Harm Smid suggested that this detail was influenced by descriptions of the altar's steps in the Hebrew Bible or by the steps that ascended from the women's court to the court of the Israelites (*Protevangelium Jacobi: A Commentary* [Assen 1965] 61; Ex 20:26, Ezek 43:13–17, Jos. *Bj* 5.195, *m. Sukkah* 5:4). Lily Vuong argues that *Prot. Jas.* portrays Mary as a sacrificial substitute, which could explain her placement on the steps of the altar (*Accessing the Virgin: Gender and Purity in the 'Protevangelium of James'* [diss. McMaster 2010] 130; for more on Vuong's argument see n.14 below). However, the altar was also associated with widows in some early Christian literature (e.g. Polyc. *Ep.* 4.3; Meth. *Symp.* 5.6, 8; Tert. *Ad ux.* 1.7.4). As one of the earliest expressions of Christian asceticism, widows likely provided a Christian frame of reference for Mary's chaste life in the temple. The idea that prayer had become the legitimate substitute for sacrifice fostered the connection between widows and the altar, since widows were particularly expected to pray (e.g. 1 Tim 5:5; see discussion in Carolyn Osiek, "Widow as Altar: The Rise and Fall of a Symbol," *Second Century* 3 [1983] 159–169). The placement of Mary on the steps of the altar could recall this relationship between ascetic women and the altar in early Christian literature. A second aspect of Mary's time in the temple that does not correspond to the three groups of Jewish women is the indication that she lived in the Holy of Holies, which could only be entered by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. While this anomaly finds no justification in Jewish literature of the period, it should be noted that Mary's presence in the Holy of Holies is not found in her arrival at the temple, her life within its precincts, or her removal to Joseph's home. Rather, it was only in retrospect, during Mary's questioning at the hands of Joseph and the high priest, that the author claimed that she lived in the Holy of Holies. The two passages that mention the Holy of Holies are remarkably similar, including the phrase "you who were brought up in the Holy of Holies and received food from the hand of an angel" (13.2 and 15.3; cf. 19.1 in the tenth-century MS. *Paris.gr.* 1454). I suggest that the nearly verbatim repetition of the Holy of Holies

The standard for interpreting Mary's time in the temple was set by Emile Amann in the first part of the twentieth century, when he characterized *Prot. Jas.*'s portrayal of Mary as one of naïve ignorance, reflecting later developments in Christian monasticism rather than real conditions of Jewish life.<sup>9</sup> Since that time, few have challenged this, and the portrayal of Mary as a temple virgin has elicited little serious discussion.<sup>10</sup> While there is no doubt that the author of *Prot. Jas.* used themes that carried special significance for his Christian audience, which Amann rightly highlighted, this does not preclude the author's simultaneous use of Jewish motifs.<sup>11</sup> My argument advances

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phrase points to the use of a formulaic source in these passages, such as found in a hymn or a creed. The inconsistent textual witness in 19.1 and the silence of the rest of the narrative about the Holy of Holies may indicate that the phrase was the product of a later interpolation. Marian hymnography is perhaps the most likely source for this phrase. Byzantine hymnographers related Jesus dwelling in Mary's womb to her residence in the Holy of Holies: just as she once lived in God's house, Mary herself later became the abode of God. For example, Ephraim the Syrian names Mary the "Holy of Holies for you [Jesus] the High Priest" in hymn 17 on the Nativity, and stanza 23 of the Akathist hymn calls her "greater than the Holy of Holies." For ways in which some of this hymnography developed see Sebastian P. Brock, "Mary in Syriac Tradition," *Sourozh* 19 (1985) 11–23.

<sup>9</sup> Amann, *La Protévangile* 209.

<sup>10</sup> Opinions similar to Amann's are found among more recent scholars. John Meier characterized *Prot. Jas.* as a "hilarious mishmash" and a "wildly imaginative folk narrative that is outrageously inaccurate about things Jewish," and Raymond Brown portrayed it as "highly legendary" and "clearly unhistorical on many points": John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus I* (New York 1991) 115, 324; Raymond Edward Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke<sup>2</sup>* (New York 1997) 33, 288. Further examples can be found in John L. Allen, "The 'Protevangeliem of James' as an 'Historia': The Insufficiency of the 'Infancy Gospel' Category," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 30 (1991) 510.

<sup>11</sup> Considerable work has been done on the relationship between the Christian and Jewish communities in the first centuries C.E. and on the degree to which the borders between these groups were fluid. This im-

the work done by three scholars who have offered fresh perspectives on the knowledge of Judaism demonstrated by the author of *Prot. Jas.* Malcolm Lowe analyzed the term Ἰουδαῖος in literature from 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. and determined that its primary meaning varied according to the geographic origin of each author. His evaluation of Ἰουδαῖος in *Prot. Jas.* placed it firmly within the category of texts originating in Palestine and led to his conclusion that the author was most likely a Palestinian Jew.<sup>12</sup> Timothy Horner maintained that Mary's

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portant question is largely outside the scope of the present article, but a brief word about definitions is in order. For the purposes of this article, 'Jewish' designates an adherence to the ritual code of the Torah, and 'Christian' reflects a belief that Jesus was the messiah. These labels obscure a great deal of diversity that existed in the first centuries C.E. and the fact that the categories themselves were not mutually exclusive. I suggest that the author of *Prot. Jas.*, while demonstrably Christian in his presentation of Jesus, was also familiar with interpretations of the Torah circulating among his Jewish contemporaries. However, my argument allows for the possibility either that he identified with both Christianity and Judaism or that his knowledge simply came from contacts with Jewish communities. Regardless of whether the author of *Prot. Jas.* followed the ritual code of the Torah himself, it is clear that he was familiar with it and with the development of these rituals in the later rabbinic imagination. He used the bitter water ordeal, the virgin weavers, and the Nazirite vow to advance the Christian message of Jesus as the messiah in a way that resonated with a Jewish audience. A similar approach to the definitions of Judaism and Christianity as they relate to *Prot. Jas.* can be found in Timothy J. Horner, "Jewish Aspects of the *Protoevangelium of James*," *J ECS* 12 (2004) 314–315, who ultimately advances "Christian Judaism" as the author's background (333–334). For an overview of recent scholarship on the categories of 'Jewish' and 'Christian', and particularly on the ambiguous label 'Jewish-Christian', see Daniel Boyarin, "Rethinking Jewish Christianity: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category," *JQR* 99 (2009) 7–36; Steve Mason, "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History," *JSH* 38 (2007) 457–519.

<sup>12</sup> Among Palestinian writers, Ἰουδαῖος described a native of the region around Jerusalem, just as 'Galilean' described one from the northern part of the country. When speaking of their entire land or people, a Palestinian Jew would refer to Ἰσραήλ or the land of Ἰσραήλ. Authors from outside Palestine followed the Roman imperial usage, which designated the

dedication to the temple and her removal from it marked her transition from infancy to childhood to maturity. He argued that the author of *Prot. Jas.* carefully aligned these events to the stages in the life of a Jewish girl and concluded that *Prot. Jas.* was the product of a Christian community with close ties to Judaism.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Lily Vuong examined the themes of ritual, menstrual, and sexual purity in *Prot. Jas.* and argued that they reflect the influence of Jewish purity laws. According to Vuong, these purity concerns and the portrayal of Mary as simultaneously virgin and mother reflect a debate about asceticism among the Christians of Syria, a community where the ritual laws of the Hebrew Bible remained important and

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Levantine coast as the province of Judea and used Ἰουδαῖος to indicate any inhabitant of Palestine. In time, this Roman use of Ἰουδαῖος ceased to be strictly geographical. Outsiders applied it as a religious appellation to all Jews, both those in Palestine and those in the Diaspora. See discussion in Malcolm Lowe, “Ἰουδαῖοι of the Apocrypha: A Fresh Approach to the Gospels of James, Pseudo-Thomas, Peter and Nicodemus,” *NT* 23 (1981) 56–57, 70, and “Who were the Ἰουδαῖοι?” *NT* 18 (1976) 101–131.

<sup>13</sup> According to *Prot. Jas.*, Mary’s parents consider bringing her to the temple when she is two years old, but decide to postpone for a year. This deliberation indicates that the timing of Mary’s entrance into the temple after her third birthday was not accidental, but by design. On the day following her third birthday, a Jewish girl was considered capable of sexual relations (*m. Nid.* 5:4); girls less than three years old were not deemed sexually mature and were presumed to be virgins. The rabbis of the Mishnah further treated all girls three years of age and older as if they had been sexually violated, unless the girl had been continuously under the care of Jewish parents (*m. Ketub.* 1:2–4). Horner argued that by postponing Mary’s entrance into the temple until after her third birthday, the author of *Prot. Jas.* emphasized her Jewish lineage. If only virgins were permitted to dwell in the temple, as *Prot. Jas.* assumes, then any girl under the age of three could have been accepted; after this turning point, only a Jewish girl would have been allowed to enter as a virgin. See discussion in Horner, *JECs* 12 (2004) 321–328, 332. For a critique of Horner’s conclusions see Jennifer A. Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (New York 2010) 109–110. Among Glancy’s concerns is the focus of this article, the depiction of Mary in the temple. For further discussion of Glancy’s argument, see nn.37–38 below.

where close relations with local Jews prevailed.<sup>14</sup> While focusing on different aspects of *Prot. Jas.*, Lowe, Horner, and Vuong uniformly challenge the standard scholarly opinion regarding its authorship. I likewise suggest that the author of *Prot. Jas.* was a Christian who was familiar with contemporary Judaism and that he used Jewish motifs to affirm Mary's purity.

The need for a defense of Mary that was sensitive to Jewish concerns is evident from Celsus' *On True Doctrine*. Scholars often mention Celsus when considering the date of *Prot. Jas.*, but these analyses frequently overlook a crucial point. Such treatments note that both Celsus and the author of *Prot. Jas.* grappled with the difficult concept of the virgin birth and interpret the emphasis on Mary's purity in *Prot. Jas.* as a defense against the objections raised by Celsus.<sup>15</sup> However, this con-

<sup>14</sup> In the first part of *Prot. Jas.*, Mary lives in a state of extreme ritual purity, which according to Vuong likens Mary to a sacrifice destined for the altar. The concern in *Prot. Jas.* 8.4 that Mary will pollute the temple through menstrual impurity, a subset of ritual impurity, is a turning point in the narrative. The overarching purity concern in the remainder of the text is sexual purity, which relates to Mary's identity as both virgin and mother. Mary is no longer portrayed as a suitable substitute for a ritually pure sacrifice; rather, she now replaces the temple itself in her role as the dwelling of the incarnate God (Vuong, *Accessing the Virgin* 252–253, 271). The earliest Marian feast in Jerusalem celebrated her as mother or birth-giver and coincided with the Jewish commemoration of the temple's destruction. It is tempting to see a Christian theology of Mary replacing the Jerusalem temple as the reason for selecting this date (August 15/Av 9). I suggested above (n.8) that a similar idea informs the placement of Mary in the Holy of Holies in *Prot. Jas.* 13.2 and 15.3. For more on this Marian feast in Jerusalem see Hagith Sivan, "Contesting Calendars: The 9th of Av and the Feast of the Theotokos," in Béatrice Caseau et al. (eds.), *Pèlerinages et lieux saints dans l'antiquité et le moyen âge: mélanges offerts à Pierre Maraval* (Paris 2006) 444–445.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Pieter van Stempvoort recognized that Celsus reported Jewish criticism, but later insisted that *Prot. Jas.* was a direct response to Celsus: "The Protevangelium Jacobi, the Sources of its Theme and Style and their Bearing on its Date," in *Studia evangelica* III (Berlin 1964) 413–415, 425; cf. Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Santa Rosa 1996) 11–12. For additional discussions on the date of *Prot. Jas.* see

clusion obscures the fact that Celsus' disparagement of Mary did not originate with him, but rather with Jews (see Origen *C. Cels.* 1.28, 32).<sup>16</sup> Neglecting this detail reinforces the century-old assumption that the author of *Prot. Jas.* did not engage his Jewish contemporaries. In contrast, I propose that he was aware of the same Jewish critiques of Mary to which Celsus referred, and that he countered them by using Jewish models for Mary's time in the temple. By constructing the temple curtains, Mary was recognized as a virgin even after she moved into Joseph's home; by facing the bitter water ordeal, she was cleared of the charge of adultery; and by following in the footsteps of Samuel, she was portrayed as a life-long Nazirite dedicated to God.

*Bitter water ordeal*

In *Prot. Jas.* 16, the author aligns Mary with a group of women known from both the Hebrew Bible and later Jewish sources: accused adulteresses. While many scholars have noted the inclusion of this tradition in *Prot. Jas.* they have discounted its significance for understanding Mary's time in the temple.<sup>17</sup> The earliest evidence for the bitter water ordeal as a method

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José Antonia de Aldama, "El Protevangelio de Santiago y sus problemas," *Ephemerides mariologicae* 12 (1962) 125–129; Raymond Edward Brown et al. (eds.), *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (Philadelphia 1978) 248; Smid, *Protevangelium Jacobi* 22–24; Emile de Strycker, *La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques* (Brussels 1961) 412–418, and "Le Protévangile de Jacques: Problèmes critiques et exégétiques," in *Studia evangelica* III 339–359; George T. Zervos, "Dating the Protevangelium of James: The Justin Martyr Connection," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 33 (1994) 419–434.

<sup>16</sup> Several passages from rabbinic literature may reflect Jewish criticism of Mary, the most detailed of which is *b. Shab.* 104b (as found in uncensored manuscripts). Despite the chronological gap between Celsus and the Babylonian Talmud, Peter Schäfer argues that they share a common source and reflect a genuine Jewish response to early Christians: *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton 2007) 15–24.

<sup>17</sup> For example Mach, in *Proceedings* 217; Smid, *Protevangelium Jacobi* 111–116.

for judging accused adulteresses can be found in the Pentateuch, which permits any man to submit his wife to the process “if a spirit of jealousy comes on him” (Num 5:14).<sup>18</sup> According to the Torah, the accused woman and her husband go to the temple, bringing with them a grain offering for jealousy and repentance. Upon their arrival, the priest prepares for the ordeal by mixing holy water with dust from the floor of the sanctuary. He then places the grain offering in the wife’s hands, dishevels her hair, and administers an oath (Num 5:19–22).<sup>19</sup> The process concludes with a curse that would expose an adulteress if her oath was false; the priest writes down this curse and washes it into the bitter water, and the truth of the woman’s fidelity is discovered after she drinks it. If a miscarriage ensues, the woman is revealed as an adulteress; if she suffers no ill effects, she is absolved of the accusation and judged innocent. It was assumed that a vindicated wife would be able to conceive children, even if she had previously been barren (Num 5:28).

Among later Jewish sources, Josephus (*AJ* 3.270–273) and Philo (*Spec.* 3.52–63) each give brief accounts of the ritual, and it is treated extensively in *Sotah*, the tractate of the Mishnah devoted to these procedures. Disagreements between these texts suggest that the Hebrew Bible traditions about the drink test did not remain static, and that they had undergone significant change by the time that *Prot. Jas.* was composed. Whereas the mishnaic procedures expose the accused woman

<sup>18</sup> For a recent assessment of the translation of מַי הַמֵּרִים as ‘bitter waters’ see Eve Levavi Feinstein, “The ‘Bitter Waters’ of Numbers 5:11–31,” *VT* 62 (2012) 300–306.

<sup>19</sup> Brian Britt points to several similarities between the suspected adulteress in Num 5 and the Nazirite in Num 6, including the role of individual choice, sacrifice, hair, and drinking: “Male Jealousy and the Suspected Sotah: Toward a Counter-Reading of Numbers 5:11–31,” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 3 no. 1 (2007) 5.1–5.19. I will argue below for another connection between suspected adulteresses and Nazirites, namely the privilege that women in both categories were allotted in the temple.

to greater shame in their application, they also allow for more compassion by preventing a man from subjecting his wife to the procedure on a whim.<sup>20</sup> In Num 5:11, a husband can initiate the proceedings based only on jealous feelings, but the Mishnah requires him to perform a two-step sequence: he must first warn his wife to stay away from a particular man and then must prove that the wife disobeyed him (*m. Sotah* 1:1).<sup>21</sup> The outcome of the ritual is also more dramatic in the Mishnah, which expected that a woman guilty of adultery would die after drinking the water (*m. Sotah* 3:4), while the Hebrew Bible indicates that the unfaithful wife would only be revealed by a miscarriage (Num 5:27).

In light of these differences between the book of Numbers and later sources, the narrative in *Prot. Jas.* 16 can be used to evaluate the common opinion that the author had little knowledge of Judaism beyond the Septuagint. The account of the bitter water ordeal in *Prot. Jas.* 16 is brief: upon learning of Mary's pregnancy, the high priest announces his intention to administer "the water of the conviction by the Lord" (τὸ ὕδωρ τῆς ἐλέγξεως κυρίου) to Mary and Joseph. Joseph drinks the water and goes into the wilderness, but returns unharmed. Likewise, the high priest gives the water to Mary and sends her away, but again nothing happens (16.1–2).<sup>22</sup> Missing in *Prot. Jas.* is any mention of the husband's jealousy, the grain

<sup>20</sup> No longer is the accused wife's hair merely disheveled, as it was in Num 5. According to *m. Sotah* 1.5–6, she may be stripped partially naked, with her clothes torn, her jewelry removed, and a rope tied around her body. The Mishnah further invites bystanders to witness her humiliation.

<sup>21</sup> See discussion in Bonna Devora Haberman, "The Suspected Adulteress: A Study of Textual Embodiment," *Prooftexts* 20 (2000) 22–23.

<sup>22</sup> There is no evidence in Num 5 that an accused adulteress is sent out of the temple while waiting for the effects of the bitter water to occur, as happens in both *Prot. Jas.* and Philo *Spec.* 3.62. The Mishnah also indicates that the woman is removed from the temple, but this seems to be the case only when the bitter water has identified her guilt; she is to be taken out of the temple before her death can pollute it (*m. Sotah* 3:4).

offering, or the oath, features that are common to both Num 5 and the three later accounts.

Despite these absences, *Prot. Jas.* includes a unique detail that can shed light on its author's background: it alone indicates that a man drank the bitter water in addition to the woman. This feature is often used to demonstrate the author's ignorance of Judaism—an innovation to strengthen his defense of Mary's purity. However, Timothy Horner argued for another explanation of Joseph's unexpected inclusion in the ritual. The mishnaic tradition indicates that the effects of the bitter water ordeal would be felt not only by the woman, but also by the man with whom she had committed adultery (*m. Sotah* 5:1).<sup>23</sup> The administration of the drink test to Joseph identifies him not as the jealous husband, but as the suspected, illegitimate father of Mary's child. Indeed, this is clear in the text of *Prot. Jas.*, as the characteristics assigned to the husband both in the Hebrew Bible and in later sources—jealousy and the formal accusation of adultery—are absent in *Prot. Jas.*'s description of Joseph. Rather than expressing jealousy, Joseph demonstrates shame and concern for Mary's fate if the pregnancy becomes known (13–14). The role of accuser falls not to Joseph, but to the scribe Annas, who reports his discovery to the High Priest (15.2). The very presence of Joseph as Mary's suspected consort aligns the drink test in *Prot. Jas.* more closely to the account in the Mishnah than to the one in the Pentateuch. The Septuagint is explicit that the test is administered to the accused adulteress only when her actions and partner are unknown (Num 5:13, λάθη ἐξ ὀφθαλμῶν τοῦ ἀνδρὸς αὐτῆς καὶ κρύψει). In contrast, the Mishnah requires the jealous husband to identify a particular man as his wife's suspected partner (*m. Sotah* 1:1), who would also experience the

<sup>23</sup> Horner, *J ECS* 12 (2004) 329, also noted that the goal of the drink test in *Prot. Jas.* could not be to reveal a secret pregnancy, as in Num 5:27, since Mary was already six months pregnant. Rather, it sought to reveal the truth about the relationship between Mary and Joseph, which Horner suggested was more in tune with the purpose of the ordeal in the Mishnah.

negative results of the bitter water ordeal (5:1). In *Prot. Jas.*, the scribe Annas takes upon himself the role of the jealous husband, perhaps standing in for God, the protector of Mary and her virgin companions. Thus, although the account of the bitter water ordeal in *Prot. Jas.* does not precisely mirror either the description in the Hebrew Bible or the one in later sources, its most peculiar component, the administration of the bitter water to Joseph, is more compatible with the mishnaic tradition.

In addition to affirming Mary's chastity, the bitter water ordeal carried a further implication for those familiar with Jewish tradition: it would have reinforced the special connection that Mary had to the temple. As an accused adulteress, she would have belonged to one of two groups of women given special dispensation to wave their own offering in the temple (*m. Qidd.* 1:8, *m. Sotah* 3:1). Besides accused adulteresses, the only other women permitted to do this were female Nazirites, a category that I will argue below is also reflected in *Prot. Jas.* The ritual act of waving one's sacrifice was reserved almost exclusively for men, and this concession to accused adulteresses and female Nazirites set them apart in the temple cult. By introducing the bitter water ordeal, the author of *Prot. Jas.* used a familiar Jewish institution not only to establish Mary's purity, but also to align her with a group that was allowed greater participation in the temple cult than most women of her time.

#### *Virgin weavers*

The second group of women with a special connection to the Jerusalem temple was the assembly of virgins who constructed its curtains. The Hebrew Bible affirms that the task of weaving the curtains had been allotted to women since the time of the tabernacle (Ex 35:25–26). Evidence that this task was later restricted to young women is found in the Mishnah, which states that eighty-two girls made two curtains each year

(*m. Sheqal.* 8:5).<sup>24</sup> The Tosefta also confirms that fabrication of the curtains was a female task, and indicates that the workers took their salary from the heave-offering of the *sheqel*-chamber in the temple treasury (*t. Sheqal.* 2:6). These virgins are also mentioned alongside the priests in Baruch's lament over the city of Jerusalem, found in the early-second-century Syriac Apocalypse (*2 Bar.* 10:18–19):<sup>25</sup>

You, priests, take the keys of the sanctuary, and cast them to the highest heaven, and give them to the Lord and say, "Guard your house yourself, because, behold, we have been found to be false stewards." And you, virgins who spin fine linen, and silk with gold of Ophir, make haste and take all things, and cast them into the fire, so that it may carry them to him who made them.

The description of the temple's destruction in *Pesiqta Rabbati* similarly expects that the virgin weavers would be present; together with the priests and Levites, the virgins would fall into the flames consuming the temple (26:6). All these sources corroborate the existence of an elite group of young women responsible for weaving the curtains that adorned the temple. While the texts do not indicate the duration of the virgins' service, the complexity of the veil's design and ornamentation, as well as the requirement that two be made each year, would

<sup>24</sup> The meaning of *m. Sheqal.* 8:5 is not certain; instead of giving the number of girls who made the curtains, it can also be translated, "it was made up of eighty-two times ten thousand threads" (cf. *y. Sheqal.* 8:2). In his discussion of the virgin weavers in *Prot. Jas.*, Frédéric Manns, *Essais sur le judéo-christianisme* (Jerusalem 1977) 106–109, maintained that *m. Sheqal.* 8:5 did indeed refer to the number of girls. Noting that they are called 'young girls' (רבות) rather than 'virgins' (בתולת), Manns argued that the weavers had to be prepubescent; he compared this to the masculine form (רובים) found in *m. Tamid* 1:1 for the young priests who kept watch in the temple at night. For Saul Lieberman's conclusion that *Prot. Jas.* also required the virgin weavers to be prepubescent see n.29 below.

<sup>25</sup> Transl. from James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha I* (Garden City 1983) 624.

suggest lengthy periods of work.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the authors of 2 *Baruch* and the *Pesiqta Rabbati* assumed that these virgins, like the priests, were regularly to be found at the temple.

Mary's participation in this assembly of temple virgins in *Prot. Jas.* can be understood as a defense against Jewish charges that she was an impoverished laborer (Origen *C. Cels.* 1.28). Whereas Celsus reports the charge that Mary was paid to spin thread, *Prot. Jas.* demonstrates that she was among a select group of privileged girls who constructed the temple curtain and that the task of spinning the red and purple threads fell to her. In *Prot. Jas.* 10, the priests summon "the undefiled virgins from the tribe of David" (τὰς παρθένους τὰς ἀμιάντους ἀπὸ τῆς φυλῆς τοῦ Δαβίδ) to begin construction of a new temple curtain.<sup>27</sup> After the gathering of an initial group of seven girls, Mary is remembered and added to their number.<sup>28</sup> At this point in the narrative, Mary had already been

<sup>26</sup> For descriptions of these curtains see Jos. *Bḥ* 5.212–214, *m. Sheqal.* 8:5, and *y. Sheqal.* 8:2.

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that there was no "tribe of David" among the twelve tribes of Israel. While the author of *Prot. Jas.* does refer to the twelve tribes of Israel (1.1, 3), the inclusion of the tribe of David here is sometimes cited as another mistake in the author's knowledge of Judaism. This "tribe of David" can be contrasted to the description of Joseph in Lk 2:4 as one "from the house and lineage of David" (ἐξ οἴκου καὶ πατρῴας Δαβίδ).

<sup>28</sup> *Prot. Jas.* and the Mishnah differ regarding the number of virgins assigned this task. While the Mishnah states that eighty-two girls participated (*m. Sheqal.* 8:5; see n.24 above), *Prot. Jas.* only accounts for eight. Various explanations have been offered for this inconsistency, including exaggeration by the rabbis compiling the Mishnah, ignorance on the part of the author of *Prot. Jas.*, or the existence of variant traditions in antiquity. The significance of seven-plus-one in Judaism may also be a factor here. In *Prot. Jas.* 10, seven virgins are chosen as a group to work on the temple curtain, and then Mary is singled out as the eighth member. A similar pattern can be seen in Jesse's presentation of his seven sons to Samuel, followed by a special summons to David, the eighth son (1 Sam 16:8–12). Despite the discrepancy regarding the number of virgins, it seems clear that the author of *Prot. Jas.* had knowledge of this Jewish tradition about young girls who worked on the temple curtains, and that he made use of it in his narrative.

removed from the temple and handed over to the care of Joseph. By incorporating a Jewish institution limited to virgins, the author of *Prot. Jas.* asserts that Mary remained a virgin while living at Joseph's home. When Mary is counted among these virgins, she is deemed eligible because she is τῆς φυλῆς τοῦ Δαυὶδ καὶ ἀμίαντος τῷ θεῷ (“of the tribe of David and undefiled before God”). The latter of these characteristics is particularly interesting—she is described as ἀμίαντος, not παρθένος. Although her virginity is implied, ἀμίαντος is made explicit and seems to be the more important quality. LSJ defines ἀμίαντος as “undefiled” or “pure.” Lampe also supplied this definition, dividing the examples into three categories: ἀμίαντος 1) as a moral indicator, 2) as a description of virgins (and especially of the virgin Mary), and 3) as an attribute of God. A slightly different explanation was given by Saul Lieberman, who suggested that παρθένοι ἀμίαντοι was the Greek translation of a technical phrase in Hebrew that meant “virgins who have not yet menstruated.”<sup>29</sup> He linked this definition to the root that ἀμίαντος shares with μιάινω, the verb used by the priests in *Prot. Jas.* 8 to express their concern that Mary would pollute the temple after she turned twelve.<sup>30</sup> Lieberman concluded that the use of ἀμίαντος in these passages exposes the dependence of *Prot. Jas.* on a “well-informed Jewish source” for its depiction of these virgins.

In addition to the use of μιάινω in *Prot. Jas.* 8, the presence of τὸ ἁγίασμα in this passage further suggests a technical definition for ἀμίαντος related to the virgins' pre-menstrual state. When discussing Mary's departure from the temple, the priests do not use the formulaic phrase, ναὸς κυρίου, which is typically found elsewhere in *Prot. Jas.* to refer to the temple.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Lieberman suggested בתולות לדמים as the original Hebrew and compared it to the definition of a virgins in *m. Nid.* 1:4: *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York 1950) 167–168.

<sup>30</sup> For the exclusion of menstruating women from the temple precincts see also Lev 12:1–5, 15:19–33, and *m. Kelim* 1:8.

<sup>31</sup> See n.8 above for the only other exceptions to ναὸς κυρίου as the

Rather, they call the temple τὸ ἁγίασμα and ask: τί οὖν αὐτὴν ποιήσωμεν μήπως μιάνη τὸ ἁγίασμα κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν (“What then are we to do with her, lest she defile the sanctuary of the Lord our God?”).<sup>32</sup> The word ἁγίασμα occurs almost exclusively in biblical and Christian literature and is usually translated as ‘sanctuary’.<sup>33</sup> One such example is in 1 Macc, where ἁγίασμα is related to purity in a way similar to that seen in *Prot. Jas.* 8. In its description of Antiochus IV Epiphanes sacking Jerusalem and looting the temple, 1 Macc 1 uses ἁγίασμα seven times.<sup>34</sup> In fact, throughout this first chapter, only one verse uses a term other than ἁγίασμα to refer to the temple.<sup>35</sup> The rest of 1 Macc, however, uses ἁγίασμα, ναός, ἱερὸν, and ἅγια interchangeably as synonyms for the temple of Jerusalem. At issue in 1 Macc 1 is the pollution and desecration of the temple, which Antiochus effected not only by taking its treasures (1:21–23), but also by shedding innocent blood (1:37) and by instituting the sacrifice of pigs and unclean animals (1:47).<sup>36</sup> Innocent or unclean blood is responsible for the temple’s desecration in 1 Macc 1:46, which con-

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name for the temple in *Prot. Jas.*

<sup>32</sup> In *Paris.gr.* 1454 the priests’ concerns about how Mary would pollute the temple are made explicit: τί οὖν ποιήσωμεν αὐτὴν μήπως ἐπέλθῃ τὰ γυναικῶν καὶ μιάνῃ τὸ ἁγίασμα κυρίου (“What then are we to do with her, lest the ways of women [i.e. menstruation] come upon her and she defile the sanctuary of the Lord?”).

<sup>33</sup> Among the biblical and early Christian uses are Ex 15:17, Sir 49:5, and Origen *C. Cels.* 2.78. See s.v. ἁγίασμα in William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*<sup>3</sup> (Chicago 2000) 10, and Lampe, *Patristic Greek Lexicon* 89.

<sup>34</sup> 1 Macc 1:21, 36, 37 (twice), 39, 45, 46.

<sup>35</sup> At 1 Macc 1:22 the temple is called ναός.

<sup>36</sup> Antiochus also forbade the Jews from practicing circumcision (1:48), from observing the Sabbath and feast days (1:45), and from performing burnt offerings and drink offerings (1:45). Furthermore, he instructed them to follow new rituals and to build altars for idols (1:44, 47). While these additional requirements were abhorrent to the Jews, they are not directly related in the text to the pollution of the temple.

tains the same verb that *Prot. Jas.* uses for Mary's impending menstrual impurity: μιάνω. The priests in *Prot. Jas.* 8.2 were concerned that Mary's continued presence in the temple after her twelfth birthday and the onset of puberty would affect the ritual purity of the sacrifices.

Thus both *Prot. Jas.* and 1 Macc juxtapose ἀγίασμα and μιάνω to express a Jewish concern for the purity of the temple, and they identify innocent or unclean blood as the source of ritual pollution.<sup>37</sup> This same attention to purity can be seen earlier in *Prot. Jas.*, when the word ἀγίασμα denotes

<sup>37</sup> Jennifer Glancy, who rejects any but the most "tangential connection" between *Prot. Jas.* and contemporary Judaism, likewise discards the idea that the priests' concern about Mary's impending menstruation was connected to a specifically Jewish notion of ritual purity (*Corporal Knowledge* 110–111). She instead suggests that this episode was informed by more general Greco-Roman notions about the inherent power found in the fluids of menstruation and parturition (e.g. Plin. *HN* 7.15, 28.23, Plut. *Quaes.conv.* 7.2). While such power is occasionally related to that of animal sacrifice (e.g. Arist. *Hist.an.* 581b1–2, Hippoc. *Nat.puer.* 18), Helen King emphasizes that this comparison is confined to gynecological texts: "Sacrificial Blood: The Role of the Amnion in Ancient Gynecology," *Helios* 13 (1987) 117–120, cf. Joan R. Branham, "Blood in Flux, Sanctity at Issue," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 31 (1997) 68. In fact, in his fundamental book on pollution in Greek religion, Robert Parker remarks on the unexpected absence of menstrual impurity in Greek religion; purification from menstrual contamination prior to entering sacred precincts only appears in the Hellenistic period, typically in non-Greek cults: *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford 1983) 100–102. The concern in *Prot. Jas.* 8 is not one simply of competition between the powers of menstrual blood and sacrificial blood; rather, it is one of contamination, which pollutes both the sacrifice and the sanctuary itself (ἀγίασμα). This notion of menstrual pollution developed relatively late in Greco-Roman religion, while it has been continuously present in Judaism from the Hebrew Bible until today. For further discussions of menstruation in Judaism and Greek religion see Shaye Cohen, "Menstruants and the Sacred in Judaism and Christianity," in Sarah B. Pomeroy (ed.), *Women's History and Ancient History* (Chapel Hill 1991) 273–299; Susan Guettel Cole, "Gynaiki ou Themis: Gender Difference in the Greek *Leges Sacrae*," *Helios* 19 (1992) 111; Heinrich von Staden, "Women and Dirt," *Helios* 19 (1992) 13–15.

the special chamber that Anna prepares when Mary is six months old (*Prot. Jas.* 6.1, 6.3). Anna vows that no unclean food (ἀκάθαρτον) would enter the ἁγίασμα while Mary lived there; just as the presence of something unclean would pollute the Jerusalem temple (ἁγίασμα), so also the presence of something unclean would pollute Mary's bedchamber (ἁγίασμα). To maintain the purity of Mary's surroundings, Anna is particular not only about Mary's food, but also about her companions. It is in this context of Mary's sheltered ἁγίασμα chamber and carefully protected purity that we return to the ἀμίαντοι virgins.

We saw above that the defining characteristic of the virgins who worked on the temple curtains in *Prot. Jas.* was their designation as ἀμίαντοι. Once this is recognized, it is clear that the description of their work in *Prot. Jas.* 10 is not the first, but actually the third time they appear in the text. In *Prot. Jas.* 6, τὰς θυγατέρας τὰς ἀμιάντους τῶν Ἑβραίων (“the undefiled daughters of the Hebrews”) are selected as suitable companions for Mary after Anna prepares the ἁγίασμα for her. In the next chapter, these same girls escort Mary to the temple on her third birthday. The portrayal of this group of virgins in chapters six and seven is remarkably similar to that of the “undefiled virgins from the tribe of David” assigned to work on the temple curtains in chapter 10. Most conspicuous is the use of ἀμίαντος in each of these three passages, as well as in the description of Mary when she is assigned thread to spin for the curtain.<sup>38</sup> While all these passages seem to designate a

<sup>38</sup> *Prot. Jas.* 12 indicates that Mary is sixteen years old when the archangel Gabriel appears to her and she becomes pregnant. However, the manuscript tradition is quite inconsistent on this point; ancient scribes seem to have shared modern scholars' confusion concerning the four years that would have transpired between Mary's departure from the temple and her pregnancy. Glancy proposes that the Greek numeral for twelve could have easily been misread by a scribe as the one for sixteen, and that Mary was still twelve years old at the time of conception. As a result, she argues that *Prot. Jas.* originally portrayed Mary as conceiving Jesus before her first

single group of ἀμύαντοι virgins, it is significant that *Prot. Jas.* 6 and 7 make no mention of their work on the curtains. This suggests that the author envisioned a company of ἀμύαντοι virgins, whose existence as a discrete group extended beyond their responsibilities to construct the temple curtains. The concept of a standing institution of ‘undefiled temple virgins’ may sound foreign to modern sensibilities regarding women and the Jerusalem temple, but it resonates with the Jewish sources that depicted the virgins in the temple alongside the priests, such as 2 *Baruch* and the *Pesiqta Rabbati*. The depiction of Mary’s entrance into the temple and her reception into the company of ἀμύαντοι virgins would have reminded a Jewish audience of these virgin weavers.

### *Nazirites*

In addition to ἀμύαντοι virgins and accused adulteresses, *Prot. Jas.* aligns Mary with a third group of women associated with the temple, namely those who had taken a Nazirite vow. The author patterns the birth and childhood of Mary on that of Samuel, whose popular identification as a Nazirite was widespread in the late Second Temple period. The parallels between the stories of Mary and Samuel begin with the Greek name, Ἀννα, shared by both mothers.<sup>39</sup> These two barren women pray that God would allow them to conceive, and

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menstruation (*Corporal Knowledge* 111–112). If Mary remains free from menstrual impurity, then it is unproblematic that she continues working on the temple’s curtains as one of the ἀμύαντοι virgins, even after she becomes pregnant (*Prot. Jas.* 12). On a related note, George Zervos argues that *Prot. Jas.* drew on an earlier narrative that located the annunciation to Mary in the temple rather than in Joseph’s home: “An Early Non-Canonical Annunciation Story,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 36 (1997) 674–677. Zervos’s proposal that Mary was still living in the temple at the time of conception is consistent with Glancy’s suggestion that Mary became pregnant before she could pollute the temple through menstruation.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. 1 Sam 1–2 and *Prot. Jas.* 4–7. I will follow the traditional spellings of “Hannah” for Samuel’s mother and “Anna” for Mary’s mother, although in Greek manuscripts they are spelled identically.

when the prayers of each are answered, they promise to return their children to God. Both sets of parents consider fulfilling their vows while the children are young, but delay until Samuel and Mary were three years old, at which time the parents present their children to God at the tabernacle and the temple respectively. The hymn of praise that Anna sings after the birth of Mary, which is clearly reminiscent of Hannah's song of thanksgiving in 1 Sam 2, reinforces the parallels between these two stories.

Interest in the birth narrative of Samuel grew during the Second Temple period, as did the popular identification of him as a Nazirite. In the Masoretic text of 1 Sam 1:11, Hannah promises that if God gives her a son, a razor will never come upon his head. The vow not to cut one's hair is a key component of the Nazirite legislation in Num 6, when the institution is first established. Indeed long hair became characteristic of Nazirites, and it was not cut until completion of the vow. When the Septuagint was translated in the Hellenistic period, Hannah's vow was widened to include abstinence from wine, a second important feature of the Nazirites (1 Kgdms 1:11).<sup>40</sup> The trajectory of this tradition can be seen even further in a copy of 1 Sam discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls. In this manuscript, Samuel's dedication was no longer implied through attributes typical of the Nazirites, but made explicit by Hannah's vow, "I will give him as a Nazirite forever—for all the days of his life."<sup>41</sup> The author of

<sup>40</sup> This abstention from wine not only precluded alcohol, but also required complete abstinence from any product of a grape vine, whether intoxicating or not (Num 6:3–4). Temporary injunctions against wine are known elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, such as in laws for the high priests, but its extreme manifestation in the Nazirite vow is unparalleled. The radical nature of the Nazirite vow was further demonstrated by its requirement that a Nazirite not come into contact with any corpse, not even that of a parent or a sibling (Num 6:7).

<sup>41</sup> 4QSam<sup>a</sup> 1:22 (= 4Q51); Andrew Fincke, *The Samuel Scroll from Qumran: 4QSam(a) restored and compared to the Septuagint and 4QSam(c)* (Leiden 2001).

*Prot. Jas.* evokes the Nazirite vow in his description of Mary by drawing clear parallels between her life and that of the prototypical Nazirite Samuel.<sup>42</sup> We can expect that a second-century audience of *Prot. Jas.* would have read it in light of 1 Sam and understood Mary as a Nazirite.

A factor in the popularity of the Nazirite vow was its ability to act as an equalizer; it was available to all Jews—men and women, rich and poor. It allowed one to express particular devotion to God, whether in response to an answered prayer or out of a sense of spirituality.<sup>43</sup> The requirements of the Nazirite vow, which rivaled those of the priests and even the

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For the evolution of the Samuel tradition see Matitiahu Tsevat, “Was Samuel a Nazirite?” in Michael A. Fishbane et al. (eds.), *Sha’arei Talmon: Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (Winona Lake 1992) 199–204. There is an interesting dichotomy between the popular stories of the Nazirites Samuel and Samson and the institution of the Nazirite vow in the legal code of Num 6. The former suggest that a Nazirite dedicated his entire life to God, having been consecrated before his birth. The latter necessarily involved a finite period of time, brought to a close by prescribed sacrifices and shaving the Nazirite’s hair. By rabbinic times, temporary Nazirite vows were understood as thirty days in length, unless otherwise specified (*m. Naz.* 1:2). For the differences between life-long and temporary Nazirite vows see discussion in Tony W. Cartledge, “Were Nazirite Vows Unconditional?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51 (1989) 409–422.

<sup>42</sup> Willem Vorster argues that readers of *Prot. Jas.* would have recognized the similarities between Mary’s and Samuel’s childhood, and that they would have added details from their knowledge of Samuels’ life to what they knew about Mary: “The Protevangelium of James and Intertextuality,” in Albertus Frederik Klijn and Tjitze Baarda (eds.), *Text and Testimony: Essays on New Testament and Apocryphal Literature in Honour of A. F. J. Klijn* (Kampen 1988) 271–274. However, he overlooks Samuel’s popular identification as a Nazirite and the implications this would have had for readers of *Prot. Jas.*

<sup>43</sup> David Halivni argued that in the late Second Temple period, some people took Nazirite vows for frivolous or non-religious reasons, such as in *m. Naz.* 5:7: “On the Supposed Anti-Asceticism or Anti-Naziritism of Simon the Just,” *JQR* 58 (1968) 243–252.

high priests, came to be understood as displays of holiness.<sup>44</sup> Women, who were often excluded from formal worship, must have been attracted by this opportunity to express their piety. Furthermore, the dynamic association between Hannah and the Nazirites and the auspicious answer that she received to her prayer would have encouraged the vow's appeal among women.<sup>45</sup> The possibility of making Nazirite vows on behalf of one's children, based on the biblical precedents of Samuel and Samson, continued until the end of the Second Temple period. The rabbis of the Mishnah would eventually resolve that such a dedication had to be made by the child's father instead of by its mother (*m. Naz.* 4:6), a ruling that was likely a response to the frequency of mothers' vows.

The importance of the Nazirite vow grew significantly during the Second Temple period. In *De specialibus legibus*, Philo indicated that the Nazirite vow was legitimately called the "great vow" (εὐχή μεγάλη) since it demonstrated an "unspeakable holiness and a certain excess of pious inclinations" (ἄλεκτον ... ὀσιότητα καὶ ὑπερβολὴν τινα γνώμης φιλοθέου), by requiring one to dedicate his greatest possession—his own self—to God (1.248).<sup>46</sup> The high regard for Nazirites is also made evident by accounts of wealthy individuals who helped Nazirites finance the expensive sacrifices required at the conclusion of their vows. According to Josephus, even Herod Agrippa desired the good favor that resulted from promoting

<sup>44</sup> *Sifre Zutta* on Num 6:8. Am 2:11–12 puts Nazirites in the same category as prophets, both of whom were selected by God.

<sup>45</sup> For example, Berenice (Jos. *BJ* 2.313) and Helena of Adiabene (*m. Naz.* 3:6) were said to have taken Nazirite vows. There is also mention of an unnamed female Nazirite in *m. Naz.* 2:3.

<sup>46</sup> Philo's language of the "great vow" is based on the Septuagint of Num 6:2, *μεγάλως ἐξήηται εὐχήν*. See below for the same language in Methodius of Olympus. For this idea of the Nazirite vow as self-sacrifice, symbolized by cutting and offering one's hair, see Eliezer Diamond, "An Israelite Self-Offering in the Priestly Code: A New Perspective on the Nazirite," *JQR* 88 (1997) 1–18.

the Nazirite vow, and he donated funds for the sacrifices made by a large group of Nazirites.<sup>47</sup> This account of Agrippa and the Nazirites is one of several which indicate that the vow had become more than a personal devotion: it gave rise to a Nazirite community. The concept of a group of Nazirites, or at least the presence of large numbers of them, is also alluded to in 1 Macc 3:49, which mentions “the Nazirites who had completed their days” (τοὺς ναζιραίους οἱ ἐπλήρωσαν τὰς ἡμέρας). This suggests that the prestige of the Nazirite vow was great enough that even those who had “completed their days” were included in the Nazirite community, alongside short-term and life-long Nazirites still within the period of their vow.<sup>48</sup> In both cases, the Nazirite community seems to be located primarily in Jerusalem, consistent with the Mishnah’s insistence that the term of a Nazirite vow could not be fulfilled in the Diaspora (*m. Naz.* 3:6). Many Nazirites may have passed a considerable portion of their vow in the special chamber set aside for their use in the Jerusalem temple. The concluding rituals of the vow, including the ritual shaving of the Nazirites’ hair and its burning under the pot that contained their peace offerings, took place in this chamber (*m. Mid.* 2:5). The permanent allotment of space to the Nazirites in the Herodian

<sup>47</sup> *AJ* 19.294. Alexander Jannaeus is also said to have paid for the sacrifices of three hundred Nazirites (*y. Ber.* 7:2 and *y. Naz.* 5:3), and Acts 21:20–26 indicates that Paul did likewise. For bibliography on Paul and the Nazirite vow see n.50.

<sup>48</sup> The excavation of a wealthy tomb on Mt. Scopus provides valuable insight into the esteem for Nazirites in the first half of the first century C.E. Among the finds in this tomb were several ossuaries, two with Aramaic inscriptions: “Hananiah son of Jonathan the Nazirite” (ossuary 7) and “Salome wife of Hananiah son of the Nazirite” (8). These inscriptions demonstrate that Jonathan was known by the appellation “the Nazirite,” as it was even used in place of his name on the ossuary of his daughter-in-law. Although it is unknown whether Jonathan was a life-long Nazirite or one who had taken a temporary vow, it certainly became his defining characteristic. For the publication of this tomb see Nahman Avigad, “The Burial-Vault of a Nazirite Family on Mount Scopus,” *IEJ* 21 (1971) 185–200.

temple testifies to the presence of a Nazirite community that gathered regularly in its precincts. The construction of this Nazirite chamber in a corner of the women's court also confirms the close association between women and the Nazirites. The juxtaposition of women, the temple, and Nazirites is brought to life in *Prot. Jas.*, where the story of Samuel is used as the model for Mary's dedication to the temple.

Even after the destruction of the temple, interest in the Nazirite vow lingered in the Jewish and Christian communities. The Nazirite vow's influence of on early Christian writings can be seen in the birth narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus and in Jesus's words at the last supper.<sup>49</sup> In Acts 18:18 Paul had his hair cut on account of a vow, and in 21:22–26 he covered the sacrificial expenses of four men who also had their hair cut because of a vow. While neither passage in Acts specifically identifies these vows, most scholars agree that the Nazirite vow informed these accounts.<sup>50</sup> Later Christian authors continued to draw upon Nazirite traditions. Hegeppus clearly portrays James, the brother of Jesus, as a Nazirite (Eus. *HE* 2.23), and Epiphanius claims that the Nazirite vow found its fulfillment in the person of Jesus (*Adv. haeres.* 80.7).<sup>51</sup> The Mishnah devotes an entire tractate (*Nazir*) to the Nazirite vow—the placement of which within the Order of

<sup>49</sup> E.g. Mt 2:23, Mk 14:25, Lk 1:15. For discussions of the Nazirite vow in these New Testament passages see François Bovon, *Luke: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Minneapolis 2002) 98; Raymond Edward Brown, "Presentation of Jesus (Luke 2:22–40)," *Worship* 51 (1977) 6, and *Birth of the Messiah* 210–211, 446–450, 688; Stuart Douglas Chepey, *Nazirites in Late Second Temple Judaism* (Leiden 2005) 147–159; Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (Nashville 1996) 69.

<sup>50</sup> See discussion in Jacob Neusner, "Vow-Taking, the Nazirites, and the Law: Does James' Advice to Paul Accord with Halakah?" in Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (eds.), *James the Just and Christian Origins* (Leiden 1999) 59–60; Roger Tomes, "Why did Paul Get his Hair Cut?" in C. M. Tuckett (ed.), *Luke's Literary Achievement* (Sheffield 1995) 188–197.

<sup>51</sup> For further discussion of James as a Nazirite, see below.

Women (*Nashim*) gives further evidence of women's attraction to the ritual. However, the rabbis expressed considerable disapproval for the vow, suggesting that Nazirite vows of suitable people do not exist, since such only an evil person would make such vows (*m. Ned.* 1:1; cf. *t. Ned.* 1:1 and *y. Ned.* 1:1).<sup>52</sup> While the rabbis' disparagement of the Nazirite vow was likely related to its influence among women, the Mishnah nevertheless allocated a special concession to female Nazirites. Unlike ordinary women bringing sacrifices, female Nazirites were allowed greater participation in the sacrifices that marked the end of their vow. Together with the accused wife undergoing the bitter water ordeal, the female Nazirite was allowed to wave her own offerings, a privilege otherwise permitted only to men (*m. Qidd.* 1:8). From the perspective of the Mishnah, the Nazirite vow was so significant that it altered the way in which women participated in the temple cult.

The attraction of women to the Nazirite vow persisted into early Christianity. In the *Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, Methodius of Olympus makes a connection between Nazirites and virgins. Recalling the identification of the Nazirite vow as the great vow in Num 6:2, Methodius suggests that virginity should instead be considered the great vow (*Symp.* 5.4).<sup>53</sup> He quotes the characteristics of Nazirites found in Num 6 and instructs the virgins not to partake of wine or strong drinks, holding themselves to the standards of abstinence observed by the Nazirites (5.5). This is not a rejection of the Nazirite vow by Methodius, but rather a claim that the earlier, Jewish vow

<sup>52</sup> Simcha Fishbane, "'As the Vows of the Evil Folk': The Structure and Implicit Message of Mishnah's Tractate Nazir," in *Deviancy in Early Rabbinic Literature* (Boston 2007) 16–41, esp. 23–25, argues that the Mishnah's attitude toward the Nazirite vow should be understood in the context of the rabbis' desire to establish themselves as the sole authority in the Jewish world after the destruction of the temple. Later rabbinic authors also objected to the asceticism of the Nazirite vow, suggesting that self-denial was antithetical to the Jewish tradition (e.g. *b. Ta'an.* 11a).

<sup>53</sup> See n.46 above for Philo's use of the same language.

found fulfillment through the Christian discipline of virginity.

In addition to evoking the Nazirite vow by modeling Mary's story on the early life of Samuel, the author of *Prot. Jas.* employed another subtle device. In *Prot. Jas.* 1 and 25, the author identifies himself as Ἰάκωβος, which has traditionally been understood as a reference to James, the brother of Jesus. While there is nothing in the text to indicate that this James actually wrote *Prot. Jas.*, it is nevertheless significant that the author chose to assume his identity. The usual explanation for the choice of James as a pseudonym is that a member of Mary's family would have seemed a reliable source for a narrative about her life. However, the author's portrayal of himself as James has a further implication. As we saw above, Hegesippus identified James as a Nazirite. He wrote that James was called ἅγιος from his mother's womb, a term which the Septuagint used interchangeably with ναζιραῖος. He also recorded that James refused to drink wine or to cut his hair, practices that were easily recognizable as those of a Nazirite (Eus. *HE* 2.23.3–6).<sup>54</sup> We must conclude that James, identified as the first bishop of Jerusalem, was remembered in the early Christian community as a Nazirite. Thus, the author's decision to style himself as James confirmed that the Nazirites were to be included in the subtext of *Prot. Jas.*

Admiration of the Nazirite vow was widespread among both Jews and Christians in the first centuries C.E., and the author's portrayal of Mary according to the Nazirite model of Samuel capitalizes on this reputation. Deliberate allusions to the popular birth narrative of Samuel guaranteed that the original audience would understand Mary as a Nazirite, imagining her within the respected community that gathered in the temple chamber set aside for its use. Not only would this

<sup>54</sup> For a discussion of the Hegesippus material from Eusebius in light of the Nazirite vow see Chepey, *Nazirites* 174–177. Paul also visits James in Acts 21:18, and the advice that Paul pay for the sacrifices of four Nazirites and join them in fulfilling their vow should perhaps be attributed to James.

paradigm provide a meaningful response to Jewish criticism of Mary, but it would also evoke the Nazirite vow as the prototype for early Christian vows of virginity. Through the Nazirite model, Mary, the Christian virgin *par excellence*, linked early Christian asceticism to its Jewish antecedent.

### *Conclusion*

This article has attempted to answer the question: what prompted a second-century writer to portray Mary as a temple virgin? I contend that the depiction of Mary's life in the temple precincts, which has elicited little serious discussion by scholars, deserves closer examination. While not denying the obvious agenda of *Prot. Jas.*'s Christian author to defend Mary's purity, I have challenged some of the preconceived ideas with which many approach the text. Rather than assigning the narrative of Mary in the temple simply to the author's Christian background and vivid imagination, I argue that *Prot. Jas.* reflects ideas found in late Second Temple and early rabbinic texts. Women's participation in the temple cult, while poorly documented, certainly took place. However, much of what we know relates not to the role of ordinary women in the temple, but rather to exceptional women. In particular, three groups of women are repeatedly singled out either for their special duties or for their special prerogatives in the temple cult: accused adulteresses undergoing the bitter water ordeal, virgins who constructed the temple curtains, and female Nazirites. The author of *Prot. Jas.* brought all three of these groups together in his narrative about the life of Mary. By incorporating these motifs, particularly in the account of Mary in the Jerusalem temple, and by tempering them with Christian themes, the author produced a work intended both to edify Christians and to refute Jewish critics of Mary.

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