

THE FALLING ASLEEP OF MARY
The Role of Mary in the Early Church
MARY: A MODEL OF HUMILITY

The Dormition – August 15th
August 15, 2017
Revision D

GOSPEL: Luke 10:38-42, 11:27-28
EPISTLE: Philippians 2:5-11

Table of Contents

Background: The Role of Mary in the Early Church.....	639
Church Life Beginning at Pentecost	639
Church Life Following Pentecost	644
The Holy Women Split Up	646
Mary Magdalene	646
Mary and Martha of Bethany	647
Mary, the Wife of Cleopas	648
Joanna, Salome and Susanna.....	648
James, Bishop of Jerusalem	648
The First Seven “Deacons”.....	652
The Stoning of Stephen.....	653
The Twelve Cast Lots	655
The Role of the Queen Mother	656
The Virgin Mary’s Journeys.....	659
Animosity in Jerusalem.....	661
The Dormition of the Virgin Mary	662
The Legacy of the Virgin Mary	665
Old Testament Readings for the Dormition	665
Genesis 28:10-17: Jacob’s Ladder	665
Proverbs 9:1-11: Wisdom Built Her House.....	668
Ezekiel 43:27-44:4: The East Gate.....	670
Epistle: Philippians 2:5-11.....	672
Gospel: Luke 10:38-42, 11:27-28.....	674
Mary of Bethany Sits at Jesus’ Feet.....	675
Mary of Bethany’s Effort in Perspective	675
Blessed Are Those Who Hear the Word and Keep It	678

Background: The Role of Mary in the Early Church

Church Life Beginning at Pentecost

To understand the role of the Virgin Mary in the Early Church, one needs to begin with her presence in the Upper Room prior to Pentecost (Acts 1:14). She had spent the previous three years working with the other Myrrh-Bearing Women, who had financed Jesus’ public ministry (Luke 8:1-3). These women stayed in the background due to their great humility, but they played a key role in facilitating everything wherever Jesus went.

Copyright © Mark Kern 2007

The Day of Pentecost occurred¹ on either the 5th, 6th or 7th of Sivan depending on the sighting of the new moon to mark the beginning of the month. In the year 30 AD, this occurred on a Sunday, the first day of the week. Thus there were back-to-back Sabbaths; the weekly Sabbath followed by the Feast of Pentecost, which was also a Sabbath.

Gathered together at this time were the Twelve, most of the Seventy², the Holy Women plus others totaling about 120 (Acts 1:15). They had been meeting in the upper room where the Twelve had eaten the Passover and Last Supper (Mark 14:15, Acts 1:13). Continuing in prayer and supplication, they were all with one accord in one place (Acts 1:14, 2:1).

Suddenly there came a sound from heaven like a rushing mighty wind and it filled the whole house where they were sitting (Acts 2:2). The sound was not just a wind blowing horizontally, but “from heaven.” This calls to mind the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night that led Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21-22). This is also reminiscent of the “strong East wind” that the Lord sent to divide the Red Sea for Moses (Exodus 14:21). It is perhaps no coincidence that the words for wind and spirit are the same in Hebrew (*ruach*) and Greek (*pneuma*).

Jerusalem was crowded for the two-day Sabbath (where no work could be done) and the sound of this “wind” created a curiosity among the multitude of devout Jews in town for the feast (Acts 2:6). The sound of the wind was localized to the house where the 120 were staying such that the multitude could pinpoint the source of the sound.

For 120 people to fit into the upper room indicates that the house was fairly large and well-built. Access to upper rooms of houses or the roofs in general was by an outside staircase and also by a staircase from an inner courtyard. There was usually a railing around the edge of the first story roof (required by Law) such that people using the roof or the upper room wouldn't accidentally fall off (Deuteronomy 22:8). The edge of the first story roof, just behind the railing presented an ideal spot for Peter to address a large gathering of people, the eleven standing with him shoulder-to-shoulder (Acts 2:14).

When the multitude was attracted to the house by the sound of the “wind”, they were confused. They recognized all or almost all as Galileans, but heard them speaking the language of their home country (Acts 2:6-7). Thus the “Gift” that was given was an ability to speak a variety of different languages.

The Greek word for tongue (*glossa*) means both the fleshly member of the human mouth and a language as being controlled by the human tongue. Rufinus of Aquileia in his commentary on the Apostles' Creed stated³

¹ A month could have either 29 or 30 days. If both Nisan and Iyyar had 29 days, Pentecost fell on the 5th of Sivan. If both Nisan and Iyyar had 30 days, Pentecost was the 7th of Sivan. If one had 29, the other 30 days, Pentecost was the 6th of Sivan. See Unger, *Bible Dictionary*, p.356.

² Apollos, one of the Seventy, was absent since he didn't hear about the Holy Spirit until over 20 years later (Acts 18:25).

³ Rufinus, “A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed”, 2, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, v.3.

“Our forefathers have handed down to us the tradition, that, after the Lord’s ascension, when tongues of flame had settled upon each of the Apostles, through the coming of the Holy Ghost, they began to speak diverse languages. No race however foreign, no tongue however barbarous, was inaccessible to them and beyond their reach; they were commanded by the Lord to go severally to the nations to preach the word of God”.

For the 3000, the recognition as Galileans was easy: Galileans had a characteristic accent due to the way they pronounced (or mispronounced) some of the gutturals of the Hebrew alphabet (Mark 14:70). This would be equivalent to the differences in pronunciation one might find between people who live in Boston, Atlanta and Los Angeles. All of the Twelve, except Judas, were also from Galilee, and therefore their Galilean accent gave them away.

Cyril of Jerusalem wrote⁴ that this was a second confusion in the same vein as that first evil one at Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). For in that confusion of tongues there was division of purpose because their thought was at enmity with God. But here, minds were restored and united, because the object of interest was godly.

But for several thousand people (Acts 2:41) to hear 120 other people speak in at least 13 different languages (Acts 2:9-10) all at the same time presents a question of logistics. If we describe the “gift” in terms of Rufinus’ and Cyril’s statements, one person could have spoken while 3,000 different people heard the Word in 13 different languages. If this were the case, the “gift” would not be with the speaking but would be with the hearing. Thus there were likely multiple speakers.

Paul stated to the Corinthians that he spoke in languages (tongues) more than all of them (1 Corinthians 14:18). This was necessary for him. From the thirteen different languages mentioned in Acts 2:9-10, Paul evangelized people speaking seven of them on his various missionary journeys: people in Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Rome and Crete.

The text states that when the sound from heaven came, “there appeared to them distributed languages (tongues), as of fire, and one sat upon each of them” (Acts 2:3). Thus the Holy Women and the Virgin Mary, as well as the Seventy, received this gift also. Later on the same thing happened to Cornelius and the Gentiles (Acts 10:44-46).

John Chrysostom stated⁵ that the wind and the fire were always couched in terms of “like as”. These physical phenomena were not the Holy Spirit, but indicated the presence of the Holy Spirit:

“Observe how it is always *like as*; and rightly so, that you may have no gross sensible notions of the Spirit. Also, *as of a rushing, mighty wind*; therefore it was not a wind. For when the Spirit was to be made known to John (the Baptist), then it came upon the head of Christ in the form of a dove. But now, when a whole multitude was to be converted, it is *like as of fire*. And it sat upon

⁴ Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures, XVII, 17

⁵ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Acts, IV.

each of them. This means that it remained and rested upon them. For the sitting is significant of settledness and continuance”.

If the languages rested on each of the 120 *like as of fire*, there was something visibly different, perhaps like the haloes or glowing spheres around the heads of the saints, that are used in iconography. This may have been similar to Moses’ face glowing after he spoke to God (Exodus 34:32-35, 2 Corinthians 3:13). And they each began to speak with other languages as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:4). The multitude heard the sound of the “wind;” they saw the glow of the “fire” that sat upon each of the 120; and they heard them speaking in their own languages the wonderful works of God (Acts 2:11). The multitude was both amazed and confused at the same time (Acts 2:6-7). When Peter spoke to the crowd of 3,000 people, he quoted Joel 2:28-29 to describe what was happening: “I will pour My Spirit on all mankind. Your sons and daughters will prophesy”.

John Chrysostom pointed out⁶ that this occurred at the third hour or 9:00 a.m. This meant that it was broad daylight and the “fire” still stood out strongly in the sunlight.

As the multitude was both amazed and perplexed (Acts 2:12) and wondered what this meant, others mocked the 120 saying that they were drunk with new wine (Acts 2:13). Part of the Old Testament Pentecost liturgy was a new grain offering from the wheat harvest. Two loaves of bread were offered with some animal sacrifices and some recently fermented wine (Leviticus 23:15-18). Thus, the mockers used the illustrations from the Pentecost liturgy to describe the 120: they appeared to the mockers to be drunk.

This speaking in languages may have appeared similar to prophesy experienced by Moses’ Seventy elders. That this prophesying of Moses’ elders was unusual behavior and quite noticeable can be seen from two of the seventy elders who were not at the tent of meeting. They began to prophesy in the camp such that Joshua suggested that Moses restrain them. Moses replied, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!” (Numbers 11:26-29).

King Saul experienced this “prophesying” on two separate occasions. The first time occurred just after the Prophet Samuel anointed him king. He met a group of prophets and “the Spirit of God came upon him mightily so that he prophesied among them. When all who knew him previously saw that he prophesied now with the prophets, the people said to one another, ‘What has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?’” At this time God changed Saul’s heart (1 Samuel 10:1-11).

The second time occurred while Saul was hunting down David to kill him. It was reported to Saul that David was with the Prophet Samuel at Ramah. Saul sent messengers three times to arrest David and bring him back. Each time the messengers came to Ramah, they began to prophesy along with the prophets who had Samuel presiding over them. And they returned to Saul empty handed. Finally, Saul, himself, went to Ramah and he, too, prophesied all day long, prostrating himself and stripped to his loin cloth (1 Samuel 19:18-24).

⁶ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Acts, V.

In other cases, the Apostle John was “in the Spirit” on the Lord’s Day (i.e. Sunday) when he received a vision (Revelation 1:10). Again, when he was “in the Spirit,” he was taken to heaven to see future things (Revelation 4:1, 2). Peter was in a trance while he was praying and saw heaven opened (Acts 10:10). Similarly, Paul was praying in the Temple in Jerusalem when he was in a trance and saw Christ speaking to him (Acts 22:17-18).

From one of the Old Testament readings for Pentecost Vespers, the Prophet Joel had predicted this, “And it will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind. And your sons and daughters will prophesy; your old men will dream dreams; your young men will see visions. And even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days” (Joel 2:28-29). We note that the text from Joel says that they will prophesy, dream and see visions but not speak in languages. Yet Peter quoted Joel to describe what was happening (Acts 2:14-21). Thus the “prophesying” and the “speaking in languages” must refer to something very similar. This does not mean that the Gift of Languages and the Gift of Prophecy are the same thing. However, since “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Revelation 19:10), the speaking in languages at Pentecost telling of “the wonderful works of God” (Acts 2:11) can be called prophecy. For more discussions on Prophecy and its implications and uses, see the discussion for the Feast Day of Elijah, July 20th.

The crowd of 3,000 was justifiably both amazed and perplexed at the same time wondering what was happening. This was a most unusual behavior and circumstances of events.

Peter’s reaction to the mockers on Pentecost was to confront them. They couldn’t have gotten drunk because it was only 9:00 a.m., i.e. the third hour. (This implies that either the 120 had just concluded a Matins service or an all-night vigil.) Then Peter quoted the above passage from Joel 2:28 to explain what was happening (Acts 2:16-21); that is, the Holy Spirit was being poured out as Joel predicted. Peter further stated to them (Acts 2:17-36):

- They all knew Jesus of Nazareth that He was attested by miracles, wonders and signs.
- By God’s foreknowledge, he was lawlessly crucified.
- God raised Him up, since death couldn’t hold Him.
- We (the 120) were all witnesses of this.
- Now that Jesus is exalted to the Right Hand of God, we have received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit.
- God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.

Hearing this, they were cut to the heart and asked what they should do. Peter said: “Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the Name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38-39). Three thousand souls were then added to their numbers.

John Chrysostom points out⁷ the tone of Peter’s address as being one of gentleness and humility. He calls them “men of Judea” (Acts 2:14), “men of Israel” (Acts 2:22), “men and brothers” (Acts 2:29), “all the house of Israel” (Acts 2:36), and concludes with “the promise is to

⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Acts, VII.

you and your children” (Acts 2:39). This is an amazing thing for Peter to say to the people who crucified Christ 7 weeks ago.

Church Life Following Pentecost

Since the 3,000 new converts were from all over the world (Acts 2:8-10), and many were in Jerusalem just for Pentecost, many had no job, income or livelihood if they stayed. For the 120, or perhaps the 500 (1 Corinthians 15:6) to find food and lodging for this many people was a major task. Fortunately, the Holy Women had already been doing that for three years on a smaller scale.

As a result, “all who believed were together and had all things common, and sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all, as anyone had need” (Acts 2:44-45). Shortly afterward, as a result of Peter and John healing a 40-year old man who was born lame (Acts 3:1-2, 4:22), 5,000 more men believed (Acts 4:4). This 5,000 most likely represents residents of Jerusalem and vicinity since this occurred after the feast days and at the 9th hour of prayer (3:00 p.m.).

Referring to both the 3,000 and the 5,000, “the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the Apostles’ feet. And they distributed to each as anyone had need” (Acts 4:32, 34).

Two examples of this are given: that of Barnabas and Ananias. Barnabas was the uncle of John Mark (Colossians 4:10) whose house was the meeting place for some of the Christians when Peter was imprisoned in 44 AD (Acts 12:12). He was a Levite born on Cyprus (Acts 4:36) and, according to tradition, his family owned property in Jerusalem around the Garden of Gethsemane⁸. Barnabas sold his portion and brought the money and laid it at the Apostles’ feet (Acts 4:37).

Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold a similar piece of property, but kept back part of the proceeds, and laid the rest at the Apostles’ feet as if it were everything. Because they lied to the Holy Spirit, they collapsed and died when confronted by Peter over their sin. In this incident, we note Peter’s words to the effect that Ananias was not forced to give over all the money and that it was OK to withhold part of it. The problem was that he pretended it was all the proceeds (Acts 5:1-11).

This serves to illustrate the spirit of the church following Pentecost. Everyone contributed what he could. Ananias served to illustrate this by being a notable exception. “And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship in the breaking of bread and in prayer” (Acts 2:42). They “continued daily with one accord in the Temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart” (Acts 2:46).

⁸ For Barnabas to sell property and lay the proceeds at the Apostles’ feet, the property would have to be near Jerusalem.

The term “breaking of bread” refers to the Lord’s Supper, which was part of the worship of the Church.

The Early Church following Pentecost can be thought of as the beginning of a monastic community. We can see this by looking ahead 15 years to the monastic communities that were organized by the Evangelist Mark. These communities were modeled after the Early Church at Pentecost. The Jewish philosopher Philo (20 BC to 50 AD) had great admiration⁹ for these monastic communities in Egypt, whom he called “*The Therapeutae*” or healers¹⁰. Eusebius devoted¹¹ a chapter of his Church History to quoting Philo’s account of 1st Century monasticism¹², saying,

“The multitude of believers, both men and women, that were collected at these monasteries at the very outset, and lived lives of the most philosophical and excessive asceticism, was so great, that Philo thought it worthwhile to describe their pursuits, their meetings, their entertainment, and their whole manner of life”.

Jerome stated¹³ that Philo, a native of Alexandria of the priestly class, saw in the monasteries of Egypt something of credit to his nation, since there was still a distinct Jewish flavor to their life together. Philo described some characteristics of these monastic communities, in his work “On the Contemplative Life”.

John Cassian, in the early 5th Century, recounted¹⁴ the history of the Cenobite¹⁵ monastics in Egypt, who were the descendants of the monks that were first organized by the Evangelist Mark. He said that they took their direction from the Early Church described in Acts, which Cassian says was a monastic-like community. Since the leaders of the Early Church were celibate, including the Twelve and the Seventy, many people naturally imitated them, including the Apostle Paul after his conversion (1 Corinthians 7:7-8).

The effect on the Church of the Twelve, the Seventy, the Holy Women, Paul and the others was profound. They all lived a celibate life of fasting and prayer. 25 years later Paul had to write to the Corinthians to tell them that it really was OK to marry (1 Corinthians 7:7-9). Everyone didn’t have to live celibate in order to be godly.

⁹ C. D. Yonge, tr., “On the Contemplative Life”, The Works of Philo, Updated Edition Database, Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, I:2, II:10 to IV:39.

¹⁰ Philo applied this name to refer to the healing of the soul and the worship of God in purity and sincerity.

¹¹ Eusebius, Church History, II, 17.

¹² The Protestant Reformers had a strong reaction to monasticism in general, and were unwilling to believe that a well-developed monasticism could have existed at all until much later, never mind before the death of Philo in 50 AD. They concluded that these communities were either not Christian, or that the accounts were a later addition to the works of Philo. See Philip Schaff, ed., Eusebius, Church History, II, 17, Footnote 2, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 1.

¹³ Jerome, “Lives of Illustrious Men”, Chapter 8, Jerome and Gennadius, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Volume 3.

¹⁴ John Cassian, Conference of Abbot Piamun, XVIII, 5.

¹⁵ The term “Cenobite” comes from the Greek words *koinos* and *bios*, meaning “common” and “life” respectively. They lived in communities, as opposed to those who lived as hermits, and they had all things in “common”, just like the Early Church following Pentecost.

In the years following Pentecost, James, the Lord's brother, put together a Liturgy¹⁶ for the Jerusalem Church. The copy of the Liturgy of St. James that exists today includes changes made later and is quite long. In the 4th Century, Basil the Great and John Chrysostom shortened this liturgy down to what is still used today in the Eastern Church. The fact that James' liturgy is so long illustrates the statement in the Scripture that they continued in prayer.

John Chrysostom stated¹⁷ that all this implies a life of fasting and prayer; that is, a "hard life" with the rigors of fasting and denial of personal pleasure.

"The poor man knew no shame; the rich, no haughtiness. This is gladness. The latter deemed himself the obliged and fortunate party; the others felt themselves as honored herein, and closely were they bound together."

"Two things there were which might deject them; their abstinent living and the loss of their property. Yet on both accounts did they rejoice. For who cannot love men of this character as common fathers? They conceived no malice toward each other; they committed all to the grace of God. Fear there was none, even though they had taken their position in the midst of dangers (cf John 20:19). By singleness (Acts 2:46), however, he denotes their entire virtue, far surpassing their contempt of riches, their abstinence, and their perseverance in prayer. For this also they offered pure praise to God. But observe also here how they immediately obtain their reward: that is in having favor with all the people (Acts 2:47). They were engaging and highly beloved".

Two leaders by example in this regard were James, the Lord's brother, and his step-mother, the Virgin Mary. Both had lived their entire life in fasting and prayer, and they continued in that way of life. Except now they had more visibility: James as Bishop of Jerusalem and Mary as the Queen Mother (where her Son was revered as King of Kings).

The Holy Women Split Up

Several things happened shortly after Pentecost, which caused the Myrrh-Bearing Women to go to different parts of the world. While they had become very close-knit, especially over the last three years, there were some things they were called to do.

Mary Magdalene

After the Ascension, Mary Magdalene lived in the same house as the Virgin Mary; that is, the Apostle John's house. At this time, the Virgin Mary was about 48 years old¹⁸, Mary Magdalene about 41 and John about 25. If Mary Magdalene had been a woman of means and able to help support Jesus' three year ministry (Luke 8:3), this may mean that she, too, sold everything and laid it at the Apostles' feet.

Shortly after Pentecost, Mary Magdalene was led with a strong desire to expose those who unjustly condemned Christ. Traveling to Rome, she asked to present her case before

¹⁶ Roberts and Donaldson, ed, "The Divine Liturgy of James, the Holy Apostle and Brother of the Lord", The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 7.

¹⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Acts, VII.

¹⁸ Holy Apostles Convent, The Life of the Virgin Mary, Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista CO, 1989, p.414.

Tiberias Caesar¹⁹. That Tiberias Caesar would actually listen to her suggests that she was a Roman citizen and had the right to appeal to Caesar (Acts 22:25-29, 25:7-12), and that she was a woman of means. Appearing before Tiberias Caesar, she presented him with a red egg and announced “Christ is risen!” She told Tiberias the whole story of Pilate’s unjust trial, the release of a murderer and insurrectionist in His place and of the cowering of Pilate to the plotting of the Jewish leaders (Acts 3:13-15, Matthew 27:15-24). Tiberias also heard that Pilate had massacred some Samaritans unjustly²⁰ and summoned him to Rome to answer for his actions. By the time Pilate arrived in Rome, Tiberias had died and Caius Caligula was Emperor. Pilate was unable to defend himself and was banished to Gaul where he committed suicide²¹.

Pilate’s wife, Procula Claudia, on the other hand, came to believe in Christ and lived an ascetic life along with others of the Holy Women²². She had sent word to her husband during Jesus’ trial to “have nothing to do with that just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of Him” (Matthew 27:19).

Mary Magdalene was renowned in the Early Church for her evangelistic efforts, both in Rome and later in Ephesus working with the Apostle John, and was referred to as “Equal to the Apostles”²³.

Mary was still in Rome in 55 AD, and Paul addressed her by name in his letter for her extensive work for the Church (Romans 16:6). She stayed in Rome until after Paul’s release from house arrest in 62 AD, and then left for Ephesus.

Mary and Martha of Bethany

At the time that Jesus raised their brother Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-46), the Jewish leaders began plotting to kill Lazarus as well as Jesus “because on account of him, many of the Jews went away and believed in Jesus” (John 12:10-11). If Mary, Martha and Lazarus were wealthy and prominent citizens of Bethany, Lazarus presented a much greater difficulty to the Jewish leaders than the son of a poor widow (Luke 7:11-16) or a child like Jairus’ daughter (Luke 8:42-56).

Sometime after Pentecost, the Jews followed through with their plot to kill Lazarus. They put Lazarus, his two sisters and one Maximinus in a leaking boat with no oars or rudder, and set them adrift at sea. From this point two different traditions have developed, perhaps due to the (mistaken) identification in Western tradition of Mary of Bethany (Lazarus’ sister) with

¹⁹ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, July 22.

²⁰ A leader of the Samaritans had promised to disclose the sacred treasures which Moses had concealed on Mt. Gerizim, and the Samaritans came together in great numbers from all quarters. There is no mention of any treasure that Moses placed on Mt. Gerizim, but there was mention of large stones on the neighboring Mt. Ebal, on which were written the Law (Deuteronomy 27:1-14). Pilate, supposing the gathering to be with rebellious purpose, sent troops against them and defeated them with great slaughter. The Samaritans complained to Vitellius, Governor of Syria, who sent Pilate to Rome in 36 AD to answer the charges brought against him. See note 1, p. 110, Eusebius, Church History, II, vii, in Philip Schaff, Post Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 1.

²¹ Eusebius, Church History, II, vii.

²² Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, October 27.

²³ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, July 22.

Mary of Magdala (Magdalene). In one account, the boat landed on Cyprus. Lazarus was later ordained Bishop of Kition (or Larnaka) and died peacefully about 60 AD. In the other account, the boat landed on the southeast shore of Gaul. Lazarus, Mary and Martha proceeded to evangelize the whole area. Lazarus was ordained Bishop of Marseilles and was martyred under Domitian (reign 81-96 AD). Mary, in this account, evangelized Provence and spent the last 30 years of her life in strict fasting and prayer in a cave in the Alps. Martha is remembered primarily for evangelizing Tarascon in France. In trying to reconcile the two accounts, it may be that the Lazarus in Gaul was really Simon the leper²⁴, who was Lazarus' friend (or relative) and at whose house Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus with costly fragrant oil (Matthew 26:6-7, John 11:1-2). For more details, see the discussion for Palm Sunday.

Mary, the Wife of Cleopas

This Mary was the mother of two of the Twelve Apostles, James and Matthew, the sons of Alphaeus or Cleopas. Her husband was the brother of Joseph, the Virgin Mary's husband; thus she was the Virgin Mary's sister-in-law (John 19:25). Since Joseph died at the age of 110 years just before Jesus' public ministry, Cleopas was probably quite old when the risen Lord appeared to him and Luke on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-18). Tradition is silent regarding Cleopas after Pentecost, indicating that he probably died shortly thereafter, leaving Mary a widow.

Spanish tradition indicates that Mary, the wife of Cleopas, accompanied James, the son of Zebedee (her niece Salome's son) to Spain. She was buried with great honor at Compostela in Spain after she died²⁵. James, the son of Zebedee, returned to Jerusalem in 44 AD and was martyred by Herod to please the Jews (Acts 12:1-3). Some accounts state that James' body was returned to Spain for burial²⁶ with great honor.

Joanna, Salome and Susanna

Not as much is known about these three women. Joanna is remembered for secretly retrieving the severed head of John the Baptist from the latrine where Herod had it thrown. She then buried John's head in the Garden of Gethsemane. Since Joanna's husband, Chuza, was the steward of Herod Antipas (Luke 8:3), Joanna most likely remained in the area of Tiberias along the Sea of Galilee where Herod's palace was located. After Herod died in 39 AD, she may have gone elsewhere. Salome, being very close to the Virgin Mary, probably remained in the Jerusalem area with her son, John, at whose house the Virgin Mary was staying.

James, Bishop of Jerusalem

At the Council of Jerusalem in 48 AD, James, the Lord's brother, was clearly the authority figure in Jerusalem. After everyone had spoken, James answered saying, "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:13, 19). Then it pleased the Apostles and elders with the whole church to send chosen men:

²⁴ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, July 13.

²⁵ See the Spanish references cited in Thurston and Attwater, Butler's Lives of the Saints, Christian Classics, Westminster, MD, 1990, July 25.

²⁶ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, April 30.

Thurston and Attwater, Butler's Lives of the Saints, Christian Classics, Westminster, MD, 1990, July 25.

Joseph (Barsabas), i.e. James' brother, and Silas with a letter to the Gentile churches documenting this.

We see James in this position much earlier also. Paul's conversion was about 34 AD. (For the reasoning behind this, see the discussion for Galatians 1:11-19, the 20th Sunday after Pentecost). Three years after this (or 37 AD) Paul went to Jerusalem but had to leave after 15 days due to an assassination plot (Galatians 1:18, Acts 9:26-30). During those 15 days, Paul only saw Peter and James, the Lord's brother; he saw none of the rest of the Twelve (Galatians 1:19). Later on, he saw the Apostle John and remarked that James, the Lord's brother, Peter and John were the pillars of the Jerusalem Church (Galatians 2:9). That this is James, the Lord's brother, and not James, the brother of John, is clear from Acts 12:2. Herod martyred James, the brother of John, in 44 AD, right after returning from Spain, or four years before the Council of Jerusalem. James, the son of Alphaeus, was away evangelizing Egypt according to tradition²⁷.

Eusebius, the 4th Century church historian, wrote²⁸ concerning James that he was a key leader in the Early Church as the Bishop of Jerusalem.

“Then James, whom the ancients surnamed ‘The Just’ on account of the excellence of his virtue, was the first to be made bishop of the Church of Jerusalem. This James was called the brother of the Lord because he was known as a son of Joseph. But Clement in the sixth book of his *Hypotyposes*²⁹ writes thus: ‘For they say that Peter and James (i.e. Zebedee) and John, after the ascension of our Savior, as if also preferred by our Lord, did not strive after honor, but chose James the Just bishop of Jerusalem’. But the same writer, in the seventh book of the same work, relates also the following things concerning him. ‘The Lord after his resurrection imparted knowledge to James the Just and to John and Peter, and they imparted it to the rest of the Apostles, and the rest of the Apostles to the Seventy, of whom Barnabas was one.’ Paul also makes mention of the same James the Just, where he writes, ‘Other of the Apostles I didn't see except James the Lord's brother’” (Galatians 1:19).

Eusebius also went into great detail about the martyrdom of James. James had angered many of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem due to his holiness and outspokenness. He was a Nazirite (Numbers 6:1-21) and spent a lot of time in the Temple praying to his brother for the people. During a period of anarchy after the death of Festus, they got their chance for revenge.

“After Paul had appealed to Caesar, and had been sent to Rome by Festus (Acts 25:12, 26:32), the Jews, frustrated in their hope of entrapping him by the snares which they had laid for him, turned against James, the brother of the Lord, to whom the Episcopal seat at Jerusalem had been entrusted by the Apostles. They undertook the following daring measures against him. Leading him into their midst they demanded that he publicly renounce faith in Christ. But, contrary to their expectation, with a clear voice, and with greater boldness than they had anticipated, he spoke out before the whole multitude and confessed that Christ is

²⁷ Nickolai Velimirovic, *Prologue From Ochrid*, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, October 9.

²⁸ Eusebius, *Church History*, II, i. 2-4.

²⁹ Clement was a late 1st Century Bishop of Rome and one of the Seventy. His *Hypotyposes* (or *Outlines*) exists today only in scattered fragments.

the Son of God. They were unable to bear any longer the testimony of the man, who had a lifelong excellence of ascetic virtue and piety, and who was esteemed by all as the most just of men, and consequently they slew him. Their opportunity was furnished by the prevailing anarchy, which was caused by the death of Festus at this time in Judea, leaving the province without a governor. The manner of James' death was described by the words of Clement, who records that he was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple, and was beaten to death with a club. But Hegesippus³⁰, who lived immediately after the Apostles, gives more details in the fifth book of his Memoirs. 'James, the brother of the Lord, governed the Church in conjunction with the Apostles. He has been called 'The Just' by all from the time of our Savior to the present day; for there were many that bore the name of James. He was holy from his mother's womb; he drank no wine nor strong drink, nor did he eat flesh. No razor came upon his head; he did not anoint himself with oil, and he did not use the bath. He alone was permitted to enter into the holy place; for he wore only linen garments. He entered alone into the temple, and was frequently found upon his knees begging forgiveness for the people, so that his knees became hard like those of a camel, because he was constantly bending them in his worship of God, and asking forgiveness for the people. Because of his exceeding great justice he was called the Just, in accordance with what the prophets declare concerning him.'

Eusebius continued to say³¹ that as many as believed (among the Jews) did so on account of James. This led to the martyrdom of James.

"When many of the Pharisees believed (Acts 15:5), there was a commotion among the Jews and Scribes and Pharisees, who said that there was danger that the whole people would be looking for Jesus as the Christ. Coming as a body to James they said, 'We entreat you, restrain the people; for they are gone astray in regard to Jesus, as if he were the Christ. We entreat you to persuade all that have come to the Feast of the Passover concerning Jesus; for we all have confidence in you. For we bear you witness, as do all the people, that you are just, and do not respect persons (Matthew 22:16). Therefore, persuade the multitude not to be led astray concerning Jesus. For the whole people, and all of us also, have confidence in you. Stand therefore upon the pinnacle of the temple (Matthew 4:5), that from that high position you may be clearly seen, and that all the people may readily hear your words. For all the tribes, with the Gentiles also, have come together on account of the Passover.' The Scribes and Pharisees therefore placed James on the pinnacle³² of the temple, and cried out to him, 'O Just One, in whom we ought all to have confidence, since the people are led astray after Jesus, the crucified one, declare to us, what is the gate of Jesus'. He answered with a booming voice, 'Why do you ask me concerning Jesus, the Son of Man? He himself sits in heaven at the right hand of the great Power, and is about to come upon the clouds of heaven' (Matthew 26:64, Mark 14:62). And

³⁰ These works of Hegesippus are lost; most of what we know about them come from Eusebius' quotes.

³¹ Eusebius, *Antiquities*, II, 23.

³² The "pinnacle" of the Temple was the flat roof above the entrance to the Holy Place. It was about the height of a 6-story building.

when many were fully convinced by the testimony of James, and said, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David,’ these same Scribes and Pharisees said to one another, ‘We have done badly in supplying such testimony to Jesus. Let us go up and throw him down, in order that they may be afraid to believe him’. And they cried out, saying, ‘Oh! The just man is also in error’. And they fulfilled the Scripture written in Isaiah, ‘let us take away the just man, because he is troublesome to us; therefore, they shall eat the fruit of their doings’ (Isaiah 3:10). So they went up and threw down the just man, and said to each other, ‘Let us stone James the Just’. And they began to stone him, for he was not killed by the six-story fall; but he knelt down and said, ‘Lord God our Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they’re doing’ (Luke 23:34). And while they were thus stoning him, one of the priests of the sons of Rechab (Jeremiah 35), cried out, saying, ‘Stop; what are you doing? The just one prays for you’. And one of them, who was a fuller, took the club with which he beat out clothes and struck the just man on the head. Thus he suffered martyrdom. And they buried him on the spot, by the Temple, and his monument still remains by the Temple. He became a true witness, both to Jews and Greeks that Jesus is the Christ. And immediately Vespasian besieged them”.

“These things are related at length by Hegesippus, who is in agreement with Clement. James was so admirable a man and so celebrated by everyone for his justice, that the more sensible of the Jews thought that this was the cause of the siege of Jerusalem, which happened to them immediately after his martyrdom for no other reason than their daring act against him. Josephus, at least, has not hesitated to testify this in his writings, where he says³³, ‘These things happened to the Jews to avenge James the Just, who was a brother of Jesus, that is called the Christ. For the Jews slew him, although he was a most just man’.

Eusebius went on to say³⁴ that the Apostles chose James’ cousin, Simeon, the son of Clopas (i.e. Alphaeus), as his successor:

“After the martyrdom of James and the conquest of Jerusalem which immediately followed, it is said that those of the Apostles and disciples of the Lord that were still living came together from all directions with those that were related to the Lord according to the flesh (for the majority of them also were still alive) to take counsel as to who was worthy to succeed James. They all with one consent pronounced Simeon, the son of Clopas, of whom the Gospel also makes mention (Luke 24:18, John 19:25), to be worthy of the Episcopal throne of that parish. He was a cousin, as they say, of the Savior. For Hegesippus records that Clopas was a brother of Joseph³⁵.

Thus James was very highly regarded, both among the Christians and among the Jews who rejected Christ. How did James come to be the person he was? One answer is that he imitated his Stepbrother and Lord. But James was 8-10 years older than Jesus. Imitation was

³³ This quote from Josephus is not in our copies of his Antiquities today. However Origin also quotes Josephus with the same statement in Contra Celsum I, 47. The prevailing opinion is that earlier copies of Josephus contained this statement but later copies (after the 4th Century) deleted it.

³⁴ Eusebius, Antiquities, III, 11.

³⁵ These works of Hegesippus are lost; most of what we know about them come from Eusebius’ quotes.

possible for James when he was in his 20's; but before that, credit for James' training in righteousness can be laid at the feet of his step-mother, Mary, and also at the feet of his father, Joseph. Since Joseph was away from home much of the time³⁶ building houses, Mary had the primary responsibility for the young children. Since Mary's lifestyle from the time she was a toddler was one of prayer and fasting and devotion to God in the Temple, it's just natural for the young James to imitate her. And it is out of this life of devotion to God that James wrote his liturgy for the Jerusalem Church.

The First Seven³⁷ "Deacons"

At first, when everyone had everything in common, people sold their possessions, brought the proceeds of the things that were sold and laid them at the Apostles' feet. And they (the Apostles) distributed to each as anyone had need (Acts 4:34-35, 2:44-45). Over the next year or so, some of the Holy Women had a hand in the distribution since that was what they did during the Lord's three-year ministry. However, if Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha of Bethany and Mary the wife of Alphaeus (Cleopas) were leaving town because they were called to other things, or if they were forced to do so, this left a hole in the operation that others needed to fill. During transitions, something often gets overlooked. In this case, it was the Greek-speaking widows who were overlooked and neglected in the daily distribution (Acts 6:1).

"The Twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said: 'It is not desirable that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word'" (Acts 6:2-4).

At this point, it is instructive to look closely at the Scriptures to see both what it says and what it doesn't say. If the issue was for the Twelve to leave the Word of God and serve tables, this implies that they weren't serving tables at that time. They were busy teaching the people daily on Solomon's porch (Acts 3:11, 4:1-3, 5:12, 20-21) and in every house (Acts 5:42). But it also says that the Twelve "distributed to each as anyone had need" (Acts 4:35) of the proceeds of the things that were sold. This seems to make a compelling case for the distribution to have been delegated to someone, and the Holy Women stand out as the most likely. Regarding delegation, John Chrysostom mentioned³⁸ that the Twelve "had been taught by Moses' example (Numbers 11:14-17, Exodus 18:14-27) not to undertake the management of everything by themselves".

Some have pointed out that these first seven are not called deacons in the Scripture. This is correct, but the Greek word *diakonos* is used to describe their activities. For example, the widows were "neglected in the daily deaconing"; i.e. *diakonia* (Acts 6:1). The Twelve did not think it desirable that they should "leave the Word and deacon, i.e. *diakonein*, tables" (Acts 6:2). Instead the Twelve gave themselves "continually to prayer and to the deaconing; i.e. *diakonia*, of the Word (Acts 6:4).

³⁶ Roberts and Donaldson, "The Protoevangelium of James", 13, Apocrypha of the New Testament, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 8.

³⁷ For more details, see Mark Kern, The First Seven Deacons, St Athanasius Press, 2007.

³⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Acts, XIV.

Later on as the Church developed, the office of deacon as distinct from that of a presbyter (or priest) and bishop came into being. In this context, a deacon has a defined liturgical role that these first seven don't seem to have. So they are not deacons in the sense that we know deacons today. Chrysostom stated³⁹ that their designation was neither deacon nor presbyter. However, in Orthodox ordinations, a presbyter is first ordained as a deacon, then as a presbyter. And a true Bishop still considers himself as a deacon at heart. (Compare 2 Timothy 4:5, Titus 1:7, Colossians 1:23, 25).

According to tradition, all seven of these men⁴⁰ had been members of the Seventy (lesser) Apostles that Jesus sent out two by two in late 29 AD (Luke 10:1-20). Chrysostom pointed out⁴¹ that they were not chosen by lot -- although that could have been done -- but the Apostles wanted the testimony of the people. The fixing of the number, and the ordaining them, and the setting them for this kind of business rested with the Apostles. But the choice of the men they left to the people, just as God left it to Moses to choose elders from those he knew (Numbers 11:16).

Chrysostom also pointed out⁴² that these men needed a great deal of wisdom in discernment. This deaconing was not done off-handedly, but with much attention.

“This business was not simply handed over to them without further ceremony, but the Apostles prayed over them, that power might be given to them. But observe, if there was the need of seven men for this, great in proportion must have been the sums of money that flowed in, great in proportion also the number of widows. The prayers were not made in an off-hand way, but with much deliberate attention. This office, as well as preaching, was thus brought to good effect”.

It is interesting to note that the complaint against the Hebrews by the Greek widows, that they were neglected in the daily deaconing, resulted in the ordaining of seven men with Greek names to oversee the entire daily deaconing. These men were probably Greek-speaking Jews except for Nicholas who may have been a Gentile proselyte (Acts 6:5). The Greek widows were also probably Greek speaking Jews; their being left out was probably not intentional, but it was rectified rather dramatically. Care and attention for the poor was a very high priority in the early Church (Galatians 2:10).

The Stoning of Stephen

At this time, “the Word of God spread and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the Faith” (Acts 6:7). These priests were Levitical priests who ceased serving under the old covenant priesthood, becoming obedient to the direction of the Holy Spirit in the Church. This does not imply that they automatically became presbyters (or priests) in the church, although some may have done so. This implies that the Apostles, including James, the Lord's brother, were very effective in

³⁹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Acts, XIV.

⁴⁰ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, July 28.

⁴¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Acts, XIV.

⁴² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Acts, XIV.

pointing out in exacting detail how the Old Testament Liturgy illustrated and spoke of the work of Christ.

Some of the Apostles, including the Seventy and the seven deacons were very eloquent on this subject, as we see with Deacon Stephen. Following his ordination, “Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). Philip did so also. “The multitudes (in Samaria) with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed” (Acts 8:6-7). Thus the seven “deacons” did more than just serve tables.

When the Lord sent the Seventy out, including the seven “deacons”, they performed similar miracles (Luke 10:1-20). But upon their return they were again restrained. Now they were re-commissioned to do that by the ordination of the Twelve. In their mission with the Seventy, they were not limited to the lost sheep of the house of Israel as were the Twelve (Matthew 10:5-6). Similarly, in the present case: Philip evangelized the Samaritans and Stephen ran into a dispute with the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Acts 6:9).

The term “Freedmen” is of Latin origin and refers to Jews who had been taken captive by Pompey (106 to 48 BC) and later set free when Pompey was defeated by Julius Caesar⁴³. They built a synagogue in Jerusalem at their own expense, which they frequented when in Jerusalem. This synagogue became a home away from home for Greek-speaking and Latin-speaking Jews.

Some from the synagogue of the Freedmen (that is, some from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia) got into a dispute with Stephen. Yet they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke. Since the Apostle Paul was from Cilicia (Acts 22:3), and since he was prominent in Stephen’s death (Acts 7:58), he may have been one of Stephen’s antagonists in this dispute. According to tradition⁴⁴, Paul and Stephen were kinsmen.

Unable to refute Stephen, they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, set up false witnesses, seized Stephen and brought him to the Council, i.e. the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:11-13). Stephen gave a very eloquent defense (Acts 6, 7) during which “all who sat in the council, looking intently at him, saw his face as the face of an angel” (Acts 6:15). In other words, his face glowed, as did Moses’ face after Moses spoke with the Lord (Exodus 34:34-35). In the midst of this unjust trial, Stephen concluded his defense by referring to the council, itself, as stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears. They resisted the Holy Spirit, murdered the prophets and the Messiah just like their fathers did. They received the Law by the direction of angels, but (as this Council attests) they haven’t kept it (Acts 7:51-53).

As they gnashed their teeth at him, he had a vision of Jesus standing at the Right Hand of God. “‘Look!’ he said, ‘I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the Right Hand of God!’ Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord. And they cast him out of the city and stoned him” (Acts 7:56-58). For Stephen to see

⁴³ Merrill Unger, Unger’s Bible Dictionary, Moody Press, Chicago, 1967, p. 660.

⁴⁴ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, December 27.

the heavens opened implies that the Sanhedrin was meeting at that occasion in a courtyard with no roof.

According to tradition, the Virgin Mary witnessed Stephen's martyrdom⁴⁵, standing at a distance with her nephew, the Apostle John, praying for Stephen. This event occurred exactly a year after Pentecost⁴⁶ and Gamaliel took Stephen's body secretly (Acts 8:2) and buried him in his own ground, similar to the way Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus did with the body of Jesus (John 19:38-42).

The death of Stephen began a major bloodbath in Jerusalem. Nicanor, another of the seven "deacons" was martyred that same day also, along with 200 others in short succession⁴⁷. According to tradition, Nicodemus died as he and others were lamenting the death of Stephen, Nicanor and the others. The "great lamentation" (Acts 8:2) over the death of Stephen thus encompassed more than just Stephen. Gamaliel buried Nicodemus in the same crypt as Stephen, and was later buried there himself⁴⁸.

"Now Saul (Paul) was consenting to (Stephen's) death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church, which was at Jerusalem; and they were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except for the Apostles. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church entering every house and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison" (Acts 8:1, 3). In Paul's testimony nearly 30 years later, he admitted that he forced them to blaspheme (Acts 26:11). This persecution lasted for about three years, or until 34 AD when Paul was converted on the road to Damascus. With Paul not leading the attack against the Christians, "the Churches throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace and were edified" (Acts 9:31).

The Twelve Cast Lots

The last mention of the Twelve as being together in Jerusalem is at the ordination of the seven "deacons" (Acts 6:1-7). At the martyrdom of Stephen and the others, which occurred one year after Pentecost⁴⁹, the saints "were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the Apostles" (Acts 8:1). It is, perhaps, significant that Luke doesn't refer to the Twelve here and subsequently, since some of them had already left for missions abroad.

To determine who went where, the Twelve divided up the world into different regions, and then cast lots⁵⁰ to determine who would go to which region. For example, Thomas' lot was India and the Far East; John's lot was Ephesus and Asia Minor; Andrew's lot was Russia plus other areas and Matthew's lot was Africa.

The Virgin Mary was said to have requested one lot also⁵¹ in the preaching of the Gospel. Her lot came to be Iberia (Georgia in Southern Russia), but she never went there herself. Instead

⁴⁵ Holy Apostles Convent, The Life of the Virgin Mary, Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista CO, 1989, p.421.

⁴⁶ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, December 27.

⁴⁷ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, July 28.

⁴⁸ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, August 2.

⁴⁹ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, December 27.

⁵⁰ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, October 6, October 9, November 30.

⁵¹ Holy Apostles Convent, The Life of the Virgin Mary, Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista CO, 1989, p.414.

Nina, called “Equal to the Apostles” and “The Enlightener of Georgia” went there with the Virgin Mary’s blessing.

The Role of the Queen Mother

To understand Mary’s role better, it is helpful to understand the customary role of the Queen Mother in ancient times. If there was a Queen Mother at all, the king had to have died (or relinquished the throne) such that his son was reigning in his place.

One time this happened when King David was an old man. David had promised that Solomon, the son of Bathsheba would reign in his place (1 Kings 1:13, 17, 30). Realizing that David was bedridden and near death, Adonijah, the son of Haggith (one of David’s wives - 2 Samuel 3:4) exalted himself saying “I will be king” (1 Kings 1:5). Getting Joab, the commander of the army and Abiathar, the high priest, to side with him, Adonijah set himself up as heir to the throne. When David heard about it, however, he had Nathan the prophet and Zadok the priest anoint Solomon king and organize a parade through Jerusalem.

This put Adonijah in the role of a traitor and usurper. Adonijah later admitted that the kingdom belonged to Solomon from the Lord and that he almost had it for himself. When he begged for mercy from Solomon, Solomon granted him mercy, sent him home and did not execute him.

After David died, Adonijah came to Bathsheba, Solomon’s mother, and now the Queen Mother, and asked her to ask Solomon for the hand of Abishag, King David’s nurse, that he might marry her (1 Kings 2:13-17). Abishag had been selected to care for David in his old age and even to lie next to him to help him keep warm (1 Kings 1:1-4). This meant Abishag was like one of David’s concubines and for one of David’s sons to request her for a wife was to request incest (compare 1 Corinthians 5:1).

When Bathsheba went to present this request to King Solomon, Solomon rose up to meet her, bowed down before her and then set her on a throne at his right hand. Then Solomon told his mother to present her request, “for I will not refuse you” (1 Kings 2:19-20). Solomon had to refuse her, however, because her request violated the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 18:6-29), even though Abishag never had sexual relations with David.

The Queen Mother was very influential in Israel, but not always for the good of the nation. King Asa (Solomon’s great grandson) tried to do what was right in the sight of the Lord. However, his mother Maacah was busy making a horrible image as an Asherah. Asa removed his mother from the position of Queen Mother and destroyed the Asherah (2 Chronicles 15:16, 1 Kings 15:13).

Asa’s great grandson Ahaziah had similar difficulties with the Queen Mother, Athaliah, and the granddaughter of Omri, King of Israel. Omri was the father of the evil king Ahab who fought against the Prophet Elijah. As Queen Mother, Athaliah counseled her son to walk in the ways of the house of Ahab (2 Chronicles 22:2-4).

Even in matters of state, the Queen Mother had a role. For example, when Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged King Jehoiachin, the dignitaries that went out to meet Nebuchadnezzar were Jehoiachin, the Queen Mother, his servants, his captains and his officials, in that order (2 Kings 24:12; Jeremiah 22:24-26).

Table I is a list of the kings of Judah from Solomon to the Babylonian captivity. For every one of these kings, the Queen Mother is also mentioned in the summary statement of his reign. [There is one exception: King Ahaz of Judah who apparently had no Queen Mother; that is, she died before he became king.] One might note also that the king's wife is not mentioned in these summary statements since the king often had more than one wife. But he had only one mother.

**TABLE I
REFERENCES TO THE QUEEN MOTHER**

KING	FATHER	QUEEN MOTHER	REFERENCE	GOOD/EVIL
Solomon	David	Bathsheba	1 Kings 2:19	G - E
Rehoboam	Solomon	Naamah the Ammonitess	1 Kings 14:21; 31,2; Chr 12:13	E
Abijam (Abijah)	Rehoboam	Micaiah, daughter of Uriel of Gibeah	2 Chr 13:2	E
Asa	Abijam	Maacah, daughter of Abishalom	1 Kings 15:10	G
Jehoshaphat	Asa	Azubah, daughter of Shilhi	1 Kings 22:42, 2 Chr 20:31	G
Joram (Jehoram)	Jehoshaphat	A daughter of Ahab, King of Israel	1 Kings 22:50, 2 Kings 8:16-18	E
Ahaziah	Jehoram	Athaliah, grand-daughter of Omri, King of Israel	2 Kings 11:1; 8:25,26, 2 Chr 22:2	E
Joash (Jehoash)	Ahaziah	Zibiah of Beersheba	2 Kings 12:1	G
Amaziah	Joash	Jehoaddin (Jehoaddam) of Jerusalem	2 Kings 12:21, 14:2	G
Azariah (Uzziah)	Amaziah	Jecoliah (Jechiliah) of Jerusalem	2 Kings 15:2, 13, 2 Chr 26:3	G
Jotham	Uzziah	Jerushah, daughter of Zadok	2 Kings 15:33, 2 Chr 27:1	G
Ahaz	Jotham		2 Kings 16:1	E
Hezekiah	Ahaz	Abi (Abijah), daughter of Zechariah	2 Kings 18:2, 2 Chr 29:1	G
Manasseh	Hezekiah	Hephzibah	2 Kings 21:1	E
Amon	Manasseh	Meshullemeth, daughter of Haruz of Jotbah	2 Kings 21:19	E
Josiah	Amon	Jedidiah, daughter of Adaiah of Bozkath	2 Kings 22:1	G
Jehoahaz	Josiah	Hamutal, daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah	2 Kings 23:31	E
Eliakim	Josiah	Zibidah, daughter of Pedaiah of Rumah	2 Kings 23:36	E
Jeconiah (Jehoiachin)	Jehoiakim	Nehushta, daughter of Elnathan of Jerusalem	2 Kings 24:8	E
Mattaniah*		Hamutal, daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah	2 Kings 24:18	E

*Mattaniah was an uncle of Jehoiachin and a brother of Jehoiakim, and he had Hamutal, the wife of his father, Josiah.

These examples illustrate the influence of the Queen Mother. She was regarded as a very important person, worthy of a throne, whose requests will be granted by the King. Since Jesus was universally regarded in the Church as the King of Kings (Revelation 19:16, Daniel 2:47, Mark 14:62, Luke 22:69, Acts 2:36), Mary, as His mother, held a similar place of honor as did

Bathsheba during the reign of Solomon, Maacah during the reign of Asa, and Athaliah during the reign of Ahaziah. Whereas many of the Queen Mothers during the history of Judah were not devoted to godliness, Mary was.

The sons of Korah (Psalm 45) also prophesied Mary's role as Queen Mother, and refer to the Son of God. "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness above Your fellows" (Psalm 45:6-7, Hebrews 1:8-9). But then the sons of Korah also refer to Mary. "Kings' daughters are among Your noble ladies; at Your right hand stands the queen in gold from Ophir" (Psalm 45:9). Since Jesus never married, the "queen" can only refer to Mary, the Queen Mother, where the imagery of gold designates holiness.

Of interest also are two letters from Ignatius, later Bishop of Antioch (martyred c. 107 AD), to the Apostle John and one letter from Ignatius to the Virgin Mary and her reply⁵². These letters had to have been written prior to Ignatius' ordination as Bishop, since Mary died c. 55 AD. Some critics discount these letters as later forgeries due to a different literary style than the letters genuinely attributed to Ignatius in 107 AD. This is really inadequate ground for rejection. (1) A person's literary style can change over 60 years. (2) Ignatius himself wrote these letters while the ones recognized as "genuine" were dictated to a scribe while Ignatius was being led as an old man to Rome to be fed to the lions.

The content of the three letters is very brief. The first letter to the Apostle John asked John to come speak to the Church in Antioch and to bring the Virgin Mary with him, since she was living in his house (John 19:26-27). Many of the women in Antioch wanted to meet Mary. Some even made pilgrimages to Jerusalem to meet her and one lady named Salome stayed with her five months. This Salome gave a glowing report in Antioch of Mary as a model of godliness and good works. In the second letter, Ignatius requested John's leave to visit Jerusalem himself to see first the Virgin Mary, and also James, the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19) and Bishop of Jerusalem.

In the letter to the Virgin Mary, Ignatius asked her about things that had been told to him by John concerning Jesus that only she would know: the things she treasured in her heart (Luke 2:19, 51). Mary replied that she will come to Antioch with John soon, and encouraged Ignatius to stand fast in the Faith and not to let the fierceness of the persecution move him.

The Virgin Mary's Journeys

In about 44 AD, Herod began to persecute the Church, killing James (Zebedee) with the sword (Acts 12:1). He also arrested Peter since he saw it pleased the Jews; but an angel let Peter out of prison at night (Acts 12:3, 7). Peter stopped by at the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where everyone was praying for him. There he told them he was OK, but that he was

⁵² Roberts and Donaldson, "The Epistle of Ignatius to St. John the Apostle", *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 1.

Roberts and Donaldson, "A Second Epistle of Ignatius to St. John", *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 1.

Roberts and Donaldson, "The Epistle of Ignatius to Mary at Neapolis, Near Zarbus", *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 1.

leaving town, and they should be sure to tell James, the Bishop of Jerusalem (Acts 12:17). From there Peter made his way first to Caesarea and eventually to Antioch.

John and the Virgin Mary left Jerusalem at this time also. Since John's lot in the evangelization of the world was Asia Minor, they sailed for Ephesus. There they stayed until the death of Herod (Acts 12:20-23). To put this in context, the Apostle Andrew had already been to Ephesus briefly, but the Apostle Paul would not arrive until 52 AD, at the end of his Second Missionary Journey. Since Herod died not too long after he killed James, John and the Virgin Mary most likely stayed in Ephesus less than two years. As was her custom, the Virgin Mary spent her time in prayer, fasting and meditation on the Scriptures.

A few years later when Mary was back in Jerusalem, in the early 50's AD, she heard that Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha desired to see her very much. Lazarus had been ordained Bishop of Cyprus by the Apostle Barnabas, but did not dare enter Jerusalem for fear of the Jews. It had been over 20 years since the Jewish leaders had tried to kill Lazarus; but they still sought to do so.

To solve this dilemma, Mary wrote to Bishop Lazarus asking him to send a ship for her so that she might visit him on Cyprus. This he did and the Virgin Mary, the Apostle John and some others set sail for Cyprus. Out at sea, however, they encountered a violent storm that took them far off course and up to the Northern part of the Aegean Sea near Macedonia. There, they put in to the port of Clemes on Athos at the tip of the 50-mile long peninsula. At this location today, there are a number of famous monasteries that trace their origin to the visit of the Virgin Mary in the early 50's AD, and most of the information we have concerning the Virgin Mary's voyage comes from these monasteries⁵³.

At that time, the population of Athos consisted of young virgins dedicated to the goddess Diana, who were expected to become priestesses to serve in the Greek temples. Also on Athos was a large gold and ivory statue of Jupiter on top of the 6,600-foot peak of Mt. Athos. This statue was mentioned in ancient history accounts of Plutarch and Anaximander as having large gems for eyes; it was used for navigation by seamen. Also present on the peninsula was a huge temple of Apollo where fortune telling, divining and witchcraft took place.

When Mary and John arrived at the port of Clemes, the huge statue of Jupiter fell and shattered to pieces with a thunderous noise. At the same time, the ground shook and idols and pagan statues in the temple and in all the shrines fell down and broke in pieces. During the chaos of this collapse, a voice was heard saying, "People of Apollo, all of you, go to Clemes Harbor and welcome Mary, the mother of the Great God Jesus". Thus the demons inhabiting the idols were forced against their will to proclaim the truth.

Seeing the destruction around them, all the inhabitants of Athos hurried to Clemes Harbor to meet the Virgin Mary. They received her, the Apostle John and the others with great honor and brought them to a large meeting hall. There they asked her to explain who was the God that she bore and inquired diligently into the mystery of the Incarnation. They also wondered at how

⁵³ Holy Apostles Convent, The Life of the Virgin Mary, Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista CO, 1989, pp.432-438.

Mary, a Hebrew woman, could explain everything to them in Greek. (This was due to the gift of languages that Mary received along with the 120 at Pentecost.)

All this resulted in the entire group of the residents of Athos accepting the Christian Faith. They were all catechized and baptized into the Faith. During their stay on Athos, Mary and the Apostle John performed many miracles among the new converts. Before leaving, they appointed a leader and teacher for the newly illumined residents of Athos from among their traveling party. In addition, Mary prayed for the blessing of Athos, that the Lord would have mercy on it and keep it free from harm until the end of the world along with its inhabitants.

Having blessed Athos, Mary, John and the others set sail for Cyprus. Meanwhile, Lazarus was very concerned about Mary's delay, assuming it was because of a storm, and not knowing that all was well. When the ship arrived, there was great rejoicing and thanksgiving. Mary presented Bishop Lazarus with an ornophorion and epimanikia (part of a bishop's vestments) that she had made. And Mary and John shared the good news of all that happened on Athos. After staying on Cyprus for a short time, Mary blessed the Christians there and returned to Jerusalem with John and the others.

Animosity in Jerusalem

By the early to mid-50's, the Apostle Peter had arrived in Rome for the 2nd time, and then left. However, Peter and Paul had sent 18 of the Seventy to Rome to continue what Mary Magdalene had started, and Paul addressed them in his letter to the Romans (Romans 16), along with Mary Magdalene (Romans 16:).

Shortly after Mary and John returned from Cyprus, Mary Magdalene also returned to Jerusalem from her evangelism in Rome and elsewhere. Since she had been very close to the Virgin Mary during Jesus' three-year ministry, she also stayed with the Apostle John for several years until the Virgin Mary's death. The Virgin Mary was now in her early 70's, Mary Magdalene was in her late 60's and the Apostle John was in his mid 40's.

Earlier in the Virgin Mary's life it had been possible for her to live a quiet life of fasting and prayer without a great deal of interruption. But during the last few years of her life, men and women journeyed from all parts of the world to visit her⁵⁴. One such visitor was Dionysius the Aeropagite and Damaris, his wife (Acts 17:34). He had been a member of the Greek Supreme Court (the Aeropagus) in Athens and was converted by the Apostle Paul on Paul's Second Missionary Journey in about 51 AD. He was very impressed by the saintly grace of both Mary and John.

Mary used to take many of these visitors around the city and its vicinity, showing them the places where her Son was born, where He had walked and preached, where He was scourged and carried His cross and where He was crucified and buried. The effect of this was a substantial undermining of the Gnostic heresies going around in the 1st Century, which taught that Jesus was divine and not really a man. Here was His mother demonstrating all the very human events in His life. From Mary's custom, which included kneeling and burning incense at the various sites,

⁵⁴ Holy Apostles Convent, The Life of the Virgin Mary, Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista CO, 1989, p.440-445.

it became customary in later centuries to make pilgrimages to the holy sites and to offer up prayers there.

Word of Mary's activities were reported to the chief priests and scribes, and they sought an opportunity to seize her and kill her. Placing guards at the various sites, they gave them orders that no Christians may approach; if the Virgin Mary were to approach, she was to be slain. This did not deter Mary; she came anyway and prayed that the guards would not notice. Somehow, their recognition was withheld and she continued unmolested.

The Jewish leaders also tried to slander the Virgin Mary by saying that Jesus was the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier and that Mary was a loose woman. This was obvious as a lie since everyone in Nazareth knew her. Everyone knew everyone's else's family matters in Nazareth.

In addition, this lie neglected to account for the respect Jesus enjoyed from everyone and how He was asked to read the Scriptures and to preach in the synagogues (Luke 4:16, Matthew 12:9-10). From the Mosaic Law, "No one of illegitimate birth shall enter the assembly of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 23:2). Would the Scribes and Pharisees have missed that opportunity to ridicule Jesus if it were true? Not likely!

The Dormition of the Virgin Mary

The earliest documents describing details of Mary's death are attributed to the Apostle John⁵⁵ and Joseph of Arimathea⁵⁶. However, these documents are nowhere near the state of preservation of the canonical New Testament texts. Whereas the earliest New Testament manuscripts date from the 4th Century, the earliest manuscripts regarding Mary's death date from the 11th Century. Many versions and manuscripts exist of these documents, one version in Greek, two versions in Latin and they differ substantially from each other. Since Epiphanius (4th Century) refers to both the Greek and Latin versions⁵⁷, we know that they were both very early and represent the current accounts of events at that time. However, they cannot be taken as Scripture any more than Josephus' writings can. In the following, they will be treated as historical documents and only points of agreement between the three versions will be mentioned. These details will be supplemented with Scriptural readings used over the centuries for the Orthodox Feast Day of the Dormition of Mary. Others who wrote after the 4th Century gave more details regarding the Dormition, elaborating on some of the earlier documents. We will not cover this additional information in the interest of simplicity.

As Mary reached her mid 70's, she was feeling the effects of old age. She longed to see her Son again and felt like her soul was trapped in her aging body like a prison. On occasion she would go to the Garden of Gethsemane where the Zebedee family owned a small plot⁵⁸. There she would pray near the spot where the Lord prayed prior to His crucifixion (Luke 22:39-44, Mark 14:32, John 18:1), often accompanied by three other virgins. And it was there that the

⁵⁵ Roberts and Donaldson, "The Book of John Concerning the Falling Asleep of Mary", *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v.8.

⁵⁶ Roberts and Donaldson, "The Passing of Mary", *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v.8.

⁵⁷ Roberts and Donaldson, "Introductory Notice for the Assumption of Mary", *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v.8, p. 359.

⁵⁸ Holy Apostles Convent, *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista CO, 1989, p.445-446.

Archangel Gabriel appeared to her⁵⁹ to tell her that her departure was imminent, and would occur in three days.

Shortly after Gabriel left, the Apostle John was translated from Ephesus, similar to the way the Deacon Philip was translated from the desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza to Azotus (Acts 8:26, 39-40). There is some disagreement among the Church Fathers as to whether John was in Ephesus or in some region of Judea. They contend that John did not leave the Virgin Mary alone during her lifetime, unless it was just briefly in the care of her stepson⁶⁰, James, the Lord's brother.

After John arrived, the rest of the Twelve arrived also from whatever part of the world where they were then preaching the Gospel. The Greek version includes one or two of the Twelve that had already been martyred; one Latin version omits Thomas, saying that he didn't arrive until after the Virgin Mary's death. All versions refer to at least some of the Seventy (Luke 10:1-20) as being gathered also.

For almost 3 days, the Apostles watched and prayed with the Virgin Mary who seemed to be largely bedridden in all the descriptions of their prayers. Occasionally she got up, but most of the time remained lying on her couch.

On the third day, a Sunday, the Lord Himself came with a great many angels. As He received the soul of Mary, the room was filled with a perfume of sweetness and the Apostles could hear the angels singing. The Greek version and one of the Latin versions relate that some spectacular displays occurred such that all of Jerusalem knew what was happening also.

The Twelve Apostles then carried Mary's body in a procession through Jerusalem to her family's burial place near the Garden of Gethsemane. According to tradition, John's house where Mary lived was on Mt. Zion, which is the Southern part of the city or the lower city. To get to the Garden of Gethsemane, the procession had to go through the heart of Jerusalem and right past the Temple, since the Garden is just East of the Temple outside the city wall.

The Jewish leaders, who had tried to kill Mary, vowed to burn and desecrate her body. One of their number, named Jephonias, Reuben or Athonios in various versions, worked his way through the crowd and tried to overturn the bier carried by the Twelve. But as he touched the bier, something happened to his arms. The Greek version says that his arms were cut off at the elbows; the two Latin versions say that his arms dried up to the elbows. All versions say that his hands remained attached to the bier and that he was in great pain. The man began to beg the Apostles and Mary to have mercy on him. When he confessed his belief in Jesus as the Christ, Peter healed him. The man then began to glorify God along with everyone else in the procession.

When they reached Gethsemane, the Twelve laid Mary's body in a new tomb and sealed it with a large stone similar to the sealing of the Lord's tomb (Matthew 27:60, Mark 15:46).

⁵⁹ Roberts and Donaldson, "The Book of John Concerning the Falling Asleep of Mary", *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v.8.

Roberts and Donaldson, "The Passing of Mary", *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, v.8.

⁶⁰ Holy Apostles Convent, *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista CO, 1989, p.452.

Then, the Twelve began keeping watch over the tomb because of the threats of the Jewish leaders. The Greek version states this went on for three days; the two Latin versions don't mention a time duration. The Greek version states that they could hear the angels singing during these three days; one of the Latin versions only mentions the singing and weeping of the people present.

After three days, all three versions state that Mary's body was taken to heaven, but each version gives a different account of how it happened. The Greek version states that the angelic voices ceased after three days and the body was then gone. One Latin version states that the Apostle Thomas arrived late from India and asked to see the body -- which was gone. The other Latin version states that the Lord Himself came with His angels, raised Mary and took her to heaven. Thus, we can say that Mary's body was taken to heaven, but the details are a little unclear.

A similar situation occurred with the body of Moses after he died. Moses was shown the Promised Land from Mt. Nebo opposite Jericho. Then "Moses died there in the land of Moab" and the Lord "buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor (across the Jordan from Jericho); but no man knows his burial place to this day. Although Moses was 120 years old when he died, his eye was not dim, nor his strength abated" (Deuteronomy 34:1, 5-7).

Yet controversy surrounded the death of Moses. The Apostle Jude refers to this when he said, "Yet Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said 'the Lord rebuke you!'" (Jude 1:9). Jude was apparently referring to the pseudepigraphal book, The Assumption of Moses. In the Transfiguration, we see the results of the assumption of Moses: Moses was transfigured along with Elijah and Jesus; they appeared in glory with Jesus and were discussing Jesus' departure which He was about to accomplish in Jerusalem (Luke 9:30-31).

Regarding the assumption of the body of Mary, other evidence is the total lack of any claim to her relics over the centuries. Holy relics are a much bigger deal in the Eastern Churches than in Western Churches. The relics (i.e. the bones) of the Twelve⁶¹, the Seventy and many other saints are prominent in Orthodox Churches throughout the world. For a Church named after St. Peter, it is considered a tremendous honor to have within the church a fragment of St. Peter's relics. The fact that no one claims to have any of the Virgin Mary's relics is a silent testimony of 2,000 years of Church history that her relics don't exist on earth.

Many Western Christians are mystified at the use of "holy relics" in the East. The practice can be traced back to c. 800 BC. The Prophet Elisha had died and was buried in a tomb. As people were burying another man, a raiding band of Moabites came. In order to leave quickly, the burying party cast the man's body into the tomb of Elisha temporarily. When the man's body touched Elisha's bones (i.e. his relics), the dead man revived and stood on his feet (2 Kings 13:20-21). This had everything to do with the "holy relics" and nothing to do with the faith of the burying party.

⁶¹ No one claims to have any relics of the Apostle John either; his body was taken to heaven after his death also. See Nikolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, September 26.

The principle here is that one thing sanctifies another: Elisha’s relics were sanctified by his life. In this regard, the Lord stated that the Temple in Jerusalem sanctified the gold in the treasury (Matthew 23:17) and the altar in the Temple sanctified the gifts being offered (Matthew 23:19). Similarly with the Apostle Paul: “Even handkerchiefs and aprons were brought from his (Paul’s) body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out from them (Acts 19:12). Paul’s life had sanctified the articles of clothing.

One thing above all can be said of the life of the Virgin Mary: that her life was characterized by holiness, and that all generations have called her blessed (Luke 1:48). If Mary’s relics existed on earth, they would be the most venerated things that exist.

The Legacy of the Virgin Mary

A tremendous legacy has been left to us by the life of the Virgin Mary, both in example, in personal godliness and in fulfillment of Scripture. Today, there are four major feast days in the Orthodox Church dedicated to some aspect of the Virgin Mary’s life:

The Nativity of Mary	September 8
The Presentation of Mary in the Temple	November 21
The Annunciation	March 25
The Dormition	August 15

To examine Mary’s legacy, the Scripture readings used by the Church for these feast days over the centuries say a great deal.

Old Testament Readings for the Dormition

These Old Testament readings are used for Vespers preceding the feast day, and are often referred to as parables of the Feast.

Genesis 28:10-17: Jacob’s Ladder

This reading is used for the Nativity of Mary, the Annunciation and the Dormition, and is the account of Jacob’s Ladder. Jacob was en route to Mesopotamia, where Abraham had come from, to seek a wife from among his kinsmen. One night, he had a dream of a ladder that was set on the earth but whose top reached to heaven, where the Lord was standing at the top of the ladder. And the angels of God were ascending and descending on the ladder. When Jacob awoke, he cried, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:17).

Jerome noted that Jacob was born into a wealthy family, but he had left this wealth behind when he had the vision of the ladder to heaven. Jerome’s implication is that as we leave our worldly cares behind, we also get a glimpse of the Gate of Heaven.

“Jacob’s father was⁶² a man of great wealth; yet, when Jacob went to Mesopotamia, he went alone and destitute. When he felt weary he had to lie

⁶² Jerome, Letter to Julian, CXVIII, 7.

down; although he was delicately nurtured by his mother Rebekah, he was forced to be content with a stone for a pillow. Yet it was then that he saw the ladder set up from earth to heaven, and the angels ascending and descending on it”.

“Jacob, in his flight⁶³ from his brother, left behind in his father’s house great riches and made his way with nothing into Mesopotamia. The lesson being taught is that the sinner must not despair of salvation nor the righteous man rest secure in his virtue”

Jerome continued that the ladder represents our walk in the Christian Faith. The Lord beckons from the top and the angels help along the way. The foot of the ladder on earth is the House of God, which is the gate of heaven. Even holy men can lose their footing, and sinners can regain their place.

“The Lord was at the top⁶⁴ holding out a helping hand to such as fall and encouraging the climbers to fresh efforts by the vision of Himself. Therefore the spot is called Bethel or the house of God; for there, day by day there is ascending and descending. When they are careless, even holy men lose their footing; and sinners, if they wash away their stains with tears, they can regain their place. I say this not that those coming down may frighten you, but that those going up may stimulate you”.

“In the lives of Christians⁶⁵ we look not to the beginnings but to the endings. Paul began badly but ended well. The start of Judas wins praise; his end is condemned because of his treachery. Read Ezekiel: ‘The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him in the day of his transgression; as for the wickedness of the wicked he shall not fall thereby in the day that he turns from his wickedness’ (Ezekiel 33:12). The Christian life is the true Jacob’s ladder on which the angels ascend and descend (Genesis 28:12), while the Lord stands above it holding out His hand to those who slip and sustaining by the vision of Himself the weary steps of those who ascend. While He does not wish the death of a sinner, but only that he should be converted and live, He hates the lukewarm (Revelation 3:16) and they quickly cause him loathing”.

Hilary of Poitiers stated⁶⁶ that Jacob’s dream was not a bodily manifestation, but the foreshadowing of the Gospel mystery, where his vision would become revealed truth. It is only through God the Son that God the Father can be apprehended.

“The Law, in its progress, follows the sequence of the Gospel mystery, of which it is the shadow; its types are a faithful anticipation of the truths taught by the Apostles. In the vision of his dream, the blessed Jacob saw God; this was the revelation of a mystery, not a bodily manifestation. He was shown the descent of angels by the ladder, and their ascent to heaven, and God resting above the ladder. The vision, as it was interpreted, foretold that his dream should some day become a revealed truth. Jacob’s words, ‘The house of God and the gate of heaven’ (Genesis 28:17), show us the scene of his vision. Then, after a long account of

⁶³ Jerome, *Letter to Ageruchia*, CXXIII, 15.

⁶⁴ Jerome, *Letter to Julian*, CXVIII, 7.

⁶⁵ Jerome, *Letter to Furia*, LIV, 6.

⁶⁶ Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, V, 20.

what he did, the narrative proceeds: God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, return to Bethel, and dwell there, and make a Sacrifice to God’ (Genesis 35:1). The faith of the Gospel has access through God the Son to God the Father, and it is only through God that God can be apprehended”.

John Chrysostom stated that we can get to heaven by understanding Jacob’s ladder and taking it one step at a time. The ladder is a riddle indicating a gradual ascent by means of virtue. We attain to heaven, not using material steps, but by improvement and correction.

“Let us learn⁶⁷ then, and having reckoned up our faults, let us accomplish their correction in time, and let us determine to correct one this month, another next month, and a third in that which follows. And so mounting as it were by steps, let us get to heaven by a Jacob’s ladder. For the ladder seems to me to signify in a riddle by that vision the gradual ascent by means of virtue, by which it is possible for us to ascend from earth to heaven, not using material steps, but improvement and correction of manners. Let us then lay hold on this means of departure and ascent, that having obtained heaven, we may also enjoy all the blessings there”.

Chrysostom also stated⁶⁸ that upward movement on the ladder results in greater understanding of the mysteries of God, such as the Incarnation. The lower rungs describe the birth of children to barren women in the Old Testament, which foreshadowed the Virgin birth at higher rungs. The lower rungs also speak of a plurality in the Godhead (Genesis 1:26); this foreshadows the Incarnation, where God begot by Himself.

“Even the things of old stood in need of forerunners and types. For as in a ladder, the first step leads to the second, and from the first it is not possible to step to the fourth. It is not possible to get to the second before the first”.

“Observe the signs of signs, and you will discern this in the ladder which Jacob saw. ‘The Lord stood at the top, and underneath angels were ascending and descending’ (Genesis 28:13). It was prophesied that the Father had a Son; it was necessary this should be believed. Because He begets without passion⁶⁹, for this reason barren women began conceiving. In order that people might understand that He begot of Himself, things happen obscurely, as in type and shadow, but still they happen, and as they go on they become somehow clearer. A woman is formed out of man alone, and the man remains whole and entire (Genesis 2:21-23). Again, it was necessary there should be some sure sign of the Conception of a Virgin. So the barren bear, not once only, but a second time and a third, and many times (Genesis 21:1-8, 30:22-23, 1 Samuel 1:11-20). Of His birth of a Virgin, the barren is a type, that sends us forward to faith, and implies that God is able to beget alone. For if man is required, and birth takes place without him, in a more excellent way, One is begotten by God. There is still another generation, which is ours by the Spirit. The barren is a type of this again, from the fact that it is not of blood (John 1:13), but pertains to the generation from above. The Virgin

⁶⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, LXXXIII, 5.

⁶⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Colossians, V, v. 5.

⁶⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, Four Discourses Against the Arians, I, viii, 28.

Mary, as also the types, shows that the generation is without passion and that it proceeds from One above”.

The Virgin Mary, in her understanding, her enlightenment and her humility illustrated the workings of Jacob’s ladder. Just as the ladder connected heaven and earth, so did the Virgin Mary. And just as Jacob saw angels ascending and descending on the ladder, so there was a strong angelic presence around the Lord and His mother everywhere they went. Even Satan recognized this in quoting from the Psalms, “He shall give His angels charge over You (to guard You in all Your ways); in their hands they shall bear You up lest You dash Your foot against a stone” (Psalm 91:11-12). Following this encounter with Satan, angels came and ministered to Jesus (Matthew 4:11).

Around the Throne of God in heaven, angels continually surround the Lord (Revelation 4). The Tabernacle in the wilderness pictured this. Cherubim were embroidered into the veil (Exodus 26:31, 36:35, 2 Chronicles 3:14) and the Presence of God dwelt between two cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:18-22, 37:6-9, 2 Chronicles 10:13). Just because the Lord took up residence on earth in the womb of the Virgin doesn’t mean the angels disappeared. For nine months, the House of God was the womb of the Virgin, and heaven and earth met there.

Proverbs 9:1-11: Wisdom Built Her House

This reading is used for the Nativity of Mary, the Annunciation and the Dormition, and speaks of Wisdom building her house (Proverbs 9:1), but goes on to say that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10). Yet it wasn’t until after the Resurrection that it was revealed how extensive the house was that Wisdom had built.

Gregory of Nyssa stated that the heretics of his day cited Proverbs, “The Lord created me in the beginning of His ways, for His works” (Proverbs 8:22 LXX) to say that Christ was created by the Father, and is therefore a lesser God. Besides quoting this out of context (the “creating” was from eternity past), Gregory pointed out⁷⁰ that Solomon was addressing the Incarnation⁷¹, the “creating” of the human flesh of Christ in the womb of the Virgin Mary. And it is not mere human wisdom that built a house. “Wisdom” refers to God as something eternal, not something Christ acquired as either created or imported.

“In saying, ‘Wisdom has built herself a house’ (Proverbs 9:1), he refers in these words to the preparation of the flesh of the Lord. Wisdom did not dwell in another’s building, but built for Itself that dwelling-place from the body of the Virgin. Both are made one, the house and the Wisdom which built the house; that is, the Humanity and the Divinity that was commingled with man. To each of these he applies suitable terms, as in the Gospels, where the more lofty phraseology indicates the Godhead, and that which is humble and lowly indicates the Manhood. Solomon, prophetically moved, delivers to us in its fullness the mystery of the Incarnation. For we speak first of the eternal power and energy of

⁷⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, Against Eunomius, III, 2.

⁷¹ For other teaching on the same subject, see:

Leo the Great, Letter to Flavian, XXVIII, 2.

Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Smyrnaeans, Chapter 2.

Athanasius of Alexandria, Four Discourses Against the Arians, II, xix, 44, 47, 50.

Wisdom; and the evangelist, to a certain extent, agrees with him in his words. As the evangelist proclaimed Him to be the cause and Maker of all things (John 1:3), so Solomon says that by Him were made those individual things which are included in the whole (Proverbs 3:19-20). For he tells us that God by Wisdom established the earth, and in understanding prepared the heavens, and all that follows these in order, keeping to the same sense. That he might not seem to pass over without mention the gift of excellence in men, he goes on to say, speaking in the person of Wisdom, the words, ‘I made counsel my dwelling-place, and knowledge, and understanding’ (Proverbs 8:12 LXX), and all that relates to instruction in intellect and knowledge. After recounting this, he proceeds to introduce his teaching concerning the dispensation to man, why the Word was made flesh”.

Gregory of Nazianzen summarized⁷² the implications of the number seven representing perfection. Hippolytus stated⁷³ that the seven pillars, on which Wisdom rests (Proverbs 9:1), refers to the sevenfold unity of the Holy Spirit as stated by Isaiah (Isaiah 11:2), where the context is the New Jerusalem. That is, the Holy Spirit represents:

Resting	Wisdom	Understanding	Counsel
Might	Knowledge	Fear of the Lord	

Clement of Alexandria noted⁷⁴ that it was Wisdom, Who sent her servants to invite everyone, with a loud proclamation, to a goblet of wine (Proverbs 9:5), referring to the Lord’s Table. The precursor to Wisdom, philosophy, had learned something of the truth, but didn’t abide in it. Therefore, Christ stated that all who came before Him were thieves and robbers (John 10:8).

Gregory of Nyssa stated⁷⁵ that the invitation from Wisdom to eating bread and drinking wine has eternal dimensions for both the righteous and the wicked. But it takes a wise man to understand this.

“But someone perhaps will say that man will not be returning to the same form of life⁷⁶, if we formerly existed by eating, and shall hereafter be free from that function. When I hear the Holy Scripture, I do not understand only bodily meat, or the pleasure of the flesh. I recognize another kind of food also, having a certain analogy to that of the body, which the soul alone enjoys. ‘Eat of my bread’ (Proverbs 9:5), is the bidding of Wisdom to the hungry; and the Lord declares those blessed who hunger for such food as this. He said, ‘If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink’ (John 7:37); ‘drink water with joy’ (Isaiah 12:3 LXX), is the great Isaiah’s charge to those who are able to hear. There is a prophetic threatening also against those worthy of vengeance, that they shall be punished with famine. But the ‘famine’ is not a lack of bread and water, but a

⁷² Gregory Nazianzen, Oration on Pentecost, XLI, 3.

⁷³ Hippolytus, “Commentary on Proverbs”, Fragments from Commentaries on Various Books, Part I, Exegetical.

⁷⁴ Clement of Alexandria, Stromata, I, 17.

⁷⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, On the Making of Man, XIX, 1.

⁷⁶ That is, when the Lord returns in glory.

failure of the Word; ‘not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the Word of the Lord’”.

Cyprian of Carthage, referring to those who used water in the chalice for the Lord’s Supper, stated⁷⁷ that Solomon foretold the Lord’s Table, where water mingled with wine was used from the beginning.

“Solomon declares the wine mingled (Proverbs 9:5), that is, he foretells with prophetic voice the cup of the Lord mingled with water and wine, that it may appear that this was done in our Lord’s passion, which had been before predicted”.

Paul wrote that he was privileged to help to “make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ. Now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the Church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:9,10). Paul also said, “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew. For had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory” (1 Corinthians 2:7,8). This Wisdom of God involved the Cross, and it became a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness for Greeks. For those who were called, however, the Wisdom of God was also the Power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18-24). All this began with the Incarnation. From the history of the life of the Virgin Mary, we see that there is considerable wisdom also associated with the simple humility of the Lord’s mother. She was involved in everything the Lord did, even from before He was born (Luke 1:41), and treasured these things in her heart (Luke 2:19, 51). Hers may have been a lowly, humble state, but she certainly has been called blessed over the centuries (Luke 1:48).

Ezekiel 43:27-44:4: The East Gate

This reading is used for the Nativity of Mary, the Annunciation, the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, and the Dormition, and is a little less obvious than the others. Ezekiel’s vision took place during the Babylonian captivity (Ezekiel 40:1). Ezekiel saw a vision of some future Temple and he described this Temple at length. This Temple was to be “the place of My Throne and the place of the soles of My feet where I will dwell among the sons of Israel forever” (Ezekiel 43:7). The dimensions given to Ezekiel were not incorporated in the Temple rebuilt by Ezra and Nehemiah after the captivity (Ezra 7:1-3) and reconstructed when Herod remodeled the Temple. In fact, there is not even adequate room on the “Temple Mount” in Jerusalem to accommodate the dimensions given to Ezekiel⁷⁸. So the imagery must refer to something else.

The parable used for these feast days only addresses the East Gate of the Temple, which in Herod’s Temple was the only gate into the Temple area. The East Gate opened onto the Garden of Gethsemane, the Kidron Valley, and the Mount of Olives. In Ezekiel’s vision, the Glory of the Lord came into the house by the East Gate (Ezekiel 43:4). Ezekiel was told, “This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it, for the Lord God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut” (Ezekiel 44:2). The question about this passage is

⁷⁷ Cyprian, *Epistles*, LXII, 5. See also Athanasius of Alexandria, *Festal Letters*, VII, 5.

⁷⁸ See Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Volume 9, p. 392.

when was the East Gate permanently shut? There is no record of this occurring during or after the time of Christ; and “the Glory of the Lord” is unlikely to refer to anyone else.

The East Gate speaks of the Incarnation, where the East Gate represented the womb of the Virgin Mary. And as the East Gate was shut in Ezekiel’s vision, so the Virgin Mary remained a virgin her entire life according to her vow and the vow of her parents. Jerome stated⁷⁹ this very emphatically. She is the East Gate through whom God entered at the Incarnation, and through whom He was born as a man. As the East Gate, she reveals the Presence of God.

“Christ Himself is a virgin; and His mother is also a virgin; though she is His mother, she is a virgin still. For Jesus has entered in through the closed doors, and in His sepulcher no man is laid either before Him or after Him (John 19:41). Mary is ‘a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed’ (Song of Solomon 4:12), and that fountain flows from the House of the Lord (Joel 3:18) to water the Valley of Acacias. She is the East Gate, always shut (Ezekiel 44:1-3) and always shining, and either concealing or revealing the Holy of Holies. Through her ‘the Sun of Righteousness’ (Malachi 4:2), our ‘high priest after the order of Melchizedek’ (Hebrew 5:10), goes in and out. Let my critics explain to me how Jesus can have entered in through closed doors when He allowed His hands and His side to be handled. He showed that He had bones and flesh (John 20:19-27), thus proving that His was a true body and no mere phantom of one. Similarly, I will explain how the holy Mary can be at once a mother and a virgin. She was a mother before she was wedded; she remained a virgin after bearing her Son. Therefore, the virgin Christ and the virgin Mary have dedicated in themselves the first fruits of virginity for both sexes. The Apostles have either been virgins or, though married, have lived celibate lives”.

John Cassian, writing against Nestorius, quoted the writings of Jerome, and concurred⁸⁰ that the Virgin Mary is the East Gate spoken of by Ezekiel. Cassian also connected the writings of Solomon on Wisdom building a house to the Incarnation.

“Jerome, the Teacher of the Catholics, whose writings shine like divine lamps throughout the whole world, says⁸¹ in his book to Eustochium: ‘For our salvation the Son of God is made the Son of Man. Nine months He awaits His birth in the womb, undergoes the most revolting conditions, and comes forth covered with blood, to be swathed in rags and covered with caresses. He who shuts up the world in His fist is contained in the narrow limits of a manger’. Again in his commentary on Isaiah: ‘For the Lord of hosts, who is the King of glory, Himself descended into the Virgin’s womb, and entered in and went forth from the East Gate which is ever shut’. Of whom Gabriel says to the Virgin: ‘The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you. Therefore that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God’ (Luke 1:35). And in Proverbs: ‘Wisdom has built herself a house’ (Proverbs 9:1). Compare this with your doctrine or rather your blasphemy,

⁷⁹ Jerome, *Letters*, XLVIII, 21.

⁸⁰ John Cassian, *Seven Books on the Incarnation*, VII, 26.

⁸¹ Jerome, *Letters*, XXII, 39.

in which you assert that God is the Creator of the months, and was not an offspring of months. For Jerome, a man of the greatest knowledge and also of the most pure and approved doctrine, says that He waited nine months in the womb to be born. Whoever admits that the Son of God is the offspring of the Virgin, admits that He is the offspring of months”.

Epistle: Philippians 2:5-11

The Epistle lesson used for the Nativity of Mary and the Dormition is Philippians 2:5-11. Paul was encouraging the Philippians to be like Christ who, although exalted in heaven as God, “made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a slave (in the Incarnation) and coming in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:7). Not just this, but then “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:8). We see His humility aptly illustrated in the Garden of Gethsemane when Peter cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant trying to defend Jesus. Jesus rebuked Peter saying, “Do you think I cannot now pray to My Father and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:53). This was truly humbling Himself to the point of death on the cross. He didn’t have to do that, but chose to do so for our sake.

And as a result, God has highly exalted Him “that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth” (Philippians 2:10). Jesus spoke of the Cross as being His glorification; he compared it to a grain of wheat falling into the ground, dying and producing much grain (John 12:23-24). This glorification, of course, refers to His humanity; He has always been glorified in His Deity.

Mary’s humility, like that of her Son is illustrated in the Matins Gospel for the Nativity, the Presentation of Mary in the Temple, the Annunciation and the Dormition (Luke 1:39-49, 56). This text describes Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, after the Annunciation. This reading and Gabriel’s greeting to Mary preceding the Matins Gospel illustrate Mary’s deep humility.

In the Annunciation, Gabriel’s words: “Rejoice, highly graced one” (Luke 1:28) and “you have found grace with God” (Luke 1:30) indicate a very special honor to Mary. [The word “grace” and “graced” is the Greek word *charis* and is translated “grace” everywhere else in the New Testament, but often not translated so here.] If we compare this to Gabriel’s announcement to Zachariah regarding the birth of John, Gabriel did not call Zachariah “highly graced”. And yet it was quite an honor to be the father of John the Baptist -- whom Christ called the greatest of the prophets (Luke 7:28).

As Mary arrived at Elizabeth’s house following the Annunciation, Elizabeth, in the spirit, spoke with a loud voice, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:42-43). Elizabeth recognized that Mary was pregnant with the Son of God and therefore “highly graced”.

But Mary’s reaction was one of great humility, both to Gabriel and to Elizabeth. To Gabriel, Mary merely replied, “Behold the maidservant (i.e. female slave) of the Lord! Let it be

to me according to your word” ((Luke 1:38). To Elizabeth, Mary replied, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant (i.e. female slave), for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed (Luke 1:46-48).

Even though she was so “highly graced” for bearing the Son of God, Mary never sought to exalt herself during her life. She was always content to stay in the background, praying, while the Twelve and others got all the recognition. This is a very good example for us: the only person who was ever called “highly graced” by God never sought recognition for herself. This is quite a contrast to attitudes today where it is fashionable to be arrogant and obnoxious and to revile anything that isn’t easily understood.

John Chrysostom spoke⁸² of true humility by taking the example of Christ, who laid aside the glory He had with the Father, took on flesh and suffered an accursed death for those He loved.

“I consider it more desirable to suffer evil for Christ’s sake, than to receive honor at Christ’s hands. This is transcendent honor; this is glory that surpasses all things. If He Himself, who became a servant for my sake, and ‘emptied’ His glory (Philippians 2:7), thought Himself truly in glory, when He was crucified for my sake, what can I not endure? Hear His own words: ‘Father, glorify Your Son’ (John 17:1). What is this You are saying? You are being led to the cross with thieves and grave-robbers; You endure the death of the accursed; You are about to be spit upon and punched; and You call this glory? Yes, He says, for I suffer these things for My beloved ones, and I count these things altogether glory. He who loved the miserable and wretched calls this glory; that is to be in dishonor, not to be on His Father’s throne, nor in His Father’s glory. If this was His glory, and if this He set before the other; much more ought I to regard these things as glory”.

Clement of Alexandria wrote⁸³ that true beauty comes when the flesh takes its proper place as a servant to the soul. This is true humility, and is illustrated by the Lord’s emptying Himself.

“The flesh is a slave to the soul, as Paul testifies; how can one with any reason adorn the handmaid like a pimp? For that which is of flesh has the form of a servant. Paul says, speaking of the Lord, ‘Because He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant’ (Philippians 2:7), called the outward man a servant. But the compassionate God Himself set the flesh free, and released it from destruction, and from bitter and deadly bondage, endowed it with incorruptibility, and arrayed the flesh in immortality, the holy embellishment of eternity”.

John Chrysostom commented⁸⁴ on Paul’s words to Timothy, where he said that the proud may be knowledgeable, but actually know nothing (1 Timothy 6:4). Everything we have, we received from God, not from ourselves.

⁸² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Ephesians, VIII.

⁸³ Clement of Alexandria, The Instructor, III, 1.

⁸⁴ John Chrysostom, Homilies on 1 Timothy, XVII.

“He that knows the doctrines of godliness is also the most disposed to moderation. An inflammation of arrogance in the body comes from pride in the soul. And as we do not say that the inflamed part of the body is sound, so neither do we consider the arrogant to be sound. It is possible then to be knowing, and yet to know nothing. For he that doesn’t know what he ought to know, knows nothing. And that pride arises from knowing nothing is clear from this: Christ ‘made Himself of no reputation’ (Philippians 2:7); he therefore who knows this will not be high-minded. Man has nothing except from God; therefore he will not be high-minded. ‘And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive *it*, why do you boast as if you had not received it?’” (1 Corinthians 4:7)

Gregory the Great wrote⁸⁵ to Shepherds in the Church about how best to admonish those under them whether they be humble or haughty. To the humble, like the Virgin Mary, he suggested to insinuate how true is the excellence which they hold. To the haughty he intimated how their temporal glory is as nothing, and even when embracing it they don’t hold it. Gregory set his suggestions in a series of contrasts; following are his admonitions for the humble:

- Let the humble hear how eternal are the things that they long for, how transitory the things which they despise.
- Let the humble hear from the authoritative voice of the Truth, ‘Every one that humbles himself shall be exalted (Luke 18:14).
- Let the humble hear, ‘Humility goes before glory’ (Proverbs 16:18 LXX).
- Let the humble hear, ‘Unto whom shall I have respect, but to him that is humble and quiet, and that trembles at my words’ (Isaiah 66:2 LXX)?
- Let the humble hear, ‘God has respect for the things that are humble’ (Psalm 138:6 LXX).
- Let the humble hear, ‘That the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve’ (Matthew 20:28).
- Let the humble hear, that ‘Our Redeemer humbled himself, being made obedient even unto death’ (Philippians 2:8).
- The pride of the devil became the occasion of our perdition, and the humility of God has been found the argument for our redemption. For our enemy, having been created among all things, desired to appear exalted above all things; but our Redeemer, remaining great above all things, desired to become little among all things.
- Let the humble be told that, when they abase themselves, they ascend to the likeness of God.
- What, then, is more debased than haughtiness, which tries to stretch itself above the stature of true loftiness? And what is more sublime than humility, which, while it depresses itself to the lowest, joins itself to its Maker who remains above the highest?

Gospel: Luke 10:38-42, 11:27-28

⁸⁵ Gregory the Great, The Book of Pastoral Rule, III, 17.

Mary of Bethany Sits at Jesus' Feet

The Gospel lesson for the Nativity of Mary, the Presentation of Mary in the Temple and the Dormition is Luke 10:38-42 plus Luke 11:27-28. The first part is the account of Mary and Martha when Jesus was invited to their house for dinner. Both Mary and Martha were among the eight “Myrrh-Bearing Women” at the Cross and at the Tomb. They were rather wealthy and helped finance Jesus’ public ministry along with Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna and the others (Luke 8:3). We see their wealth in several ways:

1. Mary’s ability to afford oil of spikenard worth 300 denarii to pour on Jesus (Mark 14:3-5; John 11:1-2, 12:1-3)
2. Lazarus’ funeral including the burial wrappings, a new tomb and prominent people in attendance (John 11:35-46). Common folk couldn’t afford a funeral like this and were buried much more simply.
3. The size of the house that they lived in. When Martha welcomed Jesus into her house (Luke 10:38), Jesus was traveling with the Twelve and most of the Seventy, including some of their wives and children. The same situation occurred when Lazarus died and many of the Jewish leaders came to the funeral (John 11:19).

The dinner at Mary and Martha’s took place in late 29 AD, or just a few months before the Crucifixion. Mary and Martha had been traveling with Jesus and helping to finance His ministry for several years at this time. During that time, it would have been their role to work in the background providing meals and accommodations for Jesus, the Twelve, the Seventy, etc. In this account, Martha was busy doing all the things she had been doing these last few years (Luke 10:40), but Mary took time out to sit at Jesus’ feet and listen (Luke 10:39).

The work carried out by the Myrrh-Bearing Women was a humble, but necessary work. Martha reminded Mary that she needed to do her part and she even asked Jesus to back her up (Luke 10:40). Jesus replied by saying, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:41-42). Martha had become somewhat arrogant in her preoccupation with serving; Mary had maintained her humble focus on doing the Lord’s Will. The serving really didn’t need to get done right away. The Lord could always have broken loaves and fish and fed the Seventy as He did the 5,000.

This Gospel lesson is used for feast days involving the Virgin Mary even though the person involved is Mary of Bethany. Mary of Bethany in this account illustrates the personality of the Virgin Mary: maintaining a quiet, cheerful devotion and concentrating on the things of God without getting overly concerned about material things. And this is also a good lesson for us: hearing the Lord’s Word is the most important part of our lives and this won’t be taken away from us. Positions of leadership may come to an end, but hearing the Lord’s voice goes on forever.

Mary of Bethany’s Effort in Perspective

John Cassian compared⁸⁶ Mary of Bethany sitting at Jesus’ feet and leaving hospitality aside to useful alloys such as bronze that are outshined by silver and gold. The things of this

⁸⁶ John Cassian, Third Conference of Abbot Theonas, III, xxiii, 3.

world are useful to lead us to eternal life and to see the invisible things of God. But even these can be put aside when compared to the things of the world to come, which Mary was considering. Cassian uses the term “contemplation”, which can also be called “revelation”.

“What is that one thing which is so incomparably above those great and good things that it alone should be acquired? Doubtless it is that truly good part, which is described by the Lord, when Mary disregarded the duties of hospitality and courtesy and chose it. Contemplation then, i.e., meditation on God, is the one thing, the value of which all the merits of our righteous acts, all our aims at virtue come short of. Alloys, which are considered useful and worthwhile, become worthless when silver is taken into account. And the value of silver disappears in comparison with gold, and gold itself is disregarded when compared with precious stones. So all those merits of holiness, although they are not merely good and useful for the present life, but also secure the gift of eternity, yet if they are compared with the merit of Divine contemplation, will be considered trifling and fit to be sold. The Scripture declares all things, which were created by God, ‘And behold everything that God had made was very good’ (Genesis 1:31). And again, ‘The things that God has made are all good in their season’ (Ecclesiasticus 39:16). These things, which in the present time, are termed not simply good, but emphatically ‘very good’. They are convenient for us for purposes of life, or for remedies for the body, or because they enable us ‘to see the invisible things of God from the creatures of the world, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead’ (Romans 1:20). Yet none of these things will keep the name of good if they are regarded in the light of that world to come, where no variation of good things, and no loss of true blessedness need be feared”.

Cassian continued⁸⁷ to say that our effort should be to aspire to cleave to God and to heavenly things. Whatever is alien to this should take second place. The case of Mary and Martha is a good illustration of this. Martha was performing a sacred service in serving the Lord and His disciples, but Mary still chose the better part.

“Mary was intent only on spiritual instruction, and the Lord showed her to have chosen the better part, and one, which should not be taken away from her. Martha was toiling with pious care, and was encumbered about her service, seeing that she was insufficient for such service. She asked for the help of her sister from the Lord; certainly it was to worthy work, and to a praiseworthy service that she summoned her. The Lord made the chief good consist in meditation, in divine contemplation. We see that all other virtues are in second place, even though we admit that they are necessary, and useful, and excellent, because they are all performed for the sake of this one thing. ‘Mary chose the good part, which shall not be taken away from her’, and this must be more carefully considered. Although He says nothing of Martha, and certainly does not appear to blame her, yet in praising the one, He implies that the other is inferior. Martha’s portion can be taken away, for a bodily ministry cannot last forever, but one’s desire can never have an end”.

⁸⁷ John Cassian, First Conference of Abbot Moses, I, i, 8.

Jerome stated⁸⁸ that we should prefer the food for the soul to the food for the body and not seek the burden of the world. In this way, we will become daughters of the heavenly Jerusalem.

“See how the example of Mary sitting at the feet of the Lord is set before the zealous Martha. In her anxiety to be hospitable Martha was preparing a meal for the Lord and His disciples; yet Jesus said, ‘Martha, Martha, you are careful and troubled about many things. But few things are needful. And Mary has chosen that good part which shall not be taken away from her’ (Luke 10:41-42). Be then like Mary; prefer the food of the soul to that of the body. Leave it to your sisters to run to and fro and to seek how they may fitly welcome Christ. But you, having once for all cast away the burden of the world, sit at the Lord’s feet and say: ‘I have found him whom my soul loves; I will hold him, I will not let him go’ (Song of Solomon 3:4). And He will answer: ‘My dove, my undefiled one; she is the only one of her mother, she is the choice one of her that bore her’ (Song of Solomon 6:8). Now the mother of whom this is said is the heavenly Jerusalem” (Galatians 4:26).

Clement of Alexandria compared⁸⁹ the rich young (synagogue) ruler, who had kept the Mosaic Law his whole life, with the busy-ness of Martha in serving the Lord. Martha’s effort was good and noble, but there is a higher ideal. One thing the ruler lacked, which endures, which is now above the Law, which the Law doesn’t give, which the Law doesn’t contain, which is the choice of those who live.

“He who had fulfilled all the demands of the Law from his youth, and had gloried in what was magnificent, was not able to complete the whole with this one thing, which was specially required by Christ, so as to receive the eternal life which he desired. But he departed displeased, vexed at the commandment of life. He did not truly wish life, but aimed at the mere reputation of the good choice. And he was capable of busying himself about many things; but the one thing, the work of life, he was powerless and unable to accomplish. Such was what the Lord said to Martha, who was occupied with many things, and distracted with serving. She blamed her sister, because she set herself at His feet, devoting her time to learning. So also He bid the young ruler to leave his busy life, and cleave to One and adhere to the grace of Him who offered everlasting life”.

Gregory the Great spoke⁹⁰ of times in his life when he felt like Martha due to his responsibilities as Bishop of Rome. He longed to get back to sitting at Jesus’ feet like Mary, but the needs of his people kept him away. He felt that there is false glory, even for good leaders within the Church, which can empty us of true glory.

“Even though I have no fears for myself, I am greatly afraid for those who have been committed to me. On every side I am tossed by the waves of business, and sunk by storms, so that I may truly say, I am come into the depth of the sea, and the storm has overwhelmed me (Psalm 69:2 LXX). After business I long to return to my heart; but, driven away by vain tumults of thoughts, I am unable to

⁸⁸ Jerome, Letter to Eustochium, XXII, 24.

⁸⁹ Clement of Alexandria, Salvation of the Rich Man, 10.

⁹⁰ Gregory the Great, Epistle to Theoctista, I, 5

return. Because of this, that which is within me is made to be far from me, so that I cannot obey the prophetic voice, which says, 'Return in your heart, transgressors' (Isaiah 46:8 LXX). But, pressed by foolish thoughts, I am impelled only to exclaim, 'My heart has failed me' (Psalm 40:12). I have loved the beauty of the contemplative life as a Rachel, barren, but keen of sight and fair (Genesis 29), who, though in her quietude she is less fertile, yet sees the light more keenly. But, Leah has been coupled with me in the night, that is, the active life; fruitful, but tender-eyed; seeing less, but bringing forth more. I have longed to sit at the feet of the Lord with Mary, to take in the words of His mouth. But I am compelled to serve with Martha in external affairs, to be careful and troubled about many things (Luke 10:39-41). A legion of demons having been cast out of me, I wished to forget those whom I had known, and to rest at the feet of the Savior. Yet it is said to me, so as to compel me against my will, 'Return to your house, and declare what great things the Lord has done for you' (Mark 5:19). But who in the midst of so many earthly cares can preach the wondrous works of God? It is already difficult for me even to call them to mind. Pressed as I am in this office of dignity by a crowd of secular occupations, I see myself to be of those of whom it is written, 'While they were being raised up you cast them down' (Psalm 73:18 LXX). For he did not say, 'You cast them down after they had been raised up, but while they were being raised up; because all bad men fall inwardly, while through the support of temporal dignity they seem outwardly to rise. Wherefore their very raising up is their fall, because they are emptied of true glory, while they rely on false glory'.

Blessed Are Those Who Hear the Word and Keep It

The second part of the Gospel lesson involves a brief answer Jesus made to a comment from someone in the crowd. Jesus had just taught His followers to pray using the Lord's Prayer, explaining how our Heavenly Father is a good father (Luke 11:2-13). Following this, Jesus cast a demon out of a person who was demon-possessed, blind and mute. When the formerly possessed person then saw and spoke, the multitudes marveled and said, "Could this be the Son of David?" (Matthew 12:22-24, Luke 11:14-16) The Pharisees, however, ridiculed Jesus by saying that He cast out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons. Jesus then proceeded to debunk this claim by showing that Satan's kingdom would be divided against itself if their claims were true.

Following this debunking, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts which nursed You!" Jesus replied, "More than that; blessed are those who hear the Word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:27-28).

The setting for the woman's comments about Mary's blessedness was probably the approach of Mary with some family members. Tertullian suggested⁹¹ this, where Mary and some of Jesus' relatives were standing outside or approaching. Just who was approaching is not clear.

⁹¹ Tertullian, *Five Books Against Marcion*, II, ii, 3, 11.
Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ*, II, v, 7.

Of Jesus' siblings (i.e. His stepbrothers and stepsister), Jude, of the Twelve, was now traveling with Jesus and had already been sent out two-by-two with the Twelve about 7 months earlier (Luke 9:1-6). Joseph Barsabas (Acts 1:23, 15:22, 32), of the Seventy, was also now traveling with Jesus and had been sent out two-by-two with the Seventy about two months earlier (Luke 10:1-20). James, the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19), had been devoted to Jesus since His birth, and was also traveling with Him as one of the Seventy. Simeon, also of the Seventy, was also now traveling with Him. His stepsister, Salome, the mother of James and John (Mark 15:40, 16:1) had been helping to finance His three-year ministry, and also traveled with Him. This means that the Virgin Mary must have arrived with some more distant relatives, since all Jesus' siblings were already there.

In a similar setting over a year earlier, Jesus' mother and brothers wanted to speak to Him, but couldn't approach due to the crowd. Jesus said at that time, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21). "His brothers" that wanted to speak to Him at that time may have included Joseph Barsabas and Simeon (Matthew 13:55), but probably not James and Jude.

In this context, Jesus had just been publicly acknowledged as the Messiah, the Son of David. The woman in the crowd was stating what every Jewish woman longed for: to be the mother of Messiah. Such was a position of great honor: The Queen Mother. Because this was such a great honor, barren women were considered cursed, since they were not able to be the mother of Messiah.

In replying as He did, Jesus was not denying that His mother was blessed. He was merely pointing out that everyone else could be blessed also by hearing the Word of God and keeping it. This the Virgin Mary did very well. When she heard the Word of God from Gabriel, she replied "Be it done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

A little after this, Jesus commended the Twelve for having left the things of this world, including father and mother, for the Kingdom of God (Matthew 19:29). Jesus denied His parents, then, in the sense in which He has taught us to deny ours — for God's work.

John Chrysostom, in addressing why Jesus spoke to His mother as He did at the wedding feast at Cana (John 2:1-11), stated⁹² that He revered her a great deal, but He was instructing her to wait for the recipient to ask for help before offering it. A similar case applies to His words in this context. Mary is blessed due to her own righteous deeds, as well as for being the mother of Christ in the flesh. Because of her humility in volunteering to do the Lord's will and bear Christ, she was referred to by the Archangel Gabriel as "highly graced" (Luke 1:28).

"What is done at the request of one's friends often causes offense to the spectators; but when they, who have the need, make the request, the miracle is free from suspicion, the praise unmixed, the benefit great. So if some excellent physician should enter a house where there are many sick, and none of the patients or their relations speaks to him, but only his mother directs him, the sufferers would dislike him, and none of the patients would think he did anything great. This was a reason why He rebuked her on that occasion, saying, 'Woman,

⁹² John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXI, 3.

what does your concern have to do with Me? (John 2:4) instructing her for the future not to do this. Though He was careful to honor His mother, yet He cared much more for the salvation of her soul, and for the doing good to the many, for which He took on flesh. These were words, not of one speaking rudely to his mother, but belonging to a wise dispensation, which brought her into a right frame of mind, and provided that the miracles should be attended with that honor which was fitting. This appearance, which these words have of having been spoken chidingly, is enough to show that He held her in high honor, for by His displeasure He showed that He revered her greatly⁹³.

“Think of this then when you hear a certain woman saying, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the nipples which You sucked’, and Him answering, ‘rather blessed are they that do the will of my Father’ (Luke 11:27). Suppose that those other words also were said with the same intention. For the answer was not One rejecting His mother, but One showing that her bearing Him would have availed her nothing, had she not been very good and faithful. Setting aside the excellence of Mary’s soul, if it profited Mary nothing that the Christ was born of her, much less will it help us to have a father or a brother or a virtuous child, if we ourselves are far removed from his virtue. ‘None *of them* can by any means redeem *his* brother’ (Psalms 49:7) We must place our hopes of salvation in nothing else but our own righteous deeds done with the grace of God”.

⁹³ In what manner, Chrysostom covers in the next discourse; see John Chrysostom, Homilies on John, XXII.