ANCIENT WRITINGS

THE PROTOEVANGELIUM OF JAMES

Mary's birth and childhood · Twenty-five chapters translated from French



Complete English translation

Reading guide

The English text, commentary and sources are gathered in the first part. Documentary reproductions appear at the end of the volume. Historical illustrations accompany the reading.

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Illustrated English edition

The Protoevangelium of James

Mary's birth and childhood · Twenty-five chapters translated from French

This ancient narrative recounts Mary's birth, her childhood consecrated to God, her betrothal to Joseph and the birth of Jesus. It ends with the coming of the Magi, Elizabeth's flight and the murder of Zechariah. It traditionally bears James's name, although this attribution does not establish the identity of its author.

Here the title 'Protoevangelium' means a narrative set before the events usually recounted at the beginning of the Gospels. The work belongs to Christian apocryphal literature: it is not part of the New Testament. Probably composed in the second century, it circulated in many languages. Papyrus Bodmer V, from the third–fourth centuries, preserves a very early Greek form.

This volume presents the twenty-five chapters of the form published and translated in the nineteenth century. After each chapter, a short section explains translation choices that may affect understanding. The older illustrations are identified and dated; they show the narratives' reception in art.

Cover: Giotto, Meeting at the Golden Gate, c. 1303–1305. Scrovegni Chapel, Padua. A medieval interpretation of Joachim and Anna's reunion recounted in chapter IV.

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Introduction and method

Adopted text and method

The French translation underlying this English version was established from Alexander Walker's early English translation, published in the Ante-Nicene Fathers, volume VIII (1886). Constantin von Tischendorf's Greek, Evangelia apocrypha, second edition (1876), was used for lexical checks and examination of specific difficulties. The variant in chapter IV was also checked in the Greek text published by Émile de Strycker. This method and the works used are stated so that readers know which text the word 'complete' refers to. It means all twenty-five adopted chapters, not a merger of every ancient form of the work.

One witness (a manuscript or early edition transmitting the text) may present a different reading from another. Differences useful to readers are noted where they have been checked. They do not form an exhaustive inventory of manuscripts. Occasional checks of the Greek must not be confused with a complete collation, that is, a word-by-word comparison of all surviving documents.

The French revision favours natural sentences, identifiable speakers and concrete terms. Numbers, expressive repetitions, changes of narrator and the narrative's assertions are retained. Where a sentence remains obscure in the source, the explanation appears in the translation choices; it is not replaced by an unannounced interpretation. This English version follows the revised French.

Reading conventions

Roman numerals designate the traditional chapters. Paragraph numbers are reference points specific to this edition. They do not claim to reproduce the divisions of every manuscript. Biblical references added in some modern editions have been removed from the narrative itself.

'The Lord', 'God', 'the Christ' and 'the Son of the Most High' translate the titles used in the source. 'Temple' denotes the Jerusalem sanctuary and its buildings; 'Holy of Holies' denotes its most sacred part. The text sometimes describes Temple practices according to its own conception: the translation preserves that conception.

The expanded title transmitted with the text is: 'The Birth of Mary, the Holy Mother of God and Most Glorious Mother of Jesus Christ'. The cover title uses the name by which the work is generally known.

Chapter I

1 In the annals of the twelve tribes of Israel, there was an account of Joachim, an exceedingly wealthy man. He brought double offerings, saying: ‘A share of my wealth shall go to all the people; the offering for my forgiveness shall be for the Lord, as atonement for me.’

2 The Lord’s great feast was approaching, and the children of Israel were bringing their offerings. Rubim stood before Joachim and said: ‘You are not permitted to present your offerings first, for you have given Israel no offspring.’ Joachim was deeply distressed. He went to consult the records of the people’s twelve tribes, saying: ‘I shall examine the records of the twelve tribes of Israel to learn whether I alone have given Israel no offspring.’ He searched and discovered that all the righteous had raised up offspring in Israel. He also remembered the patriarch Abraham: in his old age, God had given him a son, Isaac.

3 Joachim was deeply distressed. He did not appear before his wife but withdrew into the wilderness. He pitched his tent there and fasted forty days and forty nights, saying to himself: ‘I shall not go down for food or drink until the Lord my God turns His gaze upon me. Prayer shall be my food and drink.’

Translation Choices

‘The great feast’

The Greek literally says ‘the great day of the Lord’. The context is a feast at which offerings are brought; no particular feast is named.

Offspring

The Greek σπέρμα (sperma), literally ‘seed’, here denotes children and descendants. ‘Give offspring’ avoids a literal rendering that would be unintelligible in French.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter II

1 Anna, his wife, wept over two misfortunes and lamented two afflictions: ‘I shall weep for my widowhood; I shall weep for my childlessness.’ The Lord’s great feast was approaching. Judith, her servant, said: ‘How long will you torment yourself like this? The Lord’s great feast is approaching; you are not permitted to mourn. Take this headband instead: the woman who made it gave it to me. It is not fitting for me to wear it, for I am a servant, and it looks like a royal ornament.’

2 Anna answered her: ‘Go away from me! I have never done such a thing, and the Lord has deeply humbled me. Perhaps a dishonest person gave it to you, and you come to make me share in your wrongdoing.’ Judith said: ‘Why would I need to curse you? The Lord has already closed your womb and denied you fruit in Israel.’

3 Anna was deeply distressed. She took off her mourning clothes, washed her head and put on her wedding garments. Around the ninth hour, she went down to walk in the garden. She saw a laurel tree, sat in its shade and prayed to the Lord: ‘God of our fathers, bless me and hear my prayer, as You blessed Sarah’s womb and gave her a son, Isaac.’

Translation Choices

Widowhood

Joachim is alive. Anna describes his absence as widowhood; the narrative does not say he has died.

‘I have never done such a thing’

The sentence does not fully specify what Anna refuses. In context, she rejects the headband and possible participation in wrongdoing connected with it. The text does not permit the supposed wrongdoing to be specified further.

Ninth hour

The hour is counted from daybreak: it corresponds approximately to mid-afternoon, not nine in the morning.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter III

1 Looking up towards heaven, Anna saw a sparrows' nest in the laurel tree. She lamented inwardly: 'Alas! Who begot me? What womb brought me into the world? I have become a curse before the children of Israel. They have heaped reproaches upon me, mocked me and driven me from the Lord's Temple.

2 'Alas! To what can I compare myself? I am not even like the birds of heaven, for the birds of heaven too are fruitful before You, Lord. Alas! To what can I compare myself? I am not even like the beasts of the earth, for the beasts of the earth too are fruitful before You, Lord.

3 'Alas! To what can I compare myself? I am not even like these waters, for these waters too are fruitful before You, Lord. Alas! To what can I compare myself? I am not even like this earth, for the earth too produces its fruits in their season and blesses You, Lord.'

Translation Choices

> ### Fruitful
>
> The lament compares human motherhood with the fruitfulness of animals, waters and soil. The repetition is deliberate and has been retained.

> ### 'Become a curse'
>
> These are Anna's words about her own condition and the contempt she suffers. The translation retains the narrative's first person.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter IV

1 Then an angel of the Lord stood beside her and said: ‘Anna, Anna, the Lord has heard your prayer. You will conceive and give birth, and your offspring will be spoken of throughout the world.’ Anna answered: ‘As the Lord my God lives, if I give birth to a boy or a girl, I shall offer the child as a gift to the Lord my God. This child will serve Him in holy things all the days of its life.’

2 Then two angels came to tell her: ‘Joachim, your husband, is coming with his flocks.’ For an angel of the Lord had descended to him and said: ‘Joachim, Joachim, the Lord God has heard your prayer. Go down from here: Anna, your wife, will conceive.’

3 Joachim went down and called his shepherds: ‘Bring me ten ewe lambs without spot or blemish: they shall be for the Lord my God. Bring me twelve tender calves: they shall be for the priests and elders. And bring a hundred goats for all the people.’

4 Joachim arrived with his flocks. Anna, standing at the gate, saw him coming, ran to him and threw her arms around his neck: ‘Now I know that the Lord God has filled me with His blessing. The widow is no longer a widow, and I, who had no child, shall conceive.’ Joachim spent that first day resting in his house.

Translation Choices

Will conceive

The early version followed uses the future tense. Other Greek forms have ‘has conceived’ (ἐν γαστρὶ εἴληφεν) in the announcement to Joachim. This difference concerns the timing of conception; it has not been erased by harmonisation.

Elders

Here the word denotes community notables or leaders, not merely elderly people.

Sources: walker · tischendorf · destrycker-greek.

Chapter V

1 The next day Joachim brought his offerings, saying to himself: ‘If the Lord God has granted me His favour, the plate the priest wears on his forehead will make it known to me.’ He presented his offerings and watched the priest’s plate closely as the priest went up to the Lord’s altar. He saw no fault there charged against him. Joachim said: ‘Now I know that the Lord has granted me His favour and forgiven all my faults.’ He came down from the Lord’s Temple, declared righteous, and returned home.

2 Anna’s pregnancy reached its term, and she gave birth in the ninth month. She asked the midwife: ‘What have I brought into the world?’ She answered: ‘A girl.’ Anna said: ‘My soul has been glorified today.’ She laid the child down. When the prescribed days were fulfilled, Anna purified herself, nursed the child and named her Mary.

Translation Choices

The priest’s plate

This is a plate worn on the forehead, Greek πέταλον (petalon), not a weapon. How Joachim recognises his innocence in it is not explained further.

‘Declared righteous’

Here the term means that Joachim recognises himself as accepted and absolved before God. ‘Justified’, possible in French, could obscure this meaning for the reader.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter VI

1 The child grew stronger day by day. At six months, her mother put her on the ground to see whether she could stand. She took seven steps and came to shelter in her mother's arms. Anna immediately lifted her and said: 'As the Lord my God lives, you shall walk no more on this earth until I take you to the Lord's Temple.' She made a sanctuary in her room and allowed nothing profane or unclean to approach the child. She called the pure daughters of the Hebrews, and they entertained Mary.

2 When the child was one year old, Joachim gave a great feast. He invited the priests, scribes, elders and all the people of Israel. He presented the child to the priests, who blessed her: 'God of our fathers, bless this child and give her a name celebrated for ever through all generations.' All the people answered: 'So be it! So be it! Amen.' Then he presented her to the high priests, who blessed her: 'God of the heights, turn Your gaze upon this child and grant her the supreme blessing, which will have no end.'

3 Her mother took her in her arms, carried her into the sanctuary of her room and nursed her. Anna sang this song to the Lord God: 'I shall sing a song to the Lord my God, for He has turned His gaze upon me and delivered me from my enemies' reproaches. The Lord has given me a fruit of His righteousness, unique and richly endowed before Him. Who will tell the sons of Rubim that Anna is nursing? Hear, hear, twelve tribes of Israel: Anna is nursing!'

4 She laid the child in the room that served as her sanctuary, then went out to serve the guests. When the meal was over, they departed joyfully, glorifying the God of Israel.

Translation Choices

Entertained

The Greek verb διαπλανάω may suggest distracting or amusing. Here the young women keep the child occupied. The early English translation 'led her astray' would be misleading if rendered as morally leading her into error.

‘Unique and richly endowed’

The song’s Greek terms are difficult: *μονοούσιον* and *πολυούσιον* bring together uniqueness and abundance. The formula is rendered in its general movement; ‘unique of its kind and rich in good things before Him’ is another possible wording.

High priests

The plural belongs to the narrative. It is retained without artificially reducing it to a single holder of the office.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter VII

1 The months passed. The child was two years old when Joachim said: ‘Let us take her to the Lord’s Temple to fulfil the vow we made. Otherwise, the Lord might demand our offering from us, and it would no longer be accepted.’ Anna answered: ‘Let us wait until her third year, so that she does not ask for her father or mother.’ Joachim said: ‘Then let us wait.’

2 When the child was three years old, Joachim said: ‘Invite the pure daughters of the Hebrews. Let each take a lamp and stand there with their lamps lit: thus the child will not turn back, and her heart will not be drawn away from the Lord’s Temple.’ They did so until they reached the Lord’s Temple.

3 The priest received the child, kissed her and blessed her: ‘The Lord has made your name great through all generations. In you, in the last days, the Lord will reveal His deliverance to the children of Israel.’ He placed her on the third step of the altar. The Lord God poured His grace upon her; she began to dance, and the whole house of Israel loved her.

Translation Choices

> ‘Demand our offering from us’
>
> The Greek says more briefly that the Lord might ‘send to us’. The complement makes the context of the vow explicit without adding a new event.

> House of Israel
>
> This collective expression means the people or community of Israel, not a building.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter VIII

1 Her parents went down in wonder, praising the Lord God because the child had not turned back. Mary lived in the Lord's Temple like a dove that had made its home there. She received her food from an angel's hand.

2 When she was twelve, the priests met in council and said: 'Mary has now reached the age of twelve in the Lord's Temple. What shall we do with her, so that she does not risk making the Lord's sanctuary unclean?' They said to the high priest: 'You who stand near the Lord's altar, enter and pray concerning her. Whatever the Lord makes known to you, we shall do.' The high priest took the garment with twelve bells, entered the Holy of Holies and prayed concerning her.

3 Then an angel of the Lord stood beside him and said: 'Zechariah, Zechariah, go out and gather the people's widowers. Let each bring his staff. The man to whom the Lord reveals a sign shall have her as his wife.' Heralds went throughout the region of Judaea; the Lord's trumpet sounded, and all came running.

Translation Choices

Make unclean

The passage concerns the sanctuary's ritual purity as the narrative conceives it. The verb attributes no moral fault to Mary.

Widowers

The version followed calls for men whose wives have died to be gathered. Joseph's selection in the next chapter takes place within this group.

Holy of Holies

This is the Temple's most sacred space. The expression and the twelve bells are retained as the text presents them.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter IX

1 Joseph put down his axe and went to join them. Once gathered, the men went to the high priest with their staffs in their hands. He took all the staffs, entered the Temple and prayed. When he had finished praying, he came out with the staffs and returned them. No sign had appeared in them. Joseph received his staff last; then a dove came out of it and settled on his head.

2 The priest said to Joseph: 'The lot has designated you to receive the Lord's virgin into your care.' But Joseph protested: 'I have children and am an old man, while she is a young girl. I fear becoming a laughing-stock among the children of Israel.' The priest said: 'Fear the Lord your God, and remember what the Lord did to Dathan, Abiram and Korah: the earth opened, and they were swallowed up because of their rebellion. Now, Joseph, take care that the same things do not happen in your house.'

3 Joseph was afraid and received Mary into his care. He said to her: 'I have received you from the Lord's Temple. Now I leave you in my house and go to work on my buildings. I shall return to you. The Lord will protect you.'

Translation Choices

Care

The Greek εἰς τήρησιν denotes custody or protection. The narrative also uses the vocabulary of betrothal and marriage; these expressions are not standardised.

Axe and buildings

Joseph appears here as a building craftsman. The familiar term 'carpenter' is not added where the passage does not use it.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter X

1 The priests met in council and said: ‘Let us make a veil for the Lord’s Temple.’ The priest ordered: ‘Bring pure virgins of David’s lineage.’ The servants went to seek them and found seven. The priest then remembered the young Mary, who belonged to David’s lineage and was pure before God. The servants went to fetch her and brought her back. The young women were led into the Lord’s Temple.

2 The priest said: ‘Draw lots to determine who will spin the gold, white, fine linen, silk, blue, scarlet and true purple.’ The true purple and scarlet fell to Mary. She took them and went home. At that time Zechariah was mute, and Samuel took his place until Zechariah recovered his speech. Mary took the scarlet and spun it.

Translation Choices

Veil

The *καταπέτασμα* (katapetasma) is a hanging in the sanctuary. It is not a garment worn by Mary.

Colours and materials

The list combines materials and colours. The traditional designations ‘silk’, ‘blue’ and ‘true purple’ are retained; the narrative gives no technical description allowing every fibre and dye to be identified with certainty.

Samuel

This is indeed the name transmitted in the form followed. It has not been replaced with the name of another biblical figure.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XI

1 Mary took her pitcher out to fill it with water. A voice said: ‘Rejoice, you who have received grace! The Lord is with you; you are blessed among women.’ She looked right and left to find where the voice came from. Trembling, she went home and set down the pitcher. Then she took the purple, sat on her seat and began to spin it.

2 An angel of the Lord stood before her and said: ‘Do not be afraid, Mary: you have found favour before the Lord of all things. You will conceive according to his word.’ On hearing him, she wondered: ‘Is it from the Lord, the living God, that I shall conceive? And shall I give birth as every woman gives birth?’

3 The angel of the Lord answered her: ‘No, Mary. The power of the Lord will overshadow you; therefore the holy being to be born of you will be called Son of the Most High. You will name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ Mary said: ‘Here is the servant of the Lord, before him. Let it happen to me according to your word.’

Translation Choices

Rejoice

Χαῖρε (chaire) serves as a greeting, but also retains the meaning ‘rejoice’. ‘Greetings’ would also be possible.

According to his word

Tischendorf prints ἐκ λόγου αὐτοῦ, which can be rendered ‘by his word’. ‘According to his word’ follows Walker’s translation. These formulations have different nuances: ‘by’ suggests the action of the word, whereas ‘according to’ may suggest the fulfilment of what was announced. The Greek wording does not require ‘word’ to be treated as a proper name.

The holy being

The neuter Greek wording denotes the unborn child. The title ‘Son of the Most High’ is retained unchanged.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XII

1 Mary finished the purple and scarlet and brought them to the priest. He blessed her and said: ‘Mary, the Lord God has made your name great, and you will be blessed among all generations on earth.’ Full of joy, Mary went to Elizabeth, her relative, and knocked on her door.

2 When Elizabeth heard her, she put down the scarlet, ran to open the door and, seeing Mary, blessed her: ‘How is it that the mother of my Lord comes to me? The child within me has leapt and blessed you.’ But Mary had forgotten the mysteries of which the archangel Gabriel had spoken to her. She raised her eyes to heaven and said: ‘Who am I, Lord, that all generations on earth should bless me?’

3 She stayed with Elizabeth for three months; day by day, her pregnancy became more apparent. Mary grew afraid, returned home and hid from the children of Israel. She was sixteen when these mysteries took place.

Translation Choices

‘Had forgotten the mysteries’

This surprising statement belongs to the narrative. It has been retained; replacing it with ‘pondered’ or ‘remembered’ would change the text.

‘Her pregnancy became more apparent’

The source says she ‘grew’ or ‘grew larger’ day by day. The French wording, followed here, clarifies what the context describes without altering the three-month duration.

Sixteen

This is the age given by the version followed. It is not recalculated from the age of twelve in Chapter VIII.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XIII

1 Mary was in her sixth month when Joseph returned from his work. On entering his house, he discovered that she was pregnant. He struck his face, threw himself to the ground on mourning cloth and wept bitterly: ‘How shall I dare look the Lord my God in the face? What prayer can I offer concerning this young woman? I received her as a virgin from the Temple of the Lord and have not watched over her. Who has ensnared me? Who has done this evil in my house and defiled the virgin? Has Adam’s story not been repeated for me? While Adam was singing praise, the serpent came; he found Eve alone and deceived her. The same thing has happened to me.’

2 Joseph rose from his mourning cloth, called Mary and said: ‘You whom God has cared for, why have you done this? Why have you forgotten the Lord your God? Why have you debased yourself, you who were brought up in the Holy of Holies and received your food from an angel’s hand?’

3 She wept bitterly and said: ‘I am innocent and have known no man.’ Joseph asked: ‘Where, then, does what is in your womb come from?’ She answered: ‘As the Lord my God lives, I do not know where it comes from.’

Translation Choices

Mourning cloth

Biblical ‘sackcloth’ is a coarse fabric associated with mourning and penitence; this is not a sack used to carry objects.

To know a man

The expression means to have had sexual relations. This traditional wording is retained, with its meaning explained here.

‘I do not know’

This is indeed the answer in the version followed. Its relationship with the angelic announcement is not resolved by rewriting the dialogue.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XIV

1 Joseph was seized with great fear. He withdrew from Mary and considered what to do about her. He said to himself: ‘If I conceal her wrongdoing, I shall be in conflict with the law of the Lord. If I denounce her to the children of Israel, I fear that what is within her may come from an angel, and that I shall deliver an innocent being to a sentence of death. What, then, shall I do with her? I shall send her away secretly.’

2 Night came. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said: ‘Do not be afraid concerning this young woman: what is within her comes from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son; you will name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ Joseph awoke, glorified the God of Israel who had granted him this grace, and kept Mary with him.

Translation Choices

> ‘May come from an angel’
>
> Joseph’s fear precedes the answer in the dream. The narrative then says ‘from the Holy Spirit’. The two formulations are not harmonised.

> ‘An innocent being’
>
> The source uses the expression ‘innocent blood’, a way of referring to someone whose death would be unjustly caused.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XV

1 Annas the scribe came to Joseph and asked: ‘Why did you not appear at our assembly?’ Joseph answered: ‘I was tired from the journey and spent the first day resting.’ The scribe turned and saw that Mary was pregnant. He ran to the priest and said: ‘Joseph, for whom you stood surety, has committed a grave offence.’ The priest asked: ‘How so?’ The scribe answered: ‘He has defiled the virgin he received from the Temple of the Lord; he has married her secretly and has not made it known to the children of Israel.’ The priest asked: ‘Joseph has done this?’ Annas the scribe replied: ‘Send servants, and you will find the virgin pregnant.’

2 The servants went and found that it was indeed so. They brought Mary and Joseph before the court. The priest said: ‘Mary, why have you done this? Why have you debased yourself and forgotten the Lord your God? You who were brought up in the Holy of Holies, who received your food from an angel’s hand, heard the hymns and danced before him, why have you done this?’ She wept bitterly: ‘As the Lord my God lives, I am pure before him and know no man.’

3 The priest said to Joseph: ‘Why have you done this?’ Joseph answered: ‘As the Lord lives, I am innocent concerning her.’ The priest continued: ‘Do not bear false witness; tell the truth. You married her secretly without making it known to the children of Israel, and you did not bow your head beneath the mighty hand so that your offspring might be blessed.’ Joseph remained silent.

Translation Choices

Annas the scribe

This male character bears the Greek name Ἄννας (Annas). He is not Anna, Mary’s mother. The designation ‘the scribe’ distinguishes the two characters.

Mighty hand

The passage evokes a gesture of blessing but does not describe the ceremony. The translation adds neither an officiant nor a ritual that the text does not name.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XVI

1 The priest said: ‘Give back the virgin you received from the Temple of the Lord.’ Joseph burst into tears. The priest said: ‘I shall make you drink the water of the Lord’s test, and he will make your wrongdoing manifest to your own eyes.’

2 The priest took the water, made Joseph drink it and sent him into the hill country. Joseph returned unharmed. He also made Mary drink, sent her into the hill country, and she returned unharmed. All the people marvelled that no wrongdoing had become manifest in them.

3 The priest said: ‘Since the Lord God has not made your wrongdoing manifest, neither do I condemn you.’ He dismissed them. Joseph took Mary and returned home joyfully, glorifying the God of Israel.

Translation Choices

> ### Water of the test
>
> This translation denotes water administered to reveal supposed guilt. The technical term ‘ordeal’, sometimes used, means a test believed to reveal a divine judgement.

> ### ‘Unharmed’
>
> The source describes no specific bodily mark. The translation does not invent one.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XVII

1 An order from Emperor Augustus required a census of everyone in Bethlehem of Judea. Joseph said to himself: ‘I shall register my sons; but what shall I do about this young woman? Under what name shall I register her? As my wife? I am ashamed. As my daughter, then? But all the children of Israel know that she is not my daughter. The day of the Lord will itself settle matters as the Lord wills.’

2 He prepared the donkey and seated Mary on it. His son led the animal, and Joseph followed. When they were three miles from their destination, Joseph turned and saw Mary looking sad. He said to himself: ‘What is within her is probably causing her pain.’ Then he turned again and saw her laughing. He asked: ‘Mary, why does your face express laughter at one moment and sadness at another?’ She answered: ‘Because with my own eyes I see two peoples: one weeps and laments, while the other rejoices and exults.’

3 They were still on their way when Mary said to him: ‘Help me down from the donkey: what is within me presses to come out.’ He helped her down and said: ‘Where shall I take you to shelter you from sight? This place is deserted.’

Translation Choices

Census

The geographical scope given here is Bethlehem of Judea. The translation does not broaden it by borrowing the wording of another narrative.

Three miles

The mile is an ancient unit of distance. The number is retained without substituting an approximate conversion.

‘Shelter you from sight’

The Greek speaks of ‘hiding your shame’ or ‘your nakedness’. In this scene of imminent childbirth, the chosen wording expresses the need to preserve Mary’s modesty. ‘Where shall I take you to hide your nakedness?’ would be another, more literal translation.

The day of the Lord

The Greek makes ‘the day of the Lord’ the subject of the verb rendered here as ‘will settle’, then names ‘the Lord’ again as the one who decides. This unusual wording is retained. The narrative does not explain how Mary’s registration in the census will be resolved.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XVIII

1 Joseph found a cave there and took Mary inside. He left his two sons with her, then went to look for a midwife in the region of Bethlehem.

2 I, Joseph, was walking, and yet I was no longer walking. I raised my eyes to the air and saw it struck with amazement. I looked at the vault of heaven: it was motionless, and the birds of the sky hung suspended. I looked at the earth: a bowl stood there, and workers reclined for their meal, their hands in the bowl. Those chewing no longer chewed; those taking food no longer lifted it; those bringing it to their mouths no longer did so. Every face was raised towards heaven.

3 I saw sheep being driven: they no longer moved forward but stood still. The shepherd raised his hand to strike them, and his hand remained raised. I looked at the river's current: the kids had their mouths on the water but were not drinking. In an instant, all things were thus suspended in their course.

Translation Choices

Change of narrator

The narrative abruptly shifts from 'Joseph' to 'I, Joseph'. This change occurs in the tradition followed and has been retained.

Bowl

Σκάφη (skaphē) denotes a hollow vessel. In this shared meal scene, 'bowl' is more intelligible than 'trough', without adding any furniture to the text.

Final sentence

The final Greek sentence is disputed. Walker understands an interruption of movement; another interpretation reads 'And suddenly, everything resumed its course'. The chosen text follows Walker. This difference is noted to avoid presenting an interpretation as a certainty.

Sources: walker · tischendorf · vandeneykel-2017.

Chapter XIX

1 I saw a woman coming down from the hill country. She asked me: ‘Man, where are you going?’ I answered: ‘I am looking for a Hebrew midwife.’ She asked: ‘Are you of Israel?’ I answered: ‘Yes.’ She said: ‘Who, then, is giving birth in the cave?’ I answered: ‘A woman betrothed to me.’ She asked: ‘Is she not your wife?’ I said: ‘It is Mary, who was brought up in the Temple of the Lord. She was allotted to me as a wife. Yet she is not my wife: she has conceived by the Holy Spirit.’

2 The midwife asked Joseph: ‘Is this true?’ He answered: ‘Come and see.’ She went with him. They stopped at the entrance to the cave. A luminous cloud was overshadowing it. The midwife said: ‘My soul has been glorified today, for my eyes have seen wonders: salvation has been born for Israel.’

3 At once, the cloud withdrew from the cave, and a great light shone within, so bright that the eyes could not bear it. Little by little, the light diminished until the child appeared. He came to take the breast of his mother Mary. The midwife exclaimed: ‘This day is great for me, for I have seen this wonder!’

4 She left the cave and met Salome. She said: ‘Salome, Salome, I have a wonder to tell you: a virgin has given birth, which her nature does not permit.’ Salome answered: ‘As the Lord my God lives, unless I insert my finger to examine her body, I shall not believe that a virgin has given birth.’

Translation Choices

First and third persons

The beginning continues Joseph’s first-person testimony; the narrative then returns to the third person. The two voices are not artificially made uniform.

Betrothed woman and wife

Joseph uses the two terms in succession, then denies that Mary is his wife in the conjugal sense. The dialogue itself expresses this difficulty; it is not removed.

Salome's examination

The text explicitly describes a bodily examination intended to verify virginity. 'Examine her body' renders the wording in restrained language; the gesture with the finger is retained.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XX

1 The midwife entered and said to Mary: ‘Present yourself for examination, for a great dispute has arisen concerning you.’ Salome inserted her finger, then cried out: ‘Woe to me for my impiety and unbelief! I have put the living God to the test; my hand is falling away from me as though fire were consuming it!’

2 She fell to her knees before the Lord and said: ‘God of my fathers, remember that I am descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Do not make me an object of shame before the children of Israel, but restore me to those in need. You know, Lord, that I have given my care in your name and received my reward from your hand.’

3 An angel of the Lord stood beside her and said: ‘Salome, Salome, the Lord has heard you. Bring your hand near the child, take him in your arms, and you will find healing and joy.’ Salome approached and took the child, saying: ‘I shall bow down before him, for a great king has been born for Israel.’

4 At once, Salome was healed. She left the cave, acknowledged as righteous. A voice said: ‘Salome, Salome, do not tell of the wonders you have seen until the child has entered Jerusalem.’

Translation Choices

Healing

The Greek word *σωτηρία* (sōtēria) can denote salvation, deliverance or preservation. Here, the immediate context is Salome’s hand and then her healing.

‘Restore me to those in need’

The request means that Salome wishes to resume her service to the poor. The text does not ask that she herself be made poor.

To bow down

Προσκυνέω (proskyneō) can express homage or worship. The gesture is translated without making it impose a theological definition by itself.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XXI

1 Joseph was preparing to leave for Judea. A great stir arose in Bethlehem of Judea, for magi had arrived and were asking: ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the East and have come to bow down before him.’

2 On hearing this, Herod was greatly troubled and sent servants to the magi. He summoned the priests and questioned them: ‘What does Scripture say about the Christ? Where is he to be born?’ They answered: ‘In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written.’ He dismissed them, then questioned the magi: ‘What sign did you see concerning the king who has been born?’

3 The magi answered: ‘We saw an immense star shining among those stars and dimming their light until they could no longer be seen. Thus we understood that a king had been born for Israel, and we have come to bow down before him.’ Herod said: ‘Go and look for him. If you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and bow down before him.’

4 The magi left. The star they had seen in the East went before them until they reached the cave; it stopped above it. They saw the child with his mother Mary and took gold, frankincense and myrrh from their bag. Warned by the angel not to go to Judea, they returned to their country by another road.

Translation Choices

Judea

The narrative speaks of leaving ‘for Judea’ although Bethlehem has already been located in Judea. The same difficulty recurs at the end of the chapter. The name has not been replaced with ‘Jerusalem’ or ‘Herod’s court’.

Magi

The word denotes the visitors called μάγοι (magoi). Here the text gives neither their number nor their names; ‘three kings’ has therefore not been added.

Myrrh

An aromatic resin. The term is retained as the name of the gift brought to the child.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XXII

1 When Herod realised that the magi had deceived him, he flew into a rage. He sent murderers with the order: ‘Kill the children aged two and under.’

2 Mary learnt that the children were being killed. Seized with fear, she took the little one, wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in an ox manger.

3 Elizabeth learnt that John was being sought. She took him and went up into the hill country, looking for somewhere to hide him. But she could find no hiding place. Then she cried aloud: ‘Mountain of God, receive a mother and her child!’ At once, the mountain split open and received her. A light enveloped them, for an angel of the Lord was with them, watching over them.

Translation Choices

Manger

The source uses a term for an ox feeding trough or manger. It does not mean the cave itself.

John

This is the child of Elizabeth and Zechariah. The text does not relate a flight of John into Egypt here.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XXIII

1 Herod was searching for John. He sent servants to Zechariah with the question: ‘Where have you hidden your son?’ Zechariah answered: ‘I serve God in holy matters and remain constantly in the Temple of the Lord. I do not know where my son is.’ The servants went and reported all this to Herod.

2 Herod, furious, said: ‘His son is destined to rule over Israel.’ He again sent this message to Zechariah: ‘Tell the truth: where is your son? You know that your life is in my hands.’ Zechariah answered: ‘If you shed my blood, I shall be a martyr of God. The Lord will receive my spirit, for it is innocent blood that you shed at the entrance to the Temple of the Lord.’

3 Zechariah was murdered at daybreak. The children of Israel did not know that he had been murdered.

Translation Choices

Martyr

The Greek μάρτυς (martys) primarily means ‘witness’. In this sentence, acceptance of a violent death in God’s service makes ‘martyr’ appropriate. The word does not denote a manuscript.

Entrance to the Temple

The Greek designation refers to the vestibule or the space before the doors. It has not been replaced with a more precise location taken from another text.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XXIV

1 At the hour of greeting, the priests arrived, but Zechariah did not come out to meet and bless them as usual. They stood waiting for him, so that they might greet him during prayer and glorify the Most High.

2 As he delayed, they all became afraid. One of them dared to enter. He saw clotted blood near the altar and heard a voice saying: ‘Zechariah has been murdered; his blood will not be wiped away until the coming of the one who will avenge him.’ On hearing these words, he grew afraid, went out and reported them to the priests.

3 Then they dared to enter and saw what had happened. The panelling of the Temple uttered a lament, and the priests tore their garments from top to bottom. They did not find Zechariah’s body, but found his blood turned to stone. Seized with fear, they went out to tell the people that he had been murdered. All the tribes of the people heard and mourned him for three days and three nights.

4 After the three days, the priests consulted together to choose his replacement. The lot fell on Simeon. He was the one whom the Holy Spirit had told that he would not see death before seeing the Christ in the flesh.

Translation Choices

Hour of greeting

The phrase refers to a time when the priests gather for prayer and blessing. The narrative does not allow it to be assigned a precise modern time.

Panelling of the Temple

The Greek τὰ φατνώματα τοῦ ναοῦ denotes structural timbers or parts of a coffered ceiling. The text attributes a lament to them; it does not merely say that the priests lament.

The one who will avenge him

Ἔκδικος (ekdikos) can be translated as ‘avenger’ or ‘the one who will obtain justice for him’. The source does not name this figure here.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Chapter XXV

1 I, James, wrote this account in Jerusalem. When unrest broke out at Herod's death, I withdrew into the wilderness until the turmoil in Jerusalem had subsided. I glorify the Lord God, who gave me the gift and wisdom to write this account.

2 May grace be with those who fear our Lord Jesus Christ. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Translation Choices

> **James**
>
> This signature belongs to the work. Retaining it in translation does not settle the question of its historical attribution.

> **To fear**
>
> In this religious formula, 'to fear' means to revere and obey God; the word does not express fear alone.

Sources: walker · tischendorf.

Textual sources

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Older Greek edition consulted for spot checks and lexical choices in the French edition. Scan and OCR archived.

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Introduction to the work, literary dating and bibliography.

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destrycker-greek. Émile de Strycker, La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques, Brussels (1961), Greek text, pp. 64–190; electronic transcription by R. Khazarzar.

The early Greek text was consulted for the variant 'has conceived' in Chapter IV. The French translation underlying this English version does not reproduce the modern translation in that edition.

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The title attests the interpretation of the last sentence of Chapter XVIII as a resumption of movement. This translation notes that possibility while following Walker through the French edition.

https://www.nasscal.com/2017/09/06/christian-apocrypha-at-the-2017-sbl/

Provenance of the illustrations

The captions identify the reproduced works and their period. The images accompany the text; they are not presented as depictions contemporary with the events narrated.

Joachim and Anna at the Golden Gate

Giotto di Bondone, fresco from the Life of Joachim cycle, c. 1303–1305, Scrovegni Chapel, Padua. Web Gallery of Art reproduction, distributed by Wikimedia Commons as a faithful reproduction of a public-domain work (PD-Art).

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Giotto_di_Bondone_-_No._6_Scenes_from_the_Life_of_Joachim_-_6._Meeting_at_the_Golden_Gate_-_WGA09176.jpg

The Greek text in the 1876 edition

Constantin von Tischendorf's printed edition, 1876, public domain. Digitisation available on Internet Archive; page extracted from the facsimile.

https://archive.org/details/evangeliaapocry00tiscgoog

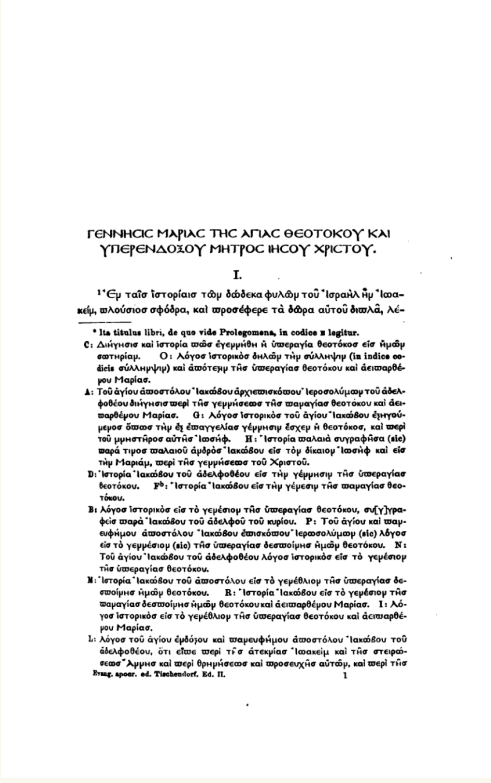
The end of the Protoevangelium in Papyrus Bodmer V

Fondation Martin Bodmer, digitised by Bodmer Lab, University of Geneva, image 039 of codex PB C. Creative Commons Attribution–NonCommercial 4.0 licence (CC BY-NC 4.0).

https://bodmerlab.unige.ch/fr/constellations/papyri/mirador/1072205366?page=039

FACSIMILES

The Protoevangelium of James



ΓΕΝΝΗϹΙϹ ΜΑΡΙΑϹ ΤΗϹ ΑΓΙΑϹ ΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΥΠΕΡΕΝΔΟΞΟΥ ΜΗΤΡΟϹ ΙΗϹΟΥ ΧΡΙϹΤΟΥ.

I.

[1] Ἐμ ταῖσ ἱστορίαισ τῶμ δώδεκα φυλῶμ τοῦ Ἰσραὴλ ἦμ Ἰωακείμ, πλούσιοσ σφόδρα, καὶ προσέφερε τὰ δῶρα αὐτοῦ διπλᾶ, λέ-

* Ita titulus libri, de quo vide Prolegomena, in codice B legitur.

C: Διήγησισ καὶ ἱστορία πῶσ ἐγεμμήθη ἡ ὑπεραγία θεοτόκοσ εἰσ ἡμῶμ σωτηρίαμ. O: Λόγοσ ἱστορικὸσ διηλῶμ τὴμ σύλληψημ (in indice codicis σύλληψιμ) καὶ ἀπότεμμ τῆσ ὑπεραγίασ θεοτόκου καὶ ἀειπαρθέμου Μαρίασ.

A: Τοῦ ἁγίου ἀποστόλου Ἰακώβου ἀρχιεπισκόπου Ἱεροσολύμωμ τοῦ ἀδελφοθέου διήγησισ περὶ τῆσ γεμμήσεωσ τῆσ παμαγίασ θεοτόκου καὶ ἀειπαρθέμου Μαρίασ. G: Λόγοσ ἱστορικὸσ τοῦ ἁγίου Ἰακώβου ἐμηγούμεμοσ ὅπωσ τὴμ ἐξ ἐπαγγελίασ γέμμησιμ ἔσχεμ ἡ θεοτόκοσ, καὶ περὶ τοῦ μμηστῆροσ αὐτῆσ Ἰωσήφ. H: Ἱστορία παλαιὰ συγραφῆσα (sic) παρὰ τιμοσ παλαιοῦ ἀμδρὸσ Ἰακώβου εἰσ τὸμ δίκαιομ Ἰωσὴφ καὶ εἰσ τὴμ Μαριάμ, περὶ τῆσ γεμμήσεωσ τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

D: Ἱστορία Ἰακώβου τοῦ ἀδελφοθέου εἰσ τὴμ γέμμησιμ τῆσ ὑπεραγίασ θεοτόκου. F[b]: Ἱστορία Ἰακώβου εἰσ τὴμ γέμεσιμ τῆσ παμαγίασ θεοτόκου.

B: Λόγοσ ἱστορικὸσ εἰσ τὸ γεμέσιομ τῆσ ὑπεραγίασ θεοτόκου, συ[γ]γραφεῖσ παρὰ Ἰακώβου τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ τοῦ κυρίου. P: Τοῦ ἁγίου καὶ παμευφήμου ἀποστόλου Ἰακώβου ἐπισκόπου Ἱεροσολύμωμ (sic) λόγοσ εἰσ τὸ γεμμέσιομ (sic) τῆσ ὑπεραγίασ δεσποίμησ ἡμῶμ θεοτόκου. N: Τοῦ ἁγίου Ἰακώβου τοῦ ἀδελφοθέου λόγοσ ἱστορικὸσ εἰσ τὸ γεμέσιομ τῆσ ὑπεραγίασ θεοτόκου.

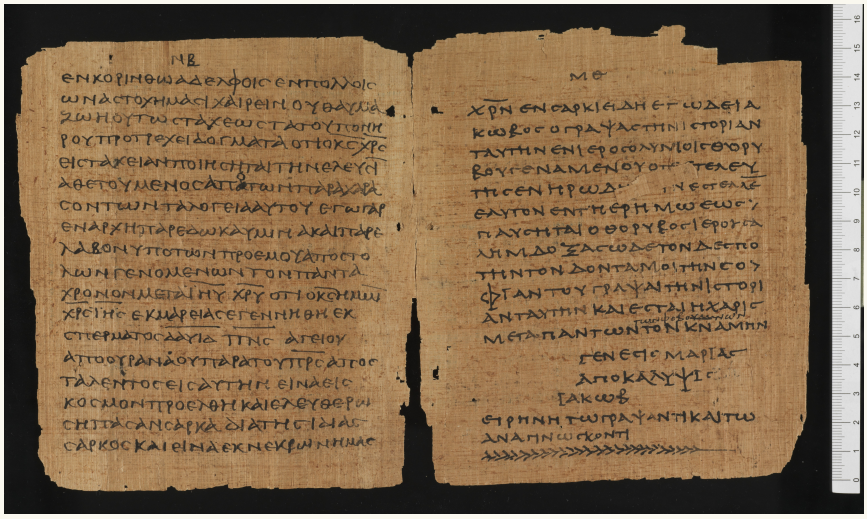
M: Ἱστορία Ἰακώβου τοῦ ἀποστόλου εἰσ τὸ γεμέθλιομ τῆσ ὑπεραγίασ δεσποίμησ ἡμῶμ θεοτόκου. R: Ἱστορία Ἰακώβου εἰσ τὸ γεμέσιομ τῆσ παμαγίασ δεσποίμησ ἡμῶμ θεοτόκου καὶ ἀειπαρθέμου Μαρίασ. I: Λόγοσ ἱστορικὸσ εἰσ τὸ γεμέθλιομ τῆσ ὑπεραγίασ θεοτόκου καὶ ἀειπαρθέμου Μαρίασ.

L: Λόγοσ τοῦ ἁγίου ἐμδόξου καὶ παμευφήμου ἀποστόλου Ἰακώβου τοῦ ἀδελφοθέου, ὅτι εἶπε περὶ τῆσ ἀτεκμίασ Ἰωακείμ καὶ τῆσ στειρώσεωσ Ἄμμησ καὶ περὶ θρημήσεωσ καὶ προσευχῆσ αὐτῶμ, καὶ περὶ τῆσ

Evang. apocr. ed. Tischendorf. Ed. II. 1

The Greek text in the 1876 edition. Opening of the Protoevangelium of James in Constantin von Tischendorf, Evangelia apocrypha, 2nd edition, Leipzig, 1876, p. 1. Title variants appear at the foot of the page. [provenance]

The Protoevangelium of James



The end of the Protoevangelium in Papyrus Bodmer V, 3rd–4th century, composite codex PB C. Right: fol. 25r, p. 49,

with the end of the Protoevangelium and the title ‘Birth of Mary, Revelation of James’. Left: a page from the correspondence of the Corinthians to Paul. [provenance]