"At the Hour of our Death": Mary's Dormition and Christian Dying in Late Patristic and Early Byzantine Literature

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At the end of a celebrated early article entitled "Eucharist and Christology in the Nestorian Controversy," Henry Chadwick commented, in his characteristically dense and suggestive fashion, on the "deep religious connexion" that seems to exist between the conception of the person of Christ promoted by Cyril of Alexandria and his later followers, especially those who were to reject the dogmatic formula of the Council of Chalcedon, and the dramatic rise of interest in and devotion to the Virgin Mary in the eastern churches during the fifth and sixth centuries.

> The whole tendency of Monophysite piety was to minimize the significance of Christ's soul. As the Antiochenes clearly perceived, the result is that Christ loses solidarity with us. Is there not, then, a consequent need for popular piety to clutch at someone, with a vital part in the drama of redemption, who is beyond doubt ὁμοούσιος ἡμῖν? . . . In such a situation it would be a reassurance if there could be someone in solidarity with the rest of mankind who had risen again in the body. . . . Accordingly, there seems little need for surprise that such a story as the Assumption of the Virgin became current in Monophysite circles during this period.[1]

At the time Chadwick's article appeared, in 1951, the scholarly world was preparing to commemorate the fifteen hundredth anniversary of the Council of Chalcedon, and Pope Pius XII had just declared, in the previous year, that the belief that Mary had been assumed bodily into heaven at the end of her life—had been allowed by God to share immediately, along with Jesus her son, in the resurrection of the body—was an integral part of the Christian tradition of faith. Although he offered little further comment, Chadwick's observation that "for the most part popular piety remains Monophysite to this day" clearly implied a certain disjunction between the faith of Chalcedon and the newly canonized Catholic dogma of Mary's Assumption. It also suggested that the popular tradition of piety on which the latter rests may well be connected with an exaggerated emphasis on the divine transformation of the human element in the person of the Incarnate Word, more reflective of the christology of the later opponents of Chalcedon than of mainstream dogma.

[1] H. Chadwick, "Eucharist and Christology in the Nestorian Controversy," *JTS*, n.s., 2 (1951): 163–64.

Scholarly understanding of the nuances and aims of Cyril's christology, and of that of his Antiochene opponents, has changed significantly since Chadwick wrote in 1951. Fewer scholars today would assume that a "monophysite" view of the person of Christ necessarily implied that Christ is less in "solidarity with us" than Chalcedon understood him to be, or that the Antiochene theologians were particularly interested in emphasizing such solidarity themselves.[2] Even so, the origins and original intent of the story of Mary's death and entry into glory, which seems to have taken shape in Antioch, Palestine, and Egypt during the century or so after the Council of Chalcedon, undoubtedly remain embedded in the christological debates of the time. The complex mass of narrative sources that present that story to us, extant in varying degrees of completeness in all the ancient languages of the eastern Mediterranean world, has been studied intensely over the past half century, even though critical editions—or accessible noncritical editions—are still lacking for many of these sources. Despite widely varying theories on the chronology and mutual relationships of these texts, it seems probable that the narrative of Mary's glorious end, her "dormition" or death and her "assumption" into glory or resurrection, was circulated first of all, as Chadwick indicates, within Christian groups that rejected the council's two-nature, one-hypostasis formulation of the structure of Christ's person.[3]

In all the Christian churches, the fifth century was a time of meteoric rise for the figure of Mary in popular devotion, art, and homiletics, as well as in the spotlight of theological controversy between the Antiochene and Alexandrian "schools." On the political level, the positive support for the cult of Mary by the powerful princess (later empress) Pulcheria should not be underestimated;[4] and on the theological and liturgical levels, it seems clear that the growing emphasis on the divinity of Christ, and on the transforming effect of that divinity on his own humanity and that of all who come into contact with him, resulted also in an increasing exaltation of the role of Mary, the human being closest to him, in the story of salvation. And even if this growth in Marian devotion and the multiplication of her privileges in fifth- and sixth-century Greek theology was *not* the expression of a need for a more accessible human mediator with God, as Chadwick

[2]See, for instance, F. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge, 1997), esp. 161–212; J. O'Keefe, "Impassible Suffering? Divine Passion and Fifth-Century Christology," *TheolSt* 58 (1997): 39–60, and bibliography cited there.

[3]The standard surveys of the history of the narrative and the theological interpretations of the Dormition story are: M. Jugie, *La mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge. Etude historico-doctrinale* (Vatican City, 1944); A. Wenger, *L'assomption de la T. S. Vierge dans la tradition byzantine du Vie au Xe siècle. Etudes et documents* (Paris, 1955); E. Cothenet, "Marie dans les apocryphes," in H. de Jouaye du Manoir, *Maria,* vol. 6 (Paris, 1961), 71–156; less reliable in detail, but very valuable for its mass of bibliographical information, is S. C. Mimouni, *Dormition et assomption de Marie. Histoire des traditions anciennes* (Paris, 1995). See also the introduction to my translation of the Greek homiletic material on the Dormition: *On the Dormition of Mary. Early Patristic Homilies* (Crestwood, N.Y., 1998), 1–45. For a list of all known ancient versions of the Dormition narrative, and an attempt to classify them chronologically by narrative detail, see M. van Esbroeck, "Les textes littéraires sur l'assomption avant le Xe siècle," in *Les Actes apocryphes des Apôtres: Christianisme et monde païen* (Geneva, 1981), 265–88 (repr. in M. van Esbroeck, *Aux origines de la Dormition de la Vierge* [London, 1995] I). Van Esbroeck's classification and proposed dating of these texts, although conjectural in some cases, is the system followed by most scholars today.

[4]For a discussion of Pulcheria's devotion to Mary, and its support by Proklos, patriarch of Constantinople in the 430s and early 440s, see N. P. Constas, "Weaving the Body of God: Proclus of Constantinople, the Theotokos and the Loom of the Flesh," *JEChrSt* 3 (1995): 169–94. See also K. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses. Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley, Calif., 1982), esp. 147–74; V. Limberis, *Divine Heiress. The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople* (London, 1994), 53–61.

suggested, still it does seem to represent, if one may put it this way, a kind of "spillover" of holy power and transcendent benevolence from the increasingly exalted figure of Christ. By the end of the fifth century, in Greek homiletics Mary had come to be evoked with a kind of ecstatic wonderment as the fulfillment of a whole range of typological figures from the Bible,[5] while in sacred iconography and the *Hymnos Akathistos* she was majestic queen, patron of her people, protector of the city.[6] Surely the story of Mary's remarkable death and her almost immediate entry into the transformed condition of Christ's risen body, which seems first to have been circulated among anti-Chalcedonian Christians in the late fifth century, must be seen as part of that spillover, that sharing in the role and qualities of the glorified Christ.

What I would like to argue here, however, is that another, more strictly eschatological concern was also at work in the development of the Dormition story, as well as in the rapid spread of its liturgical celebration and its theological interpretation by preachers: specifically, the concern to respond to a deep anxiety in the face of death that apparently began to be felt by Christians throughout the Mediterranean world just before 400, by depicting Mary as both the model of serene and holy dying and as the exemplar of the fully achieved salvation promised to all who die in faith. By the eighth century, at any rate, it is clear in the interpretations of Mary's Dormition by some of the classical homilists of the time that the story and the feast are as much about the general Christian hope for heaven, hope for an eternal happiness that will begin at death and that eventually will include the transfigured body as well as the soul, as they are about the uniquely exalted role of Mary herself.

Christian conceptions of death in the first three centuries of the church's history tended, in general, to mirror those of ancient Israel and popular Hellenistic culture. Most early Christian writers assume that death consists in the separation of the conscious soul from the material body, and that the best hope of the believer is that he or she will rest in a state of comfort among the dead—in "the bosom of Abraham," perhaps, or in what Tertullian calls the *inferiora terrarum*[7]—until the eschatological transformation of history, the final resurrection of the dead, and the judgment of all who have lived by the triumphant Christ.[8] In the most common early western understanding, forcefully expressed by Tertullian, only the martyrs can be expected to join the patriarchs and

[5]For references, see my article, "The 'Closed Garden' and the 'Sealed Fountain': Song of Songs 4:12 in the Late Medieval Iconography of Mary," in *Medieval Gardens* (Washington, D.C., 1986), 261 and n. 16; Mimouni, *Dormition,* 390–413.

[6]For the text and an English translation of the *Akathistos* hymn, see G. G. Meerssemann, *The Acathistos Hymn* (Fribourg, 1958); for a discussion of its origins, see C. Trypanis, *Fourteen Early Byzantine Cantica,* WByzSt 5 (Vienna, 1966); J. Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode et les origines de la poésie religieuse à Byzance* (Paris, 1977); Limberis, *Divine Heiress,* 89–92. For the development and importance of Marian iconography in the 5th and 6th centuries, see Averil Cameron, "Images of Authority: Elites and Icons in Late Sixth-Century Byzantium," in *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition,* ed. M. Mullett and R. Scott (Birmingham, U.K., 1981), 205–34; J. Pelikan, *Imago Dei. The Byzantine Apologia for Icons* (Princeton, N.J., 1990), 121–51.

[7]*De Anima,* 55, (CCSL), 2.862.11; cf. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* (ed. M. Marcovich, Patristische Texte und Studien 47 [Berlin, 1997], 80.32–81.36), 5; Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* (SC 294), 2.34.1–2, 352–54, and (SC 153), 5.31.1–2, 390–96.

[8]For full discussions of the early Christian understanding of death and expectations of salvation, see A. C. Rush, *Death and Burial in Christian Antiquity* (Washington, D.C., 1941); J. A. Fischer, *Studien zum Todesgedanken in der Alten Kirche* (Munich, 1954); A. Stuiber, *Refrigerium Interim. Die Vorstellungen vom Zwischenzustand und die frühchristliche Grabeskunst* (Bonn, 1957); B. E. Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church. A Handbook of Patristic Eschatology* (Cambridge, 1991), esp. 5–43.

prophets of old in Paradise immediately after death. Cyprian of Carthage, it is true, and some later authors insisted that all who live and die in courageous fidelity to their faith will be admitted immediately, as souls, into the Kingdom of God,[9] and Clement of Alexandria was convinced that those who have learned impassibility and have become "true Gnostics" during this life will come, at the end of the present life, to the "sacred abode" of the apostles and saints.[10] Still, the conception of the place of the dead essentially in terms of a more restful version of Sheol or Hades, rather than as bliss in the presence of God, seems to have persisted among ordinary Christians. The fourth-century Syriac writers Aphrahat and Ephrem, along with Hilary of Poitiers in the West, imagine both the souls and the bodies of the dead as "sleeping" under the earth until the end of history:[11] and the commendation of the dead given in the prayerbook of Sarapion of Thmuis—an Alexandrian collection probably put together in the early 350s—asks that the soul of the deceased person be given "rest . . . in green places, in chambers of rest (ἐν ταμιείοις ἀναπαύσεως) with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all your saints," until, in the day of final resurrection, "you may render to [the body] also the heritage of which it is worthy in your holy pastures."[12]

Against the background of such a passive conception of personal existence after death, it is easy to see why classically formed Christians, like Clement of Alexandria or Ambrose of Milan, continued to urge the view on their readers that death, as rest from labor, is a benefit for those who have lived well,[13] who have made their lives, in Platonic style, a "preparation for departure."[14] Gregory of Nazianzus, who frequently stresses the oppressiveness and fragility of the present life, in the style of the book of Ecclesiastes,[15] himself cherishes the hope that "every fair and God-beloved soul, when it is freed from the bonds of the body, . . . at once enjoys a sense and perception of the blessings that await it . . . and feels a wondrous pleasure and exultation, and goes rejoicing to meet its Lord,"[16] so he, too, speaks of grieving as vain and death as a welcome release. In his

[9] *To Fortunatus,* 12–13, (CSEL 3/1.345–47).

[10] *Stromateis,* 6.13.106–14.109 (GCS 52.485–86); cf. 4.26.163–65 (GCS 52.320–21); 7.12.79 (GCS 17/2.56).

[11] See Daley, *Hope,* 72–75 and 95 for references.

[12] Sarapion, *Euchologion,* 18 (ed. Maxwell E. Johnson; *OrChr* 249 [Rome, 1995], 68. Similarly, the prayer for the dead given in book 8 of the *Apostolic Constitutions* (Antioch, late 4th century) asks that God place the departed soul "in the place of the holy ones, in the bosom of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, with all those who have pleased God through the ages and have done his will"; in that peaceful place, the text later says, the just may hope to "see the glory of your Christ" (SC 336.256–58). In this text, it is not clear whether this hoped-for vision of glory is something to be enjoyed immediately after death, or only after the resurrection at the end of history.

[13] See, e.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.11.80 (GCS 52.283–84) and 7.13.82 (GCS 52.58–59); Ambrose, *De bono mortis,* 4.14–15 (CSEL 32/1.715–17), 5.16 (CSEL 32/1.717–19), 8.31–33 (CSEL 32/1.730–33), etc.; *De excessu fratris,* 2.3–7, 20–22.

[14] See, e.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 2.20.109.1 (GCS 52.172); Gregory of Nazianzos, *Or.* 7.18–19 (SC 405.224–28) (life as μελέτη λύσεως).

[15] See, e.g., *Poems,* II, 1, 31–32 (PG 37.1299–1305); *Or.* 7.18–19 (SC 405.224–28) (on the death of his brother Caesarius).

[16] *Or.* 7.21. For a perceptive reading of Gregory's view of death in its continuity with the spiritualized and intellectualized understanding of the Platonic tradition, see C. Moreschini, "La 'meditatio mortis' e la spiritualità di Gregorio Nazianzeno," in *Morte e immortalità nella catechesi dei padri del III–IV secolo,* ed. S. Felici (Rome, 1985), 151–60. See also J. Mossay, "Perspectives eschatologiques de saint Grégoire de Nazianze," *Questions liturgiques et paroissales* 45 (1964): 320–39; and idem, *La mort et l'audelà dans saint Grégoire de Nazianze* (Louvain, 1966).

funeral oration for his father, Gregory sets death in the context of a calm philosophical vision that owes as much to Platonic and Stoic anthropology as it does to the Gospel.

> Life and death, as they are called—apparently so different—are in a sense mutually dependent, and exist in tension with each other. For the former takes its rise from the corruption that is the mother of all of us, runs its course through the corruption that consists in the constant replacement of the present with something new, and comes to its end in the corruption that destroys this life altogether; while the latter, which is able to release us from the ills of this life, and which often transfers us to the life that is above, is not, in my opinion, properly called death at all, and is more dreadful in name than in reality. . . . There is one life: to look ahead to life. There is one death: sin, for it is the destruction of the soul.[17]

So in the new hagiographical genre portraying the ascetic life as the Christian "philosophy," the death of saints like Antony or Macrina was presented as embodying a calm and clear-eyed realization that departure from the body held no dangers for the soul, and was even to be welcomed joyously, as bringing about the union with Christ that one had so long desired.[18]

In the last decades of the fourth century, however, a new sense of insecurity and dramatic foreboding seems to have entered into the perception of both human history and the individual human life, among many Christians of both Greek East and Latin West. Unsettled, perhaps, by Emperor Julian's sudden decision in 362 to ban Christians from teaching in publicly supported schools, and by the threat of invasion from a variety of migrating peoples, many Christians in the decades before and after 400 seem to have shared a growing apocalyptic sense that history was nearing a disastrous end.[19] At about the same time, a new emphasis on death as a fearful and violent event, in which hostile demons struggle with protecting angels over the fate of each departing soul, begins to show itself more and more widely in Christian literature. For the Latin West, Eric Rebillard has recently argued at some length that the transition from the classic serenity of an Ambrose in the face of death, to the anguish of an Augustine, a Peter Chrysologus, or a Leo, was largely due to Augustine's theology and was grounded in his growing conviction of the powerlessness and sinfulness of human nature, developed in his controversy with the Pelagians.[20] However one judges Rebillard's thesis—and it seems to me not to explain the more dramatic apocalyptic forebodings of some of Augustine's own correspondents, let alone the terrors of Sulpicius Severus or Jerome, which antedate the Pelagian controversy—it is at least more likely that the strongly agonistic view of death that begins to appear in Greek and Coptic ascetical and hagiographical literature of the late fourth

[17] *Or.* 18.42 (PG 35.1041AB).

[18] See Athanasius, *Life of Antony,* 92 (SC 400.370–72); Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Macrina,* 23–25 (SC 178.216–28); cf. Gregory of Nazianzos, *Or.* 8.21–22 (SC 405.290–96), on the serene and prayerful death of his ascetical sister, Gorgonia. For a thoughtful interpretation of the treatment of Antony's death in Athanasius's *Vita,* as a paradigm of a new ascetic ideal of death, see M. Alexandre, "A propos du récit de la mort d'Antoine (Athanase, *Vie d'Antoine:* PG 26.968–974, par. 89–93). L'heure de la mort dans la littérature monastique," in *Le temps chrétien de la fin de l'Antiquité au Moyen-Age, IIIe–XIIIe s.* (Paris, 1984), 263–82.

[19] For the evidence of this change in the perception of contemporary history, see B. E. Daley, "Apocalypticism in Early Christian Theology," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism, II: Apocalypticism in Western History and Culture,* ed. B. McGinn (New York, 1998), 21–39.

[20] E. Rebillard, *In Hora Mortis. Evolution de la pastorale chrétienne de la mort aux IVe et Ve siècles* (Rome, 1994).

century probably has its roots not in learned disputes but in popular Christian piety, and may perhaps reach back to pre-Christian notions common to a number of Near Eastern cultures.

Although Athanasius, for instance, presents Antony's own death as an utterly peaceful event, he describes an earlier vision the saint had of the normal dying person's struggle with evil spirits, as if it were happening to himself.

> He saw himself as if he were outside himself, and as if he were being led through the air by certain beings. Next he saw some foul and terrible figures standing in the air, intent on holding him back so he could not pass by. When his guides combatted them, they demanded to know the reason why he was not answerable to them. And when they sought an accounting of his life from the time of his birth, Antony's guides prevented it, saying to them, "The Lord has wiped clean the items dating from his birth, but from the time he became a monk and devoted himself to God, you can take an account."[21]

This same notion, that repulsive and frightening demons wait to detain the dying soul and to drag it off to hell—that they act as assessors or "tax collectors" (τελῶναι) to hold each soul accountable for all its past sins—appears early in the Christian literature of Egypt: in the Gnostic "First Apocalypse of James" and even in a few of Origen's homilies.[22] But it was used with especially powerful effect in the desert monastic literature of the fourth and fifth centuries,[23] combined with dire warnings of the severity of God's coming judgments and depictions of the sufferings of the damned.[24] The first letter ascribed to Antony regards the Bible's descriptions of the punishments of the wicked and the rewards of the just after death as one of the three "gates for souls," leading to healing repentance in this present life.

A homily attributed to Cyril of Alexandria, which almost certainly comes from the monastic world of the fifth-century Egyptian desert, even if it is not by Cyril himself, depicts a separate demonic examination on the use of each of the five senses, and portrays in abundant and harrowing detail the world of torture that awaits convicted sinners after death.[25]

[21] Athanasius, *Life of Antony,* 65 (SC 400.304–6), trans. R. C. Gregg (New York, 1980), 79 (alt.).

[22] *First Apocalypse of James* (Nag Hammadi V, 3), 33.2–36.1 (ed. A. Veilleux, Bibliothèque Copte de Nag Hammadi 17 [Quebec, 1986], 40–46); in its present form, this work shows some signs of Syrian origin, but the idea of demonic tax collectors is clearly Egyptian: see Origen, *Homily on Luke,* 23.5–6 (GCS 35.154–55; SC 87 bis. 318–20). On this theme in early Christianity, see J. Rivière, "Le rôle du démon au jugement particulier chez les pères," *RSR* 4 (1924): 43–64; idem, "Mort et démon chez les pères," *RSR* 10 (1930): 577–621; A. Recheis, *Engel, Tod und Seelenreise. Das Wirken der Geister beim Heimgang des Menschen in der Lehre der alexandrinischen und kappadokischen Väter* (Rome, 1958).

[23] See, e.g., the first Greek *Life of Pachomius,* 93 (ed. F. Halkin, *Sancti Pachomii vitae Graecae;* Subsidia Hagiographica 19 [Brussels, 1932] 62–63), and the Bohairic *Life,* 83 (ed. L.-Th. Lefort, *S. Pachomii vita Bohairice scripta,* CSCO 89 [Leuven, 1965], 93–94; trans. CSCO 107, 62); or the Coptic fragments of Schenute of Atripe, Op. 42 (CSCO 42.189; trans. 96.111) and 82.1 (CSCO 73.199–202; trans. 108.121 f).

[24] See, e.g., *Apophthegmata Patrum,* Evagrius, 1 (PG 65.173AC); ibid., Macarius, 38 (PG 65.280AB); Macarius of Egypt, *Visio* (PG 34:386–92).

[25] Cyril of Alexandria (?), Homily 14, *On the Departure of the Soul, and on the Second Coming (of Christ)* (PG 77:1072–90). A small part of this homily also appears in the alphabetical *Apophthegmata* under the name of Cyril's uncle and predecessor, Theophilus. Related texts from the Schenute tradition, as well as the style of the homily, suggest that the source is Egyptian and ascetical, although it is unlike the other work of both Theophilus and Cyril. See O. Bardenhewer, *Geschichte der frühchristlichen Literatur,* vol. 4 (Freiburg, 1923), 65; M. Richard, "Les ecrits de Théophile d'Alexandrie," *Le Muséon* 52 (1939): 33–50, esp. 41–42.

> "What fear and trembling do you think the soul will experience on that day," the preacher asks, "when it gazes on the dreadful, fierce, cruel, merciless, untamable demons circled around it, as dark as Ethiopians? The very thought of them is more oppressive than any punishment! Just by looking at them, the soul will be cast into turmoil, terrified, racked with pain, and made to shrink with horror and distress, and will flee for refuge to the angels of God. The soul will be protected by the holy angels, as it makes its way forward and upward through the air, but it will discover toll stations (τελώνια) guarding and controlling the way, blocking the path of the souls that are trying to ascend. And each toll station deals with its own particular sins."[26]

In a more sustained narrative form, the *Apocalypse of Paul*—probably composed, in its present form, by Greek monks in or near Constantinople during the first two decades of the fifth century—also tells of the role of protective and challenging angels at the death of each individual, and describes at length the divine judgment that follows and the various punishments and rewards meted out to the dead as a result.[27] All of these fourth- and fifth-century works suggest a new preoccupation, especially in the ascetical milieu, with the uncertainty of human fate after death, an unrelenting emphasis on the need for penance and conversion, and a dread of the severity of the judgment that awaits each departing soul. It is a far cry from both the quiet anonymity of Hades and the peace of Abraham's bosom.

Christian theological literature of the later fifth and sixth centuries, however, shows signs of a decided attempt to correct the imbalance of this anxious picture, by connecting the death of the individual once again with the more hopeful promises of salvation central to Christian tradition. A striking example is the treatment of the church's funeral liturgy in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* of Pseudo-Dionysius. In the introductory section to his description and interpretation of these rites, the author remarks that the death of those who have lived holy lives should be as different from the deaths of "profane" people as their whole lives have been: "When those who have led a holy life consider the truthful promises of God, since they have observed the truth of them in some way at the Resurrection [of Christ], they come to the end of death with a divine joy and a firm and sincere hope, as though they were coming to the conclusion of their holy contests. They understand perfectly that through their resurrection to come their rewards will be in a perfect and endless life and salvation."[28] Rejecting a variety of what he considers erroneous notions of the afterlife—that it will be perpetually disembodied; that souls will receive other bodies and live on earth again; or that the beatitude promised us is simply material, worldly happiness, in some millenarian paradise[29]—Dionysius contends that those whose lives are sanctified in faith know instead that "their entire selves will receive the Christlike inheritance."[30] The baptized who have deviated from the path of faith may see their approaching end as a warning, a questioning of the value of their former behavior; but

[26] PG 77:1073C2–D1.

[27] *Apocalypse of Paul,* 8–18, 31–51 (ed. K. von Tischendorf, *Apocalypses Apocryphae* [Leipzig, 1866; repr. Hildesheim, 1966] 38–48, 56–69). See P. Piovanelli, "Les origines de l'*Apocalypse de Paul* reconsidérées," *Apocrypha* 4 (1993): 25–64; C. Carozzi, *Eschatologie et au-delà: Recherches sur l'Apocalypse de Paul* (Aix-en-Provence, 1994), with introduction, analysis, and corrected Latin text.

[28] *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy,* 7.1.1, ed. G. Heil and A. M. Ritter, Corpus Dionysiacum 2, Patristische Texte und Studien 36 (Berlin, 1991), 120.16–22; trans. T. L. Campbell (Lanham, Md., 1981), 79.

[29] *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy,* 7.1.2, 121.10–12.

[30] Ibid. (ed. Heil and Ritter, 121.22–23; trans. Campbell, 80).

the holy person is filled "with a sacred joy" as he or she sees death come near, and that joy will communicate itself to the holy person's friends: "The friends of the one fallen asleep, in accordance with their divine relationship and similarity of life, call him blessed, whoever he is, because he has triumphantly arrived at the goal of his prayers. They offer up songs of thanksgiving to the Author of his victory, and pray that they, too, may come to the same lot."[31]

Dionysius then goes on to describe the funeral rites—allusively, as is his wont, but in considerable detail. The actual liturgy depicted bears enough similarity to the prayer for the dead in the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* to suggest that Dionysius, too, is presenting us with a recognizable picture of the fifth-century Antiochene liturgy of burial. In his opening prayer for the deceased, the bishop "pronounces a holy prayer praising the august Deity who delivers us from the unjust tyrannical power oppressing us all, and conducts us to his most just judgments"[32]—no demon examiners are thought of here as conducting a summary judgment on a Christian's life. The texts of the prayers and the contents of the scriptural readings to which Dionysius alludes, as well as the rite of anointing the corpse and what seems to be eucharistic communion for the assembled community,[33] are all sacred actions which, in Dionysius's view, "sanctify the whole person, effect the work of his complete salvation, and announce through all the holy ceremonies that his resurrection will be absolutely perfect."[34]

Although his sermons frequently contain allusions to the prospect of judgment after death, Caesarius of Arles (ca. 470–543), who was presumably a contemporary of the author of the Dionysian corpus, seems to imagine that searching process as involving body and soul at the time of resurrection.[35] A brief collection of prayers for the time of death and the service of burial, however, appended to Caesarius's rule for nuns in a ninth-century manuscript, which seems either to have been composed by him or to come from the church of his time, presents the death of a Christian, in its ideal form, as the journey of her soul through the underworld directly to a region of light: "Permit her to cross over the gates of hell and the paths of darkness and remain in the mansions of the saints and in the blessed light, as you once promised to Abraham and his descendants."[36] The language of these prayers is largely reminiscent of the older Latin conception of death as a time of peaceful waiting, but there is at least the hint of special and immediate reward for a person who has consecrated her life to God.

The last two decades of the sixth century witness to a continuing concern on the part

[31] Ibid., 7.1.3 (ed. Heil and Ritter, 122.15–19; trans. Campbell, 81).

[32] Ibid., 7.3.1 (ed. Heil and Ritter, 124.4–7; trans. Campbell, 83).

[33] The structure of the ceremony described—opening prayers and psalms; the reading of scripture and a homily by the deacon; the dismissal of catechumens after the homily; the reading out of diptychs; the kiss of peace and concluding intercessions—suggests that the burial service is also a eucharistic liturgy, as does Dionysios' concluding statement that the anointing of the corpse, which recalls baptism, and "the most sacred symbol of the divine communion," promise salvation for the body as well as for the soul of the deceased.

[34] *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy,* 7.3.9 (ed. Heil and Ritter, 130.3–5; trans. Campbell, 89).

[35] See Daley, *Hope,* 208–9, for references.

[36] *Caesarii opera,* 2, ed. G. Morin (Maredsous, 1942), 127; trans. F. S. Paxton, *Christianizing Death. The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), 54. For a detailed study of this and the other prayers of this brief ritual appended to Cesarius' rule, as well as of their relationship to other Gallican liturgical prayers, see D. Sicard, *La liturgie de la mort dans l'église latine dès origines à la réforme carolingienne* (Münster, 1978), 260–79.

of church leaders in both East and West to affirm that death is not simply a sleep or a period of inert waiting for final transformation, but that the souls of the dead are very much alive, and that both the joy of the blessed and the punishments of the damned begin immediately with death. In a little-known work written shortly after 582 *On the State of Souls after Death,* Eustratius, a presbyter of Hagia Sophia who is better known as the biographer of Patriarch Eutychius (552–565, 577–582), drew on classical philosophy and the leading voices of the Christian tradition—especially the Cappadocian fathers and John Chrysostom—to argue that the souls of the dead are not inactive in any sense but continue to operate, either in praising God in heaven or in occasionally carrying out missions for God on earth. Citing a passage from Chrysostom that refers to the life after death of the souls of both the damned and the saints, Eustratius asks: "If, then, even before the resurrection, those who have expended their efforts on the virtues enjoy the dignity of the angels when they depart this life, and offer their hymns to God along with the angels as a work of their own, and if those who are weighed down by troubles in this life have them as their advocates and helpers before God, with what right do you say that they can neither appear [on earth], nor be active, nor do anything else at all?"[37]

Eustratius's Roman contemporary, Pope Gregory the Great, is similarly concerned, in the fourth book of his *Dialogues,* to remind his readers of the prospect of immediate judgment, purification, reward, or damnation after death, and cites the experiences of many in his own day who have had vivid dreams and visions of the souls of the dead, warning of these things. Some of his anecdotes reflect the same sense we have met in fifth-century eastern ascetical literature, that the death of sinners involves a conflict with menacing demons, while "the sound of heavenly singing" accompanies the death of the elect.[38] Like Eustratius, Gregory seems to be particularly eager to demolish the notion that the dead are simply quiescent, or that they are incapable of continuing interaction with the living, even as they enjoy or suffer the fruits of the life they have led, in a transcendent state of existence beyond the grave.[39]

It is in the context of this late antique concern for the fate of the human soul at death and beyond, and of attempts within the Greek church, especially, to offer a more reassuring picture than what was being promoted in the ascetical literature or in works

[37] Eustratius Presbyter, *De statu animarum post mortem,* 17, 18 in J.-P. Migne, *Theologiae Cursus Completus* (Paris, 1840), 494. This work has not yet been fully published in Greek; a partial edition, along with the Latin translation included by Migne in his collection, first appeared in Leo Allatius, *De Utriusque Ecclesiae Occidentalis atque Orientalis Perpetua in Dogmate de Purgatorio Consensu* (Rome, 1655), 336–580. In the work, Eustratius refers to his former patriarch, Eutychius, as dead which places its composition after 582. This work is summarized by Photius, *Bibliotheca,* 171 (ed. R. Henry, 2: Edition Budé [Paris, 1960] 165–67). See Daley, *Hope,* 200.

[38] E.g., *Dialogues,* 4.15 (SC 265.58–62).

[39] See, e.g., Gregory's powerful narrative of the "immense throng" of heavenly men and women who surrounded the holy Roman recluse Romula at her death: *Dial.* 4.16 (SC 265.66); cf. ibid., 18 (SC 265.70) and 22 (SC 265.78): "God wished to have the voices of these spirits reach human ears, so that human beings might learn in a human way that if they serve God zealously they will live their true lives hereafter." In his *Moralia in Job* (14.72–74: CCSL 143A.743–45), Gregory tell us that while he was still papal *apocrisiarius* in Constantinople (579–586), he publicly challenged the assertion of the reigning patriarch, Eutychius, that the body of the resurrection will not be identical with the present, mortal body—an apparently Origenist position that the patriarch, according to Gregory, publicly recanted on his deathbed. Both Greeks and Latins were clearly preoccupied with the fate of the dead during the last decades of the 6th century.

like the *Acts of Paul,* I suggest, that one must place the full development of the story and the liturgical feast of Mary's Dormition in the sixth century, as well as its subsequent theological interpretation. The origins of the notion that Mary's death was in some way extraordinary, and that she has already been allowed to share in the full reality of the eschatological resurrection, are obscure.[40] Epiphanius of Salamis, writing in Palestine in the late 370s, takes an expressly agnostic position on the question of whether she died and was buried at all, or whether she "remained alive," presumably in the way that Enoch and Elijah were said to have been taken alive into heaven.[41] By the 440s, under the patronage of Bishop Juvenal and the exiled empress Eudokia, a basilica in honor of the Theotokos was built in an ancient Jewish cemetery near Jerusalem, in the heart of the Kedron valley, at the foot of the Mount of Olives and adjacent to the site venerated as the Garden of Gethsemane; by the mid-sixth century, at the latest, pilgrims visited the basilica as the place of Mary's empty tomb.

The first reliably datable narrative sources that testify to some kind of personal apotheosis for the mother of Jesus come from the Syriac churches of the late fifth century. A verse homily by the Syriac poet Jacob of Serug, delivered at a synod of anti-Chalcedonian bishops at Nisibis in 489, celebrates Mary's holy death and glorious entry into heaven.[42] After her body is buried on the Mount of Olives by Jesus and the twelve apostles, her soul is depicted as passing first through Hades to comfort the patriarchs and prophets, then entering with them into the Kingdom of God, where she is crowned queen before "the celestial assemblies."[43] In Pseudo-Dionysius's treatise *On the Divine Names,* probably written around 500 in a west Syrian community, there is an enigmatic passage in which the author, in the persona of a contemporary of the apostles, tells of being gathered with them at what appears to be Mary's funeral, and of joining with them in an ecstatic outpouring of inspired songs, in praise of the ineffable mysteries that took place then.[44] The earliest full narrative of her death and bodily migration from earth to heaven is found in a group of fragmentary Syriac texts in the British Museum, texts representing a source usually dated to the second half of the fifth century.[45] In this version, Mary dies

[40]For a survey of the highly nuanced terminology developed in late Patristic Greek literature to denote the "mystery" of Mary's death, see Daley, *Dormition,* 27–28.

[41]*Panarion,* 78.11, (GCS 37 [Epiphanius 3], 462); ibid., 23 (474). For a discussion of these texts, see Daley, *Dormition,* 5–7.

[42]Although Jacob of Serug (451–519) was not himself a polemical opponent of the Chalcedonian definition, and seems to have retained good relations with some of its supporters, his christology clearly fits the anti-Chalcedonian or "monophysite" pattern of the late 5th and 6th centuries. It seems safe to assume that he was part of the "monophysite" ecclesial communion that had broken contact with the imperial church. See R. C. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies* (Oxford, 1976), 6, 119–22.

[43]The only available edition of the Syriac text of this *memrā* is that of P. Bedjan, *Sancti Martyrii, qui et Sahdona, quae supersunt omnia* (Paris-Leipzig, 1902); a partial English translation by T. R. Hurst is available in *Marianum* 52 (1990): 86–100, and a full translation, by M. Hansbury, in *Jacob of Serug on the Mother of God* (Crestwood, N.Y., 1998), 89–100.

[44]*On the Divine Names,* 3.2 (ed. Heil and Ritter, 141). This passage is tentatively identified in the early scholia on Dionysios, by John of Skythopolis, as referring to the death of Mary and her entry into glory (PG 4:236c; Eng. tr. P. Rorem and J. C. Lamoreaux, John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus [Oxford, 1998] 199–200); it is repeatedly quoted by the early homilists on the Dormition, as containing the earliest and most reliable narrative account of the event.

[45]These texts, identified as the "obsequies" narrative or S1 by Michel van Esbroeck, are dated to the 5th century by all scholars who have studied them except Mimouni, who prefers to put them in the 6th century on the basis of his own scheme for the development of the Dormition narrative (*Dormition,* 78–86). For details on their manuscript identity and publication, see Daley, *Dormition,* 7 and n. 16. A long narrative of Mary's

and is buried by the apostles; Jesus receives her soul, and her body is then transferred by angels to Paradise, where it is buried under the Tree of Life to await the resurrection. The two earliest Greek accounts—probably also from the late fifth or early sixth century—tell a much more elaborate story of Mary's death and burial. One of these narratives (Van Esbroeck's G1) begins with the announcement by an angel to Mary of her approaching death, in which she is presented with a palm branch from Paradise as a symbol of her coming triumph; they conclude with the discovery by the apostles, three days after Jesus received her soul in death, that her body has also been conveyed by the angels to Paradise, where it is now reunited with her soul.[46] In the other (Van Esbroeck's G2), narrated in the person of John the Evangelist, the apostles are also gathered from the ends of the earth to be with Mary at her death. Many people from Jerusalem, hearing of her approaching end, visit her at Bethlehem and are cured of various illnesses. Finally, Jesus comes to receive her soul, as the apostles sing praise and as Mary blesses the whole assembly. She is buried, despite resistance from Jews; three days later her tomb is discovered to be empty, "and we all perceived," the narrator concludes, "that her spotless and precious body was translated to Paradise."[47]

It is not until the end of the sixth century that the narrative of Mary's death and entry into glory seems to have become fixed in its general outline and accepted by all the major churches of the eastern Mediterranean world, whether they subscribed to the imperially sponsored christology of Chalcedon or not. Its origins, however, seem clearly to have been among those who opposed Chalcedon, probably above all monastic communities in Syria and around Jerusalem. Scholars have recently suggested that the final form of the story may represent a compromise between the "aphthartist" party among the non-Chalcedonians—those (eventually even including Emperor Justinian[48]) who

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death, burial, and translation to Paradise, which clearly belongs to the same tradition as these Syriac fragments and Jacob of Serug's homily, is the so-called *Liber requiei,* now preserved in full only in an Ethiopic translation dating from the 13th century or later. The modern editor of this work, Victor Arras, argues in his introduction to the text (*De transitu Mariae apocrypha Aethiopice,* I, CSCO 343 [Leuven, 1973], v–viii) that it is the fullest representative of the original source—probably written in Greek—from which not only the Syriac witnesses derive their story, but also the earliest extant Greek accounts (Van Esbroeck's G1 and G2), the longer Greek narrative of John of Thessalonike (G4: see below), the Latin narrative of Pseudo-Melito (L1), two 8th-century Old Irish narratives (H1), and some Georgian fragments recently discovered and published by Van Esbroeck (I1–3: "Apocryphes géorgiens de la dormition," *AB* 91 [1973]:55–75, repr. in his *Aux origines de la dormition,* V). The Ethiopic text, however, contains other known apocryphal stories about Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, which seem more likely to have been added to an older narrative of Mary's death than to have been omitted by the other early witnesses. As a result, it is difficult to accept Arras's confident assertion that this Ethiopic text represents the version that is "omnium . . . (fide) dignissimus, quamvis vitiatus" (introduction, viii).

[46]This narrative, which clearly shows Gnostic or Hermetic features (see secs. 11, 20), was published by Antoine Wenger from a Vatican manuscript: *L'assomption de la T. S. Vierge,* 210–40 (in Wenger's typology, "R").

[47]Pseudo-John the Evangelist, *Transitus Mariae,* ed. K. von Tischendorf, *Apocalypses Apocryphae* (Leipzig, 1886), 95–112 (here 112); trans. M. Rhodes James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1926), 201–9 (here 208).

[48]For a discussion of Justinian's late edict—now lost—supporting the "aphthartist" christology, see F. Loofs, "Die 'Ketzerei' Justinians," in *Harnack-Ehrung: Beiträge zur Kirchengeschichte* (Leipzig, 1921), 238–48; M. Jugie, "L'empereur Justinien a-t-il été aphthartodocète?" *EO* 24 (1925): 399–402. Justinian himself always strongly supported the official Chalcedonian formulation of the person of Christ, although he worked for an interpretation of it that would be acceptable to the non-Chalcedonian party. There were "aphthartists," however, among both Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians: see Leontius of Byzantium, *Contra Aphthartodocetas* (PG 86:1317A–1320C).

maintained that the divinizing effect of the hypostatic union upon the human flesh of Christ freed it, and perhaps also the flesh of Mary in which that union was achieved, from the very possibility of corruption from the moment of Incarnation—and the "non-aphthartists," like Severus of Antioch and Leontius of Byzantium, who held that the flesh of both Mary and Jesus was normal, mortal, and subject to all sinless forms of corruption.[49]

One early retelling of this unified narrative of Mary's dormition is contained in a sermon preached by Theodosius, the influential anti-Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria from 535, in the year of his death, 566/567. Although the sermon now exists only in Coptic, it was probably delivered in Greek, and the author claims as his source for the dormition story a manuscript from Jerusalem, which he had consulted in the library of St. Mark in Alexandria. After a considerable introduction extolling Mary's many virtues, Theodosios presents a brief narrative of her life, followed by an extended retelling of the story of her death. Here the emphasis, as he begins, is clearly on Mary's terror at her approaching end; in a dream, she encounters Jesus, who warns her that her death is near, and she is immediately filled with dread. For the just as well as the sinner, she says, death is a journey across a vast sea of fire; she continues:

> what shall I say about the separation of soul from body? Oh, that moment is full of fear and terror! We are told that two powers accompany the soul: one light, the other hideous shadow, full of disgusting and fearful shapes. If the soul is just, it is led toward them with compassion and well-meaning encouragement, and one realizes that one is at peace with one's creator. But if the soul is sinful, those [spirits] who belong to the light withdraw, and those who belong to darkness approach with anger, striking the soul, darting suddenly at it, beating it, grinding their teeth, pouring out flames of fire from their mouths on the face of the soul.[50]

The portrayal of the anguish of death here is familiar from the Egyptian ascetical tradition. But the point of the narrative is clearly to counteract such terrors. As Mary prays to die peacefully, surrounded by virgins with lamps and censers, and supported by the apostles Peter and John, Jesus appears, telling her that a better life "in the heavenly Jerusalem" awaits her,[51] and promising that 206 days after her body is placed in the tomb[52] he will come again to reunite her soul and her body and lead both into glory.[53] Theodosios proceeds to describe Mary's peaceful death, her funeral procession and burial—complete with the traditional detail of an attempt by Jews to hinder it by violence—and the joyful reception of her soul in heaven. After 206 days of watching by her tomb, the apostles see Christ appear again; he opens her tomb and summons her body

[49]On the possibility of an "aphthartist" influence on the development of the standard dormition narrative, see Mimouni, *Dormition,* 461–71 and the literature cited there.

[50]Vat. Copt. 61, fol. 131v: M. Chaîne, "Sermon de Théodose, patriarche d'Alexandrie, sur la dormition et l'assomption de la Vierge," *ROC* 29 (1933–34): 305. Chaîne offers both a complete Coptic text and a complete translation of this sermon; a text and English translation of its narrative section have been published by F. Robinson, in *Coptic Apocryphal Gospels* (Cambridge, 1896), 90–127.

[51]Chaîne, "Sermon de Théodose," 307.

[52]The sermon lays great stress on the date of Mary's death, which it places on the 20th of Tobi (29–30 January by our calendar), and that of her bodily assumption, the night of the 15th–16th of Mesori (22 August by our calendar). This seems to represent the Egyptian liturgical practice of celebrating her death, or dormition, separately from her assumption, a practice that may well be reflected in the 18 January date of the assumption festival in the early Gallican missals.

[53]Chaîne, "Sermon de Théodose," 309.

forth to be reunited with her soul, saying, "Rise, you who are free! Go, bring to the whole world that liberty by which I have redeemed all of my creation! Rise up, O holy body; be united to this blessed soul, and receive it in resurrection before the eyes of all creation!"[54] Theodosius concludes his sermon by assuring his hearers that Mary has "received glory for all the human race."[55] Those who practice compassion toward the poor and the weak, and who celebrate the memory of Mary and the saints, will have powerful patrons before Christ, interceding "that the frail little skiffs of our bodies and souls might themselves arrive in safe harbor."[56]

This narrative and its interpretation, by a patriarch who was himself apparently facing death and whose Coptic church had traditionally viewed death in the darkest of colors, conveys a particular poignancy in its studied attempt to replace fear with consolation and hope.[57] The Palestinian, Syrian, and Byzantine churches of the sixth century may generally have imagined death in less dramatic terms, yet the same sense of anxiety before demons, the same fear of a pitiless judgment and a journey into dark and unknown regions, seems by then to have percolated into the popular Christian imagination throughout the empire. It seems significant, then, that it was during the last two decades of the sixth century—the decades in which both the presbyter Eustratius and Pope Gregory the Great urged their own, more positive picture of the fate of the dead—that Emperor Maurice (582–602) not only refurbished the basilica at Gethsemane marking the traditional site of Mary's tomb,[58] but established the liturgical celebration of her death and her entry into glory as a feast for the whole empire.[59] The Dormition story seems to have been thought to contain a message the world needed to hear.

The first extant Greek homily for the feast—as distinguished from the earlier documents I have mentioned, which simply narrated the reported events of Mary's death and entry into glory—is that of John of Thessalonike, who was bishop of that city for at least some of the time between 610 and 649. John's homily is largely also a retelling of the Dormition story, as it had now become stabilized throughout the churches of the East, but it includes a brief hortatory introduction. He says that he has composed it in order to put its liturgical celebration, which had been delayed in Thessalonike until then, on the sound footing of reliable tradition; his predecessors had been reluctant to introduce the feast, despite Maurice's policy, because the accounts circulating of Mary's death were generally unreliable and occasionally heretical.[60] Here John proposes to offer an authen-

[54] Ibid., 312.

[55] Ibid., 313.

[56] Ibid., 314.

[57] The Coptic tradition seems to have continued to find consolation and inspiration for a courageous death in the story of Mary's end. The present-day liturgy for death and burial of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which is thought to have been derived, through an Arabic translation, from Coptic liturgical books in the 14th century, includes a long prayer to be said over the linen burial cloth before the wrapping of the body, which recounts the story of Mary's death at length, with some details reminiscent of Theodosius's homily. See F. E. Dobberahn in *Liturgie im Angesicht des Todes. Judentum und Ostkirchen,* ed. H. Becker and H. Ühlein (Skt. Ottilien, 1997), 1:657–79 (analysis), 2:882–86 (translation of this prayer). For a description of contemporary practices of mourning among Coptic Christians, which apparently no longer avert to the Dormition narrative, see L. Störk, ibid., 1:629–55.

[58] This is attested by the Georgian lectionary of Jerusalem: M. Tarchnischvili, ed., *Le grand lectionnaire de l'Eglise de Jérusalem* 2: CSCO 204 (Leuven, 1960), 27.

[59] So Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, *Church History,* 17.28 (PG 147:292).

[60] *Homily on the Dormition,* 1, ed. M. Jugie, PO 19 (Paris, 1925), 376.

tic report, based on his culling of material from the best earlier accounts. His purpose, he says, is to glorify the Mother of God in a fitting way,[61] but it seems just as clearly to be that of giving his hearers a paradigm for holy dying, a story that models both normal fear and proper ritual practice, and that offers in return a more exalted hope.

The details of the Dormition story, as John of Thessalonike tells it, reveal the classical shape of the narrative from now on. After she has been apprised of her coming death by an angel, and given a branch of palm that is to serve—in this, as in many of the Dormition accounts—as a kind of emblem for her funeral procession as well as a traditional symbol of victory,[62] Mary prays earnestly to Christ to be saved "from the powers that will confront [her] soul" in the hour of death. She is joined by friends and relatives, and later by the twelve apostles, miraculously gathered on clouds from the ends of the earth; all of them light lamps and join her in her vigil, singing psalms as she prepares the garments for her burial.[63] During their watch, Mary remarks to those gathered in her house that death in itself is not terrible, "for it is a universal thing. I am only afraid of the enemy who makes war on everyone. He can do nothing, of course, against the righteous and faithful; but he defeats the unbelieving and sinners, and those who do their own will—he does in them whatever he desires."[64] Mary's friends immediately reply, "Sister, you who have become Mother of God and mistress of all the world, even if all of us are afraid, what do you have to fear? . . . You are the hope of us all. We little ones—what shall we do, or where shall we escape?"[65] Mary immediately urges them not to weep, but to rejoice; she herself, however, in the paragraphs that follow, is depicted alternately as calm and full of courage, and as weeping and anxious about the immediate future, especially about the possibility that hostile Jews may try to burn her body before it is buried.[66]

Mary eventually dies, on the third day after the narrative begins, in a way that determined the later Byzantine iconography of the Dormition: Jesus and the archangel Michael come to her house, and Jesus takes her soul—which John describes as human in form but lacking any features to distinguish it sexually,[67] and seven times more brilliant than the sun—wraps it in veils, and gives it to Michael to bear away.[68] Mary is buried with

[61] Ibid., 2, ed. Jugie, 378 (Daley, *Dormition,* 49).

[62] Michel van Esbroeck uses the palm branch, as well as a number of other details, as the distinguishing mark of one of the two main branches of Dormition apocrypha: "Les textes littéraires sur l' Assomption," 268–69. In some versions, the angel who gives it to her tells her that he has taken it from the tree of life in Paradise, under which she will later be laid to rest.

[63] *Homily on the Dormition,* 4–6, ed. Jugie, 380–84 (Daley, *Dormition,* 50–55).

[64] Ibid., 5, ed. Jugie, 382 (Daley, *Dormition,* 52).

[65] Ibid., ed. Jugie, 382 (Daley, *Dormition,* 52).

[66] Ibid., 6, ed. Jugie 383–86 (Daley, *Dormition,* 53–54).

[67] The lack of sexual characteristics in this eschatological human form reflects a Greek theological tradition going back to Gregory of Nyssa. In his sermons *On the Making of the Human Person* (PG 44.177D–196B) 16–18, Gregory argues that the "original" form of the human creature, contained only in the mind of God but most fully reflective of God's image, lacked the differentiation of the sexes, but that this difference was included in the earthly realization of humanity with the purpose of imposing some limits on sin, since sexual reproduction is closely linked to mortality; in the final perfection of the human person, however, when the "original" form will finally be attained, sexual characteristics will disappear. See also Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (PG 46.148B–149A); for a 7th-century witness to the same tradition, see Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua,* 41 (PG 91:1304–16). For a recent reinterpretation of the passage in *On the Making of the Human Person,* see J. Behr, "The Rational Animal: A Rereading of Gregory of Nyssa's *De hominis opificio,*" *JEChrSt* 7 (1999): 219–47.

[68] *Homily on the Dormition,* 12: Jugie 396 (Daley, *Dormition,* 62–63).

elaborate ceremony (including the prominent use of her palm branch and the singing of Psalm 113 [114–115]—beginning "Israel has come out from Egypt"—during the funeral procession[69]), and John of Thessalonike tells us that three days later, when the disciples opened her tomb to venerate her body, they found only an empty shroud. The interpretive core of the homily, however, comes not at the end but in a long discourse delivered by the apostle Peter to the assembled mourners just before Mary's death. Peter praises them for keeping their lamps lit during their vigil, and urges them to do the same with the "immaterial lamp" of the inner person, so that death may be for all of them an entry into "the marriage feast to rest with the bridegroom. For so it is with our mother Mary. For the light of her lamp fills the world, and will not be quenched until the end of the ages, so that all who wish to be saved may take courage from her. Do not think, then, that Mary's death is death! It is not death, but eternal life, because 'the death of the just will be proclaimed glorious before the Lord' (Ps. 115 [116]:15)."[70]

John of Thessalonike's retelling of the fully developed Dormition story, as well as the other extant narrative and homiletic sources, provide details of ritual action surrounding Mary's death and burial that were clearly considered important by him and later commentators on the Dormition tradition, details that I can only summarize here. Forewarned by God, Mary realizes that death is near; friends and neighbors gather around her bed to console her and pray for her peaceful passing—women from the neighborhood, plus the twelve apostles and St. Paul, gathered from the ends of the earth, and sometimes also other figures associated with the New Testament, like Dionysios the Areopagite. Mary urges them all not to weep or mourn, but simply to carry torches, to burn incense, and to pray the Psalms incessantly in a kind of long vigil service; some of the apostles give elaborate sermons, apostolic exhortations that may be intended as the equivalent of scripture readings. Then Mary dies peacefully, commending her soul into Jesus' hands; her body is wrapped in the grave clothes she herself has prepared; she is brought to burial in a procession that again includes torches, incense, and the singing of Psalm 113; finally, she is laid in the tomb with solemn prayers, and in some sources the apostles are said to have been inspired by the Holy Spirit to improvise "mystical hymns": religious poems, presumably, that were not taken from the Psalter. Although the shape and details of the ceremonies of Mary's death and burial do not directly correspond to what we know of ancient Antiochene or Byzantine rituals surrounding death,[71] these narratives are clearly intended to describe an extended solemn liturgy and to hold that liturgy up to their hearers as a central part of how to die well.

[69] Ibid., 13, ed. Jugie, 398 (Daley, *Dormition,* 64). This detail, present in at least two 6th-century narrative sources for the Dormition story (Wenger's R and A: G1 and L4 in Van Esbroeck's listing), suggests the use of this psalm in burial rites of the period. We have no other sources to corroborate this for the Byzantine liturgy, although both this psalm and Ps. 114 (116) ("I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplication") appear in an early—perhaps even contemporary—Latin *Ordo Defunctorum,* to be chanted at the moment of death. See Paxton 39; Sicard 2–33. Richard Rutherford has observed that the wording of the first line of Ps. 113 (114) in these Dormition narratives is different from the usual form: not "As Israel came forth from Egypt," but the declarative "Israel has come forth from Egypt." As in later Latin liturgical formulations, Mary's passage through death is conceived as a new typological realization of the Exodus of God's people. See R. Rutherford, "Psalm 113 (114–115) and Christian Burial," *StP* 13 (1975): 391–96.

[70] John of Thessalonike, 9, ed. *Homily on the Dormition,* Jugie, 390 (Daley, *Dormition,* 58).

[71] For full descriptions of the various liturgies surrounding Jewish and eastern Christian death and burial, with the original versions and German translations of the texts currently in use in these communities, see Becker and Ühlein, *Liturgie im Angesicht des Todes* (as above, n. 57).

In the two centuries that followed John of Thessalonike's retelling and reinterpretation of the story of Mary's Dormition, other Greek preachers also attempted to reflect on the wider theological significance of what was now a universally observed liturgical feast: lesser-known preachers like the sixth-century Palestinian bishop Theoteknus of Livias and the unknown author of a late seventh-century homily attributed to Modestus of Jerusalem, as well as major figures of the eighth- and ninth-century church such as Germanus of Constantinople, Andrew of Crete, John of Damascus, and Theodore of Stoudios. Most of them work a modest summary of the now-traditional narrative into their sermons, usually emphasizing that it can claim the authority of no less a figure than Dionysius the Areopagite, but they are clearly hesitant to accept all the details at face value. All of them, more importantly, suggest that what the church celebrated in the story of Mary's death and resurrection was a great "mystery" that involved not only her but in some way all of humanity, indeed all of creation.[72]

Perhaps the clearest development of this theological reflection on the meaning of the Dormition festival, and on the narrative it presumes, can be found in Andrew of Crete's eloquent trilogy of sermons for the all-night vigil of the feast, probably composed during the early decades of the eighth century. The second of these sermons begins with a sustained reflection on the significance for Christian faith of what is being celebrated. Andrew here reminds his hearers that the central Christian Mystery is that of Christ: the Incarnation of the Word, and the redemption worked for all humanity through his presence in the world, his death, and his resurrection. "He accepted even the experience of corruption, he mingled with the dead and entered the cheerless realm of the underworld, so that we might escape the bonds that awaited us there and might pass over to the world of incorruption."[73] This does not mean, of course, that those who now live by faith in Christ escape the necessity of dying; the point, rather, is that "we shall die, but we shall not remain enslaved by death, as once we did when we were bound by it through the legal bond of sin."[74] For all Christians, he writes, death truly is a transitory sleep—a "dormition" (κοίμησις)—"a passage into a second life."[75] Since even Jesus, in sharing our lot, endured human death and entered into the underworld himself, none of us is dispensed from making that same journey; for Andrew, however, the important message of Christian faith is that "the souls of all who submit to God's law and show, in the Holy

[72] See, for instance, the homily of Ps.-Modestos, 7 (Daley, *Dormition,* 90–92); see also the Dormition homilies of Andrew of Crete, I, 5 (Daley, 108 ff); John of Damascus, I, 12 (Daley, 196 f). The recognition that the classical Dormition story asserted nothing less than full resurrection of Mary's body—even though church authors had tended to avoid that term, probably because it is used in the New Testament and the earlier tradition primarily for the resurrection of Christ at Easter and the eschatological resurrection of the saints—is clearly attested by the 12th-century grammarian Michael Glykas, in the twenty-second of his *Chapters* on difficult passages in scripture: see S. Eustratiades, Μιχαὴλ τοῦ Γλυκᾶ, Εἰς τὰς ἀπορίας τῆς θείας Γραφῆς κεφάλαια, 22 (Athens, 1906), 258–66.

[73] Homily II, 1 (Daley, *Dormition,* 118).

[74] Ibid., 2 (Daley, *Dormition,* 118).

[75] Ibid. (Daley, *Dormition,* 119). The verb κοιμάω, sleep, is a fairly common euphemism for dying in classical Greek poetry; its substantival version, κοίμησις, is not generally used in this sense, but appears in the Septuagint version of the book of Sirach (46:19 [for the "death" or end of the world]; 48.13), in John 11:13, and in Christian literature of the first four centuries. With the general acceptance of the story of Mary's holy death and entry into heavenly glory, she seems rapidly to have become the figure with whom this term is primarily associated.

Spirit, a heavenly pattern of life while they are still in the flesh will be taken from [the region of death] to a place of light that more befits the holy state of the saints. . . . As for the beauty and greatness of that place, its infinite blessedness and its loveliness that exceeds even the mind's power to comprehend, they will doubtless see all these things more clearly and more profoundly who have drawn closer to God than we have."[76]

Against the background of this universal Christian hope, Mary's Dormition, in Andrew's view, was simply a direct and immediate realization of the deliverance from death promised to all human beings: an "ecstatic movement toward the things we only hope for during this life, a passage that leads us on toward transformation into a state like that of God."[77] Like all of us, even Jesus, Mary too had to descend into the underworld of bodily death; but her descent was less slow and laborious than ours will be, her stay in the condition of mortal decay much briefer, in proportion to the degree that her holiness, as Mother of God, is greater than ours. "The period of time for which death and bodily decay held power over her," he writes, "was only as long as was necessary for her to move, at natural speed, through unknown regions and to come to know them firsthand, regions where she had never set foot before and that she was now crossing as in a journey through foreign, uncharted territory."[78] The *manner* of her passing over to heaven, he has Mary herself tell his hearers a few paragraphs further on, "had its own peculiar dignity, above the lot of every other mortal," but "the change itself will be common to you all."[79] In fact, Andrew asserts openly at the end of his first homily for the feast, the miracle they are celebrating is something "common to us all, yet proper to her";[80] "this is our frame we celebrate today," he insists, "our formation, our disintegration!"[81] What the Dormition festival commemorates, in other words, is really nothing else than the universal Christian hope for a life and transformation reaching beyond death, rooted in the life and death of Mary's son.

In 1978 Hans-Georg Beck argued, with typical erudition and flair, that despite the deeply Christian character of Byzantine culture in so many respects, there remained throughout its history, in popular attitudes to death, strong elements of a "mentality"—a de facto way of looking at things—that was more in continuity with antique fatalism than with the Christian hope just described.[82] However one may judge his conclusions, the evidence Beck presents certainly illustrates intellectual and emotional conflict and ambivalence, within Byzantine literature, toward death as the ultimate threat to human happiness—a tension, in the terminology Beck borrows from John Henry Newman, between a widespread "notional assent" to the Christian Gospel's promise of eternal life and an underlying "real assent" to a darker, pre-Christian apprehension of death as simple and inexorable deprivation of all that gives human existence color and joy.

Part of the problem, I suspect, is that Greek theology never articulated a clear and unanimous vision of the Christian eschatological hope, at least not in the unambiguous

[76]Andrew of Crete, Homily II, 3 (Daley, *Dormition,* 120).

[77]Ibid., 4 (Daley, *Dormition,* 121).

[78]Ibid. (Daley, *Dormition,* 121 f).

[79]Ibid., 7 (Daley, *Dormition,* 125).

[80]Homily I, 8 (Daley, *Dormition,* 114).

[81]Ibid., 9 (Daley, *Dormition,* 114).

[82]H.-G. Beck, *Die Byzantiner und ihr Jenseits. Zur Entstehungsgeschichte einer Mentalität,* AbhMünch, Hist.Kl. (1979, no. 6).

terms in which it had come to speak of the trinity of hypostases within the single reality of God, or the two unmingled yet unseparated natures in which the single hypostasis of the Son had his being. There had been no major controversies on eschatology, except for intermittent debates with the Origenist tradition on the corporeal character of the resurrection body and on universal salvation or *apokatastasis*. Apart from Gregory of Nyssa's brilliant dialogue *On the Soul and the Resurrection* or his briefer, more strictly philosophical discourse *On the Dead,* no Greek theologian had attempted, in the patristic period, to move Christian thought in a systematic and reflective way beyond the vision of immortality sketched out in Plato's *Phaedo,* or the Stoic quest for freedom from passion and irrational fear. Ordinary people's view of death was undoubtedly still overshadowed, through the late patristic period and well into medieval Byzantium, by the dreary prospect of a dank underworld and the dreadful vision of demonic judges harassing the soul at death. In effect, I would argue, the only clear and viable medium in late Christian antiquity for proclaiming the prospect of a gracious transformation of all humanity by God that would reach through and beyond the terrors of death was the story, the feast, and the theological interpretation of Mary's death: a death witnessed by the apostles and the church, and celebrated with prayer and pious ritual, in which Jesus himself received the departing soul in his arms, and the body, though buried, itself soon came to share in Jesus' own bliss and glory. The recent date and questionable origins of the story raised some Orthodox eyebrows in the sixth century, but seem not to have mattered in the end. What was important was the news that one of our own kind—the Theotokos, the source of the Savior's humanity—herself already shared, after death, in the glorious life of the risen Christ, and that Christ had appointed her as our patron to help us navigate the same journey.[83]

Occasionally, one glimpses a hint of the idea that such a postmortem transformation was indeed still being accomplished in other extraordinarily holy people. In his *Life of Symeon the Fool,* Leontius of Neapolis, in the mid-seventh century, reports that the end of that saint, too, was what could best be called a κοίμησις, a falling asleep. Unlike Mary, Symeon was simply buried in a stranger's tomb by a few friends, without ritual washing, incense, procession, candles, or psalms. But when his faithful follower John the deacon, with other admirers, opened his grave shortly afterwards, to move him to a more honorable resting place, they found that Symeon's body, too, was gone, "for the Lord had glorified him and translated him."[84] It seems possible, at least, that the Mystery of Mary's

[83]Significantly, the extant homilies on the Dormition from 7th- and 8th-century authors stress the new role of patron given to Mary after her death and glorification: see esp. John of Thessalonike, 14 (Daley, *Dormition,* 67); Andrew of Crete, III, 9 (Daley, *Dormition,* 144); Germanos, I, 8 and II, 2 (Daley, *Dormition,* 160, 170); John of Damascus, II, 17 (Daley, *Dormition,* 221 f). It seems to have become commonplace to pray to the Theotokos for help at the hour of death: Theophanes reports this of the dying iconoclast emperor Constantine V Copronymos (Theophanes, *Chronographia,* ed. Carolus de Boor [Leipzig, 1883] 1.448), and Leo the Deacon (History 10.11 [PG 117.924C]) gives the same picture of John I Tzimiskes. In the 5th-century *Apocalypse of Paul* (chap. 46, Tischendorf, 64), Mary is the spokesperson for all the saints who have interceded for Paul and have asked that he be granted his vision of the afterlife. Similarly, in an anonymous 10th-century Byzantine apocalypse, Mary is depicted as interceding with Christ for a respite in the sufferings of the damned—a role that in *Apocalypse of Paul* (chap. 44, Tischendorf, 62–63) is given to Michael and the other angels. See L. Radermacher, ed., *Anonymi Byzantini de caelo et infernis epistula* (Leipzig, 1898); Beck, *Jenseits,* 49 f.

[84]Leontios of Neapolis, *Life of Symeon the Fool,* 168, ed. L. Rydén (Uppsala, 1963), trans. D. Krueger, *Symeon the Holy Fool Leontius's Life and the Late Antique City* (Berkeley, Calif., 1996), 169 f). A similar disappearance is

Dormition had already assumed for Leontius the paradigmatic role that Andrew of Crete, some fifty years later, would boldly proclaim it to have for all believers: "this is *our* Mystery," *our* transformation—our pattern and promise of eschatological hope.

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reported of the body of St. Andrew the Fool, in the life of that saint by Nicephorus the Presbyter—a work of disputed date, but probably from the late 10th century and apparently modeled on Leontius's life of Symeon. Andrew, who has lived on the streets of Constantinople most of his adult life, dies alone; his corpse is found lying on the ground in a subterranean portico, by a poor woman who has been drawn to it by the heavenly fragrance it is emitting. She runs to tell others of this phenomenon, and when they return together, "they saw no one; they were deeply amazed by the fragrance of myrrh and incense, but were unable to find the remains of the saint. For the Lord had transferred him (μετέθηκε—one of the common terms in the Dormition literature for Mary's transition to glory), by a peculiar judgment which only that person knows, who understands God's hidden decrees." (*Life of St. Andrew the Fool,* ed. L. Rydén, 2 vols., Studia Byzantina Upsaliensia 4:2 [Uppsala, 1995], 300; PG 111:888B [translation mine]).