THE SIX BOOKS APOCRYPHON: TOWARDS A RITUAL ANALYSIS

by

Ana H. Golland

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ABSTRACT

The dormition narratives, concerned with relating the last days of Mary, seem to have emerged in the late fourth century. This thesis will focus on one example of the dormition narratives, the Syriac Six Books Apocryphon. By comparing The Six Books Apocryphon with other dormition narratives, and through analysis of the text within a ritual theoretical framework, this thesis will aim to discuss its significance and relevance as an example of marginal Christian groups, syncretism, and the diversity of Christian groups in the third to fifth centuries. It will also demonstrate the value of ritual theories for the study of religious texts.

Dormition narratives are important because of what we are able to glean from them regarding the history of Christianity prior to the triumph of orthodoxy as we know it today. I find The Six Books Apocryphon particularly interesting as an example of the wide range of popular groups and beliefs in late antiquity considered heretical in nature by figures such as Epiphanius of Salamis, as well as for exploring the reasons why texts such as this and the groups that produced them remained marginal. Furthermore, this text exemplifies the syncretism that has characterized Christianity since Antiquity.

For the purposes of this thesis paper, my main focus is Wright’s version of the Syriac Six Books Apocryphon, the features that render this text different from all the other dormition narratives, and what those differences can tell us about the communities in which the text was produced and used.
PREFACE

This thesis is the original, unpublished, and independent work of Ana H. Golland.
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INTRODUCTION

The ancient accounts of the last days of Mary, also known as the dormition narratives, are traditionally thought to have emerged in the late fifth century as a result of the granting of the title *Theotokos* or God-Bearer to Mary during the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE. In spite of the popularity of these narratives, these texts were officially condemned as heretical by the mid-sixth century in what is known as the *Decretum Gelasianum*.¹ The fifth chapter of this document consisted of a catalogue of apocryphal works to be rejected by the church, among which the book called ‘The Home-Going (Assumption) of the Holy Mary’ was included due to its presumed authorship by heretics or schismatics of the Roman Catholic Church.²

Such a view of the dormition narratives pushed the literature further to the fringes, and over the course of time some of the exemplars systematically passed into obscurity. What is more, whenever any of these obscure texts resurfaced from the archives of remote monasteries, theologians and religious scholars dismissed them as worthless superstition. As I will show below, the last decades of the twentieth century saw a

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renewed interest in the dormition narratives, and the narratives’ value for understanding early Christianity began to be acknowledged, albeit only by a handful of scholars.

In the introduction to the latest edition of Simon Claude Mimouni’s comprehensive work on the dormition and assumption narratives, an attempt is made to emphasize the importance of studying these narratives individually as well as part of the larger genre of dormition narratives to which they belong. He explains that no text can be properly studied without first having a ‘global overview’ of all the other documents within the genre. This has been the approach taken by Mimouni as well as by Stephen Shoemaker, who is at present the leading North American scholar in the subject. In fact, one can summarize the scholarly work done in the last twenty years on the earliest dormition narrative, the Six Books Apocryphon, in terms of the expositions of these two scholars on dormition narratives, often presenting opposing views. At the heart of their argument is the theoretical approach each has chosen. Mimouni seems to have endeavoured to merge literary analyses with theological concerns in his assessment of the dormition narratives. Shoemaker, on the other hand, has been more willing to set aside theological concerns in search for a more empirical look at the narratives, seeing them as works within a particular genre.

As will become apparent in the next several pages, academic work on the subject of the dormition narratives has been approached from either a literary or historical framework, and this tendency has inevitably led to the endorsement of doctrinal associations. The academic discussion on these texts has indeed been directed towards

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3 Dormition narratives refer to written traditions about the death of Mary and her assumption to heaven.
5 I will be referring to Shoemaker’s works throughout this paper.
trying to identify the origins and provenance of the traditions, as well as the need to trace the development of the theological thought through the various stages of redaction of the texts and across the various families of traditions within the dormition literature. However, in these endeavours there is still a subtle struggle in defense of the various religious sensibilities regarding the Virgin Mary. In other words, the antagonistic discourse between Protestants and Catholics about the veneration of Mary seems to have almost inevitably crept in to academic circles. Each scholar or theologian who has ever worked on the dormition narratives seems to have brought in his own dogmatic position, mainly through the theoretical framework within which texts are typically analyzed. My goal is to suggest a different approach to the dormition narratives that avoids assigning any doctrinal value judgement on the text. Far from being definitive, my conclusions will be only suggestive, and my approach heuristic. Nonetheless, I hope to be able to remain as close to a social-scientific interpretation as possible, paralleling the most recent multidisciplinary developments in patristic and late antiquity studies.

Although I agree that theological and literary analyses are in order for the study of the dormition narratives in general and the *Six Books Apocryphon* in particular, limiting our approach to only these aspects will give us only a partial understanding of the significance of these texts to the study of Christianity in Late Antiquity. As far as I can see, neither of the scholars mentioned above have fully explored the possibility of approaching the *Six Books Apocryphon*, or any of the other dormition narratives, from a multidisciplinary point of view in order to understand not only when and how the narratives emerged but also why the narratives exist and who produced them. Rather than following through from the point of view of literary criticism or adopting a
theological approach, I propose that some answers can be reached by taking into consideration the leading practices in ritual theory.

It seems appropriate to begin with a short description of the *Six Book Apocryphon* based on its background, provenance, date, and genre, followed by a brief survey of the scholarship on the Apocryphon. Following this brief synopsis, the aim of the first chapter is to provide an overview of origins of the dormition narratives and to compare the *Six Books Apocryphon* to other dormition narratives and to other related genres. In the second chapter I will inquire about the authorship and audience of the *Six Books Apocryphon*, as well as to examine a sect described by Epiphanius of Salamis in the mid-fourth century called the *Kollyridians*. This sect is sometimes understood to be related to the community or group behind the *Six Books Apocryphon*, although this association is debated. In the third chapter I will attempt to analyse the *Six Books Apocryphon* through a ritual theoretical framework, in order to show the value of this methodology for providing a more nuanced interpretation of the text in terms of possible authorship and audience.

**The Six Books Apocryphon**

**Background and provenance of the text**

The *Six Books Apocryphon* is a text of Syriac origin, extant almost in its entirety in only two manuscripts, one discovered by William Wright and published in 1865 and the other discovered by Agnes Smith Lewis and published in 1902. For reasons I will explain below, the text discovered and translated by Wright is the subject of this research, and all references there in are to that text.

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6 Stephen Shoemaker, “The Cult of the Virgin in the Fourth Century: A Fresh Look at Some Old and New Sources,” in *The Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (New York: Burns and Oates, 2008), p. 79. For reasons I will explain below, the text discovered and translated by Wright is the subject of this research, and all references
consensus among scholars regarding a Greek original text as the basis from which these Syriac versions derive, which would have been already in circulation in the fourth century.\(^7\) However, there is no textual evidence to support this claim.\(^8\)

Like other apocryphal works on Mary considered outside of the proto-orthodox tradition\(^9\), Shoemaker states that The Six Books Apocryphon “bore the imprint of the heterodox communities that had produced and transmitted [it]”.\(^10\) As just noted, some scholars, including Shoemaker, have connected The Six Books Apocryphon to a particular

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\(^8\) The earliest Greek dormition narrative available is from the sixth century, attributed to John the Theologian, and later than the Six Books Apocryphon. This text is considerably different from the Six Books, and belongs to a different tradition. The various traditions of dormition narratives will be briefly explained in chapter 1 below. For the text of John the Theologian’s Greek dormition see Stephen Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption* (New York: Oxford University Press: 2002), 35 and 360-369. Also, Wright refers to a Greek version discovered and translated by Tischendorf, which Wright himself examined before it was published in 1866. Tischendorf’s Greek text, however, is dated to the 11th century.

\(^9\) Examples of such heterodox apocryphal works are the Gospel of Mary, the Mater Mysteriorum, the Book of Mary’s Repose. In both the Gospel of Mary and the Mater Mysteriorum, Mary is portrayed as a gnostic teacher to the apostles of the mysteries of the world and of salvation; see Stephen Shoemaker, “From Mother of Mysteries to Mother of the Church: The Institutionalization of the Dormition Apocrypha,” in *Apocrypha*, Volume 22 (Brepols Publishers, 2011): 30.15, 20. In the Book of Mary’s Repose, Jesus is portrayed as an angel in contrast to the high Christology of other orthodox apocryphal works; see Shoemaker, “Mother of Mysteries” 22.

community named the Kollyridians, based on the fourth-century CE account of Epiphanius of Salamis.\(^{11}\) The connection between the text and the community will be the subject of Chapter 2 below.

**Date of the Six Books Apocryphon**

The text has been traditionally dated to 550-600 CE, but there are indications that both the text and the tradition it represents may be much older. One indication is the fact that nowhere in the text is Mary referred to by the title of *Theotokos*, although the title ‘mother of the Lord’ is used.\(^{12}\) Since the title of *Theotokos* became widespread in Marian literature as one of her official titles after the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE, the absence of this particular title of Mary in the *Six Books Apocryphon* suggests that the text may have been composed before the mid-fifth century. Also, according to Shoemaker, the instruction in the *Six Books Apocryphon* concerning the offering of baked bread is curiously reminiscent of the bread-baking rituals in honour of Mary criticized in the *Panarion* of Epiphanius of Salamis, dated to approximately 375 CE. The appearance of this ritual in the *Panarion* serves as additional evidence that either the *Six Books Apocryphon* or a version close to it may have been in circulation by the mid fourth century.\(^{13}\)

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11 Shoemaker believes that “the striking parallels between the rituals of the *Six Books* and those ascribed by Epiphanius to his opponents would seem to suggest some sort of a connection between the two.” See Shoemaker, “Mother of Mysteries,” 30.


Genre

The dormition narratives, including the *Six Books Apocryphon*, fit perfectly the description of apocalypses. Besides the account of Mary’s dormition and assumption, these narratives also include her otherworldly journeys to heaven and hell, although she is always guided by Jesus himself rather than by an angel, as is customary of apocalypses. Richard Bauckham also refers to the *Six Books Apocryphon* as “a distinctive early Christian apocalypse, which has not hitherto been recognized as such.” Esbroeck, Mimouni and Shoemaker situate the text within the dormition narratives and make these type of narratives their own separate genre.

Sources for the *Six Books Apocryphon*

The *Six Books Apocryphon* does not seem to have been mentioned by any other ancient source, although the number of versions in which it appears - Latin, Syriac, Arabic, and Ethiopic - are a testimony of its influence and widespread use.

William Wright, who published his work on palimpsests in 1865, translated the text I have chosen to work with from one of the only two Syriac manuscripts extant in its entirety. At the time, Wright did not find the text valuable, only interesting. Agnes Smith Lewis translated the other Syriac palimpsest (see Figure 1) of the *Six Books* Apocryphon.

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14 Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 333.
15 Palimpsests are basically recycled parchment material. Bruce Metzger explains that “in times of economic depression, when the cost of vellum increased, the parchment of an older manuscript would be used over again.” Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 21.
Apocryphon reaching more or less the same wording as that of William Wright, although her Syriac text had some additions. These two manuscripts have been dated to the fifth century CE. Other versions are also extant in Arabic and Ethiopic, but these are not as ancient or complete as the Syriac versions and are also newer renditions.

Figure 1: Plate VII from palimpsest containing portion of the Transitus Mariae. Source: Agnes Smith Lewis (1902), public domain.

In terms of establishing which text of the Six Books Apocryphon is older, considering that Smith Lewis’ text contains material also appearing in Ethiopic and

17 Agnes Smith Lewis, *Apocrypha Syriaca: The Protevangelium Jacobi and Transitus Mariae* (London: C. J. Clay and Sons, Cambridge University Press Warehouse, 1902), xvii. Lewis came across this vellum palimpsest in 1895 at Suez, and she purchased it after noticing the contents. The texts on the surface correspond to the works of Athanasius, John of Chrysostom, Theodosius, Mar Efram, Theodorus, and others. However, beneath these texts lie the Syriac version of the *Protoevangelium of James* and one of the Dormition narratives (*Transitus Mariae*). Smith Lewis, *Apocrypha*, ix-x.

18 In the case of the Arabic dormition narratives, the extant manuscripts are all dated between the 14th and the 19th centuries, although based on their themes and theology these could correspond to an earlier time, perhaps the 9th to 13th centuries. Pilar González Casado, “Textos árabes cristianos sobre la dormicion de la Virgen,” *Ilu. Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones, VI*, Jan 2001, p 76. The earliest Ethiopic manuscript of the dormition narratives, *Liber Riquiei*, although considered by Shoemaker contemporary with perhaps Smith Lewis’ text of the fifth century CE, belongs to a separate dormition tradition (Palm of Tree tradition of narratives). See Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 33.

Arabic but missing from Wright’s text, I understand Wright’s to be the earliest copy based on the reasons I will give below. In this respect, according to Bauckham it is better to suppose the longer text to be original. He consequently identifies Smith Lewis’ text as older than Wright’s,20 but I disagree with this position. Contrary to Bauckham, I believe that the textual tradition tends to elaborate rather than to omit over time.21

Bauckham infers from the variations between the two Syriac texts that Smith Lewis’ text preserved material omitted from Wright’s text for the sake of abbreviation, although he also grants the possibility that the variants in Smith Lewis’ text may suggest later additions.22 The main omissions Bauckham singled out as omitted in later recensions are the passages describing the throne of the Trinity.23 He says that these throne passages must be the original ones, considered superfluous by subsequent redactors, and thus omitted. He further states that these very passages reveal Smith Lewis’ text as the earliest one. However, a different scenario might be plausible. First of all, the issues surrounding the Trinity are not ironed out until the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE, while Epiphanius’ Panarion, which seems to respond the rituals found in Wright’s version of the Six Books Apocryphon, was written in 375 CE.24 If Wright’s version does in fact pre-dates Smith Lewis’ text, it makes sense for Wright’s

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21 I have followed the conventions used in textual criticism applied to biblical passages with two kinds of probabilities. One of the criteria based on internal evidence is to prefer shorter readings over longer ones unless there is an overwhelming sense that the omitted portions are otherwise suspicious. In this case, the omission hypothesis is warranted. See Metzger and Ehrman, The Text of the New Testament, 218.
22 Bauckham, The Fate of the Dead, 347.
24 If indeed Epiphanius of Salamis is referring to a written tradition of Mary’s dormition it is plausible to connect his reference to Wright’s version of the Six Books Apocryphon, as this is the only text in the dormition genre that mentions the offering of baked bread which Epiphanius condemns as heretical. This point will be elaborated on below.
text to not convey the strong position towards the Trinity found in Smith Lewis’ text, while such material describing the Trinity could have been found in subsequent texts redacted after the Council of 381 CE. In other words, Wright’s text omission of the elaborate throne of the Trinity is not the product of later redactions. Instead, the addition of the descriptions of the throne in Smith Lewis’ text are an example of additions made in light of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. There is no explicit reason for passages concerning the Trinity to be omitted in later renditions of The Six Books, as these passages can add authenticity to the narrative. It makes more sense that, as the doctrine of the Trinity developed, the passage was added to later versions of the narratives.

History of the research on the dormition narratives

Among the first scholars to work on the dormition narratives was Arthur Le Hir, who in a publication of 1886 commented on the texts from a theological point of view and on their scholarly value. He maintained that the origins of the belief in the assumption of Mary belonged to an oral tradition, and that the texts that followed had not much historical value, as they reflected only the variations to which the original oral tradition was subject in the first five centuries of Christianity. In other words, his position was that the dormition narratives, namely those published by his contemporaries

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G. Zoega, M. Enger, W. Wright and T. Tischendorf, were not worthy of study based on their lack of scriptural support.  

Later, Joseph Plessis in 1924 questioned again the historical value of the texts. He failed to see the value of the texts as historical evidence of the beliefs present in the first centuries of Christianity, as he only focused on the lack of historicity of the account of Mary. His contributions, however, were important. He acknowledged the artificial nature of the apostolic origins claimed by some of the narratives and he also noticed that the narratives could be divided into two groups, namely the ones that share a common ancestor, and the ones that seem to be literarily independent from other texts. He considered Wright’s *Six Books Apocryphon* in Syriac as belonging to the same family as the Greek Dormition Narrative of Pseudo-John and the Arabic version of the *Six Books Apocryphon*. After his work, there seems to be a long pause in scholarly work on the dormition narratives until Martin Jugie’s publications in 1944. 

Although not explicitly referred to in the papal decree, the dormition narratives were an important part of the formulation of the 1950 *Munificentissimus Deus* decree of Pope Pius XII in the Vatican. A committee of theologians was established by the

26 Le Hir, “De l’assomption de la sainte Vierge,” pp. 554-555. For his brief description of the published narratives he used in his study, see Le Hir, “De l’assomption de la sainte Vierge,” 534-535.
29 Mimouni criticizes this aspect of Plessis’ contributions to the study, as he finds them, rightly so, rather arbitrary. See Mimouni, *Les traditions anciennes*, 33.
Vatican to determine whether the assumption of Mary was an issue that merited an official dogmatic definition. As a result, in preparation for the decree, a renewed interest in the dormition narratives emerged, aimed mostly at recovering the earliest traditions in support of the papal decree being drafted. In fact, it seems as if the studies published between the 1940’s and 1950’s on the various dormition narratives were limited to dogmatic issues regarding the dormition and assumption of Mary. Consequently, this dogmatic approach perpetuated the subtle debates regarding the last days of Mary between Roman Catholic and non-Catholic parties in academic circles, during the decades following the announcement of the Munificentissimus Deus decree.

Martin Jugie (1878-1950) played an important role in the research of the traditions concerning Mary’s last days, in spite of his dogmatic and didactic approach. He looked at the early dormition narratives as a tool for drawing out doctrinal issues concerning the assumption of Mary. From his time forward, most of the scholarly discussion has centered on the dispute between Assumptionist and Assumptionless doctrines. His engagement with the oldest dormition narratives, including William Wright’s English translation of the Syriac Six Books Apocryphon, was framed within the context of Ephrem of Edessa’s teachings on the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

Some of his contributions to the study of Mariology were based on his opinion regarding

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31 Stephen Shoemaker, Ancient Traditions, 10.
33 This theological terminology refers to distinctions between the narratives or traditions that explicitly mention Mary’s bodily assumption to heaven (Assumptionist), and those traditions that omit these details (Assumptionless). See Shoemaker, Ancient traditions, 3.
what he saw as a close relationship between the emergence of these dormition texts in the fifth century and the council of Ephesus in 431 CE, and also the evolution of the belief in the assumption of Mary within the context of the conflicts against the Monophysites.35

By 1944, he published a highly influential study presenting the historical and doctrinal value of the dormition narratives and their impact in liturgy, theology and art.36

One of Jugie’s students, Antoine Wenger, approached the subject from a philological point of view, though still influenced by his own personal theology.37 His work in the 1950’s focused on the literary history of the narratives separate from the history of the belief in the assumption of Mary.38 He maintained that the idea of the assumption of Mary originated with the apocryphal writings, as his approach privileged what he considered the history of the literary tradition.39 He also published the earliest extant Greek text of the dormition narratives, labeled Transitus R, dated to the 11th century, although he believed it to derive from a prototype of the fifth century.40 The strength of his philological background, according to Mimouni, led to a few biases in judgment, such as the identification of the Transitus R he had published with the fragments of a Syriac dormition narrative without providing any basis for such a conclusion other than mere

36 Martin Jugie, La Mort et L’Assomption de la Sainte Vierge: Etude Historico-Doctrinale. Studi e Testi 114 (Vatican City, 1944). Also see Mimouni, Les traditions anciennes, 42 for a summary of Jugie’s contributions.
37 Mimouni, Les traditions anciennes, 26, 49.
40 Wenger, L’Assomption de la T.S. Vierge, 210-241. The reasons for his identification of this text with a prototype, unknown and lost to us, are not clear.
literary considerations not disclosed. Generally speaking, Wenger’s theological stance also influenced his work, as he devoted most of his research to Assumptionist narratives, almost totally neglecting texts that clearly belonged to that grouping, such as the Syriac dormition narratives including the *Six Books Apocryphon.* One valuable contribution to the study, however, was Wenger’s theory that the various early dormition narratives resulted from different original types rather than being the product of revisions made to a single original tradition.

Unlike Wenger, Bellarmino Bagatti understood the dormition traditions as derivatives of a single oral tradition. He published a series of studies in the early 1970’s proposing that the traditions behind the dormition narratives originated in the Jewish-Christian communities of the second century CE. He based his thesis on his comparison of the archaeological record of what he identified as the tomb of Mary in Jerusalem and the topographical data present in most dormition narratives, especially noting the position of a new tomb in relation to the other sepulchral spaces in the area. Moreover, according to Bagatti, the Judeo-Christian themes belonging to the original oral tradition of the last days of Mary were redacted by the Gentile-Christians during recovery

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41 Wenger, “Foi et pieté,” 933, 935. Mimouni, *Les traditions anciennes*, 49, 52. I agree with Mimouni that Wenger’s claims about the antiquity of the Greek *Transitus R* over the other dormition narratives is based solely on presupposition and therefore open to question.
of the traditions leading up to the 4th century. He then concluded that the existence of such a place both as the tomb of Mary in the archaeological record of Gethsemane as well as the literary record of the dormition narratives are evidence of the uninterrupted veneration of Mary and her tomb since the very beginning of Christianity. The oral tradition, which he dates to at least the second century CE, is the missing link in his proposal. The relevance of his work to the study of the Six Books Apocryphon in particular is the assertion that the tradition goes back to the Judeo-Christians of first- and second-century Palestine.

An interesting new direction on the subject was introduced by New Testament specialist Frederic Manns. In an article published in 1979, Manns proposed that the dormition narratives were related to rabbinic literature and belonged to the type of Midrash that emerged in the first centuries of Christianity. Drawing from his knowledge of early rabbinic literature, Mann compares the Christian attitudes towards the death of saints to various Midrashic passages and concludes that the symbolism found in those Midrashic passages influenced Christian views on death and the final fate of the saints, most importantly that of Mary. He fits the narratives about Mary’s dormition within the common themes of veneration of saints in Second Temple Judaism, based on rabbinic exegesis on the deaths of Abraham, Moses, and Aaron found in Genesis Rabbah and Deuteronomy Rabbah to support his view. In the same way that the rabbinic tradition resorted to symbolism that is also common to other cultures, the authors of the early dormition narratives also must have done the same. Rather than reinventing a

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46 Bagatti, New Discoveries, 58.
47 No one that I know of has contested his views.
48 Frederic Manns, “La Mort de Marie Dans le Texte de la Dormition de Marie” in Augustinianum vol. 19 no. 3 (1979), 507-515.
49 Manns, “La Mort de Marie,” 508, 510.
language that would express the complexities of death, Manns believes it would have been more convenient for Christians to employ the symbolic language of rabbinic literature and to repeat certain common motifs, such as death as sleep, God’s intervention in announcing death to the saints, death and the afterlife as rest from earth’s toils and as a reward for righteous life, and so on.\textsuperscript{50} Furthermore, according to Manns, the authors of the dormition narratives seem to also have used the same themes as the rabbinic writers to deal with questions regarding the last days of Mary, her death and final destiny. The implication is that the authors of the original dormition narratives would have been familiar with the rabbinic representations of the death of holy men, and that perhaps the dormition tradition originated in a Judeo-Christian \textit{milieu}.

Michael Van Esbroeck was interested in the typology of the dormition narratives, and he proposed the idea of analyzing the texts based on types or families of origin. He identified two families in the dormition traditions, the “Palm of the Tree of Life” and the “Bethlehem” traditions.\textsuperscript{52} He places the Syriac \textit{Six Books Apocryphon} under the “Bethlehem” tradition, and considers it the oldest narrative of the tradition widely diffused in what he calls ‘Monophysite’ areas.\textsuperscript{53} He saw the emergence of these

\textsuperscript{50} Manns, “La Mort de Marie,” 511.
\textsuperscript{51} Manns, “La Mort de Marie,” 507. The parallels between the dormition traditions and Midrashic passages in respect of calendrical rites are not within the scope of this paper, although it is a subject worth further examination.
texts as a response to the council of Chalcedon in 451, and the polemics against the Monophysites.\(^{54}\)

To this list we can add the current works of Simon Claude Mimouni and Stephen Shoemaker. After the passing away of Michel von Esbroeck in 2003, contemporary scholarship on the dormition narratives has been largely carried out by these two scholars. Their opposing views regarding the origins of the dormition narratives, as well as the methodology for their study, can be appreciated from the preface and the introduction to Mimouni’s second edition of his monograph on the dormition and assumption of Mary published in 2011. Shoemaker is the only one to have written extensively over the last decades on the relationship between Marian veneration and the apocryphal narratives of late antiquity. He is considered at present the leading voice on the subject.\(^{55}\) The discrepancies between Mimouni and Shoemaker can be summarized in terms of their approach to the dormition narratives.

Underlying Mimouni’s work are theological concerns regarding the reception of Mary in antiquity. According to him, one cannot divorce the literary considerations from the doctrinal. In other words, it is necessary to take an egalitarian approach between these two criteria when analyzing the dormition narratives.\(^{56}\) He is particularly concerned with singling out various stages in the perception of Mary’s end, these being her assumption to heaven after death delayed until the end of times, her death closely followed by her assumption to heaven, and her assumption to heaven without death. Mimouni is also concerned with the origins of the dormition narratives, which he places in Jerusalem and attributes to the controversies against the Monophysites after the council of Chalcedon.

\(^{55}\) Mimouni, Les traditions anciennes, xxxvi.
\(^{56}\) Mimouni, Les traditions anciennes, xxxii.
Stephen Shoemaker, on the other hand, tries to look at the dormition narratives in a similar fashion to von Esbroeck, by analyzing the texts within the context of their specific family traditions ("Bethlehem" / "Palm of Tree" traditions). He is also interested, like Mimouni, in the origins of these traditions, and considers them the result of diverse theological positions coexistent with each other in the formative centuries of Christianity. Of these theological positions, Shoemaker finds Gnosticism the closest to the earliest dormition narratives, especially to those under the "Palm of Tree" traditions. He further adds the Jewish and Christian polemics of late antiquity as contributing factors to the emergence of the dormition narratives.
CHAPTER ONE: THE *SIX BOOKS APOCRYPHON* AND ITS PLACE IN THE DORMITION NARRATIVE CORPUS

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to examine the *Six Books Apocryphon* within the context of the ancient dormition narratives presumably in circulation up to the sixth century by considering the following: a) the origins of Marian worship in general; b) the origins of the dormition narratives; c) the common features among them; d) the main distinctive features of the *Six Books Apocryphon* in comparison with other dormition narratives of the late fourth to sixth centuries; e) the parallels between the *Six Books Apocryphon* and the canonical Gospels.

Marian worship in the first five centuries

The worship of Mary has traditionally been thought of as a phenomenon resulting from the theological debates brought to light at the ecumenical councils, especially the Council of Ephesus in 431 CE, and strictly motivated by the defense of high Christological theologies. However, the emergence of the cult of Mary and the proliferation of several texts about her are hardly likely to have occurred overnight after the events in Ephesus. 57 Recent scholars like Bellarmino Baggati have challenged the traditional view, and propose that the traditions about Mary's life and death emerged as

57 It seems to me that the councils only addressed the issue of Mary and her status as the Mother of God as opposed to the Mother of Christ mainly in support of Christological views. Furthermore, I see the origin of the dormition traditions arising in parallel to the councils, not as a result of them.
early as the second century. Rather than emerging as a result of the councils, early traditions about Mary are now seen as contributing factors to the interest in Marian piety both in the writings of the church fathers as well as in the council debates.

Early written accounts of Mary’s life and death, such as *The Protoevangelium of James*, composed sometime in the first half of the second century, provided aspects of Mary’s life beyond what is offered in the canonical Gospels. The congruency of this text with the theology of the church fathers made it not only popular with general audiences, but also useful to apologists and theologians. At first, the church fathers focused their attention on the nature of Christ himself, and initially Mary may have been only incidental to that focus. The writings of the church fathers on Mary were apologetic in nature. The earliest works to mention Mary seem to have had an anti-docetic purpose, that is, to support the belief in the human nature of Jesus against those who believed Jesus to be only a spirit that appeared human. This is the case of Ignatius of Antioch,

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58 Baggati, “New Discoveries at the Tomb,” 14. He compared the specific instructions Jesus gave the apostles as to where to lay Mary’s body, according to Syriac and Ethiopic dormition texts, with the archaeological data of an ancient Jewish tomb in Gethsemane traditionally thought of as the tomb of Mary. He then concluded that this particular tomb must be the tomb referred to in the text, and that because the tomb’s bench is plain like those of the first and second century, the tradition must have originated then. See Baggati, “New Discoveries at the Tomb,” 42, 47.


60 Emmanuel Lanne, “Marian Doctrine and Piety up to the Council of Chalcedon: The Fathers and the Liturgy,” in *Studying Mary: Reflections on the Virgin Mary in Anglican and Roman Catholic Theology and Devotion*, eds. Nicholas Sagovsky and Adelbert Denaux, (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 41. This apocryphal work, also known as the *Gospel of James*, was probably produced originally in Greek, now lost to us. Its main focus was to narrate the birth and childhood of Mary in a way that showed her worthy of the responsibility of being the Mother of Christ. It stressed her virginity throughout her pregnancy and after the birth of Jesus, as well as her relationship to Joseph as more of a father-daughter relationship than a marriage, because of Joseph’s advanced age.

writing circa 115. Others like Justin Martyr (d. 165) focused only on the virginity of Mary, and her importance as the new Eve and mother of Christ. Tertullian, however, was the first Latin apologist to expand on the doctrine concerning Mary, towards whom he felt no obligation to pay veneration. His only concern in relation to Mary was to show Jesus’ full humanity, as born through a regular woman. Theologians like Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215), Origen (d. 253), Ambrose (d. ca. 397) at the end of the fourth century, and Jerome (d. ca. 420) in the early fifth century were fully engaged in the doctrine of Mary as the Theotokos, or Mother of God, in addition to upholding the virginal status of Mary and defending the proto-orthodox Christology (against Docetism and Gnosticism). Cyril of Alexandria, writing in the mid-fifth century after the council of Ephesus, was clearly invested in the theology of the Theotokos as part of the controversy over Christology against Nestorius.

However, that is not to say that interest in Mary was always exclusively theological or Christological. The existence of the tradition of the Protoevangelium of

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63 Justin Martyr, *Apologia*, 1.22, 1.33, 1.44; Justyn Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 100. See Justin, et al. *Saint Justin Martyr the First Apology, the Second Apology, Dialogue with Trypho, Exhortation to the Greeks, Discourse to the Greeks, the Monarchy, Or the Rule of God*, (Catholic University of America Press, 2013). Irenaeus of Lyons picked up the same topic of Eve and Mary in *Against Heresies*, 3.22.2-4.


James is a testimony to the popularity of Mary as a subject in her own right. Evidence of early worship of Mary rests mainly on homilies and late apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature, perhaps the product of popular culture, well outside the control of what would eventually become the orthodox authorities. The text known as the Sub Tuum Praesidium, dated to late third or early fourth century CE, is an important example of intercessory prayers to Mary prior to the Council of Ephesus.  

As for apocryphal literature besides the narratives about the life of Mary, there were also traditions in circulation, particularly about her last days, which serve as evidence of people’s reception of Mary. These popular narratives, also called dormition narratives, filled in the blanks left in the canonical writings of the New Testament concerning the fate of Mary. While the Protoevangelium of James was influential in establishing and supporting what became the orthodox views about Mary and the nature of Christ, many of the dormition narratives were also influential in supporting a view of Mary congruent with her worship.

Origins and spread of the dormition traditions

Traditions about Mary’s last days

According to scholars such as Bagatti and Shoemaker, the origins of the traditions behind the dormition narratives themselves belong to the Jewish-Christian community in

Jerusalem during the second and third centuries.\textsuperscript{68} Such a claim seems difficult to support. The Jewish-Christian communities developed into several subgroups during the first few centuries of Christianity, and unfortunately we have little evidence about them. Most of what we know come from external sources, perhaps with the exception of the so-called Pseudo-Clementines.\textsuperscript{69} Nothing in their text seems to indicate that they would have produced the traditions behind the dormition narratives. Another of these Jewish-Christian groups were the Ebionites. The Ebionites had an angel Christology, a Midrashic interpretation of the Scriptures, and an apocalyptic worldview.\textsuperscript{70} Some of the beliefs and symbols identified as particularly belonging to the Ebionites are prominent in the “Palm” narratives, which will be explained below.\textsuperscript{71} It is, however, not plausible to link the dormition narratives to the Jewish-Christians of the second or third century based on the angel Christology of the Ebionites or on the parallels such angel Christology share with the dormition narratives. One must consider other factors we know about the theological polemics that distinguished the Jewish-Christians from their gentile-Christian counterparts. Although it is difficult to reconstruct exactly who the Jewish Christians in

\textsuperscript{68} Bagatti, \textit{New Discoveries}, 14. Shoemaker, \textit{Ancient Traditions}, 212. Shoemaker notes that this hypothesis seems uncontested by other scholars, as most of them tend to divorce the study of theology from the study of the history of Christianity. Elsewhere, Alfred Rush considered that the origins were in Syria, and referred to the \textit{Obsequies of the Holy Virgin} as the earliest extant example. Alfred C. Rush, “Scriptural Texts and the Assumption in the Transitus Mariae,” \textit{Catholic Biblical Quarterly} 12 (1950), 368.


\textsuperscript{71} The angel Christology of the Ebionites is, according to Shoemaker, the main example of the relationship between the Jewish-Christian group and the dormition narratives. The angel that speaks to Mary in the narrative is none other than Jesus Christ himself. Shoemaker, \textit{Ancient Traditions}, 215. See also Manns, “La Mort de Marie,” 507-515.
Palestine were, how many groups they formed, or how these groups differed from one another, we know that the Ebionites also held to an adoptionist view of Jesus, according to which Jesus was a regular man, born under regular circumstances, and adopted by God to be the Messiah based on his righteousness.\footnote{Bart Ehrman, \textit{Lost Christianities: the Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 100-1. Unfortunately, no internal sources for the Ebionites remain, only what is written by opponents such as Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen.} Within such a view of Jesus, there is no place for the veneration of Mary as the virgin mother of Christ.\footnote{I am aware that there is always the possibility that anti-Jewish texts were a later addition to the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon}. However, because this negative attitude towards the Jews seems to permeate the entire text, I am inclined to think that it was there from the beginning.} 

Another observation that might oppose the Jewish-Christian origin of the traditions about Mary’s dormition is the fact that the Jews are portrayed as the murderers of Jesus\footnote{One of the relevant passages reads, \textit{“And the judge said to them [the priests, elders, and Sadducees]: Ye wicked nation, nation that crucified God, I know that ye are men bitter of soul and stiff of neck, doers of the wish of your own heart. But I thank God that I am not of your country or one of your communion.”} Wright, “The Departure of my Lady Mary,” 143.} and the enemies of Mary\footnote{According to the text, when Mary arrived in Jerusalem, the townspeople urged the judge of the town to let them go up against her: \textit{“Let us take fire, and go and burn the house in which she dwells.”} Wright, “The Departure of my Lady Mary,” 143.}. Furthermore, this vilified portrayal of the Jews is accompanied by antagonistic language towards anyone who befriended the Jews.\footnote{The narrator of the book, presumably John, says, \textit{“Let no one who loves God and my Lady Mary, who bore Him, be a companion and friend to the Jews; for if he is so, the love of the Messiah is severed from him.”} Wright, “The Departure of my Lady Mary,” 149.} If a Jewish-Christian group were responsible for the origins of the dormition traditions, it would be very difficult to explain this anti-Jewish aspect of the narratives. Not only is the evidence for Jewish-Christian groups in antiquity scant, but there is also no indication that any such groups (among them the Nazarenes, the authors of the Pseudo-Clementine...}
literature and the Ebionites) would have produced a tradition as unsympathetic to Judaism as the dormition narratives. In fact, all these groups have in common a certain degree of adherence to Jewish customs that definitely disqualify them as responsible for the traditions about Mary. Such anti-Jewish attitudes, which are present in all the narratives, are better explained as originating outside a Jewish-Christian community, and perhaps within gentile Christian communities that rejected any Jewish associations with Christianity.

The Appearance of the dormition narratives

Regardless of the origins of the dormition traditions themselves, which are almost impossible to identify, most scholars would agree that the textual witnesses of the dormition narratives themselves began to surface soon after the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Among these narratives, the earliest examples are *The Six Books Apocryphon*, *Obsequies of the Holy Virgin*, and the *Transitus Mariae*. We can at least say for certain that by the turn of the 6th century, the traditions of the dormition of Mary were well

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78 Shoemaker explains the anti-Jewish attitude of the narratives as a result of the Jewish/Christian conflicts of late antiquity and the early medieval period. The Jews had raised numerous claims against the virginity of Mary and the early Byzantine Empire had a strong stance against the Jews living within its borders. See Stephen Shoemaker, “Let Us Go And Burn Her Body: The Image of the Jews In The Early Dormition Traditions,” in *Church History*, Vol 68, (1999), 777-8.
79 Shoemaker would argue against the idea that the impetus for the narratives was the council. He considers the cult of Mary to have developed naturally out of the emergence of the cult of the saints. See Shoemaker, “Epiphanius of Salamis,” 372.
known and written texts on the subject were already in circulation.\footnote{Also, the *Gospel of Bartholomew*, dated to the late 5\textsuperscript{th} and early 6\textsuperscript{th} centuries, briefly describes details from the dormition narratives. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 31.} In fact, the so-called *Tübingen Theosophy*, dated to approximately between 490 and 500, certainly mentions one of these dormition narratives.\footnote{An epitome of Byzantine origin, the *Tübingen Theosophy* was composed around 500 CE, and referred to an appendix of *The One True Belief*, lost to us. See Beatrice PierFranco. “Pagan Wisdom and Christian Theology According to the *Tübingen Theosophy,*” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3.4 (1995): 403–418. One of the works mentioned is a text on the birth and assumption of the Theotokos. From this text it could be deduced that written accounts of Mary’s last days, and possibly even the dormition narratives, were part of this work.}

Shoemaker, following the convention already set by Von Esbroeck, categorizes the dormition narratives as either belonging to the “Bethlehem” tradition or the “Palm of the Tree” (or simply the “Palm”) tradition. The “Bethlehem” tradition owes its designation to the fact that it relates key events associated with either the passing and/or the assumption of Mary as having taken place in Bethlehem. Examples of the “Bethlehem” tradition are the *Six Books Apocryphon* and the *Transitus Mariae* of Ps-John.\footnote{Antoine Wenger, *L’Assomption de la T.S. Vierge dans la Tradition Byzantine du VIe au Xe siècle: Études et Documents, Archives de l’Orient Chrétien*, 5 (Paris: Institute Français d’Études Byzantines, 1955), 17. Also, Stephen Shoemaker, “From Mother of Mysteries to Mother of the Church: The Institutionalization of the Dormition Apocrypha,” *Apocrypha* 22 (2011): 14.} As for the Palm tradition, Shoemaker says that these narratives are concerned with accounts of Mary’s dormition and assumption from her house in Jerusalem. In his view, narratives from the Palm traditions are heterodox in their portrayal of Mary as possessing ‘gnostic’ qualities.\footnote{Shoemaker, “Mother of Mysteries,” 14.} Shoemaker also identifies a third category, the Coptic tradition. Since the literary elements that constitute this tradition are homilies, I have
excluded them from this study.\textsuperscript{84}

According to Shoemaker, the earliest evidence of a dormition narrative that has come to us is a fragment from an Ethiopic text, although Georgian fragments also exist. Michel van Esbroeck and Antoine Wenger had dated the contents of this fragment to the fourth century, and Shoemaker believes the traditions themselves may have originated in the third century.\textsuperscript{85} The earliest of the narratives extant in full is the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon}, presented as an addendum to the \textit{Protoevangelium of James} and the \textit{Infancy Gospel of Thomas}, and dated to the late 5\textsuperscript{th} or early 6\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{86} For a full list of the dormition narratives and related homilies from the third to the fifth centuries, see Table 1 below.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|l|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Dormition Narrative / Homily} & \textbf{Approximate Date} & \textbf{Tradition} & \textbf{Language / Source} \\
\hline
Obsequies of the Holy Virgin & Late 5\textsuperscript{th} to early 6\textsuperscript{th} centuries & Palm of Tree & Syriac – fragments \\
\hline
Liber Riquiei & Late 5\textsuperscript{th} to early 6\textsuperscript{th} centuries & Palm of Tree & Ethiopic - fragments - almost complete \\
\hline
Transitus Mariae of Ps. Melito of Sardis & 5\textsuperscript{th} century & Palm of Tree & Latin – fragment \\
\hline
Six Books (Wright) & 5\textsuperscript{th} century & Bethlehem & Syriac – palimpsest \\
\hline
Six Books (Smith Lewis) & Late 5\textsuperscript{th} to early 6\textsuperscript{th} century & Bethlehem & Syriac - palimpsest \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Early dormition narratives and related homilies (450 - 600 CE)}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{84} There seems to be a disagreement between Shoemaker and Mimouni as to the classification of these narratives and their dating. See Shoemaker, “Mother of Mysteries,” 14, and Mimouni, \textit{Les traditiones anciennes}, 31-32, 35.


\textsuperscript{86} Shoemaker, \textit{Ancient Traditions}, 28-29.
## Dormition Narrative / Homily

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dormition Narrative / Homily</th>
<th>Approximate Date</th>
<th>Tradition</th>
<th>Language / Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Six Books (Sinai)</td>
<td>Late 5th to early 6th century</td>
<td>Bethlehem</td>
<td>Syriac - palimpsest Fragments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homily of Ps. Cyril of Jerusalem</td>
<td>Early 6th century</td>
<td>Coptic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Monastery Homily - Ps. Evodius</td>
<td>Early 6th century</td>
<td>Coptic</td>
<td>Sahidic - fragment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Macarius Homily- Ps. Evodius</td>
<td>Early 6th century</td>
<td>Coptic</td>
<td>Bohairic - complete manuscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homily of Jacob of Serug</td>
<td>Late 5th century</td>
<td>Independent / Atypical</td>
<td>Syriac</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Spread of the dormition narratives and languages

These narratives may have been originally composed in Greek, though this is only a hypothesis as any Greek manuscripts prior to the Ethiopic Obsequies of the 4th century and the Syriac Six Books Apocryphon of the 5th century have been lost.\(^\text{87}\) Translations into Latin, Georgian, Syriac, Armenian, and Coptic followed the lost original texts. These translations are a testimony to the influence of the Marian traditions from

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\(^\text{87}\) Von Esbroeck believes that there must have been a Greek source for the ‘Palm’ traditions, mainly based on the internal evidence from the narratives themselves. However, there are no extant Greek texts prior to the narrative of Pseudo-John the Evangelist and the dormition-homily of John of Thessalonica in the early to mid-seventh century. See Von Esbroeck, “Les Textes Littéraires,” 270-271 and Jugie, La Mort et L’Assomption sur la Sainte Vierge, 213. See also Shoemaker, Ancient Traditions, 38-39. According to Frédéric Manns, referenced by Shoemaker, the original language may have been Syriac based on the less frequent and significant variants when the Liber Riquiei is compared to the extant Syriac. Perhaps both Obsequies and the Liber Riquiei had Syriac origins (and a Semitic context), while the other versions more prominent in the West, including The Six Books Apocryphon, may have been composed originally in Greek. Again, there is no textual evidence for a Greek original in the ‘Bethlehem’ traditions either.
Jerusalem and to the popularity of the dormition narratives across the various regions of the vast Roman Empire in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages. The use of the narratives in liturgy aided the process of dissemination of the tradition behind the narratives beyond geographical, social and ethnic boundaries. It further bolstered Marian piety into the medieval period.

**Common features of dormition narratives**

Not only can we say for certain that the dormition narratives proliferated in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, we can also certainly attest that the narratives were quite diverse. However, there are some common features shared by the narratives in two of the traditions mentioned earlier, namely the “Bethlehem” tradition and the “Palm of the Tree” tradition.

**Feature 1: An angel announces Mary’s death**

In both traditions Mary’s impending death is announced by an angel. According to the “Bethlehem” tradition, the angel appears to Mary while she was in Jerusalem, soon after she had been expelled from the town by the priests for praying at Jesus’ tomb. In the “Palm of Tree” tradition, the narrative opens up with an angel meeting Mary at the Mount of Olives - outside the city walls - in order to announce her death.

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88 Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 281. Some of the Coptic traditions and other independent or atypical traditions also share most of these features.
90 See Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 51, 379. In Wright’s version of the *Six Books Apocryphon*, the apostles are the recipients of the vision about Mary’s departure and they receive their revelation directly from the Holy Spirit. Wright, “Departure of My Lady” 136-140.
Feature 2: Appearance of the apostles to accompany Mary

In both the “Bethlehem” and the “Palm of Tree” traditions, the apostles learn that Mary would die soon, and all are brought to Mary in order to minister to her. For the “Bethlehem” traditions, Mary is joined by the apostles in her house in Bethlehem, as she had been expelled from Jerusalem by the authorities. As for the “Palm of Tree” traditions, the apostles join Mary in Jerusalem, as she never leaves the city. 

Feature 3: Mary faces opposition from the Jews

The Jews are portrayed as acting aggressively against Mary. In both traditions they plot to harm her body. In the “Bethlehem” traditions they try to burn Mary’s body at the tomb, while she was still alive (the apostles had brought her there to wait for her passing). In the “Palm Traditions” the Jews try to destroy her dead body at the tomb.

Feature 4: Mary performs miracles

According to the “Bethlehem” narratives, Mary was actively performing miracles among the people, who would bring to her their sick for healing. She also miraculously healed Jephonias, the leader of the Jews, who was plotting to harm her. Mary also healed Jephonias in the “Palm of Tree” traditions, although according to the narrative she did so through intercessional prayers offered in her name, as at that point she was already dead. Intercession through Mary is also obviously a common motif of the narratives.

Feature 5: Christ’s reception of Mary’s soul

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Although the manner in which Christ receives Mary’s soul varies between the traditions, Christ appears in both traditions after the apostles join Mary and after she has endured some persecution.95

**Feature 6: Transfer of Mary’s body to paradise**

Whether Mary is transferred to the garden in Paradise while dead in order to be resurrected there, or transferred to await resurrection at a later time, all the traditions have Mary’s transfer to paradise as a common feature.96

**Comparison between the Six Books Apocryphon and other dormition narratives**

There are a few features in Wright’s version of the Syriac *Six Books Apocryphon* that set it apart from the other dormition narratives, and some are unique even among other narratives within the same ‘Bethlehem tradition’.97 The most prominent features are the instructions to incorporate into the church’s calendar three ritual feasts of Mary, the offering of bread in honour of Mary and the reading of the dormition narrative itself. These three aspects are *The Six Books Apocryphon*’s most obvious departure from the other dormition narratives of its kind, as the following shall make clear.

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96 See Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 38, 52. According to Shoemaker, some scholars attribute these different versions of Mary’s dormition to ‘a developmental typology, according to which each narrative type develops out of and replaces an earlier type, paralleling related developments in Christian doctrine.’ However, he finds such a conclusion misguided, arguing for a synchronic coexistence of the varied traditions. See Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 282-3.
a) Instructions regarding commemorating Mary at specific times:

After Mary’s soul departed from her body, the *Six Books Apocryphon* gives instructions for feasts to be held in honour of Mary. It is interesting that the command to celebrate these feasts comes from the apostles themselves, especially considering the weight of apostolic claims in antiquity for establishing legitimacy.

“And the apostles commanded that there should be a commemoration of the blessed one three times in the year... on the twenty-fourth of the first Kânûn;... in the month of Iyar... the apostles ordered also that, on the Wednesday and Friday and Sunday of all the months of the year, there should be prayers and that these three days should be observed, and no work should be done on them... And the apostles ordered that there should be a commemoration of the blessed one on the thirteenth of the month of Ab...”

b) Instructions regarding bread offerings in rituals:

The *Six Books Apocryphon* is the only dormition narrative to prescribe ritual offerings of bread to Mary. In fact, it is the only early church document to combine a dormition narrative with instructions for worship.

“...and the apostles also ordered that any offering offered in the name of my Lady Mary should not remain over the night, but that at midnight of the night

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98 According to Wright’s version of the *Six Books Apocryphon*, Mary’s soul departs from her body and later on Christ restores Mary to life in Paradise. There is no specific mention of how her body gets there, whereas in the “Palm of Tree” traditions there is a specific scene in which Christ carries Mary’s lifeless body along with the apostles, who act as witnesses, to Paradise. See Wright, “Departure of My Lady,” 156 and Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 38.

99 Wright, “Departure of My Lady,” 152.

100 Shoemaker, "Epiphanius of Salamis," 392.
immediately preceding her commemorations, it should be kneaded and baked; and in the morning let it go up on the altar, whilst the people stand before the altar with psalms of David and let the New and Old Testaments be read, and the volume of the decease of the blessed one;”  


c) Instructions commanding the reading of the *Six Books Apocryphon* during feasts:

In the last section of the *Six Books Apocryphon* we find specific instructions for the use of the dormition narrative at the feasts of Mary. According to Wright’s translation, the related passage into English is rendered as follows:

“... and let the New and the Old Testaments be read, and the volume of the decease of the blessed one...” 102

Although liturgical use of apocryphal writings in medieval times was commonplace, it is more difficult to speak of the practice in late antiquity, as evidence is not abundant. 103 However, one of the significant features of the *Six Books Apocryphon* as early as the 4th century is that it presents a dormition narrative in the apocryphal literature genre as being of equal significance to canonized writings.

The *Six Books Apocryphon* as an apocalypse

Several aspects of the *Six Books Apocryphon* compare to apocalypses of the otherworldly type in Jewish and early Christian literature. According to John Collins, a
A good working definition of apocalypse is “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.” Based on this definition, the distinctive criteria of apocalypses are as follows: a) a narrative framework; b) revelation is passed on to a human being of spiritual authority (either a prophet from distant past or an apostle) through the mediation of an angel or otherworldly being; c) the nature of the revelation must be temporal (envisioning an eschatological view of salvation) and spatial (related to the supernatural world).

Richard Bauckham sees the Six Books Apocryphon as an apocalypse of sorts, “a distinctive early Christian apocalypse” not previously recognized as such, and in the same plane as other early Christian apocalypses such as the Apocalypse of Peter and the Apocalypse of Paul. In fact, he considers the narratives on the dormition/assumption of Mary to be apocalypses in themselves. Among the features in the Six Books Apocryphon that can be identified as apocalyptical are the following:

1. The revelation is nestled within a larger narrative concerning the last days of Mary, including the transitus story.

2. The revelation is passed directly onto Mary, who, on the basis of her identity as the Mother of God and of the miraculous signs performed throughout the narrative, is worthy to receive it. The mediator is not an angel, although the

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105 Bauckham, The Fate of the Dead, 332.
angels are present, but her son, Christ himself - considered to be an otherworldly being above the angels.

c. The nature of the revelation has a temporal aspect that is distinctly eschatological, in that Mary is shown the places of rest for the just (Book 5) and the places of punishment (*Gehenna*) for the wicked (Book 6). Jesus only shows her these places already prepared for the future. Mary does not see the people already populating their eternal dwellings as they await the final judgement - but from their waiting places the dead can anticipate their final destiny.  

It also has a cosmic spatial aspect in that Mary is given a tour not only of the final dwellings of mortals but also the store-houses of God (blessings and curses on the land) and God’s very throne, and the storehouses of the weather.

**Conclusion**

In dealing with the variety of features within the corpus of dormition narratives, this chapter has attempted to show the place of the *Six Books Apocryphon* in relation to the history of Marian worship, to other narratives within the same genre, to the gospels and to the apocalypse genre. It is quite difficult to establish the origins of Marian worship in any precise manner. What can be said is that interest in the life of Mary

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106 Bauckham makes a distinction between apocalypses that portray heaven and hell not yet populated, like Wright’s version of the *Six Book Apocryphon*, and those narratives that show the dead already inhabiting heaven or hell, depending on the outcome of their lives, like Smith Lewis’ version of *the Six Book Apocryphon*. This distinction can be seen as a doctrinal development of the afterlife: earlier Christians believed that the dead would reach their final destiny after the Day of Judgment, while later Christians believed the dead did not wait for judgment day in order to receive eternal reward/punishment. This distinction in doctrinal development could misleadingly suggest the possibility of establishing dates for the composition of the various *Six Book Apocryphon* manuscripts, except that in reality both doctrines co-existed in the late 5th and 6th centuries. Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead*, 358.
existed already in the 2nd century - whether out of Christological concerns or not - and that by the 4th century Mary had a cult and a following, complete with liturgies, apocalypses, and festivals in her name. Furthermore, the origins of the dormition narratives are also difficult to identify.

As for the *Six Books Apocryphon* itself and its relationship to the other dormition narratives, the features shared in common by all the narratives are: the revelation about Mary’s death, the miraculous appearance of the apostles to accompany Mary in her last days, the opposition Mary faces from the Jews in Jerusalem, the portrayal of Mary as a miracle worker, Christ’s reception of Mary’s soul into heaven, and the transfer of Mary’s body to Paradise. The main variant features of the *Six Books Apocryphon* are quite unusual: the institution of the feasts of Mary within the context of liturgy, the instructions regarding the ritual of offering baked bread in honour of Mary, and the requirement to read the *Six Book Apocryphon* during the liturgy along with the readings from the Bible. These variants raise important questions about the purpose of the narrative, the identity of the redactors of the narrative, the ideology behind it, and the reception of the text in antiquity. The significance of these variants is the subject of the following chapters.

The *Six Books Apocryphon* also fits well into the genre of apocalypses, as do some of the other dormition narratives as well. Just like the other Jewish and early Christian apocalypses, the dormition narratives include a revelation given to an important figure mediated through an angel concerning events that have both an eschatological dimension to them (temporal) as well as a cosmic one (otherworldly).
CHAPTER TWO: THE *SIX BOOKS APOCRYPHON* - AUTHORSHIP AND AUDIENCE

Introduction

As we saw in the previous chapter, the *Six Books Apocryphon* has been mainly identified as an apocryphal narrative representative of the traditions about Mary’s dormition and also as an apocalypse. The particular features that set the *Six Books Apocryphon* apart from all other apocryphal texts are the specific instructions regarding commemorating Mary at specific times, the offering of bread to Mary as part of the rituals, and the reading of the *Six Books* as part of the liturgy during commemorations of Mary’s dormition. These features cause one to inquire about the identity of the redactors of this peculiar text, the composition of the audience for which it was produced, the reception of the text by the populace, and the ideologies that prompted the creation of the text. The purpose of this chapter and the following chapter is to address these questions by showing the various conclusions scholars of Mariology and of Christianity in Late Antiquity have reached on the subject.

This chapter will focus on the discussion regarding authorship and audience. As a point of departure into this discussion, the main fourth-century figure that one inevitably encounters, who was contemporary with the plausible date of redaction of *Six Books Apocryphon*, is Epiphanius of Salamis. Although Epiphanius never mentions the *Six Books Apocryphon* explicitly, his works could be considered as a possible source of information regarding the author(s) and the intended audience of the text. Epiphanius
devoted an entire chapter of his book against heresies, the *Panarion*, to a sect that seems to have adopted practices similar to those instructed in the *Six Books Apocryphon*.

**Epiphanius of Salamis and the Kollyridians**

Our only primary source for the existence of an early Christian group that engages in ritual activities similar to those described in the *Six Books Apocryphon* is Epiphanius of Salamis (c.310-403). Originally from Palestine, Epiphanius was educated in an Egyptian monastic community and was entrenched in the monastic movement popular in this region. He eventually returned to Palestine, where he founded various monasteries in the area of Eleutheropolis, serving as abbot. He later moved to Cyprus and was elected to the see of Salamis in 366 CE, from where he wrote the *Panarion*.107

It is in the *Panarion*, a sourcebook of sorts against heresies in his day, where Epiphanius describes the sect he calls *Kollyridians*, a heretical group singled out for their distinctive form of Marian veneration and excessive worship.108 Some of the activities in which this group participated, according to Epiphanius’ description, resemble the rituals prescribed in the *Six Books Apocryphon*. Curiously enough, Epiphanius never mentioned the *Six Books* specifically.

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107 Frank Williams, introduction to The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Book 1, (Leiden; Koninklijke Brill NV, 2009), xiii-xiv. *Panarion* means ‘medicine chest’ and the work is also known by its title in Latin, *Adversus Haereses*.

The term *Kollyridians* is derived from the Greek for ‘loaf’, *kollyris*. Epiphanius mentions the *Kollyridians* (Κολλυριδανοί) by name only in his introduction or Proem 1.4.8 as the 59th heretical sect of sixty other sects within Christianity. Although Epiphanius goes into detail about the *Kollyridians* in his *Panarion*, devoting the 79th chapter entirely to them, he had also referred to them in a previous document written in defence of Mary’s perpetual virginity, *Letter to Arabia*. Epiphanius eventually incorporated this letter in its entirety into the *Panarion* as well. The relevant passages of the *Letter to Arabia* repeated in the *Panarion* 78.23.3-4 read as follows:

“For <we have heard> in turn that others, being foolish to bewilderment concerning the holy Ever-Virgin herself, have been and are eager to propose this subject in substitute of God, and that they are swept away in some sheer madness and folly. For they describe how some women from the regions of Thrace have indeed brought into Arabia this nonsense, how in the name of the Ever-Virgin some would offer baked bread and gather together upon it and in the name of the Holy Virgin try something beyond measure and also attempt an unlawful, blasphemous deed and offer sacrifice in her name through women.”

109 Κολλύρα (κόλλιξ) = roll or loaf of coarse bread. *Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, 7th edition, Liddell and Scott, s.v. “κολλύρα.”


As for Epiphanius’ description of the *Kollyridians* in the chapter devoted to them, the *Panarion* 79.1.2-1.7, 2.1, 8.3 says:

“And again this very heresy was displayed in Arabia from Thrace and beyond the region of Scythia, and news of it was brought... For indeed who are the teachers of this other than the women? For the slippery race of women are likely to make one stumble and are also mean-spirited... For certain women surely adorn the square stool for cutting hair, spreading upon it fine linen, in the open on a certain day of the year (in certain days), set out a loaf of bread and bring it in the name of Mary, and they all partake of the bread - as written in the same letter to Arabia from what we had partially discussed... So now, we will speak clearly about it... Therefore, servants of God, let us assume a manly mindset, and let us diffuse the madness of these women. The assumption is completely womanly and again the sickness of the deceived Eve... For every sect is an insignificant woman, and more so this sect of women, and it is from the deceiver of the first woman.”

113 Epiphanius, “The Panarion,” 446, 448. “...καὶ αὐτὴ δὲ ἡ ἁίρεσις πάλιν ἐν τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ ἀπὸ τῶν μερῶν τῆς Θρᾴκης καὶ τῶν ἄνω μερῶν τῆς Σκυθίας ἀνεδείχθη καὶ εἰς ἡμῶν ἀνατράπατ έπικεφαλείς ἐπιχειρεῖν πράγματι καὶ εἰς ὄνομα αὐτῆς ἱερουργεῖν διὰ γυναικῶν...”

ἐν τῇ Ἀραβίᾳ ἀπὸ τῶν μερῶν τῆς Θρᾴκης τοῦτό γε τὸ κενοφόνημα ἐνηνόχασιν, ὡς εἰς ὄνομα τῆς ἀειπαρθένου κολλυρίδα τινὰ ἐπιτελεῖν καὶ συνάγεσθαι ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ εἰς ὄνομα τῆς ἁγίας παρθένου ὑπὲρ τὸ μέτρον τί πειράσθαι, ἀθεμίτῳ καὶ βλασφήμῳ ἐπιχειρεῖν πράγματι καὶ εἰς ὄνομα αὐτῆς ἱερουργεῖν διὰ γυναικῶν...
In summary, Epiphanius describes a Christian group initiated by women who traveled from Thrace and Scythia down into Arabia spreading their worship practices in veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus. However, their veneration of Mary was different from that of other Christian groups, as their worship practices included the offering of bread in Mary’s name on a specific day of the year and the partaking of bread, both rituals officiated by women acting as priests. Although he did not disclose his sources on the Marian sect, it is understood that Epiphanius relied on oral sources for this account.\textsuperscript{114} Epiphanius condemned the \textit{Kollyridians} as a heretical sect because he deemed their worship of Mary to be excessive, akin to idolatry.\textsuperscript{115} He also heavily criticized their admission of women as priests.\textsuperscript{116}

That the so-called \textit{Kollyridians}, unpopular as they may have been in Epiphanius’ circles, continued to thrive may be evidenced by a brief remark of Leontius of Byzantium (d. 543-4) in reference to a ‘bread which the Philomarianites offer in the name of Mary’, perhaps as a still contemporary practice.\textsuperscript{117}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[114] Williams, Introduction to \textit{The Panarion}, xxv-xxvi. Also see Epiphanius’ own admission, Williams, \textit{The Panarion Books II and II}, 634.
\item[115] Epiphanius, \textit{Panarion Books II and II}, 640-41 (79.4.6-7).
\item[116] Epiphanius, \textit{Panarion Books II and II}, 639-40 (79.3.6 - 79.4.1)
\item[117] Philomarianites is another name for the Kollyridians. See Leontius of Byzantium, \textit{Contra Nestorianus et Eutychianos} 3.6, Migne, \textit{Patrologia Series Graeca}, 86.1, pg 1363: “\textit{Panis enim in typum corporis Christi propositus plus benedictionis participavit quam panis qui in foro venditur, et quam panes quos Philomarianitas offerunt in nomine Mariae}.” Epiphanius also used the term \textit{Philomarianites} to refer to the same sect in xxx.
\end{footnotes}
Modern sources for the Kollyridians

In the same way that the *Six Books Apocryphon* has received partial attention in academic circles, scholarly work on the *Kollyridians* has also been limited, often only in the form of brief references. In fact, it seems to me that the amount of material devoted to the study of the *Six Books Apocryphon* and to smaller Christian sects such as the *Kollyridians* is scant, especially considering the potential value for understanding marginal Christian practices during the turbulent years leading up to and following the major councils of the fourth and fifth centuries that culminated in the formation of orthodoxy as we know it today. In this chapter I will address questions of redaction and audience of the *Six Books Apocryphon*. Although I will briefly present the most relevant arguments in circulation, I will also refrain from reaching an immediate conclusion.

In the short list of studies on the *Kollyridians*, the earliest ones were published by German scholars Leonhard Fendt and Franz Dölger. In 1922 Fendt rejected the idea that the cult of Mary would have arisen from the syncretistic cult of the Mother Goddess, and yet he could not explain the existence of the *Kollyridians* satisfactorily. To him, they were just an exception to other forms of Marian veneration because they seemed to have identified Mary with the ancient Mother Goddess. A few years later, Franz Dölger published an article specifically dealing with the *Kollyridians*. Dölger compared the Marian cult with Greco-Roman goddess worship and also connected them with the Montanists, based on Syrian sources of the 5th century, particularly a report written by

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Syrian bishop Marutha of Maipherkat.\textsuperscript{120} Neither of these German scholars seems to have connected the \textit{Kollyridians} with the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon}.

E. O. James also briefly mentioned the \textit{Kollyridians}, but within the context of the assumption festivals. It is interesting that he mentions them in this context, aware of Epiphanius’ confutation of the assumption traditions, and yet makes no conclusive statement about the relationship between the two writings. He does intimate that the \textit{Kollyridians} along with the Gnostics were responsible for the spread of the dormition traditions, as a result of the dedication of a church to Mary in an unidentified location in the region of either Syria or Palestine early in the fifth century.\textsuperscript{121} However, just as in Epiphanius’ writings, the connection between the sect and the dormition narratives in James’ book is only implied, and not explicitly drawn, and there is no specific mention of the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon}.

A few decades later, Michael Carroll also devoted a few pages of his book \textit{Cult of the Virgin Mary} (1986) to the \textit{Kollyridians}.\textsuperscript{122} He wrote mostly in response to a popular, though non-academic hypothesis proposed by British writer Geoffrey Ashe. Ashe had argued that the \textit{Kollyridians} were proof of the existence of a separate Marian church alongside New Testament Christianity, developing from the very beginning of the

\textsuperscript{120} Dölger, “Die eigenartige Marienverehrung,” 112-113.
\textsuperscript{121} E. O. James, \textit{The Cult of the Mother Goddess}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition, (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1994), 214-5. According to James, whose book was first published in 1959, the issues raised in the Council of Ephesus were not the cause for the birth of the dormition traditions, as other scholars before him claimed (See footnote 34). It is unclear how James arrived at this conclusion. He does casually mention Theodosius the Cenobiarch as a source, although without citation.
Christian movement.\textsuperscript{123} Ashe saw the \textit{Kollyridians} as the pinnacle of the suggested Marian church and the reason for the incorporation of Marian veneration in the Orthodox Church. Michael Carroll rejected Ashe’s theory as fictitious, and argued instead for a correlation between the \textit{Kollyridians} and the Montanists or the Pepuzians, based on their emphasis on female priests and their activities in Thrace as mentioned by Epiphanius.\textsuperscript{124} Carroll makes no mention of the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon} and instead claims there is no written evidence for a sect like the \textit{Kollyridians} besides Epiphanius’s works, which he considers questionable, and those who used Epiphanius as source.\textsuperscript{125}

Later on, in 1994 Vasiliki Limberis addressed the \textit{Kollyridians} in his book \textit{Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople}. He noted the strong religious affiliations in Thrace and Scythia with the cults to the mother-goddess Rhea and to Demeter, and concluded that the \textit{Kollyridian} sect is the product of syncretism of Mary’s veneration into a pagan goddess cult.\textsuperscript{126} Limberis also limited his discussion of the \textit{Kollyridians} to their relationship with co-existing religions of the Greco-Roman world without tying them to any particular literary tradition.

Stephen Benko picked up the topic again in \textit{The Virgin Goddess}, published in 2004, in which he gave more detailed attention to the \textit{Kollyridian} sect than his predecessors had.\textsuperscript{127} According to Benko, bread or cereal offerings were commonplace in

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{123} Carroll, \textit{The Cult of the Virgin}, 42. See also Geoffrey Ashe, \textit{The Virgin}, (London: Routledge, 1976), 151, 196. Later scholars like Stephen Benko have opted to not engage with Ashe’s claims due to the non-academic nature of his work. For this reason I have also decided to not elaborate further on Ashe’s ideas.
\bibitem{125} Carroll, \textit{The Cult of the Virgin}, 44.
\end{thebibliography}
the ancient world from the very beginnings of civilization. He gave examples of the use of bread in celebrations centered on Demeter-Ceres cults of the Greco-Roman world. Festivals such as the *Thesmophoria*, the *Liberalia*, the *Parilia*, the *Matralia*, and many others were celebrated with the offering of cakes or of loafs of bread.\(^{128}\) Bread cake offerings were, in Benko’s words, “the ‘fruit of Demeter’, sacred to Artemis, Minerva, Juno and all the great fertility goddesses of the ancient world.”\(^{129}\) With each example, he discussed the symbolic character present in the acts of offering bread to a deity and in the partaking of it, either for communion with the deity or for tapping into the healing powers of the goddess to which the breads are offered.\(^{130}\) Benko rightly noted that Epiphanius’ complaints against the *Kollyridians* were not because of their practice of offering bread - as this was in essence the nature of the Christian Eucharist - but because the bread was offered in Mary’s name instead of in Christ’s. He then proposed that the *Kollyridians* had begun as a local branch of the Montanists - as Franz Dölger had earlier suggested. Benko based his conclusion on Thrace’s identification with strong female deity cults such as those to Artemis, Persephone and Hecate, on the connections between Montanists with the region of Thrace, and on Epiphanius’ report that the group came into Arabia from Thrace. In other words, according to Benko, the *Kollyridians* were Montanists who over the course of time had adopted popular mother-goddess ideas prevalent in their region and who found in Mary a proper recipient of devotion.\(^{131}\) However, in all of this, Benko


\(^{129}\) Benko, *Virgin Goddess*, 190.

\(^{130}\) Benko, *Virgin Goddess*, 180-1. The same can be said for the symbolism of offering bread in the Old Testament, a notion that eventually, according to Benko, transferred into Christianity and into the Marian cult in particular.

\(^{131}\) Benko, *Virgin Goddess*, 192. Also, Ross Shepard Kraemer agreed with Benko’s portrayal of the Kollyridians and based her own assessment of the sect on Benko’s work prior to its publication. See Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women’s
never mentions the *Six Books Apocryphon* or any other type of apocryphal or liturgical literature associated with the *Kollyridians*.

Within the last decade, Stephen Shoemaker has written extensively on the *Kollyridians* and their possible connection to the *Six Books Apocryphon*.\(^{132}\) He convincingly argues that Epiphanius’ complaints against the *Kollyridians* were a direct response to the *Six Books Apocryphon* and the traditions, oral or written, associated with it. In fact, he is the first scholar to decisively make this association. Shoemaker bases his argument on the remarkably similar rituals of bread offerings and Eucharistic meals in honour of Mary present both in Epiphanius’ *Panarion* and in the *Six Books Apocryphon*.\(^{133}\) Shoemaker also notes that in *Letters to Arabia* Epiphanius goes back and forth in discussing the ritual practices of the *Kollyridians* and his ambiguity about the likelihood of Mary’s last days as projected in the dormition narratives.\(^{134}\) This back-and-forth in *Letters to Arabia* further strengthens Shoemaker’s hypothesis that Epiphanius had knowledge of the dormition narratives in general, and particularly of the *Six Books Apocryphon*, as this is the only narrative in which the offering of baked bread to Mary on a specific holiday is described. Shoemaker offers some interesting interpretations of


\(^{134}\) Shoemaker, “Epiphanius of Salamis,” 391.
Epiphanius’ work regarding the origins of Marian cults in general and the nature of the *Kollyridians* in particular, and those will be discussed below. More so than Benko, Shoemaker has looked into the *Kollyridian* sect in depth and his claims provide a good starting point for the discussion of authorship and audience of the *Six Books Apocryphon*.

In general, it seems that the scholars mentioned above approached the study of the *Kollyridian* sect relying solely on historical and/or literary theoretical frameworks, just as is the case with the dormition narratives scholarship. I believe that an approach that takes into consideration ritual theory as well would render a more complete set of data from which to draw any conclusions as to its possible connection, if any, between *Six Books Apocryphon* and the *Kollyridians*, to the background of this particular dormition narrative, and to its redactors and audience.

**Who wrote the *Six Books Apocryphon*?**

Although the dating and provenance of the *Six Books Apocryphon* have been subjects of inquiry and speculation, the identity of the redactor of this particular text has not been fully explored by the scholars mentioned above. For example, prior to Stephen Shoemaker, no one had published any definitive statement about the relationship between the *Six Books Apocryphon* and the *Kollyridian* sect. It could be inferred from Shoemaker’s position that the *Kollyridians* may have at least been closely associated with the redactors of the *Six Books* - a claim Shoemaker does not explicitly make. The silence is understandable, considering the amount of ambiguity surrounding the narrative’s origins.
In a paper submitted to the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Ally Kateusz proposed an interesting solution to the puzzle of authorship.\(^{135}\) She agreed with Shoemaker and others on an earlier date for the original composition of the dormition narratives, based mainly on the heterodox motifs that betray origins prior to the supremacy of an orthodox dogmatic position. Examples of heterodox motifs include depictions of Mary as leading the apostles in prayer, or performing miracles, or preaching to crowds. These motifs may be evidence that the accounts date to a time before women leadership was eradicated.\(^{136}\) Kateusz considered the dormition narratives to have developed as early as the second century.\(^{137}\)

She further claimed that the *Six Books Apocryphon* text discovered by Agnes Smith Lewis predates William Wright’s text, and that both these texts antecede the Ethiopian version of the *Six Books Apocryphon*. She based these claims on the redaction of various portions of the narrative where Mary exhibits strong leadership over the apostles according to Smith Lewis’ texts, only to have these diminished in Wright’s text and somewhat reverted in the Ethiopian version. Kateusz was under the impression that the longer narratives must be original, and that traditions tend to become abridged with subsequent redactions. As a result of this chronology of the texts in the *Six Books Apocryphon*,


\(^{136}\) Kateusz, “Collyridien Déjà Vu,” 76-7. Other arguments for an early date of the *Six Books* in particular are the archaic Jewish concepts of paradise, the terminology used to refer to Christians, and Mary’s leading of the apostle in prayer. See Kateusz, “Collyridien Déjà Vu,” 79.

\(^{137}\) Kateusz, “Collyridien Déjà Vu,” 76-7, 92. I agree that the traditions behind the narratives may have emerged this early, although in the case of the *Six Books Apocryphon*, perhaps the written tradition followed at least two centuries later.
Apocryphon family, Kateusz saw the acts of “scribal liberty” in redacting away women’s authority as a way for the editors of these narratives to silence women.138

Kateusz also agreed with Shoemaker in connecting the Six Books Apocryphon to Epiphanius’ Kollyridians, and that even though the sect may have never existed under such a name, Epiphanius must have added them to his Panarion in response to the written (or oral) tradition of the Six Books Apocryphon.139 In a very sensible argument, Kateusz concluded that there must have been a sect, known to Epiphanius, who used the Six Books Apocryphon as a manual for liturgy, as an example of proper ritual and as a model of female clergy.140 Kateusz combined this conclusion with her previously mentioned idea of supremacy of a heterodox text in which women took on leadership roles equal to men, and suggested that the writers of the Six Books Apocryphon may have been women, perhaps evangelists and house church leaders of the first century.141

I disagree with Kateusz’ chronology of the texts within the Six Books family for the same reasons I disagreed with Bauckham earlier.142 It is better to assume the shorter text’s preexistence over the longer texts, as elaborations over the course of time are more common than abridgements, especially on important issues, as the opposite scenario requires elaborate explanations. In the case of the three versions of the Six Books Apocryphon discussed by Kateusz, it seems more plausible that Wright’s text was redacted in order to render a more elaborate account of Mary, elevated to a higher

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138 Kateusz, “Collyridien Déjà Vu,” 84. She refers to a particular example in which the men were sleeping while the women told Jesus that his mother had died. In a later edition it is the men who announce Mary’s death to Jesus. See Stephen Shoemaker, “Gender at the Virgin’s Funeral: Men and Women as Witness to the Dormition,” Studia Patristica 34 (2001): 552-58.
141 Kateusz, “Collyridien Déjà Vu,” 92.
142 See footnote 19.
position as the Theotokos, as we see in Smith’s text. The Ethiopian Six Books may be simply a renewed rendition of Wright’s text or an amalgamation of both Syriac versions.143

While I disagree with the chronology of the extant Six Books Apocryphon as proposed by Kateusz, it is undeniable that over the course of time representations of female leadership roles were altered and even reversed. Regardless of which Syriac text of the Six Books Apocryphon came first, the fact remains that the dormition narratives must have originated in a milieu in which women had various degrees of agency in relation to men for the officiating of liturgy and the dispensation of apostolic (read male) duties. Other Christian literary genres in the second century had explored the themes of women leadership and prophecy, as exemplified by the Acts of Paul and Thecla. While the degree of agency women had probably varied from one congregation or house church to the next, and admittedly, in some circles women may not have been allowed to even speak,144 there is also material evidence of women who led their own congregations and who were honoured for their contributions.145 Still in the fifth century, women deacons were able to act as priests at the altar in their roles as deacons, and could distribute

143 Another example of a dormition narrative that may have been expanded over time is the Greek Pseudo-John Evangelist. See Shoemaker, Ancient Traditions, 211.
144 Certainly by the time 1 Timothy 2:11 was redacted, women ecclesiastical authority would have been unacceptable in some circles. Also see Apostolic Constitutions III, 9, 1-4, accessed on June 22, 2015, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/07153.htm.
145 The specific examples are outside of the scope of this paper and therefore not detailed here. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins, (New York: Crossroad, 1983). Her work is significant in that it brought to light the support Jesus received from women throughout his ministry, and their roles as patrons as well as messengers of the gospel. See also Ross Shepard Kraemer, Her Share of the Blessings: Women’s Religions Among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). For material evidence of Jewish contemporary parallels to Christian women in positions of authority, see Bernadette J. Brooten, Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues, (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1982).
communion if necessary. According to the Testamentum Domini, an apocryphal document from Syria dated between the mid-fourth to the sixth century, women deacons were in fact charged with the duty of ministering to other women by taking communion to the sick as an extension of their duties at the altar. Considering the historical texts against women leaders, priests and prophets that have survived to our day, it only makes sense that women once did hold a position of authority in some Christian circles. In such an environment, Kateusz’ hypothesis regarding female authorship for the Six Books Apocryphon is a very plausible idea.

However, in spite of the undeniable influence of women in their communities in their roles as benefactors, deaconesses, priestesses, house church leaders and prophetesses, this literary/historical approach to the question of authorship does not provide enough evidence to support female authorship of the Six Books Apocryphon. The application of a ritual theoretical model in the following chapter will prove helpful in strengthening the female authorship hypothesis.

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147 Testamentum Domini II, 20.7, accessed on June 22, 2015, https://ldsfocuschrist2.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/testament-lord-jesus-christsyriac.pdf. The text reads: “Similarly if a woman be pregnant [and] sick, and cannot fast these two days, let her fast that one day, taking on the first [day] bread and water. And if she cannot come, let a Deaconess carry [the Offering] to her.”
148 For a few examples of such texts against women’s involvement in priestly ministries see A. D. Lee, Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity: A Sourcebook, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 261-3.
The Kollyrians and the Six Books Apocryphon

Reliance on a literary-historical framework to propose a hypothesis as to the authorship of the Six Books Apocryphon, might lead us to consider the possibility that women may be responsible for the composition of the text based on the strong egalitarian motifs in the narrative. What can be said about the intended audience of the Six Books Apocryphon? Who was the text written for, and for what purpose? Is Epiphanius’ account in the Panarion a reliable source of information regarding people associated with the Six Books Apocryphon?

Before addressing these questions, another practical question comes to mind. Did the Kollyrians really exist, or are they a rhetorical instrument Epiphanius used against women seeking the priesthood? As mentioned above, Michel Carroll questions the existence of the group. Also, although Averil Cameron advocates looking at heresiologies as texts, straying away from the reductionist trends of most of modern scholarship and from rationalizing the texts with assumptions against their repressive nature, she also believes that the Kollyrians were an invention of Epiphanius, mainly on the basis of his style and language.

Did the Kollyrians exist?

Some consider Epiphanius as an unreliable source of otherwise unknown religious sects and cults, and in the words of Cameron, ‘an interpretative challenge to the modern

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150 Cameron, “How to Read Heresiology,” 197-8.
At times, his writings have even been dismissed as fictitious. Even Shoemaker entertains the possibility that the *Kollyridians* never existed. He suggested that the sect was Epiphanius’ clever invention for the purpose of illustrating a point against women acting as officiates or priests of a clearly Christian ritual in an indistinct pagan fashion, as well as a way to polemicize what Epiphanius himself perceived as an excessive veneration of Mary.

While it is true there are many challenges in interpreting Epiphanius’ *Panarion*, especially considering that, just like any other text, it is subject to the biases of a particular person writing at a particular time and place, it still ought not to be discounted wholesale. I agree that the *Panarion* should be interpreted within the context of heresiologies. At the same time, the existence of the *Six Books Apocryphon* leads me to believe that, whether the *Kollyridians* existed by name or not, there must have been a sect characterized by the practices Epiphanius attributed to them. There must have been a sect, made up of mostly women perhaps, some of whom acted as priests, who celebrated the dormition and ascension of Mary three times a year, baked bread and participated in a Eucharistic ritual in honour of Mary, and read the dormition narrative as part of their worship service. And so Epiphanius participated in the debates of his times while armed with name calling, confrontational rhetoric and the endless listing of wrong doctrines and practices, weapons which in modern times divest him of any credibility. However, he can be added to the lists of early Christian and late antiquity authors who engaged in

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151 Cameron, “How to Read Heresiology,” 198.
153 In Cameron’s words, one should see heresiology “as a power game between individuals or groups, or as the politics of the early Christian world.” Cameron, “How to read Heresiology,” 206.
154 The same rhetorical style was continued to be used to some extent in later Byzantine discourse. Cameron, “How to read Heresiology,” 204.
ideological and theological battles for control and for supremacy. For this reason alone, his texts, taken at face value, can be helpful for understanding the type of opposition and marginalization that the sects he criticized must have sustained.

The Six Books Apocryphon’s audience considered

Returning to the question of the intended audience of the Six Books Apocryphon, it seems without question that the narrative was used by an undetermined audience. The most obvious place of use would have been liturgical, giving the text authority. There is no indication in the narrative itself that would lead us to think the audience was made up of solely women. Perhaps the group was made up of Christians of both genders, and the officiating of the rituals prescribed in the text may have been performed by both men and women. In this case, the audience would have been familiar and comfortable with women performing priestly functions.

As for Epiphanius’ contribution to the inquiry about audience, although he does mention that the group offering baked bread to Mary was comprised of women, the name he gives them in Greek is a plural, masculine noun, κολλυριδιανοί. Yet the most significant information we can infer from the Panarion is the fact that around the 370’s CE Epiphanius knew about the practices like those prescribed in the Six Books Apocryphon through the activities of a group of people. Epiphanius seems to be more

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155 Bart Ehrman considers Epiphanius as one of the proponents of emerging orthodoxy, although perhaps Epiphanius could be best described as extreme, and not a fair representative of orthodoxy. Ehrman seems to also treat Epiphanius’ writings with caution, at times taking his statements at face value, as in the case of Epiphanius’ description of the Ebionites, and at times dismissing him as exaggerated and fictitious in his portrayal of other groups such as the Phibionites. See Bart D. Ehrman, Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and Faiths We Never Knew, (New York: Oxford University Press: 2003), 102 and 200-1.
confident about the existence of a group who engaged in these practices and who adhere to the tenets of this particular dormition narrative, than about the existence of the narratives themselves.

The practice of breaking bread to a female deity, or in this case, to Mary is not a ritual to be taken lightly by virtue of its peculiar nature. A lot could be inferred about a community that endorses this ritual, not attested anywhere else in Late Antiquity outside of the *Six Books Apocryphon* and Epiphanius’ description of the *Kollyridians*. Benko notes that this would have been perfectly normal within the cultural and religious milieu of the Latin East, as many people in the rural areas would have been paying reverence to a goddess whose sphere of influence was agriculture and fertility. Within the text of the *Six Books Apocryphon* there are promises for plentiful harvest and prosperity along with the instructions to offer bread in honour of Mary and to commemorate her dormition. Even in the event that fourth-century Christians had lost the earlier meaning of a rite such as the baking of bread to a goddess, it was probably still the case that, as Benko points out, the offering of bread during the pagan festival of Matralia hinted at a symbolism that was still powerful enough for people to engage with in a meaningful way. In other words, it is very possible that the *Six Books Apocryphon* would have been written with people who were drawn to the symbolism of offering breads to a goddess in return for the promise of protection of their crops. It follows that a Christian community able to facilitate rituals in accordance with the agricultural calendar in which Mary was entreated

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156 Although the *Kollyridians* apparently were not the only ones to offer bread in their Eucharist, they were the only ones to do so in honour of Mary. Epiphanius speaks of another group that also offered bread in their rituals, called the *Artotyritai*. He called them so because they were thought to offer cheese along with their bread in their mysteries. Ἀρτοτυρίται derives from ἄρτος or bread and τυρός or cheese. See Epiphanius, *Panarion* 49.1.1 and 49.2.6. Also see Benko, *Virgin Goddess*, 162.

157 Benko, *Virgin Goddess*, 177.
for reassurance of a good harvest would resonate with people from the peripheral urban areas.

However, it is impossible to make any more statements regarding the audience of the *Six Books Apocryphon* with the current information available. It is at this junction that the benefits of a social-scientific approach such as that afforded by ritual criticism can help formulate a more informed and nuanced hypothesis about the type of audience for which the *Six Books Apocryphon* was written.

**Conclusion**

Questions of authorship and intended audience of the *Six Books Apocryphon* seem to have been mostly left out of the discussions on the text, perhaps mainly due to the difficulties in dealing with such questions through the traditional literary and historical methods of inquiry. Stephen J. Shoemaker is the first scholar to explicitly connect the *Six Books Apocryphon* with the writings of Epiphanius of Salamis from the mid-fourth century, condemning a sect for heresy in their veneration of Mary. In fact, the description Epiphanius provides of this sect, whom he calls the *Kollyridians*, is congruent with one of the most significant instructions in the *Six Books Apocryphon*, the offering of baked bread to Mary.

It has been suggested that the author(s) of the *Six Books Apocryphon* had to be invested in defending not only an egalitarian view of the Christian community in respect to gender, but also women in leadership roles in general and the institution of female priests in particular. Furthermore, the intended audience of the text may have been people from rural areas who were familiar both with female-officiating rituals and with
agriculturally based rituals in the hopes of a good harvest. This means that goddess worship may have been a practice that resonated with the sect or community that used (and reproduced) the *Six Books Apocryphon*.

All these ideas about authorship and audience are simply deductions made from following a literary/historical approach for the interpretation of the text. In the next chapter, I will explore the use of ritual theories for interpreting the *Six Books Apocryphon* and for better understanding the communities that produced and used the text.
CHAPTER THREE: THE SIX BOOKS APOCRYPHON AND RITUAL THEORY

Introduction

The *Six Book Apocryphon* was rejected by the developing proto-orthodox church and almost completely forgotten until fragments were discovered in the nineteenth century. Even after the text was discovered, most scholars initially ignored it, considering it a useless text, full of superstition and fantastic notions of no real value. As shown in the Introduction above, it was not until the 1940’s that scholars like Martin Jugie saw the potential of the dormition narratives for illuminating the history of liturgy and began to take an interest in the narratives. However, in spite of the recent scholarly interest, the *Six Books Apocryphon* has been primarily approached from a strictly historical-literary framework, an approach that can lend itself to misrepresentations of the origins and background of the text due to the scant nature of the evidence available. Meanwhile, ritual theory has not been applied to the evaluation of the dormition narratives in general or to the *Six Books Apocryphon* in particular. Considering that the *Six Books Apocryphon* is the only early church document to combine a dormition narrative with instructions for worship, it is worth closely examining the text and the community it represents. The frameworks provided by literary and historical analysis are insufficient for reconstructing the community behind *Six Books Apocryphon* due to the absence of literary and material evidence. However, according to Richard De Maris, the application of ritual criticism for the interpretation of texts can serve as a tool to re-create

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the ancient communities associated with the texts more accurately.\textsuperscript{159} Therefore I suspect that ritual theory can be a useful tool for thinking about the Six Books Apocryphon community.\textsuperscript{160}

The aim of this chapter is to explore ways in which ritual theory can contribute to the interpretation of the Six Books Apocryphon in search of answers to the following issues: 1) What is the function of ritual in the Six Books Apocryphon? 2) What can be said about the social structures behind the text? 3) What is the significance of the specific rituals commanded in the text, i.e., the offering of baking bread in commemoration of Mary’s dormition, the reading of specific passages including the dormition text itself, and the three specific dates chosen for the commemoration to take place as prescribed in the Six Book Apocryphon? The issues of authorship and audience will naturally be addressed in pursuit of these three questions.

I would like to first set this analysis within the context of the development of ritual theory in the last century by very briefly referring to the theories of Émile Durkheim, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and, to a greater extent, Mary Douglas. This will allow me to apply a combination of functional theory and structuralism. Then, moving beyond the origins of ritual theory in functional / structuralist studies, I will focus on the specific categories of rites that are exemplified in the Six Books Apocryphon, namely the unusual ritual of offering baked bread in honour of Mary and the designation of specific dates for the commemorations of Mary’s


dormition. Next, I will aim to explore the relationship between ritual and text. The application of specific interpretive approaches for understanding ritual density as it relates to the *Six Books Apocryphon*, namely systems, typology and ritual change, will serve to describe the nature of the relationship between ritual and text. Lastly, I will propose a reconstruction of the community behind the *Six Books Apocryphon* based on the approaches discussed previously in the chapter.

The theoretical frameworks mentioned here are useful and convenient in their functional / structural character, but are not definitive. Following the example of the American religious studies scholar Catherine Bell, I am employing them simply as tools to explore in a fluid and heuristic way the possible functions of the rituals described in the *Six Books Apocryphon* and the structure of the communities the text implicitly represents. Additionally, it is important to point out from the beginning that ritual theory is far from perfect. Obviously, it is not to be used as the sole criterion and method by which to analyze a text. Early theorists ran into problems, as they had a natural tendency to pick as a subject of study only those rituals that seemed appropriate for their particular bias.\(^\text{161}\) In the words of the structuralist Edmund Leach, “Anthropological theories often tell us more about the anthropologists than about their subject.”\(^\text{162}\) However, in spite of the challenges to the research behind many of these theories, the insights they offer into the relationship between religious ritual and social identifications are valid and generally

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\(^{161}\) Bell, *Ritual*, 17. It is also tempting and common for theorists to begin research having already formulated a theory and only applying a method later. For criticism of theorizing and researching in ritual studies, see Ronald Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 29.

accepted among scholars. In fact, as long as one is aware of the possible problems arising from following any single theoretical framework exclusively, and provided that one seeks answers from a variety of perspectives, the application of ritual theory to the study of religion in general and to the subject text in particular can prove fruitful. Moreover, in the case of the *Six Books Apocryphon*, it seems to me that the nature of this particular text is such that the proposal to use ritual theory as a basis for analysis is appropriate, safely removed from any biased agenda. Scholars of early Christianity have traditionally assumed that ancient Christianity—that is Christianity from the first five centuries—was void of ritual and that it stood in opposition to the ritualistic religions of the Greco-Roman neighbours through its focus on doctrine and dogma rather than on ritual practice. When looking at the development of the cult of Mary and at the traditions of the dormition narratives, such assumptions lead invariably to what Richard DeMaris sees as a blatant “polemic against Roman Catholicism.” Ritual theory exposes the fact that, as in the case of all human institutions including the church, ritual is the basic foundation for its social development. In this way, ritual theory moves the study of Christianity in antiquity away from the Protestant/Catholic sectarian arguments. DeMaris considers that the methodologies inclusive of ritual studies as an integral part of the research process are the best medicine against the researcher’s personal bias. A great example of this line of reasoning is found in the works of Mary Douglas, whose methodology is still commonly referenced to in anthropological circles as well as in

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recent New Testament studies for its focus on ritual theory.\textsuperscript{165}

Furthermore, the analysis in this chapter is not meant to offer any value judgment in terms of the theological underpinnings of the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon} or of any other dormition narratives. The \textit{Six Books Apocryphon} is a wonderful and useful example of the variety of beliefs and practices of some early Christians, mostly situated in the Syria-Palestine region between the fourth and sixth centuries CE. As with the previous chapters, the focus of my analysis using ritual theory will be on the particular features that distinguish the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon} from other dormition narratives, namely the instructions regarding festivals, rituals and liturgical readings during these festivals.

\textbf{Ritual theory: functional / structuralist}

According to early functionalists such as Robertson Smith (1846–1894) and Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), there is a strong correlation between ritual and society. They perceived the functions of ritual and religion to be the ensuring of the well-being and preservation of society.\textsuperscript{166} In general, functional theorists are concerned with how ritual affects social groups.\textsuperscript{167} For example, according to Durkheim, rituals can serve as a means to bring individuals into a group, and can ‘strengthen the bonds attaching the

\textsuperscript{165} De Maris, \textit{The New Testament in its Ritual World}, 5. Although now there is a proliferation of scholarly work on ritual beyond the original works of Douglas and others, her works are relevant and commonly cited by scholars of ritual as a starting point for discussion.

\textsuperscript{166} Bell, \textit{Ritual}, 4. Robertson Smith’s emphasis on the importance of ritual for understanding society laid the groundwork for three other major approaches in the field. Émile Durkheim developed Robertson Smith’s ideas and concluded that the sacred was simply a representation of the social group itself. However, this theory seems impossible to prove, and will not be pursued here. Bell, \textit{Ritual}, 24.

\textsuperscript{167} Bell, \textit{Ritual}, 23.
individual to the society of which he is a member.”

For theorists like Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955), functionalism aims to deal with “religion’s social functions rather than their origins.” This approach to religion and by extension to religious texts seems to offer a new vantage point in comparison to the often futile efforts to recover the origins of a tradition through a historical inquiry when external evidence is scant or non-existent, as is the case with the *Six Books Apocryphon*.

Having said that, functionalism often produces more questions than answers, and it can also at times be inadequate in explaining the relationship between ritual and society. For certain, this relationship is not always one of society giving birth to ritual, as it would be misleading to consider ritual to always be the product of social concerns. While theorists like Robertson Smith emphasized the pre-eminence of society over ritual, others saw ritual as a way to reshape and therefore create new societies. According to American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), the systems of symbols that code rituals “have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning… to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves.” At any rate, what we see in the study of ritual is that, even though by the mid-twentieth century theorists were certain that a relationship between ritual and society existed, the exact nature of the relationship has continued to be elusive. Out of this conundrum developed a

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169 Theorists like Radcliffe-Brown understood ritual’s importance in its social role to “secure and maintain the unity of the group.” Bell, *Ritual*, 27.


171 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 93. In other words, ritual can be the product of society and it can also in turn be manipulated in order to produce a society.
nuanced theoretical approach that is not exclusively concerned with the origins of social groupings and that combines the mutually opposite views of functionalism and structuralism. While functionalism ultimately seeks to reveal the meaning and benefits ritual offers to the society that engages in it, structuralism sees social phenomena such as ritual as the manifestation of communicative symbols that originate, as Bell clearly put it, not in society itself but in the “unconscious processes of human thought.”

It was Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) who first challenged the functionalist idea that social constructs such as ritual were the inevitable product of social hierarchies. Instead of seeing these constructs as the direct product of human interactions within a specific society in a linear way, he found that ritual, as well as other social elements, could also originate in the human brain through the structured organization of symbols and symbolic systems akin to grammar.

Although Lévi-Strauss never meant to come up with a ritual theory, his work served as the inspiration for anthropologist Mary Douglas’ (1921-2007) ground-breaking *Natural Symbols*, first published in 1970, in which she presents a functional / structuralist framework for understanding the relationship between society and rituals based on a grid-group quadrant. Douglas’ grid, running vertically in her quadrant, refers to the strength of the rules that dictate the nature of the various relationships and roles in a society. Her group category, running horizontally in Douglas’ quadrant, refers to the level

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172 Bell, *Ritual*, 42. If functionalism has been criticized as reductionist, structuralism also has its critics. See Edmund Leach’s criticism of structuralism on account of anthropologists’ biases, Edmund Leach, “Virgin Birth,” in *Proceedings of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* (1966): p. 46.
of commitment within the community. The four different types of societies produced by
the combination of grid and group are as follows (See Figure 2): 175

a. **Strong grid and group** - This society falls in the top right corner of Douglas’
quadrant. In this society there is high control over the individuals and a great
amount of social pressure. Being a complex social system, it engages in
significant ritual activity. This society believes in the efficacy of symbolic
behaviour, has an anthropomorphic view of the cosmos and considers misfortune
to be the natural and divinely ordained result/punishment for the violation of
formal rules. In this society we find piety and institutions held sacred. Monks and
military groups fit into this category. 176

b. **Strong grid and weak group** - This society fits into the top left corner of
Douglas’ quadrant, although the group itself can spread across the horizontal axis.
In this society the leaders are powerful, and they are able to remotely apply a high
degree of control over individuals. The leaders, whom Douglas refers to as the
Big Men, often need to protect their position from rivalries. Their group is weak,
meaning there are generally less social pressures on them. In this society rituals
are sparse and reflect a concern over boundaries. However, in some cases, as the
leadership moves further to the left in terms of innovation, autonomy and
popularity, the group it influences moves further to the right towards more peer
pressure and less autonomy. If and when the group moves towards the right across
the horizontal axis of social pressures, the views of the group become dualistic
(good vs. evil). Having crossed over the horizontal axis towards less autonomy

also means this group will experience stronger control, and will try to concoct a complex system of rules.\textsuperscript{177} Besides the dynamic shifts across autonomy boundaries (the vertical axis), social density / scarcity will also be among the shaping factors in determining the behaviour and character of the group.\textsuperscript{178}

c. **Weak grid and strong group**  - This society fits in the lower right side of the quadrant. The group may engage in ritual activities for private ends. Their leaders exert control remotely and fit the profile of those in the bottom left quadrant, but their leadership is not as authoritative or powerful. The group has a broader category of rejects than the highly classified group ‘a’. Their cosmology is geared to individual success and initiative, and they see God as distant and not interested in protecting them. Suffering and misfortune cannot be avoided due to the agency of demons (dualistic cosmology).\textsuperscript{179}

d. **Weak grid and weak group**  - This society lingers low on the vertical line of leadership and to the left of the horizontal line of social control. In this society there is less control over the individuals—hence more individualism—and hardly any ritual at all. For Douglas, to this group belong the “voluntary outcasts, tramps,

\textsuperscript{177} Douglas, *Natural Symbols* 60, 65-66.
\textsuperscript{178} Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 62. This is true for every group in the quadrant. The density of a group relates to the frequency of social relations of the members of a society. This density is high in urban centers. However, in rural areas, where the population is sparse, so is the frequency of social intercourse. As a rule of thumb, the higher density a society experiences, the greater is their need for symbols and rituals and the more the individual is concerned with social pressures that determine the quality of his life. Similarly, the lower the density, or the sparser a society’s relational encounters are, the less regard they will have towards ritual. People in this type of society tend to live in an agrarian environment and are more preoccupied with their crops or livestock than with their relationships within their community. Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 67.
\textsuperscript{179} Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 61, 64.
gipsies, rich eccentrics, or others who retain their freedom, at a cost.”

Their cosmology is impersonal, in which individual access to God is usually direct, and there is no need for mediation. In the end, suffering and misfortune are conquered by love.

**Grid**

Douglas was able to provide a clear way of explaining the relationship between ritual and society in this grid. According to Bell, Douglas’ work was and still is a real breakthrough in the study of ritual theory, as it provides an unprecedented system to correlate ritual with various other issues. Her quadrants are a helpful and versatile tool for understanding ritual practices in relation to the patterns of social organization, and its worldviews about the supernatural, the eschatology, and even the theodicy of the people.

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182 The intersection of horizontal and vertical axis corresponds to the value ‘0’.
that engage in ritual. Furthermore, from the group-grid quadrants it seems apparent that the adoption of rituals by any community is dynamic rather than static, and that the shape of the rituals will change as the communities that perform them also undergo change.

Apart from Douglas’ grid and group analysis, which so far has not been applied to the dormition narratives, the link between social organization and the cult of Mary was previously underscored by Edmund Leach. In his article titled “Virgin Birth,” Leach connects the development of the cult of the Virgin Mary, of which the development of the dormition narratives is part and parcel, with societies where “the rulers are vastly superior to the ruled class.”

The brief notes above on functionalism and structuralism show their relevance to the rituals in the Six Books Apocryphon. I do not suggest that this framework provides a complete picture of the community behind the Apocryphon or that through it one can fully comprehend what produced the ritual prescriptions that make this dormition narrative different from the rest. However, using the principles of functionalism and structuralism in a way that combines the implications of ritual on society and the notion of ritual as communicative symbols adds depth and clarity to the study of the Six Books Apocryphon missing from a mere literary or historical analysis. As for Douglas’

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184 Leach, “Virgin Birth,” 43. His article and the lectures from which it was produced argued against the current view among some anthropologists about primitive cultures that believed in supernatural births such as virgin births. He compared the myths of aboriginal groups in Australia with Christianity and argued for a structural approach to demystify the Christian and the Tully River Blacks’ belief in virgin births by linking the doctrine to social cast systems.

185 Although Mary Douglas would not have identified herself as a structural anthropologist, she admittedly borrowed some of the concepts developed by Basil Bernstein on the presence of restricted language codes in developed societies and applied them to her work within a structuralist stance. Douglas, Natural Symbols, 10, 21, 54. In short, it seems to me she recognizes and upholds the claims of Lévi-Strauss regarding the similarities between rituals and language and their classifications in the unconscious structuring actions of the brain. Douglas, Natural Symbols, 169.
quadrants, their relevance to the Six Books Apocryphon becomes clearer after looking at the specific categories of rites present in the text and at the relationship between text and ritual. For this reason, it is necessary to return to the application of Douglas’ quadrants to the text later on in the chapter.

**Categories of rites**

The categories of ritual can be endless, and they may reflect the interest or biases and assumptions of the ritual theorists more than the realities of the rituals themselves. It seems to me that the problem is not in identifying what ritual typology a particular text exemplifies, but in assigning limited categories to any particular ritual. Meanwhile, there are definitely certain characteristics of rituals that lend themselves to being grouped into legitimate categories. Some rituals can fall into more than one category, as these categories should be fluid and allow for broad descriptions when necessary. The rituals in the *Six Books Apocryphon* are a prime example of such fluidity. Based on some of the categories or genres defined by Bell, I have identified the following two categories as the most important ones for the analysis of the *Six Books Apocryphon*. The same passages used to support this claim can also be used in exemplifying other categories mentioned by Bell, such as feasting, fasting and festivals.

1. **Calendrical rites**

These rites can be seen as an attempt to merge the social and the natural worlds. They have a predictable schedule, as they accompany the various seasonal changes in

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187 Bell, *Ritual*, 93-4. Bell sought a middle ground between theorists like Victor Turner who divided all ritual into only two categories, and Ronald Grimes who did it into sixteen. Bell’s six categories are: rites of passage, calendrical and commemorative rites, rites of exchange and communion, rites of affliction, rites of fasting, feasting and festivals, and political rites.
weather and agricultural work, according to either the solar calendar (fixed dates) or the lunar calendar (variable dates).\textsuperscript{188} Wright’s translation of the passage in the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon} relevant to calendrical rites reads as follows:

“On the twenty-fourth of the first Kanun... we order that the commemoration of her shall take place two days after (the Nativity), and that with her pure offerings shall be blessed the seeds of the husbandmen, which they have borrowed and sown... and there should be a commemoration in the month of Iyar, on account of the seeds that were sown, and on account of the flying and creeping locust, that they might not come forth and destroy the crops, and so there be a famine and the people perish... And the apostles ordered also that there should be a commemoration of the blessed one on the thirteenth of the month of Ab, on account of the vines bearing bunches (of grapes), and on account of the trees bearing fruit, that clouds of hail, bearing stones of wrath might not come and the trees be broken and their fruits and the vines with their clusters.” \textsuperscript{189}

Bell identified two types of calendrical rituals: seasonal and commemorative, and the celebrations described in the above passage from the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon} easily fit into both categories.

\textbf{a. Seasonal celebrations}

These are based on planting and harvesting agricultural cycles or grazing and moving for pastoral cycles: the style of ritual depends on the type of cultivation.\textsuperscript{190} In the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon}, the rituals themselves are concerned with the agricultural cycle, and are linked to offerings to Mary for the protection of the crops. The purpose of these rituals is to seek Mary’s blessing upon the seeds, which have been borrowed and sown. This wording calls to mind sharecroppers who would have been fully dependent on a

\textsuperscript{188} Bell, \textit{Ritual}, 102.
\textsuperscript{189} Wright, \textit{Departure of My Lady}, 153.
\textsuperscript{190} Bell, \textit{Ritual}, 102.
plentiful harvest. They also seek for protection against natural agents that might destroy their crops even after the trees have borne fruit. The specific agricultural concerns in the prescribed commemoration of Mary suggest that the community in which the text was produced or for which the instructions were given were not inhabitants of urban centers, merchants or tradespeople, but most likely lived in rural areas and were engaged in farming. The rituals of the *Six Books Apocryphon* can be seen, in the words of Bell, as “working interpretations of the natural and social worlds,” as these Christian communities included their concern over the impact of the natural world on their lives into the social aspect of their religious experience. In a way that is characteristic of calendrical rites of the seasonal type; the aim of this commemoration is both to influence nature and to align Christian piety with the natural seasons through their offerings to Mary.

b. **Commemorative celebrations**

These types of celebrations are held in order to explicitly recall an event that may or may not be historical. Bell gives the example of the birth of Jesus on December 25 as an appropriation to a previous festival. The birth of Jesus substituted for the birth of the *Sol Invictus*, an already well-established Roman festival previously instituted by Marcus Aurelius. Bell points out that appropriations of calendric festivals, such as the Christian appropriation of Roman religious practices in the fourth century, are common and effective ways to deal with competing religious practices. This also seems to be the case with the instructions regarding the festival of Mary’s assumption. Although it is difficult to correlate the Marian festivals prescribed in the *Six Books* to any particular

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191 Bell, *Ritual*, 103.
192 Bell, *Ritual*, 104.
193 Bell, *Ritual*, 104.
female deity on August 15, there were various festivals held at that time of year in the ancient world in honour of female deities whose spheres of influence were agricultural.\textsuperscript{194} It seems that one of the functions of the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon} might be to introduce this particular tradition about the last days of Mary in a way that would be appealing and effective for winning over communities that engaged in the already well-established celebratory practices around agricultural events.\textsuperscript{195}

### 2. Exchange and communion rites

Offerings made to a deity with the expressed purpose of receiving some type of blessing in return fall into Bell’s proposed category of exchange and communion rites.\textsuperscript{196} These offerings, which may be as simple as a flower or as symbolically dense as animal sacrifice, represent what Bell calls “a mutual interdependence between the human and the divine”.\textsuperscript{197} Furthermore, the offerings also serve a purpose in organizing and making sense of the social and cultural character of a community.

The relevant passage from the Syriac \textit{Six Books Apocryphon}, as translated by Wright, reads as follows:

\textsuperscript{194} Another parallel to the Marian festival in the month of Av is the commemoration /lamentation over the destruction of Jerusalem on the 9\textsuperscript{th} of Av. See H. Sivan, “Contesting Calendars: The 9\textsuperscript{th} of Av and the Feast of the Theotokos,” ed. B. Caseu, \textit{Pelerinages et lieux saints dans l’Antiquité et Moyen Age}, (Paris: Centre de Recherche d’Histoire et Civilisation de Byzance, 2006), 443-456. Although outside the scope of this present paper, further inquiry into any parallels between the calendrical rituals observed by Jews and the rituals of the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon} would further enrich this topic.\textsuperscript{195} Among these known and well established celebrations would have been the ones dedicated to Demeter. Hellenism, including the worship of indigenous deities under local and Greek names, continued well into Antiquity in the rural areas of greater Syria. See G. W. Bowersock, \textit{Hellenism in Late Antiquity}, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 29.

\textsuperscript{196} Bell, \textit{Ritual}, 108.

\textsuperscript{197} Bell, \textit{Ritual}, 109.
“...and the apostles also ordered that any offering offered in the name of my Lady Mary should not remain over the night, but that at midnight of the night immediately preceding her commemorations, it should be kneaded and baked; and in the morning let it go up on the altar,... and let everyone be before the altar in the church, and the priests celebrate (the holy Eucharist) and set forth the censer of incense and kindle the lights, and let the whole service be concerning these offerings; and when the whole service is finished, let every one take his offerings to his house... the Holy Spirit shall come and bless these offerings; and when every one takes away his offering, and goes to his house, great help and the benison of the blessed one shall enter his dwelling and establish it forever.”

Along with the explicit instruction for the baking of bread, Wright translates the priest’s celebration as ‘the holy Eucharist’, a term that complicates an already problematic passage. Part of what already makes this passage complicated is the fact that the text found and translated by Wright is the only one of all the dormition narratives that contains the instruction regarding the baking of bread. In addition, it is unclear whether the instructions to offer baked bread to Mary found in Wright’s Six Books Apocryphon combined the baked bread with the holy Eucharist. Furthermore, Wright indicates in his footnotes that the ‘holy Eucharist’ might simply refer to the offering itself being holy. Perhaps the baked bread in honour of Mary was meant to replace the traditional Eucharist, in which bread and often wine were offered at the altar in either thanksgiving to or remembrance of Jesus. For this reason, I am inclined to consider the offerings of bread to Mary as a rite unrelated to the Eucharist rites of the third and fourth centuries.

Another consideration is the phrase “let the whole service be concerning these offerings; and when the whole service is finished, let everyone take his offerings to his

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“house.” Since there is no indication that taking the Eucharist home was a practice in antiquity, but rather common practice in the cults of the Greco-Roman deities, it does not seem that the Eucharist was at all part of the ritual performed on the dormition celebration. 199 Wright’s mention of the ‘holy Eucharist’ in his translation above may be misleading. 200

In contrast to the above passage, the version discovered by Agnes Smith Lewis has no reference to baked bread. However, Smith-Lewis’ passage is explicit on the use of the offerings in exchange for blessings. Her translation reads,

“And the Apostles commanded that the priests and the believing peoples should fast on the day of the commemoration until the ninth hour; and at the ninth hour offerings should be made to her. And like as the power of the Most High came and dwelt in her, so the power of prayer should come and bless the land in which offerings are made. And the apostles commanded that the vows and the offerings which should be made to the Blessed one in her name should be preserved, and that in every place where such offering is made she should come and appear there; and in every place where men call upon her she should come and appear there; and should help them.” 201

In this case, what we have in the Six Books Apocryphon is not the high symbolism that accompanies Eucharistic rites, but rather the symbolism of bread and grain offerings. This symbolism could be seen as an expression of patron-client relationships. Ernest Gellner refers to patronage as one of the ways in which social scientists explain a wide

200 To date, the only translation of this Syriac palimpsest of the Six Books Apocryphon is the above translation by Wright, published in 1865. 201 Smith Lewis, Apocrypha Syriaca, 61.
variety of relationships that go beyond political and economic contexts.²⁰² These relationships can range from deity-human to professor-student, and so forth, and they have in common the unequal status of the pair, in which one is the superior element and the other is the dependent element. Early ritual theorists understood the relationship between humans and deities of the Greco-Roman world as symbolic of social structures in antiquity. In fact, the symbolic representation of society as the ritual activities of humans towards their patron deity can be attested since the beginnings of civilization. It was expressed in the form of sacrifices and offerings to deities in exchange for their patronage in the deity’s sphere of influence. Divine patronage - the belief that in order to be successful in any aspect of life one needed to seek the support of divine beings - was as normal to Christians as it was to their polytheistic neighbors.²⁰³

However, in the Six Books Apocryphon we see a variant of the symbolic expression of social patronage, in that the superior element and recipient of the offerings is not a deity, but another human. This shift, particular to the fourth century, coincides with the emergence of the cult of the saints as well as of the cult of Mary.²⁰⁴ In the words of Paul Antony Hayward, “by bridging the gap between heaven and earth with human

²⁰⁴ I am aware of the problems associated with joining the term ‘saint’ with anything related to the late antique period, as there was no formal process of sainthood. Likewise, to refer to these superior men and women who were the recipients of piety in the early centuries of Christianity as holy men can also be problematic due to the broad scope of the word ‘holy’. See Averil Cameron, “On Defining the Holy Man” in *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, Howard-Johnston, James; Hayward, Paul Antony, eds, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 27-43. Since the problems associated with these terms are not the center of my discussion in this paper, I have considered it sufficient to acknowledge that these problems exist without delving into any conclusions about them.
beings as opposed to semi-divine angels or demons, Christians were able to articulate their relationships with these intercessors in terms of the intimate bonds of everyday life, to treat them, that is, as their kinsmen, friends, or preferred patrons.\textsuperscript{205} The requests to Mary accompanied by offerings of baked bread in exchange for the survival of crops and the well-being of the people as prescribed in the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon} represents the relationship between the rural people engaging in such rituals and their dependence upon individuals of higher standing who exert a great deal of influence and power over them. In such a situation, the community does not have any special status per se, and yet it engages as a client with the figure of Mary as patron.

Religion in this sense, including devotion to Mary, was encased within the familiar territory of human relations between patron and client—a relationship familiar to every class in the Mediterranean world. Writing on the importance of the shift in patron-client relationships from deities to humans, Peter Brown says:

\begin{quote}
In a society that knew all about the immediate social effects of friendship and patronage, the emergence of men and women who claimed intimate relations with invisible patrons meant far more than the rise of a tender religiosity of personal experience, and more than the groping of lonely men for invisible companionship. It meant that yet another form of power was available for the inhabitant of a Mediterranean city.\textsuperscript{206}
\end{quote}

\textbf{Ritual theory and text}

According to Jason T. Lamoureaux, ritual theory serves as a heuristic tool to understand rituals in their ancient context, specifically in respect to social power


\textsuperscript{206} Peter Brown, \textit{The Making of Late Antiquity}, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978), 64.
struggles and the religious lives of the communities that produced and used the religious texts. As mentioned earlier, De Maris also considers the interpretation of texts through ritual criticism a useful way to re-create the ancient communities associated with the texts more accurately. What is more, we can see in the *Six Books Apocryphon* most of the specific features that, according to Christian Strecker, serve as links between ritual and text. These features are:

1. **The text’s instructions or commands for carrying out a rite**

   The main relevant passage reads, “And the apostles also ordered that any offering offered in the name of my Lady Mary should not remain over the night, but that midnight of the night immediately preceding her commemoration, it should be kneaded and baked...”

   There is no need for speculation as to who the apostles are, since they are all mentioned by name in the text. However, the mention of the apostles in this passage is significant in that it ensures that the rites, which are probably new to some in the community, become uniform based on the apostolic tradition for legitimization.

2. **The text’s exposition of meaning, function or implementation of a rite**

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211 For reference to Jewish instructions regarding sacrifice see Leviticus 7:11-15 and 2:4-10. A dependence on Leviticus for ritual forms may be difficult to prove at first glance, especially considering the anti-Jewish sentiments all throughout the text. However, since by the fourth century Christians had appropriated the Old Testament as their own, there may be a case for conceiving the rituals in Wright’s *Six Books Apocryphon* as an explicit imitation and appropriation of an Old Testament ritual.
One of the immediate functions of the rite concerning the baking of bread is found within its instructions, according to which, “when everyone takes away his offering, and goes to his house, great help and the benison of the blessed one shall enter his dwelling and establish it forever.”

3. **The ritual as direct cause for the redaction of the text**

This can be seen in Peter’s words to the apostles, “Let each of us, when he has gone to the place whence he came, write and teach the people, to whom he has gone, whatever the Holy Spirit puts into his mouth; and let him teach these things, that there may be a commemoration of my Lady Mary three times in the year.” According to the text itself, the books were written so that the commemorations could take place, including the specific rites prescribed. In this respect, anthropologist Jack Goody suggests that religious texts can function as a way to heighten social stratification, emphasizing the gap between the lords, represented by the priests to whom the written world belongs, and the rest of the people, who receive divine instruction.

4. **The text’s function during the ritual performance**

The text is commanded to be used during ritual performance, all within the context of the instructions for the celebration. According to the instructions, “… and in the morning let it [the baked bread offering] go up on the altar, whilst the people stand before the altar with psalms of David, and let the New and Old Testaments be read, and the volume of the

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213 Wright, “Departure of My Lady,” 156.
decease of the blessed one; and let everyone be before the alter in the church...” 

This command places the text in parallel to the Old and New Testaments, and assumes that the text should carry the same functions, namely the creation of a normative and prescriptive account of the feast of Mary.

These features in the *Six Books Apocryphon* linking ritual and text provide a good starting point for interpretation of the text’s ritual character. I will later return to them in my discussion about reconstructing the community of the text. Before, I must return briefly to the issue of density, as understanding this variant can be helpful in the ritual analysis of texts.

As expressed above in the description of Douglas’ quadrants, density can be one of the factors in determining the character of a group. Dynamic shifts in the composition of a group in terms of density—meaning the frequency of social relations between members of the group—will produce changes in the need for rituals in that group. This aspect makes the ‘strong grid - weak group’ difficult to analyze, because societies in this quadrant are dynamic and prone to develop a stronger group as the grid strengthens. However, looking at a group’s ritual activities as part of a larger system of rituals can help us understand how the shifts in composition affected the ritual. In the case of the *Six Books Apocryphon*, we can look at the offering of bread and the liturgy (readings of the Old and New Testament plus the dormition account) that accompany the offering both within the context of offerings to fertility goddesses as well as within the context of Eucharistic rites. Societies that have experienced a shift in social density will combine

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215 Wright, “Departure of My Lady,” 153. I do not read the references to the Old Testament as a certain acceptance of Jewish ritual, as much as a convention followed in services including the Eucharist.

216 Bell, *Ritual*, 204.
various rituals belonging to the larger ritual system, and as a result the society will exhibit
ritual behaviour that seems out of context with their original character. 217 As Bell noted,
there is among theorists the recognition of “opposing social or cultural forces” coming
together in ritual performances of the ancient world.218

According to Douglas, sometimes communities experience some form of shift
either in strength of group due to density or in intensity of grid due to leadership
changes.219 Related to these shifts is the notion of longevity of ritual over dogma.
According to Radcliffe-Brown, “rites are in all religions the most stable and lasting
element, and consequently that in which we can best discover the spirit of ancient
cults.”220 In other words, the activities of ritual life in any community are more stable
than any doctrines or beliefs they may profess, and rites can tell us a great deal about
ancient communities. In the case of the community or the redactors behind the Six Books
Apocryphon, perhaps the popular rituals of baking bread and offering them to a female
deity in order to secure agricultural prosperity were a stable ritual likely to linger, in spite
of the adoption of Christian doctrines and beliefs that may have been opposed to the
practice. The doctrines and beliefs of the early Christians were varied and a state of
uniformity was being developed in the first centuries of Christianity through the

217 This is because societies tend to have more than just one ritual system, and these
systems overlap in tension or in harmony. In the case of the Six Books, the overlap is
definitely one of tension, as demonstrated by the negative response of Epiphanius of
Salamis to practices similar to those prescribed in the text. Bell, Ritual, 174.
219 Douglas, Natural Symbols, 13. Her study of the Navajo people show that a shift in
form of grouping cause changes in ritual which in turn also cause further changes in
doctrines.
220 Jacques Waardenburg, Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods
and Theories of Research. Introduction and Anthology, (Tubingen, DEU: Walter de
Gruyter, 2011), 591. This bibliographical reference corresponds to the works of
Radcliffe-Brown as reproduced in this anthology.
relentless labour of theologians, bishops and church authorities. Epiphanius of Salamis would have considered himself one of the authorities working against the grain of already well-established ritual practices. The various developmental stages of the veneration of Mary stand as an example of the amalgamation of opposing rituals and doctrines. Moreover, some ritual practices, such as the incense offerings for Mary during the dormition feast on or around August 15th, were also adopted from popular seasonal celebrations to fertility deities into emerging ritual and belief systems of Christianity, and continued to be performed for centuries. These adopted ritual practices were both resilient and versatile in terms of their symbolism and adaptability to the changes in Marian perceptions in the early centuries of Christianity.

Reconstruction of the Six Books Apocryphon community

1. The Six Books Apocryphon and Douglas’ grid and group model

Mary Douglas’ quadrants are helpful for conceptualizing the social structures behind the composition of the Six Books Apocryphon. Her quadrants are by no means rigid, and the fit is not perfect. As shown above, issues of group density can alter the society’s character and how the description of the quadrants may fit with the overall scenario. For this reason, it is best to see the quadrants as fluid guidelines, not strict descriptions.

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221 A simple example of this is the offering of incense in the presence of the deity. The practice itself, being stable, continued to have meaning and use in various contexts in spite of belief systems. The ritual of breaking bread prescribed in the Six Books Apocryphon happens to be another example.

222 An example of a practice comparable to the offering of bread to Mary is the offering of bread or mollai to Demeter during the Thesmophoria. See Merlin Stone, Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 370.
To begin with, the ‘strong group - strong grid’ social structure does not seem to fit in with what we see in the dormition text. According to Douglas, “strong grid and strong group will tend to a routinized piety towards authority and its symbols; beliefs in a punishing, moral universe, and a category of rejects.”223 The egalitarian position represented in the Six Books Apocryphon, and the passing of this society to almost complete obscurity within a few hundred years, would not correspond to such a social structure. The same can be said about the ‘strong group - weak grid’ society, in which the tendency to marginalize women, the poor and the weak is even greater. As for the ‘weak group - weak grid’ social structure, it will also be unlikely that the Six Books Apocryphon community could identify with this type of structure. Within this structure there is little interest in ritual, and perhaps any patron-client relationship would be almost non-existent.

The most likely scenario to consider as representative of the Six Books Apocryphon community based on Douglas’ quadrants is that of the ‘strong grid - weak group’. Douglas described this combination as one in which the community engages in ritual activities for their own benefit, meaning that the needs and desires of the individuals within the community are more important than well-established rules, societal hierarchies, or the agendas of authorities outside the group. An example of this is the very fact that their ritual activities, such as the offering of baked bread to Mary during her festival and to bring the offering back home for consumption, are of the heretical type according to figures like Epiphanius. The use of ritual activities in the Six Books Apocryphon for private ends of the individuals, in which misfortune associated with the destruction of crops and natural disasters could be avoided through the appropriate rites, is also in line with societies in this quadrant. This scenario would fit in well in the case

223 Douglas, Natural Symbols, 66.
of Kateusz’ hypothesis, according to which the creators of the *Six Books Apocryphon* were women who had a strong egalitarian presence in the community, and who perhaps had to flee due to persecution.

The leaders responsible for the redaction of the *Six Book Apocryphon* established their authority through apostolic claims, as represented by the attribution of the instructions to the apostles.\(^{224}\) A valid question that naturally arises from this scenario would be how this particular interpretation might square with the apparent heretical features of the rituals in the Syriac *Six Books Apocryphon*. Part of the answer lies in the inherent character of the leader or leaders in a strong grid - weak group configuration. These leader(s) are removed from their group, rarely seen face to face, and they may be influential individuals who have already reached some level of autonomy from the norm.\(^{225}\) Within the group there might be people likely to belong to the category of mavericks, eccentrics, and marginalized individuals.\(^{226}\)

The group to whom the *Six Book Apocryphon* was delivered, and who presumably adhered to its instructions, is described within the text. The opening chapter of the *Six Books Apocryphon*, an example of liturgical narrative, begins with a blessing to the audience. It reads,

> “Command, Lord, a blessing and a good reward upon the ministry, that they may glorify; and upon rich, that they may laud; and upon the poor, that they may become rich; and upon the old men, that they may praise; and upon the youths, that they may bless. And the women, the daughters of Eve,

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\(^{224}\) Other groups considered heretical also had a strong leadership structure and appealed to apostolic tradition for the legitimization of their views. William L. Petersen, “Tatian the Assyrian” in *Companion to Second-Century Christian 'Heretics'* , eds. Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen, (Leiden, NLD: Brill Academic Publishers, 2005), 132-3.

\(^{225}\) Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, 68.

answer them, Lord, in prayer, when they cry to Thee; for from them was chosen the woman, the virgin and holy, whom her Lord chose from all women, and of her was born the Lord of glory, the Son of the living God...

Stretch forth, Lord, Thy right hand from the exalted throne of Thy glory at this time, and bless, Lord, our congregation, that exalts the commemoration of Thy mother, my Lady Mary, Thou Lord God.”  

The women received special attention in the blessing. From samples of eastern anaphoras, such expressed mention of women is not a standard feature of eastern liturgy. This internal evidence from the *Six Books Apocryphon* shows that there was a certain element of egalitarianism within the community of the *Six Books Apocryphon*.

The celebration of feasts in line with the agricultural calendar and the offering of baked bread in order to entreat a female deity whose sphere of influence was the prosperity of crops can safely be understood as standing outside the common ritual practices of Christian communities at large. Yet, this was exactly the type of instructions given in the *Six Books Apocryphon*. And so the community behind this text engaged in a ritual that was marginal to the majority of Christian society, and that must have attracted the non-Christian rural population. What is more, the ritual activities associated with the *Six Books Apocryphon* are specific to the needs and worldview of both Christians and non-Christian people alike, as the well-being of the crops was a private concern, not the

227 Wright, Departure of My Lady,” 129-130.
228 An example from an anaphora attributed to Addai and Mari and dating back to the third century and taken from Bryan D. Spinks article on liturgical traditions, reads, “May he come, O Lord, your Holy Spirit and rest upon this oblation of your servants, and bless and hallow it, that it may be to us, O Lord, for the pardon of debts and the forgiveness of sins, and a great hope of resurrection from the dead and a new life in the kingdom of heaven with all who have been pleasing before you.” See Spinks, “Eastern Christian Liturgical Traditions,” 341.
concern of the church. This feature shows that the society that produced the *Six Book Apocryphon* can be probably identified as a ‘strong grid - weak group’ combination.

Ross Shepard Kraemer used Mary Douglas’ quadrants to analyze Epiphanius’ *Kollyridians*, the group Shoemaker identified with the *Six Books Apocryphon*. She concluded that, based on the limited information available about them, “it seems difficult to tell whether the *Kollyridian* women, for example, may best be understood as strong grid, weak group or perhaps as weak grid and strong group.”\(^{229}\) However, she admits that communities of the weak grid and strong group type tend to display egalitarian views that translate into more authority roles and options for women. She ascribes the egalitarian hierarchy to the very nature of low grid groups, in which social discrimination breaks down.\(^{230}\) Regardless of whether or not the community behind the *Six Books Apocryphon* were *Kollyridians*, the picture of Mary portrayed in the text is definitely egalitarian. Mary seems to share equally with the apostles in the dispensation of miracles,\(^{231}\) she is able to give the apostles instructions on how to proceed after she is gone,\(^{232}\) she performs acts such as the healing of Jephonias that are parallel to Jesus in the Gospels and to some of the apostles in the apocryphal works,\(^ {233}\) and she is praised by the patriarchs.\(^ {234}\)

\(^{229}\) Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings*, 203.
\(^{230}\) Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings*, 199.
\(^{231}\) “There came to my Lady Mary a woman from Berytus, who had a devil, that at all times was strangling her; and the blessed one prayed over her and cursed these devils in the name of our Lord Jesus the Messiah, and straightaway the devils came out of her...” Wright, “Departure of My Lady,” 142.
\(^{232}\) “And my Lady Mary called Mar John the young... and she said to John: Guard these things which thy Lord hath shown me... and I tell thee, these words shall go forth, and the books of my glorious deeds, that there may be to me commemoration and offerings among men.” Wright, “Departure of My Lady,” 159.
\(^{233}\) Wright, “Departure of My Lady,” 149.
\(^{234}\) “…And there came our father Adam, and Seth his son, and Shem and Noah, who was leaven to this world; and they worshipped before the blessed one.” Wright, “Departure of My Lady,” 150.

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Also, there seems to be a relationship between the ritual of offering baked bread to Mary and the social structure of the group that produced the text. Ritual functionalism suggests that the function of this ritual particular to the Six Books Apocryphon may have been to attract and bring in outsiders into the church in a meaningful way and to keep them engaged in the liturgical practices of the Christian community. These bread offerings in honour of Mary and the accompanying participation in consuming the offering can be used as an attractive and meaningful way to bring people who identify with that specific type of worship into the folds of the church. Notice that the performance of such offering rituals is in line with the common practices of other polytheistic religious still active at the time, as exemplified by the Carvoran inscription.\textsuperscript{235} The Carvoran inscription, credited to a certain prefect named Marcus Caecilius Donatianus, reveals that even in the third century CE a female deity was still worshiped as the ear-bearer. This goddess, Virgo, whose sphere of influence goes beyond agricultural concerns, is seen in this inscription as an amalgamation of various goddesses from the Mediterranean basin such as Ceres, the Syrian goddess (possibly Atargatis), Peace, Virtue, and the mother of the gods, and an example of the continued worship of a female deity well into the third century.

At a time in church history before proto-orthodoxy established its supremacy, part of the religious worldview of most people involved offerings of the type prescribed in the Six Books Apocryphon to fertility goddesses. Some scholars, including Shoemaker, insist

\textsuperscript{235} Benko, Virgin Goddess, 112-3. The inscription reads, “Imminet Leoni Virgo caelesti situ, spicifera, iusti inventrix, urbiun conditrix, ex quis muneribus nosse contigit deos, ergo eadem mater divum, pax, virtus, Ceres, Dea Syria, lance vitam et iura pensitans. In caelo visum Syria sidus edidit Libyae coledum. Inde cuncti didicimus. Ita intellexit numine inductus tuo Marcus Caecilius Donatianus militans tribunus in praefecto dono principis.”
that the baking of bread must not be seen as a continuation of earlier pagan worship, but as a natural example of the developing cult of the saints.\textsuperscript{236} The principles of functionalist ritual theory suggest, however, that the ritual in the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon} may indeed owe its existence to previous pagan practices, as these practices would actually be congruent with some of the worldviews prevalent in ancient society.

2. \textbf{Modern feast of the dormition and the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon} community: comparative case study}

In 2011 Nurit Stadler wrote an interesting article about the different modern religious expressions that converge on contemporary celebrations of the Feast of Mary’s dormition in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{237} He emphasized the relationships among text (the apocryphal dormition narratives), the clergy’s rituals, and popular performances. He also took note of the religious and political antagonisms that ruled in Jerusalem, which I believe by extension can also be said to rule the redaction of the narratives such as the \textit{Six Books Apocryphon}.\textsuperscript{238} In a study he conducted between 2003 and 2010 on the various elements of worship during the Feast of the Dormition in Jerusalem, he noticed that the local Arab worshipers were by far the largest group, in spite of the tremendous crisis their community faced at the hands of both Israeli militia and radical Islamic neighbours.\textsuperscript{239} I find in this modern Arab minority group—in as much as the Christian Arab population can be considered a minority in some regions of the Middle East—an appropriate example for illustrating the ideas behind Douglas’ grid and group quadrants. Groups that

\textsuperscript{238} Stadler, “Between Scriptures and Performance,” 646.
\textsuperscript{239} Stadler, “Between Scriptures and Performance,” 647.
are under severe stress but that have a very strong sense of unity tend to exhibit greater
attachment to rituals. For these contemporary Arab Christian worshipers, ritual functions
as a way to keep their communities together in a time of crisis, persecution from both the
Israeli authorities and the Arab Islamists, and consequently political upheaval. It is
possible that a similar conclusion could be reached about the marginal nature, social or
otherwise, of the ancient communities behind the *Six Books Apocryphon* and about their
use of ritual as a way of unifying the group. The case of these Arab Christian worshipers
can serve as a useful comparison for illustrating the character of the *Six Books
Apocryphon* community based on Douglas’ quadrants.

Another observation Stadler recorded was the discrepancy between the Orthodox
clergy’s efforts to uphold a traditional performance of the rituals (the funeral
processions), and the various lay groups’ agendas and expectations that were congruent
with their own understanding of Mary.240 This shows the presence of a clergy-laity
struggle between conservative and popular groups. Furthermore, Stadler may be right in
asserting that “the rituals and symbols do not unite people around coherent meanings”, as
the rites themselves are not the basis for the formation of these communities.241 Instead,
the rites can be seen as a product of unity, and as a guarantee or an aid in making sure
that the already tight community remains unified. It was the popular devotion that was
demonstrated in the processions, which although remotely endorsed by the clergy, were
fully enacted by the lay community. Again, I believe that this modern example of clergy
vs. laity parallels the third and fourth-century struggles between conservative groups who
preferred a more traditional devotion of Mary and the popular groups, egalitarian in

240 Stadler, “Between Scriptures and Performance,” 647.
nature, who promoted alternative demonstrations of devotion to Mary as exemplified in the *Six Books Apocryphon*. Furthermore, Stadler may be right in asserting that “the rituals and symbols do not unite people around coherent meanings”, as the rites themselves are not the basis for the formation of these communities.\(^{242}\) In other words, the rites can be seen as a product of such unity, and as a guarantee or an aid in making sure that the already tight community remains unified.

Also, the function of shrines is similar to that of texts, in that they both have a two-fold effect.\(^{243}\) According to Stadler, the text can, as does the shrine, conjure images that reinforce identity while at the same time subverting the normative or imposed values that are also present during the ritual. For example, the image of Mary as being sternly opposed to the Jews in the dormition narratives, including the *Six Books Apocryphon*, is consistent with the identity of Christian communities that harboured antagonistic sentiments towards the Jews.\(^{244}\) In this sense, the text reinforces the Christian identity in opposition of the Jews. Meanwhile, Mary is portrayed as a divine figure opposed to the Jews and also as a woman who performs miracles, who can summon all the apostles to her, and who can even demand the terms in which her own Eucharist is to be celebrated in her honour. The equality between Mary and the apostles, and even the possible

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\(^{242}\) Stadler, “Between Scriptures and Performance,” 647.


\(^{244}\) Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, “Jewish Christians, Judaizers and Christian Anti-Judaism” in *A People’s History of Christianity: Late Ancient Christianity*, Vol 2, ed. Virginia Burrus, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 234-254. Although anti-Jewish sentiments were not necessarily shared by the majority of the Christians, there were many who strongly opposed anything Jewish. These Christians need to not have been as extreme as the Marcionites in their anti-Jewish views. An example of a late ancient Christian writer who wrote against the Jews is John Chrysostom in his book *Against the Jews*. 
supremacy of Mary over them as reflected in the text, betrays a subversion of the normative androcentric position of the emerging Orthodox Church.

Conclusion

The rituals prescribed in the *Six Books Apocryphon* serve a dual function: to conjure images that reinforce the identity of this rural Christian community, and at the same time to subvert the normative hierarchical values in favour of the marginalized\(^{245}\) (the members of the congregation mentioned in the opening of the text, namely the poor, the old, the young and especially the women).

As for the social structures behind the text, we see that the community perhaps fits better into Douglas’ model for a strong grid with weak group society, based on the importance of the ritual to this community in spite of its composition. Edmund Leach’s statements about the possibility of the cult of Mary flourishing in communities where there is a vast gap between the ruling class and the people leads one to identify the community of the *Six Books Apocryphon* as one within a strong patron-client culture.\(^{246}\) The representation of Mary, a woman, as the ultimate intermediary between God and men, points to a society with egalitarian views about women. In this society, where the woman, Mary, can reach a status equal to that of the ancient goddesses whose sphere of influence was agriculture and to whom grain offerings were made, there must have been a social structure characterized by the leadership of independent, strong individuals who were patrons to a rural community.

The symbolism of offering baked bread to a deity was shared across religious groups in antiquity, and the community behind the *Six Books Apocryphon* made use of


\(^{246}\) Leach, “Virgin Birth,” 43.
this symbol to unify a larger rural community under the commemoration of Mary’s
dormition in a way that appealed both to Christians and to non-Christians alike. In this
way, the social density of the group was altered. Perhaps the text was redacted in order to
explain the origins of the festival commemorating Mary, and the instructions to read the
dormition narrative at every festival served to reinforce and legitimize the tradition.
CONCLUSION

In my analysis of the dormition narratives—in particular narratives related to the final days of Mary—I chose to use a very specific example, namely the Syriac Six Books Apocryphon discovered by William Wright and published with an English translation in 1865. I chose Wright’s text of the Six Books Apocryphon because the text contains instructions for the worship of Mary that are not found in any other narrative and that exemplify a type of devotion considered heretical by the proto-orthodox church authorities, who were otherwise supporters of Mary’s cult. These instructions are for the celebration of a feast commemorating the dormition of Mary on specific times of the year (incidentally in accordance with the agricultural cycle), the offering of baked bread in honour of Mary most likely in place of the regular Eucharist during the service, and the reading of the dormition narrative alongside the Old and New Testaments during the liturgy.

In spite of being one of the oldest examples of its kind, the Six Books Apocryphon is among the most understudied texts among the dormition narratives. Only in the last twenty years have scholars begun to pay attention to this text, the most prolific scholars being Michele Van Esbroeck, Simon Claude Mimouni and Stephen Shoemaker. Even then, the attention this text has received is limited to classification under a particular tradition of dormition narratives, that is, the Bethlehem tradition, and a few hypotheses as to the origins of the traditions about Mary’s last days. In spite of various opinions about the dormition narratives, most scholars have agreed that the narratives themselves are a response to the Council of Chalcedon of 451, and that the emergence of the cult of Mary alongside the dormition traditions is not accidental. An alternative opinion, raised by
Bellarmino Bagatti and supported by Shoemaker, places the origins of the dormition traditions in the Jewish Christian communities of the second and third centuries in Jerusalem. However, after looking at the anti-Jewish attitudes that permeate the dormition narratives, and in the absence of any substantial evidence for an oral tradition as such, Bagatti’s proposal seems unlikely.

Although the origins of the traditions behind the dormition narratives are elusive due to lack of evidence, scholarly inquiry into the *Six Books Apocryphon* seems more promising, particularly in terms of authorship and audience. Shoemaker is the first to make a connection between the *Kollyridians*—a sect condemned as heretical by Epiphanius of Salamis in the late fourth century—and Wright’s version of the *Six Books Apocryphon*. Alley Kateusz recently proposed that, based on a literary-historical approach to the *Six Books Apocryphon* and to Epiphanius’ writings, the author of the *Six Books Apocryphon* must have been a female, and that the document was conceived or redacted at a time when women had agency over liturgical matters and influence in their communities through leadership roles. Although this is a very plausible argument, it is limited in scope. Additionally, this approach does not address the question of audience satisfactorily.

The attempts scholars have made in order to understand the dormition narratives have followed a literary-historical approach to the various texts. Such an approach has often led to biased conclusions in what can be interpreted as polemical stances either in favour or against Catholic views on the worship of saints in general, and the worship of Mary in particular. In this thesis paper I proposed that using ritual theory as a supplementary theoretical framework with which to examine the dormition narratives might offer a nuanced study on the texts as well as minimize the possibility of bias.
Although New Testament scholars such as DeMaris and Lamoureaux have demonstrated the benefits of applying ritual theory to religious texts for reconstructing the texts’ origins, not many scholars have yet applied religious theory to their analyses of the dormition narratives. Additionally, the Syriac _Six Books Apocryphon_ has not been analysed though a ritual theoretical framework before.

Following a heuristic ritual analysis of the _Six Books Apocryphon_, based on the group-grid model developed by anthropologist Mary Douglas, it seems that the text was produced by a strong grid - weak group type of society, in which the leaders are quite distant from the people and the people belong to a rural congregation perhaps struggling for unity and cohesiveness. The text may have been produced by community leaders who had a high degree of influence based on patronage of some sort, as suggested by the ritual of offerings to a deity in exchange for blessings prescribed in the _Six Books Apocryphon_. As for the audience of the text, it may have been composed of both men and women in rural areas who depended on the land for their sustenance. This Christian community must have existed alongside pagan communities. As the rural peoples were Christianized, their worship of a female deity, perhaps Demeter or another goddess, was naturally amalgamated into the already emerging devotion of Mary popular in Monophysite areas of the eastern Mediterranean. Furthermore, the text’s redaction may have resulted in response to rituals already in place among the rural community, thus creating the need to legitimize both the ritual and the instructions. The fact that the narrative of the _Six Books Apocryphon_ includes not only the regular apostolic claims by which authors sought to establish the legitimacy of the text, but also instructions for the narrative to be read as part of the liturgy on the feast of the commemoration of Mary’s dormition, are indicative of the precedence of the ritual over the text and of the need to legitimize the text.
These are some of the preliminary conclusions resulting from examining the text of the *Six Books Apocryphon* with ritual theory in mind. A thorough analysis of the text may exceed the limits of this thesis paper in terms of volume and scope. In terms of possible future directions of this study of the *Six Books Apocryphon*, more could be said about the political pressures that manifest themselves through patron-client relationships and class struggles, and which affect the way in which societies perform their rituals. Also, the relationship between heavy reliance on agriculture and the devotion to female deities would need more attention. Another interesting research would be a comparison between the rituals prescribed in this text and any evidence of popular piety displayed towards other female figures, such as Thecla and Perpetua.

This thesis demonstrates that the application of ritual theory to the study of religious texts (an approach which has already been adopted by some New Testament scholars) would yield fruitful discussions on the social background of these texts. When applied in conjunction with literary-historical approaches it results in a more nuanced understanding of the authors and audiences behind these texts, and steers the discussion about religious texts away from dogmatic or sectarian biases. This project on the *Six Books Apocryphon* can also serve as support for the issues behind syncretism both in antiquity as well as in the modern world.
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