

THE VIRGIN CHURCH AND THE VIRGIN
MOTHER, A STUDY OF THE ORIGIN
OF MARIOLATRY.

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In the Armenian conception of the Church many different strains of belief meet and unite.

In general the Church is personified as a pure virgin able and worthy to receive the prayers of the faithful and intercede in their behalf with Christ.

The prayer which at a later time the crusader breathed to the Virgin Mary as he rode into the fray, was addressed by the Armenian or Albanian warrior to the virgin *Catholicé*. Thus in an Armenian Saga transcribed by Moses Kalankatuatzi in a part of his history (bk. i., ch. 12) of the Albanians of the Caucasus, which was penned in the seventh century, we read of how 'the brave Wahan Amatuni cast his glance towards the Catholicé (that is the church) and said: Help me. And forthwith aiming his lance along the croup of his horse laid prone in the dust the terrible monster.'

And in an earlier passage, in ch. 9, the same writer wishing to refer to the western church speaks of her simply as 'the Western Virgin.' 'At the time,' he says, 'when God visited mankind and made the virgin of the west to flourish universally under the great Caesar Constantine, he also illumined the Armenians.'

There exist a number of canticles exemplifying the veneration paid to the virgin church in ancient Armenia. The demand is always for her intercession and pity; and along with her are habitually invoked John the Baptist, S. Stephen and Gregory the Illuminator. Here is an example.

, Text from the Vienna Mechitarist MS., 133, f. 190; and British Museum MSS., orient. 2609, fol. 205; and or. 2608, fol. 217:

A CANTICLE OF HOLY CHURCH.¹

¹ Br. Mus. or. 2608 entitles this canticle: 'Canon of the Holy Ark and Ecumenical Church.' Or. 2609 entitles it: 'A Canticle of *Sholakuthi* (effusion of light or *Shekinah*) of the Consecration of Holy Church.' The Armenian legend was that Gregory the Illuminator in a vision saw the Only-Begotten descend with the angels in a flood of light on the site of Edschmiatzin to evoke the Church by smiting earth with his golden hammer.

'Cleansed Temple, holy dominical, harbouring God, luminous tabernacle. Foundation of Faith, Rock of certainty. Mediator of our Life and Salvation: Door of light and mercy: House of God² and of Kingship,

² For 'House of God' the Vienna MS. and or. 2608 read 'Name of God.'

Tabernacle of joy and gladness: Tabernacle pure, Tabernacle of holiness. Mother of the faith of Christianity: Tabernacle of Light ecumenical. House of dwelling and Region of rest, Catholic tabernacle full of cleansing. Place of the Saints, Citadel of refuge, hollower, mercy-seat of sinners. Of the Trinity thou becamest the dwelling-place, and of the angels the place of meet-

ing. Thee we beseech, tabernacle of holiness. Intercede with the deathless King, to have mercy on us in the awful day and to dispel the fear which saddens us. We beseech thee.

'Place of planting of the Tree of Life, that was set up among men. Unto thee is come the King of the deathless ones. Radiant tabernacle, full of joy. Door of the Increate One, resting-place of glory, eternally harbouring the Word. Dwelling of angelic orders, that wait upon the Saving Body. Ark of Noe, Hut of Abraham, divinely marvellous tabernacle of Moses. Thou art more eminent than that house of holiness, that admirable and mighty fane of Solomon, and than many other exemplars that exist, thou whom the prophets foresaw. To thee we pray, Temple of holiness. Intercede with the King of the Immortals. Have mercy on us.

'The King of Hosts hath humbly stooped unto the Church, his pure betrothed. Even as the Great Seer, Zachariah, made it plain in prophesy. In thee is the gentle and humble King made man by love. He is truly come. Daughter thou of old Sion blessed (to whom was the Annunciation *ceteri*); the Bridegroom Christ hath stooped unto thee, bringing the wreath that fades not, by will of Father and of Spirit crowned. The bride gorgeously arrayed in her glory advances to meet the Lord the King who is come forth to meet her. Into thy holy pavilion invited, the Bridegroom Christ, the Sovereign is come. The children of the Church encircle Him, and send up songs of praise. Thee we beseech, Tabernacle made glorious of the Sovereign Jesus, to guard us and have mercy on us.'

~~Here is another~~

'The Lord of Lords, the God of Gods, hath entered thee with grace, Holy one of holies; the band of twelve apostles is thine, that, O Virgin, thou mayest adorn thee with a crown on thy head; the company of holy prophets that, O Virgin, thou mayest make thee a veil for thy face; the four fountain streams of the rivers are thine; the Gospels hast thou for thy box of perfumes; the assembly of holy pontiffs is thine, precious stones (to be), O Virgin, for thee an armet; the preachings of the holy doctors, for thou acceptest them, O Virgin, as thy eardrops; the blood-droppings of the holy martyrs are the brocade, O Virgin, of thy robe; the souls of the holy ascetics, O Virgin, shalt thou take as jewels for thy necklace; the troops of virgins undefiled, for they befit thee, O Virgin, are thy corselet; the goods of the charitable, as they distribute them, are thine, that they may be, O Virgin, for thee a rose; thine the lives of them that fast and are austere, for thou smellest (them) O Virgin, as fragrance of musk; thine the prayers of holy martyrs, for thou waxest fat (on them) as upon food; thine the sweet strains of the hosts on high, O Virgin, to thee they shall be as the Song of Songs; the tuneful melodies of worship of Saints, O Virgin, accept for thyself as it were strains of musicians; the cross of light aflame like fire, thou shalt take for thyself, O Virgin, as a summer wreath from the Sovereign of all spirits, the Creator of all bodies, the Crowner of all saints, thou glory of the Saviour of all souls. Thee we beseech, dwelling-place of saints. Forgive our debts and transgressions, and have mercy on us.

3

‘Unto thee we lift up our hearts and our speech, the eyes of our body, and the supplications of our soul. O tabernacle of holiness, decked with light, altar dominical and rock adorable. May the reasonable hosts encamped draw nigh unto thee, to praise in unison the increate God. In thee reclineth the Prince of the immortals, thou altar foursquare of holiness. In thee is distributed the bread of immortality, which is the holy dominical body. In thee the cup is vouchsafed to men, that is the blood uncorrupt and saving. Through thee the priests are made illustrious, and the congregations are glad and exult. Through thee is established the faith of all, who have been baptized in thy font. Through thee are blessed the virginal crowns of them that unblemished are joined with thee. Through thee the sinners find forgiveness, when they have with faith confessed. They who in thee are fallen asleep with hope, pass unto their Maker, blessed of God for ever. Lo, remember us and furthermore let us beseech thee. Our souls let us commit unto thee.

‘Throne of fourfold shape, marvellous, adorned with stones, holy and twelve, all-blessed Virgin incorruptible, Mother of God, temple dominical, torch inextinguishable, golden censer of the fire divine. In thee was lit the fire supernal, even that which shone in Tabor. In thee gleamed forth the light ethereal, which erewhile (gleamed) in Sinai’s mount. In thee gleamed forth the peerless Sun, illumining the races of mankind. From thee blossomed forth the unfading Rose, whence exhaled the fragrant of deathlessness; and all the garden burst into bloom and was filled with odour thereof. Thou place of the glory of the Holy Trinity, intercede with the deathless King for the peace of this our world, for the establishing of our Church, that its children may abide unshaken. And now have mercy upon us.

[‘Christ is come, the holy highpriest. Into thee he enters, temple fraught with light, Mountain of the Lord and house of God. Thou that hast much seed (i.e. πολυσπóρος), Virgin bearing without throes the race of the sons of men, through the holy font unto the adoptive Sonship of the heavenly Father. An Altar of holiness is set up in (thee), holy church, on which is ever distributed among us the flesh and blood of the Son of God. Let us with one accord ask of the Giver of good things, to bestow a peaceful life on ourselves, and to Him be Glory, Honour and Thanksgiving, now and ever, continually unto eternity. Amen.}]¹

¹ The passage bracketed is supplied from the Brit. Mus. Codex 2609. The Vienna MS. omits it.

In these invocations the Church is usually invoked under the figure of a throne of fourfold shape adorned or equipt with twelve sacred stones. Here we recognise the leading features of the Armenian rite of church-dedication in which the central altar is first located on ground traditionally holy and then ritually surrounded by twelve unhewn stones. But the imagery of these canticles to mother church is also drawn from Ezekiel i. 26, and from the descriptions of the Israelitish ark in Exodus. If we could suppose that in the numerous Jewish colonies of old Armenia a cult of the ark continued to exist such as inspired king David to execute before it his ritualistic dance, we might conjecture that the Armenian Christians took over both the cult and the ideas that inspired it.

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In his highly imaginative canticle composed to The Church, Gregory of Narek (c. 950) identifies her with the throne of the King's glory in heaven, screened by the ether even from empyrean beings. As such she has in herself the promise and potency of the fullness of grace to be shed through the divine advent upon earth; she is the heavenly prototype of the church upon earth, of the kingdom of God realisable yet never fully realised in men's souls; and she looks forward to the accomplishment of that of which she is the promise.

He next celebrates her as a creative wisdom, who constructs a series of tenements of God and is herself mystically each of these tenements in turn; first the firmament, then Eden and Adam its inhabitant; the ark and its holy contents, the booth of Abraham, the pillar of flame, Aaron's tabernacle, Solomon's temple. He exhausts the imagery of the historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament; but all culminates in his description of the Church as a soul pierced with love of the bridegroom, as a city of light builded by God, a virgin betrothed through the holy spirit to Christ. Church of the Gentiles, she resembles Hagar, for at first she lay apart desolate and rejected. But now the Firstborn of the Father has descended from heaven to woo her as his bride; he brings the crown of wedlock and takes her to himself. She remains a virgin, yet becomes mother of many children, and with painless, passionless parturition there issue from her pure womb, which is the font, the sons of God.

Every stanza of this stately hymn ends with a prayer that she may listen to the supplications which rise up to her amidst the ascending fumes of incense.

It is worth while to enumerate from these and other such canticles attributes of the Virgin Church.

The Church then is:—Cleansed ark; temple of holiness; altar dominical; ark of Noe; booth of Abraham; tabernacle of Moses; harbouring or receiving God; dispenser of the bread of immortality; rock of faith; mother of the faith; mercy-seat; dwelling-place of the Trinity; intercessor with the Son and immortal King; Eden wherein the tree of life is planted; the betrothed virgin of Christ; daughter of ancient Sion; recipient of the Annunciation; crowned with deathless wreath by the bridegroom Christ; endued by Christ with grace; equipt by Christ with twelve apostles or stones; virgin incontaminate; *Theotokos* and mother of God; in whom the gentle King is made man by love; torch extinguishable; golden censer of fire divine; candlestick; bush unconsumed yet burning on Sinai; garden in which blossoms the unfading Rose (i.e. Christ) exhaling immortality; virgin mother bearing Sons of God without throes or sin: altar where flesh and blood of Son of God is dispensed; mountain of the Lord; pure dove; pot of manna; cloud; fountain; purple sea; luminous upper Jerusalem.

I have chiefly found these canticles in MSS. of the Armenian *Gautsaran* or Thesaurus of canticles, and they differ from hymns or *Sharakang* (*είρημοί*) in having a liturgical form. But similar invocations of *Catholicē* or the virgin mother church may be found in almost any collection of popular Armenian songs, manuscript or printed. Thus in a small volume entitled *Talaran* or song book of Paltasar, the *dpér* or scribe printed in

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Turkey without place or date long ago, I find on page 63 in a hymn to the universal and apostolic church the following:—“Mountain of God, rich and fertile. Heaven upon earth, Sion rapturous, the fountain of life springs forth and wells up from thee, mother of faith. As children of light dost thou bear and beget us, when we have increased and grown up by enlargement of faith in the full measure of our age, mother of faith.”

As the official Armenian church abandoned adult baptism at least a thousand years ago, the above hymn must be of respectable antiquity.

The Epiphany is commonly regarded as the feast of the union between Christ and his virgin bride the Church. Thus in the commentary of Grigor Arsharuni, about 700 A.D., Christ is represented as the bridegroom who descends from heaven to woo his bride, having already dispatched his paranympths, that is the prophets of a former age, to praise and magnify him in the eyes of his beloved. In the Epiphany the holy couple feast together in the bride's house, that is on earth, beside Jordan's stream in which the union takes place in the presence of the Baptist, who is the friend of the Bridegroom. The Bride's rejoicings are specially in her own home, the earth; and when they are complete the Bridegroom returns with her to his Father's house, which he had temporarily quitted in order to seek his bride, and espouse her in the flesh. 'Afterwards,' writes Arsharuni, 'he leads her up to the mansions of glory of his Father's house, where she having risen along with him shall perpetually behold his glory.' Thus the baptism is in a special manner the feast of the salvation of the woman, that is of the church and of her rescue from Satan: the resurrection as distinctively is the salvation of the man.

The same thought inspires an old Epiphany homily of Zenobius. He represents the bride as an impure woman lying prone in the bloodstained mire of idolatry. The Father on high pities her and sends his only-begotten Son to espouse her.

There is also a parallelism, to which I shall again refer, between this taking up by the Saviour of the Church his bride into heaven and the assumption of the Virgin Mary; the latter idea appeared in Armenia in the twelfth or thirteenth century as an outgrowth of the former. And in this connection it is important to note that even as late as the seventeenth century a woodcut representing to the Latin Catholic the assumption of the Virgin was by the first editors of the Armenian hymn-book taken to represent the assumption and crowning of the virgin church by Christ. The woodcut is placed at the head of the Canon of Sholakath, the

great feast held in honour of the Church. Some of the elements proper to the assumption of the Church have certainly passed into the hymns for the assumption of the Virgin, the thought for example that the wise virgins accompany the latter on her upward path into the heavenly tabernacle. This thought occurs in the printed hymn-book of 1664, pp. 474, 476 in the hymns for the *transitus Marias*.

The feast of the Passing or Assumption of Mary is in the Calendar placed immediately after the *Sholakath*, and it would seem as if the Armenians had had at first some difficulty in distinguishing the one from the other. Nor is it an easy task even to-day to discriminate between hymns addressed to the virgin mother Church and those addressed to the Virgin Mary; there being as a rule, apart from intrusive references to Bethlehem, no clue to guide us to a decision. For not only the epithet *theotokos*, but all the other epithets of the Church above enumerated are applied to the Virgin Mary.

The ordinary Armenian believers—I speak not of the small minority of doctors trained in Byzantine dogmatics and reading Greek—seem to have referred the name *Theotokos*, when they heard it proclaimed, not to the physical mother of Christ, but to the virgin mother Church. To the superficial observer Armenian Christianity has, apart from the issue of the two natures in Christ, an air of complete Byzantine orthodoxy. But for a student who knows how to penetrate below the surface, there are in store some curious discoveries—and that not only in the religion of Armenia, but of Georgia and Syria also, perhaps of the Slavonic, Greek and Latin peoples as well.

I must warn my reader that the majority of hymns apostrophising the church as ‘Throne dominical of fourfold shape,’ etc., omit this epithet of *Theotokos*, which I would not deny to have been carried over into this class of hymn by way of adjusting it to Mary. Nor would I deny that a modern Armenian supposes that in such invocations as contain this epithet he is addressing himself to Mary. But the decisive question is this: To which aeon, whether Church or Mary, is the bulk of the imagery preserved in these hymns—be they now addressed or not to Mary—most applicable? For example were such phrases as ‘Throne of fourfold shape, set with twelve stones,’ ‘New garden or paradise,’ ‘Spotless bride of Christ,’ used first of the Church, and then carried over into the cult of Mary; or first of Mary and then transferred to a cult of the mother church? No one acquainted with the evidence can hesitate to accept the former alternative, and allow that Mariolatry in Armenia was a transformed cult of the virgin church.

The question arises: What is the date of these canticles, especially of those in which the Church is addressed so strangely as *Theotokos* and invited to intercede with her Son, the heavenly King?

The manuscripts from which I have drawn them are all comparatively modern, and of the writers whose names are traditionally attached to them few go back behind the thirteenth century. Can we ascribe to them a higher antiquity?

The canticle: 'To the Church,' which I give above, is in many ways the most important, and it has so much in common with the canticle of Gregory of Narek, which is of the tenth century, that its subject matter must anyhow go back beyond that date. Again, the fact that the invocation of the Church under the figure of a throne is common property of all the thirteenth century hymnodists, suggests that it was a commonplace at a much earlier time; and so it can be proved to be by the references of Gregory of Narek who (documents p.) writes thus of the church, ark or tabernacle: "This is the mother, spiritual, heavenly, luminous, Let any one describe her as an image of the *Theotokos*, he breaks no law."

And Gregory Arsharuni, c. 700, in an explanation of the Ark of the Lord, in his Commentary on the Lectionary of Cyril of Jerusalem, declares equally that it signifies or symbolises the *Theotokos*. Thus the language of these canticles is traceable back through the tenth to the very beginning of the eighth century; and as both these older writers mildly deprecate the identification of the ark or church with the *Theotokos*, and insist that it is rather a mere symbol of her, we may infer that these hymns in which is found a complete equation of the two were already in existence, if not quite in their present form. No sane critic would aver that the comparison or identification of the Virgin Mary with church, throne and ark came first, and was a stepping stone to that direct adoration and invocation of them of which these Armenian canticles furnish so many examples. The transition from the worship of the virgin church to that of the Virgin Mary is intelligible, and was real, as I shall presently demonstrate from the Greek fathers. On the other hand a transmutation of Mariolatry, once thoroughly established into a cult of the virgin church, is unthinkable; and, as the surviving documents prove, historically a *hysteron proteron*.

Nor was it only the attributes of the church that in Armenia were attached to the physical mother of Jesus; but we get the very name of the latter, Mary, bestowed on the former in a way that presupposes a complete fusion in the popular mind of the one with the other. Thus in chapter 22 of the historian Aristakes of the eleventh century¹ we read that the orthodox Armenian

¹ For the entire passage see the *Key of Truth*, p. 131 foll. where I translate it.

clergy having triumphed over Vrver, a Thouraki or Manichean heresiarch of Mananali, crossed the Euphrates and 'sang all the night a hymn of thanksgiving to God, having for the leader of their choir the spotless Mary, who is the holy church, bearing in her hand the cymbal, that is the truth of the faith.' This was about A.D. 1000.

Here there is an identification of the Church with the mother of Jesus, perhaps a confusion of the latter with the sister of Moses and Aaron, such as we meet with in Mahomet's Koran. The only possible explanation of such a mixture of ideas is this; An extension of the attributes of the virgin church to the mother of Jesus having induced a confusion of the one with the other, there followed a retransference to the heavenly aeon of the name of the earthly woman. And this retransference and the previous confusions it implies were of early date; for already in the *Acta Archelai*, behind which lies a Syriac document not much later than 275 A.D., Mani is introduced as identifying 'Joseph's virgin' with 'the most chaste and immaculate church.'

It was alleged against the Paulicians that they made the same equation, as we know from a document published by J. Friedrich in the *Sitzungsberichte der K. b. Akademie, Munchen*, 1896, *Heft I.*, which forms the basis of the accounts given of the Paulicians by Photius, Petrus Sikulus and Georgius Monachus, the last of whom wrote before 866. In section 7 of this we read the following:—

'And in the next place they blaspheme the all-holy *Theotokos* in unmeasured terms. But if they are forced by us to acknowledge her, they give an allegorical account of her and say: I believe in the all-holy Theotokos in whom the Lord entered and went out. But they mean the upper Jerusalem (*ἄνω Ἱερουσαλήμ*), in which as precursor in our behalf Christ entered, as the apostle declares (Gal. iv. 26). And they do not really mean the holy Mary our *Theotokos*, nor allow that the Lord was made flesh from her.'

Such an attitude as is conveyed in the above is not consistent with Mariolatry, but implies a covert rejection of the supernatural attributes and adoration of the mother of Christ's flesh. And it will accord with such a state of opinion that a consensus of testimony both of Greek and of Armenians proves that as late as the tenth century the latter kept no feast of the Annunciation on any generally recognised day. Some mentioned it on the eve of Epiphany, that is at nightfall on January 5, some on January 9, some on April 6. But the day assigned by the Greeks, March 25, was in Armenia kept as a fast. The Greeks therefore with some show of reason accused them of ignoring the Virgin Mary altogether.

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The same sect of Paulicians refused the name *Theotokos* to the physical mother of Jesus, whose flesh and blood reality they did not deny; but appealed to such passages as Luc. viii. 20, 21 against the Byzantine beliefs about her. Here then we have the dogmatic position which really underlies the Armenian canticles to the church, and would certainly have been detected in them by the hostile Greeks. It must not be forgotten either that the Paulicians of the age of Photius, and even earlier were almost exclusively Armenians.

It was natural for those who regarded the Church as an heavenly aeon to deny so sacred a name to temples built with hands out of lifeless stones. In the early fifth century the orthodox patriarch S. Sahak proclaimed this in his canons in a passage cited by me in the introduction to the Key of Truth, page 164: 'The precept of God sets forth unto us no church merely built of stones and logs, but the races of mankind built by faith on the rock of foundation. Wherefore the true faith is the church, which assembles and builds us into one accord of knowledge of the Son of God.'

These 'spiritual' believers therefore utterly condemned the rite of church dedication compiled by John Mandakuni about 480, as well as the kindred rites of consecrating artificial fonts, crosses and other material aids to devotion. With them, as was natural, the disciples of Marcion and Mani, who abounded in Armenia, leagued their forces. These could not allow that the holy spirit could enter and abide any parcel of matter; for the entire visible and material creation was the work of the evil principle, and could, if at all, be animated by evil spirits alone. And another reason for their rejection of the Mashdote was this, that its rites of consecrating churches, altars, priests and animal victims were based on the Jewish Old Testament, of which the inspiration came from the evil one.

Among the European Cathars of the eleventh to fourteenth century we find the same opinion that the church can be no construction of wood and stone; and it was in vain that the inquisitors and saints of those ages, for example Ebrardus, Ermengard, Moneta and St. Bernard, sought to convince them, some with pen, others with sword and brand, that the most High is after all pleased to inhabit stocks and stones. At the same time the Cathars followed Mani in identifying the Church with the Virgin Mary, whom they asserted to have been as mother of Christ a celestial aeon or angel and no woman of flesh and blood. Thus of the Cathars of Carcassonne we have this reported in Doellinger's *Lectengeschichte*, ii. 598 (from the Paris copy of Jean Doat):—

'Suam et suorum ecclesiam, quam dicunt esse veram poenitentiam, confingunt esse Mariam Virginem.'

Similar opinions were in vogue among the Bogomiles of whom we read in a lengthy formula of recantation published by Thallódry from the Vienna Cod. Theol. gr. cccvi., in the *Wissensch. Mittheil. aus Bosnien* III Bd. 1895, the following:

Τοῖς τὰς εἰς δόξαν θεοῦ παραδοθείσας ἡμῖν παρὰ τῶν ἁγίων ἀποστόλων ἐκκλησίας οἰκοδομείσθαι, ὡς ἔργα χειρῶν διαβάλλουσι, καὶ κατοικητήρια δαιμόνων εἶναι ταύτας λέγουσι . . . ἀνάθεμα.

This document is repeated in another Vienna Codex Theol. gr. xl., fol. 250, wherein an added reference to Porphyrogenetus as the then occupant of the throne proves it to be at least as old as the tenth century. The beliefs and religious habits of the Bogomils have descended by tradition to more than one of the many sects of modern Russia.

In the above pages I have merely indicated a line of research, which some day with the oldest hymnals of the Syrians and yet more of the Georgians in my hand I hope to complete. It remains to sketch out the background of these Armenian conceptions of the church, firstly as bride, secondly as mother of the God in Christ. In doing so we shall find that, although they are not in documentary Armenian sources very distinctly traceable further back than the seventh century, nevertheless they belong to the oldest stratum of Greek, Latin and Syrian Christianity.

It may well be that the references to the Church in the New Testament as the Virgin Bride of Christ are consciously figurative; but in the pages of the subapostolic writers the conception of the Church as a transcendental power, not merely an ideal union of saints, but a personality to be praised and invoked in prayer. And this will surprise no one who has made a study of the society in which the religion spread when it left its primitive home in Judæa. For that society must have numbered not a few ready to think that the *Anastasis* proclaimed by Paul was a new goddess, and we know from Epictetus that in Rome altars were raised to the God Fever. In an age so mythoplastic the church already personified by Paul as a virgin bride of Christ and as mother of us all would quickly assume in the believer's mind the role of a personal being; and in proportion as the severer characteristics of Christ as judge were emphasised by Christian teachers, the bride and mother must have taken on those of an intercessor, especially for converts who had been robbed of the female goddesses, so essential to male comfort and peace of mind.

In the Hermae pastor the church is not only allegorised as a virgin, but is conceived of as a celestial aeon coeval with Christ. 'The god of hosts, we read in *Vis.* 1, 3, 4, by his own wisdom and foresight created his holy Church, whom he also blessed.'

'The lady elder' also whom the Pastor had confused with the Sibyl, was really the church; and she was elder because 'she was created first,' before other creatures, and 'for her sake the cosmos was made and in array' (*Vis.* ii., 4, 1). In the form (*morphè*) of the church he holy spirit, the Son of God, revealed to the Shepherd the first part of his vision (*Sim.* ix., 1, 1).

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The same hypostasis of the church confronts us in another early book, the second epistle, so called, of Clement, which declares (ch. xix) that 'those who do the will of our father God shall be of the first, the pneumatic or inspired church, that was created before sun and moon.' And the same writer in the sequel alleges that when we read that God made man, male and female, we must understand Christ to have been the male and the Church the female. For the living Church was the body of Christ; and as both Bible and apostles bear witness, this church is not anything new but from above. 'For it was pneumatic, even as our Jesus, but was manifested in these last days in order that she may save us.'

Similarly Clement of Alexandria (Protrept. 9, p. 69) calls the Church *prōtokos* or eldest born of God, and declares that the mundane church is an image thereof.

In the letter of the Church in Vienne and Lugdunum of Gaul concerning the persecution endured in A.D. given by Eusebins H.E., v. 1, sect. 207, we have evidence of the personal life and interest in the faithful attributed to the hypostatised Church. Some who had recanted affirmed their faith afresh. Then, says the letter, 'deep joy was experienced by the virgin mother, because she received back again alive those whom she had born untimely as if they were dead.'

Tertullian attests the practice in the second century of addressing prayers to the Church; for in the last words of his tract on Baptism ch. 20, he exhorts the faithful, when they go up out of the most holy font, to take their places among the brethren, and to offer up their first prayer in the presence of their mother, 'the Church.' Cum de ilio sanctissimo lavacro novi natalis ascenditis et primas manus apud matrem cum fratribus aperitis, petite de patre, petite de domino peculia gratiae.

In his Ad Martyras also *Tertullian* speaks of the domina mater ecclesia who nourishes the faithful from her breasts.

Hegesippus as cited in Eusebius in H.E. iii. 32, 127, declared that the Church until the times of Trajan remained *pure and undeflowered*, in the sense that there was till then no deflection among its teachers from the wholesome standard of the Saviour's preaching. In iv. 22, 182, the same writer is cited as declaring that until then they called the Church *Virgin*, because she was not yet contaminated by vain reports. Similarly Marcion was accused of seducing a virgin, the virgin intended being, as Schmiedel has noticed (in art. gospels of Encycl. Biblica col. 1778), the Church.

The equation of the Church with Eve which I have adduced from the second Clement meets us also in the epistle Ad Diognetum xii, 8, ascribed to Justin Martyr and certainly a work of that age. In it we read that the Church of Christ is an Eve who far from being corrupted, is believed and certified to be a virgin.¹

¹ Οὐδὲ Εὐα φθείρεται, ἀλλὰ παρθένος πιστεύεται.

This parallel between the Church and Eve is a favourite one, as Christ was second Adam, so the Church is a second Eve, 'created out of the rib of Christ as Eve out of Adam's, but having neither spot nor blemish.' So we read in the *Acta Petri et Pauli*, Ed. Lipsius, 1891, ch. 29, p. 192; and the same idea often recurs in Armenian and other sources, and was readily transferred to the Virgin Mary. Irenaeus testifies that the Valentinians adopted it. *De loge autem et Zoe emissum secundum coniugationem Hominem et ecclesiam, et esse hanc primogenitam octonationem.* 'Out of the Word and the life were projected (*or* emanated) by *syzygy* the Man and the Church, so completing the archegonic ogdoad' (Iren. i. 1, 1). This was the union within the *pleroma*, said the Valentinians, perhaps rightly, of which Paul (Eph. v. 32) proclaimed the great mystery (Iren. i. 1, 17).

It is evident therefore that all schools of Christian speculation whether Gnostic or orthodox agreed during the second century in regarding the Church as a hypostatic heavenly being, coeval with Christ and on a level with the wisdom and word of God. But it is in the *Acts of Thomas*, a second century apocryph, perhaps originally composed in Syriac, but not less popular in their Latin, Greek, Armenian, Georgian and Ethiopic forms, that we find the virgin Church frankly invoked in hymns as 'the maiden daughter of light' in whom is established and realised the irradiation of kings. Exultation is hers and the vision of her excited joy. With brilliant beauty she dazzles. Whose garments are like the spring flowers, and a fragrance is given off from them and diffused. And on her head is planted the king feeding with his own ambrosia those who are settled upon him. On her head reclines truth, and gladness doth she reveal with her feet. Whose mouth is opened as besemeth her. Thirty-and-two in number are they who praise her in hymns. . . .

But it is her bridegroom's men that form her body-guard, whose tale is seven, whom of herself she chose. But her paranymphs are seven maidens, that dance before her. And twelve in number are they who in front of her do service and are subject unto her, keeping their glance and sight on the bridegroom, in order that by the sight of him they may be illumined, and may for all eternity be with him in eternal joy, and may have seats in that wedding, at which the mighty ones, and may abide at the banquet of which the eternal ones are held worthy, and may put on royal raiment and be clad in brilliant stoles. And both parties shall be full of joy and merrymaking, and shall glorify the Father of all things. Whose glad light they have received, and have been illumined by the vision of their Lord, whose ambrosia they have received that never fails, and have drunk of the wine that excites no thirst in them nor desire of the flesh. And they have glorified and lauded together with the living spirit the Father of Truth and the Mother of wisdom (chs. 6, 7).

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And even more explicitly the Ecclesia is invoked by the Apostle when he sets the holy seal of unction on King Gundaphor and Gad in ch. 26.

Come, holy name of Christ that is above every name.
Come, Power of the Highest and Mercy Supreme.
Come, giver of grace, the highest.
Come, mother merciful.
Come, economy of the male.
Come, lady that revealest the hidden mysteries.
Come, mother of the seven abodes, that repose may be for thee in the eighth abode. . . .

The last four invocations are of the Church, which was the economy of the male in the sense that she was his body in which he was incarnate on earth, a thought which is also common in Methodius.

And subsequently in these same Acts, ch. 46, the Church is again invoked by the Apostle when after giving the seal with imposition of hands he proceeds to communicate his new converts in the bread of blessing or *eulogia*.

And he began and said :

Come, mercy Supreme.
Come, consort (lit. communion) of the male.
Come, lady that knowest the mysteries of the elect one.
Come, lady that sharest in all the struggles of the noble athlete.
Come, silence that revealest the great secrets of the All-great.
Come, lady that shewest forth the hidden things and makest manifest the unspeakable things, holy dove that bringest forth the twin nestlings.
Come, secret mother.
Come, lady that art manifest in her actions and affordest joy and repose to those attached to her.
Come and share with us in this Eucharist which we perform in thy name, and in the love (agape) with which we are brought together at thy calling.

The description of the Church as 'a holy dove bringing to birth the twin nestlings' is explained by the belief exhibited in this most popular of early apocryphs that Jesus and Thomas were twins. As they were twins in physical birth, so in this passage they are regarded as twins in the spiritual birth through which the Mother Church bears sons of God.

In the classical inscription of Abercius, bishop of Hierapolis, c. 160 A.D., to which reference was made above, the Church is represented as a 'holy virgin' who pulls up the great Fish, Christ, out of the fountain.

This exhausts the second century references to the Virgin Church, and it is instructive to note that it was particularly in Syria, whence the first seeds of Christianity were carried to Armenia, that she was regarded as a goddess or divine aeon to be invoked in prayer and lauded in hymns.

Next let us consider the attribute given to the Church of being the mother of Christ, of being even the *Theotokos*.

In Revelation as we have seen the Church is the mother holding in her arms the infant Christ and fleeing from the dragon; and it is possible this thought inspires the beautiful and early painting in the Roman Catacomb of Priscilla. However there is here no dragon and no flight. Instead we have the reposeful bliss of the mother in the presence of the prophet, who stands beside her, and a star is traceable over head. Christian archeologists have assumed it to be Mary.

What led the author of Revelation to represent the Church in this rôle we cannot say. It may have been the Ebionite tenet of Christ's spiritual rebirth in baptism with the Church as his mother that prompted him; but we have no evidence on the point which would allow us to be positive.

Nor do we know exactly how much was intended by Tertullian when in his *De Oratione* ch. 2, he represents the Church as mother. In this passage Tertullian dwells on the fatherhood of God; in whom if we believe, we are authorised by Christ to call ourselves Sons of God (Jo. i. 12). He then remarks: 'Also in the Father the Son is invoked; for the latter said: I and the Father are one thing. Not is even the Mother Church left out. Since indeed in recognising father and son you recognise a mother, who is implied in the name of both Father and Son.'

Primarily Tertullian argues that in invoking our Father in heaven, we by implication invoke also Son and Mother, and the Mother is the Church. Analogy and strict logic might no doubt require us to view the Church as Mother of Christ as of other sons of God. But Tertullian hardly says so, and may have intended to say no more than Cyprian says in his tract *De Unitate Ecclesiae*, p. 467, ed. Baluz: 'He cannot ever have God for his father, who has not the Church as his mother.'

And S. Zeno does not venture to affirm that the Church is mother of Christ, though he applies to her those predicates of painless parturition and of virginity eternally preserved in spite of motherhood which have become of classical application in a physical sense to the mother of Jesus. I subjoin examples from the works of this bishop of Verona.

S. Zeno, Lib. II. tract. xxx., p. 240. Migne P. d. 11, 476: In the *Invitatio ad fontem* writes:—*Iam vos sempiterni fontis calor salutaris invitat. Iam mater nostra adoptat, ut pariat: sed non ea lege, qua vos matres nestrae pepererunt, quae et ipsae partus dolore Gementes, et vos plorantes sordidos, paunis sordidis alligatos, huic mundo dediticios intulerunt.*

Also Tr. xxxii. *Eia quid statis, fratres, nestram quos per fidem genitalis unda concepit, per sacramenta iam parturit, ad Desiderata (scil. Eucharistiam) quanto-cius festinate.*

Also Tr. xxxlii. *Quid statis genere, aetate, sexu, conditione diversi, mox unum futuri? Fontanum Semper virginis matris dulcem ad uterum convolate ... O admirabilis et vere divina Sacrosancta dignatio! in qua quae parturit, non gemit; qui renascitur, plorare non novit. Haec renovatio, haec resurrectio, haec vita aeterna, haec est mater omnium, quae nos adunatos, ex omni gente et natione collectos, unum postmodum efficit corpus.*

If Tertullian really regarded the Ecclesia as the spiritual mother of Christ, in contrast with Mary his physical mother whom he alleges to have been a type of the unbelieving synagogue, he assumed very much the same position as Clement of Alexandria takes up in a passage of the *Paedagogus* (Sylb. Ed. p. 102). Therein he asserts that Christ, the fruit of the Virgin, disdained

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the breasts of human mothers. And he hastens to explain whom he regards as the Virgin Mother of Christ. She is the universal Church, *one* as the Father of all is one, as the Word of all is one, as the Holy Spirit is one and the same everywhere. 'Her it is my delight to call the Church. She is the only mother that never had milk, for she alone was not a woman. Yet she is a virgin and mother in one. Spotless as a virgin, yet fond as a mother.' In general the fathers of the third and later centuries found the picture of the mother Church given in Revelation difficult to explain in an orthodox manner, and Hippolytus gives an explanation of the vision in Revelation xii. 13-17 which as we shall see Methodus also adopts. It is in ch. 61 of his work 'about the Anti-Christ,' p. 41 of the edition of H. Achelis.

By 'the woman clothed with the sun' he most clearly signified the *Ecclesia*, clad with the *logos* of the Father which shines more brightly than the sun. But when he speaks of 'the moon below her feet' he means that she was adorned with heavenly glory like the moon. And the saying that 'above her head was a crown of twelve stars' is a clear indication of the twelve apostles, by whom the Church has been established on a basis. And the words 'being big with child she cries, being in throes and travailing to bring forth' signify that the Church never ceases to bring to birth out of her heart the word, although she is persecuted in the world by the infidels.

'And she bore', he says, 'a male child, who is to shepherd the nations,' to wit the male and perfect Christ, child of God, God and man, whom the prophets announced, whom continually bearing the *Ecclesia* teaches all the nations.

But the words: 'Her child was caught up unto God, and unto his throne' are because the son perpetually brought to birth by her is a heavenly king and not a denizen of earth.

The flaw in Hippolytus' exegesis is that it takes the words of Revelation 'a male child, who is to shepherd the nations' in an unnatural sense. They can refer to the Messiah alone; yet Hippolytus pretends that they signify the Christhood of the individual believer. The same halting explanation is given more at length in Methodius' *convivium, oratio* viii. ch. 8. 'I hold that it is the *Ecclesia* that is here asserted to bring forth the male child . . . so that in each of us the Christ is brought forth in a mystic sense' (*νοητός*). And this is why the Church is big with child and travails, until the Christ in us takes shape and is brought forth, in order that each of the Saints, by participating in Christ, may be brought forth a Christ, which is the sense of a certain passage in scripture, 'Touch not my Christs, and do no evil to my prophets' (Ps. civ. 15).

This writer also puts into the mouth of Thekla, one of his *personae dramatis*, an eloquent hymn in which the holy wedding of Christ and his virgin is celebrated, and which may probably have been liturgically used in the third century. It is supposed to be sung by the ten virgins who in the parable go forth to meet the bride and bridegroom and the refrain is this: 'I keep myself chaste and holding up lamps that shine afar I go to meet thee, O Bridegroom.'

A stanza addressed to the Church runs as follows: 'With hymns, O blessed nymph of God, we thy chamber-maids exalt thee now, O intact Virgin Ecclesia, of snowy body, with dark-blue tresses, chaste, blameless, loveable.'

In the pages of Methodius we therefore not only have the Church apostrophised in hymns, but recognise most of the imagery assigned to her from the Song of Songs, from the New Testament and from other sources in the Armenian hymns. 'She is,' he declares in Or. viii. ch. 5, 'if accurately considered, the mother of us, being a power (*dynamis*) of a kind in herself other than her children.' In other words she is a transcendental power or aeon. 'The prophets', he continues, 'have called her sometimes Jerusalem, sometimes the Bride, sometimes Mount Zion, sometimes Temple and Sanctuary of God.'

In another passage he writes that 'the Jews have foretold our realities just as we proclaim beforehand the realities of heaven. For the tabernacle was a symbol of the Church as the Church is of heaven'. And in the sequel he explains how the various material elements of the Jewish tabernacle symbolise the orders of widows and virgins in the Church (Or. v. ch. 8). In yet another passage Or. vii. ch. 1, he exhausts the imagery of the Song of Songs in behalf of the Church. She is 'inviolate and pure from contact, as it were a sealed paradise, in which grow all the fragrant scents of heaven, in order that Christ alone may come and cull them, for they have grown up from bodiless seeds.'

In another passage (Or. viii. ch. 8) which seems as if it might be the prototype of what Gregory of Arsharuni wrote (see above p.), Methodius interprets the Bride of the Song of Songs as 'the unstained flesh' of the Lord, 'for the sake of which he left the Father and came down here and alighted, being made man therein. This flesh, metaphorically called the dove in the Song was of all flesh alone found to be free from spot or corruption, and to excel all men in orderliness of righteousness and in beauty, so that no man of those who had perfectly satisfied God could in respect of moral excellence come nigh to it or be set on a level. For that reason it was held worthy to become partner in the kingdom of the *monogenes* by being fitted to and united with him.'

Accordingly Methodius explains the Queen who alone of many, according to Ps. xlv. 10, 15, 16, stands at God's right hand robed in the golden adornment of excellence to be 'that incontaminate and blessed flesh, which the Word himself carried up into heaven adorned in golden raiment.'

This is the *ἡ ἀβελί, ἡ ἁγία, ἡ ἁγία* of *Abercius's epitaph*. In Arsharuni it is the Church to which Christ descends *the person* from above, chooses as his bride, and whom he takes up *the person* again to heaven with him. In the above passage of *(in the alias)* Methodius it is the flesh. But the common equation of the Church with the body of Christ brings the two views into line, and it is remarkable that in the papyrus fragment of the Pastor Hermae recently discovered by Drs. Greenfell and Hunt and published in Pt. 1, p. 8, of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri 'the body of the flesh of Jesus Christ which was mingled with humanity through Mary' is identified with 'the Prophetic order,' or perhaps—for the text is ambiguous—with 'the essence or inner body' (*σωμάτειον*) of that order. Here then the transcendental or heavenly body of flesh of Christ is identified with the

order of prophets, who when the Pastor was written constituted the vital core of the Church. Methodius in the passage quoted echoes the tone and phraseology of the Pastor, of which he may have possessed an unmutated text.

The idea that the Church as chosen bride of Christ went up again with him to heaven is met with in other authors, for example in the *Expositio in Cantica Cantorum* ascribed to Cassiodorus in Migne S. L. tom. 70, col. 1100. For as comment on ch. 8, 2: *apprehendam te et ducam te in domum matris meae, ibi ure docebis*, the author explains that the *mater ecclesiae* is here that heavenly Jerusalem of which Paul speaks in Gal. iv. 26, and he glosses the text of the Song thus: *id est prosequae te revertentem in coelum, post actum incarnationis tuae, et passionis mysterium . . . cum (inquit) coelo receptus fueris, et me quoque in coelum tecum assumpseris ibi me docebis et in omnem veritatem induces.*

The same author, it should be observed, though his commentary is deeply tinged with the mariolatrous spirit, interprets the 'closed garden' and 'sealed fountain' of ch. iv. 12 of the Church and not of the Mother of Christ. In Armenian and other hymns addressed to the latter the phrases constantly recur, but there can be no doubt that the earliest exegesis of the canticle referred them to the Church.

We raised the question above of the date at which the imagery of the Jewish ark and tabernacle used in the Armenian hymns of the Church was transferred to the Virgin Mary. Among the works ascribed to Methodius (in Migne S. gr. t. 18, col. 347) is an oration for the feast of *Hypapante*, which in its first lines claims to be by the author of the *Convivium*. Its authenticity is denied by some modern critics, who have not however satisfactorily explained why the author of a homily, so naive in tone, and neutral in dogmatic tendency should have worked into its text, not indeed the name of Methodius, but a reference indirect only.¹

¹ Πάλαι ἰκανῶς, ὡς οἶον τε, διὰ βραχέων, τὰ περὶ παρθενίας ἐν τοῖς περὶ ἀγγελίας συμποσίοις κατεστρωκότων ἡμῶν, σήμερον κ.τ.λ.

In this we already find many attributes of the Church, notably that of being the throne, already transferred to the Virgin Mary.

Thus in Col. 352, c. 2, 'Behold there as it were a throne lofty and raised to the glory of him that created it the Virgin Mother is made ready most manifestly for the King Lord Sabaoth . . . on this virginal throne, I say, thou must adore him that has appointed this new journey unto thee, sung of in many hymns.'

And lower down in c. 3: 'Do thou dance before the face of the virginal throne, as David of old before the face of the ark.'

In c. 4, col. 356 of this tract the Virgin Mary is called the 'Ark of God that rested on the hills of Sion and took up on her stainless lap as on a throne lofty and transcending human nature, the King of all.'

In c. 5, col. 357 the writer apostrophised Mary thus: 'O mother virgin and spiritual throne, glorified and worthy of God.'¹ In c. 7, col. 364, she is declared to be

¹ Μητηρ παρθένη και νοητέ θρόνε, δεδοξασμένη και θεού Έπαξιε.

'the inviolate and all spotless altar of which was made flesh the life-giving and ineffable live coal' of Isaiah vi. 6.

In c. 9, col. 369 she is 'the untouched bush which unconsumed carried God when he was pleased to be seen by the prophet,' And lower down she is 'the ark which was receptacle of the law and overshadowed jointly by the Cherubim.' And lastly c. 14, col. 381, she is 'the living altar of the bread of life, treasure house of God's love, well-spring of the Son's loving kindness and mountain overshadowed of the holy spirit' (Heb. iii. 3).

This oration then, which even if it be not a work of Methodius, can hardly be later than the fourth century, represents a later stage in the evolution of the cult of the physical mother of Jesus than the Armenian hymns to the Church. It also encourages us to suppose that at one time there existed in the Greek and Latin not a few hymns addressed to and extolling the Church which were subsequently converted into hymns to the Virgin Mary. Of this lost hymnology we have reminiscences, perhaps even versions, in the Armenian Canticles which I have brought to your notice. I believe moreover that many of the hymns of Ephrem Syrus, more especially those which apostrophise Mary as not only mother, but bride of Christ, had a similar origin. If we examine these hymns we find phrase after phrase which like the term bride are more applicable to the Virgin Church than to the Virgin Mary, and the same remark holds good of the Ethiopic hymns to Mary.