Apocalyptic Traditions in the Armenian Dormition Narratives

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The early traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption are a particularly rich, if frequently overlooked, repository of early Christian apocalyptic traditions. These diverse narratives of the end of Mary’s life, which survive in a wide range of languages, generally conclude with Mary’s transfer to the other world, often offering a detailed vision of both heaven and hell and the fates awaiting humankind. Either in or out of her body, according to different versions, Mary is brought to the eschatological Garden of Paradise, where she receives a foretaste of the reward awaiting all the Just at the end of time. While many interpreters have sought to relate this early tradition to modern dogmatic debates, it seems that the theological significance of Mary’s precocious return to the Garden in these ancient apocrypha has more to do with the eschatological role of Paradise as envisioned within a given text rather than the Mariological disputes of later centuries. The fluid and interstitial nature of Paradise in the early Christian imagination is on full display in these texts: it is a place at once both terrestrial and celestial that serves either as a kind of first-class waiting room for the final judgment or as the ultimate destination of the righteous where they will receive their eternal reward—or sometimes as both. Whatever its precise status, Paradise always lies at the center of the eschatological drama envisioned by these early Christian apocrypha.¹

Life” tradition, and another that concludes the oldest “Bethlehem” narratives.\textsuperscript{2} Despite a handful of common features linking these ancient Marian apocalypses, their manifold differences reveal two distinct literary traditions that developed independently of one another from a fairly early stage.\textsuperscript{3}

The apocalypse from the Palm tradition survives most completely in the Ethiopic Liber Requiei Mariae, although significant portions of Mary’s heavenly journey appear in several Syriac fragments from late fifth century manuscripts, as well as in other early witnesses.\textsuperscript{4} This cosmic tour begins with a visit to the place of the damned, where Mary beholds their torments, and the sufferings of a few individuals are explained to her in light of their transgressions, a feature common to many other “tours of Hell.” When the damned cry out for mercy, Mary successfully intercedes on their behalf, securing for them nine hours of respite every Sunday in what is seemingly one of the earliest examples of a belief in Marian intercession. Then Mary proceeds to the land of the blessed, and many of the Biblical Patriarchs come to greet her, including Enoch, who is singled out for particular emphasis. Finally, Mary enters “the seventh heaven,” where she and the apostles behold God, who is “entirely fire” and suspended by two seraphim so that God’s feet do not touch the earth, an event that will occasion the world’s final destruction. This apocalypse from the Palm tradition appears to belong to the third century, although a dating to the late second or early fourth century cannot be ruled out entirely.\textsuperscript{5} Its contents are in many ways quite similar to the Apocalypse of Paul, and it would appear that there is some sort of a literary connection between the two texts. As Richard Bauckham has noted, comparison of the tours of Hell described by these two texts seems to suggest the influence of this Marian apocalypse on the Apocalypse of Paul, rather than vice versa, and, as I have noted elsewhere, several additional features are indicative of the Palm apocalypse’s priority.\textsuperscript{6}

An alternative account of Mary’s Himmelreise completes the so-called Six Books apocryphon, the earliest narrative of Mary’s Dormition from the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[2] For a description of these two literary traditions, the “Palm” and “Bethlehem” traditions, and the most important narratives in each tradition, see Shoemaker 2002, 32–57.
\item[3] See the discussion in Bauckham 1998.
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