

# Today's Marian Perspectives: Any Glimpses Prior to the Council of Ephesus?

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## **Introduction**

When we think of Mary, the Mother of God in the history of the Church, the immediate association that we make of her is to do with the Council of Ephesus, as it was this Council that came out with the first ever Marian title. Nevertheless, we could always ask a question, was there any trace of Marian teaching or Marian devotion prior to the Council of Ephesus? In answering this question, we make an attempt here to see whether Mary had some place in the history of the Church, prior to the Council of Ephesus. Hence our study starts from the New Testament itself. After tracing out the place of Mary in the New Testament, we explore the existence of a Marianist Movement and the influence of goddesses' worship of the pre-Christian era, which some people claim to have paved the way for the origin of Marian devotion. Then we highlight the impact of various apocryphal books, the writings of the Church Fathers prior to the Council of Ephesus, which undoubtedly paved the way for emergence of Marian dogmas in course of time. Hence we think that one cannot deny the fact of the existence of embryonic Marian devotion prior to the Council of Ephesus.

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## 1. Mary in the New Testament

In human history no woman has had greater influence than the woman of Nazareth, Mary.<sup>2</sup> When we trace out the historical account of Mary in the New Testament<sup>3</sup> and in the writing of the

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<sup>2</sup> Six women in the New Testament have the name 'Mary' – twenty five times as 'Mariam' and twenty eight times as 'Maria'. Referring to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the word 'Mariam' has been used twelve times and the word 'Maria' seven times. See, Geoffrey Ashe, *The Virgin* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), 48. Mary was known as "Mariam" in Aramaic, "Miriam" in Hebrew, and "Maria" in Greek and Latin. See, Leonardo Boff, *The Maternal Face of God: The Feminine and Its Religious Expressions*, trans., Robert R. Barr and John W. Diercksmeier (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 107; 'Mariamme' was the elegant form of 'Mariam' and the name 'Mariam' was pronounced as 'Miriam', which was a typical name in the Jewish community of that time. See, David Flusser, "Mary and Israel," in *Mary: Images of the Mother of Jesus in Jewish and Christian Perspective*, ed. David Flusser, Jaroslav Jan Pelikan and Justin Lang (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Except for a few references in the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the letter of St. Paul to the Galatians, the New Testament does not say much about Mary. The passages in which Mary appears in the canonical scriptures are: Gal 4:4; Mk 3:19-21, 3:31-45, 6:3; Mt 1:2, 12:46-50; Lk 1:5-2:52, 8:19-21, 11:27-28; Jn 2:1-11; 19: 25-27; Acts 1:14. See, Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1997), 56-57. In Galatians there is only an allusion to Mary. Besides the Galatians, the other potential references in the Pauline letters are Rom. 1:3 and 9:5. In the Gospel of Mark, Mary is referred to by name once (6:3) and indirectly another time (3:35). In both instances Mary is spoken in the context of the general theme of the Gospel of Mark, namely it is the discipleship and not the family bond that constitutes the kingdom of God. The Gospel of Matthew portrays Mary only as a passive character in comparison with the Gospel of Luke. When we look at the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, the space allotted to Mary is more in the Gospel of Luke: Mary received the message from the angel, Mary sang the Magnificat; Mary pondered on the angel's message delivered to the shepherds; Simeon delivers his prophetic message to Mary and it is Mary who kept "all these things in her heart". See, Janice Capel Anderson, "Mary's Difference: Gender and Patriarchy in the Birth Narratives," *The Journal of Religion* 67 (1987): 191. The elements of historicity in the infancy narratives could be the following: our Lady's virginity and her betrothal to Joseph (Mt 1:18-24), her virginal conception by the operation of the Holy Spirit (Mt 1: 18-20, Lk 1: 35), the name "Jesus" decreed by the Most High (Mt 1:21, Lk 1:31), and the fact of her Son's infancy in Nazareth (Mt 2:23). Though in the Gospel of John, Mary appears only twice, she plays a vital role both at the event in Cana and at the time of the crucifixion of the Lord.

Apostolic Fathers belonging to the second century, it is either "tantalizingly brief",<sup>4</sup> or *rien de rien* – nothing at all.<sup>5</sup> Hence biblicists and theologians like Raymond Brown and Karl Rahner have explicitly stated that the New Testament could not provide us "much knowledge of Mary, as a historical character"<sup>6</sup> and so it is impossible for the Church to have the complete life story of her.

If this is the case, is there anything at all that we could say of the historical figure of Mary? John van den Hengel has classified the Scriptural texts on Mary into three categories: texts that are related to situations in the life of Jesus and of the early Church, the Fourth Gospel, and the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives. According to him the first category of texts that is related to situations in the life of Jesus and of the early Church, provide us in all likelihood with the historical life of Mary. The second category, namely the Fourth Gospel, is more theological than historical. The last category, the Matthean and Lukan infancy narratives, is a

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<sup>4</sup> Maeckelberghe too has made a similar claim with regard to the historical accounts on Mary. See, Els Maeckelberghe, *Desperately Seeking Mary: A Feminist Appropriation of a Traditional Religious Symbol* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991), 14. Hilda Graef has said that Mary remains "in a kind of chiaroscuro" in the Scripture and in the beginning of the Church tradition. See, Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 3 ed. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 32.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Ashe, who has made a historical study on the early Christianity, has pointed out that what we could be certain of the Mother of God is only her name. See, Ashe, *The Virgin*, 46. The Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars too, who employed the historical-critical method in their analysis of Marian texts, have concluded that they were not able to see a "high Mariology" in the New Testament. See, Brown and Others, eds., *Mary in the New Testament*, 283.

<sup>6</sup> See, Karl Rahner, *Mary: Mother of the Lord* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 83. Raymond E. Brown, *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 105. However, Dominic Unger took a strong exception to Brown's idea. He has insisted that the biblical accounts that are recorded are historical events on Mary. See, Dominic Unger, "Does the New Testament Give much Historical Information about the Blessed Virgin or Mostly Symbolic Meanings?," *Marianum* 39 (1977): 323-347.

reflection that represents only a post-Resurrection theology. The evangelists have interwoven the historical facts with the theological reflections on the texts of the Old Testament. Hence he says that the historical element of Mary could not be totally ruled out in the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> Similarly Merle Salazar too acknowledges that what we know of the actual Mary is very little, and all the other aspects that we know of her are only human constructs. In parallel to the idea of Sandra Schneiders' view of "four Jesuses"<sup>8</sup>, Merle Salazar speaks of "four Marys" analogously – the actual Mary, the historical Mary, the textual Mary and the proclaimed Mary. According to her, other than the actual Mary, the other "three Marys" are constructs that mediate our encounter with the actual Mary. The historical Mary bears upon the earthly Mary, Miriam of Nazareth; the textual Mary is the Mary enshrined in the New

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<sup>7</sup> See, John van den Hengel, "Miriam of Nazareth: Between Symbol and History," in *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 140-141. In his analysis of the historical nature of the infancy narratives, Brown too has observed, "We have no reliable information about the source of the infancy material. This does not mean that the infancy narratives have no historical value, but it does mean that one cannot make assumptions of historicity on the basis of their presence in the Gospels". See, Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke*, Updated ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 6. David Jenkins has said that the birth narratives of Jesus were only legends, without any historical basis. He made this statement in 1984 just before being consecrated as the Bishop of Durham. See, Chris Maunder, "Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary in the New Testament," in *The Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (New York: Burns and Oates, 2008), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Sandra Schneiders speaks of "four Jesuses", namely the actual Jesus, the historical Jesus, the proclaimed Jesus, and the textual Jesus. See, Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (HarperCollins: New York, 1991), 20-26. Schneiders in explaining the actual Jesus and the historical Jesus, says, "The concerns of the scholars were, originally, to discover through the biblical text what "really happened" and, somewhat later, to discover what the biblical authors intended to say (whether or not that was in accord with what really happened or with what the Church today believes). Both sets of questions were properly historical". See, Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 22.

Testament texts; and the proclaimed Mary is the product of people's collective imagination and it primarily bears upon the glorified Mary.<sup>9</sup> Of course no one can really say anything concrete about the actual Mary; if at all something can be said about Mary, it is about the historical Mary, namely a construction of Mary taking into account the social, political, cultural milieu of that time. So she thinks that the few historical events of Mary that are given to us must be understood only in the milieu of the interpretation of the faithful of that particular time. In my observation too, though the Gospels spell out very little on Mary, looking at her from the surroundings of that time, we can really draw a lot of conclusions about Mary.

Why did the Gospels and the writing of the Apostolic Fathers not speak much about Mary? There could be two reasons. The first reason has something to do with the prime focus of the Gospels. In this regard, Ben Witherington is right in saying that the Gospel writers never intended to bring out the historical picture of Mary. Their prime motive was to focus on the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> The second reason has something to do with the religious conditioning of that time. We know that Christianity in its initial stage was very much influenced by Jewish concerns about cultic worship. So the first Christians avoided all kinds of pagan goddess

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<sup>9</sup> See, Merle Salazar, "Miriam of Nazareth: A Jewish Galilean," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 42 (2005): 353-354.

<sup>10</sup> "The overall impression left by the material in the Gospels about Mary is that no Evangelist made a concerted effort to give Mary more significance than she actually had in the ministry of Jesus; that no Evangelist attempted to paint a purely idealized portrait of her; that no Evangelist attempted to portray a strictly Christian (i.e. non-Jewish) picture of Jesus' mother." See, Ben Witherington, *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 99-100. The other people who are referred to in the Gospels are chiefly either the supporters or the opponents of Jesus. See, George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1996), 3.

worship. This idea led them to have a very minimal place for Mary too. They feared that the emphasis on Mary would be described as an assimilation of pagan goddess worship.<sup>11</sup>

While this being the fact of Mary of the New Testament and of the writing of the Apostolic Fathers, the tradition of the Church has given a lot of titles and attributes to her in the past two thousand years that have very little space in the New Testament. Now the question that naturally arises in our mind is how Mary became very prominent and popular in the tradition of the Church? Hence here we make a study of the different factors that paved the way for the emergence and the development of Marian devotion and doctrines.

## 2. Marianist Movement

A Marianist Movement! Did it really exist? Was it the real cause for the emergence of Marian devotion? Probably Ashe is the only man who has strongly spoken of the existence of a woman-led movement,<sup>12</sup> namely a Marianist Movement prior to the time of the Council of Ephesus that had posed a great challenge to the mainstream Christianity. He has even said that the declaration of the dogma of Mary as *Theotokos* was not only a recognition of that Marianist Movement but it was also a way to accommodate

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<sup>11</sup> See, Tina Beattie, "Mary in Patristic Theology," in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (London: Continuum, 2007), 77.

<sup>12</sup> This sect ordained women as priests and was anti-hierarchical. Ashe has found lots of similarity between the Collyridian sect and the feminist movement of today, and he has spoken of the Collyridian sect as the early Christian feminists. See, Maurice Hamington, *Hail Mary?: The Struggle for Ultimate Womanhood in Catholicism* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 11. It is true that feminists want to make use of this claim. Nevertheless, Epiphanius is the only early heresiologist who has spoken about 'Collyridians' and so we cannot attach too much weight to it. See, Averil Cameron, "The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Religious Development and Myth-Making," in *The Church and Mary*, ed. R. N. Swanson (New York: The Boydell Press, 2004), 6-7.

that Movement partially within mainstream Christianity. He has consolidated this position by pointing out the good number of writings on Marian devotion after the Council of Ephesus. Nevertheless, he himself has admitted that the hypothesis that he has arrived at is only a "historical fiction".<sup>13</sup> Besides, we do not have any further substantial literature to ascertain his hypothesis. Hence many theologians of today discard his view. Since we are not certain of the existence of this Marianist Movement itself, we cannot also claim that this Movement could have given rise to the emergence of Marian devotion. What could be the key factor then for the emergence of Marian devotion?

### 3. Mary in the Apocryphal Literatures

One of the prominent sources for the emergence of the Marian devotion was definitely the good number of the apocryphal books<sup>14</sup> that emerged from the second century to the ninth century. We could point out two reasons for the emergence of these apocryphal books on Mary: The prime motive of these literatures was to fill in the gap found in the biblical narratives, as the Gospels spoke very little about Mary; and the second was "the completing of the biographies of its *dramatis personae*".<sup>15</sup> Hence these works have provided us with the information such as, the place of her birth, her parents, her early childhood, death, etc. They too have

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<sup>13</sup> See, Ashe, *The Virgin*, 170. See also, Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 59. He claims that the apostles might have rejected Mary after the resurrection of Jesus Christ and Mary might have had her own women followers.

<sup>14</sup> Here the word 'apocryphal' should not be understood in its primary meaning of 'hidden', as not all the books were hidden once they were written; it has to be understood with the meaning of 'spurious' or 'secondary'. We should not call them 'non-canonical', 'unorthodox', or 'heretical' as these terms are anachronistic. See, J.K. Elliott, "Mary in the Apocryphal New Testament," in *The Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (New York: Burns and Oates, 2008), 57. Nevertheless, for our convenience we still use the word 'apocryphal'.

<sup>15</sup> See, Elliott, "Mary in the Apocryphal New Testament," 58.

discussed some of the theological issues such as, the reason for Mary to be selected as the mother of God, the uniqueness found in Mary, the exemplary life that Mary has led, etc.<sup>16</sup>

Among the many apocryphal books *Protoevangelium of James* or *Infancy Gospel of James*, which belonged to the middle of the second century, was one of the prominent sources that focused its attention on the events prior to the birth of Jesus, namely, the parents of Mary, the birth of Mary, her childhood in the temple, her betrothal to an aged Joseph, her holiness, the annunciation, the doubt of Joseph, the vindication of Mary before the High Priest, and her perpetual virginity. It also enumerates the events that took place during the birth of Jesus and after: the birth of Jesus in a cave outside Bethlehem, the adoration of the *magi* and the slaughter of the children by Herod.<sup>17</sup> Besides *Protoevangelium of James*, there are a number of other works that have got references to Mary.<sup>18</sup> These apocryphal books that have portrayed Mary in parallel to Christ have strengthened the Marian devotion in the lives of people. In the tradition of the Church, many believed the content of these writings to be historical, which by and large has paved the way for the devotion to Mary.

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<sup>16</sup> See, Elliott, "Mary in the Apocryphal New Testament," 58.

<sup>17</sup> See, Brown and Others, eds., *Mary in the New Testament*, 253-254.

<sup>18</sup> *Ascension of Isaiah* (a Jewish-Christian work belonging to the end of the first century), *Odes of Solomon* (before 150 A.D.), *The Apostles' Epistle (Epistula apostolorum)*, *The Gospel of the Nazaraeans*, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (probably second century), *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Gospel of Ebionites* – known from the writings of Epiphanius, *The Secret Gospel of Mark* – known from Clement of Alexandria, *The Gospel of the Hebrews* – known from the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, Jerome, Origen and Eusebius (third to fourth centuries), *The Gnostic Gospel of Philip* (third century), *The Gospel of Bartholomew* (fourth century), *The Infancy Gospel of "Thomas the Israelite"* (fifth century), *Arabic Infancy Gospel* (sixth century), *One of the dialogues in the Pistis Sophia*, *Pseudo-Matthew* (seventh century), *Latin Infancy Gospel* (seventh to ninth century).

#### 4. The Influence of Goddesses of Pre-Christian Era

Besides the impact of different apocryphal books on Marian devotion, one could not simply ignore the influence of the goddesses of the pre-Christian era, though there exist some differences of opinions. Some believe that being surrounded by different cultic practices, where the worship of mother goddesses was dominant, there was a primeval need in the Church for the female archetype. So with the demise of Greco-Roman religion with all its deities, when the people embraced Christianity, their view of gods and goddesses did not change much. They absorbed the cult of Greco-Roman religion into their new Christian faith. Hence some people have said that the early cult of Mary ought to be seen in continuity with the worship of ancient earth mothers and fertility goddesses of the pre-Christian era. They have claimed that the previous goddesses worshipers have merely supplanted their spirituality with the Christian Mary. So Stephen Benko has said that Mary did “in effect replace these deities and continued them in Christian form”.<sup>19</sup> He has also claimed that even the origination of earlier Marian doctrines has been “rooted in popular piety that was motivated by pagan precedents, more precisely by the worship of Cybele”.<sup>20</sup> Elisabeth A. Johnson has also looked at the emergence of the earlier Marian doctrines as a fortuitous event in which we could find that the Marian tradition became a “conduit of imagery and language about the divine reality flowing from the veneration of the Great Mother in the pre-Christian Mediterranean world”.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless some people have argued that paganism had no influence at all on the cult of Mary.<sup>22</sup> Cameron has said that

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<sup>19</sup> See, Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, 2.

<sup>20</sup> See, Benko, *The Virgin Goddess*, 205.

<sup>21</sup> See, Elisabeth A. Johnson, “Mary and the Female Face of God,” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 507.

<sup>22</sup> See, Ashe, *The Virgin*, 8.

the Marian cult must be seen in the light of the special churches dedicated in her name, the various images, liturgical feasts and religious expressions that were developed with and out of the self definition by the Church, the formulation of the Marian dogmas after the Council of Nicaea, and the intense discussion on the Marian issues such as *Theotokos* and Ever-Virgin in the late fourth century. However, he has admitted too that no religious development of importance could be explained in "simple or monocausal terms". According to him, the pagan syncretism might have played a very minor role and he has proposed that "competition" could be a better model in this case.<sup>23</sup> John McGuckin too has said that there were no "real influences and indebtedness" of 'pagan' goddesses on Marian devotion. There was no actual "religious inter-penetration" between Christianity and Hellenistic tradition. It was rather only "a symbol of the dramatic missionary strategy".<sup>24</sup>

## 5. The Teaching of the Pre-Nicene Church Fathers

The third major factor that contributed to the development of Marian devotion was the writings of the pre-Nicene Church Fathers. Already from the middle of the second century, the Church Fathers especially, Irenaeus of Lyons, Justin Martyr, Origen and Ephraem of Syria have spoken of Mary and Eve in antithesis, which many have termed as the origin of Marian theology. The Church Fathers spoke of Mary as the New Eve or as the Second Eve.<sup>25</sup> They have employed lots of allusions to point out the exalted position of Mary, her spotless innocence and her sanctity unstained by any fault. Irenaeus who became the bishop of Lyons in 177/

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<sup>23</sup> See, Cameron, "The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity," 13-14.

<sup>24</sup> See, John McGuckin, "The Early Cult of Mary and Inter-Religious Contexts in the Fifth-Century Church," in *The Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (New York: Burns and Oates, 2008), 14-18.

<sup>25</sup> See, Carl F. Baechle, "The Christological Roots of Cappadocian Mariology: Mary as Theotokos and Perpetual Virgin," *Diakonia* 34 (2001): 35.

178 was the first one to develop the Eve/Mary typology and spoke of Mary as the Second Eve. He contrasted the obedience of Mary with the disobedience of Eve (*Against the Heresies* 3.22.4). St. Justin Martyr (died c. 165) in his *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho* (100, 5) made a similar contrast too. Origen (d. 253) in his *Homily I on Matthew 5* and Ephrem of Syria (c. 306-373) in his *Hymns on the Church*, 49.7 have made a similar contrast between the disobedience of Eve and the obedience of Mary.

This Eve-Mary contrast that had already originated in the second century is still very common in the tradition of the Church. By making this analogy, in the tradition of Church, Eve has been equated with sin, sexuality and death; whereas Mary has been attributed with grace, virginity and life. Nevertheless, Kari Elisabeth Børresen says that the Eve-Mary parallel has to be situated in the context of the role played by woman in the fall and in the incarnation: "In both cases their part is ancillary and subordinate in relation to the principal actor, Adam and the new Adam. But this ancillary function takes on a profound significance by imprinting on the work of salvation the stamp of universality. Both sexes are saved; women should not despair, in spite of their initiative, in the person of Eve, in the original fall".<sup>26</sup> Tina Beattie in her analysis of patristic comments on the Eve-Mary contrast has pointed out that the concern of the Church Fathers was not "the condemnation of Eve, but her redemption in Mary".<sup>27</sup> She says that while they spoke of the redemption of Eve in Mary, they too emphasized the salvation of all women as Eve was redeemed. Thus Beattie has pointed out that it is unfortunate that the Church has not paid much attention to this perspective.

<sup>26</sup> See, Kari Elisabeth Børresen, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Women in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1995), 75.

<sup>27</sup> See, Beattie, "Mary in Patristic Theology," 90.

## 6. The Dispute over the Divine-Human Nature of Jesus

The fourth factor that paved the way for the emergence of Marian theology was the dispute over the divine-human nature of Jesus. Averil Cameron has pointed out that the “constellation of the heated Christological debates” contributed enormously to the growth of Marian cult.<sup>28</sup> Already from the second century onwards different sects, such as Gnostics, Ebionites, Eunomians, Apollinarians held different views on the divine-human nature of Jesus Christ. Besides these different sects, Arius (c. 250-336) a Christian priest in Alexandria too raised a Christological controversy. According to him, God alone is eternal and He cannot communicate His own being or substance to any created thing. So for Arius, the Son is not of the same substance as the Father and is only the first of created beings.<sup>29</sup> Here we must understand that though these disputes were directly centred on the divine-human nature of Jesus, it also indirectly spoke on the role of Mary in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, which in turn paved the way for the development of Marian theology that we see in the writings of the post-Nicene Church Fathers.

## 7. The Teaching of the Post-Nicene Church Fathers

As we have seen, though the pre-Nicene Church Fathers mostly spoke of Mary in an antithesis with Eve, in line with the Nicene teaching, the post-Nicene Church Fathers like Alexander of Alexandria (d. 328), Athanasius (296-373) and the Greek contemporaries of the Cappadocians / Cyril of Jerusalem, Didymus the Blind, Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis – explained Mary more from a Christological perspective, stressing the virginity of Mary

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<sup>28</sup> See, Cameron, “The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity,” 1-21.

<sup>29</sup> See, E.J.A. Bicknell, *Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (London: Longmans, 1955), 43-46.

and her being the *Theotokos*,<sup>30</sup> which too contributed to the emergence of Marian theology. Bishop Alexander of Alexandria (d. 328) who called Mary as *Theotokos* defended the true manhood of Christ and the true motherhood of Mary against the prevailing Gnostic and Manichean heresies of that time.<sup>31</sup> Athanasius (c. 296-373) in his controversy with Arianism stressed that Christ took his Godhead from the Father, but his manhood from his mother “the unploughed earth” (*Oratio* II, 7 – *C. Arianos*).<sup>32</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) in his only surviving work *Catecheses* (Ch. 10, 19)<sup>33</sup> called Mary as *Theotokos*. Similarly Didymus in his work *On the Trinity* (I, 31) called Mary both as *Theotokos* and Ever-Virgin.<sup>34</sup> Epiphanius, one of the main contributors to Marian theology, said that whenever we speak of Mary, we always speak of her as the Ever-Virgin.<sup>35</sup> Ambrose too spoke clearly of Mary, as Mother of God.<sup>36</sup>

Besides this, the Church Fathers have also made a relationship between Eve and the Church which was understood in the context of the creation of Eve (Gen. 2) and of the piercing of Christ’s side (Jn. 19: 34) – they spoke of the creation of Eve from the side of sleeping Adam and the creation of the Church from the side of the dead Christ.<sup>37</sup> However, this relationship between Eve and the Church was not much insisted in the later tradition of the Church. Similar to this Eve-Church relationship, Mary, too, was spoken of in relation to the Church. St. Ambrose (339-397) was the first one to speak of the close relationship

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<sup>30</sup> See, Baechle, “The Christological Roots of Cappadocian Mariology,” 35.

<sup>31</sup> See, Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> See, Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 51-52.

<sup>33</sup> See, Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses*, ed. W.K. Reischl and J. Rupp (1848/1860).

<sup>34</sup> See, *Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, 39, 421B.

<sup>35</sup> See, Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> See, Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 78.

<sup>37</sup> Beattie, “Mary in Patristic Theology,” 93.

between Mary and the Church in an extensive way.<sup>38</sup> He saw Mary as the model of the Church as "Mary is the Church in germ, as it were, because when she conceived Christ she conceived also all who were to be his own."<sup>39</sup> For him, this identification of Mary with the Church culminated under the Cross, where Christ gave John to be her son, so all believers too became her sons and daughters.<sup>40</sup> Later, under the influence of St. Ambrose, St. Augustine (354-430) too spoke of Mary as the model of the Church.<sup>41</sup> He treated Mary's faith in the context of the spiritual fecundity of the Church. Mary, being a member of the Church, played a part in the fecundity of the Church, as she physically gave birth to Christ, whose members are born of the spirit: "The Church is Christ's mother. How is she Christ's mother if not because she gives birth to his members?"<sup>42</sup> This Mary-Church relationship was not given much prominence in the tradition of the Church until the Second Vatican Council.

Besides these themes, the Church Fathers saw Mary as a model of Christian life, as a prophet and as a pre-eminent member of the Church. Origen spoke of Mary as a model of Christian life and as the "first-fruits of faith" through her obedience (*Commentary on Matthew*, 10.17). He said that Mary was consecrated twice, the first time at the descent of the Holy Spirit and the second time through the descent of the Divine Word within her (*Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*, 7.2-4; *Commentary on Matthew*, 10.17). He spoke of Mary also as a prophetic figure

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<sup>38</sup> See in, Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in the Patristic Thought*, trans., Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 198.

<sup>39</sup> See, Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 86.

<sup>40</sup> See, Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 86.

<sup>41</sup> See, Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 224.

<sup>42</sup> See, Borresen, "Mary in Catholic Theology," 50.

(*Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*, 8.11) and a channel of the Holy Spirit who conveyed to John the Baptist while he was in his mother's womb that the grace of the Holy Spirit would be upon him. Thus, we could find that Mary had prophesied about the prophetic mission of John the Baptist when he was still in his mother's womb (*Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 6.49; *Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*, 7. 1-3).<sup>43</sup> Augustine too spoke of Mary as the pre-eminent member of the Church: "... Mary is a part of the Church, a holy member, an excellent member, a supereminent member – yet but a member of the whole body" (*Sermon Denis*, 25, 7.)<sup>44</sup> These teachings of the Church Fathers were however not given sufficient attention in the Middle Ages during which Mary was placed above the Church, between the angels and God. Only during and after the Second Vatican Council, some of these prominent themes of the Church Fathers came again to the surface. It is unfortunate that the teachings of the Church Fathers on themes such as the modesty of Mary, her silence and domestic seclusion alone became the 'ideals' of Christian womanhood in the course of medieval history.<sup>45</sup>

## 8. The Existence of the "Embryonic Devotion" to Mary

When we read the teaching of the theologians and the Church Fathers of early centuries, we realize that they were uniformly Christological, not Marian, in their prime emphasis, and they have nothing to say about prayer to Our Lady or her powers of intercession. The heart of the message is not that women should focus their devotion on Mary, or pray to her, but that all faithful Christians need to get closer to Christ.<sup>46</sup> For example, Epiphanius

<sup>43</sup> See, McGuckin, "The Early Cult of Mary," 10.

<sup>44</sup> As found in, Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 97.

<sup>45</sup> See, Beattie, "Mary in Patristic Theology," 99.

<sup>46</sup> See, Richard Price, "Theotokos: The Title and Its Significance in Doctrine and Devotion," in *Mary: The Complete Resource*, ed. Sarah Jane Boss (London: Continuum, 2007), 60.

of Salamis, in his 'medicine-chest' against heresies, the *Panarion* (377), condemned the 'Collyridians' who worshipped the Virgin Mary.<sup>47</sup> He said that Mary deserved only our honour (*timē*) and not the worship (*proskunēsis*).<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Ambrose too has said that Mary should not be adored as "Mary was the temple of God, not the God of the temple" (*De Spiritu Sancto*, 3, 79f).<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, Chris Maunder has claimed that we cannot totally deny the "embryonic devotion" to Mary that had already existed in the New Testament time itself. According to him this devotion was based on the Gospel themes themselves, such as Mary, as the virgin mother, Mary's eyewitness in the public ministry of Jesus, and Mary standing at the cross of her crucified Son.<sup>50</sup> Besides, we have a number of examples of the existence of different Marian devotions from the end of the third century. The prayer of petition to Mary, *Sub tuum praesidium* that appeared in the third century was the first prayer addressed to Mary, which was the public expression of intercessory powers of Mary.<sup>51</sup> This prayer was very much incorporated into the prayers of the

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<sup>47</sup> The Collyridian sect was recorded in the *Panarion*, or Medicine Chest, of Saint Epiphanius of Salamis as the 79<sup>th</sup> heresy of the Church. He denounced the rituals of this sect as "foolish, crazy idolatry and the work of the devil," consisting of women who praise Mary "more than they ought." As quoted in the work of, Hamington, *Hail Mary?*, 11. This sect had some rituals that honoured Mary over Jesus and worshipped Mary as a goddess. See, Joseph A. Grassi, *Mary, Mother and Disciple: From the Scriptures to the Council of Ephesus* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), 127.

<sup>48</sup> "Now the body of Mary was indeed holy, but it was not God; the Virgin was indeed a virgin and revered, but she was not given us for worship, but herself worshipped him who was born in the flesh from her." He continues to say, "Honour Mary, but let the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be worshipped, but let no one worship Mary ... even though Mary is most beautiful and holy and venerable, yet she is not to be worshipped." See, *Panarion*, 79, 4; 79, 7. As cited in, Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 73.

<sup>49</sup> See, Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 88.

<sup>50</sup> See, Maunder, "Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary in the New Testament," 33.

<sup>51</sup> See, Hamington, *Hail Mary?*, 14.

Byzantine, Coptic, Ethiopian and Latin Churches.<sup>52</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus in his *Oratio* 24, which he delivered in 379, has made a reference to a virgin named Justina who invoked the name of Christ as well as Virgin Mary to protect her from Cyprian of Antioch who tried to seduce her. Thus this evidence has shown us the existence of intercessory prayers to the Virgin Mary in the Nicene Christian community of Constantinople in the year 379. A fourth century apocryphal text, *Six books apocryphon*,<sup>53</sup> has numerous references to the intercessory power of Mary and points out the miracles that Mary has performed before the end of her earthly life. It has references to three Marian feasts<sup>54</sup> that were associated with agriculture, wherein we could find people seeking the aid of Mary to protect the crops. During this time there was also evidence for the cult of Mary that were centered on Mary's dormition<sup>55</sup> and the Assumption.<sup>56</sup> The sermons of Atticus (406-25) and Proclus

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<sup>52</sup> See, Kathleen Coyle. "Mary, the Embodiment of God's Love: A Historical Perspective," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 35 (1998): 258.

<sup>53</sup> It is a brief liturgical handbook mandating the annual observance of three Marian feasts.

<sup>54</sup> The first one is two days after the Nativity (celebrated 24 December or 6 January), the second on 15 May and the third on 13 August. See, Shoemaker, "Marian Liturgies and Devotion," 137.

<sup>55</sup> There is a reference to Peter preaching to the people on the intercessory power of Mary just on the previous night before her death: "The light of our sister Mary's lamp fills the world and will not be extinguished until the end of days, so that those who have decided to be saved will receive assistance from her. And if they receive the image of light, they will receive her rest and her blessing". As quoted in, Shoemaker, "Marian Liturgies and Devotion," 135.

<sup>56</sup> In a narration we find resurrected Mary and the apostles taking a tour in heaven that concludes with a visit to hell. In hell, the sinners request the intercession of Michael, the Archangel and then of the apostles, whose prayers are ineffective. Then they request the prayer of Mary that is effective: "Mary, we beseech you, Mary, light and the mother of light; Mary, life and mother of the apostles; Mary, golden lamp, you who carry every righteous lamp; Mary, our master and the mother of our Master; Mary, our queen, beseech your son to give us a little rest". As quoted in, Shoemaker, "Marian Liturgies and Devotion," 136.

point out the existence of Marian cult at Constantinople. Besides these prayers addressed to Mary and the different Marian devotions, we have also some accounts of Marian apparitions.<sup>57</sup> Thus our study on Marian devotion in the first four centuries points out that Mary already had a significant place in the tradition of the Church, prior to the Council of Ephesus.

## **Conclusion**

Our historical overview of the place of Mary and Marian devotion in the Church prior to the Council of Ephesus brings few things to light: Surrounded by many religions, where goddesses were very common, the people might have looked for a female figure that could fill the space of these goddesses in their devotional practices. This desire of the people may have led to see Mary as a 'semi-goddess'. Hence we could say that there was a constant and conscious move to 'divinize' Mary, which became very explicit in course of the history of the Church.

Right from the time of the early Church Fathers, Eve and Mary have been spoken of in an antithesis. They depicted Mary to be pure and Eve to be the cause of all sins. The Church Fathers have spoken of women as followers of Eve, and we know the negative impact of it: women being seen as the cause of evil and being inferior to men etc. The society in which this antithesis emerged was a patriarchal one, and so we understand the teaching of the Church Fathers, though we do not approve of it. Nevertheless, this parallelism has been repeated with the traditional understanding of Eve-Mary typology in different documents of

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<sup>57</sup> The earliest narration of Marian apparitions is found in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa in 380 that made reference to "a waking vision of the Virgin experienced by Gregory Thaumaturgus, who received a trinitarian creed directly from the apostle John at the Virgin's command". See, Shoemaker, "Marian Liturgies and Devotion," 131.

the Churches, including other Christian Churches. As some feminist theologians have reinterpreted the Eve-Mary typology of the Church fathers, we are of the view that the Church has to come forward in paying much attention to the patristic soteriology, namely the redemption of Eve in Mary.

It is a sad reality that some of the teaching of the Church Fathers on Mary, namely Mary as a model of discipleship, Mary as a pre-eminent member of the Church, Mary as a prophetess, Mary as a model of all believers, and Mary as our sister, have been largely forgotten in the tradition. What could be the reasons for non-accentuation of these Marian teachings? Can we think that the Church authorities might have thought that the projection of these teachings on Mary would eventually lead to the participation of women in the hierarchy of the Church equal with men? Is the marginalization of these Marian teachings an attempt to stabilize the male dominance in the hierarchy of the Church? These are some of our observations and questions that emerge from the historical study of Mary's place in the Church prior to the Council of Ephesus.