

© 2025, Dallas Theological Seminary. This article was accepted for publication by Bibliotheca Sacra, <https://www.dts.edu/resources/bibliotheca-sacra/>, in September 2024. This pre-publication copy is being made available in keeping with Bibliotheca Sacra guidelines. IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO CITE THIS PAPER IN YOUR RESEARCH, PLEASE WAIT UNTIL IT IS PUBLISHED IN BIBLIOTHECA SACRA SO THAT YOU CAN CITE THE PROPER PAGE NUMBERS IN THE PUBLISHED VERSION.

December 25th and the *Protevangelium Jacobi*

by

Kurt M Simmons

Keywords: *Protevangelium Jacobi*; *Excerpta Latina Barbari*; Julius Africanus; Evodius; December 25th; January 6th; Nativity of Christ.

Introduction

This article examines the relationship between the traditional, received date of the nativity of Christ and the *Protevangelium Jacobi*. Although the Christmas date does not occur in versions of the *Protevangelium Jacobi* we possess today, it did apparently appear in versions cited by several early patristic writers, including potentially Africanus and an epistle attributed to Evodius. Moreover, various indicia preserved in the version we presently possess seem to attest to its one-time presence and the early winter birth of Christ remains an implicit part of the story even today. The author's reliance upon the canonical Gospels of Matthew and Luke argues that church

fathers understood the early winter birth of Christ as an integral part thereof, particularly when read together with other period sources, including John's Gospel and Josephus. However, the specific date of December 25th was probably received by tradition, there being no explicit source for the date in the canonical texts.

The Protevangelium Jacobi

One of several “infancy gospels” written to expand upon the canonical Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the *Protevangelium Jacobi* is the most important and influential pseudepigraphal document of the New Testament era. Its dependance upon the canonical Gospels means it cannot be earlier than the latter part of the first century.¹ It was known to Origen (AD 184-254) and probably Clement (AD 150-215),² and therefore cannot be later than AD 250. Most scholars date it to the middle or latter half of the second century, about AD 170. It circulated widely in the Greek-speaking Byzantine East as attested by the 170 Greek manuscripts that have survived.³ Its popularity is also witnessed by the many translations it underwent, including Syriac, Ethiopic, Coptic, Georgian, Slavonic, Armenian, Arabic, Latin, and Irish.⁴ Despite its wide circulation in the East, the document was largely unknown in the West due to the fifth and sixth century papal decrees *Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis*, which proscribed the reception and use of the many pseudepigraphal and apocryphal documents generated over the centuries. It was re-introduced to the West in AD 1552 by the French humanist Guillaume Postel

¹ Jonathan Bernier, *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament* (Baker Academic, 2022); John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London, 1976).

² Clement Alexandria, *Stomata*, 7:16; Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 17.

³ A full collation of the Greek texts has recently been published: George Themelis Zervos, *The Protevangelium of James, Critical Questions of the Text and Full Collations of the Greek Manuscripts: Volume 2* (T&T Clark, 2022).

⁴ O. Cullmann, “Infancy Gospels,” in *The New Testament Apocrypha* (Volume 1) edited by Schneemelcher, W. and translated by Wilson, R. McLochlan, (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 421-2; Emile de Strycker, ‘Dei griechischen Handschriften des Protevangeliums Jacobi,’ in D. Harlfinger (ed.), *Griechische Kodikologie und Textüberlieferung* (1980), pp. 577-612; Maurice Geerard, *Clavis Apocryphorum Novi Testamenti*, (Brepols, 1992), pp. 27-29.

who published a Latin translation of the Greek text.⁵ Indeed, the very title *Protevangelium Jacobi* was first coined by Postel, and has been customary ever since.⁶

The storyline of the *Protoevangelium* is based upon the Biblical account of Elkanah, Hannah, and Samuel: Hannah and Elkanah make their annual trek to the tabernacle. Hannah is barren and asks a child of the Lord who gives her conception of the child Samuel. Samuel is dedicated to the Lord and grows up in the temple under the care and tutelage of the High Priest, Eli, until becoming established as a prophet in his own right (I Sam. 1-4). In the *Protoevangelium*, Joachim, Anna, and Mary are substituted for Elkanah, Hannah, and Samuel. Anna is barren but obtains conception of Mary from the Lord. Mary is then dedicated to the Lord when she is three years of age. Later, she is betrothed to Joseph and bears the Christ-child. The narrative also includes the Arrival of the Magi (*Prot.* 21), the Slaughter of the Innocents (*Prot.* 22), and the Martyrdom of Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, who is portrayed as the High Priest (*Prot.* 23, 24).

The original scope of the work is debated. Various peculiarities and incongruities in the details and storyline have led many to believe that the document is a composite made of parts older than the whole. For example, in the narrative of Jesus' birth, Joseph suddenly begins speaking in the first-person singular. Thereafter, the narrative resumes the third-person until the story's close when the first-person occurs again, this time in the person of James who claims to be the author. The sudden change from third-person to first-person and back again strikes the reader as odd and

⁵ George Themelis Zervos, *The Protevangelium of James, Greek Text, English Translation, Critical Introduction Volume I* (T&T Clark, 2019), p. 1; Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, (Polebridge Press, 1995), p. 4, 27, 28.

⁶ H.R. Smid, *Protevangelium Jacobi*, A Commentary (Assen, 1965), p. 1.

leaves the impression that portions of the work represent separate documents that have been carelessly tacked together.

Harnack proposed that the *Protoevangelium* was a composite of three separate documents: a *Nativity of Mary*, a *Joseph Apocryphon*, and a *Zachariah Apocryphon* which were joined together before the end of the fourth century.⁷ More recently, Zervos has argued that, rather than being comprised of separate documents, the *Protevangelium* is the product of three successive writers or editors who adapted and emended their predecessors' work to fit their own editorial agendas. According to Zervos, the original document consisted of the *Nativity of Mary*; was later edited by a second individual who added the material about Joseph, followed by a third editor who added the material about Zachariah.⁸ At the other end of the spectrum is Emile de Strycker who argued for a single author on the basis of the literary technique and the overall consistency in language, style and composition. Those subscribing to the single-author theory explain the oddity of Joseph suddenly speaking in the first-person as a rhetorical device used to arrest the reader's attention and enliven the narrative, comparable in some ways to the "we" passages in Acts (16:16; 20:6, 13, 15; 21:1), or John's and Paul's use of the third-person in passages almost certainly referring to themselves (John 19:26, 35; II Cor. 12:1-5). Any editor capable of joining several parts into a single document would have possessed the skill necessary to remove Joseph's use of the first-person had he chosen to do so. That he did not argues that the use of the first-person was deliberate and not an editorial oversight. Hence, the existence of a separate document embodying the *Joseph Apocryphon* may be doubted.⁹

⁷ Adolph von Harnack, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur bis Eusebius* (2 vols.; Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1897), 1:600-3; cf. O. Cullmann, 'Infancy Gospels,' in *The New Testament Apocrypha*, p. 424

⁸ Zervos, *Protevangelium Jacobi*, 1.19-21.

⁹ See, generally, Smid, *Protevangelium Jacobi*, pp. 176-178; Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas*, p. 14.

De Strycker also argued that there is no evidence the several parts of the story ever circulated independently before or after their alleged combination in the *Protevangelium Jacobi* and that the *Zachariah Apocryphon* was too small to have ever existed as an independent document in any event.¹⁰ Here it is incumbent to note that Origen reports a different set of circumstances connected with the death of Zachariah than the *Protevangelium* we presently possess. Rather than dying at the hands of Herod for refusing to disclose the location of the infant John in connection with the Slaughter of the Innocents, Zachariah is slain for sacrilege for allowing Mary, after the birth of Christ, to re-enter the (fictional) place in the temple reserved solely for virgins:

But this tradition has come down to us, that there was formerly a place in the temple where virgins were permitted to enter and to worship God, but those who had known the bed of a man were not permitted to enter. When therefore Mary, after the birth of our Savior, came to worship, she was in the place of virgins. But when those forbidden who had given birth saw her, Zachariah said to those forbidden that she deserved to be in the place of virgins because she was still a virgin. Therefore, as unlawfully permitting wives to be swept into the place of virgins, that generation slew him between the temple and the altar.¹¹

This tradition has many points of contact with the *Protevangelium* we possess today. These include Mary and the temple, questions of her virginity, her perpetual virginity, Zachariah, and

¹⁰ Emile de Strycker, *La forme la plus ancienne du Protévangile de Jacques* (Bruxelles, Société des Bollandistes, 1961), pp. 377-92; cf. Ronald F. Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Polebridge Press, 1995), pp. 13-15.

¹¹ Translation by the author. The Greek text may be found at: W. Delius, *Texte zur Geschichte der Marienverehrung und Marienverkündigung in der Alten Kirche, Kleine Texte* 178 (Berlin, 1956). Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, is misidentified with Zachariah, the son of Barachiah, mentioned by the Lord in Matt. 23:35.

Zachariah's death. Moreover, since Zachariah has knowledge of Mary's virginity, we may conclude he is the husband of Mary's kinswoman, Elizabeth, the father of John the Baptist, and therefore also (falsely) the High Priest. This also seems to be implied by the authority with which he speaks or pronounces judgment regarding Mary worshipping in the place of virgins. Reading it, one gets the impression that it represents part of the growth and development of the *Protevangelium* story. The version we possess today likely prevailed over its competitor because it is more closely tied to the canonical birth narratives in causing Zachariah to die in connection with the Arrival of the Magi and the Slaughter of the Innocents, whereas the version cited by Origen has no inherent connection to the birth narratives of Matthew or Luke. The fact that Origen reports the tradition he does and not the version we possess today makes likely the latter was unknown to him and had not yet been attached to the story as he knew it. Indeed, this seems to be confirmed by the Christmas sermon of Gregory of Nyssa *circa* AD 386.¹² Gregory makes extended reference to the *Protevangelium Jacobi* in discussing the circumstances of Mary's asserted conception and upbringing in the temple, followed by her betrothal to Joseph and the conception and birth of Christ. However, Gregory provides the circumstances of Zachariah's death as reported by Origen, not the version attached to the story today. That these occur together in Gregory's sermon argues that the version of the *Protevangelium* known to Gregory of Nyssa differed from our own and was like Origen's.

In the end, perhaps all that can be said is that the *Protevangelium* story is a composite, drawn from the canonical Gospels and embellished with various inventions and traditions. If in the main the story was written or compiled by a single author, it seems equally clear that it has been

¹² Εἰς τὸ γενέθλιον τοῦ Σωτῆρος from *Gregorii Nysseni Sermones Pars III* (Ed. Friedhelm Mann). *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* X, 2. NY: Brill, 1996: pp. 235-269.

emended by subsequent editors and copyists who gave it its final form. This conclusion will grow stronger as we proceed.

That brings us to a version of the *Protevangelium Jacobi* attributed to Evodius.

Evodius and *Protevangelium Jacobi*

According to Eusebius, Evodius was the second bishop of the church of Antioch, Syria.¹³

Nicephorus calls Evodius a “successor” of the apostles and is related to have been ordained by St. Peter. Tradition has it that he was one of the Seventy sent out by the Lord (Luke 10:1). He is believed to have suffered martyrdom in the persecution under Nero (AD 64-68). The only writing that has reputedly survived of Evodius is part of an epistle quoted by Nicephorus:

From the baptism unto the passion of Christ there were three years; from the passion, resurrection, and his ascension into heaven unto the stoning of Steven, seven years; from Steven’s martyrdom unto the time when light encompassed Paul, six months. From there unto the decease of the holy mother of God, three years. He [Evodius] says the period from the nativity of Christ unto the passing of the mother of God was forty-four years; but the whole of her life, fifty-nine years. This sum obtains if it was in fact the case that she was presented at the temple when she was three years old and there in the holy precincts spent eleven years. Then, by the priest’s hands was placed in the custody of Joseph, with whom she resided four months when she received the joyful announcement from the angel Gabriel. However, she gave birth to the Light of this World, the twenty-fifth day of the month of December, being fifteen years of age. Following this, she passed

¹³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.22 (Loeb edition); cf. Joseph Bingham, *Origines Ecclesiasticae, Antiquities of the Christian Church* (London, 1878), Vol. 2, p. 20.

thirty-three years, which sum also her son completed on earth, who was even the eternal and before all ages Word. After the cross, however, at his request she dwelt in the home of John eleven years, so that of her life-time there were altogether fifty-nine years.¹⁴

The section above appears in a chapter from Nicephorus' Ecclesiastical History about the early church and the holy family; James in particular figures prominently. Hence, it is not surprising that portions of the chapter are drawn from the *Protevangelium Jacobi*. That the selection was actually penned by Evodius may certainly be questioned and, indeed, seems doubtful. Eusebius fails to mention Evodius among the early Christian authors who left writings. We may therefore proceed upon the assumption that the ascription to Evodius is unworthy credit and is either false or mistaken. However, this does not destroy its value for purposes of historical inquiry. The *Protevangelium* is falsely attributed to James, and intentionally so, but its historical value is not diminished thereby. Rather, the piece attributed to Evodius appears to be very early and provides a window into the history and development of the *Protevangelium* story. We note initially that Evodius places Jesus' birth on December 25th. That this is part of the original composition and not the addition of a later hand will appear from the discussion that follows. The main question that concerns us is how early is the version attributed to Evodius? Does the presence of the Christmas date mark this as a later fabrication, or does it testify to the existence of the Christmas date earlier than we are wont to ascribe?

We saw above that many scholars believe the *Protevangelium Jacobi* to be a composite document drawn from different traditions and sources. Clearly, the versions denoted by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa and that attributed to Evodius differ from the version we possess today.

¹⁴ Nicephorus Callisti, *Ecclesiastical History*, 2.3; translated from the Greek to Latin by Iohannes Langus AD 1562; English translation from the Latin by the author.

These variations, and the likelihood that the document represents a compilation of earlier traditions, may explain the differences that occur in the account attributed to Evodius. In Evodius, Mary is *fourteen* years old when she is betrothed and placed in the custody of Joseph, whereas in the *Protevangelium* she is only *twelve*.¹⁵ In Evodius, Mary resides with Joseph four *months* before the annunciation; the *Protevangelium* changes this to four *years*. Mary gives birth to Jesus while she is still *fifteen* according to Evodius; in the *Protevangelium* she is *sixteen*. The difference between a fourteen-year-old girl capable of conception four months after her betrothal and a twelve-year-old girl that must wait four years to conceive is highly significant. A girl of fourteen would already experience menstruation; a girl of twelve presumably would not. The difference therefore likely reflects a change in the story to address issues not anticipated in the original composition, requiring her age be lowered to twelve.

Jewish law rendered a woman ritually impure during her menstrual flow (Lev. 18:19; 20:18; Isa. 30:22; Lam. 1:17; Ezek. 22:10). The original author apparently did not realize this fact and therefore failed to take into consideration issues regarding Mary remaining in the temple until she was fully capable of conception. When this point later came to attention, the age must then have been lowered to twelve and the period between her betrothal and the annunciation lengthened accordingly. How else can we account for the difference? What other motivation can there be to make Mary so young at the time of her betrothal if not to avoid the problem associated with a fourteen-year-old girl, capable of conception, dwelling in the temple? Indeed, the *Protevangelium* we presently possess specifically states that it was to *prevent* Mary from polluting the temple that she was betrothed to Joseph upon turning twelve (*Prot.* 8:3-9). It then

¹⁵ The Greek manuscripts are almost unanimous here making Mary twelve at her betrothal. The exception is No. 93, which makes Mary fourteen. See Zervos, 323, 325.

causes her to live as a virgin *four full years* before the annunciation (*Prot.* 12:9)—a duration inexplicably long except understood as a contrivance allowing Mary to pass from prepubescence to physical maturity and adulthood where she is finally able to conceive.

At this very point a further anomaly occurs in the story: Joseph, after receiving custody of Mary, takes her to his home where he leaves her for *four-and-a-half years*, only to return and find her six months pregnant (*Prot.* 9:2, 13:1). The author's purpose in causing Joseph to leave Mary this way is plain enough: it removes all question about Joseph being the father of Mary's child.

However, that the original author would have contrived a four-and-a-half-year absence is impossible to accept. That Joseph might have absented himself several months, as in the version attributed to Evodius, is certainly plausible, but not four-and-a-half years. Indeed, the events that transpire during Joseph's absence can in no way fill up four-and-a-half years. During Joseph's absence Mary is reputedly involved in weaving tapestry for the temple veil (*Prot.* 10-12). Can it really be argued that this consumed four full years? Surely, this is more consistent with the passage of several months, than several years. Moreover, there is nothing in the text that reflects Mary's increasing maturity or her passage from girlhood to womanhood. The same young girl betrothed to Joseph is presented throughout. It would therefore appear that in solving the problem of Mary's age at her betrothal, another problem was created: the period during which Joseph was absent was made impossibly long. If so, the *Protevangelium* we presently possess is not the original, potentially giving the version attributed to Evodius the better claim to priority.

But there is more.

The *Protevangelium* and the December 25th Birth of Christ

1. Mary's Passover conception, Jesus' birth, and the manuscript tradition

According to the *Protevangelium*, Mary was conceived at the time of the “great day of the Lord” when Jews from all over make their annual trek to the temple. It is a time of rejoicing when mourning and sorrow are to be put away. The term “great day of the Lord” is inherently ambiguous and might apply to any of the “pilgrim” feasts which required all males to be present at the temple thrice annually, including Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Ex. 23:14-18; 34:23; Lev. 23). The phrase “great day” occurs in John’s Gospel in connection with the last day of Tabernacles (John 7:37) and the notion that mourning and sorrow should be banished may find precedent and derive from Nehemiah, also in connection with the fall festival of the seventh month (Neh. 8:1-10). On the other hand, the *Protevangelium* mentions that hatchlings are still in their nests while Anna laments her barrenness, possibly suggesting spring at Passover (*Prot.* 2:2; 3:1). If this is not a deliberate allusion to spring, at the least it is inconsistent with autumn. From Nehemiah we learn that the children of Israel abandoned and neglected the feast of Tabernacles after the time of Joshua and did not keep it until renewed by Ezra and Nehemiah (Neh. 8:17). If so, the account of Elkanah and Hannah likely refers to Passover and may therefore also be the setting here. However, if the passage is ambiguous, the mathematics are not: both the *Protevangelium* and the piece attributed to Evodius contemplate an *early winter nativity* and therefore must place the conception of both Mary and Jesus in spring near Passover. This is especially clear in Evodius, so we will begin there.

According to the piece attributed to Evodius, Jesus was born December 25th, following his conception the fourth month after Mary’s betrothal shortly after her fourteenth birthday. Assuming a nine-month gestation, this would place Jesus’ conception sometime in late March. Mary’s betrothal would therefore have occurred four months earlier in late November. The earliest complete manuscripts of the *Protevangelium*, the Papyrus Bodomer V (BD31) and Sinai

491 (BD81), make Mary's gestation only *seven* months, which would place her conception in April. However, the text is insecure that this point; variations exist also giving *eight* and *nine* months.¹⁶ That copyists felt necessary to manipulate the text at this point suggests it was a key point in development of the story and reflect attempts to confine the narrative within certain limits. The exception is probably where nine months occurs, where the motivation was probably simply to make Mary full term. But where a shorter gestation occurs, we may conclude the copyists' changes reflect other considerations. Since all the early traditions place the nativity in early winter either January 6th or December 25th, it is possible that copyists lengthened and shortened Mary's gestation to accommodate these dates.

Passover occurs at the full moon on or first after the vernal equinox. Because the lunar cycle is twenty-nine and a half days, there is a thirty-day window beginning with the vernal equinox in which Passover can occur. That is, assuming the full moon occurred the day before the vernal equinox, one would have to wait thirty days until the next full moon to celebrate Passover. The Roman calendar set the vernal equinox at March 25th. Therefore, by this rubric, Passover could occur anywhere between March 25th and April 24th. Variations in the length of Mary's gestation that give seven- and eight-months length fit comfortably within this thirty-day Passover window, seven months from April to November, eight months from March. Both therefore tend to confirm and comport with Evodius' plan placing Mary's birth in November.¹⁷ This argues that copyists

¹⁶ Hock states that variations occur including six months, but Zervos' collation of the existing Greek manuscripts fails to confirm this (Hock, 40; Zervos, 239). Six months may refer to the first half of 5:5 where, perhaps drawing on Luke's account of Elizebeth who hid herself five months (Luke 1:24), Anna fulfills six months but gives birth in the seventh.

¹⁷ That Mary's betrothal corresponded closely with her fourteenth birthday in Evodius' account is seen in the fact that she was fifteen when she gave birth to Jesus: four months betrothal until the annunciation plus nine months gestation equals thirteen months, allowing Mary to turn from fourteen to fifteen.

generally understood Passover as the setting for Mary's conception; April and March being the *terminus a quo* and November the *terminus ad quem* of Mary's gestation.

If it is assumed that the version attributed to Evodius was the original or circulated as an early version and competitor, at some point the date of Jesus' birth necessarily dropped out of the text for it is not present today. When it did, the need to foreshorten Mary's gestation would have disappeared and copyists would have wondered why Anna's pregnancy was only seven or eight months long and would have begun to correct or lengthen it. This is borne out in the manuscript witness. The Papyrus Bodmer V, dated between the third and fourth centuries, is the oldest complete manuscript we possess; no date is given for Jesus' birth. However, it still retains the seven-month-long-gestation. The connection between the foreshortened gestation of Mary and the early winter birth of Christ appears to have gone unnoticed at first, and editorial correction lengthening Anna's pregnancy to have lagged behind removal of the Christmas date. Virtually all early manuscripts and several versions, including the Latin and Armenian,¹⁸ make Anna's pregnancy seven or eight months, placing Mary's birthday and betrothal in November. It is not until the *ninth* century that a nine-month-long-gestation occurs in the Greek manuscripts.¹⁹

¹⁸ For the Latin, see Jean-Daniel Kaestli, 'Le Protévangile de Jacques latin dans l'homélie Inquirendum est pour la fête de la Nativité de Marie', in *Apocrypha* 12 (2001), p. 126; de Strycker attached three Latin translations of early Armenian texts to his *La Forme La Plus Ancienne Du Protevangile De Jacques*, pp. 448-473; for a more recent translation of the Armenian, see, Abraham Terian, *The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy: with three early versions of the Protevangelium of James* (Oxford, 2008). Excerpts of Coptic and Ethiopic versions are very late (15th century) and give nine months for Mary's gestation: E.A. Wallis Budge, *Legends of Our Lady Mary the Perpetual Virgin and her Mother Hanna* (The Medici Society, LTD, 1922), p. 146. The Syriac (5th or 6th century) gives nine months: A Smith-Lewis, 'The Protevangelium Jacobi and transitus Mariae' in *Apocrypha Syriaca, Studia Sinaitica*, No. XI, (London, 1902).

¹⁹ See generally, George Themelis Zervos, *The Protevangelium of James, Critical Questions of the Text and Full Collations of the Greek Manuscripts Volume 2*, (T&T Clark (2022), pp. 238, 239. We reject the notion that there is any symbolic value attached to the length of Mary's gestation or that such considerations explain its length. The sole consideration appears to be the 20 or 21 months necessary complete Mary's gestation and Christ's birth December 25th. Two full terms gestations, plus four month's betrothal would equal 22 months (9+9+4=22), but the timeline in Evodius' version is cut short to 20 or 21 months (7+9+4=20 for an April conception, 8+9+4= 21 for March).

The manuscript tradition varying the length of Mary's gestation therefore appears to bear witness that the Christmas date was formerly attached to the *Protevangelium* precisely as reported by Evodius. Indeed, it is only in versions of the *Protevangelium* where the length of Mary's betrothal is extended to four years that the winter birth of Christ is lost or obscured. Even then, however, it does not disappear altogether; traces of it may still be seen in the High Priesthood of Zachariah and the Arrival of the Magi.

2. December 25th and the High Priesthood of Zachariah

Luke indicates that Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, was fulfilling his priestly ministration when he received the announcement of John's impending conception (Luke 1:5-20). Encountering this imagery, early writers supposed Zachariah was High Priest serving at the Feast of Atonement. The Feast of Atonement occurred the tenth day of the seventh lunar month (Lev. 16:29-34; Nu. 29:7) in a thirty-day window beginning roughly late-September through late-October, near the autumnal equinox. This would place the birth of John the Baptist nine months later about the time of the summer solstice. Because John was six months older than Jesus (Luke 1:26, 36), the nativity of Christ would have occurred six months later, near the winter solstice. Among the earliest writers proposing Zachariah was High Priest are Ephrem Syrus (AD 306-373)²⁰ and Ambrose of Milan (AD 340-397).²¹ However, the most well-known example is probably the AD 386 Christmas-day sermon of John Chrysostom, given in defense of the Christmas festival lately arrived in the city of Antioch. Chrysostom gives the Greek name of the month *Gorpiaios* answering to our September, when Zachariah purportedly served, the sixth

²⁰ Ephrem Syrus, "Commentary on Exodus 12:2-3" in *Opera Omnia Ephraem Syri* (Rome, 1737), 1.212-213; (CSCO 152, p. 141); cf. Ephrem, *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, Luke 1:29 (SC 121, pp. 61-62).

²¹ Ambrose, "Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam" ad 1:22 in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, Vol. XXXII, S. Ambrosii Opera, Pars III, p. 24; (CCSL 14, p. 17).

month thereafter (*Dustros – March*) when the annunciation was made to Mary, then counts nine months forward to the Greek equivalent of our December and the birth of Christ.²²

Of course, Zachariah was *not* High Priest. Zachariah lived in the priestly city of Hebron in the hill country of Judea (Luke 1:39; Josh.20:7; 21:11; cf. Num. 35); the High Priest maintained a palace in Jerusalem (John 18:15). It was to burn incense *outside* the veil that brought Zachariah into the Holy Place, not to carry blood within the veil (Ex. 30:7; 1 Chron. 23:13; Lev. 10:1; Num. 16:39). Nevertheless, that early writers confused Zachariah's office bears directly upon our discussion, for the *Protevangelium* also represents Zachariah as High Priest. In fact, it is Zachariah who betroths Mary to Joseph after receiving a vision within the veil:

And the priest took the vestment with twelve bells and went into the Holy of Holies and prayed concerning her. And behold, an angel of the Lord (suddenly) stood before him and said to him, saying, "Zacharias, Zacharias."²³

The vision of Zachariah here cannot be read in isolation but must be read in light of the canonical vision recorded by Luke foretelling the conception of John and was almost certainly written to fill up the space between the conceptions of John and Christ. The writer therefore takes us into the Holy of Holies a *second* time, two months after the Feast of Atonement, to provide details of Mary's betrothal to Joseph and the annunciation four months later. September to November (the time from Zachariah's vision regarding John until Mary's betrothal) is two months. November to March (the length of Mary's betrothal until the annunciation) is four months. Together these equal six months, the length between the births of John and Christ. Hence, the whole storyline as reported by Evodius appears to have been carefully thought through and arranged to fit

²² John Chrysostom, *In diem natalem D.M. Jesu Christi*, PG 49, cols. 351-352.

²³ 'Protevangelium of James,' 8.3, in Cameron, *The Other Gospels, Non-Canonical Gospel Texts*, 113.

seamlessly into the canonical narrative of Luke, providing a timeline from the conception of John until Mary's betrothal, and thence to the annunciation and the December 25th birth of Christ.

However, our author was not without mistakes. Another error that likely contributed to re-writing the *Protevangelium* bears notice. When Zachariah re-enters the Holy of Holies two months after his vision regarding the birth of John, he would have been mute and unable to speak (Luke 1:20, 22; 62-64). This fact was apparently overlooked by the author and required correction. Happily, the solution that fixed Mary's polluting the temple helped also solve the problem here. By reducing Mary's age to twelve at her betrothal and postponing the annunciation four years, the vision of Zachariah regarding Mary is made to *precede* his vision regarding John. That is, the vision regarding Mary, which in Evodius' version would have followed Zachariah's vision regarding John, now occurs four years before it, eliminating the question of his muteness.

It is worth noting here that the problems and their solutions are not passed over in silence. Just as the problem of Mary's polluting the temple and its resolution are brought to our attention (*Prot.* 8:4), so now the question of Zachariah's muteness is brought forward: at the time of the annunciation, we are told Zachariah was dumb and another priest officiated in his stead (*Prot.* 10:9). Of course, none of these details were necessary to the story and might just as easily have been left out or passed over in silence. That they receive explicit mention suggests they had come under scrutiny in the version attributed to Evodius and the editor wanted to call attention to their correction. Moreover, the fact that, at the very point problems exist in the version reported by Evodius the version we possess today resolves them, argues that it came afterward and emended the version that preceded it. That bears repeating: *that at the very point problems exist in the one version they are corrected in the other argues the one emended the other*. Indeed, it is impossible

that the two versions could have circulated very long together, or that the version attributed to Evodius came later, as the corrections of the one call attention to the problems of the other. The natural progression in development of the story is from the version attributed to Evodius to the one known today, not *vice-versa*. Nobody possessing the version we have today would contrive the version attributed to Evodius for the simple fact that he would be introducing errors and anomalies into the text requiring edits and corrections the existing version already addresses. Since there could be no purpose in forging a version condemned to failure from the start, we must conclude the progression went the other direction and that Evodius' came first. If so, Evodius' version would reach back before the latter half of the second century.

We want to be careful not to attribute too much to the piece published by Nicephorus, but neither do we want to be unduly dismissive. We know from Origen and Gregory of Nyssa that other versions of the *Protevangelium* were anciently in circulation. The version attributed to Evodius and published by Nicephorus evidently is one more. In the end, since we do not know its origin, all we can do is note how it differs from the modern version and attempt to render an account. However, Evodius' account seems to us more likely to have been the original, as witnessed by the manuscript variations, and the inherent improbability of Mary being twelve at her betrothal and living as a virgin four full years until the annunciation, Joseph all the while having absented himself. Moreover, the seamlessness with which Evodius' account fits into the canonical narrative of Luke impresses us as the more probable setting for a story about Mary's betrothal than one that carries us back four years before the vision regarding John.

Julius Africanus and the *Protevangelium Jacobi*

If the version attributed to Evodius alone testified to the Christmas date being formerly connected with the *Protevangelium Jacobi*, we would be tempted not to credit it or give it much attention.

However, the corroborating testimony of Julius Africanus prevents it from being ignored. Africanus (AD 160-240) is credited as the first Christian chronographer; the first to graphically present events from sacred and secular history, setting them in opposing columns where they might be readily seen and compared. Most of Africanus' works have been lost, but portions have come down to us preserved in the works of later writers, including George Syncellus²⁴ and the *Excerpta Latina Barbari*. Scholars have long proposed that Africanus, like his younger contemporary, Hippolytus of Rome,²⁵ held to the December 25th birth of Christ.²⁶ However, it is in the *Excerpta Latina Barbari* that we find confirmation of this fact. Eight data points identify Africanus as the ultimate author of the notes inserted into its lists of consular dates:

- Africanus dated Christ's incarnation to *Annus Mundi* (AM) 5500 (T92; 93c).²⁷ AM 5500 is the date provided in the *Excerpta Barbari*.
- Africanus dates the death of Cleopatra (30 BC) to the 14th year of Augustus, AM 5472 (F89). If AM 5472 equals 14 Augustus, then AM 5500 would correspond to 42 Augustus ($5500 - 5472 = 28 / 14 + 28 = 42$). The *Excerpta Barbari* specifies that the annunciation occurred when Augustus was consul the 13th time, which corresponds with 42 Augustus.²⁸

²⁴ George Syncellus, *The Chronography of George Syncellus, A Byzantine Chronicle of Universal History from the Creation*, (Oxford, New York, 2002) translated by William Adler and Paul Tuffin.

²⁵ Thomas C. Schmidt, "Calculating December 25 as the Birth of Jesus in Hippolytus' Canon and Chronicon," 69 *Vigiliae Christianae* (2015), pp. 542-563; cf. Schmidt, Hippolytus of Rome: "Commentary on Daniel and Chronicon" in *Studies in Early Christianity and Patristics*, Vol. 67 (2017, Gorgias Press).

²⁶ Paul de Lagarde, "Altes und Neues über das Weihnachtsfest," in *Mittheilungen* (Goettingen, 1889), 316-317; Venance Grumel, *La chronologie* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1958), pp. 22-4; C. Phillip E. Nothaft, "Early Christian Chronology and the Origin of the Christmas Date: A Defense of the 'Calculation Theory,'" *Questions Liturgiques* 94, no. 3-4 (2013).

²⁷ All references are to Julius Africanus, *Chronographiae, The Extant Fragments*, (Martin Wallraff, ed., trans. William Adler, Walter de Gruyter, New York, 2007).

²⁸ Cf. Finegan, p. 84.

- Scholars predict that Africanus placed the conception of Christ on March 25th based upon the fact that he counted the years of the world from this date.²⁹ March 25th is the calendar date given by the *Excerpta Barbari* for the annunciation and conception.
- Scholars predict that Africanus placed the nativity of Christ December 25th. This is the calendar date given in the *Excerpta Barbari*.
- The *Excerpta Barbari* gives January 1st as the date the Magi arrived. Africanus placed the arrival of the Magi when Jesus was seven days old. Seven days from December 25th is January 1st: “But Cyril and Africanus together with some others report that Christ was seven days old when the Magi arrived” (T91).
- Both Africanus and the *Excerpta Barbari* commence numbering consulships from the first year of Augustus, showing both attached particular significance to that date, evidencing a common plan and scheme (T6).³⁰
- Africanus numbers seventy-four years from the first of Augustus until the resurrection of Christ (T6; F93, 53f).³¹ The *Excerpta Barbari* states that Jesus died and rose again under *Rubellio & Fufio*, which the early fathers associated with AD 31, making it the seventy-

²⁹ Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus and the Origin of the Christian Era* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 389-421, at p. 418.

³⁰ Cf. Julius Africanus, *Chronographiae, The Extant Fragments*, p. 13, fn. 3. The year *Annus Mundi* for the first year of Augustus is given by the *Excerpta Barbari* as 5467. But inasmuch as Christ’s birth is set at 42 Augustus, AM 5500, the first regnal year of Augustus would correspond to the last quarter of AM 5458 (5500 - 42 = 5458). The date is therefore plainly corrupt and should be emended to AM 5458. “In the same Consulship Julius Caesar was killed and Octavian, who also is Augustus, took the kingdom for fifty-six years and received the consulship thirteen times. Verily, from Adam unto the beginning of the reign of Augustus there were 5467 [5458] years.”

³¹ *Ibid.*, T6, p. 13, fn. 3. Africanus numbers 60 years from the death of Cleopatra in 14 Augustus to the *Parousia* of Christ, which is often equated with Jesus’ resurrection (F89, 93) (14 + 60 = 74 / BC 29 + AD 31 = 60 yrs. reckoned exclusively). If, however, by *Parousia* Africanus meant Jesus’ public ministry, reckoned inclusively, this would point to AD 30, 16 Tiberius being the date twice actually given by Africanus for the *Parousia*, rather than 17 Tiberius which answers to AD 31 (F93; cf. T93b, c, d; F94). In either case, the resurrection would occur in 74 Augustus regardless of which meaning is attached to the “*Parousia*.”

fourth consulship from the first of Augustus (43 BC + AD 31 = 74 / AM 5532 -5458 = 74).³²

- Africanus set the crucifixion on Luna (Nisan) 13, AM 5531 (F93; T93b, c); the *Excerpta Barbari* places the crucifixion on March 25th. Hebrew date converters place Nisan (Luna) 13 on March 25th in AD 31.³³ The *Excerpta Barbari* and Africanus therefore agree. “*For the Hebrews celebrate the Passover on Luna 14, and what happened to the Savior occurred one day before the Passover*” (F93).

According to Martin Wallraff, editor of the standard edition of Africanus, where the *Excerpta Barbari* lists the names and dates of rulers recorded in synchronism with major events in sacred history, and these also correspond with the dating scheme of Africanus’ *Chronographiae*, “*there is a strong likelihood that the information derives from Africanus.*”³⁴ The table of consuls and corresponding events from sacred history fit this description perfectly. Moreover, we have identified *eight* points of correspondence between Africanus’ chronology and the *Excerpta Barbari*. The conclusion therefore seems unavoidable that Africanus is the ultimate author of the *Excerpta Latina Barbari*. At the least, the burden of proof must now shift to those that would deny this conclusion. Since that is not likely to be forthcoming, we may rest confident in our judgment of Africanus’ authorship.³⁵

³² For an overview of the dating scheme of Africanus as adopted herein, see Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Easter Computus and the Origin of the Christian Era* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 389-421, advocating the date AD 31 for the passion and resurrection *per* Africanus.

³³ <http://www.rosettacalendar.com>, accessed November 27, 2023.

³⁴ Julius Africanus, *Chronographiae, The Extant Fragments*, XXXVII.

³⁵ For a fuller discussion see, Kurt M Simmons, “Revisiting the Fathers, An Examination of the Christmas Date in Several Early Patristic Writers,” *Questions Liturgique* 98 (2017) 143-180.

Having established Africanus as the ultimate author of the *Excerpta Latina Barbari* and having noted that he placed the nativity December 25th and arrival of the Magi January 1st, the seventh day thereafter, it now remains only to notice that Africanus gives these dates in connection with the *Protevangelium Jacobi*. Immediately following mention of the Magi, Africanus describes the martyrdom of Zachariah, the Slaughter of the Innocents, and the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt in notes taken directly from the *Protevangelium*:

In these days under Augustus on the calends of January the Magi brought gifts and worshipped him. The Magi, however, were called Bithisarea, Melchior, and Gathaspar. Herod, hearing from the Magi that a king was born, was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And seeing that he was mocked by the Magi, he sent his murderers saying to them: slay all the male children two years old and under.

Herod, however, sought John and sent minsters before the altar to Zachariah, saying to him, where have you hidden your son? Are you ignorant that I have power to kill; your life-blood is in my hands? And Zachariah said, I am a witness of the living God. You can spill my blood, but God will receive my spirit. And Zachariah was slain under the altar.

However, Elizabeth recognizing that he sought John, took him and ascended into the mountain and sought where she might hide him, but found no place to conceal him. Then sighing, Elizabeth cried, saying, Mountain of God, receive me a mother with child. And immediately, the mountain was rent open and received her.

In those days they mourned Zachariah and wept for him three days and nights. And the Lord God raised up in place of Zachariah Simeon. He received an answer from an angel that he should not see death until he saw the Lord's Christ in the flesh. And seeing him said, Now let thy servant depart in peace, Lord, because my eyes have seen your, salvation that you have prepared before the face of all people, a light of revelation unto the gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.

Then Joseph received answer, that taking Jesus and Mary, fled to Egypt and was there twelve months, concerning which I must now be silent.

The martyrdom of Zachariah is connected with the arrival of the Magi and the Slaughter of the Innocents, which Africanus has taken directly from the *Protevangelium Jacobi*. In the *Protevangelium* the Magi arrive while the Holy Family is still in the cave where Jesus was born, before they found more suitable accommodations (*Prot.* 21). This comports with Africanus' report alleging the Magi arrived January 1st, the seventh day after Jesus' December 25th birth. The

question we must answer is whether Africanus found the Christmas date in the version he consulted, or did he super-add the dates to his notes? Unfortunately, there is no certain answer. As already noted, the fact that Origen and Gregory of Nyssa knew versions of the *Protevangelium* different than our own means that there may have been still others. The version attributed to Evodius apparently is one of these. Given his use of the Christmas date, it is possible Africanus was familiar with this very version. The same may be said of Gregory of Nyssa who also connected the *Protevangelium* with the Christmas date. On the other hand, if Africanus did not find the Christmas date in the *Protevangelium* and merely super-added the dates to his notes, this would still mean the dates were already current in church tradition and that he understood the *Protevangelium* as contemplating a winter birth, like Chrysostom, Ephrem Syrus, and others. In the end, all that can confidently be affirmed is that Africanus cites the Christmas date in connection with the *Protevangelium Jacobi* and that he considered it an integral part thereof.

The *Protevangelium* and the “Hundred Years of Silence”

In the preceding sections, we looked at the Christmas date as it appears in an epistle attributed to Evodius and excerpts from Julius Africanus, both cited in connection with the *Protevangelium Jacobi*. Here, we want to look at the historical setting that produced the *Protevangelium* and circumstances that may account for disappearance of the Christmas date.

With rare exception, the only season assigned for the nativity of Christ is early winter. Clement Alexandria cites several instances where other dates and seasons were proposed, including 24 and 25 Pharmuthi (April-May) and 25 Pachon (May-June) (*Stromata*, 2.21). However, these dates disappeared to history almost as soon as they were mentioned, having nothing to recommend them. Instead, the united voice of all the early fathers and of Christendom place the birth of Christ in early winter, either on December 25th or January 6th.

Following Africanus' *Chronographiae*, there is about one hundred years silence touching December 25th. Nicephorus mentions the martyrdom of several thousand Christians celebrating the nativity around AD 304 whom the emperor Diocletian ordered to be shut up in the church and burned alive.³⁶ Ancient Syrian menologies and Roman martyrologies give the date as December 25th, but it is celebrated December 28th in the Greek church;³⁷ Baronius put the date at the 25th.³⁸ It is difficult to know the accuracy of these dates. As they were written after the event, it is possible the then-accepted date of the nativity December 25th was used or supplied. At that particular time in that part of the world, January 6th seems more probable. Hence, we must pass over this reference as insecure. The next undisputed reference is not until the *Chronograph of AD 354*, an illuminated codex manuscript commissioned in AD 336, but updated in AD 354, in which we find the Christmas date at the head of the ecclesiastical year. We next encounter it in a sudden flourish of Christmas-day sermons including Optatus of Melevis (*circa* AD 361-363),³⁹ Gregory Nazianzus (AD 379),⁴⁰ Gregory of Nyssa (AD 386),⁴¹ and John Chrysostom (AD 387).⁴² Chrysostom asserts that observance of the date was then almost universal and was celebrated from "Thrace to Gades" ("Turkey to Spain"). It is during the one-hundred-year period from Africanus until the *Chronograph of AD 354* that January 6th attained ascendancy in the East.

³⁶ Nicephorus Callistus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 1.7.6.

³⁷ John Selden, *Theanthropos, or God Made Man: A Tract Proving the Nativity of our Savior to be on December 25th* (London, 1661), 34-35.

³⁸ Caesaris Baronii, *Tractatio de Martyrologio Romano*, (Rome 1586), pp. 342, 343.

³⁹ André Wilmart, « Un Sermon de saint Optat pour la fête de Noël, » *Revue de sciences religieuses* 2 (1922) : 271-302.

⁴⁰ Εἰς τὰ Θεοφάνια From Gregoire de Nazianze: Discours 38-41 (Introduction et texte critique par Claudio Moreschini, traduction par Paul Gallay). SC 358. Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1990: pp. 105-149.

⁴¹ Εἰς τὸ Γενέθλιον τοῦ Σωτῆρος from *Gregorii Nysseni Sermones Pars III* (Ed. Friedhelm Mann). *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* X, 2. NY: Brill, 1996: pp. 235-269.

⁴² Εἰς τὴν γενέθλιον ἡμέραν τοῦ Σωτος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. John Chrysostom. *Patrologia Graeca* 49:351-362.

January 6th occurs about as early as December 25th in the writings that have come down to us, perhaps a little earlier. We first encounter the date in Clement Alexandria about AD 200, where it occurs in connection with the followers of Basilides who kept vigil in commemoration of Christ's baptism the night preceding January 6th (11 Tubi). In the same passage, Clement gives the following date for the nativity:

From the birth of Christ, therefore, to the death of Commodus, are, in all, a hundred- and ninety-four-year years, one month, and thirteen days. *Stromata* 1.21

According to Roland Bainton, when reckoned in the so-called *Annus Vagus*, or “Wondering Year,” the Egyptian calendar which did not provide for leap years, one-hundred-ninety-four years of 365 days each, one month, and thirteen days works out to January 6th, 2 BC. Bainton went on also to conclude “that Epiphany as a Christian festival antedates the schisms and hence goes back to the beginning of the second century.”⁴³ These are the earliest references to January 6th we possess. The date is also given by Ephrem Syrus (AD 306-373),⁴⁴ Epiphanius (AD 315-403) and is the date the Jerusalem Church observed the Nativity until AD 548, when it was abandoned in favor of December 25th. Christmas is still observed January 6th in Armenia and Russia, and perhaps other Eastern Orthodox churches.

The fact that there were disagreements helps confirm the authenticity of the dates and that they were not imposed top-down by an ecclesiastical authority or appropriated from pagan sources but were an organic part of church tradition, sacred to the mind and memory of the church from

⁴³ Roland H. Bainton, “Basilidian Chronology and New Testament Interpretation,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1923), XLII, 103-105; cf. C. Philip E. Nothaft, ‘Early Christian Chronology and the Origins of the Christmas Date: In Defense of the “Calculation Theory,”’ 94 *Questions Liturgiques* (2013) 257; Thomas J. Talley, ‘Liturgical Time in the Ancient Church,’ in *Between Memory and Hope* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2000), 36-37.

⁴⁴ *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, translated by Kathleen E. McVey, (Paulist Press, 1989), Hymn 5, p. 107; Hymn 27, pp. 210-211.

the earliest times. Although January 6th overtook December 25th for a short while in the East, there remained a great deal of confusion about what it commemorated. Some associated it with the nativity; some with the arrival of the Magi; others the baptism of Christ; still others, the wedding at Cana and Jesus' first miracle. We gain a sense of the confusion from Epiphanius:

I have been obliged to prove this with many examples because of those do not believe that 'The Epiphany' is a good name for the fleshly birth of the Savior, who was born at the eighth hour and *manifested*, by the angels' testimony, to the shepherds and the world - but he was *manifested* to Mary and Joseph as well. And the star was *manifested* to the magi in the east at that hour, two years before their arrival at Jerusalem and Bethlehem, when Herod asked the magi the precise time of the star's manifestation, and they told him it was no more than two years before. And this very word gave the Epiphany its name, from Herod's saying, 'the *manifestation* of the star.'⁴⁵

We see in this passage that men hesitated about the feast of Epiphany and whether it in fact commemorated the birth of Christ. The name itself seemed wrong. It thus appears that men understood January 6th commemorated *something* early in the Gospel records, but there was a good deal of uncertainty precisely what. At the least, they doubted it commemorated the nativity. Although it became attached to the nativity for a time, in the end it could not withstand scrutiny and was forced to yield to the more-historically defensible date of December 25th.⁴⁶ Epiphany

⁴⁵ Epiphanius, "Panarion," ("Against the sect which does not accept the Gospel according to John, and his Revelation," 22.12), in *Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies*, vol. 79, pp. 52.

⁴⁶ We cannot explore this information here. Suffice it to say that if Jesus was on the threshold of his 30th birthday in autumn at his baptism (Luke 3:23) and forty days elapsed in the fast following, and his first disciples were made when he returned to John in Bethabara followed by his first miracle January 6th, he likely turned thirty sometime *after* his fast but *before* his return to John.

January 6th is best understood to commemorate Jesus' first miracle at the wedding in Cana sixty-odd days following Jesus' fall baptism (John 2:1-11).

Meanwhile, it was into this ferment that the *Protevangelium Jacobi* was introduced. Most scholars believe the document originated in Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, or even Palestine. However, whether the author lived in Palestine, Syria, Egypt or Asia Minor need not detain us, for by any account the *Protevangelium* grew up in the East where January 6th became the dominate date of the nativity in the course of the third century. It seems likely that it was during this period that the *Protevangelium* underwent editorial revision to correct the issues extant in the version attributed to Evodius, and that it was then that reference to the Christmas date dropped out to give the document wider reception in the East where January 6th was in the ascendancy. As a case in point, there is considerable evidence that part of Ephrem Syrus' belief about the nativity was shaped and informed by the *Protevangelium Jacobi*, similar to Africanus. For example, Ephrem places the nativity in a cave and causes the Magi arrive while the babe lies in a manger, calls Simeon "High Priest," and refers to Mary's hymen as the "seal" and evidence of her virginity.

Womankind possessed the evidence of virginity / because of You, to affirm that Yours /
was a holy conception. Within the seals / dwelt Your purity. The seal refutes / one who
falsely claims that Your mother made false pretenses.⁴⁷

Since no one could know whether Mary retained her hymen *post partem*, this likely refers to Salome's examination of Mary in the *Protevangelium* after the birth of Christ (*Prot.* 20). If so,

⁴⁷ Hymn 12 in *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, translated by Kathleen E. McVey, (Paulist Press, 1989), p. 134; *cf.* Hymn 13, p. 138, Hymn 17, p. 154, Hymn 19, p. 168; Hymn 21, p. 178; Hymn 22, pp. 183-4; Hymn 23, p. 189; Hymn 25, p. 203.

and since Ephrem held to the January 6th birth of Christ, the advantage of redacting the Christmas date for wider reception of the *Protevangelium* in the East seems apparent. The editorial marks left from re-writing the story seem fairly evident, particularly Joseph's four-and-a-half-year absence, which is impossible to believe was part of the original story and is almost certainly the result of lowering Mary's age from fourteen to twelve and extending the period of her betrothal until the annunciation to four years. There is no way we can be sure, but this fits the historical situation relative to the competing dates of the nativity and the apparent timeline for the emendation of the story. If so, what entered the 'hundred years of silence' looking like the versions ostensibly known to Africanus and Evodius came out of the other end looking like the Papyrus Bodmer 5. Or so the evidence suggests and permits us to argue.

Conclusion

Julius Africanus' ultimate authorship of the *Excerpta Latina* and the occurrence of the Christmas date in the late second- early third centuries seem beyond successful contradiction. That the *Protevangelium Jacobi* originally contemplated the early winter birth of the Savior also seems certain and was so understood by many early patristic writers, some of whom have been cited here. Whether the Christmas date was expressly attached to the *Protevangelium Jacobi* is less certain and turns upon the provenance of the material attributed to Evodius, and whether Africanus, and perhaps Gregory of Nyssa, found the date in copies of the *Protevangelium* they consulted, or provided the date themselves. Unfortunately, a definitive answer to these questions is elusive. Apparent editorial revisions of the version we presently possess suggest the Christmas date did, in fact, appear. If so, it was likely suppressed in response to the ascendancy of January 6th in the east in the course of the third century. Greater certainly must await further research and discussion.