

**“Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion” presented by
Stephen Shoemaker, 1/31/17
Transcript**

[00:00:01]

>> Well good evening everybody and welcome. My name is Karen Eifler and together with Father Charlie Gordon, we run the Garaventa Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American Culture here at the university. And I think there are a lot of friends of Stephen Shoemaker here tonight. And this might be your first visit to the University of Portland so we're really happy that you're here.

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I think if anyone wants to break down and sit in the front row, we still have some seats available, alright, there's no audience participation planned for tonight if you're feeling nervous about getting asked a tough question or something like that. We have some special guests with us tonight in addition to our speaker.

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We are delighted to welcome our provost, Dr. Tom Greene over there. And Barbara and John Adams who are celebrating their 47th wedding anniversary. What better way to celebrate.

>> [APPLAUSE]

>> If you live in the area and get in to the University of Portland, it's something that you could do and you love what you see here tonight and I'm pretty sure that you will, I want to make sure that you know on your way out we have a very full calendar lined up for this spring.

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We've got The Simpsons and Theology. We've got Why Aren't Comics Funny Anymore? We've got panels for every play that's going on. We have Hiding in Plain Sight -- the art of turbans and hoodies and head covers from the Renaissance to the present. That's going to be pretty amazing, and a whole lot of other things.

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I always think whatever the event that we're just about to launch is coming up, is the best one that we have. So tonight is the very best thing that we have coming up in the next 24 hours.

>> [LAUGH]

>> And so I'm really glad that you're here for that.

[00:01:55]

Make sure that you grab a calendar. If you'd like to be part of our mailing list, that keeps you on top of the fast breaking Garaventa Center events. We send out a newsletter once a month, and it also connects you to our weekly podcast series, in which Father Charlie provides a terrific four and a half minute reflection on the Sunday readings.

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And we also turn most of our presentations into podcasts. So if you wanted to relisten to this on the treadmill or something like that, that's also part of being part of our electronic mailing list. If you're a student here as part of a class, you'll get a chance to sign that sheet on your way out.

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And if you are a K-12 teacher in any school system we have a partnership with our school of ed that allows us to offer you at no cost to you professional development units. And all you need to do is sign up for that on your way out. And they will be in your inbox by the end of the day tomorrow, okay?

[00:02:58]

Is that all for announcements?

>> Absolutely.

>> Okay, well thank you again for being here tonight. And I know that you're in for a treat. Dr. Steven Shoemaker travelled all the way from Eugene to be with us tonight. In the teaching part of his life, he's a professor of religious studies at the University of Oregon where he makes the earliest days of Christianity and Islam come alive from his students.

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And he can do that because those far away days are part of the many languages that he reads, and writes, and speaks. Syriac, Latin, Coptic, and Arabic, just to name a few. In the research part of his life, grants and fellowships from Harvard, from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Guggenheim Foundation, among many, have taken Dr. Shoemaker all over the world to pour over ancient manuscripts.

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And often, it's his translations that make the future work of other biblical scholars possible. He is in great demand as an invited speaker at places like Tübingen, Germany, Cambridge, England, Vienna, Austria, and we are delighted to add the Garaventa Center at the University of Portland to that August list.

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Of places that Dr. Shoemaker has shared the fruits of his capacious mind and relentlessly curious spirit. So please join me in welcoming Dr. Shoemaker for presentation on Mary in early Christian faith and devotion.

[APPLAUSE].

[APPLAUSE]

>> Thank you very much for that more than generous introduction of me.

[00:04:47]

Well I hope you haven't hyped me too much. It is a great time, really excited about this turn out, although I don't think I know most of you.

>> [LAUGH]

>> I think it's just [INAUDIBLE] blessed virgin Mary sells for itself. Who doesn't wanna learn more about the virgin Mary.

[00:05:08]

I'm so glad you chose this icon. This is an icon that I saw in Tbilisi. Russell, my partner, and I were traveling and we were struck by it. It was too expensive for us, of course. I've never seen this, the virgin with the grapes like this, ever, and I don't know what to make of it.

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And then, the child with the grape leaf. I've never seen anything like this. I just love it, actually. I think it's so neat. But anyway, what an extra treat that I didn't know you guys would get from this slide into and thanks for arranging this Karen, Charlie. It's really my pleasure to be here.

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It's always nice to be in Portland, but remember it's more important to be nice.

>> [LAUGH] [SOUND]

>> Pilots said that once on a flight to Portland, can't claim originality. Okay. I'm gonna talk to you tonight about the history of early Mary piety. This was something that it surprised me to learn, that it hadn't really been done yet.

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There have been a lot of studies with Mary, especially a lot of work on Mary and Christian thought. I think you'll see, as I get into this pretty quickly, we really haven't investigated. Although now, now hopefully we

have. I've written a book about this. And I hope it's just the first of many books that people will be writing about devotion to Mary in the early Christian centuries.

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There is a strangely overlooked topic and some of what I want to talk about is why I think that has been the case. What are some of the problems understanding the early history of the cult or veneration of the Virgin Mary? And just what is some of the evidence that we have for the earliest Christian devotion to Mary and veneration of Mary.

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So let's go. It is rather remarkable, I think, that even at this late date, there is still very little satisfactory study of the development of Mary and piety in ancient Christianity. In view of the considerable importance, the devotion to the virgin Mary has held over the course of Christian history, one might expect that by now, there would be a number of monographs on this topic.

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But as others have noted before me, part of the comprehensive study remains or remained lacking. This absence became quite clear to me some 20 years ago as I began research for my first book on the ancient traditions of Mary's dormition and assumption, that is the traditions about the end of her life.

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In sitting out I simply assumed that the origins of Mary and piety would already be well mapped onto the history of early Christianity. And I still recall my astonishment. One specialist in early Byzantine piety suggested that I might find, in these early Dormition and assumption traditions, the origins of Marian intercession.

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Such a matter had surely been long settled, I naively thought. Yet, despite the existence of a number of fine articles, and even several monographs on specific aspects of devotion to Mary in late antiquity, there was then, and hopefully not any longer now that I published this book, an adequate treatment of Marian piety's emergence within the history of early Christianity.

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Of course, there has been much previous investigation of Marian doctrine during the early Christian period. But such studies generally pay scant attention to the emergence of Marian devotion and cult, preferring instead to focus on Mary's position in the development of Christian dogma. And, likewise, there has been a significant amount of Roman Catholic scholarship on Mary and early Christianity, much of it coming toward the end of the so-called Marian century of 1850 to 1950.

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Nevertheless, these works often show a strong tendency toward dogmatic readings of the evidence that seek to align early Christian history with modern Roman Catholic doctrine. And occasionally they're overly optimistic about how quickly veneration of the Virgin took hold within ancient Christianity. While such perspectives have obvious value in a Roman Catholic context, they have limited use for understanding the historical development of early Christianity and Mary's place therein.

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Accordingly, it would appear that the history of early Marian piety is largely unwritten. I wish that I could promise that I have now been able to dispel the fog that has been surrounding the origins of devotion to the Virgin. But, unfortunately, the limitations of our evidence, in fact, precludes such an outcome.

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No doubt, this problem of the evidence is largely to blame for the relative neglect of this subject. Instead, what I hope to offer in my new study is an approach to this topic that contributes to a better understanding, a basic understanding, of how Mary emerged as a focus of Christian devotion.

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There is certainly much more to be said about Mary's role in early Christianity than I can cover in my talk today or even in my recent book. And no doubt additional sources relevant to early Marian piety will continue to emerge. But one of the main goals of this project has been to assemble the scattered and often overlooked evidence for early Marian piety from the very beginnings of Christianity up through, and including, the events of the Council of Ephesus, the third ecumenical council where, in 431, Mary was famously proclaimed as the Theotokos, that is, one who gave birth to God.

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Nevertheless, since there is virtually no evidence of any devotion to Mary prior to 150, or for that matter to any other figure besides Jesus, the practical matter that I'm really looking at here is the period from the latter half of the second century to the first half of the fifth.

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The reasons for selecting such a chronological window are fairly obvious. The Council of Ephesus is widely recognized as a watershed event in the history of Marian piety. In fact, explosion of devotion to the Virgin that took place in the aftermath of this council was so significant that much previous scholarship has credited the council, itself, and its decisions with giving rise to the cult of the Virgin almost single-handedly.

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It is now increasingly clear, however, that devotion to the Virgin, and even her cultic veneration, had begun well before the Council of Ephesus had even convened. And there is significant evidence that the controversies of this Third Council were themselves fueled, at least partly, by an already vibrant devotion to the Virgin Mary that established itself in Constantinople, and elsewhere, in the Roman Empire.

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So while the Christological views of a certain Nestorius, which were the main focus of this ecumenical council, were certainly upsetting to his more learned theological opponents, it was Nestorius' refusal to call Mary, Theotokos, the God bearer, that seems to have turned the tide of popular opinion against him.

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Although questions will remain as to just how much Marian piety may have determined the debates of this council and their outcome, there can be little question that wide spread devotion to the Virgin played an important role in the broader conversation. However one might estimate the relation between Marian piety and the events of the Council of Ephesus, there can be no mistaking that, in the Council's aftermath, devotion to the Virgin intensified considerably and spread widely.

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As one scholar aptly observes during the middle of the fifth century, I quote here, the figure of Mary emerged like a comet in Christian devotion and liturgical celebration throughout the world. Scholars of early Christianity have long struggled to comprehend this dramatic explosion of Marian piety after Ephesus, particularly in light of the apparent paucity of evidence for devotion to the Virgin from previous centuries.

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It is, in fact, true that most Christian sources from the first four centuries have surprisingly little to say about Mary. Early orthodox writers enlist her motherhood of Jesus as a guarantee of his humanity, her virginal conception as a sign of his exalted status. Her obedience at the annunciation rectifies the disobedience of Eve, making Mary a new Eve for the new Adam.

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And her persistence in virginity is a model for other virgins. There is, however, beyond this little interest in Mary in her own right, and almost no evidence of Marian cult before the middle of the fourth century. Such relative silence is indeed difficult to reconcile with the thriving Marian piety that we suddenly find in the fifth century, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean world.

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Nevertheless, despite the limitations of the evidence and the convictions of much earlier scholarship, the notion that the abstruse theological debates over Nestorius' Christology at the Third Council, the Council of Ephesus, could somehow have generated the cult of the Virgin with such apparent velocity seems, frankly, rather preposterous. And just to put a bow on this one, I'm saying here scholars time and again said no one prayed to Mary until there was this big, ecumenical council in 431.

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And then all of a sudden they're like, Mary, she's really cool, we should pray to her, right. What I'm saying to you is no. That's not the case, that's ridiculous. How could we ever have thought that? While the Council's outcome and its proclamation of Mary as Theotokos obviously catalyzed the growth and spread of Marian cult, there can be little question that the veneration of Mary had already begun to establish itself before the events of Ephesus.

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The difficulty, however, lies in finding clear evidence of devotion to Mary during the first four centuries that can offer meaningful precedent capable of explaining the eruption of Marian piety that took place in the middle of the fifth century. And although such evidence is surprisingly scarce, given Mary's prominence in the later Christian tradition, it is nonetheless sufficient to sketch a history of early Christian devotion to Mary.

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There are, in fact, many traces of an incipient Marian piety from the pre-Ephesian period before 431, a number of which by now are well known. But these are scattered and often faint. Making it difficult to judge their overall significance as a witness to emergent devotion to the Virgin.

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One of the most famous of these is a text called the Protoevangelium of James, right? Literally, the proto-Gospel of James. A very poorly-named text actually, because what this is, in fact, is a late second century biography of Mary. That tells the story of her youth, it's not about Jesus, it's about Mary.

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It tells the story of her youth, from her own conception through the Nativity of Christ. The Protoevangelium reveals a surprisingly developed interest in Mary as a significant figure in her own right. As well as early devotion to her unique holiness, although to be clear, there is admittedly no evidence of any cultic veneration there, no prayer to Mary.

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Nevertheless, the remarkably advanced Marian piety of the Protoevangelium stands at a considerable distance from the widespread devotion that would follow in the fifth century. And it is not, and is still not, I would say, entirely clear what happened in between. As other scholars have noted, the Protoevangelium's great reverence for the virgin seems so isolated within its immediate historical context.

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And it needs to be better connected to the emergence of Mary's cult in late antiquity. And this, in essence, is what I have aimed to achieve in the recent book. Bridging the piety of the Protoevangelium with the veneration of the fifth and later centuries, through the Marian traditions of the second, third, and fourth centuries.

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>> [COUGH]

>> [INAUDIBLE] In order to accomplish this, it's necessary to examine a wide range of sources, including a number of long overlooked and recently discovered texts, as well as more familiar witnesses to early Marian piety, such as this Protoevangelium. In particular, the apocryphal literature of early Christianity, that is, its extracanonical gospels and other related extra-biblical texts, offers a significant, but largely neglected, witness to early Christian interest in Mary.

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These extra biblical-writings, and especially the early Dormition and Assumption apocrypha, that is, this text telling the end of Mary's life, present much clearer evidence of devotion to the Virgin that one finds, for instance, in the writings of the so-called church fathers. Indeed, it would appear that a focus largely on patristic sources, on the church fathers, is at least partly responsible for leading earlier scholars to the conclusion that Marian veneration was largely unknown in the early church.

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For whatever reason, Marian piety seems to register more clearly in apocryphal, and also liturgical, texts than it does in theological or moral treatises. Why it is more visible in these contexts than in the writings of the early Christian intellectuals and bishops that we name the fathers, admittedly, is not entirely clear.

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Yet this evidence of early devotion, from the apocryphal writings in particular, could seem to suggest that Marian piety first developed in milieu outside the purview of the, quote unquote, orthodox church authorities, in heterodox and in other theologically marginal communities. The sharply heterodox, unorthodox, context of some of these texts could seem to affirm such an hypothesis.

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And I'm just saying this is one hypothesis. And occasionally, these sources reveal understandings of Mary decidedly different from those related by the church fathers. Some early Christians, for instance, remembered the Virgin Mary as a learned teacher of the divine mysteries. In any case, as you will see, these texts afford clear evidence that Marian veneration had, indeed, come into existence already, by the fourth century at the latest.

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Even if the church fathers in the main seemed to have kept their silence from, kept their distance from this practice, sorry, prior to the fifth century. Scholarly response to the sparse state of our evidence for devotion to Mary during the early centuries has varied a great deal. Although generally, it has fallen in one of two directions, usually according to confessional orientation.

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Such sectarian divide certainly comes as no great surprise. Particularly given Mary's often volatile status in the history of Protestant and Catholic debate, where her veneration has long posed one of the major theological boundaries dividing these Christian communities. And despite the convergence of much Catholic, Protestant, and secular scholarship on Christian origins over the past several decades, as Beverly Roberts Gaventa observes, and I quote her, the differences between Catholic and Protestant perspectives on Mary remains significant in the scholarship.

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Although it hesitates to generalize about something as diverse as modern Roman Catholicism, there has been a tendency in much Catholic scholarship, as I've noted already, to maximize the somewhat limited evidence

for early Marian piety. One of the most common solutions to this problem is to find ways of reading modern mereological dogmas back into the writings of the New Testament and the early church fathers.

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Such an approach finds passages from early Christian literature that seem reminiscent of modern Catholic doctrines. And despite the clear absence of such beliefs from early Christian literature, when read on its own terms, the obvious contextual difficulties of such readings on this basis, it has often been alleged, that the Marian dogmas of modern Catholicism also belonged to the ancient church.

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While such an interpretive move is entirely appropriate, I would suggest, within the context of Catholic dogmatics, where confidence in the eternal truth that the church is teaching, effectively requires such readings of the early evidence. These ultimately apologetic exercises fail to shed any actual historical light on the emergence of Marian piety in early Christianity.

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On the Protestant side, other than general neglect, the tendency has been to emphasize the dearth of evidence and on this basis, to refuse the existence of any significant devotion to the Virgin prior to the middle of the fifth century. The Council of Ephesus, as I've said, is, in this case, often adduced as the sole and sufficient cause for what amounts to an essentially medieval cult of Mary.

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In this way, the early church could be made into a largely Mary-free zone, well suited to Protestantism's rejection of the elaborate and intense devotion to Mary, that characterises its parent faith. Recent decades, it is true, have seen some renewed Protestant interest in Mary, no doubt much of it inspired by broader academic and theological concerns with women's history and gender.

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Nevertheless, by and large, such studies have tended to focus primarily on the exegesis of Mary's appearances in the New Testament, as one might expect, rather than on Marian doctrine or veneration. It is also worth noting that this narrative of Mary's relatively late arrival on the scene also appears in a kinda, what I would call, post-Protestant guise in certain more secular accounts that take a similar approach.

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And unfortunately, in these contexts, as well as in much earlier Protestant scholarship, a sort of anti-Catholicism can sometimes stand fairly close to the surface. Of these accounts about Mary. Not surprisingly, these confessional dynamics have done little to foster any critical study of early Marian piety. Happily, however, it would appear that this gap is beginning to narrow.

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As many mainline Protestant theologians have begun to grapple with the fact that their acceptance of the first four Ecumenical Councils includes Ephesus. And makes Marian devotion somewhat difficult to ignore completely, while Catholic scholarship has shown an increasing willingness, willingness, to embrace historical critical scholarship. Particularly since the second Vatican council, yet the fact remains that outside of Catholic circles, little consideration has been given, so far, to the possibility that Christians may have begun significant betteration of the virgin prior to the council of Ephesus.

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And likewise, much, but certainly not all of the earlier work by Catholic scholars has been essentially apologetic or dogmatic in nature and has a limited historical value. [COUGH] And so it would seem, that in many respects, the investigation of the early development of Marian piety has only just begun.

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And, above all, it will now be essential to look back beyond the events of the Council of Ephesus in order to discover its roots. No less problematic in the study of early Marian piety, has been a persistent urge to discover an explanation for early Marian veneration. That locates its genesis primarily in some larger cultural influence extraneous to the Christian tradition.

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In this respect, much current scholarship on the origins of Marian devotion suffers, in my opinion, from a crisis of both over explanation and insufficient understanding. Numerous studies have been published that would purport to explain Christian devotion to Mary as a result of some foreign impulse that intruded the Christian faith.

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Or else has something fully comprehensible only in light of some modern intellectual discourse that reveals a peculiar logic underlying this reverence for Mary. Indeed, it works taking such an approach are often among those most cited by non-specialists, particularly because they appear to operate outside of the confessional interests that govern other more theologically oriented works.

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Nevertheless, it's hard not to see such approaches as a kind of extension of the more validly protestant view of Marian cult, as something grafted onto the Christian tradition only rather late in the game. As a result, Marian piety is effectively made out to be something so exotic, so discordant with the fabric of the Christian faith, that external influences must be identified in order to comprehend its very existence.

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Whether it be ancient goddess tradition, psychoanalysis, the eternal feminine, or the anthropology of sacrifice in one case. Something else must explain why and how the early Christians turn to Mary in prayer and devotion. To be sure, there is nothing inherently wrong with such perspectives in their own right.

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All are immensely valuable for understanding the many facets of Marian devotion and its origins. Feminist critiques of Mary's overwhelmingly patriarchal representation are particularly needful and welcome. But the problem here is, as a good friend of mine, Nina Maripeltimaya observes, this abundance of explanation has in fact prevented us from recognizing that we actually lack historical reconstruction of the rise of the cult of the virgin.

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So much emphasis on discovering the skeleton key that unlocks the mystery of Christian devotion to Mary has left us without an account of early Marian piety. Describes how the basic principles underlying these influential beliefs and practices actually arose from a logic native to the Christian tradition itself. Instead devotion to the Virgin is presented as something largely anomalous to the Christian tradition, a historical oddity that requires some sort of dramatic explanation towards Genesis.

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By comparison, for instance, it is hard to imagine a similar urgency being given to discovering why so many early Christians were devoted to St. Becla or St. Mary of Magdala. Something peculiar seems to be at work in many of these approaches to the development of Marian piety. Of all of these different options the goddess explanation has certainly proven to be the most popular.

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And so perhaps it warrants some direct attention. On the one hand there is no denying that Mary's representation and veneration had been deeply colored by the influence of earlier traditions derived from the worship or various goddesses in the ancient Mediterranean world. Yet on the other hand these similarities are

often superficial in nature and they frequently can distract from more fundamental differences at both the conceptual and practical levels.

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As is also true more broadly in the early Christian call to the saints. It is a profound mistake to imagine that such parallels should somehow explain the origins of the Cult of Mary and likewise reveal it as something exogenous to the Christian tradition. The simple truth of the matter is that a great deal of traditional Christian faith and practice reflects earlier precedents from the Greco-Roman world.

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Not only in the case of veneration of saints more generally, but in other areas as well, such as The Eucharist or the celebration of Christmas, right? So much of early Christian culture was deeply imprint by Hellenistic precedence that one must wonder why the influence of goddess traditions on Marian piety should somehow be singled out as it often as it has been.

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And as scholars have increasingly come to recognize this Christian Pagan dichotomy that underlies these kinds of explanations is largely a false one in Late Antiquity. Furthermore, scholars of Late Antiquity have recently drawn attention to the fact that such appeals to the Pagan origin of certain Christian beliefs and practices.

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And particularly the veneration of saints derived largely, in actuality, from Protestant invectives against Roman Catholicism or from enlightenment critiques of vulgar, right, common, popular religious practices. Of course such misuse does not mean that the comparative history of religions should be abandoned for front. But rather we must instead be aware that this approach is not always ideologically neutral and may reflect different sorts of inherent bias.

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And in the case of early Marian piety it is often hard to miss such undertones. Protestant writers have often emphasized the influence of ancient goddess traditions. In order to make Marian devotion appear as something alien to the Christian tradition. Frame the rise of Marian cult in terms of her gradual deification rather than instead as a fairly ordinary development of an late ancient Christian piety.

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So while parallels between ancient goddess traditions and early Marian piety of course remain significant, for the historian of religion. They try and explain the emergence of Christian devotion to Mary. And likewise should not be allowed to control its interpretation in a way that one finds in much previous scholarship.

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Instead, one is inclined to agree with Averil Cameron, who I think is, I wanna mention her a little bit later. Because I think this is the greatest scholar of Late Antiquity and is one of my heroes. She rightly concludes of Marian veneration, and I quote her, no religious development of such importance can be explained in simple or monocausal terms.

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Pagan syncretism may have played a part, but in my view it was a minor one. Competition would be a better model, unquote. So, rather than looking for some external cause or explanation, i propose that what we need to do is seek to understand the origins of marion piety.

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Primarily on terms taken from within the Christian tradition itself. Devotion to Mary is in fact a product of early Christian culture that grew naturally out of its concerns with Christology and virginity. And most

especially, the practice of venerating the Saints. There is simply no need to find some sort of outside influence, that is responsible for Christian veneration of the Virgin Mary.

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It was implicit in the patterns of early Christian discourse. Of course there is again no question that precedence from ancient Mediterranean goddess traditions, and insights from modern social sciences can offer us important perspectives for studying the history of Marian devotion. Yet at the same time, it seems absolutely essential to understand Christian veneration of Mary as something arising from within the Christian tradition itself.

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The cult to the Virgin must have had powerful resonance with other central elements of early Christian discourse and practice for it to have achieved the remarkable success that it did. And this became most evident, as we begin to situate the emergence of devotion to Mary within the broader context of the emergent Christian devotion to the Saints.

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For that is how the cult of the virgin should be primarily be understood in early Christianity. Simply one variation, albeit a remarkable one of the nascent cult of the saints. Of course Mary quickly emerged, even in this early period, as a Saint whose petitions and influence with her son surpassed that of other potential advocates.

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Likewise, we can see that already in late antiquity, the Virgin had begun to acquire some of the accolades and attributes, that would ultimately lead to her elevation above the rest of the company of the Saints as a sort of super Saint, especially in the late medieval modern west.

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Indeed in these later periods, Mary sometimes came to be regarded as almost super human. It was elevated dangerously close to an equal footing with her son. Never the less, I will not attempt to account for these more recent developments in the medieval and modern western traditions, since these elements are largely foreign to Mary's generation in late antiquity and this is an area where one can consult any number of fine studies on medieval and early modern piety.

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Yet at the same time, it would appear that this exaltation of Mary in later centuries in the Christian west is at least partly responsible for some of the overdetermined explanations of Mary and piety that I previously mentioned. Focus on these later developments has occasionally distorted scholarly perception. Of early Marian piety and thereby inspired the search for a more dramatic cause for her cult.

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And while the near of Marian some quarters of the Roman Catholic tradition may warrant the identification of some extraordinary catalyst. Although, I remain skeptical of this as well, such later developments need not concern us as we try to understand the beginning of early Christian devotion to Mary. Instead, we need to dial things back a bit from the Medieval Mary in order to better understand her role in ancient Christian faith and practice.

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And at this early stage she was effectively a Saint among other Saints. Who was revered for her exceptional purity and holiness as well as her intimacy with her son. A more modest status, she retains more or less in much of the Christian east up until the present day.

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So my hero, the English scholar [INAUDIBLE] was singularly the first to propose that the Mary veneration are best understood when placed in this broader context of the emerging Cult of the Saints, right, and so much work I've done is inspired by earlier work she did. Yet at the same time, she, take specific, one example, has rather recently maintained, I quote, Only after the council of Ephesus and the recognition of her title as [INAUDIBLE] the God there, in AD 431, do we find the real development of the cult of the virgin, which was to find expression in the sixth century now, even later, it was sixth century.

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In popular, so in particular, in the establishment of a Mary of Peace and stories of her appearances and of miracles performed by her only in the 6th century, right. This is really pushing things in the Middle Ages. Cameron also, frequently remarks in her many publications on early devotion to Mary, That the cult of the Virgin developed much more slowly than did the cult of many other early Saints.

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And here she usually cites the cult of Saint Thecla, a missionary apostle of Saint Paul. If you've never read the acts of Paul and Thecla go home and do it tonight. It's a really amazing story, acts of Paul and Thecla. Find it on the Google. Usually citing the cult of Saint Thecla as a main point of reference.

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Her argument is that Mary's cult develops much more slowly than Thecla's. And in many respects Thecla presents an ideal figure for such a comparison. Although Cameron goes a bit far I think, in suggesting that Thecla was, in fact, more popular and influential, in early Christianity, than the virgin Mary.

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It seems safe to say that this missionary companion of Paul, was the only female figure in early Christianity whose popularity could possibly rival that of Jesus' mother. Nevertheless, as we will see, the evidence for early devotion to Mary actually compares quite favorably for that, of that love, and in many cases, it is the much better.

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So in making a case for the priority of feckless cult, Professor Cameron points especially to the famous itinerary of an early Christian Pilgrim to the Holy Land. It's from the earliest pilgrimage accounts we have. A pilgrim named Egeria, who visited the Holy Land in 384 and on her way she visits a shrine of Saint Thecla.

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On the southern coast of Turkey. There it was, according to this late second century Acts of Paul and Thecla, that she completed her life. So we have a shrine for Thecla. Furthermore, Cameron notes that Thecla's depiction in visual art and pilgrimage souvenirs, as well as the existence in the 5th century of a life and miracles collection of Thecla offered clear indication for an early active cult.

[00:38:50]

By contrast, Cameron posits, and I quote her again, in the case of the virgin, the kind of evidence that is plentiful for the cult of Thecla from the 4th and 5th centuries tends not to be found until the late six, not even to the late six, and seven centuries roughly 200 years later.

[00:39:09]

Now despite this frequent assertion of Mary in veneration's tardy arrival and part of why I and Cameron speak, it's because this is something that's been sighted over and over again. In fact, it was much earlier than there, and it's just not true. It's just not true. The truth of the matter is that on the whole, the earliest evidence for the cult of the Virgin is not significantly later, particularly if one looks beyond the environment of the imperial capitol, the city of Constantinople.

[00:39:34]

And this is one of the things that steers I think Cameron down a blind alley here. As has long been well known, the earliest shrine set of origin were established not in the Constantinople, but in the Jerusalem area already in the first decade of the 5th century and perhaps probably be even earlier than the beginning of the 5th century.

[00:39:56]

Admittedly this is some 40 years After we first learned of shrine in. But one certainly has to wonder, are several decades really evidence that Mary's cult was laid unseen? Or is this difference merely a matter of serendipity? Specialists on the Jerusalem liturgies would tend to suggest indeed the latter, and that the shrines in Jerusalem are older.

[00:40:18]

And several scholars have proposed that in all probability, both the shrines, and the annual feast of Mary commemorated in them, go back at least into the later fourth century. And not only that, but around the same time that we find the first clear evidence for these Jerusalem tribes, the early 5th century, the Church of Santa Maria Nigori was just being finished in Rome.

[00:40:41]

Even as this 3rd ecumenical council I've mentioned meeting at 431 in Ephesus, convened in a church dedicated to The Virgin Mary. In terms of literary production, the Protoevangelium of James certainly offers a worthy rival to Thecla's Acts of Paul and Thecla. And judging from this basis, the Christians of the later second century seemed to have held at least as much interest in the mother of Jesus as in this companion of Paul.

[00:41:09]

And Mary certainly can best Thecla in this arena as we move into later centuries. An account of Mary's life and miracles can easily be dated to the fourth century, at least a century before we find the life and miracles of Thecla. And in all probability another similar Marian narrative dates to the third century, if not even earlier.

[00:41:34]

Moreover both of these early Marian texts bear witness now to the practice of intercessory prayer to the virgin, not just seen for her purity, intercessory prayer to the virgin. And the fourth century narrative in particular reveals a highly developed cult of the virgin with three annual feasts celebrated in her honor.

[00:41:57]

These two writings, the writings in question, are the earliest surviving accounts of the end of Mary's life, her dormition and assumption. Although these texts have been largely ignored by scholars of early Christianity until the present, it is no exaggeration to say that they are equal in importance to the Protoevangelium of James for understanding Mary's significance in the early Christian tradition and the rise of her cult.

[00:42:23]

The first of these two early Marian narratives is a work often known in the scholarly literature by its Latin title, the *Liber Requiei Mariae*. The Book of Mary's Repose is how it translates, which is the title that I'll use. This entire work survives only in a translation into classical Ethiopic.

[00:42:45]

And it's a translation that seems to have been made sometime during late antiquity, probably not long after the conversion of the Ethiopians. Did you know that? Georginians, Ethiopians, quite interesting. But there's also some significant fragments of this text that survived in other languages as well, notably Syrian and old Georgian.

[00:43:05]

No doubt, this apocryphon, this text preservation in these lesser known languages is at least partly responsible for the fact that he's been so long overlooked. The Greek original that underlies these translations, the Greek original of the book of Mary's Repose dates, most likely, to the third century. Although it's possible that it is even earlier.

[00:43:27]

In comparison with the Protevangelium, this apocryphon, The Book of Mary's Repose, is less obsessed with Mary's purity and holiness. Those are the themes of the Protevangelium. Here instead we find Mary as a much more active figure who possesses superior understanding of the Christian faith. And is revered for it by the apostles and other members of the Christian community.

[00:43:51]

The story itself, which relates Mary's glorious departure from this world and miraculous transfer of her body to Paradise, is unmistakably designed to highlight Mary's uniquely exalted status among the followers of Christ. Yet the text is also strikingly heterodox, again, unorthodox, in sharp contrast to the stalwartly orthodox Protoevangelium of James.

[00:44:13]

In the Book of Mary's Repose, Jesus is identified as a manifestation, not of the second person of the Trinity, but instead the great cherub of light. And the text is riddled with concepts and vocabulary that would be more at home in a Gnostic Christian text. Indeed the theological peculiarities of this ancient Christian writing alone should warrant broader consideration within the study of early Christianity than it has yet received.

[00:44:40]

But perhaps most noteworthy for our purposes is the evidence that the Book of Mary's Repose provides for nascent Marian veneration already by the third century it would seem. Particularly in its conclusion as Mary tours the places of the damned along side of the apostles, the power of her intercessions on behalf of sinners is made known.

[00:45:03]

For this reason some scholars had proposed that the traditions of Mary's dormition and assumption may have emerged even already in the second century. In order to add validation of what they believed was an existing practice of intercession to the Virgin already then. This is an intriguing hypothesis, but I haven't found evidence yet that will let me concur with that hypothesis.

[00:45:27]

It is, nonetheless, worth noting that this earliest evidence for veneration of Mary, of prayer to Mary, appears to come from a theological milieu that is markedly heterodox. And this is something that could suggest the hypothesis I suggested earlier. That the cult of the virgin may have had its origins somewhere outside of the Orthodox streams of early Christianity.

[00:45:52]

And this too, this would make sense of why the church fathers are so silent. Right, because it's something going on among different communities of Christians that aren't orthodox. This is just a hypothesis, I don't know, [INAUDIBLE]. The second of these two important early dormition narratives, turning to the second text.

[00:46:11]

This is a work known as the Six Books Dormition Apocryphon. So called on account of its division into six separate books. Although this text is best preserved in several Cypriot manuscripts from the fifth and sixth centuries. Manuscripts are from the fifth and sixth centuries. The Greek original and its traditions date almost certainly to the middle of the fourth century, if not perhaps even earlier.

[00:46:36]

This much is indicated especially by their apparent connection with a group of fourth century Christian quote unquote heretics that we know of otherwise known as the Coloridians. Whom a certain church father, Epiphanius, condemned for excessive devotion to the virgin Mary. Yet most significantly, the Six Books Dormition Apocryphon provides compelling evidence for an early cult of the Virgin nearly a century before the council of Ephesus.

[00:47:04]

It reveals a remarkably advanced level of Marian veneration. Including, in addition to frequent intercessory prayers offered to the Virgin, now we have an organised cult, with annual feasts, miracles ascribed to the Virgin and even Marian apparitions by the middle of the fourth century. Judging from this early dormition narrative, there seems to be little question that the cult of the Virgin had already attained a high-degree of complexity by the middle of the fourth century.

[00:47:33]

And once again, it is seemingly noteworthy that in this instance, the emergent Marian veneration is also linked with an allegedly marginal group that was regarded as heretical by at least one contemporary church father. I will say this, though, there is absolutely nothing at all heterodox about the Six Books Dormition Apocryphon, and this is a contest that the other one I mentioned before.

[00:47:56]

Very stalwartly orthodox, as seemingly was the group That was opposed by Epiphanius. Nonetheless, we may take some clue from this. Again, that somehow this is something coming from the margins. In terms of literary evidence then, the cult of the Virgin Mary actually fares much better than that of [INAUDIBLE].

[00:48:19]

It is true, however, that Mary is not quite as visible in early church decoration and pilgrimage art, as is. But, again, this difference is not dramatic. Representations of the virgin in art are largely absent during the first few centuries of Christianity. Which is hardly a surprise given that very little in the way of Christian art survives from before the fourth century.

[00:48:44]

The only possible exceptions would be certain representations in the Roman catacombs. But unfortunately the interpretation of these images is often difficult and subject to considerable debate. Still there is a strong possibility that we find there depictions of Mary in funerary context dating from the third century. Much more certain are depictions of Mary as an.

[00:49:08]

This on several pieces of gold glass from fourth century Rome. But it is really only in the fifth century, that we begin to find representations of Mary in art in any significant numbers. Which, I would add, is fairly typical for most saints. Much more important is the evidence for early Marian piety that we find in liturgical sources.

[00:49:37]

This is another area where we lack much evidence for the first few centuries of Christianity. But Mary is surprisingly well represented in some of the earliest witnesses to Christian worship. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these is a prayer to Mary on a papyrus from Egypt dating to the third or fourth century.

[00:49:56]

Famous [INAUDIBLE] papyrus that's named for the beginning of this prayer in Latin. Beneath your protection, it translates, and this is a prayer that's still in use in many Christian communities. But there is also evidence of liturgical feasts commemorating the virgin. From the fourth and the fifth centuries in several major urban centers.

[00:50:16]

Jerusalem emerges as the most significant of these, not in the least because its early liturgies are especially well documented. And also because it is the site of the two of the earliest and most important Marian shrines. Among the most remarkable service books to survive from the ancient church is certainly the recently published Jerusalem chant book.

[00:50:41]

A work extant only in old Georgian translation. That preserves basically, the hymnal of The Church of the Holy Sepulchre from the late fourth, early fifth centuries. And in this collection we find ample, and I mean ample, evidence. That Mary's intercessions were regularly sought during the Sunday worship of Jerusalem in the period prior to the Council of Ephesus.

[00:51:08]

Along with a substantial corpus of specifically Marian hymnography dating to the early fifth century. In this respect evidence for early Marian veneration exceeds considerably. What we find church cult not only. But of most other early Christian saints as well. On the whole, then, the evidence for early Marian veneration is not nearly as bad as we have frequently been led to believe.

[00:51:34]

And indeed it compares very favorably with for instance Thecla's record, and in some regard even exceeds it. Once again, perhaps the main problem lies not so much with the evidence itself. But rather with the heightened expectations generated by the virgin's exaltation in centuries to come. It is perhaps a bit peculiar however that we seem to find evidence of an active cult of the Virgin.

[00:51:58]

Well before we have clear confirmation of a shrine, an actual site dedicated to her. Typically a saint shrine was fundamental in the emergence of a cult, particularly in the case of the martyrs. The Cult of the Martyrs began at the graveside. Where early Christians would gather to commemorate their local martyrs and seek their prayers on the anniversary of their death.

[00:52:21]

The saint's grave and his or her relics provided the main locus for offering intercessory prayers and other ritual activities. With the conversion of Constantine in the early fourth century, it became possible to build churches on these sites. And as non-martyrs were soon added to the ranks of the saints.

[00:52:38]

Their graves and remains also were graced with increasingly grand sanctuaries and facilities for pilgrims. At these shrines, the saints remained uniquely present and available to petitioners, who would often travel great distances. To experience the holiness of such places and bring their prayers directly before these trusted advocates. Nevertheless, Mary was not a martyr.

[00:53:02]

And thus did not have an obvious spot for a shrine such as one could discover for Peter or Paul or Thecla. Yet even more problematic was the fact that Mary had not left behind any bodily remains, a quality she shares interestingly with Thecla. Or at least so it came to be believed, particularly in those settings where her veneration was first beginning to take hold.

[00:53:25]

We see mission and assumption traditions. With no martyr, and no relics. It would appear that a shrine was not as important to the emergence of the cult of the virgin, as it was for other saints. And the evidence would seem to suggest that her veneration may have initially emerged in the absence of a specific cult center.

[00:53:43]

There were of course other possible locations for a shrine besides the grave. And one of the earliest centers of Marian cult. Developed at an alternative site for the nativity of Christ, midway between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Almost simultaneously, the Virgin's empty tomb in the Garden of Gethsemane also emerged as a locus of her special veneration.

[00:54:05]

And as the cult of the Virgin rapidly expanded and took hold of the Christian world during the fifth century. This church, the Church of Mary's Tomb, quickly took pride of place as the foremost Marian shrine. Like so many other saints then, Mary's cult ultimately came to focus on her tomb, empty though it was.

[00:54:23]

And in the absence of bodily relics, items of her clothing would eventually be discovered. In order to evoke her holy presence within the shrines, especially in Constantinople. Therefore, despite frequent assertions to the contrary. The evidence for early Christian devotion to Mary is not nearly as meager as has often been maintained.

[00:54:44]

To be sure it is less abundant than one might initially expect. Given Mary's enormous importance in later Christian faith and practice. Though when considered within the emerging cult of the saints. And in comparison with evidence for the veneration of other early Christian saints. Particularly those who were not martyrs, the cult of the virgin fares quite well.

[00:55:07]

It is long past time then that Marian devotion should be recognized for its importance in the early history of Christianity. Alongside the veneration of other holy men and women from this period. And perhaps now we can also leave behind the persistent need to explain the cult of the virgin.

[00:55:23]

As an intrusion of pagan goddess worship or through some other foreign impulse. Finding instead a phenomenon that developed organically from within the early Christian tradition itself. Emerging at least initially as simply one popular variant within the nascent cult of the saints. As for the Council of Ephesus, what happened there was something, it would appear.

[00:55:47]

It was not the beginnings of the cult of the Virgin, as so many have assumed. But rather it was the embrace and promotion of an already existing set of practices by the Roman Empire and by its imperial church. This political developments bear the primary responsibility for what we've seen as an explosion of Mary across the Roman Empire in the middle of fifth century.

[00:56:11]

And this merge a fusion of Mary and with the Christian empire and its church, which dramatically transform the virgin Mary's image. And her remuneration, so that she quickly emerges as the patroness of the Roman, or Byzantine Empire, and its capital Constantinople. But that is a story for another project and no.

[00:56:34]

>> [LAUGH]

>> Thank you.

>> [APPLAUSE].

Wouldn't it be great if Dr. Shoemaker could work up some enthusiasm for his topic? [LAUGH]

>> I have such a boring job.

>> There may be, some of you may have some questions you would like to address to him, and so what I'm going to do is invite maybe a couple

[00:57:01]

>> Questions from the audience and then we can call it an evening. He's been very enthusiastic and generous with his time and I'm sure he would also stick around if there are some followup questions after one or two that we can all enjoy together. So let me just give you some think time and ask you if anybody has a I assume that you like to, to pose for the good of the order.

[00:57:28]

>> [INAUDIBLE] emphasis the two places that are [INAUDIBLE] times that he fell asleep. How about that?
>> I sure can you got this thing. You got this [INAUDIBLE] lake. It is not harder in any in any ancient veneration of Mary, the first evidence we have so let's back up a little bit, right?

[00:57:45]

>> There's a tradition that Mary were like above the city there's a house there that's suppose to be the house where she lived at the end of her life, actually have a house on it
>> [CROSSTALK]
>> [LAUGH]
>> So great thing about great souvenirs, so and where this comes from, right?

[00:58:04]

It's the same to the gospel of John, right? Mary cross, Jesus trusted to, John therefore by the property of John, Mary ends up too, makes a lot of sense But we don't see it happening in the early Christian narratives. But in one of the earliest biographies of Mary, she starts off to go as a missionary with the other apostles, then she's carried back by God.

[00:58:31]

[INAUDIBLE] because, she'd told she has a more important mission, and you'll never guess what it is. She's supposed to run a church, which she does, and she directs the apostles, teaches them how to pray. [INAUDIBLE]. So this tradition of the first time we've seen this is in some Syriac text, from south-eastern Turkey.

[00:58:55]

What's today south-eastern Turkey, northern Mesopotamia. There's a monastic center there, it's part of the Syrian Orthodox Church, kind of the equivalent of. Natural regime. And somehow the tradition takes over, and it gets a little bit of popularity really, what really makes this tradition so cool and so much fun is the story of it's modern discovery.

[00:59:22]

Nun Katherine Emmerick Supposedly had visions of Mary living out the end of her life in the hills above the city of Ephesus and she had started a house there. And then sure enough some Lazarus fathers took a book in one hand, a stake in the other, and pow, found it exactly like she said.

[00:59:44]

And that's why its become a very important shrine, particularly in Roman Catholic devotion, all right. It is not a Eastern Christian tradition so, tradition
>> Marys assumed was the absence of anything that she left. There wasn't anything normally someone well loved and well known would have something behind.

[01:00:16]

A physical thing by which to remember the person, Mary didn't leave anything. There was apparently no bits of clothing, remember what they worked is.

>> They're for kids.

>> They're actually several. More than enough, actually.

>> [LAUGH]

>> The other is And breast milk was the other relevant we had from there [INAUDIBLE].

[01:00:38]

Well yeah, it's like with Jesus, all they could get was a all right. This is that's left from and her girdle belt is one of their girdles And then some sort of a garment. It's a garment very generically in the earliest traditions have been becomes It's her protecting veil.

[01:01:05]

The Byzantine tradition believes this protecting veil covers Constantinople and protects it ,which it did for a while. And then sometimes it's also a burial shroud as well.

>> Where are these [INAUDIBLE]? Since you asked, I'm not sure where the Constantinople relics have ended up, to be perfectly honest.

[01:01:29]

I think at least one of them ended up in Italy. This was what happened to a lot of the Eastern relics after the fall of Constantinople, was they fled with a lot of the intellectuals and the leaders to Italy. I don't know specifically where they are. I know there's a girdle, well there was, God knows what it's like now, in Hama in Syria.

[01:01:52]

I'm trying to think, I don't know places where her relics are but there are

>> I think that Chartres-

>> That's part of her veil.

>> That's part of her veil? So that's another one. It was built originally as a shrine for the priests.

>> But surely it wasn't the one from Constantinople, right?

[01:02:09]

>> Yeah

>> So I don't know what happened to that one? And where did these pilgrims go? Is a pilgrim. He is a sixth century pilgrim. He's one of our favorites. He is very colorful and has great stories but well let's just say, there's a lot of alternative facts compared to the other.

[01:02:25]

>> [LAUGH]

>> But he gets to Nazareth and he's going to Mary's house, and he's scoping through her closet, and he sees a whole closet full of the Virgin Mary's clothes. How cool must that have been, right.

>> [LAUGH]

>> He's the only person who saw that. So she did leave a lot of neat stuff behind.

[01:02:45]

Yeah, what about the church of Santa Maria and I've always heard that that is one of the oldest churches dedicated to.

>> Could you repeat that question?

>> The church of Santa Maria and I don't know. I don't know anything about it. I know so much less about The western tradition but I knew about the eastern tradition.

[01:03:06]

And I don't know a lot about art history, architecture history is one of my blind spots. I know that [INAUDIBLE] is quite old in this one. From this particular end of this program assessment, I don't know that [INAUDIBLE] but it's possible it is although I tried to track down.

[01:03:24]

Do you have a last question, Patrick?

>> [INAUDIBLE] took a while to develop?

>> Yes.

>> Where does Thecla and the Virgin, how does that line up time wise with the [INAUDIBLE]

>> The Apostles.

>> Devotion to the Apostles. That's a good question and I don't know especially about the devotion of the Apostles.

[01:03:48]

The thing that develops first is the Cult of the Martyrs, right. And so arguably in the second century we're starting to see the Cult of the Martyrs as something like the Martyrdom of Polycarp. It's much clearer in the third century.

>> The third century, we're starting to find suggestions of some shrines, we're starting to see some pilgrimage art from some of these early martyr shrines.

[01:04:11]

Insofar as any of the apostles would have been martyrs, they too could have fallen, they would have fallen under the generation of martyrs, I'm not sure about apostles Who were venerated early on who weren't martyrs, but I just don't know. That's a specific question that I don't know a lot about.

[01:04:31]

But what happens is you generally don't start seeing the veneration of non-martyr saints, period. I think the apostles would be an interesting exception. You don't start seeing non-martyr saints venerating until there aren't any martyrs any Right, once they stopped making martyrs. When Constantine stops the persecution of Christians.

[01:04:49]

That's when now, it's opened up to non-martyrs. Which is why actually it makes perfect sense to be seeing Mary, who is not a martyr, see her cult rising with these other non-martyrs. In order of saints even though, at the same time, as I've said more than once in this talk, I hope I wasn't repeating myself too much.

[01:05:06]

I know I am. Given how important she became, we would expect her to be really important from the beginning. And that is, admittedly to me, something of a mystery. But if we take our hindsight away, we just look at her as another non-martyr. Who becomes subject to veneration, she's right on time.

[01:05:27]

>> We don't have a talk this thick without more questions, Dr. Shoemaker will be very generous and enthusiastic with his time, if a question is lingering in your mind, would you join me in thanking him one more time?

>> [APPLAUSE]