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**Dormition Apocryphal Literature  
“Six Books” Syriac Text  
Greek text attributed to Saint John the Theologian  
Spiritual-Theological Aspects  
(Doctoral thesis summary)**

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## **First part**

At the beginning of this part, we propose to focus our attention over the context in which the first elements of an Marian devotion appeared and developed, which were the prerequisites for the emergence of this piety and prolific way in which it developed itself, which is why, starting from sixth and seventh centuries it evolved into an independent and very popular cult of the Virgin.

Because the early moments of Marian piety or the cult of the Virgin are shrouded in mystery and very little documented, there have been various speculations and often numerous questions were asked, but for many still no satisfactory answers have been found.

One of the questions to which we tried to find an answer would be: what kind of evidence is needed to establish the existence of an early cult of the Virgin? Limited existence of some explicit evidences of an early cult of the Virgin may lead to the supposition that, in fact, there was no cult. We showed that such an interpretation is incorrect, for from lack of evidence it can be only said that we do not know whether existed and under what form of worship existed.

We wanted then to follow the possible roots of the cult of the Virgin where we usually seek the origins of the Christian worship, namely in Scripture. The conclusion is already known: mentions, hints or clues of a cult or a Marian devotion cannot be found in the Gospels or in other writings of the New Testament. Instead, in Scriptural texts, some details can be read about the importance of the Virgin for the Christians of those times, and her presence in such important moments as The Passion of Christ can be taken as indications that the personality of the Virgin was indeed relevant to the early Christian communities.

Often emerged the remarks of those sustaining the influence of the cult of goddesses in Christianity through the emergence of the cult of the Virgin. Therefore, their assertions made us, however, to ask to what extent the cult of goddesses somehow influenced the cult of the Virgin. Although we cannot deny the existence, in some degree, of association between the images of the Virgin and those of the pagan goddesses, Isis and Cybele in particular. The idea that these

associations express the evidence of an identity between them is not only incorrect, but these associations are only external. The quintessential differences between the Virgin and pagan goddesses are more than eloquent.

It was argued by some scholars that the fourth century knew no form of worship dedicated to the Virgin. The same researchers have asserted that any development of some form of a Marian piety was only a consequence, and not a cause for the decision of Ephesus council to grant the Virgin the title of Theotokos.

By the end of the fourth century, the veneration of the Virgin began to appear in the churches of the Mediterranean Eastern, and the Panarion of Saint Epiphanius is a hostile witness of this phenomenon, which bears evidence, beyond its polemic, of a Marian piety that was included in the emergence of the cult of the saints.

A closer examination of St. Epiphanius rhetoric and the comparison with “Six Books” apocryphal writing suggests that the sect of kollyridians, or anyone who he opposes, did not really worshiped the Mother of God as a deity. On the contrary, it seems that these opponents offered the Virgin the veneration and prayer that many Christians of that time began to offer the saints. It seems, however, that Saint Epiphanius saw any form of devotion offered to another human as idolatrous, affirming again his conservative position in terms of devotion.

Although we cannot deny the parallels between Greek-Roman worship of deities and rituals performed by the kollyridians and those presented in the apocryphal “Six Books”, these parallels, however would no way provide a complete explanation of these phenomena, nor reveal the theological intentions of the followers. And from a historical perspective, the opponents of the Marian piety have shown a desire to take advantage of the Virgin’s special status and of the parallels with the worship practices, thus attacking her devotion.

Considering all these, leaving aside the “classical” image that we have on kollyridians, it seems that their place as potential pioneers in worshipping the Virgin deserves recognition.

To move to the next chapter in which we will try to get an overview of the apocryphal/legendary traditions containing the presentation of the moments that define the Dormition or Assumption of Our Lady, to the texts belonging to these traditions that will be the main element of the present research, namely the Syriac “Six Books” and the Greek text attributed to St. John the Theologian, it is first necessary to make a brief incursion into Palestine of the late antiquity to reveal details of the piety and worship of the Virgin at the time.

The development of the ancient cult of the Virgin in Palestine it is similar to the stationary liturgies. Marian veneration in the Holy Land began with the annual celebrations in Kathisma church, as early as the fifth century. Then, probably in the sixth century, the center of the Marian devotion moves gradually to the church of the tomb of the Virgin near Gethsemane, in the Valley of Josaphat, which was the second stop of the mobile liturgical commemoration. Finally, with the final construction works of the “Nea” basilica in 543, this Marian shrine becomes a third point of the Marian devotion in Jerusalem.

## **Second part**

In the second part we initially tried to present the context of emergence of Dormition Apocrypha. First we can mention that the possible origin of anti-Chalcedonian, which was much circulated within researchers’ circles, is hardly unlikely. Although there are textual elements of a Gnostic inspiration, we cannot know for sure if this is due to a possible origin in a Gnostic environment of such literary tradition or just that at one time there were used by Gnostic communities which by transcription or by other processes they've left their mark on them. Although these traditions have suddenly become visible after the Council of Chalcedon, it is unlikely to be created then, but just inserted in Orthodox Christianity. Knowing this situation we naturally ask ourselves: who inserted these texts? Those who opposed the Council to Chalcedon or its opponents? And the answer is surprising, even unexpected. Neither ones nor the others, because this



extensive literature has no pro attitude for Chalcedon, or against it, but has a unbiased position, avoiding, perhaps willingly, the chalcedonian dogmatic problems. This may suggest that the Dormition traditions would have originated or would had been initially used in an environment that was not affected, interested or that was opposing the scissions started Chalcedon.

Images of Paradise in early Dormition traditions and in Christian imagination were often expressed ambiguous, having goals and nature that were not easy to grasp within the limits of human understanding. It seems that the diversity of ancient conceptions of paradise influenced Dormition apocrypha. The difficulty of finding a primary tradition and grouping them into dogmatic categories to highlight the stages of development, it makes us to consider these traditions as a body with a common core and with numerous branches that originally appeared independently and in parallel. This conclusion is supported by an topographical and liturgical analysis of those traditions, for analyzing the liturgical traditions from Jerusalem, the topographical details and doctrinal differences, it cannot be determined with certainty which one is earlier.

Presentation of both different ways of modern classifying the Transitus traditions it is necessary to provide a unilateral insight to conclude as faithful as we can the needs of contemporary Orthodox Christianity. Although we have consistently supported the classification adopted and developed by Stephen Shoemaker, the one promoted by Simon Mimouni should not be ignored or its value not to be recognized. The fact that these texts cannot really be constrained to an actual dogmatic template means that they not necessarily appeared as an exclusive dogmatic need, as confirmed by the possibility of a literary classification. Their literary value can be commonly analyzed and classified, but not also its dogmatic diversity.

After the synoptic presentation of two Dormition texts, which belong to “Bethlehem” traditions, we have in mind a clearer image. The Syriac “Six Books” seems to be the translation of a Greek original, as stated even in it, written either in order to present and clarify certain issues related to the Dormition of Virgin, or it

had as main core only a limited number of events, and then other were added that correspond to the needs of certain communities. The fact is that the Dormition attributed to Saint John the Theologian was not composed in order to add something extra to the multitude of details already existing within traditions “Bethlehem” Dormition traditions, but to select and discern only topics that were necessary in the Church for the moment. As we have seen, the structure of the text seems to indicate an initial writing that had the purpose to be used in devotion, as a liturgical reading. Therefore, the Church kept only the essential nucleus, giving up to certain details or themes, and keeping only what sent a clear and nonwinding message to its believers.

### **Third part**

Regarding the use of the Apocrypha in a liturgical fram, the issue was posed totally different in western and eastern Christianity. In the West, the Church, because of the controversy caused by the heretic Priscillian and his followers, tried to totally ban the use of non-canonical writings in the liturgy. In the East, the Church, less compelling, but also more divided, allowed extra-canonical writings to enter the liturgy. One of the testimonies that we can analyze is given by studying byzantine homiliaries, which for our case are an important element for the discovering the liturgical function of the Dormition apocrypha.

Although apocryphal writings are generally regarded as rejected scriptures, that tried to enter in the canon, but were ultimately excluded due to their content and their doubts on the authenticity. However, this view of Christian apocrypha fails to explain the historical diversity of apocryphal traditions or their diversified usage within the Christian faith. Therefore, we can see that not all apocryphal writings are simple rejected scriptures, but some of them are accepted and better understood as elements of Tradition of the Church, such as the Marian apocrypha from early Christian era.

Apocryphal writings that concern the end of Virgin’s life have a place in the Christian tradition that is similar to unbiblical stories related to her birth and

childhood. Although it seems unlikely that these writings would have had the purpose to become part of the biblical canon, though some of them have been preserved as valuable parts of the Tradition of the Church, especially in terms of liturgical worship and through the veneration that the Church offers to Mary.

Many of the early texts of the Church were composed for liturgical use. Although most of them were homilies, however for many of the so called apocryphal texts, their purpose can be considered to be read in a liturgical setting, and some of them even identify themselves as having that meaning. One of these apocrypha is the Syriac “Six Books”, which explicitly mentions that must be used as a liturgical reading, providing a calendar of Marian holidays, together with an order that the volume describing the death of Mother of our Lord to be read at each of these holidays.

It seems that also for the liturgical use was accepted or composed the Dormition attributed to Saint John the Theologian, as it can be found in some of the byzantine homiliaries. Also some texts from the “Palm” traditions containing evidence of a possible division for the purpose of liturgical use, such as the St. John of Thessalonica’s homily, which was delivered in the city at the beginning of the celebration of Dormition on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August.

For these reasons, ancient forms of Marian liturgical devotion in Jerusalem were always an important part in the study Dormition traditions, which sometimes have been used by researchers to date and classify literary traditions, having mixed results.

From the variety of apocryphal traditions concerning the Virgin earthly end, as from the actual Dormition devotion we can highlight the most important universal aspect testified in Orthodoxy: death of the Virgin, incorruptibility of her body, move of her body to heaven.

Her death has a human journey, dying with death human because she lived a life like ours and because her birth was like ours. She had no special nature, incapable of sin or not affected by death, but achieving personal holiness from a fallen nature, through her role as Mother of God.

Celebrating and witnessing the death of the Virgin, the Church does not place her above the Church giving her a special birth and escaping the death by “assumption”.

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