Lily C. Vuong

Gender and Purity in the Protevangelium of James

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This book is a revision of Vuong’s 2010 doctoral dissertation, written under the supervision of Annette Y. Reed at McMaster University. Simply by providing a sustained investigation of the Protevangelium of James—a work that was enormously popular in late antiquity and beyond, extant in some 140 Greek manuscripts as well as in Syriac, Georgian, Armenian, Coptic, Latin, and Slavonic translations, and yet has not received the attention it deserves by modern scholars—Vuong has already offered a substantial contribution to the field. While we have H. R. Smid’s 1965 commentary and the Protevangelium of James is regularly treated in studies of the development of Mariology, Vuong’s is, to my knowledge, the first monograph in English dedicated solely to the interpretation of the text. With any luck, her work will encourage others to focus their attention on this fascinating, well-known, yet understudied text.

In the introduction, Vuong lays out her primary goals as “to examine the characterization of Mary in the Protevangelium of James with a specific focus on the place and function of the theme of purity; and to analyze the structure, concerns, and interests of the narrative so as to suggest its possible temporal and geographical milieu” (23). The book proceeds with a first chapter on current opinions concerning the date, provenance, and genre of the text, followed by three chapters on purity. Chapter 5 revisits the question of date and
provenance, bringing the conclusions of chapters 2–4 to bear particularly on the question of provenance. A brief conclusion pulls together observations made throughout the book on the literary characterization of Mary in the Protevangelium of James, emphasizing that her purity as depicted in the text is not restricted to her virginity; rather: “The text’s characterization of Mary as pure involves not only her sexual purity and therefore her moral purity, but also a concern for her ritual, menstrual and even genealogical purity” (243).

As Vuong makes clear in chapter 1, much of the discussion of the Protevangelium of James in modern scholarship has focused on the disputed issues of date and provenance; much of this conversation, in turn, has focused on the relationship of the Protevangelium of James to Judaism, specifically the author’s purported ignorance of both Palestinian geography and Jewish customs. After laying out the various sides of the debate, Vuong suggests that the way forward is through an analysis of the primary content of the text—specifically a careful examination of the theme of purity—as opposed to, for example, its comments made in passing regarding the proximity of the desert to Jerusalem. This strikes me as very sensible. Moreover, Vuong, following Timothy Horner, suggests that arguments about the “[non-]Jewishness” of the Protevangelium of James should take into consideration not simply the text’s connections (or lack thereof) with Levitical law but also parallel material in other Jewish literature—again, a very sensible approach.

Chapters 2–4 proceed with discussions of purity: chapter 2, on purity in Mary’s own birth and childhood (focusing on ritual purity/impurity); chapter 3, on purity in Mary’s adolescent years (focusing on menstrual purity/impurity); and chapter 4, on Mary’s virginity (focusing on sexual purity/impurity). Vuong begins each chapter by asking what ritual (or menstrual or sexual, respectively) purity is; she then surveys the relevant material in the Hebrew Bible, Philo (when applicable), the Qumran scrolls, rabbinic literature, and, finally, early Christian sources, each of which generally yields a slightly different view of the specific type of purity under consideration. She then turns to the Protevangelium of James, asking to which—if any—of the surveyed material the views represented in the Protevangelium of James are most similar, but also providing a rich literary analysis of the theme in the Protevangelium of James itself.

Chapter 2, on ritual purity/impurity, reveals interesting points of contact between the Protevangelium of James and mishnaic literature—an observation that argues against those who find no evidence for a Jewish or Jewish-Christian background for the text. More significantly, however, Vuong demonstrates that “purity” in the Protevangelium of James should not be reduced, as it frequently has been, to virginity and chastity. To the contrary, the initial sections of the narrative, particularly in the descriptions of the actions of Joachim and Anna, convey a deep concern “for the Temple and sacrificial system
whereby ritual impurity is reversed”; Vuong concludes that “the concern for ritual purity presented in this text is … [similar to] … the sacrificial system found in Leviticus” (105).

In chapter 3, on menstrual impurity, Vuong again reveals points of contact between the Protevangelium of James and both biblical and mishnaic ideas regarding girls, women, and the transition to adulthood. As opposed to those who have read Mary’s departure from the temple as a negative shift in the text’s characterization of her—taking her impending menarche, and ultimately her femaleness, as a problem to be dealt with—Vuong’s close reading of the text finds a different sort of narrative pivot: “Whereas the beginning of the Protevangelium of James narratively depicts the Temple as central for purity and piety, the focus increasingly falls, from Prot. Jas. 8:4 onwards, on Mary’s own body as the locus of a piety conceived in terms of sexual purity” (137).

In chapter 4, turning to sexual impurity, Vuong once again finds points of contact with biblical and rabbinic sources, where specific views on betrothal and marriage shed light on the ambiguous depiction of the relationship between Joseph and Mary in the Protevangelium of James. In her close reading of the last third of the work, particularly the infamous virginity tests that Mary endures, Vuong concludes that “Mary’s purity is no longer characterized exclusively by her associations with the Temple and its priests…. instead, Mary transitions into being a symbolic Temple replacement herself” (190).

Chapter 5 returns to the question of provenance, reconsidering the various proposals in light of the conclusions of chapters 2–4. Ultimately, Vuong places the Protevangelium of James in the context of a particularly Syrian Christian debate between the markedly ascetic (represented in texts like the Acts of Thomas) and those with more positive views on marriage and procreation (represented in texts such as the Didascalia apostolorum). In fact, “strong parallels” between the Didascalia apostolorum and the Protevangelium of James with respect to a shared interest in Jewish practice—particularly involving menstrual purity—are the clearest evidence, for Vuong, of a Syrian provenance for the latter (236).

The structure of the book might suggest that the discussions of purity in chapters 2–4 are primarily in service of the argument on provenance presented in chapter 5. While Vuong certainly makes a contribution to our understanding of the context in which the Protevangelium of James was produced, the real impact of her work is to be found, I would argue, in the complexities of the text revealed by her close reading. Her approach is a fruitful combination of historical-critical and literary; her study of the parallel material surely elucidates the theme of “purity” in the Protevangelium of James, but her consistent return to how the theme functions in the narrative is what really adds to our understanding. The Protevangelium of James is not simply, as it has often been read, an
entertaining narrative confirming and defending the miraculous nature of Jesus’s birth to a virgin; rather, the narrative expounds complex notions of Mary’s identity and significance, of which her status as virgin is only a part.