ABSTRACT

“BUT THEIR FACES WERE ALL LOOKING UP”:
AUTHOR AND READER IN THE PROTEVANGELIUM OF JAMES

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This is a study about the Protevangelium of James, an “infancy gospel” that recounts the birth and childhood of Mary, the mother of Jesus. It is also a study about authors, readers, texts, meaning, and how they are interrelated. In it I aim to take seriously the insights of “intertextuality,” not as a matter of source criticism but as an approach to literature that is concerned with the reader's active role in determining meaning in a text.

The methodology I develop in Chapter One situates intertextual phenomena in a historically oriented study of ancient texts. I maintain that the reader’s discernment of intertexts has the capacity to generate new layers of meaning, and that these layers may reveal new aspects of the author’s meaning, some of which the author may not have anticipated.

After outlining the history of research on PJ in Chapter Two, I set out the results of my approach in exegetical chapters devoted to specific episodes in the life of the Virgin. In Chapter Three I examine Mary’s childhood in the Jerusalem temple (PJ 7-9), where she dances at the altar and receives food from an angel. I argue that the second-century reader understands her dancing as cultic worship, and her angelic diet as preservation for her role in God’s redemption of Israel.

In Chapter Four I explore the image of Mary’s spinning thread for the temple veil (PJ 10-12). I suggest that the reader conceives of her work as participation in the forces that govern human fate, and that the tearing of the veil at the crucifixion locates her power within the overarching divine plan.

Finally, in Chapter Five I address the episode of Jesus’ birth in the cave outside Bethlehem (PJ 17-20). This space, I maintain, prompts the reader to see Jesus’ birth through the lens of the Passion Narratives, as a foreshadowing of his crucifixion and burial, and to visualize his death as the moment that he is “born” as Israel’s Messiah.