

Article

Mary and the Church: The Theotokos as Ecclesial Paradigm

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Abstract

This article explores whether the Mariological antinomies presented in three scriptural passages—*Isaiah* 7:14, *Matthew* 1:22–25, and *Galatians* 4:4—can serve as structural paradigms for ecclesial experience. Each passage articulates a distinct antinomic mode: *Isaiah* offers a biological paradox, uniting virginity and motherhood in a single person; *Matthew* reveals a historical antinomy, positioning the Virgin at the threshold of the Law as both unbetrothed spouse and Bride of God; and *Galatians* presents a mystical antinomy, wherein the Woman who gives birth to the Redeemer is simultaneously born into freedom through the One she bears. These three antinomies, biological, historical, and mystical, constitute the “law of the Spirit” (*Romans* 8:2): a dynamic of communion between the sensible and the intelligible uniquely concentrated in the person of the Theotokos. The article concludes that the Virgin serves as an ecclesial paradigm not by virtue of her unrepeatable experience, but because the same “law of the Spirit” that generated her experience continues to shape the life of the Church.

Keywords: Orthodox Mariology; ecclesiology; antinomy; *Isaiah* 7:14; *Galatians* 4:4

1. Introduction

An old Ethiopian parable aptly illustrates the complexity of Orthodox Mariology. On his deathbed, a father summoned his sons, giving each a penny and vowing his fortune to the one who fills a room with something he buys from the market. The first son bought hay and spread it; the second used feathers and did better. The youngest bought a candle, and when night fell, its light filled the hut. In the same way, efforts to present teaching on the Most Holy Theotokos often fall short. Those who seek to exhaust doctrine intellectually find the Mother of God an eternal mystery—her depth resists full explanation. Reading Marian literature is a lifelong task; summarizing Marian concepts, whether in relation to liturgy, patristics, or doctrine, is daunting. Even a simple account of a moment in Mary’s life raises many interpretive perspectives. Reading about the Assumption, one discovers layers beneath familiarity (see Bot 2022). Mariology, more than other theological topics, demands another stance, as it relates to the whole theology: it requires a search for illumination that changes one’s life, not just fills one’s mind. The following inquiry takes the parable’s lesson seriously: rather than attempting a comprehensive account, it traces a single, focused idea. So, the guiding question here is existential and sacramental, not abstract: What does Mary’s life reveal about our own ecclesial experience?

2. Methodological Preliminaries

This question remains overly ambitious and requires further refinement. There are multiple ways to approach an answer. On one hand, the phrase “the life of the Virgin”



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can signify realities of varying complexity. For instance, it may be restricted to the spiritual experience of the Mother of God and to the transformation of her *bios* into *zoe* (see Vlachos 2019; Popa 2023). Alternatively, it can be explored through the lens of the Byzantine hagiographical tradition dedicated to the Holy Mother, such as the *Lives* authored by Saint Maximus the Confessor, Epiphanius the Monk, John the Geometer, Saint Symeon Metaphrastus, or the anonymous Nestorian writer (see Shoemaker 2012, 2016; Cunningham 2022). Each of these texts conveys a unique vision of the world, transcending simple biography. Even when drawing from common sources, they are shaped by distinct ecclesial and sacramental beliefs. A third interpretative approach views the life of the Virgin through the lens of the scriptural canon. However, even identifying the biblical texts pertinent to Mariology presents significant challenges. Beyond the misconception that *Scripture* “says nothing” about the Mother of God, the sheer abundance of passages relevant to Orthodox doctrine can itself be problematic. Some authors dedicate their scholarship to expounding a single verse, such as *Luke* 1:35. Who, then, can claim mastery over the entire scriptural corpus? On the other hand, the study is further complicated by the inherent disparity between the Virgin’s life and the lives of all others, whether saints or angels. The Church proclaims emphatically that the Most Holy Theotokos is “more honorable than the Cherubim” and “more glorious, beyond compare, than the Seraphim” (Axion Estin). Thus, there is a real risk of overestimating our human capacities, of presuming that the unique qualities of the Virgin are attainable or define our own existence.

These two boundaries point to the limits of this study. Rather than striving for a comprehensive account of the Virgin’s life or pursuing a diffuse association with her virtues, this work intentionally adopts a selective, fragmentary approach. The analysis begins with three scriptural passages—*Isaiah* 7:14, *Matthew* 1:22–25, and *Galatians* 4:4—each of which evokes the theme of femininity. This selection is intentional, as the biblical image of femininity in relation to the Mother of God has generated more cultural resonance in Europe than any other, while paradoxically attracting significant criticism. In *Scripture*, the Mother of God is repeatedly referred to as both Woman and Virgin, with key references including *Isaiah* 7:14, *Genesis* 3:15, *Galatians* 4:4–5, *Matthew* 1:22–23, 25, *Luke* 2:19, *John* 2:1–11 and 19:25–27, and *Revelation* 12. Each pericope deepens the Orthodox understanding of femininity and offers insights into the enduring mystery of the Mother of God. The three selected passages are examined with the aim of discerning what—if anything—is distinctive about the life of the Virgin. Has this distinctive characteristic of the Mother of God become a defining aspect of ecclesial life? While I do not intend to examine how her virtues have become foundational for Christian living, I wish to emphasize that God’s presence introduces a particular mystery into human experience—one that is especially significant for our sacramental life. Two further methodological points need to be mentioned.

In Orthodox Tradition, Theotokos has long served as the archetype of ecclesial life, offering a model to which every Christian is called to aspire. This Marian belief, rooted in scriptural, patristic and apocryphal texts, echoes throughout modern treatises. When the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* outlines the Virgin’s rule of prayer (*Evangelii apocrife* 1996, p. 155), for example, it is not merely a historical note but the articulation of a spiritual model for all who seek to live in Christ. Countless other examples reinforce this paradigm. The faithfulness, obedience, wisdom, sacrificial love, and transcendent beauty of the Holy Mother are upheld as ideals “for the Church and for the entire human race,” her life becoming a paradigm of communion with God (Popa 2023, pp. 9, 235–36, 404–6, 414–15). In light of this, further inquiry into her holy example might seem superfluous. Yet, as when meditating on the *Scripture*, one comes to new insights, contemplating the mystery of the Theotokos can offer fresh theological perspectives relevant to the present age.

Nevertheless, the scriptural testimony concerning the Mother of God remains a site of considerable debate, with the arrangement of biblical references fueling ongoing scholarly discussion (May 1960). Brant Pitre suggests that the interpretive key lies in approaching *New Testament* passages about Mary through the lens of ancient Jewish experience: “look at Mary with the eyes of the ancient Jews,” and “everything will become clear” (Pitre 2020, p. 22). Yet, there are other methodological approaches worth consideration, as well. Some scholars seek coherence by organizing scriptural data around central themes: holiness (Turro 1963), virginity (Clarke 1962), obedience (Vollert 1958), or motherhood (Griffin 1959). Others take a more circumscribed, dogmatic route, focusing exclusively on passages with unambiguous Marian content (Brown 1978). Jaroslav Pelikan, on the other hand, offers a synthesis grounded in scriptural images that have been further elaborated in the Church’s evolving tradition (Pelikan 1998, pp. 33–43). Navigating between the rigor of biblical exegesis and the breadth of theological speculation, Alexis Kniazev recommends a doctrine built upon “*particular facts*”: explicit affirmations about the Theotokos drawn from *Scripture*, *Councils*, and the broader Tradition—all converging in the Church’s veneration of Mary (Kniazev 1998, p. 36).

The three scriptural passages under consideration—*Isaiah* 7:14, *Matthew* 1:22–25, and *Galatians* 4:4—provide a unique lens through which to explore the antinomy at the heart of Orthodox Mariology. This inquiry draws on both Kniazev’s attention to “*particular facts*” and Pelikan’s broader dogmatic perspective, combining historical detail with theological synthesis. While these scriptural texts are not explicitly interlinked within the biblical corpus, and their Marian relevance is sometimes contested, the Eastern tradition unites them within a larger canonical framework that shapes the doctrine. Together, they are part of a scriptural mosaic essential for Orthodox Mariology and devotion. In this context, the selected passages are analyzed for recurring, cross-cutting themes. *Do they reveal anything distinctive about the Most Holy Virgin?*

This question leads to my second key point. The doctrine of Mary is inextricably woven into the fabric of Orthodox ecclesiology. Their relationship becomes most apparent when examined through the lens of *mariological antinomies*. Antinomy is typically described as a “*contradiction between two laws or principles, in their practical application, in a particular case or between two theses that are mutually exclusive and that are considered equally true*” (Glăjar 1958, p. 547). Theologians have classified antinomies by form—such as inter-propositional and intra-propositional—or by context, in Triadology (the unity and distinction of the Trinity), in Christology (the coexistence of two natures in one Person), or in Gnoseology, where antinomy signifies ways of knowing distinct from Cartesian rationalism. Russian theologians like Florensky (1908), Bulgakov (1943), and Kovalevski (2003–2005), along with Greek theologians such as Karamis, Mantzaridis, and Matsoukas, have placed particular emphasis on the role of antinomies in theological reasoning. Romanian thinkers, notably St. Dumitru Stăniloae and Andrei Scrima, have also enriched this discourse. With the rise of Kantian philosophy, the concept of antinomic logic was extended into discussions of creativity (Blaga 2019, pp. 151–69) and culture (Noica 1993, pp. 64–72), though theologians have been careful to distinguish between philosophical and theological uses. While this study will not exhaust these debates, it is important to recognize that, beyond scholarly categorization, antinomy functions as a linguistic marker of mystery and of divine presence. Nowhere is this mystery more powerfully revealed than in the Incarnation, though it permeates every dimension of ecclesial experience. My central claim is that, when we contemplate the Theotokos either from a biological, historical, and mystical starting point, the paradox we experience opens a window into God’s Kingdom. It forces one to look beyond what is tangible. The same dynamic of openness, I contend,

is manifest throughout ecclesial life. For those who live in the Church, the sacramental experience opens God's Kingdom.

Contemporary Orthodox ecclesiology has developed around two central questions. Theologians have sought to define the nature of the Church to clarify its boundaries and distinguish it from what it is not. Ecclesial "ontology" has long stood as a premier dogmatic concern, typically addressed in the context of God's *oikonomia*. When the essence of the Church is articulated through the lens of Paul's depiction of the Church as Body of Christ (Colossians 1:18), this approach illuminates the riches of Eastern patristic theology. However, attempts to make sharp distinctions between the roles of the Son and the Holy Spirit in constituting the *ekklesia* have often resulted in overly philosophical analyses and, ultimately, conceptual impasses. Today, two doctrinal tendencies have emerged from this heritage: one emphasizing institutional and Christocentric elements, and the other favoring a personalist and Pneumatocentric orientation. Efforts to reconcile these positions—while retaining the idea of a dynamic interplay between Christological and Pneumatological aspects—have yet to overcome the risk of abstracting the lived reality of the Church. Contemporary theologians have also examined how *ekklesia* functions and how it is defined in its relationship to the world. This theme has been explored primarily within missiology, which has focused on practical aspects and treated the topic as an extension of dogmatic inquiry. Over time, missiology has produced both confessional approaches—emphasizing differences between the Orthodox Church and other Christian communities—and ecumenical approaches—highlighting similarities. Both strands begin from a somewhat personalist premise, presuming a distinction between the being and the activity of the Church analogous to that drawn between essence, hypostasis, and energy.

When examined through the lens of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, the fundamental questions posed by modern ecclesiology appear misguided (see Bot 2017, pp. 311–83). The Creed emphasizes how the Church exists, rather than what it is in abstract terms, and proclaims what the *ekklesia* does, not merely how it functions as a confession and institution. This shift in perspective reveals a significant divergence between the language of the Holy Fathers and that of modern theology. The analytical approach of modern ecclesiology has fostered stereotypes and entrenched rigid views on the Church. To move forward it is crucial to return to the patristic mode of inquiry. Rather than confining ourselves to scientific definitions of the Church's nature and functions, we should ask the following: How is the Church manifested, and what does it do? This study follows this perspective by focusing on Mariology. It is structured into three sections, each examining key biblical passages that describe the Theotokos. After highlighting some of the most significant exegetical points, the study brings to light the antinomical structure of Orthodox doctrine. In this way, Mary's life and existence is shown as a profound expression of what it means to live ecclesially.

3. Isaiah 7:14: A Biological Antinomy

The interpretation of *Isaiah* 7:14 remains a central topic of scholarly debate. The Orthodox Church, following the *Septuagint*, renders the Hebrew term 'almā' as 'parthenos', translated into modern English as "virgin". As Christophe Rico observes, most modern scholars argue that 'almā' should be translated as "young girl" rather than "virgin" (Rico 2016, p. 22). The case for this translation rests on four main arguments: (a) the etymology of 'almā', (b) the existence of a specific Hebrew word for virginity, (c) the use of 'almā' in *Proverbs* 30:19, and (d) rabbinical interpretive tradition. In a thorough philological analysis, Rico recommends revisiting these claims, especially given their frequent use against the Eastern tradition. First, (a) the etymological argument proves inconclusive and can easily mislead. It is not the only case in theological discourses. For example, the reduction of

‘leitourgia’ to merely “work of the people” (*érgon leitós*) has historically obscured the term’s deeper existential and dogmatic dimensions (Taft 1997, pp. 161–62). Second, (b) the distinction between ‘betûlâ’ (the Hebrew term typically associated with virginity) and ‘almâ’ is less definitive than often supposed: ‘betûlâ’ frequently functions as an adjective rather than a substantive noun, complicating clear-cut translations. Turning to (c) *Proverbs* 30:19—the passage cited by rabbins and modern theologians to dispute the synonymy of ‘almâ’ and ‘parthenos’—Rico finds the evidence unconvincing. The very presence of ‘almâ’ in this context is debatable: the Masoretic text suggests that the original word may have been ‘ālūmāyw’ or ‘ālūmāw’, meaning “youth” rather than “virgin” (Rico 2007). This alternative reading lends greater coherence to the passage, making “the way of a man in his youth” a more plausible reason for amazement than “the way of a man with a young woman” (*Proverbs* 30:18–20). Finally, (d) rabbinical interpretations remain ambivalent, making it difficult to assert a definitive position based on their testimony (Rico 2016, pp. 100–1). Given the general Jewish reticence toward Christian readings of *Isaiah*, one might even see those rabbinic passages that accept the synonymy of ‘almâ’ and ‘parthenos’ as evidence of scholarly integrity prevailing over confessional bias.

Conversely, the case for accepting the Greek translation of *Isaiah* 7:14 rests on both philological and historical grounds. Philologically, a survey of the biblical uses of ‘almâ’ often points toward the notion of virginity. Of the nine occurrences of the term, four are rendered as “young girl” in the *Septuagint*, even in contexts where it clearly refers to a particular social category—namely, virgins (Rico 2016, pp. 103, 140–43)—or describes a soprano voice (Rico 2016, pp. 106–35). The reference in *Proverbs* 30:19 remains ambiguous and cannot decisively confirm or negate synonymy, while the remaining uses generally align closely with the meaning of parthenos. For instance, in *Isaiah* 54:4, ‘almâ’ describes “a girl who has never had a husband and children,” subtly implying virginity (Rico 2016, p. 158). *Genesis* 24:43 (Rico 2016, p. 91) goes further, elevating virginity from a mere attribute to a marker of personal distinctiveness. Ultimately, *Isaiah* 7:14 occupies a unique place. While the other occurrences seem to support interpreting ‘almâ’ as ‘parthenos’, this passage transcends a simple description of status or age, presenting a profound sign of divine intervention instead.

Historical considerations further support the philological case. From its earliest reception, the sign in *Isaiah* 7 was understood as a messianic prophecy. Notably, even prior to the composition of the *Septuagint*, the book of the prophet *Micah* (5:1–2) presents an interpretation remarkably aligned with the Greek tradition:

“Verse 2 contains a phrase that alludes to the Mother of the Messiah [...]. This prophecy, thus, offers insight into how Isaiah’s contemporaries, including Micah himself, understood and received Isaiah’s vision” (Kniazhev 1998, pp. 47–48).

Thus, Isaiah’s prophecy is best understood as a messianic sign. *But does this necessarily imply the virginity of the Mother?*

The short answer is yes, though the paths to this conclusion are many. Ultimately, the Virgin—spoken of as a sign—is the very embodiment of the salvation offered by God to His people. What is wondrous is not only the advent of Emmanuel, but also the extraordinary manner in which His coming is revealed to the world. Christ accomplishes far more than the miracles witnessed by Israel—such as the opening of barren wombs—by enacting a mystery greater than all previous wonders in sacred history. He fashions a body for Himself from the immaculate flesh of the Virgin, in a manner beyond comprehension (“how will this be?”—*Luke* 1:34). Through His conception, He raises humanity and clothes it anew in divine glory (see St. Maximos the Confessor 2014, pp. 103–21).

There is another way to arrive at this answer. It demands a nuanced and attentive exegesis. To understand the verse from *Isaiah*, it must be situated within its broader literary

and theological context. The passage belongs to the so-called Book of Emmanuel (*Isaiah* 6:1–12:6), which unfolds in three progressive cycles—those of Emmanuel, the child of the prophet Isaiah, and the offspring of Jesse. Each cycle reiterates the theme of the messianic sign, layering meaning through additions and contrasts. In the first section (7:1–8:18), Emmanuel is presented as born of the Virgin. The second (8:19–10:19) attributes to him the titles “*Angel of Great Counsel, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Victorious, Prince of Peace, Father of the Age to Come*” (9:5). The final section (10:20–12:6) emphasizes Emmanuel’s descent from Jesse and his work as a bringer of peace (Chapter 11). Some scholars argue that this triptych traces the unfolding of prophecy: first, within the royal house (Emmanuel is announced to the king in the presence of the people); next, to a collective category (the Lord of Peace is given as a sign to all); and finally, to all nations (the Branch of Jesse becomes the hope of the world). Across these cycles, Emmanuel’s birth, his existence, and his origin diverge meaningfully from those of Isaiah’s own son, who likewise serves as a sign confirming the messianic prophecy and is described at length in 8:19–10:19 (Rico 2016, p. 204). The balance of all the features determines Rico to affirm that the symmetry of contrasts also exists in the plan of births. Emmanuel is born of the Virgin, unlike Maher-Shalal-Has-Baz, who is born according to nature (Rico 2016, pp. 219–20).

The Eastern Fathers who have commented on *Isaiah* are unanimous in affirming the virgin birth as the definitive sign of the Son’s messianic identity. Saint Basil the Great offers a particularly insightful interpretation in this regard. In his reading of *Isaiah* chapter seven, he emphasizes the divine nature of the sign bestowed upon the chosen people, interpreting the entire passage through an allegorical lens. In Basil’s exegesis, King Ahaz represents the “city” guarded by God (St. Basil the Great 2009, p. 222; 2001, p. 230; 1888, PG30, col. 448B), while “*knowledge from the wisdom of the age*” and “*knowledge prepared by accepting the Holy Scriptures, but turned away from what is right*” (St. Basil the Great 2009, pp. 221–22; 2001, pp. 229–30; PG 30, col. 445D–448A) are embodied by Aram and Ephraim—symbols for pagan philosophy and rabbinic interpretation, respectively. According to Basil, the prophetic teachings of Isaiah elude these forms of knowledge, for prophecies require the reception of “*divine meanings*” that do not arise through sensory perception or logical deduction. Even Isaiah himself receives the revelation about Emmanuel “*through the ears of the rational soul*,” as God reveals His mysteries only to those prepared for contemplation (St. Basil the Great 2009, p. 224; 2001, p. 232; PG 30, col. 452A). Thus, the sign granted by God is both a concrete event and a living presence, perceptible only to the pure in heart—a reality at once visible and shrouded in mystery, imbued with mystical significance (St. Basil the Great 2009, pp. 229–30; 2001, p. 238; PG 30, col. 460BD). Jews and pagans alike are depicted as opposing this mystical sign: some possess scriptural knowledge “*turned away from what is right*,” while others measure divine realities by merely human standards. In doing so, they reject not only the Mother of Emmanuel, but the Messiah Himself:

“If a «*sign*» is the demonstration of something prodigious and differing from the ordinary experience of people, what would be marvellous if one particular woman who cohabits with a man should become a mother of a child? And how could one which was born from the will of the flesh be called «*Emmanuel*»? Therefore, if what is given is to be a sign, the birth must also be paradoxical. But if the birth if the Child is to be commonplace, it cannot be called a sign, neither can He be called Emmanuel. [...] Therefore Emmanuel was born of the Holy Virgin [...] she became the mother of Emmanuel without being impregnated with seed, is pure, and holy and undefiled, and after becoming a mother she remains a virgin” (St. Basil the Great 2009, pp. 232–33; 2001, pp. 241–42; PG 30, col. 464B–465A).

Saint Basil concludes his plea by showing that the birth of the Messiah had to correspond to the creation of Adam, since Emmanuel is the New Adam (St. Basil the Great 2009, pp. 233–34; 2001, p. 242; PG 30, col. 465AC). Going beyond the polemical accents of his interpretation, it is worth noting how the Saint builds his case for accepting the Greek translation. Chapter seven of *Isaiah* is read both as a preparation for the mystical sign and as an exegesis of this sign. The sign is perceptible only to the one who purifies himself to contemplate Christ and who has refused the pagan knowledge and the knowledge “turned away from what is right.”

Although Isaiah does not disclose the Virgin’s personal identity, the passage elevates the Mother of Emmanuel as a revelatory and eschatological sign par excellence. In her, two ordinarily sequential biological states—birth and virginity—are united, making her the archetype of Woman and the representative of all Adam’s descendants. Through the Virgin-Mother, humanity is introduced to a new paradigm of life. Anca Manolache insightfully writes:

“If the biological were to take precedence in the proliferation of humanity, the sons of such a maternity would not be much more important than the offspring born of any creature [...]. The maintenance of life as *bios* does not grant man a rational exelixis except through Mary’s pneumatic maternity” (Manolache 1984, p. 284).

Only in the Mother of God does virginity attain the dignity of divine birth, and maternity receive the image of the fullness of grace. As a messianic sign, the Mother proclaims the establishment of a Kingdom rooted in these two dimensions: the standard of virginity and the vision of birth. As the model of femininity, the Virgin-Mother extends to all earthly existence the horizon of Eden.

Drawing on Eastern insights, *Isaiah* 7:14 reveals a biological antinomy: two seemingly irreconcilable states are united simultaneously in a single person, remaining in a perpetual, creative tension. This union is not a mere paradox; it constitutes a dynamic convergence that enriches human nature and resonates in the lives of all who are spiritually connected to the Mother of God. What Isaiah proclaims about femininity under the Old Covenant is echoed in the *New Testament* passages in *Matthew* and *Galatians*. Despite their differences, these texts illuminate the paradox at the heart of the Virgin’s mystery, each articulating this process in ways that recall Isaiah’s prophetic vision.

4. *Matthew* 1:22–25: A Historical Antinomy

Verses 22–25 in the opening chapter of *Matthew’s Gospel* further illuminate the antinomy first articulated by Isaiah. These verses address not only the origins of Jesus but also point toward the profound mysteries surrounding His Mother. The persistent questions—“Who are you?” and “Where do you come from?”—echo throughout the Gospels, underscoring the inseparability of Christ’s mission from His identity. Those who challenge Him by disparaging His earthly lineage fail to comprehend the divine power manifest in the Galilean and remain distant from the enigma enveloping His Mother. The genealogy and the narrative of Christ’s birth thus serve not merely as historical records, but as gateways to the Marian mystery itself (Ratzinger 2013, p. 24). Even before the closing verses, the first chapter makes this explicit.

The genealogy of the Savior invites multiple readings, extending well beyond the challenges posed by comparing the accounts in *Matthew* and *Luke*. One prominent interpretation views the genealogy as a confirmation of Christ’s Davidic lineage. The succession of generations demonstrates that Jesus Christ is the Son of David, who came at the moment foretold by Daniel (9:1–27). This moment marks the beginning of the seventh week of history—the era of fulfillment and new creation—culminating the sixty-nine cosmic

weeks that encapsulate the entire history. Among biblical scholars, this reading is particularly favored, as Matthew's genealogy lends itself to analysis by Hebrew gematria, the assignment of numerical values to letters. Notably, the Evangelist emphasizes the number fourteen for each of the three stages—Abraham to David, David to the exile, and exile to Christ—which corresponds to the numerical value of David's name in Hebrew: Dwd, or 4-6-4 (Preda 2006, pp. 242–44). Yet this explanation primarily concerns the Lord's earthly paternity rather than the Virgin's role, who appears at the end of the genealogy. It affirms that, according to the Law, Jesus is the son of Joseph and the offspring of Jesse, though His birth from Mary is of divine origin. This affirmation is reinforced in the birth narrative, where Joseph, prompted by an angelic command in a dream, assumes his unique role as foster father and bestows the Child's name.

A second interpretive tradition, especially prominent in patristic commentary, regards the genealogy as a symbol of continual renewal among the nations. Saint Gregory Palamas, for instance, observes that only those individuals named by the Evangelist from each nation were found worthy to inherit Abraham's promise, while many others were omitted due to their impurity:

"[...] just as among the called nations only those who listened were considered worthy of divine kinship, so also in the nation of Israel [...]. But among all these, only those who lived according to the will of God, only these were considered truly Israelites, that is, only those to whom the visions were shown beforehand and were imagined beforehand, and to whom the promises were given. And only these are truly fathers and ancestors" (St. Gregory Palamas 2012, pp. 263–64).

This patristic perspective deepens our understanding of the Virgin Mother, unveiling further dimensions of her mystery. At the end of Matthew's genealogy, we encounter two individuals—Joseph and Mary—who receive divine revelation within the same generation, yet in profoundly distinct ways. Both are made aware of the Messiah's impending birth, but their roles in this sacred drama differ significantly. Joseph receives the announcement as a faithful servant who accompanies God's plan through obedience to the divine commandments. The Virgin, by contrast, becomes not merely a recipient but the very medium of Revelation: she is the *locus* through which God enters the world, simultaneously rooted in history and transcending it. In her, the divine presence is manifested. She becomes the new Holy Temple, the dwelling place from where God's commandments are proclaimed.

This encapsulates the historical paradox. The Incarnate One fashions His own body as the new Temple, the site of His Hypostatic Presence, yet He also makes the Virgin's body His dwelling, revealing Himself not solely through His own Person but through inhabiting a Woman who participates bodily in the mystery of His Revelation. In *Isaiah*, two states—Virgin and Mother—are held together; in the genealogy, the inseparability of two persons is demonstrated. Wherever the Mother of God is present, so too is the Presence of her Son, continually manifesting the Revelation of God among people for the sake of salvation. It is an antinomy expressed in the midst of history.

It is also noteworthy that Matthew includes in his genealogical record four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (the wife of Uriah). This is a striking departure from Jewish custom. Scholars have proposed various interpretations for their inclusion, all centering on their significance within the divine *oikonomia* (Preda 2006, pp. 240–42). One early hypothesis, found in the writings of Blessed Jerome, suggests that these women exemplify humanity's need for salvation because of their supposed sinfulness. However, this view is undermined by both Jewish tradition (Perrot 2018, p. 101) and patristic theology, neither of which regarded them as sinners but quite the opposite: despite the complexities of their stories, these four women were honored as righteous and exemplary figures before God.

While the first interpretation has largely fallen out of scholarly favor, the second hypothesis gained followers, even during the Reformation. It highlights the universal scope of Christian mission, suggesting that the common feature of these women is their status as outsiders. According to this reading, the evangelist intends to signal that foreigners, too, are woven into the fabric of sacred history. Yet this explanation remains insufficient to fully account for the inclusion of these women in the genealogy. One ambiguity centers on Tamar and Rahab, who, contrary to this hypothesis, are not actually regarded as outsiders to Israel in the post-biblical Jewish literature. It is difficult to establish that their status was viewed differently at the time the *New Testament* canon was formed. Another ambiguity concerns the broader implications of this interpretation for early Christian audiences. If these four women entered sacred history by becoming proselytes, *does that imply that Christians must first become proselytes to the Law before becoming disciples of Christ* (Brown 1993, p. 73)?

The third hypothesis provides a more compelling explanation and highlights the connection between these four women and the Theotokos. It focuses on the remarkable initiative each woman displays in fulfilling God's purposes and the active, even transgressive, roles they assume in the unfolding of salvation history. By placing themselves at the service of divine will, these women become instruments and witnesses of God's action in the world. The Virgin exemplifies this dynamic most fully; she stands as the ultimate Witness to a divine intervention that transforms the very fabric of material existence. Yet, this conclusion remains challenging for many today, who might accept that God acts invisibly within the spiritual realm but struggle to believe that He intervenes directly in the visible, historical, world.

Matthew's account of the Lord's birth deepens the mystery of the Virgin, presenting the Mother of God as the Unbetrothed Spouse. Legally, she is the betrothed of righteous Joseph, yet—according to the Law—she stands accused and subject to repudiation, for she conceives before marital union. In the immediate sense of Mosaic justice, the Virgin Mother remains perpetually unbetrothed, standing at the very threshold of the Law. Simultaneously, she is the Betrothed of the divine Bridegroom: by bearing God's Son, she belongs wholly to Him. Within the logic of Jewish tradition, this unique status renders it inconceivable for Joseph to approach Mary physically after the Savior's birth; she is consecrated to Another and, by the Law, forever forbidden to her earthly husband (Ford 1973). This paradox can only be apprehended by those attuned to Revelation, who transcend merely earthly categories. As the Bride of the divine Bridegroom, Mary's union is not announced or ratified in social terms but revealed through what is accomplished in and through her. She remains eternally Bride and hidden Bride. Once again, we encounter an antinomy: from the historical manifestation—where one Presence is revealed through the appearance of Another—to the concrete event, where the hidden Bride remains forever Bride. This prepares us for the conclusion Saint Matthew draws in the final verses of his first chapter.

The concluding verses bring together the two antinomies articulated in the genealogy and the birth narrative, affirming the Virgin's central role in the Revelation of God. Even at the philological level, there is a notable unity between Matthew's conclusion and his account of the Nativity, both grounded in the prophecy of *Isaiah* 7:14. The mystery of Emmanuel and the obedience of righteous Joseph are united in the person of the Virgin, "*who conceives from the Holy Spirit.*" Through Mary, Joseph becomes a participant in the divine *oikonomia*: he receives from the angel the name "Jesus"—a name that contains the core of the *New Testament* proclamation (Daniélou 1974, p. 236)—and is entrusted with the knowledge of the Son's saving work, the One who "*will save His people*" and brings "*God*

with us.” With the Revelation of Christ, Joseph is commissioned to share the Name and the good news with the entire world.

5. Galatians 4:4: A Mystical Antinomy

The *Epistle to the Galatians* offers the sole explicit Pauline reference to the Mother of God. While *Romans* 1:3–4 notes that the Son of God is “of the seed of David according to the flesh,” this phrase does little to advance the theology of the Virgin. The perceived absence of Pauline Marian focus might be considered “puzzling” (Cunningham 2017, p. 34), yet this concern should not be overstated. Paul’s mission to the Gentiles demanded a certain discretion regarding the Mother of God, as an overt emphasis risked confusion with figures from the Greek pantheon (Rus 2023, pp. 22–23). Nevertheless, the passage in *Galatians* provides valuable insight into Paul’s understanding of Virgin Mary and her unique role in the mystery of salvation (Donnelly 1956, pp. 24–29).

The passage in *Galatians* 4:4–7 serves as a focal point for Paul’s teaching about Christ (Fee 2007, p. 208), while simultaneously summarizing his earlier argument regarding spiritual filiation in 3:23–29 (Dunn 1985, p. 210). The concise phrases in verses 4–7 encapsulate the core of Pauline doctrine as articulated throughout *Galatians*, achieving a dogmatic precision widely recognized today. Here, the Apostle to the Gentiles affirms the Lord’s “preexistence” (Fee 2007, pp. 213–14; cf. Dunn 1985, p. 215), the Incarnation, Redemption, Adoption, Renewal in the Spirit, and the inheritance of the Kingdom “through God”. Every phrase employed by St. Paul—“the fullness of time,” “born under the Law,” “to redeem,” “to receive adoption,” and others—is indispensable, each carrying a distinct theological significance. Should any expression be omitted, the meaning of Paul’s testimony would be fundamentally altered.

Yet within this tightly constructed passage, one phrase stands out as unexpected: “born of a woman.” On the surface, this expression appears redundant after “God sent” (Fee 2007, p. 215) and seems only loosely connected to what follows. Even if interpreted as a reference to the assumption of human nature in Christ, it does not fundamentally alter the argument. It functions as a simple affirmation of the Lord’s humanity, immediately paired with the sign of his Jewish identity: “born under the Law” (Dunn 1985, p. 216). The central message endures: through the Incarnation of the Son, God confounds those who seek salvation through abstract spiritual or cosmological schemes, as well as Jews who claim it solely by descent from Abraham. While the suggestion that Paul borrowed this phrase from a fixed formula has found little support (Betz 1979, p. 207), modern exegesis often shies away from a Marian reading (Breck 2008, p. 206). Yet, such an interpretation remains compelling.

Verses 4–5 of *Galatians* exhibit a chiasmic structure (Mihoc 1983, p. 334), a literary device widely employed in Antiquity and frequently found in Paul’s letters. A closely related formulation, both structurally and theologically, appears in *Romans* 8:3–4. In both passages, Christological doctrine is emphasized through intricate symmetries that invite careful interpretation. Accordingly, the *Galatians* text is best understood through the lens of parallelism, with the first half (A–C)—describing God’s action—mirrored by the second half (C’–A’), which reveals the divine purpose:

- A: God sent forth his Son
- B: born of woman
- C: born under the Law
- C’: to redeem those under the Law
- B’: so that we might receive adoption as sons
- A’: and that you are sons is evident...

The Son embraces the human condition and subjection to its fullness (Mihoc 1983, p. 335). The Incarnation, understood as the perfect kenosis of the Word, reveals the depth of God's love and His longing for communion with creation. Grounded in this dual reality—divine initiative and human participation—all who are adopted in Christ are drawn into the relationship between the Father and the Son. The phrase “*born of woman*” thus stands not only as testimony to Christ's true humanity, but also as the ultimate sign of His self-giving love.

On a deeper level, Christ's birth signals the renewal of all creation. This singular, unmistakably historical event is connected to a collective adoption that is no less real (Dunn 1985, p. 215). The transition from the invisible presence of the divine Word to His incarnate existence is echoed in human history by a growth from the sensory to the intelligible. It inaugurates a new order of existence. Paul reminds the Galatians that life in Christ grants access to a relationship with the Father that surpasses the limitations of the Old Law and mere Abrahamic descent. Just as the Lord's birth from a woman is indisputable, so too is the Galatians' spiritual filiation. Both realities operate on a meta-historical level and are charged with eschatological significance. Each takes place at “*the fullness of time*,” when the divine present breaks into history. This “*fullness of time*” grants humanity a glimpse of eternity: the Son of God enters history, and humanity is deified into the everlasting Kingdom. Yet this fulfillment depends on specific realities and moments—the woman who gives birth to Christ and those upon whom the Spirit rests. Thus, far from being a superfluous detail, the reference to the woman is vital for understanding the manifold experiences of adoption into God's communion.

A proper understanding of verses 4–7 also requires careful attention to their context. These verses bring to a close an argument marked by ambiguity. At the outset of chapter four, Paul likens the Galatians' pre-conversion state to that of minors, who, until reaching maturity, possess no more rights than slaves. Thus, he urges the Galatians not to return to the bondage of the Law or to the “*weak and beggarly elements*” of the world (v. 3). The ambiguity is palpable: *if the Galatians are already children of the Father, why would they revert to slavery?* And if Paul addresses Jews, *how can they be adopted to inherit Abraham's promise, since they already claim descent from Abraham?* Paul's analogy, amplifying the contrast between the periods before and after the Incarnation, intentionally blurs the distinction between Jews and Gentiles to highlight their shared limitations (cf. Romans 8–9). The argument here does not proceed with strict logic but rather conveys the urgency and emotional weight of confronting competing beliefs. *Galatians* contains several such moments (Patte 1983, pp. 40–41). Viewed from the perspective of the Gospel, both pagan and Jewish systems are ultimately inadequate, for neither places Christ at the center. Both stand in opposition to the freedom of grace offered by the Lord; though their forms of bondage may differ, both enslave with equal force. This is not to deny the value of the Law or of Greek philosophies, nor to reject the “*lifestyles*” adopted by Jews and Gentiles. In fact, Christians share much in common with both traditions (Patte 1983, p. 71). The essential question is one of relationship to Christ and faith in Him. “*In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free*” (3:28). Before Christ, all—regardless of ancestry or status—are in the same predicament; after the Incarnation, all are invited to partake of the same grace. The only greater tragedy than remaining bound to the Law or to “*the weak principles of the world*” (4:3) is to return to them after having come to know God (v. 9).

These brief observations unveil the profound antinomy at the heart of the fourth chapter from *Galatians*. They illuminate the Virgin's mystery in several interwoven ways. Firstly, these verses reveal a tapestry of paradoxical relationships between unity and multiplicity: a singular moment of “*fulfillment*” encompasses a multitude of adoptions; history is marked by fixed points—the birth and the conversion of the Galatians—yet each discloses an eschatological present. Distinct identities and spiritual states remain: one is a

son, another a slave; one is a Jew, another a pagan; and one is a man, another a woman—yet all “*are one in Christ Jesus*” (3:28). The Incarnation is not relativized, history is not annulled, and difference is not erased; instead, these contradictions are preserved as signs of the divine presence. Furthermore, verses 4–7 extend this antinomy to the hypostatic level. The woman from whom Christ is born intensifies the earlier paradoxes. Before the Incarnation, she, along with all humanity, was in bondage; yet as the one from whom the Redeemer is born, she becomes, indirectly, the cause of universal freedom. The Lord’s birth also marks her adoption, the “fulfillment of the time.” In essence, the Woman who gives birth to Christ is herself born, at that very moment, by the One she brings into the world.

If we reverse the direction of the antinomy, its beauty becomes even more obvious. Rather than proceeding from “born of woman” to the recipients of adoption, as the argument traditionally flows, we may look from the perspective of the sons back toward the Incarnation. The chiasmic symmetry of the text supports such a reading. Notably, verse six of chapter four allows for two possible translations of the conjunction ὅτι, with Eastern Fathers favoring the latter. One translation views adoption as preceding the coming of the Spirit (“*and because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts...*”), while the other sees simultaneity: “*and that you are sons is evident, because God has sent...*” (Mihoc 1983, p. 339). Choosing the latter interpretation, the state of sonship is conferred with the Spirit’s presence from the outset of adoption. The Spirit of God accompanies not only the Woman, but all believers. In the Spirit, history and eschaton are held in unity, yet this Spirit, unchanging, accompanies the Woman before all, at the “fulfillment of time.” Thus, she is first not only chronologically but spiritually.

One further detail merits attention: the fourth chapter of *Galatians* presents a rich and layered vision of motherhood that extends beyond the Marian antinomy. Several maternal motifs frame the significance of the “born of woman” (v. 4)—not only Marian, but also apostolic motherhood in verse 19, and the allegory of Sarah and Hagar in verses 21–31. The apostolic dimension, in particular, invites closer scrutiny.

The Apostle Paul addresses the Galatians as children “*for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth, until Christ is formed in you*” (“τέκνα μου, οὓς πάλιν ὠδίνω μέχρις οὗ μορφωθῇ Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν,” v. 19). Only two other Pauline passages—1 *Thessalonians* 2:7 and 1 *Corinthians* 3:2—echo this idea of apostolic motherhood, though the maternal aspect has sometimes been debated. Gaventa, for instance, contends that the language in *Thessalonians* and *Corinthians* could refer to either a mother or a nurse (Gaventa 2007, pp. 17–28). The striking symbolism of *Galatians* 4:19 is matched by its interpretive challenges. In the first clause—“*my children for whom I am again in labor*”—Paul is clearly the subject, but the next—“*until Christ is formed in you*”—with its passive construction, obscures the agent. Paul experiences the labor, yet it is unclear who brings Christ to life in the disciples’ hearts. The relationship between Paul and the Galatians is thus paradoxical: they are his children, but he alone bears the pain of their spiritual rebirth. This image resonates with the themes found in verses 4–5.

The singular event of the Incarnation establishes a broad kinship that echoes apostolic maternity. Yet Paul does not replicate the Virgin’s historical role; rather, he mediates the presence of the Word at a distinct moment in the salvation history. His apostolic motherhood must be understood in relation to God’s *oikonomia* and as an asymmetrical reflection of Marian maternity. Chronology alone cannot contain the mystery of this motherhood. Just as the Incarnation, a fixed point in time, expresses an ongoing kenosis, so too the Galatians’ spiritual experience transcends a single historical event. The adoption of the redeemed (v. 6) occurred at a particular moment, but its reality endures through the abiding presence of the Spirit. The phrase “*until Christ is formed in you*” signals not a mere temporal process, but an existential unfolding. Within this soteriological tension, Paul en-

dures a continual labor: the spiritual gift is never simply a thing of the past, but opens an antinomic horizon.

6. Conclusions

The three texts examined—*Isaiah* 7:14, *Matthew* 1:22–25, and *Galatians* 4:4—do not form a unified or explicit Marian corpus, nor do they exhaust the scriptural witness to the Theotokos. Yet each offers a unique window into the mystery of the Virgin's life. Across these passages, femininity becomes the *locus* of profound antinomy. In *Isaiah*, the Mother of Emmanuel is also the Ever-Virgin: two biologically exclusive states are realized simultaneously in one person, establishing a tension that announces the inauguration of God's Kingdom. In *Galatians*, the paradox shifts to a mystical realm. The woman from whom the Son of God is born shares in humanity's bondage under the Law, but through her birth, she receives perfect freedom. Thus, the Virgin is both Mother of the Son and Daughter of the Most High, freely consenting to God's will. Her ultimate freedom is attained only after the conception and birth of the Word. This antinomy, without negating Isaiah's carnal paradigm, reaches beyond individual history. Here, the focus is not on the Kingdom's inauguration but on the recovery and the restoration of authentic freedom. In *Matthew*, the convergence of opposites assumes a functional and historical character. Social roles are reconfigured: by the Law, the Virgin is both Joseph's unbetrothed spouse and the Bride of God. The established order, though outwardly unchanged, is inwardly transformed by divine intervention. At the same time, the very sacramental bond between God and His people is renewed. The Temple—as a sign of divine presence and revelation—yields to the indwelling of the Word in the Virgin's womb. She becomes the testimony of God's Presence and the *locus* of His choice. After conception, it is not the Holy of Holies but the Virgin's womb that is chosen and consecrated as God's dwelling place, prefiguring the Church.

These paradoxes converge to illuminate a single mystery from multiple perspectives: biological, mystical, and historical. Collectively, they reveal that in the person of the Virgin, the usual logic of earthly existence is suspended. Historical exclusions are overturned: virginity persists alongside motherhood; servitude does not undermine the freedom to embrace God; betrothal is not nullified by mystical union; hypostatic singularity remains intact even within sacramental transformation. These contradictions are not resolved, nor are their tensions dispelled. Yet at every level, a "*law of the Spirit*" (*Romans* 8:2) operates, forging communion between the sensible and the intelligible, the visible and the invisible, history and eschaton, the created and the uncreated. In this sense, the Marian antinomies serve as keys for articulating the nature of ecclesial experience.

The guiding question—*what does the Virgin's life reveal about our ecclesial existence?*—finds greater clarity at the conclusion of this exegesis. The focus shifts away from the unique, incommunicable realities of the Mother of God's experience toward the new Law fully manifested at the "*fulfillment of time*." The passages from *Isaiah*, *Galatians*, and *Matthew* converge on a single, pivotal moment: the Nativity of the Savior. Each approaching it from a distinct angle: *Isaiah* prophesies what will be, Paul unpacks why it must be, and Matthew recounts how it unfolds. The Nativity stands as an inaugural event. Thus, while the three Mariological antinomies remain non-transferable, marked by an irreducible asymmetry—the Virgin's experience is unique and unrepeatable—the "*law of the Spirit*" that generated these antinomies, after the Nativity, becomes the principle of communion with God. Consequently, there is a structural unity between the life of the Mother and the Church, both of which express the encounter with God. *Galatians*, in particular, conveys this unity: the Apostle's motherhood, though distinct from that of the Mother of God, mediates the Same Presence. The Marian antinomies, therefore, emerge as paradigms for Christian existence.

This hypothesis may be tested through a variety of approaches. One might, for instance, catalog the ethical teachings of different Church Fathers to see whether asceticism is articulated in antinomic terms. The Eastern tradition's frequent references to joyful sorrow, or to suffering as a source of healing exemplify this dynamic, suggesting that the hypothesis is well grounded. The Church's sacramental experience is even more profound than its ethical discourse. Eucharistic communion represents a literal assimilation of the other: Christ becomes my body in His very flesh—first, by receiving the Eucharist, I take His body; second, by integrating His flesh into mine, I am transformed into a member of Christ (Depraz 2022, pp. 227–28).

In Eastern tradition, the Mother of God stands as a paradigm of ecclesial experience. Yet, throughout history, the practice of *imitatio Mariae* has met with hesitation. Empress Pulcheria, for instance, claimed liturgical privileges by virtue of her virginity, only to face strong opposition and criticism from the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The attempt to replicate the Virgin's gifts, blessings, and purity ultimately proves impossible. Theotokos remains utterly unique and unrepeatable within the divine *oikonomia*. She is a mystery articulated through divine silence. Such mysteries, by their very nature, invite contemplation and confession rather than mere imitation, as if they were subject to repetition or magical reproduction. Equally unrealistic is the idea that we could “multiply” the Virgin's history by mystic means. Thus, *in what sense does the Mother of God serve as a paradigm for our own lives?* I believe Marian antinomies begin to point us toward an answer.

The three passages examined—*Isaiah* 7:14, *Matthew* 1:22–25, and *Galatians* 4:4—each reveal a fundamental antinomy. Traditionally, antinomy is explored in Triadology, where God is triune in three Persons, and in Christology, where two natures are united in one Person. The term also denotes a unique mode of conceptualization, distinct from Cartesian rationalism. This study showed that, in light of *Scripture*, Theotokos is best described in terms of antinomy. She is simultaneously Mother and Virgin, Birthgiver and Born, Spouse and Bride. These apparent contradictions are neither annulled nor resolved; they transcend intellectual paradox and lack a “solution” within the framework of human logic. They express a mystery that surpasses the immediate and exposes the very limits of reason. What is crucial is not only that antinomy “captures” the life of the Virgin, but that it does so across multiple dimensions: biological, historical, and mystical. In the Theotokos, new possibilities of communion are inaugurated. She herself becomes a sign of the “law of the Spirit” (*Romans* 8:2). Returning to the Ethiopian parable: to win the father's challenge, one needs not only wisdom but the light of a candle. The same principle pervades the Eastern ascetic tradition: human effort alone is insufficient; a paradigm is essential. To paraphrase Saint Gregory Palamas's prayer, Theotokos's life is the light that dispels the darkness in our hearts.

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