

LITTLE-KNOWN TESTIMONIES TO PETER'S PRIMACY

Testimonies to a primacy of St. Peter, which have hitherto been little noticed, appear in a group of documents that deal with the death and Assumption of Mary. This literature, technically known as the *Transitus Mariae*, belongs to the Apocrypha of the New Testament; as a matter of fact, the *Transitus* is the last of the New Testament Apocrypha.¹ Although there has been a great amount of controversy regarding this literature, it seems that it developed in Syria towards the end of the fifth century, after the solemn declaration of the divine maternity at Ephesus had given a great impetus to Mariology.² After this it spread rapidly, the golden age of its development being the sixth century.

It is somewhat remarkable to see such a decided stress on Peter's primacy in documents whose chief concern is the death and the final lot of Mary. This is all the more remarkable when it is realized that the authors of these legendary accounts, in claiming an apostolic source as a guarantee of the veracity of the events they narrate, seldom claim St. Peter. Generally St. John, and occasionally St. James, is claimed as the source of the authors' knowledge, and a certain prominence is accordingly granted them. Despite this, Peter's primacy is very much to the fore.

The oldest *Transitus*, the Syriac version from the end of the fifth century, is fragmentary.³ The opening section in which the authority of some Apostle might be called upon is lacking. Another Syriac version which is very complete and detailed, purports to be a translation from a Greek account attributed to the Apostles, and especially attributed to St. James. Hence it is sometimes referred to as the *Transitus* of Pseudo-James. For the sake of clarity it will be so designated in this paper.⁴

The sixth-century account, which has come down under the name of Theodosius, is in all probability the sermon which Theodosius, the Jacobite

¹ For orientation on the *Transitus* literature, see M. Jugie, *La Mort et l'Assomption de la Sainte Vierge* (Città del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944), pp. 103-171; C. Balić, O.F.M., *Testimonia de Assumptione Beatae Virginis Mariae ex omnibus saeculis*, pars prior (Rome: Academia Mariana, 1948), pp. 14-65, 137-53; A. C. Rush, "The Assumption in the Apocrypha," *American Ecclesiastical Review*, CXVI (1947), 5-31; "Assumption Theology in the *Transitus Mariae*," *Ibid.*, CXXIII (1950), 93-110.

² F. Cayré, A.A., "L'Assomption aux quatre premiers siècles," in *Vers le Dogme de l'Assomption* (Montreal: Fides, 1948), p. 147; M. Jugie, *op. cit.*, pp. 81, 108 f., 169.

³ *The Obsequies of the Holy Virgin*: W. Wright, *Contributions to the Apocryphal Literature of the New Testament* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1865), pp. 42-51.

⁴ Pseudo-James, *Transitus Mariae*: A. Lewis, *Apocrypha Syriaca* (Studia Sinaitica, XI [London: Cambridge University Press, 1902]), pp. 12-69; cf. M. Jugie, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

patriarch of Alexandria from 536 to 567, composed for the feast of Mary's Assumption.⁵ Another Coptic account, similar to that of Theodosius, is the sermon under the name of Evodius. This is the only *Transitus* that in any way claims the backing of St. Peter, for Evodius states that he is the first successor of St. Peter in Rome, a disciple of Peter, and an eyewitness along with Peter to the events that he describes.⁶

The widely-known, sixth-century Latin account of Pseudo-Melito unhesitatingly claims the backing of St. John. Pseudo-Melito tries to say that he is the bishop of Sardis, and that he is giving a true and reliable account of Mary's departure from this world because he is writing nothing else but what he heard from St. John to whose care Mary was entrusted by Christ from the cross.⁷

So much is St. John to the foreground in the sixth-century Greek account that the work is actually presented as a discourse which St. John gave concerning the falling asleep of the Holy Mother of God.⁸ Lastly, the seventh-century sermon of John of Thessalonica leans heavily on the Apocrypha. However, John who believed in a written tradition on the death of Mary going back to the Apostles utilizes the better elements in the apocryphal accounts, and his work is important as the beginning of a line of panegyrics on Mary composed by Byzantine writers.⁹

It is in these documents which, for the most part, do not claim the backing of St. Peter that Peter's primacy is greatly emphasized. However, to a certain degree, it is not too surprising that these apocryphal accounts should play up the primacy of St. Peter. Apocrypha imitate as closely as possible the canonical writings; they strive for a scriptural style and flavor. Hence, when Peter is mentioned they strive to reproduce the manner in which Peter is mentioned in the New Testament writings. In these documents,

⁵ Theodosius, *The Falling Asleep of Mary*: J. Robinson, *Coptic Apocryphal Gospels* (Texts and Studies, IV, 2 [Cambridge: University Press, 1896]), pp. 91-127. On Theodosius, cf. E. Amann, "Théodose d'Alexandrie," *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, XV, 1 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1946), 325-28; M. Chaine, "Sermon de Théodose, patriarche d'Alexandrie," *Revue de l'Orient chrétien*, XXIX (1933-34), 272-314.

⁶ Pseudo-Evodius, *The Falling Asleep of Mary*: J. Robinson, *Coptic Apocryphal Gospels*, pp. 44-69. In posing as Peter's successor in Rome, Pseudo-Evodius was mistaken in his history, for Evodius is listed as the first successor of Peter at Antioch; cf. R. Devreesse, *Le Patriarcat d'Antioche* (Paris: Gabalda, 1945), p. 115.

⁷ Pseudo-Melito, *Transitus Mariae*: C. Tischendorf, *Apocalypses apocryphae* (Leipzig: Mendelsohn, 1866), pp. 124-36.

⁸ Pseudo-John, *Liber de dormitione Mariae* (*Ibid.*, pp. 95-112).

⁹ John of Thessalonica, *Dormitio dominae nostrae deiparae ac semper virginis Mariae* (Patrologia Orientalis, XIX [1926], 375-405); this is the widely acclaimed edition of M. Jugie.

then, we find explicit testimonies to Peter's primacy, actions showing the exercise of supreme power on the part of Peter, and indications that others recognized Peter as the head and leader of the Church.

In the fragmentary Syriac account from the end of the fifth century, Christ is represented as appearing to the Apostles as they were gathered about the tomb of Mary. It was Peter whom the Lord singled out and to whom He gave the first greeting. His first words were: "Greetings to thee, Peter, thou art the bishop."¹⁰ In the sermon of Theodosius it is to "Peter, my bishop" that Christ gives the command to watch over Mary.¹¹ When Pseudo-Evodius relates the various offices set up by Christ in the Church, he specifically mentions that the highest office was conferred upon Peter when he says that the Lord appointed Peter archbishop.¹² These statements are somewhat brief and sparse. However, it is in similar situations that other accounts expatiate on this idea and bring forth statements that emphasize in no little measure the primacy of Peter.

In the Latin account of Pseudo-Melito a question arose as to who was to bear the palm which the angel had brought to Mary. It was then that John said to Peter: "Thou who art before us in the apostleship shouldst carry this palm before her bed."¹³ One of the manuscripts, utilized by Tischendorf for his edition of Pseudo-Melito, represents Peter as urging Paul to pray first. At this juncture Paul said to Peter: "Thine is the office to begin first, especially since thou hast been chosen by God as the pillar of the Church, and thou art before all in the apostleship."¹⁴

It is in the sermon of John of Thessalonica that the most developed statements on Peter's primacy appear. When Mary offered John the palm brought her by the angel, John said: "I cannot take it without my co-apostles, as long as they are not here, lest when they arrive murmuring and complaining break out among us. For, among them there is one who is greater than I, who has been set up over us."¹⁵ To complete the story of the palm, and to introduce the Apostle who is greater than John and set up over the others, we will pass to that part of the sermon that deals with Mary's burial. Peter pointed out that John was the Virgin Apostle and that he should march before the bed, singing psalms and carrying the palm.

¹⁰ *Obsequies of the Holy Virgin* (Wright, p. 46).

¹¹ Theodosius, *The Falling Asleep of Mary*, I, 6 (Robinson, p. 93).

¹² Pseudo-Evodius, *The Falling Asleep of Mary*, VI, 6 (*Ibid.*, p. 52).

¹³ Pseudo-Melito, *Transitus Mariae*, X, 1 (Tischendorf, p. 131).

¹⁴ C. Tischendorf, *op. cit.*, p. 127, n. IV; this is a later interpolation, as can be seen by comparing this with n. 17 below.

¹⁵ John of Thessalonica, *Dormitio Mariae*, 6 (Patrologia Orientalis, XIX, 385).

John, however, deferred to Peter and said: "Thou art our Father and Bishop, and thou shouldst take the stand in front of the bed."¹⁶

In the same sermon, after all the Apostles were gathered about Mary, Peter urged Paul to pray first. After excusing himself as being unworthy, Paul said to Peter: "Thou art the pillar of light, and all the other brethren are more worthy than I am. Thou therefore, O Father, pray for me and for all, that the grace of the Lord may remain with us."¹⁷ All the Apostles rejoiced over the humility of Paul and said: "Father Peter, thou hast been set up over us; thou pray before us."¹⁸

Another opportunity for these accounts to bring out testimonies to Peter's primacy is the discussion of Peter's place as pall-bearer. Just as the head is the principal member of the body, so Peter, as the head of the Church, was to carry Mary by the head. In the Coptic account of Pseudo-Evodius, Christ says to Peter: "And thou, O my chosen Peter, bear her head on thy shoulders."¹⁹ One of the manuscripts of Pseudo-Melito mentions that Peter bore the head.²⁰ John of Thessalonica portrays Peter as standing at the head of Mary's deathbed.²¹ However, the most precise statement in this regard is found in the sermon of Theodosius. Christ is portrayed as addressing Peter: "Peter, my bishop, bear her head on thy shoulders, for thou art the head of the Church after me."²²

The opening chapters of the Acts of the Apostles show the primacy of Peter in action; the same is true of this *Transitus* literature. Peter's actions and activity reveal him as the head and leader of the apostolic band. In all things Peter takes the lead and initiative; it is to Peter that the other Apostles defer. It would be tedious and repetitious to cite every individual instance in which this is verified. It seems better to group such instances under specific headings, and in this way to indicate the general trend and tenor of these documents.

In those accounts that presuppose the dispersion of the Apostles before the death of Mary, there is the story of the miraculous gathering of the Apostles on clouds or chariots to be present with Mary in her last days. When the Apostles are gathered together, there is no doubt whatsoever as to who their leader is. In the Syriac account of Pseudo-James, Peter is

¹⁶ *Dormitio Mariae*, 13 (*Ibid.*, p. 398).

¹⁷ *Dormitio Mariae*, 7 (*Ibid.*, p. 386).

¹⁸ *Dormitio Mariae*, 7 (*Ibid.*, p. 387).

¹⁹ Pseudo-Evodius, *The Falling Asleep of Mary*, XIV, 4 (Robinson, p. 61).

²⁰ C. Tischendorf, *op. cit.*, p. 131, n. 2.

²¹ John of Thessalonica, *Dormitio Mariae*, 12 (*Patrologia Orientalis*, XIX, 395).

²² Theodosius, *The Falling Asleep of Mary*, VI, 6 (Robinson, p. 111).

represented as being snatched away on a cloud and standing between heaven and earth, while he waits for the other Apostles to come to him. The other Apostles are portrayed as being carried on chariots of lights that all converged on Peter. When they were gathered round Mary, she asked them to tell where they came from and how they knew she was dying. It is at this point that the account goes on to say: "Peter said to all the Apostles, Let each one of us tell the Blessed Mary how the Holy Spirit spoke to him; and whence we came."²³ In the Greek account of Pseudo-John the same incident is recorded, and again it is Peter who steps forth and bids the Apostles tell Mary how they were gathered unto her.²⁴ When John of Thessalonica describes the coming of the Apostles on clouds, he expressly states that the first to come down was Peter. When all were gathered around Mary, they were somewhat perplexed to see themselves reunited. At this point Peter stepped forth and bade the Apostles to pray to God that they might find out the reason for their reunion.²⁵ Later on, Peter, hailed by the other Apostles for his wisdom, delivered addresses, first to the Apostles, then to the virgins, and finally to the people.²⁶

In general, it was Peter who at the express command of Christ made the arrangements for Mary's funeral. Describing the apparition of Christ to the Apostles the day before Mary died, Pseudo-Evodius writes: "And our Savior saluted His virgin Mother, and afterwards He saluted my father Peter . . . and last of all He said to my father Peter, Make haste and prepare the altar, that I may give a blessing unto you today."²⁷ The following day when Christ again appeared He "turned to my father Peter, and said to him, Take care of the altar, that I may give a blessing to you, for I must take a great offering from your midst today."²⁸ It was to Peter that Christ addressed the order to "look upon the altar and bring Me these pure garments which My Father has sent Me from heaven, that I may shroud My blessed Mother in them."²⁹ Describing the orders of Christ for Mary's burial, Theodosius writes: "He said to me, even to me Peter and to John, Make haste, shroud the body of My mother before I go away from you."³⁰ In the Latin account of Pseudo-Melito, it is to Peter that the Lord says: "Arise, Peter, and take the body of Mary and bring it to the right of the city

²³ Pseudo-James, *Transitus Mariae*, II (Lewis, p. 30).

²⁴ Pseudo-John, *Liber de Dormitione Mariae*, 16 (Tischendorf, p. 100).

²⁵ John of Thessalonica, *Dormitio Mariae*, 7 (Patrologia Orientalis, XIX, 386).

²⁶ *Dormitio Mariae*, 9-12 (*Ibid.*, pp. 389-95).

²⁷ Pseudo-Evodius, *The Falling Asleep of Mary*, VI, 5 (Robinson, p. 51).

²⁸ *The Falling Asleep of Mary*, VII, 4 (*Ibid.*, p. 52).

²⁹ *The Falling Asleep of Mary*, VIII, 11 (*Ibid.*, p. 56).

³⁰ Theodosius, *The Falling Asleep of Mary*, VI, 2 (*Ibid.*, p. 111).

to the east, and there thou shalt find a new tomb in which thou shalt place it."³¹

Specifically, it was Peter who began the psalmody, and who gave the sign for the procession to start. In Pseudo-James, just before Mary died Christ called on Peter to raise his voice in psalmody.³² Of the same incident, Pseudo-John writes: "And the Lord turned and said to Peter, The time is come to begin the song of praise."³³ In Pseudo-Melito the psalmody began after Mary died and was a sign for the funeral procession to start. Peter lifted his voice and gave orders that the body of Mary be borne aloft. Then he began the psalmody by intoning *Exiit Israel de Aegypto*.³⁴ When John of Thessalonica describes the same scene he mentions that the Apostles carried the bed of Mary and that Peter took the lead in starting the singing of the psalms.³⁵

Peter's preeminence and headship is also seen in the accounts of conversations between Christ and the Apostles. Christ asks questions of the Apostles, and invariably it is Peter who is singled out as the one who gave the answer in the name of all. After describing how Christ asked the Apostles why they were sad, Pseudo-Evodius goes on to say: "Our father Peter said to Him, My Lord and my God, we weep over the great bereavement that shall befall us."³⁶ Similarly, when the Apostles were gathered round the tomb awaiting the resurrection of Mary, Christ asked the same question and again it was Peter who gave the answer.³⁷ In Pseudo-Melito, after Christ asked the Apostles what He should do for Mary, it was "Peter and the other Apostles" who requested Him to raise up the body of Mary in glory just as He had risen in glory from the dead.³⁸

Finally, in the *Transitus* literature there are indications that others recognized Peter's position as head and leader. As is evident, many of the passages already cited are testimonies to the fact that Mary, John, Paul, and the Apostles as a group recognized Peter's primacy. As is evident, also, in this literature, as in the canonical writings, Peter always heads the list in the enumeration of the Apostles; furthermore, these documents are replete with such phrases as "Peter and the other Apostles." However, there is one particular incident in these apocryphal writings which shows

³¹ Pseudo-Melito, *Transitus Mariae*, VIII, 1 (Tischendorf, p. 129 f.).

³² Pseudo-James, *Transitus Mariae*, IV (Lewis, p. 58).

³³ Pseudo-John, *Liber de Dormitione Mariae*, 44 (Tischendorf, p. 109).

³⁴ Pseudo-Melito, *Transitus Mariae*, X, 2 (*Ibid.*, p. 131).

³⁵ John of Thessalonica, *Dormitio Mariae*, 13 (Patrologia Orientalis, XIX, 398).

³⁶ Pseudo-Evodius, *The Falling Asleep of Mary*, VIII, 4 (Robinson, p. 54).

³⁷ *The Falling Asleep of Mary*, XVIII, 3 (*Ibid.*, p. 64).

³⁸ Pseudo-Melito, *Transitus Mariae*, XV, 3 (Tischendorf, p. 134).

that Peter's primacy was recognized by others. This is the episode of the attempt to overthrow the body of Mary as it was being carried to the grave. Rather than give repeated accounts of the story in the different versions, it seems sufficient to single out the account of Pseudo-Melito. The story is concerned with a Jewish priest who made an effort to overthrow the bier and cast the body of Mary on the ground. At once his hands dried up from the elbows and clung to the bier. When the Apostles again took up the body of Mary, the priest was in extreme agony. Though all the Apostles were present, it was to Peter that he cried out saying: "I implore thee, O holy Peter, do not despise me in this terrible predicament, for I am tormented with excruciating pain."³⁹ Peter led him to faith in Christ whom Mary had borne, with the result that he was healed in body and soul. Then, on Peter's orders, he became a means of winning over many of his race to faith in Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Mary.

Such is the testimony to Peter's primacy in the *Transitus Mariae*. The testimonies come from documents written in Syriac, Coptic, Greek, and Latin; they come from the Syriac and Coptic-speaking East, the Greek-speaking Byzantine world, and the Latin-speaking West. When M. Jugie wrote his introduction to the sermon of John of Thessalonica, he noted the marvellous testimony that it contained to the primacy of Peter. In this regard he writes: "Peter always occupies the first place. It is Peter who always speaks first, who always takes the initiative. It is Peter to whom the others defer the most honorable roles."⁴⁰ The foregoing pages have not only pointed out that this is true of John of Thessalonica, but they have also shown that the primacy of Peter is a theme that runs through the earlier accounts of the *Transitus*. Such testimonies to Peter's primacy throw added light on the value of these documents. Though these documents are of no value in reporting history, they are of tremendous value in recording and mirroring doctrinal tenets. The foregoing testimonies are a factual proof of how important these documents are for the historian of dogma. Specifically, they throw light on the doctrine and acceptance of the primacy of Peter. In these documents, as a whole, it can be said that Peter is the head, that Peter always occupies the first place.

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³⁹ *Transitus Mariae*, XII, 1 (*Ibid.*, p. 132).

⁴⁰ M. Jugie, *Homélies mariales byzantines*, X: *Saint Jean, archevêque de Thessalonique* (*Patrologia Orientalis*, XIX, 373); "La Vie et les oeuvres de Jean de Thessalonique," *Echos d'Orient*, XXI (1922), 305-7.