



Özet: *Meryem'in yaşamına ilişkin apokrif bir öykü olan Acı Su Deneyi, erken dönemden itibaren başta Bizans sanatı olmak üzere Doğu ikonografisinde yer bulurken Batı sanatında örneklerine rastlanmayan bir temadır. Apokrif Yakup İncili'nde geçen bu anlatı, tapınağın başkahini tarafından Meryem'in bekaretinin sınanmasını konu etmektedir. Bu temanın sanat tarihindeki başlıca örneklerini, Kapadokya kiliselerinin fresk çevrimlerindeki sahneler oluşturur. Acı Su Deneyi sahnelerini, Doğu ve Batı Kiliselerinin apokrif metinlere yaklaşımı ve "Meryem'in ebedi bakireliği" öğretisi bağlamında ele alan bu çalışma, söz konusu apokrif anlatıya Batı sanatında yer verilmeyişinin nedenleri üzerine bir çözümleme ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.*

Anahtar sözcükler: *Acı Su Deneyi, Meryem'in bakireliği, Apokrif Yakup İncili, ikonografi, Kapadokya.*

Abstract: *From early periods on, while finding a place especially in Byzantine art and in Eastern iconography, 'The Trial by Water', an apocryphal story about Mary's life, has been a theme absent from Western art. The narrative which takes place in the Protevangelium of James is about the testing of Mary's virginity by the priest of the temple. The significant examples of this theme in history of art can be found in the scenes of the fresco cycles of the Cappadocian churches. Discussing the Trial by Water scenes in the context of the approach of Western and Eastern Churches to the apocryphal texts and the "perpetual virginity of Mary", this study aims to give an analysis of the reasons for the exclusion of this apocryphal narrative in Western art.*

Key words: *Trial by Water, virginity of Mary, Protevangelium of James, iconography, Cappadocia.*

Résumé: *Tout en trouvant une place en iconographie orientale dès le début du christianisme, particulièrement dans l'art byzantin, l'"épreuve des eaux amères" qui est une histoire apocryphe concernant la vie de Marie, est un sujet absent dans l'art occidental. Le récit qui se trouve dans le Protévangile de Jacob a comme thème la virginité de Marie mise à l'épreuve par le prêtre du temple. Les exemples significatifs de ce thème dans l'histoire de l'art peuvent être trouvés dans les scènes des cycles de fresque des églises cappadociennes. Discutant l'"Épreuve des eaux amères" dans le contexte de l'approche des églises occidentales et orientales dans les textes apocryphes*

et «la virginité perpétuelle de Marie», cette étude vise à donner une analyse sur les raisons particulières de l'absence de ce récit apocryphe dans l'art occidental.

Mots-clés: *Epreuve des eaux amères, la virginité perpétuelle de Marie, le Protévangile de Jacob, l'iconographie, Cappadoce.*

The subject of this study is the narrative of “The Trial by Water”, a story about Mary’s life found in the apocryphal narratives and yet missing in Western iconography. This text aims to make a contribution to the field of the study of Christian iconography from Asia Minor. The story, which is not mentioned in the Canonical Gospels, is taken from the Protevangelium of James, written in the 2nd century and narrating the birth of Mary, her childhood, her marriage and the events that happened during the childhood of Christ. According to the narrative, when the high priest of the temple learns that Virgin Mary who was entrusted to Joseph is pregnant, he interrogates both Mary and Joseph in the temple:

“And the priest said (to Joseph): ‘Give back the virgin whom you have received from the temple of the Lord.’ And Joseph began to weep. And the priest said: ‘I will give you both to drink the water of conviction of the Lord, and it will make your sins manifest in your eyes.’ And the priest took it and gave it to Joseph to drink and sent him into the hill-country, and he returned whole. And he made Mary drink also, and sent her into the hill-country, and she returned whole. And all the people marvelled, because sin did not appear in them. And the priest said: ‘If the Lord God has not revealed your sins, neither do I judge you.’ And he released them. And Joseph took Mary and departed to his house. Rejoicing and glorifying the God of Israel.” (Protevangelium of James 16)

A similar narrative can be seen in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. Hearing the rumors, the high priest summons Mary and Joseph to the temple and makes them drink the bitter water and rotate seven times around the altar. They are acquitted when the priest realizes that no symptoms appear in their bodies. It is necessary to mention the priest’s identity. According to the Protevangelium of James, the priest who tests Mary and Joseph is John the Baptist’s father Zachariah (Kostof 1972: 176) whereas according to the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew it is Abiathar (Elliot 1994: 89). The story of the testing of women who are accused of having deceived their husbands in the Old Testament (Numbers 5: 11-31) is taken as reference to the story mentioned in the Apocryphal Gospels. In accordance with God’s revelation, the priest makes the woman accused of having deceived her husband drink the bitter water in an earthen vessel. If her belly swells she is guilty; if no change takes place in her body her innocence will be substantiated. It is noteworthy that Joseph, as well as Mary, drinks from the bitter water in the Apocryphal Gospels because this trial is conducted only on women in the Old Testament.

The story about the Trial by Water conducted to test Mary’s virginity is a theme seen in early period ivory reliefs from Eastern Christian art. The throne of Maximianus, dating back to the 6th century, is an example to the earliest depictions of the subject. In one of the reliefs on the throne, Mary is about to

drink the water and Joseph leaning against a rod is watching her (Fig. 1). In the background of this composition, an angel is added to the scene. The presence of an angel instead of the priest can be interpreted as a sign of the divinity of the trial (Schiller 1971: 167). In an ivory Gospel cover belonging to the same period, the high priest, instead of an angel, presenting the bitter water vessel to Mary is depicted (Fig. 2).

After these early examples, the Trial by Water became a theme dealt with in Byzantine art. This apocryphal story is found especially in the fresco cycles of the churches of Cappadocia (Tokalı, H. Eustathios, Aynalı, Kılıçlar, Bahattin Samanlıđı, Eğritaş, Pürenli Seki Churches) (Ötüken 1987; 1990). In the frescoes of the Tokalı Church dating back to the 10th century, after the Annunciation and Visitation scenes, Mary and Joseph are seen in the presence of the high priest (Figs. 3-4). While Mary is drinking the water from the vessel given by the high priest, Joseph, depicted in the background, is also drinking water from the vessel in his hands. Next to this composition there is another depiction showing that no physical change has occurred in Mary's and Joseph's bodies, thus revealing their innocence. The main source for the painting program about Mary's life and Christ's childhood in the churches of Cappadocia is the Protevangelium James. In the frescoes, instead of the narratives from the Canonical Gospels with apocryphal details, the apocryphal stories from the Protevangelium of James with details from the Gospel of Matthew are depicted (Kostof 1972: 184). Especially the first eight scenes from this cycle follow the narrative system of this apocryphal text (Akyürek 1998: 325). In this context, one can observe that the scene of the Trial by Water is usually added to the fresco program in the cycles which begin with the Annunciation.

The Trial by Water is a narrative seen mostly in Byzantine art and Eastern iconography but it is less known in Western art. That the Church of S. Maria in Castelseprio (the 9th and 10th centuries) and the Church of San Marco in Venice (the 12th century) both have the Trial by Water depictions in their fresco cycles can be associated with their Byzantine influenced painting programs and iconographical features (Leveto 1990: 393-413; Mâle 2000: 245). On the other hand, while the Protevangelium of James comprises many narratives about the birth of Mary, her childhood, her education at the temple and her marriage, which are also seen in Western iconography, it is noteworthy that the Trial by Water which also takes place in the same source is a theme that has gone undepicted in Western art. At this point, it is crucial to point out the difference between the approach of Eastern and Western Churches to the apocryphal texts. While the Western Church, with the *Decretum Gelasianum* in the 5th century, rejected the literary tradition which she defined as apocryphal, in the Christian world of the East there was no such official decision to reject it. Nevertheless, from the 13th century on, some apocryphal stories about Mary (her birth, presentation at the temple, ascension, etc.) started to take their place in Western iconography. The emergence of such circumstances is closely related to the importance attached to Mary by the Catholic Church. Her story before the birth of Christ is only mentioned in the apocryphal texts. Moreover, Mary's birth and her presentation at the temple, which are celebrated as feasts by the Eastern Church, started to be celebrated from the 12th century on in the West. The *Golden Legend*, written

in the 13th century, is a source which shaped Western iconography with the reinterpretation of Gospel stories. The early life of Mary in the apocryphal texts is also treated in the *Golden Legend* and this paved the way for the depiction of such scenes in Western art. Thus, many themes in Western art, such as the Meeting at the Golden Gate, the Birth of Mary, and the Presentation at the Temple find their source in the Protevangelium of James.

While dealing with the early life of Christ, the Protevangelium of James is a text –within the context of its narratives– which focuses mainly on the life of Mary, which is not narrated in the Canonical Gospels. At the time it was written, there were attacks on the sanctity of Mary so it can be claimed that this text bears an apologetic quality (Elliot 1994: 50; Hock 1995: 15). Pagan texts (Celsus, *True Doctrine* etc.) claiming that Mary was from a poor, lower class family doubted her purity. Whereas the Protevangelium of James, which held that Mary was from a wealthy and eminent family in that society, emphasized her purity, sanctity and most of all her virginity. In this context, the most pivotal point of the text was the idea of Mary’s glorification (Elliot 1994: 50).

In the Protevangelium of James, Mary’s being brought up at the temple, her being fed by an angel and her contribution to the sewing of the temple curtain alongside with other virgins are cited as signs of Mary’s purity and chastity. Furthermore, this notion of purity is reinforced with the belief that she retained her virginity before and during her pregnancy as well as after giving birth to Christ. While Mary’s conception as a virgin is also stated in the Canonical Gospels, the view that she still retained her virginity appears only in the apocryphal texts. In fact, the narrative of the Trial by Water, in which the high priest of the temple makes Mary and Joseph drink the bitter water in front of an audience, clearly attests to the conservation of Mary’s virginity during her pregnancy. Alongside with this trial, Salome’s –the midwife who helped Mary in the labor– skeptical physical examination of Mary (Protevangelium James 19; 20) can be considered as another proof of Mary’s retaining her virginity even after her delivery. At this point, the Trial by Water and Midwife Salome are narratives that confirm the perpetual virginity of Mary in a process in which her sanctity and virginity are interrogated.

The major counter-thesis against Mary’s virginity is attributable to the indication of Christ’s having some siblings mentioned in the Canonical Gospels (Matthew 12: 46; 13: 55; Mark 3: 31; 6: 3; Luke 8: 19 etc.). The siblings who are mentioned in the Canonical Gospels are stated as the children of Joseph from his previous marriage in the Protevangelium of James (9: 2). This view which is adopted by the apocryphal texts has not been accepted by the Western Church. Jerome (340/42-420), one of the Latin Fathers of the Church, labeled the apocryphal narratives about the testing of Mary’s virginity as ‘raving’ and played an important part in the decline of this doctrine which was put forth in the Protevangelium of James (Jerome: X). Jerome, in his text “*Against Helvidius: on the Perpetual Virginity of the Virgin Mary*” (383), wrote in opposition to Helvidius, who criticized the notion of Mary’s perpetual virginity, that the brothers and sisters of Christ mentioned in the Canonical Gospels were the children of Mary’s sister, in other words the cousins of Christ.

From the earliest periods of Christianity, the notion of Mary's virginity was among the points of attack for pagan writers, which also became the basic motive of Jerome's work. Taking the Old and the New Testament as references, Jerome, who severely reproaches the 'trial' narratives in the apocryphal texts, states that Mary retained her virginity before (*virginitas ante partum*), during (*virginitas in partu*) and after giving birth to Christ (*virginitas post partum*). The Church Fathers founded this doctrine on a verse from the Old Testament; "This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it" (Ezekiel 44: 2). Narratives of the Old Testament like the Burning Bush, the Enclosed Garden (*hortus conclusus*), the Sealed Fountain and some others have been accepted as symbols of Mary's virginity in the context of prefiguration. The apocryphal narratives which contain the proofs of Mary's virginity were rejected by Jerome and were not taken as reference points in his text that he wrote against the attacks of pagan texts. The doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary established by Jerome was adopted by the theologians following the era of the Church Fathers and the Papacy and has thus become a dogma of the Catholic Church.

The Marian cult developed in the 12th and 13th centuries in the Western world. The notions of *Theotokos* (Mother of God) and the Immaculate Conception became a matter of serious dispute among the Franciscan and Dominican Orders. While the Franciscans believe that Mary was purged of all sins, including the Original Sin, from the moment she was conceived, the Dominicans consider this doctrine a heresy. The Papacy avoided this dispute but in 1476 the Birth of Mary started to be celebrated as a feast and after the Counter-Reformation, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was accepted as a dogma by Pope Pius IX in 1854. Following these religious transformations, subject matters handled in the *Golden Legend*, such as the themes of Ascension, Coronation of Mary, became eminent in Western iconography, and Mary in the Coronation scenes came to symbolize directly the Church. With the coming of the Counter-Reformation, these scenes were replaced by the Immaculate Conception scenes.

The theological debates which are briefly summarized above prove that although various apocryphal narratives related to Mary's life have been depicted in Western art, the narrative of the Trial by Water has hardly found a place in the iconographic program. In Western iconography, in which the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity has been accepted as a dogma, the narrative of the Trial by Water has not been embraced as an image supporting the dogma of Mary's virginity during pregnancy. However, the earliest written source related to the doctrine of Mary's virginity is the Protevangelium of James, which also comprises the narrative of the Trial by Water and this very source has played a significant part in the progress of the Marian cult. As a matter of fact, this text which has not been accepted as canonical by the Eastern and Western Churches and even condemned in the West was an important reference for Byzantine art as illustrated in the Cappadocia fresco cycle. However, Western art has 'wisely' chosen not to add some of the apocryphal narratives about Mary's life, which have been depicted pervasively by Eastern iconography, to its iconographic program (Mâle 2000: 245). The reason for this attitude lay in the reproach of the Church Fathers—and especially of Jerome—to the apocryphal stories about Mary's virginity. On the other hand, it can be claimed that although the Catholic Church, which acknowledges the

doctrine of the Immaculate Conception and regards Mary as a devotional figure symbolizing the Church itself, still does not approve of this apocryphal narrative in which Mary is tested to substantiate her innocence.



Fig.1: Throne of Maximianus, ivory plaque, 6th century, Museo Arcivescovile, Ravenna.



Fig. 2: Gospel book cover, ivory relief, 6th century, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.



Fig. 3: Fresco, Tokalı Church (Old Church), early 10th century, Cappadocia (Photograph: Arzu Toraman).



Fig. 4: Fresco, Tokalı Church (New Church), end of the 10th century, Cappadocia (Photograph: Arzu Toraman).

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