

Two Views of Mary's Faith

By

Brandon P. Otto

August 22, 2016

Two Views of Mary's Faith

For many Catholics, a focus in Marian devotion is on Mary's Fiat. By this simple declaration, Mary proclaimed her unshakeable faith in the divine plan; this immovable faith is one of her greatest virtues, and it is one of the aspects of the Mother of God that is most frequently held up as an example for the lives of the faithful. In this view of Mary's unbendable trust in God, Mary's question of "How can this be, since I do not know man?" has no element of doubt or faithlessness; rather, it is only a request for information to enlighten her ignorance. Thus she is saying, "Please tell me how this will occur, though I have no doubts that it will occur." There are other ways, however, to view the faith and—if there is any—doubt of Our Lady, and this paper explores two such views, both from Syrian writers: those of St. Jacob of Serug and those of St. Antipater of Bostra.

Jacob of Serug is, along with St. Ephraim, whom Jacob took as his theological model, one of the greatest poets of the Syrian Church.¹ He lived, roughly, between 451 and 521.² According to an anonymous *Life of Jacob of Serug*, as a three-year-old child, during the epiclesis of a Divine Liturgy, he ran up to the altar and received "three 'handfuls' of the Holy Spirit," which allowed him to preach and write with great skill, beginning with a homily on the *Merkabah* (the chariot of the Lord in Ezekiel's first vision) written when he was 22 years old.³

¹ See Sebastian Brock, "Introduction," in Jacob of Serug, *On the Mother of God*, trans. Mary Hansbury, Popular Patristic Series 19 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 2; Alexander Golitzin, "The Image and Glory of God in Jacob of Serug's Homily, 'On That Chariot That Ezekiel the Prophet Saw,'" 2002, <http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/Serug.html> (accessed August 22, 2016). A version of Golitzin's paper was also published in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 47 (2003): 323-64.

² See E. Hyvernath, "James of Sarugh," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 8 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), in Kevin Knight, ed., *New Advent*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08278a.htm> (accessed August 22, 2016).

³ "Life of Jacob of Serug" in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 15.

After being a travelling preacher (*periodeutes*) for most of his life, he became bishop in 519, at the age of 67, only a couple of years before his death.⁴ One Syriac writer, Gregory Bar-Hebraeus, claims Jacob penned 760 homilies in dodecasyllabic verse, along with assorted prose works, but only a portion of these are currently in our possession.⁵ It is these poetical homilies which concern us here, particularly a few which deal with the Annunciation and the Visitation.

In *Homily I*, after praising Mary's many virtues and stating that God choose her to be His Mother because she was the holiest of women, Jacob begins to recount the story of the Annunciation.⁶ The great Watcher (a common Syriac term for the angels) Gabriel comes to meet the humble, virtuous Mary, and "with prayers and in limpidity [*shafyuta*] and in simplicity, / Mary received that spiritual revelation."⁷ As the translator, Mary Hansbury, notes, limpidity, or *shafyuta*, is an important Syriac term that "indicates a receptivity to revelation"; Sebastian Brock also describes it as "purity," "luminosity," or "transparency," as well as receptivity: a luminous heart is a fertile soil for the seed of the Word.⁸ This description of Mary's receptivity implies some form of faith in what God wants to work through her, a faith that exists even at the first appearance of Gabriel. There will be no concept of a skeptical woman finally won over to faith by miraculous words or deeds: instead, Mary is a faithful woman whose faith grows ever deeper as she hears ever more glorious words of revelation and experiences ever more of God's

⁴ See Hyvernât; Goltizin.

⁵ See Hyvernât.

⁶ On God's choice of Mary, see particularly Jacob, *Homily I*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 23 (B 620): "And if there were a soul <more> splendid and holy, / rather than hers, He would choose this one and forsake that one." The numbering of the homilies is that used by Hansbury in her translation; the page numbers marked "B" are the corresponding pages in the Syriac text given in Paul Bedjan, ed., *S. Martyrii, qui et Sahdona quae supersunt omnia* (Paris: O. Harassowitz, 1902). The references to Bedjan's pages are those given by Hansbury.

⁷ Jacob, *Homily I*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 27 (B 625).

⁸ Jacob, *Homily I*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 27, n. 20; Sebastian Brock, trans., *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, Cistercian Studies 101 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publicans, Inc., 1987), xxviii-xxix.

almighty deeds. (In addition, though the earlier praises of her virtues do not mention faith specifically, it would be strange for Mary to be praised for her panoply of virtues and yet be lacking faith.)

The tale becomes more interesting once Jacob comes to discussing Mary's question to Gabriel after his initial greeting and discourse. Jacob lays strong emphasis on the importance of Mary's question. For one, the question asked by Mary, the New Eve, contrasts her with the old Eve, who did not question the serpent but instead "by her will kept silent and firmly believed the treachery."⁹ For another, Mary questioned so that we, the faithful who succeed her, might know about the manner of her divine birth-giving and how the Power of the Most High came upon her and how the Holy Spirit overshadowed her, for Gabriel did not explain these until after Mary's question.¹⁰ What most concerns us here, though, is what this event means for Mary's faith.

When Gabriel greeted the Mother of God, Jacob says that "Mary began to consent," in contrast to Eve.¹¹ Yet he also affirms that, "In that moment it was very necessary to question, / so that the mystery of the Son dwelling in her might be explained to her."¹² For Jacob, then, Mary herself—and not only the faithful after her—needed to receive an explanation from Gabriel. This was not because she could not keep silent, for it was equally easy for her to either keep silent or to ask questions.¹³ So why is it said that "she inquired, sought, investigated, learned and then kept silent"?¹⁴ Why was there a need for investigation before silence, if it

⁹ Jacob, *Homily I*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 32 (B 630).

¹⁰ See Jacob, *Homily I*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 32 (B 629-30).

¹¹ Jacob, *Homily I*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 29 (B 627).

¹² Jacob, *Homily I*, Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 32 (B 629).

¹³ See Jacob, *Homily I*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 33 (B 630).

¹⁴ Jacob, *Homily I*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 33 (B 630).

would have been easy for her to keep silent? We saw some of Jacob's answers already: "For if she had not asked him how it would be, / we would not have learned the explanation of the matter of the Son."¹⁵ It is not due to a lack of virtue, for she would not have come to speak before the Watcher without "sublime impulses," and without "inner and outer beauty," Gabriel would not have answered her.¹⁶ Yet no mention of Mary's faith is made in connection with this question; the previously-mentioned explanations from Jacob constitute the full reason for the necessity of the questioning. From merely reviewing *Homily I*, it appears Mary was impelled to question Gabriel's greeting in order to 1) be a contrast to the credulous Eve and 2) to prompt the angel's explanation of the manner of her conceiving for the enlightenment and edification of Christians. Later homilies, though, reveal to us the role this question had in Mary's faith.

Homily II begins by re-presenting the tale of the Annunciation already seen in *Homily I*, before continuing on to the Visitation. Throughout this homily, Jacob greatly expands the dialogues given in Scripture, and he even adds entirely new events (unlike in Scripture, Joseph speaks in Jacob's homily).¹⁷ After a longer greeting from Gabriel, praising the Mother of God as "castle of holy things and full of virtues, / harbour of mysteries and new ship full of riches," Mary responds with an elongated question, with the final crux being these words: "From a virgin who would expect birth without marital union? / Tell your tale which is baffling and concealed from the intellect. / How will what you say come to pass, as you say it? / Either explain it to me or it will not be easy for me to consent."¹⁸ The first of these couplets could accord with an

¹⁵ Jacob, *Homily I*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 38 (B 635).

¹⁶ Jacob, *Homily I*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 38 (B 635).

¹⁷ For Joseph's vocalizations, see Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 58-59, 62 (B 655, 658).

¹⁸ Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 45 (B 641-42).

unswerving, unbending faith on Mary's part: one can have faith in what one cannot understand, what is "concealed from the intellect." After all, the Letter to the Hebrews says, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."¹⁹ But Mary goes farther than merely expressing ignorance: she goes so far as to say, "I will have difficulty accepting this without further explanation." That does not seem to be a faith as unshakeable as a cedar! She appears to be balancing her acceptance on how much she understands of what will occur to her, how much she could fore-see, we might say. Now, she only says "it will not be easy for me to consent," not, "I will not consent"; this does not have the force of Jacob's "I will not let you go, unless you bless me."²⁰ Yet this does seem opposed to the common devotional image of Mary's pure, unquestioning acceptance of God's will, whether she understood it or not.

Now, we should not exaggerate the slightly uncertain faith here expressed. Jacob clearly states later that "Mary firmly believed all which the faithful Watcher had said," so this is only a passing moment of uncertainty; yet it needed to be resolved in order for her to receive the promised conception.²¹ (Perhaps, we might say, though moving beyond Jacob's interpretation, the explanation provided by Gabriel and the fuller understanding it brought would make her consent complete, with consent being in some degree lacking without full understanding.)²² Indeed, she believed Gabriel's words regarding Elizabeth, and so she went to see her

kinswoman.²³ Jacob's description of the Visitation is beautiful, utilizing images such as the

¹⁹ Heb 11:1 (RSV-2CE).

²⁰ Gen 32:26 (RSV-2CE).

²¹ Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 49 (B 645).

²² I thank Mary Otto for suggesting this point.

²³ Ibid. On Elizabeth as Mary's kinswoman, Jacob interprets this to mean that they are both of the human race, and thus of the same kin; the angel, who called them kin, is of a different race, so all humans look like kin to him. This is how Jacob solves the issue of a Levite and a Judahite being kin. See Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 46-48 (B 642-45).

meeting of morning (Mary) and evening (Elizabeth) and a focus on the priestly character of Zachariah, Elizabeth, and John. Yet what concerns us here is the educational role of the Visitation. Elizabeth joins with Gabriel in being a witness to Mary, a witness that her Son was God.²⁴ Though the mystery of this conception was only perceived by the Father, Who revealed it only to Mary, it had been prophesied among the Levites, and so “it was mysteriously shown to the wife of the priest, / that she might speak with Mary concerning hidden things.”²⁵ Jacob goes into explicit detail as to how Elizabeth teaches Mary: besides explaining the wordless gestures of her husband and the inner leapings of her son, she also, along with Zachariah, taught Mary “the mysteries of the Son from the readings” of the prophets.²⁶ This is how Mary spends her three months in the home of Elizabeth: learning the prophecies that teach about her Son. Elizabeth even gives Mary a scroll of Isaiah so that she can better explain these matters to Joseph.²⁷ The line that truly affects our study here is the following: “They [Elizabeth and Zachariah] were encouraging her lest she doubt on account of her conception, / while they were narrating all which had been spoken in the prophecy.”²⁸ It is possible to read this as merely saying that Elizabeth and Zachariah thought Mary would doubt, not that there was necessarily the possibility of her doubting; but this could also provide more support to the idea that Mary struggled with doubt. Any doubt that might exist in her mind, of course, is assuaged; so, after she returns to

²⁴ Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 51-52 (B 648).

²⁵ Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 52 (B 649); see also 52 (B 648).

²⁶ Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 55 (B 652); on Zachariah’s gestures and Elizabeth’s explanations, see 53-55 (B 649-51). Though it seems possible that this story of Mary’s learning the prophets from Elizabeth and Zachariah could come from an apocryphal gospel, I have been unable to locate any other text giving this tale.

²⁷ Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 55-56 (B 652).

²⁸ Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 55 (B 652).

Nazareth, Mary urges Joseph not to doubt.²⁹ His doubt, though, is not assuaged until he receives a visit from Gabriel. It appears there is a parallel here, in Jacob's thought: both Mary and Joseph need to receive encouragement and explanation from both an angel and a human in order to assuage doubt in Mary's conception, though the order is reversed for them both (for Mary, Gabriel and then Elizabeth; for Joseph, Mary and then Gabriel). Words that describe Joseph could be easily applied to Mary, at least at the Annunciation: "he trembled while remaining steadfast, and he firmly believed everything, while hesitating."³⁰ One more interesting phrase relating to this issue occurs in *Homily II*: when speaking of the necessity of Joseph as Mary's guardian and as Christ's "reputed father," Jacob states that Joseph proclaims his fatherhood of Christ "lest scruples and doubts and anguish assail her."³¹ At first glance, Jacob seems to say that Mary would have doubts without Joseph's guardianship; however, in context, it makes more sense for him to be referring to the "gossip and ill-repute" that would attack Mary if she were not betrothed.³²

To summarize what is found in Jacob's *Homily II*, Mary is shown to have a hesitating faith. She admits that, without an explanation from Gabriel, she may not be able to accept and believe the conception that was to occur. She is also taught the prophecies about this conception by Elizabeth and Zachariah (thus making the Visitation an educational experience), and this helps assuage her doubts, as well as the doubts of Joseph. Despite these doubts, though, and

²⁹ Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 57 (B 654).

³⁰ Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 57 (B 654).

³¹ Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 62 (B 658). The issue of Joseph's reputed fatherhood will not be discussed here; a cursory glance makes it appear that Jacob believes that Mary and Joseph lied. After all, both knew that Christ's only father was the heavenly Father, and yet, "to strangers He was said to be the son of Joseph, / both by Joseph and by Mary who was a virgin" (62 (B 659)). However, an examination of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

³² Jacob, *Homily II*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 62 (B 658).

despite the fact that Mary's ignorance about the manner of conception was slowly remedied (first by Gabriel, then by Elizabeth and Zachariah), Mary still firmly believed; the best explanation of the state of her faith might be found in Jacob's above-cited words describing Joseph: "he trembled while remaining steadfast, and he firmly believed everything, while hesitating."

The penultimate homily from Jacob we will consider is *Homily III*, which again describes the Visitation. It opens with wondrous praises of the Incarnation and of Mary before moving to the Visitation itself; after repeating the imagery of morning and evening seen in *Homily II*, Elizabeth's greeting becomes a grand hymn of praise dripping with Old Testament allusions and imagery of fire. Mary's first words in this homily, coming immediately after Elizabeth's hymn of greeting, are these: "Speak, old woman, for it is right for you; speak / and cry out about the conception which confounds me greatly."³³ This is the strongest statement we have seen yet of Mary's confusion and doubt. She has already accepted the conception of Christ declared by Gabriel, yet she is still confused. The confusion does not last long, though: Elizabeth responds to Mary by declaring that John, not Gabriel (as Mary suspects), taught her this mystery. After this, Mary cries out in an expanded Magnificat, and no hint of doubt or confusion appears; instead, she proclaims that the Lord has worked wonders in her, wonders that will redeem mankind, and thus her name will be praised to all peoples and all generations.³⁴ Doubt is mentioned no more in the remainder of the homily, which focuses mainly on John the Baptist and his relation to Christ. From *Homily III*, then, we see that Mary still had doubts when she

³³ Jacob, *Homily III*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 80 (B 677).

³⁴ Jacob, *Homily III*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 81-83 (B 678-79).

went to visit Elizabeth, but the latter assuaged them and gave the Mother of God full confidence in what was to come.

The final homily to explore is Jacob's *Festal Homily I*, which, though technically a homily on the Nativity, deals heavily with Mary's faith. Near the homily's opening, Jacob emphasizes the fact that there is always mystery in God's revelation, such that "veiled is that human revelation of yours even from your mother" and "concealed is your story even from the watchers."³⁵ This apophatic theme is common in Jacob's thought, but it has a particular emphasis here, and it adds an interesting element to the depiction of Mary's faith.³⁶ After an opening, Jacob presents the Annunciation; in this portrayal, Mary questions who Gabriel is and who his lord is, before the key question of "How shall this be?" occurs. In explaining why Mary questions Gabriel about the manner of the conception, Jacob explains that she is "sagacious," and this is a rationale for Mary to be questioning and critical.³⁷ In this homily, Mary has the harshest question yet, paralleling Jacob's wrestling with the angel mentioned above: "O fiery one, if you are not propounding any explanation / in my ears the story that you are telling will not be

³⁵ Jacob, *Festal Homily I*, in Jacob of Serugh, *Selected Festal Homilies*, trans. Thomas Kollamparampil (Bangalore: Centre for Indian and Inter-Religious Studies and Dharamaram Publications, 1997), 41 (B 720). This is *Homily 6* in Bedjan's numbering in *S. Martyrii*; page references marked "B" are to the Syriac text in this edition.

³⁶ Elsewhere, Jacob even encourages remaining in a state of incomplete understanding and of wonder at hidden mysteries: "This is why the discerning soul should abandon the debate [over Christ] and be filled [instead] with the wonder of Christ. Let it be filled with the wonder Who is Christ! Whoever pries into the unsearchably Begotten [of the Father] no longer has wonder, and this is to say that he no longer has Christ in himself. If some investigation has set him off in search of wonder, this is because he has lost that wonder...Therefore, O soul, make haste rather to wonder, and take care to love. Be ready to worship. Keep yourself in a state of wonder...Open the door of your spirit to wonder" (P. Krüger, "Le caractère monophysite de la troisième lettre de Jacques de Saroug," in *L'Orient Syrien* 6 (1961), 306-7, qtd. in Golitzin).

³⁷ *Festal Homily I*, in Jacob, *Selected Festal Homilies*, 51 (B 730). Jacob also depicts Mary as sagacious in her questioning when she questions Simeon's prophecy in the Temple in *Festal Homily V*, in Jacob, *Selected Festal Homilies*, 151-52 (B 458-59). This homily is *Homily 165* in Bedjan's numbering in Paul Bedjan, ed., *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, Tome V (Leipzig: Otto Harassowitz, 1910); page reference marked "B" is to the Syriac text in this edition.

accepted,” continuing with “unless I have learned the truth, you shall not depart.”³⁸ Here, then, Mary adamantly asserts that a satisfaction to her questioning is needed before she will accept Gabriel’s message, a much stronger statement than in the other homilies explored, equivalent to the Patriarch Jacob’s demand to the wrestling angel. Though she also uses similar words to those above (a lack of explanation will make it hard for her to be “convinced”), she threatens Gabriel’s honor by challenging, “If you do not debate with me unto the end, you are not true.”³⁹ In his response, Gabriel explicitly points to Elizabeth’s pregnancy as a proof of his words.⁴⁰ Before proceeding directly to the Visitation and Mary’s encounters with Joseph, though, Jacob inserts a tangential explanation of Mary’s faith. This begins with an explicit contrast between Zachariah’s questioning of Gabriel and Mary’s questioning of him, with the former’s being a questioning that causes harm by doubt, since “he was there where there was not even any need for questions,” while Mary’s is an advantageous question.⁴¹ By her question, Mary “crushed inquiry for the audacious,” that is, she gave cause for an explanation of the manner of conception so that those coming after would not speak ill of her by ignorance.⁴² Her inquiry led her into the shining of truth; by it, she was rid of doubts, and Jacob uses a variety of cleansing images to unfold the meaning of this removal.⁴³ Jacob declares, “She asked, learned, and hence forth she

³⁸ *Festal Homily I*, in Jacob, *Selected Festal Homilies*, 52 (B 730-31). Another reference is made to Eve’s unquestioning acceptance of Satan’s promise, as seen above (52 (B 730-31)).

³⁹ *Festal Homily I*, in Jacob, *Selected Festal Homilies*, 53 (B 732). The view of this encounter as a debate is also found in *Homily I*, in Jacob, *On the Mother of God*, 29 (B 626-27).

⁴⁰ *Festal Homily I*, in Jacob, *Selected Festal Homilies*, 56 (B 734-35).

⁴¹ *Festal Homily I*, in Jacob, *Selected Festal Homilies*, 57 (B 736). On the two types of questions, advantageous and harmful, see *Festal Homily I*, 56 (B 735).

⁴² *Festal Homily I*, in Jacob, *Selected Festal Homilies*, 57 (B 736). As above, Mary’s question is a source of revelation: “Blessed is Mary who became an occasion for the hidden matter, / so that it might be said clearly by the angel (58 (B 736)).

⁴³ *Festal Homily I*, in Jacob, *Selected Festal Homilies*, 59 (B 738).

did not doubt. / The truth shone forth to her and after she saw it she did not inquire into it.”⁴⁴

Mary is thus confirmed in her faith after Gabriel’s response to her inquiry, and before meeting with Elizabeth, who does not teach her the prophecies in this account. To summarize the view in this homily, Mary had a very strong doubt upon first hearing Gabriel’s words, so strong that she would not even accept the conception until an explanation was given; yet this strong doubt was still reckoned to her as righteousness, since her question was advantageous and not harmful in its doubt, unlike Zachariah’s. Gabriel’s explanation and use of Elizabeth as a witness convinces Mary to such a degree that she is cleansed of doubts and is unswervingly firm in her faith afterwards, despite the fact that her knowledge was not truly complete, since no one can fully understand the Lord’s mysteries (as Jacob asserted at the beginning).

Now let us summarize Jacob of Serug’s view of Mary’s faith as seen in these four homilies, even though there are discrepancies and contradictions. When Gabriel came to Mary and proclaimed that she would bear the Son of God without the union of man, Mary believed firmly, yet she hesitated, according to some accounts; according to others, she was so doubtful that she would not accept the message without explanation. At least partly, this was due to ignorance: she did not know the manner of this conception, and she (apparently) was not aware of the prophecies about the Incarnation. She thus asked Gabriel to explain the manner of conception; this question and explanation would enlighten her ignorance, assuage her doubts, contrast Mary with Eve, and reveal the truth of the Incarnation to us, the faithful who would come after her. Despite her fierce demand for an explanation in some homilies, the Watcher’s

⁴⁴ *Festal Homily I*, in Jacob, *Selected Festal Homilies*, 59 (B 738).

words put her mind at ease enough to accept this great mystery. According to *Homily III* and *Festal Homily I*, this response assuaged all of her doubts: the Magnificat, according to *Homily III*, could be taken as confirmation of her faith and lack of doubt. According to *Homily II*, though, doubts still remained after her encounter with Gabriel, as she still remained ignorant of the prophecies and confounded by the manner of conception. Thus, during her three-month stay with Elizabeth and Zachariah after the Visitation, she was instructed in the prophecies, and she was strengthened so that she would not doubt. With this confidence and undoubting faith, she was able to strengthen Joseph and assuage his doubts, though he was not fully confident until after a visit from Gabriel.⁴⁵

It does not appear Jacob is consistent in his view of Mary's faith. All of the homilies show a transition from doubt to certainty, but some show the certainty occurring after Gabriel's visit, while *Homily II* shows it as only occurring after the Visitation. Numerically, at least in this sampling of his writing, it seems that Jacob holds more strongly to the former view (*Homily III* and *Festal Homily I* assert it, while only *Homily II* asserts the latter), but other homilies I was unable to obtain in translation may change that reckoning in light of his entire corpus of work. One possibility is that Jacob's view changed over time; however, neither Hansbury nor Bedjan give individual dates or conjectures of dates for these homilies, so I am unable to determine which is earlier. Another possibility is that Jacob did not try to form a consistent view but rather merely explained in his homilies based on however the events and words came to his mind at

⁴⁵ This two-fold strengthening of Joseph also occurs in *Festal Homily I*, in Jacob, *Selected Festal Homilies*, 68-75 (B 748-55).

that time.⁴⁶ Whatever the explanation for this inconsistency, it does exist. Despite it, though, we can still give a general summary of St. Jacob's view of Mary's faith: she had doubts upon Gabriel's announcement, and her question "How shall this be?" sought information to assuage her doubts. Either Gabriel's response alone solidified her faith, or it was the combination of his response and Elizabeth and Zachariah's exegesis of the prophets that did so; whichever the case, by the end of the Visitation, Mary was firm and unwavering in her faith, and she was able to pass this faith along to Joseph with the assistance of Gabriel.

Next we turn to our second writer, St. Antipater of Bostra. Little is known about him: he flourished about 460, and he was a Greek bishop in the Roman-controlled Syrian town of Bostra.⁴⁷ (Thus, both of these writers have Syrian connections, although Antipater only presided there.) His writings were highly regarded, particularly by the Second Council of Nicaea, and they included a grand and lengthy refutation of Origenism, which has only reached us in fragments. His works were read publicly in churches in the East to combat heresies (particularly Origenism and Apollinarianism), but we only have a few complete works and fragments remaining. Thankfully, two of these complete works are homilies that deal with the Annunciation, which we will be examining.

The first homily begins with the story of Zachariah before proceeding to the Annunciation. This sets the stage for the contrast between Zachariah's response to Gabriel and

⁴⁶ After all, the anonymous *Life* of St. Jacob implies that his homilies were preached through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: it may be that this inspiration caused Jacob to pronounce these contradictory stories at varying times.

⁴⁷ F.M. Rudge, "Antipater of Bostra," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), in Kevin Knight, ed., *New Advent*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01574b.htm> (accessed August 22, 2016). All following information regarding Antipater also comes from this source.

Mary's response, particularly between their questions, a point that was only seen briefly in Jacob's writings. After some opening praise of, musing on, and prayer to John the Baptist, as well as a short discussion of the Incarnation, Antipater begins to provide his account of Zachariah's meeting with Gabriel. Zachariah was in the Temple performing his priestly duties, when Gabriel appeared by the altar of incense, and the priest was confused as to how to proceed with his duties when this angel is present with him ("For we did not learn to concelebrate with angels").⁴⁸ He is afraid that Gabriel is coming to "collect" for his sins and the people's failings, and he will never be able to pay such a debt.⁴⁹ Thus Gabriel began by saying, "Do not fear, Zachariah": "First he threw out his fear, and then he dictated the Gospel, so that with untroubled soul Zachariah might receive the information."⁵⁰ Yet Gabriel's attempt at calming him was not successful, for after his message, "Zachariah became at once exceedingly glad and needlessly troubled."⁵¹ This "needless troubling" is the cause of Zachariah's downfall. It is this that causes him to inquire of Gabriel, and his inquiry is "without faith."⁵² Gabriel is furious at Zachariah's faithless question, and so he scorns the priest with harsh words and, at the end of his tirade, muteness. He rebukes the priest for not accepting the gift of a child with thanksgiving, but instead he demands more. In response to Zachariah's question, Gabriel claims his status as an angel, a messenger of God, as proof of the truth of his message; if that is not enough, he points to the many children born to sterile women in the Scriptures. He laments that, if the priest not even

⁴⁸ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* I.5, in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Cursus Completus..., Series Graeca* [henceforth PG], Tome 85 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1864), 1768C.

⁴⁹ See Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* I.5, in PG 85:1768C: "For did he come from the holy ministers not reckoning accounts?"

⁵⁰ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* I.6, in PG 85:1769A.

⁵¹ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* I.7, in PG 85:1769B.

⁵² Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* I.7, in PG 85:1769B.

believe this lesser message, despite so many examples, images, and proofs, then how could he ever receive the message of Christ's virginal birth? Since Zachariah is "disbelieving the lesser," and since "it is in [his] mind to receive a sign," Gabriel gives him "voicelessness, childmaking's pledge: be silent until the deeds confirm the words."⁵³ Then Zachariah exits the Temple, making the crowd outside aware of his silence, with Gabriel having (apparently) departed, and he returns home after his priestly days are over.

At first Zachariah is troubled rightly: it is a rare occurrence to meet an angel of God, and it is a fearful one. After all, an angel slew the first-born children of Egypt and slew the thousands of warriors in the Assyrians' camp. Yet, after Gabriel has allayed his fears and preached the miraculous childbirth to come, Zachariah continues to be troubled, this time "needlessly." This needless trouble prompts his faithless question. It is faithless because Zachariah has witnesses to the truth of the message 1) from the angel himself and 2) from the Scriptures. He has even heard in the Scriptures that a *virgin* shall be with child, as Gabriel reminds him; there is no reason for him to doubt that a mere old woman will give birth.⁵⁴

Next, Antipater passes to the Annunciation. Gabriel comes with his grand, expanded greeting, with many additions echoing the Greek tradition of *chairetismoi* (that is, strings of invocations beginning with the word "Rejoice" (*Chaire*), the most famous being the *Akathist* of St. Romanos the Melodist); Mary responds by "testing the voice" (βασανίζω can also mean "to investigate closely," "to cross-question," or even "to interrogate via torture").⁵⁵ She is wary of

⁵³ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* I.7, in PG 85:1772A. The following line explains the occurrence this way: "From the generating to the voicing organs may sterility's fetter pass over."

⁵⁴ See Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* I.7, in PG 85:1769D-72A.

⁵⁵ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* I.10, in PG 85:1772D.

Gabriel since 1) he is not human, 2) Joseph is not present, and 3) she does not want to be led away by a strange voice while alone, as the first-formed was by the originator of evil.⁵⁶ After Gabriel's response, Mary again questions him, this time about the manner of her conception. She specifically states that she is "not contradicting, but learning by question."⁵⁷ She openly states that she is not disbelieving the message she has heard; she merely wants to understand it better and know how she, alone of all woman, will bear a child without "childbearings' beginnings."⁵⁸ Gabriel responds by saying that he does not know the details of the manner, merely that it is God Who will make it occur; however, Elizabeth will also witness to the message, being a pledge of the Gospel he preached.

After Mary visits Elizabeth, who preaches Mary's blessings, as taught by her unborn child John, Antipater recounts John's birth. Zachariah's "fetter of unbelief" is removed at the end of his time of judgment, that is, the time of pregnancy, and so, while he "heard unbelievably," he "gratefully" or "prudently" wrote John's name and received back his voice.⁵⁹ With a final praise of John, Antipater ends his homily.

In *Homily I*, then, we see the antithetical nature of the two questions, Zachariah's and Mary's. The difference in tone is somewhat visible from the wording of their questions, at least in Antipater's interpretation. Zachariah asks, "By what will I know this?" Mary, on the other hand, asks, "How will this be?" Zachariah's question focuses on himself, on finding a sign by which he will know this will occur; he asks for a sign of proof. Mary, on the other hand, asks a

⁵⁶ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily I.10*, in PG 85:1772D-73A.

⁵⁷ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily I.10*, in PG 85:1773A.

⁵⁸ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily I.10*, in PG 85:1773B.

⁵⁹ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily I.13*, in PG 85:1776B.

more general question regarding the manner of what will occur. Thus Zachariah is manifesting unbelief, as Antipater says numerous times, unbelief in the angel's witness and in the witness of the Scriptures; Mary, on the other hand, is being prudent in her first questioning of Gabriel, and then merely inquisitive in her second. By the end of the homily, Zachariah appears to have learned some humility from his experience, as he wrote John's name "gratefully," "prudently," or "good-naturedly"; Mary's faith is not greatly examined, though. Her state of mind is not explained after Gabriel's final speech to her, nor after her visit to Elizabeth. Antipater's second homily, however, will expand on Mary's experience.

After a reference to his last homily, and a series of parallels between Zachariah's meeting with Gabriel and Mary's, Antipater moves to an account of the Annunciation itself. He again comments how Mary was troubled about the fact that a strange being was greeting her; this time, he specifies that the angel's voice was a man's voice, which made the experience even more troubling.⁶⁰ At Gabriel's preaching of the Gospel, Mary again "struggled and reasoned"; however, Antipater specifies, "when she heard the evangelic word, she did not still struggle against the word, but she was at a loss regarding the promise....She did not disbelieve the word: but she demanded [to know] the manner."⁶¹ Antipater then explicitly details the contrast between Zachariah and Mary, and between their questions: "Thus Zachariah disbelieved, yet the virgin did not disbelieve. That one at least said, *By what shall I know this?* He sought therefore a sign to receive, that he might believe. The virgin said, *How will this be?* This, then, is a word worthy of faith: 'The manner is impassable; nature does not know what you say.'"⁶² Gabriel, too, points

⁶⁰ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* II.4, in PG 85:1777C-77D.

⁶¹ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* II.6, in PG 85:1780B.

⁶² Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* II.6, in PG 85:1780B.

to Zachariah's failure as a foil: to the Virgin is allowed an answer to her question, but to Zachariah it was not allowed, for he is the one "who badly disbelieves," and thus he is bridled with silence.⁶³ One reason Mary's question is allowed is due to the fact that "there was not an example of a Virgin" giving birth, yet there were many examples in the Scriptures of sterile old women bearing children.⁶⁴ Thus Gabriel explains the work of God in the conception of Christ; unlike the last homily, where he said that only God could explain the manner of conception, this time "the angel neglected nothing, kept nothing silent."⁶⁵ After his elaboration, he again points to Elizabeth as a sign, and Mary pronounces her Fiat, at which the angel leaves. Antipater points out that Mary did not reject what was heard; she did not merely say, "I am a virgin. I do not know man; what you say does not have reason"; instead, she believed the angel's pronouncements "holily," and "she remained, the faith keeping, and the promise receiving."⁶⁶

After Gabriel's departure, Antipater turns, again, to the Visitation. Upon Elizabeth's greeting, Antipater proclaims that "Mary was evangelized from every direction," and he goes so far as to say that Elizabeth's prophesy makes Mary become "steadier in faith"; after this preaching, "not again, then, did she doubt."⁶⁷ These two words, one from an angel and one from a woman, joined together, and the Virgin received this joint proclamation. (This seems to imply that Mary was somewhat unsteady, or at least not steady to the most perfect degree, before the Visitation; however, Antipater did not mention this previously.) Her firm belief in the promise

⁶³ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* II.7, in PG 85:1780C. Zachariah's silence was also referred to as a "bit" in Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* I.8, in PG 85:1772B.

⁶⁴ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* II.7, in PG 85:1780C.

⁶⁵ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* II.9, in PG 85:1781B.

⁶⁶ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* II.11, in PG 85:1784A-84B.

⁶⁷ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily* II.15, II.16, in PG 85:1785B.

spoken to her is displayed in the first words of the Magnificat, according to Antipater; it shows, in particular, that she believed Elizabeth's greeting of "Blessed is she who believes."⁶⁸ Her saying that "the mighty one" had done great things to her confirms the fact that it is God the Almighty Who made her conceive, and thus "by the name of the mighty the unbelief [arising] from nature is thrown out."⁶⁹ After a line by line commentary on the Magnificat, Antipater ends his homily by calling all Christians to rejoice in the great work of the Incarnation.

Antipater's *Homily II*, then, puts the emphasis on Mary's faith, while *Homily I* focused more on Zachariah's disbelief and only briefly discussed Mary's mindset. The same contrast used in the first homily appears, where Mary wants to know the manner of her conception, but she emphatically does not "struggle" against the prophecy or "contradict" the message preached to her. Antipater explicitly details the contrasts between the two questions of Zachariah and Mary, showing that the former's question is focused on a sign while the latter's is a faithful request for knowledge. (We could say that Mary's question, in Antipater's view, is a perfect example of *fides quaerens intellectum*.) Besides this contrast, Antipater also hints that the Visitation confirmed Mary's faith ("not again did she doubt"), and the proclamation of the Magnificat affirms the total stability of this faith.

Now we can compare and contrast these two views. Jacob spends much more time discussing Mary's faith than does Antipater, though both tackle the issue of Mary's question to Gabriel, "How shall this be?" Both have a sense of Mary's question being a true search for knowledge about something she could not have known before; Zachariah's question, on the other

⁶⁸ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily II.18*, in PG 85: 1785D-88A.

⁶⁹ Antipater of Bostra, *Homily II.21*, in PG 85:1789A-89B.

hand, is a mere request for a sign in order to believe something that should be easily believable, given the great number of sterile women that have born children in the past, as reported by the Scriptures. Mary's lack of faith in what Gabriel speaks to her, then, seems to be mainly based on ignorance and lack of a model (as Antipater pointed out): she asks her question in order to learn what she could not have known, and in order that we, the faithful after her, can also know (as Jacob emphasizes). Antipater describes this episode as a struggle, though Mary did not disbelieve; however, Jacob goes so far as to say that Mary would possibly not accept the promised conception unless an explanation is provided.

In both writers, there is some aspect of a further stabilizing of Mary's faith during the Visitation. Jacob, though only in his *Homily II*, explains the details of this stay, saying how Elizabeth and Zachariah taught Mary the prophecies about her so that she would believe more strongly, while Antipater seems to think Elizabeth's greeting alone banished all doubt from Mary's mind. Whatever the case, both agree that Mary was without doubt after the Visitation, if not before (as in Jacob's *Festal Homily I*); there are also hints in certain of the writings of both (Jacob's *Homily III* and Antipater's *Homily II*) that Mary's proclamation of the Magnificat declares her firm, unbending faith and lack of doubt.

In conclusion, both Jacob of Serug and Antipater of Bostra share core similarities about Mary's faith, namely, that she had doubts when she asked Gabriel, "How shall this be?" While the details vary, both writers agree that Mary could not utter her Fiat until after receiving an answer to her question, and both (at least according to Jacob's *Homily II*) imply that even at the Fiat she was not fully unbending her faith but that the Visitation was necessary to some extent;

however, on the contrary, Jacob's *Festal Homily I* states Mary was without doubt prior to the Visitation. These views are a contrast to the typical view that Mary had an unbending faith even before the Annunciation and that Gabriel's greeting and message to her did not shake her faith at all; instead, Mary is shown to have doubts, though this does not mean that they were sinful doubts.⁷⁰ This paper does not argue that either Jacob's view or Antipater's view is the final truth regarding Mary's faith, but it proposes them as views to consider, views that show Mary as a model for those facing doubts about the Faith, and a model showing that one can doubt without sin.

⁷⁰ Jean Baptiste Abbeloos, *De vita et Scriptis Sancti Jacobi, Batnarum Sarugi in Mesopotamia Episcopi* (Leuven: Vanlinthout, 1867), 187-95, argues that Jacob of Serug not only believed in Mary's sinlessness but also in her Immaculate Conception. If Mary is sinless, then her doubts cannot be sinful.