

Epiphanius of Salamis, the Kollyridians, and the Early Dormition Narratives: The Cult of the Virgin in the Fourth Century

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The so-called Kollyridians of Epiphanius's *Panarion* are commonly regarded in modern scholarship as a group of Christian goddess worshipers who believed in the Virgin Mary's divinity. Yet a careful reading of Epiphanius's account, with close attention to his rhetoric, suggests instead that the Kollyridians merely were offering Mary a kind of veneration that during the late fourth century was increasingly directed toward Christian saints. The Six Books apocryphon, an early Dormition narrative from the fourth century, enjoins on its readers ritual practices almost identical with what Epiphanius ascribes to the Kollyridians, yet without any indication of belief in Mary's divinity. Comparison of this apocryphon with Epiphanius's description of the Kollyridians further suggests that the Kollyridian rituals do not necessarily amount to goddess worship or belief in Mary's divinity. Moreover, such comparison reveals that Epiphanius probably knew the Six Books apocryphon, either directly or indirectly, and his account of the Kollyridians likely responds in part to its early Dormition traditions.

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Epiphanius's *Panarion*, his "medicine chest" against the heresies, is a surprisingly important Marian text. In the midst of this massive and often vicious anti-heretical treatise, Epiphanius considers several important mariological topics, including the issue of Mary's postpartum virginity, the mystery of her departure from this world, and the rather distinctive ritual practices of a group that he names the "Kollyridians."¹ After knocking out the first seventy-seven of his opponents, some of whom may indeed be "straw men," Epiphanius turns toward the end of his treatise to consider two Marian "heresies," both of which he refutes at some length. The first of these, the so-called "Antidicomarianites," had dared to suggest that Mary and Joseph had sexual relations after Christ's birth, inspiring an aggressive defense of Mary's perpetual virginity from Epiphanius. Perhaps by this late point in the *Panarion* Epiphanius has begun to grow a little weary of his promise to deliver eighty heresies, reflecting the eighty concubines of Song of Songs 6.8, inasmuch as he dispenses with this seventy-eighth opponent by citing in full an earlier work, a *Letter to Arabia* in which he had previously rebuked this group and its blasphemies against the ever-virgin Mary. Although one may doubt whether there really was such a sect of Christians in Arabia, it is clear from other contemporary sources, including both Ambrose and Jerome, that this was a topic of considerable debate in the later fourth century.² In the very same letter, Epiphanius also introduces a second group, the Kollyridians, whom he subsequently identifies as his seventy-ninth and penultimate heresy. In contrast to the Antidicomarianites, these devotees of Mary are found guilty of having gone too far in the opposite direction with their excessive honor for the Virgin, and immediately after the *Letter to Arabia's* conclusion, Epiphanius turns to fuller consideration of this group and its practices.

The Kollyridians, as Epiphanius describes them, were a group of women first in Thrace and Scythia and then in Arabia who observed a distinctive and early form of Marian veneration and allowed women to serve as priests, both practices that he vigorously condemns. While Epiphanius's rejection of women priests is stridently clear from his account, the precise nature of the Kollyridians' alleged ritual practices is somewhat less obvious, and their admittedly unusual veneration of the Virgin has frequently been taken for the worship of Mary as some sort of goddess. Epiphanius's rhetoric certainly works to create this impression, and most modern

1. The name apparently derives from the bread—the κολλυρίς—that they offered to Mary.

2. See, e.g., David G. Hunter, "Helvidius, Jovinian, and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth-Century Rome," *J ECS* 1 (1993): 47–71.

scholars have followed him to this conclusion. The primary study of the Kollyridians remains an article from 1929 by Franz Dölger, in which he identifies numerous parallels from Greco-Roman goddess worship and postulates a connection with the Montanists based on a report from the east Syrian bishop Marutha of Maipherkat (ca. 400) and an assortment of much later testimonies from Syriac and Arabic sources.³ In subsequent years, understanding of the Kollyridians and their practices has progressed very little. The only significant study since Dölger's article is a chapter on the Kollyridians in Stephen Benko's *The Virgin Goddess*, which reiterates Dölger's questionable thesis about a connection to the Montanists and focuses largely on identifying additional parallels from Greco-Roman goddess worship.⁴ As a result, many scholars have all too readily followed the connections between Greco-Roman religions and the ritual practices ascribed to the Kollyridians to the conclusion that these Christians were indeed worshipping Mary as a deity.⁵

Nevertheless, it is worth reevaluating this received view of the Kollyridians and their rituals, particularly in light of more recent developments in the study of late ancient Christianity. For instance, in the first chapter of his groundbreaking work *The Cult of the Saints*, Peter Brown identifies a tendency of much previous scholarship on this topic to view the veneration of saints (including Mary) as a sort of "popular" survival of Greco-Roman religion, an alien intrusion into Christian faith and practice. Yet as Brown explains, such an approach, while identifying numerous illuminating parallels between these religious phenomena, fails to understand the basis of the cult of the saints in a logic native to the Christian tradition itself.⁶ Inasmuch as most previous scholarship on the Kollyridians

3. Franz J. Dölger, "Die eigenartige Marienverehrung der Philomarianiten oder Kollyridianer in Arabia," *Antike und Christentum* 1 (1929): 1–46. On the questionable value of these reports, see Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority, and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 222. These reports do not seem sufficient to connect the Montanists with Epiphanius's Kollyridians.

4. Stephen Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology*, *Studies in the History of Religions* 59 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 170–95.

5. For example, Martin Jugie, *La mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge, étude historico-doctrinale*, ST 114 (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944), 79–80; Ross Shepard Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings: Women's Religions among Pagans, Jews, and Christians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York: Oxford, 1992), 201; Benko, *Virgin Goddess*, esp. 173, 190; Vasiliki Limberis, *Divine Heiress: The Virgin Mary and the Creation of Christian Constantinople* (London: Routledge, 1994), 118; Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, trans. Thomas Buffer (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 122.

6. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, *The Haskell Lectures on History of Religions*, New Series, 2 (Chicago: University of

has been undertaken from the viewpoint of this older “History of Religions” perspective, it may be fruitful to consider Epiphanius’s report on the Kollyridians from a vantage that does not equate explanation with the identification of “pagan” parallels. Furthermore, recent years have seen a rising skepticism about the accuracy of Epiphanius’s descriptions of his opponents in the *Panarion*, and it will be useful to reconsider his account of the Kollyridians with such issues in mind.⁷ Finally, new developments in the early history of Marian piety have identified cultic veneration of the Virgin much earlier than many scholars had previously thought, bringing to light long overlooked Marian texts that offer potential clarification of the ritual practices ascribed to the Kollyridians.⁸

Reading Epiphanius’s account of the Kollyridians in light of these new perspectives suggests that his representation of their practices frequently engages in polemical rhetoric that may in fact distort and disguise their actual practices. While Epiphanius accuses the Kollyridians of worshipping Mary in the place of God, his charge offers no assurance that these opponents, whoever they may have been, understood their ritual practices in this way. In this section Epiphanius presents a rather broad understanding of idolatry that certainly was not shared by all of his contemporaries. Consequently, it is a rather different question whether others within the larger context of fourth-century “orthodoxy” would have considered the Kollyridians’ actions idolatrous, as the *Panarion* makes them appear, let alone whether such practices can be identified with some sort of “goddess worship,” as some modern interpreters have maintained. Comparing Epiphanius’s description of the Kollyridians with the contemporary witness of the early Dormition apocrypha suggests alternatively that these ancient Christians, rather than worshipping a divine Mary, were simply offering to Mary a kind of veneration that was routinely offered to other saints and martyrs beginning at this time, albeit in a somewhat more elaborate fashion.

Chicago Press, 1981). See also James Howard-Johnston and Paul Antony Hayward, eds., *The Cult of the Saints in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

7. See, e.g., Averil Cameron, “How to Read Heresiology,” in *Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*, ed. Dale B. Martin and Patricia Cox Miller (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 193–212.

8. See esp. Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition and Assumption*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

THE KOLLYRIDIAN'S RITUAL PRACTICES:
VESTIGIAL GODDESS WORSHIP OR
PRIMITIVE MARIAN PIETY?

According to Epiphanius's *Letter to Arabia*, the Kollyridians "bake a loaf in the name of the Ever-virgin and gather together, and they attempt an excess and undertake a forbidden and blasphemous act in the holy Virgin's name, celebrating offices [ἱερουργεῖν] in her name with women officiants."⁹ Epiphanius offers a little more detail when he subsequently considers the Kollyridians as his seventy-ninth heresy, explaining that "these women prepare a certain carriage with a square seat and spread out fine linens over it on a special day of the year, and they put forth bread and offer it in the name of Mary, and they all partake of the bread."¹⁰ After first assailing the Kollyridian practice of allowing women to serve as priests, Epiphanius eventually turns to address their ritual practices. Yet his lengthy denunciation of their devotion to the Virgin by no means simply reveals the worship of Mary as a goddess, as some would have it, but suggests instead a far more ordinary veneration of Mary situated within the broader context of the veneration of saints. Careful attention to Epiphanius's rhetoric and what he often leaves unsaid not only reveals a very different portrait of his opponents but also suggests rather strongly that Epiphanius had encountered one of the early Dormition narratives, the so-called Six Books apocryphon.

In view of Epiphanius's highly rhetorical presentation of both this "heresy" and so many others, it is certainly right to question of whether such a group of "Kollyridians" ever even existed as Epiphanius here describes them. It is well known that Epiphanius had an active imagination, and the fact that he determined at the outset of his treatise to come up with exactly eighty heresies does not inspire great confidence. While it is always wise to approach Epiphanius inoculated with a strong dose of skepticism, I think Averil Cameron goes too far in proposing that "we should probably leave aside" his account of Kollyridians, as she suggests in a recent article on the early cult of the Virgin.¹¹ Admittedly, Epiphanius may very

9. Epiphanius, *haer.* 78.23.4 (Karl Holl and Jürgen Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 2nd ed., 3 vols., GCS 25, 31, 37 [Leipzig; Berlin: J. C. Hinrichs; Akademie-Verlag, 1915, 1980, 1985], 3:473; trans. Frank Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, 2 vols., NHS 35–36 [Leiden: Brill, 1987, 1994], 2:618, slightly modified).

10. Epiphanius, *haer.* 79.1.7 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:476).

11. Averil Cameron, "The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Religious Development and Myth-Making," in *The Church and Mary*, ed. R. N. Swanson, *Studies in Church History* 39 (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2004), 1–21, 6–7.

well have invented a group with the name “Kollyridians,” but the primary issues that he addresses in their refutation were in fact religious phenomena of the late fourth century, as can be determined from other sources. The beliefs and practices that Epiphanius attacks seem to have been real, even if he fabricated the existence of this particular group in order to oppose them. That is, while there may never have been an actual early Christian group named the “Kollyridians” that believed and did all the things that Epiphanius reports, the practices that he attacks under their name, female liturgical leadership and the veneration of Mary, were quite clearly a part of his late fourth century religious milieu.

Certainly something like this is true in regard to his seventy-eighth heresy, the “Antidicomarianites”: I find it doubtful that there was an actual sect by this name that had organized around the principle of denying Mary’s post-partum virginity. The issue itself, however, was at the time widely debated, as a number of other sources reveal, and quite probably Epiphanius has invented the “Antidicomarianites” in order to address those opposed to Mary’s perpetual virginity, first in the *Letter to Arabia* and then again in the *Panarion*. Thus if Epiphanius has similarly invented a sect named “the Kollyridians,” which is admittedly a possibility, he has presumably done so for the purpose of addressing what were real issues of fourth-century Christianity. I will for the most part leave aside the question of women serving in positions of liturgical leadership, an issue that certainly is not Epiphanius’s invention. As with Mary’s virginity, other contemporary sources confirm that female clergy remained a controversial subject in the eastern churches of the later fourth century, including the *Apostolic Constitutions* and the canons of the Council of Laodicea.¹²

Likewise, the veneration of the Virgin Mary was in the later fourth century a nascent although increasingly prominent feature of Christianity, and Epiphanius’s account of the Kollyridians forms an important early witness to the phenomenon. Marian veneration does not appear, as some would have it, only rather suddenly in the fifth century.¹³ Gregory of Nazianzus

12. See for instance the excellent survey in Francine Cardman, “Women, Ministry, and Church Order in Early Christianity,” in *Women and Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 300–329, esp. 314–19. See also Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings*, 183–87.

13. For example, Hans von Campenhausen, *The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church*, trans. Frank Clarke, Studies in Historical Theology 2 (London: SCM Press, 1964), esp. 7–9; Michael P. Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), xii; Averil Cameron, “The Early Cult of the Virgin,” in *Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Milan: Skira, 2000), 3–15, 5; Richard M. Price,

and Gregory of Nyssa bear witness to the emerging cult of the Virgin in both Constantinople and Cappadocia, attesting to belief in Marian apparitions as well as the practice of intercessory prayer to the Virgin at this time.¹⁴ Marian intercession is also evidenced by a papyrus fragment from fourth-century Egypt (or perhaps even the third century) that preserves an early prayer addressed to the Virgin.¹⁵ The earliest narratives of the Virgin's Dormition also date to the later fourth century at the latest, bearing witness to a fully developed Marian piety already by this time.¹⁶ Thus while Epiphanius may have invented a group named the Kollyridians to serve as useful "straw women" for addressing the issue of Marian cult, it is highly improbable that he has fabricated the veneration of Mary here merely to condemn something that no one actually did. Even if we cannot be entirely certain that Epiphanius's Kollyridians actually existed as he

"Marian Piety and the Nestorian Controversy," in *The Church and Mary*, ed. R. N. Swanson, Studies in Church History 39 (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2004), 31–38. In a more recent article, however, Cameron identifies the late fourth and fifth centuries as the formative period of Marian piety, while still pointing to the determinative influence of Ephesus: Cameron, "Cult of the Virgin," esp. 1–10.

14. See, e.g., my forthcoming articles: Stephen J. Shoemaker "Marian Liturgies and Devotion in Early Christianity," in Tina Beattie and Sarah Jane Boss, eds., *A Marian Reader* (Continuum Press, 2007); idem, "The Cult of the Virgin in the Fourth Century: A Fresh Look at Some Old and New Sources," in Sarah Jane Boss and Chris Maunder, eds., *The Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (Continuum, 2007).

15. Arthur S. Hunt, John de Monins Johnson, and Colin H. Roberts, *Catalogue of the Greek Papyri in the John Rylands Library, Manchester*, 4 vols. (Manchester: University Press, 1911–52), 3:47; Otto Stegmüller, "Sub tuum praesidium: Bemerkungen zur ältesten Überlieferung," *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 74 (1952): 76–82, 78. See also Gabriele Giamberardini, *Il culto mariano in Egitto*, 2nd ed., 3 vols., Pubblicazioni dello Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Analecta 6 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1975), 1:95–97, but see the dissenting opinion of Hans Förster, "Zur ältesten Überlieferung der marianischen Antiphon 'Sub tuum praesidium,'" *Biblos: Österreichische Zeitschrift für Buch- und Bibliothekswesen, Dokumentation, Bibliographie, und Bibliophilie* 44, no. 2 (1995): 183–92; Gabriele Giamberardini, "Il 'Sub tuum praesidium' e il titolo 'Theotokos' nella tradizione egiziana," *Marianum* 31 (1969): 324–62; Achille M. Triacca, "'Sub tuum praesidium': nella 'lex orandi' un'anticipata presenza della 'lex credendi.' La 'teotologia' precede la 'mariologia?'" in *La mariologia nella catechesi dei padri (età prenicena). Convegno di studio e aggiornamento*, Facoltà di Lettere cristiane e classiche (Pontificium Institutum Altioris Latinitatis), Roma, 10–11 marzo 1989, ed. S. Felici, Biblioteca di scienze religiose 95 (Rome: LAS, 1989), 183–205.

16. See Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 32–46; 54–57; 205–56; Michel van Esbroeck, "Some Earlier Features in the Life of the Virgin," *Marianum* 63 (2001): 297–308; Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 93 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 346–60.

describes them, it is clear that the broader issues he addresses in refuting them, including veneration of the Virgin, were threateningly real in his milieu. Consequently, his account of this “heresy” sheds intriguing light on the developing cult of Mary from the vantage of an ardent opponent.

It would be a mistake to simply identify the practices that Epiphanius here condemns with worshipping Mary “as a goddess” in some sort of “revival of paganism in Christian garb” or to understand them as reflecting belief in “the divinity of Mary,” as scholars have often concluded.¹⁷ To a large extent such assessments fall prey to Epiphanius’s rhetoric, perhaps with some encouragement from older views of the cult of Mary and the saints as a vulgar intrusion of Greco-Roman “paganism” into the Christian faith.¹⁸ Admittedly, Epiphanius accuses the Kollyridians of being “eager to substitute her for God,”¹⁹ and when read in isolation, this passage certainly could seem to suggest their belief in Mary’s divinity. Yet one cannot lift this statement out of its context like some sort of proof-text; Epiphanius is engaged here in heated polemic against these opponents, and we must consider the possibility that he has either distorted their intentions for rhetorical effect or misunderstood their practices in light of his own prejudices.²⁰ Indeed, as Gerald Hawting persuasively argues, charges of idolatry within the monotheist tradition, including Judaism and Islam as well as Christianity, are generally leveled at other monotheist groups whose beliefs and practices are perceived as a perversion of the monotheism they falsely espouse.²¹ Similarly, Carlos M. N. Eire’s study of

17. For example, Jugie, *La mort et l’assomption*, 79–80; Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings*, 201; Benko, *Virgin Goddess*, esp. 173, 190; Limberis, *Divine Heiress*, 118; Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 122.

18. For example, Benko, *Virgin Goddess*, 1–5; see the excellent critique of this view in Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 4–22.

19. Epiphanius, *haer.* 78.23.3 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:473).

20. It is quite possible that while Epiphanius misrepresents the intentions of his opponents with regard to the purpose of their “worship” (i.e., veneration of Mary as a saint or her adoration as a divine goddess in place of God), he very well may report with greater accuracy practices that were known to him, either through an encounter with practitioners (direct or indirect) or one of their texts (see below). An excellent discussion of the distinction between these two types of reports, the description of actions and the attribution of motives, can be found in Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13 (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997), 592–97.

21. Gerald R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 6, 45–66.

the rhetoric of idolatry in Reformation Europe identifies “idolatry” as “a fighting word,” to the effect that “one man’s devotion was another man’s idolatry.”²² So seems to be the case with Epiphanius’s invective against the Kollyridians as well.

In order to properly understand Epiphanius’s accusations of Marian idolatry, they must be considered within the broader context of his entire attack on the Kollyridians’ practices. Epiphanius immediately situates this charge within the context of a general critique of veneration of the saints:

The words, “Some shall depart from sound doctrine, giving heed to fables and doctrines of devils,” apply to these people as well. For as the scriptures say, they will be “worshipping the dead” as the dead were given honors in Israel. And the timely glory of the saints, which redounds to God in their lifetimes, has become an error for others, who do not see the truth.²³

Here Epiphanius equates the Kollyridian veneration of Mary with the more generic practice of “worshipping the dead,” the saints as he clarifies, whose glory “redounds to God in their lifetimes,” and accordingly they are not to be “worshipped” after their death. Thus it would appear that Epiphanius considered not only the Kollyridian veneration of Mary an idolatrous perversion of monotheism, but in his view the veneration of any human being was blasphemous.

The veneration of saints was yet another burning issue of late fourth-century Christianity, and in rebutting the Kollyridians, Epiphanius enters into the fray. There was, as Peter Brown explains, “a debate around the grave in these years,”²⁴ and it became increasingly important to distinguish the kinds of “worship” that could be offered to a human being from the adoration that belongs to God alone. Augustine, for instance, was often lukewarm toward the veneration of saints and martyrs, expressing concern early in his career that feasts of the martyrs and celebrations at their graves were occasions for pagan practices to creep back into the church.²⁵ In preaching on their feast days, his tendency was instead to emphasize the “example of faith and endurance they offered to other Christians,”

22. Carlos M. N. Eire, *War against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 4–7.

23. Epiphanius, *haer.* 78.23.5 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:473; trans. Williams, *Panarion*, 2:618–19).

24. Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 27; see also David G. Hunter, “Vigilantius of Calagurris and Victricius of Rouen: Ascetics, Relics, and Clerics in Late Roman Gaul,” *J ECS* 7 (1999): 401–30.

25. Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 26–27.

which likely would have met with Epiphanius's approval.²⁶ Later in life, however, Augustine came to embrace more fully the veneration of saints and belief in their miracles, as witnessed in the last book of the *City of God*.²⁷ Yet even there he found it necessary to underscore that Christians do not worship the saints as gods: the sacrifice of the Eucharist is offered only to God, who alone is adored.²⁸ Others were less ambivalent: one of Jerome's nastiest letters was written against a certain Vigilantius, who criticized the growing reverence for saints and their relics as "the ceremonial of pagan worship introduced into the churches under the pretext of religious observance."²⁹ In defending the cult of the saints, Jerome insists on a difference in the kind of worship offered to the saints and to God, introducing a distinction that is fairly typical of the late fourth-century Fathers. Adoration (*adorare*) is reserved for God alone, while the saints are given honor (*honorare*) in a manner that avoids idolatry, "so that their honor may be reflected on the Lord."³⁰

Yet it is clear that already by this time there were others, even among the "orthodox," who did not hesitate to offer more than mere honor to Mary and the saints. Ambrose, for instance, advocates not only Mary's honor but also her veneration (*venerare*) while distinguishing this from the adoration due the Holy Trinity alone.³¹ Jerome himself wrote to Marcella

26. Gillian Clark, "Victricius of Rouen: *Praising the Saints*," *J ECS* 7 (1999): 365–99, 371.

27. Augustine, *Ciu.* 22.8 (Bernhard Dombart, Alfons Kalb, and Johannes Divjak, eds., *Sancti Aurelii Augustini episcopi De civitate Dei libri XXII*, 5th ed., 2 vols. [Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1981], 2:566–81). See also Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 27–28; Clark, "Victricius of Rouen: *Praising the Saints*," 371; Bruria Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred: The Debate on Christian Pilgrimage in Late Antiquity*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 132–39.

28. Augustine, *Ciu.* 22.10 (Dombart, Kalb, and Divjak, eds., *De civitate Dei*, 2:583–84).

29. Jerome, *Vigil.* 4 (PL 23:357B; trans. Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 26).

30. Jerome, *Vigil.* 4–5 (PL 23:357B–359A); *ep.* 109, 1 (Isidorus Hilberg, ed., *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, 3 vols., CSEL 54–56 [Vienna & Leipzig: F. Tempsky & G. Freytag, 1910], 2:352). See also Bitton-Ashkelony, *Encountering the Sacred*, 97–105.

31. Ambrose, *Exh. Virg.* 27 (Franco Gori, ed., *Verginità e vedovanza*, 2 vols., *Sancti Ambrosii episcopi Mediolandensis opera* 14 [Milan: Biblioteca Ambrosiana, 1989], 2:218): *Quis non honorabit tot uirginum matrem? Quis non uenerabitur aulam pudoris?*; cf. Ambrose, *Spir.* 3.79f (Otto Faller, ed., *De spiritu sancto libri tres; De incarnationis dominicae sacramento*, CSEL 79; *Sancti Ambrosii opera pars* 9 [Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1964], 182–83). See also Hilda C. Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to the Eve*

in 386, urging her to join him in Bethlehem, where together they could “adore (*adorare*) the ashes of John the Baptist, Elisha, and Obadiah.”³² Likewise, already in the later fourth century, Augustine had begun to focus on the Greek λατρεία as the proper term designating the worship reserved for God alone, arguing that Latin lacked an equivalent word.³³ Although John of Damascus’s clear distinction between the worship of λατρεία (“adoration”) and προσκύνησις (“veneration”) was still several centuries away, by the later fourth century a large number of Christians, including the Kollyridians it would seem, found it entirely appropriate to offer Mary and the saints a certain kind of “worship” that was increasingly identified as προσκύνησις.³⁴ Yet Epiphanius appears to have resisted this emerging form of Christian devotion and was unwilling to allow that any form of “worship,” however qualified, could be directed toward a human being. For Epiphanius, such actions implied elevation of the object of one’s devotion, whether that be Mary or any other saint, to equal status with God.

As Epiphanius turns his focus directly to the Kollyridians, in section seventy-nine of the *Panarion*, his attack on their worship of the Virgin remains constantly anchored within a broader critique of veneration offered to saints and angels.

Which scripture has spoken of it? Which prophet permitted the veneration [προσκυνεῖσθαι] of a man, let alone a woman? The vessel is choice but a woman, and by nature no different [from others]. Like the bodies of the saints, however, she has been held in honor [τιμῇ] for her character and understanding. And if I should say anything more in her praise, she is like Elijah, who was a virgin from his mother’s womb, he remained so

of the Reformation (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 88. For more on Ambrose’s Mariology, see Charles William Neumann, S.M., *The Virgin Mary in the Works of Saint Ambrose*, Paradosis 17 (Fribourg: The University Press, 1962), which focuses heavily on issues related to Mary’s virginity.

32. Jerome, *ep.* 46, 13 (Hilberg, *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, 1:343).

33. Augustine’s earliest discussion of this comes in response to Faustus the Manichean, *Faust.* 20.21 (Joseph Zycha, ed., *Sancti Aureli Augustini De utilitate credendi*, CSEL 25, pt. 1 [Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1891], 561–65); see also *Hept.* 2.94 (Joseph Zycha, ed., *Sancti Aureli Augustini Quaestionum in Heptateuchum libri VII; Adnotationum in Job liber unus*, CSEL 28, pt. 2 [Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1895], 156) and *Ciu.* 10.1 (Dombart, Kalb, and Divjak, eds., *De civitate Dei*, 1:400–404).

34. For more discussion of this terminology and its usage in this period, see Pierre Maraval, *Lieux saints et pèlerinages d’orient: Histoire et géographie des origines à la conquête arabe*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004), 145–47. Here Maraval discusses the shift in vocabulary that occurs around this time, whereby προσκύνησις becomes an accepted term for describing the veneration of saints.

perpetually, and was assumed [ἀναλαμβάνόμενος] and has not seen death. She is like John who leaned on the Lord's breast, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." She is like St. Thecla; and Mary is still more honored than she, because of the providence vouchsafed her. But Elijah is not to be venerated [προσκυνητός], even though he is alive. And John is not to be venerated, even if through his own prayer (or rather, by receiving grace from God) he made of his falling asleep [κοίμησιν] an amazing thing. But neither is Thecla venerated, nor any of the saints. For the age-old error of forgetting the living God and worshipping his creatures will not get the better of me. "They worshipped and venerated the creature more than the creator," and "were made fools." If it is not his will that angels be venerated, how much more the woman born of Ann?³⁵

Using terminology somewhat similar to Jerome's, Epiphanius insists that such holy persons, among whom he highlights the Virgin Mary, may not receive veneration but should only be held in honor: "Let Mary be held in honor [τιμῇ], but let the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be venerated [προσκυνεῖσθω]: let no one venerate Mary."³⁶ Even this comparatively weaker honor shown to Mary and the saints must be carefully limited, and he warns his readers, "we must not honor the saints to excess; we must honor their master."³⁷

Yet the general tone of this section of the *Panarion* suggests that Epiphanius's idea of "honoring" a saint involved significantly less than for many of his contemporaries, such as Jerome, for instance. Here Epiphanius describes honor for the saints in terms limited to following their examples rather than offering any kind of prayers or cultic ceremonies in their honor. They are, he writes, to be "held in honor for [their] character and understanding." As an alternative to the Kollyridians' cultic veneration of the Virgin, Epiphanius instead emphasizes the purity of Mary's physical body and identifies her virginity as a cause for Christians to hold her in honor.³⁸ His remark that the "timely glory of the saints . . . redounds to God in their lifetimes" in opposition to the "worship of the dead" certainly suggests that the value of saints for Christian believers lies in the example of their lives rather than any intercessory or other powers from beyond the grave. At no point does Epiphanius allow that honoring the saints should include seeking their intercession or observing a ceremony

35. Epiphanius, *haer.* 79.5.1–4 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:479–80; trans. Williams, *Panarion*, 2:624–25, slightly modified).

36. Epiphanius, *haer.* 79.7.5 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:482).

37. Epiphanius, *haer.* 78.23.9 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:473; trans. Williams, *Panarion*, 2:619).

38. Epiphanius, *haer.* 79.4.6 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:479).

to commemorate their “birthdays,” that is, the day of their death, both of which Jerome, Augustine, and others reveal to be common elements of the nascent cult of the saints. Although Epiphanius nowhere specifically condemns such practices, the tenor of his discussion here is that the role of Mary and the saints should be limited to serving as examples of Christian excellence who are honored through imitation, not cult. Such conservatism comports well with his early opposition to the cultic use of images: in fact, Epiphanius explicitly joins the issue of images to his refutation of the Kollyridians’ practices, and the fragments from his iconoclastic writings also censure the veneration of angels and the apostles themselves in addition to their images.³⁹

Epiphanius expresses opposition to any cultic veneration of the saints, and his condemnation of the Kollyridians’ incipient Marian piety is persistently couched in these terms. According to him, their liturgical actions transgress the boundary between divine and human, although he at no point accuses them of identifying Mary with the deity in the way that Trinitarian Christians had come to understand her son as divine, for instance. He does not denounce the Kollyridians for advancing a theological belief in Mary’s divinity, as some have interpreted it, but rather condemns their ceremonial veneration of the Virgin as blasphemous. Epiphanius faults them not so much for heterodoxy as for heteropraxy: he considers their ritual activities tantamount to “substituting her for God,” involving worship of a creature in the place of God, regardless of what their intentions may have been. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that the Kollyridians (or whoever’s practices Epiphanius is attacking) understood their actions in this way. As Hawting observes, “the fact that a monotheist may talk of the ‘gods’ of his opponents does not mean that he (or they) in fact regards them as gods.”⁴⁰ To the contrary, it appears even from Epiphanius’s own rhetoric that the Kollyridians were simply offering Mary a somewhat more elaborate version of the veneration that Christians increasingly offered to the saints during the late fourth century. Reading between the lines suggests that the Kollyridians were apparently no more interested in replacing God with

39. Epiphanius, *haer.* 79.4.4–5 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:479); fragments 7–10 (Karl Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, 3 vols. [Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1928–32], 3:358). On Epiphanius’s iconoclastic writings, see Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 3 vols. (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1950), 3:390–93; and Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 103–4.

40. Hawting, *Idea of Idolatry*, 65.

Mary or elevating her to a divine status than were the early devotees of St. Thecla or St. John intent on divinizing the subjects of their devotion.

Epiphanius even concedes as much toward the conclusion of his attack on the Kollyridians, when he allows for the possibility that their offerings in the Virgin's name may reflect something quite different from worship of Mary as divine.

And how much is there to say? Whether these worthless women offer Mary the loaf as though in worship of her, or whether they mean to offer this rotten fruit on her behalf, it is altogether silly and heretical, and demon-inspired insolence and imposture.⁴¹

Here Epiphanius is reduced to mere rhetorical bluster: while there presumably would be nothing inherently wrong with presenting such bread offerings on Mary's behalf instead of *to* her as an act of worship, and Epiphanius allows that this may be all that is going on, he nonetheless insists that such practices amount to demonic foolishness and must be shunned. Despite Epiphanius's attempts to trump up the charges against the Kollyridians as idolatrous worship of Mary as a goddess, in this passage he essentially admits that he does not really know the intentions behind his opponents' actions and acknowledges that they may very well have understood their liturgical activities quite differently than he presents them. To be sure, the actions ascribed to the Kollyridians are in many ways strongly reminiscent of Greco-Roman goddess worship, but the simple existence of such parallels does not necessarily amount to worship of Mary as divine.⁴² Innumerable elements of the early Christian faith and particularly the cult of the saints have clear antecedents in Greco-Roman religious practice, and yet these do not entail the rejection of monotheistic worship.⁴³ The simple fact that certain aspects of the cults of the Virgin and other saints borrow from the discourse and practice of Greco-Roman religions does not allow the assumption that their practitioners were worshipping them as deities. Consequently, Epiphanius's polemics against the Kollyridians do not appear to reveal a group of Christians who worshipped a goddess or the divine feminine in guise of Mary, as scholars have often concluded; to the contrary, it seems far more likely that his opponents offered a kind

41. Epiphanius, *haer.* 79.9.3 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:484; trans. Williams, *Panarion*, 2:628).

42. See the extensive catalog of parallels in Dölger, "Die eigenartige Marienverehrung," and Benko, *Virgin Goddess*, 173–91.

43. See Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 1–22; Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21–23, 213–21, 229–30.

of veneration to Mary as one of the saints that Epiphanius condemns through a wholesale denunciation of any "worship" directed toward saints or angels.

Accordingly, Epiphanius's account of the Kollyridians bears witness to the existence of Marian cult situated within the broader context of the veneration of the saints already by 370, the approximate date of the *Letter to Arabia*, and certainly by 377, when he most likely completed the *Panarion*.⁴⁴ Even if, as some would suggest, the Kollyridians never actually existed as a clearly defined group in the way that Epiphanius presents them, his attack on the veneration of Mary as a particular variant of the emergent cult of the saints reveals that by this time such practices were already sufficiently well established to arouse opposition from a "watch-dog" such as Epiphanius. These opponents were simply a little ahead of the curve: only half a century later their veneration of the Virgin would likely have placed them within the mainstream of Christian piety. As much is suggested at least by the emergence of the Six Books apocryphon with its remarkably similar rituals into the Christian "mainstream" during the fifth century.

THE "KOLLYRIDIAN" AND THE SIX BOOKS APOCRYPHON

This reinterpretation of the Kollyridians as early devotees of St. Mary rather than crypto-pagan goddess worshippers is made all the more compelling by the fact that we are now able to identify a likely source of Epiphanius's outrage not in a sect of Arabian women but in a long overlooked early Marian text, the Six Books narrative of the Virgin's Dormition and Assumption. This apocryphon, which had its roots in Roman Palestine, enjoins on its readers a set of regular liturgical practices almost identical with those Epiphanius ascribes to the Kollyridians. Although the Six Books apocryphon bears no obvious signs of any connection with a group named the Kollyridians or with the practice of female liturgical leadership, it is not in the least incompatible with either. Indeed, it is entirely possible that the Six Books apocryphon comes from an early community where women held positions of liturgical leadership: the question of qualifications for the priesthood simply does not arise. Still, it may well be that the "Kollyridians" as a group are Epiphanius's invention, and perhaps he

44. Georges Jouassard, "Deux chefs de file en théologie mariale dans la seconde moitié du IV^e siècle: saint Epiphane et saint Ambroise," *Greg* 42 (1961): 6–36, 6; Quasten, *Patrology*, 3:388.

has joined together in an imaginary sect the two separate issues of Marian veneration and women's liturgical leadership, in order to squeeze in both topics while saving heresy number eighty for the Messalians. Yet the Six Books apocryphon provides crucial evidence that even if Epiphanius has completely fabricated the sect of the Kollyridians, the issues and practices that he uses them to address were quite real within his religious milieu. Moreover, his apparent knowledge of the rituals prescribed by this text provides important confirmation of its likely circulation in the eastern Mediterranean by the middle of the fourth century.

The Six Books narrative of the Virgin's Dormition and Assumption is one of the oldest accounts of the end of Mary's life, and it is the earliest exemplar of the Bethlehem tradition, one of the two main literary traditions of her death. This ancient Christian apocryphon survives in a variety of versions and languages, but the earliest are several Syriac accounts known from least five different manuscripts produced during the fifth and sixth centuries.⁴⁵ The Greek originals behind these translations are of course considerably earlier, although it is somewhat difficult to be certain just how much older the narrative is. The age of the manuscripts and the diversity of their versions secures a date of the early fifth century at the absolute latest, but a number of features identify a likely origin by the second half of the fourth century if not even earlier.⁴⁶ Epiphanius's attacks on the Kollyridians not only appear to confirm the existence of the Six Books apocryphon in the later fourth century, but his *Letter to Arabia* suggests it had begun to circulate within Palestine already by the middle of the fourth century. It would seem that Epiphanius was acquainted with the text, either directly or through a group that followed its traditions, despite his pointed disavowals of knowledge of this or any other early Dormition tradition. To the contrary, his discussions of the Kollyridians bear traces, some more subtle than others, of his encounter with this text and its traditions, suggesting that his protests of ignorance are mere pretense.

The most obvious link between the Six Books and Epiphanius's Kollyridians occurs in the ritual practices that he ascribes to the sect. The Six

45. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 46–49. There is also a fifth-century manuscript preserving fragments of the Six Books in the Schøyen collection, of which I have prepared an edition for publication.

46. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 54–57; idem, "Death and the Maiden: The Early History of the Dormition and Assumption Apocrypha," *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 50 (2006): 59–97; Stephen J. Shoemaker, "A Peculiar Version of the *Inventio crucis* in the Early Syriac Dormition Traditions," *SP* 41 (2006): 75–81; van Esbroeck, "Some Earlier Features"; Bauckham, *Fate of the Dead*, 346–60, esp. 358–60.

Books mandates that an almost identical ceremony be performed three times during the year in the Virgin's honor. Although the precise dates vary somewhat among the different early versions, their approximate times and significance are quite uniform: first there is a feast of Mary two or three days after the Nativity (which is celebrated 24 December or 6 January according to the different manuscripts), followed by a second on 15 May and a third on 13 August.⁴⁷ Each feast has strong agricultural associations, but none is connected with Mary's death or any other event from her life, suggesting a primitive stage in the development of Marian cult, before any of the specific occasions in her life came to be memorialized liturgically. Yet the most extraordinary aspect of this brief liturgical handbook from the early Dormition apocrypha is the rather explicit set of instructions for how each of these feasts is to be celebrated:

And the apostles also ordered that any offering offered in the name of my Lady Mary should not remain overnight, but that at midnight of the night immediately preceding her commemoration, it should be kneaded and baked; and in the morning let it go up on the altar while the people stand before the altar with psalms of David, and let the New and Old Testaments be read, and the volume of the decease of the blessed one [i.e., the Six Books apocryphon]; and let everyone be before the altar in the church, and let the priests make the offering and set forth the censer of incense and kindle the lights, and let the whole service be concerning these offerings; and when the whole service is finished, let everyone take his offerings to his house. And let the priest speak thus: "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we celebrate the commemoration of my Lady Mary." Thus let the priest speak three times; and (simultaneously) with the word of the priest who speaks, the Holy Spirit shall come and bless these offerings; and when everyone takes away his offering, and goes to his house, great help and the blessing of the blessed one shall enter his dwelling and establish it for ever.⁴⁸

47. Agnes Smith Lewis, *Apocrypha Syriaca*, *Studia Sinaitica* 11 (London: C.J. Clay and Sons, 1902), ܡܪܝܡ (Syr) and 59–61 (Eng); William Wright, "The Departure of My Lady Mary from This World," *The Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* 6–7 (1865): 417–48 and 108–60, ܡܪܝܡ (Syr) and 152–53 (Eng); the fifth-century palimpsest fragments from Sinai also refer to the three feasts, although the section prescribing dates and ritual actions for these commemorations is lacking: see Smith Lewis, *Apocrypha Syriaca*, ܡܪܝܡ; trans. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition*, 371–72. The same feasts are also described in the sixth-century Göttingen MS syr 10, ff. 30b–31b with comparable dates. See also Simon C. Mimouni, "La fête de la dormition de Marie en Syrie à l'époque byzantine," *The Harp* 5 (1992): 157–74.

48. Wright, "Departure of my Lady Mary," ܡܪܝܡ (Syr) and 153 (Eng), translation slightly modified. The corresponding section is missing from the three fifth-century

The similarities of this ritual to Epiphanius's account of the Kollyridians are fairly obvious: a special bread is prepared and offered in the Virgin's name, and after a ceremony in her honor (during which the Six Books apocryphon is to be read), the participants take home the blessed bread and, as Epiphanius reports, "all partake of the bread." These liturgical instructions combined with the narrative's constant reference to "veneration" (ܠܚܝܬܐ) offered to the Virgin Mary add considerable credibility to Epiphanius's complaints against such practices. Although the Six Books apocryphon gives no indication of women serving as priests, nor any direct link with the "Kollyridians," its brief liturgical manual confirms that by the late fourth century there were those who advocated, and presumably even practiced, regular veneration (or "worship") of the Virgin Mary using a ritual that looks very much like the one Epiphanius attributes to the Kollyridians.⁴⁹ The strong connections that each festival has with agriculture probably derive from earlier goddess traditions, here recast in Christian form, and these elements could certainly give someone like Epiphanius cause to deride the ceremonies the blasphemous worship of Mary as a deity. Yet perhaps this is all a rather remarkable coincidence.

palimpsests, all of which are fragmentary, and so we do not know what liturgical instructions may have been present in these manuscripts. Nevertheless, as noted above in n. 43, two of these fifth-century palimpsests refer in other places to the three annual commemorations of the Virgin. Only the sixth-century Göttingen MS Syr. 10 preserves a comparable passage on fol. 31, which is as follows:

And the apostles ordered that there will be a commemoration of the blessed one in these three months, so that people will be delivered from hard afflictions and a plague of wrath will not come upon the earth and its inhabitants. And the apostles ordered that offerings that have been made to the blessed one should not remain overnight, but in the evening let flour of the finest wheat flour come to the church and be placed before the altar. And the priests will make the offering and set up censors of incense and light the lights. And the entire evening service [vespers] will concern these offerings. And when the service is finished, let everyone take his offering to his house. Because as soon as the priests pray and say the prayer of my master Mary, the Theotokos, "Come to us and help the people who call upon you," and with the priest's word of blessing, my master Mary comes and blesses these offerings. And as soon as everyone takes his offering and goes to his house, great aid and the blessing of my master Mary will enter his dwelling and sustain it forever. (my trans.)

49. Although it is difficult to know for certain whether anyone ever actually performed these rituals, the prescriptions of the Six Books apocryphon and its self-identification as a liturgical reading for this occasion suggest that the communities that produced and transmitted the various versions of this text engaged in these ceremonies. Epiphanius's report that people were actually doing this lends a further measure of plausibility.

We should look for other signs that Epiphanius knew either this text or at least a group that espoused its traditions.

As noted already above, Epiphanius first introduces the Kollyridians and their ritual practices while attacking the “Antidicomarianites” in his *Letter to Arabia*. Interestingly enough, in this very same letter Epiphanius rather famously raises the question of the end of Mary’s life for the first time in patristic literature. Is his introduction of this topic within the same letter simply another coincidence or does it point to a connection between the “Kollyridians” and the end of Mary’s life that Epiphanius does not wish, for whatever reason, to acknowledge openly?

Although Epiphanius first addresses the matter of Mary’s passing from this life while refuting the doctrines of the Antidicomarianites, careful attention to the texts, both the *Letter to Arabia* and the *Panarion*, reveals an easily overlooked association between the Kollyridians and Mary’s departure from the world. It is hard to imagine that the Antidicomarianites alone inspired his digression on this theme, inasmuch as they held little regard for the Virgin, particularly if there were as yet no extant traditions of Mary’s Dormition as Epiphanius so ardently maintains. The Kollyridians, however, with their “exaggerated” Marian piety, present a more likely stimulus for Epiphanius’s reflections on the end of Mary’s life.

According to Epiphanius, this topic remained a great mystery in his day, and there was no definitive tradition of Mary’s death that had been handed down from the Scriptures or otherwise. Consequently, his consideration of Mary’s ultimate fate repeatedly invokes a position of agnosticism, pointing only to possible hints about the end of her life from the Scriptures. Symeon’s prophecy “a sword shall pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2.35) may hold the answer, he suggests, pointing toward her martyrdom. Or perhaps the woman clothed with the sun in the Apocalypse holds the key: the serpent chases after her, but she is given the wings of a great eagle and escapes into the desert (Rev 12.13–14). Epiphanius teases his readers with a guarded confession that he harbors suspicions about how Mary’s life actually ended, but he insists that he dares not disclose his thoughts. Instead, he concludes this first discussion of the subject with deliberate equivocation: “I am not saying that she remained immortal; but neither am I affirming that she died.”⁵⁰

By his own admission, Epiphanius knows more about this topic than he wants to reveal, and the context for this intriguing deliberation on the end of Mary’s life suggests that Epiphanius quite possibly had reasons

50. Epiphanius, *haer.* 78.11.2–4 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:462).

beyond refutation of the Antidicomarianites for introducing the subject. These initial reflections on Mary's final lot come toward the middle of his attack on the Antidicomarianites, as he argues that Christ's entrusting of his mother to John at the crucifixion is proof of her postpartum virginity: if she had other children to care for her, why would Christ entrust her to John? Not content merely to have made a point about Mary's virginity, Epiphanius further insists that John's care for Mary should in no way be taken as precedent for the troubling practice of *subintroductae* or "spiritual marriage," that is, cohabitation of unmarried ascetic men and women.⁵¹ As Epiphanius explains, the case of John and Mary was a divinely ordained exception. One might imagine that this would have settled the matter. Yet Epiphanius continues, adding that "when this happened and he took her to himself, she remained with him no longer."⁵² This passage is admittedly a little peculiar, but it appears to indicate Epiphanius's belief that, despite this divine dispensation, Mary and John did not continue living together for any length of time after the crucifixion.

At this point Epiphanius launches into his initial discussion of Mary's ultimate fate, apparently to confirm that the two virgins did not abide long in such questionable living arrangements. As he explains,

If any think [I] am mistaken, moreover, let him search through the Scriptures and neither find Mary's death, nor whether or not she died, or whether or not she was buried—even though John surely traveled throughout Asia. And yet, nowhere does he say that he took the holy Virgin with him.⁵³

The end of Mary's life remains a mystery, and surely if she had in fact remained with John, he argues, her fate would be well known. Epiphanius's musings on Symeon's prophecy and the woman clothed with the

51. For more on this phenomenon, see Elizabeth A. Clark, "John Chrysostom and the *Subintroductae*," *CH* 46 (1977): 171–85; eadem, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends*, SW (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), 158–248.

52. Epiphanius, *haer.* 78.11.1 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:461–62). Williams translates the second part of this peculiar passage, οὐκέτι παρέμεινε παρ' αὐτοῦ, as "she did not yet live with him": Williams, *Panarion*, 2:609. This translation seems to reflect a very different understanding of its meaning: that prior to this special dispensation the two virgins had not dared to live together. Yet in light of what follows in the letter, I think the above translation makes much more sense. Walter Burghardt understands the passage as I have: Walter J. Burghardt, *The Testimony of the Patristic Age Concerning Mary's Death*, Woodstock Papers: Occasional Essays for Theology, 2 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957), 5.

53. Epiphanius, *haer.* 78.11.2 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:462; trans. Williams, *Panarion*, 2:609).

sun follow, together with his resolute agnosticism. Although he admits to his “suspicions,” he insists that the end of Mary’s life is completely unknown, a point that is central to his argument. Then, in a bit of questionable logic, Epiphanius brings the discussion of Mary’s departure from this world to a close and returns to the topic of her virginity by explaining that the Scriptures are silent on this subject precisely so that “no one would suspect her of carnal behavior.”⁵⁴

This sudden excursus on the end of Mary’s life stands out abruptly amidst Epiphanius’s broader argument for her perpetual virginity, and the topic does not fit well with its immediate context. It is puzzling why Epiphanius has chosen to engage in this digression: it adds very little to the discussion of Mary’s virginity and does not contribute much to his attack on “spiritual marriage.” The rather peculiar argument from silence that Epiphanius makes here does not especially strengthen his view that Mary and John quickly “broke up” after being united at the foot of the cross. Could it be that Epiphanius had some ulterior motive for so deliberately bringing focus to the end of Mary’s life in the midst of his defense of her virginity? The abrupt reappearance of this theme at the end of the letter, when Epiphanius turns to address the Kollyridians, may hold the key to understanding his keen interest in this topic. Despite his protests of ignorance, it seems that Epiphanius had in fact encountered specific traditions about Mary’s Dormition, and his insistence on an absolute “silence” regarding Mary’s end is conceivably for rhetorical effect, to support his position about Mary and John’s separation.

Just before concluding his *Letter to Arabia*, Epiphanius briefly introduces his second Marian heresy, the Kollyridians, who erred in the opposite extreme from the Antidicomarianites by glorifying Mary to excess. Much of this initial report on the Kollyridians has already been discussed above. Here Epiphanius first introduces the group’s ritual practices and accuses them of offering to the Virgin a veneration that belongs to God alone, opposing such practices within a broader critique of the veneration of saints. Epiphanius then gives two examples of what he considers similar errors, neither of which is especially comparable to the Kollyridian veneration of Mary. According to Epiphanius, the inhabitants of Shechem (Neapolis) offer sacrifices in the name of Kore (Persephone), because of Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter to God. Likewise, Epiphanius says that the Egyptians worship in the place of God Thermutis, the legendary daughter of Pharaoh who rescued Moses and raised him as her son.⁵⁵ Obviously,

54. Epiphanius, *haer.* 78.11.5 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:462).

55. Epiphanius, *haer.* 78.23.6–7 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:473–74).

the worship of these two goddesses has nothing to do with these biblical parallels, despite the identification of Moses's adoptive mother with the name of this Egyptian harvest goddess in certain early Jewish sources.⁵⁶ Yet regardless, Epiphanius achieves his purpose here by associating the Kollyridian veneration of Mary with pagan goddess worship.

Much more surprising than such innuendo is what follows in Epiphanius's discussion of the Kollyridians: suddenly and without any explanation he returns again to the question of Mary's ultimate fate.

The holy virgin may have died and been buried—her falling asleep was with honor, her death in purity, her crown in virginity. Or she may have been put to death—as the scripture says, “And a sword shall pierce through her soul”—her fame is among the martyrs and her body, by which light rose in the world, [rests] amid blessings. Or she remained alive, for God is not incapable of doing whatever he wills. No one knows her end.⁵⁷

This passage is especially puzzling, inasmuch as Epiphanius gives no reason whatsoever for reintroducing the topic of Mary's Dormition, and he makes no direct connections between the Kollyridians and the end of Mary's life. Yet it is clear that he is still discussing this group, since the following section continues to repudiate their excessive honor for the Virgin and their ritual offerings in her name. The reader is thus left wondering why Epiphanius has chosen to bring this issue up yet again in this particular context: the topic has no obvious connection with his arguments against the Kollyridian ritual practices. It would seem that there is something that he is not telling us, at least not directly. The sudden reappearance of the Dormition here certainly seems to imply that some sort unvoiced connection exists between the Kollyridians and traditions about the end of Mary's life; otherwise, it is very difficult to understand why he reintroduces this topic in this context.

Presumably, the “Kollyridians,” or whomever Epiphanius is opposing here, must have had a specific tradition about the end of Mary's life, and he responds by insisting once again that her ultimate fate is a great mystery, about which both Scripture and tradition are oddly silent. Yet in fact, each of the three possibilities that Epiphanius identifies here, an ordinary death, martyrdom, or that she somehow “remained alive,” had already

56. This was her name according to *Jubilees* 41.5 and Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 2.224–25; other sources name her differently: e.g., 1 Chr 4.18 (Bithiah); and Eusebius, *p.e.* 9.27.3 (Merris).

57. Epiphanius, *haer.* 78.23.9 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:473; trans. Williams, *Panarion*, 2:619).

begun to circulate by this time.⁵⁸ Perhaps this recapitulation of the various options serves to “de-center” for readers a tradition about the end of Mary’s life connected with Kollyridian ritual practices by calling attention to the unsettled nature of this question. In any case, Epiphanius’s claims of agnosticism seem somewhat disingenuous, as will be seen more clearly in a moment: even if he could find no clear witness from the Scriptures concerning the end of Mary’s life, his discussion of the topic reveals an awareness of certain extra-biblical traditions about her departure from this world that were already in circulation. More specifically, Epiphanius’s rather awkward introduction of the Virgin’s “death” at this point in his letter suggests that he must have encountered some sort of connection between the ritual practices ascribed to the Kollyridians and a tradition about the end of Mary’s life that necessitated a return to this topic. In fact, his linkage of these two topics points toward knowledge of the Six Books apocryphon, either directly or through a group that followed its traditions and practices. Perhaps it was his encounter with the Dormition traditions in this context that inspired Epiphanius to raise the issue of Mary’s Dormition in regard to the relationship between John and Mary while refuting the Antidicomarianites. Yet before exploring the possible connection between Epiphanius, the Kollyridians, and Six Books any further, we should consider his extended discussion of this group in the following section of the *Panarion*, where he focuses more intently on refuting their alleged beliefs and practices.

As Epiphanius turns to address the Kollyridians directly in this penultimate section, he attacks first their practice of women’s liturgical leadership before concluding with a scathing condemnation of their veneration of the Virgin and offerings of bread in her name. Unfortunately, in this section he does not raise the question of Mary’s Dormition in the same direct manner as the *Letter to Arabia*. Yet his arguments here against the Kollyridians show symptoms of a repressed knowledge about the end of the Virgin’s life, and these traces are perhaps all the more telling for the manner in which Epiphanius’s text seems to obscure the issue. Reading the gaps in his rhetoric and paying attention to what remains unspoken in this account once again reveals a likely connection between his opponents’ veneration of the Virgin and traditions about the end of her life. Indeed, there are hints in this section of the *Panarion* that the Kollyridians may have adduced the Virgin’s miraculous departure from life as justification for their ritual offerings and prayers to Mary, although this is far from certain.

58. See Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary’s Dormition*, 11–14.

As he abandons the issue of women's liturgical leadership to rebut the Kollyridian veneration of Mary, Epiphanius begins, as already noted, by situating his objections to their practices within the broader context of an attack on the veneration of saints more generally.⁵⁹ In a key passage quoted above, he compares Mary first with Elijah and then with John and Thecla, explaining that Mary, like these revered figures from sacred history, should not be venerated but only held in honor by orthodox Christians. Epiphanius likens Mary to each of these saints in very specific ways, seemingly to demonstrate that her most remarkable characteristics are shared by these other mortals, and just as they do not merit veneration because of their excellence, neither does Mary. Thecla's inclusion here is a rather obvious choice, since, as Stephen Davis demonstrates in his monograph on the early cult of Saint Thecla, Thecla was "a female saint whose popularity rivaled that of Mary in the early church."⁶⁰ Indeed, prior to the fourth century, it was generally Thecla who served as the main role model for female virgins, a role that Mary began to usurp only at this time.⁶¹ Thus, Thecla afforded a perfect example for Epiphanius, underscoring that Mary's virginity and bodily purity afforded no grounds for her "worship" any more than they could justify the veneration of Thecla. The reasons behind the other two choices, however, are a little less obvious: comparison of Mary to an Old Testament prophet and one of the apostles is perhaps a little unexpected in the wake of a diatribe against women's liturgical leadership and prophecy. Yet the text stresses these two comparisons the most, particularly emphasizing Mary's similarities with Elijah, who appears first. Moreover, through comparison with these two figures, the issue of Mary's miraculous departure from this world suddenly leaps to the fore again, in indirect yet unmistakable fashion.

John presumably appears to rival the virgin mother's intimacy with her son; John, also a virgin, is described as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," who leaned upon his breast at the Last Supper.⁶² While the point is not explicit, it would seem the message is that Mary's close relationship with her son does not warrant veneration any more than John's status as Christ's

59. Epiphanius, *haer.* 79.5.1–3 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:479–80).

60. Stephen J. Davis, *The Cult of Saint Thecla: A Tradition of Women's Piety in Late Antiquity*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 4.

61. Davis, *Cult of Saint Thecla*, 21; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, Lectures on the History of Religions, New Series 13 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 157–59.

62. Epiphanius, *haer.* 79.5.2 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:479–80).

beloved disciple could justify his veneration. The comparison with Elijah is perhaps the most surprising, and possibly for this reason, it occasions the most explanation. Mary is like Elijah, Epiphanius explains, because he was “a virgin from his mother’s womb, he remained so perpetually, and was assumed [ἀναλαμβάνόμενος] and has not seen death.”⁶³ The last point of course deserves particular emphasis and attention. While Epiphanius does not formally reintroduce the theme of Mary’s Dormition after its reappearance at the *Letter to Arabia*’s conclusion, its sudden, unheralded intrusion here is surely telling.

This return to the Dormition of Mary signals once again a likely connection between the Kollyridians and this subject. Even if Epiphanius does not address the end of Mary’s life with the same detail as in the *Letter to Arabia*, he nonetheless returns to the topic again in his arguments against the Kollyridian ritual practices. More importantly, however, Epiphanius here tacitly departs from the agnosticism of his *Letter to Arabia* in stating rather unambiguously that Mary, like Elijah, was assumed in the body and did not die. Approximately seven years after the *Letter to Arabia*, Epiphanius no longer insists that Mary’s ultimate fate is a great mystery but informs his readers in an unguarded moment that she was miraculously removed from this world and still remains alive. The significance of this new position is not entirely clear. Did Epiphanius simply change his mind by the time he came to write the final sections of the *Panarion*? Perhaps in the intervening years traditions about the end of Mary’s life had begun to circulate more widely, making it increasingly difficult to maintain a position of ignorance. Or perhaps the insistent agnosticism of the *Letter to Arabia* is feigned, designed to suit his rhetoric against spiritual marriage, as suggested above. It may be that lacking any controversy with regard to Mary’s virginity in his conflict with the Kollyridians, he is able to address the question more openly. Yet regardless of his inspiration, there can be no mistake that Epiphanius here takes a different position regarding the end of Mary’s life than in the *Letter to Arabia*. Without equivocation he reports that Mary, like Elijah, escaped death and was assumed into heaven, and his sudden clarity on this point certainly calls further into question his earlier protests of ignorance in the *Letter to Arabia*.

As Epiphanius continues to press this argument against the veneration of Mary and the saints, he soon turns his focus more directly to the miraculous endings of both Elijah’s and John’s lives, again calling attention to the importance of Mary’s Dormition in his confrontation with the

63. Epiphanius, *haer.* 79.5.2 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:479).

Kollyridians. Elijah, he notes, “is not to be venerated, even though he is alive,”⁶⁴ referring again to his marvelous removal from the world. For good measure, Epiphanius also makes note of John’s miraculous dormition, adding that “John is not to be venerated, even if through his own prayer (or rather, by receiving grace from God) he made of his falling asleep [κοίμησιν] an amazing thing.”⁶⁵ Here Epiphanius alludes to the variety of traditions about the marvelous conclusion of John’s life that had begun to circulate by this time. According to the second-century *Acts of John*, John’s departure from this world occurred in dramatic fashion, seemingly at his own will.⁶⁶ By the late fourth century, a separate but related literary tradition of his “metastasis,” including the miraculous removal of his body, had begun to circulate widely and in numerous versions.⁶⁷ Clearly, John’s intimacy with Christ was not the only comparison that could be made with Mary: John’s miraculous dormition could be used to counter the traditions of Mary’s Dormition and diminish any claims that the Virgin was somehow uniquely to be venerated on account of her miraculous departure from this world.

Epiphanius’s deployment of such arguments in opposition to the Kollyridian ritual practices again points toward a connection between their liturgical ceremonies and traditions about the Virgin’s Dormition. There is no obvious reason for Epiphanius to again raise this issue so prominently through explicit comparison with Elijah and John unless the issue of Mary’s Dormition was already at play in his confrontation with the Kollyridian ritual practices. In fact, Epiphanius’s rhetoric here suggests that his opponents may have defended their veneration of Mary through an appeal to her marvelous departure from the world, although it is also possible that he merely anticipates such an argument. Nevertheless, his focus one more time on the end of Mary’s life in rebutting the Kollyridians further suggests a link between their ritual practices and traditions of Mary’s Dormition.

Epiphanius’s rhetorical connection of these two themes is invaluable for

64. Epiphanius, *haer.* 79.5.3 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:480).

65. Epiphanius, *haer.* 79.5.3 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:480).

66. *The Acts of John* 106–15 (Éric Junod and Jean-Daniel Kaestli, eds., *Acta Iohannis*, 2 vols, CCA 1–2 [Turnhout: Brepols, 1983], 1:292–315; see also the other early versions at 317–419).

67. Jean-Daniel Kaestli, “Le rôle des textes bibliques dans la genèse et le développement des légendes apocryphes. Le cas du sort final de l’apôtre Jean,” *Aug* 23 (1983): 319–36, esp. 329–30. See also Junod and Kaestli, *Acta Iohannis*, 1:30–63; and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991–92), 2:161–63, 204–5.

understanding the early history of the early Dormition traditions. Firstly, the *Panarion* reveals that traditions about the Dormition and Assumption of the Virgin were already in existence and had begun to circulate by the middle of the fourth century, when Epiphanius seems to have encountered them. In contrast to his uncertainty in the *Letter to Arabia*, Epiphanius here declares that, like Elijah, Mary's life also ended in assumption, drawing further comparisons between Mary and the traditions of John's metastasis. Moreover, Epiphanius's unexplained focus on the end of Mary's life in attacking the Kollyridians suggests that he encountered a liturgical tradition of bread offerings in the Virgin's name that somehow was intimately linked with a tradition about her miraculous Dormition and Assumption. Of course, this connection points overwhelmingly toward the Six Books apocryphon as Epiphanius's source, whose traditions he seems to have known, either directly from the text itself or through encountering a group that followed its traditions and practices. As noted already, this ancient Dormition narrative provides liturgical instructions for regular performance of a ritual almost identical to the Kollyridian bread offerings in Mary's name, embedding these practices within an extensive account of Mary's miraculous departure from this life. The Six Books apocryphon is the only known source from the ancient church to actually prescribe regular, ritual offerings of bread on Mary's behalf, and this feature alone invites suspicion that Epiphanius's attack on the "Kollyridians" responds to this text, either directly or indirectly. Yet the fact that these rituals appear in one of the earliest Dormition narratives fits remarkably well with the rhetoric of Epiphanius's anti-Kollyridian polemic, strongly suggesting that his awareness of this text and its traditions may be more than just a mere possibility.

The Six Books apocryphon is the sole document from the early church combining the end of Mary's life with such ritual practices, and Epiphanius's awareness of this narrative and its traditions can readily explain his otherwise puzzling concern with the end of Mary's life in the midst of his attacks on the Kollyridians' ritual offerings in the Virgin's name. The striking parallels between the Six Books and Epiphanius's account of the Kollyridians are surely more than just mere coincidences. Although his witness is somewhat oblique, the *Panarion's* evidence for the Six Books' circulation in the mid-fourth century seems comparable, for instance, to the brief parallel to the *Apocryphon of John* in Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* that is used to date the former to the second century.⁶⁸ Either Epiphanius

68. Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Co., 1987), 24, 163; Karen L. King, *The Secret Revelation of John* (Cambridge: Harvard

must have known an early Christian group whose beliefs and practices were inspired by (or perhaps inspired) the Six Books apocryphon, or after encountering an early version of this text, he invented a group named the Kollyridians in order to refute its ideas, first in the *Letter to Arabia* and then as the seventy-ninth heresy of his *Panarion*. In either case, the significance of Epiphanius's discussions of the Kollyridians for understanding the earliest history of the ancient Dormition traditions is both substantial and surprisingly overlooked.

Epiphanius's apparent knowledge of the Six Books apocryphon indicates that an early version of this important Dormition narrative was probably in circulation by the middle of the fourth century. The connection between the Kollyridians' ritual practices and the subject of Mary's Dormition in the *Letter to Arabia* suggests that already by the time of this letter (ca. 370) Epiphanius had encountered the traditions of the Six Books apocryphon either in written or oral form. This circumstance certainly comports well with what is otherwise known about the early history of this ancient Dormition narrative. Presumably, Epiphanius encountered the Six Books traditions in Palestine, where he lived prior to becoming metropolitan of Cyprus in 367; this would be consonant with the likely origin of these Dormition traditions in Roman Palestine, where the narrative's events take place and where the Virgin's tomb came to be venerated. The Six Books apocryphon is replete with examples of prayer to the Virgin, instances of Marian intercession, numerous miracles ascribed to her authority, and even Marian apparitions, all of which can easily account for Epiphanius's broad attack on Marian piety in response.

The only thing lacking from the Six Books is explicit support for women's liturgical leadership, a practice for which Epiphanius excoriates his opponents. Of course, there is nothing in the Six Books that would contradict female religious leadership, and perhaps the text was used by a group contemporary with Epiphanius that allowed women to serve as priests. Or, it could be that any traditions of women's leadership were edited out during the century between Epiphanius's *Panarion* and the earliest Syriac versions, as devotion to the Virgin entered into Christianity's patriarchal "mainstream." Or, as noted above, it may be that Epiphanius invented the Kollyridians to suit his own rhetorical purposes, using an

University Press, 2006), 9, 17, 24. Irenaeus' summary in *haer.* 1.29 nonetheless parallels only the initial section of the *Apocryphon of John* and has sufficient differences that both scholars conclude that Irenaeus must have had a different, earlier version before him as he wrote.

imaginary sect to address simultaneously the issues of emergent Marian piety and women's liturgical leadership. Yet the fact that he attacked the Kollyridians several years earlier in the *Letter to Arabia* assures that if he has fabricated the group, it was not merely to fill out the eighty heresies of the *Panarion*.⁶⁹ In any case, whether such a sect named the Kollyridians actually existed or not is largely immaterial. The issues that Epiphanius addresses in refuting the group certainly were real phenomena of his broader religious milieu, and the rhetoric of his attack on the Kollyridians' ritual offerings in Mary's name strongly suggests knowledge of the Six Books Dormition narrative, confirming its circulation in the Christian East by the later fourth century.

Likewise, the Six Books narrative can perhaps help to interpret the ritual practices ascribed to the Kollyridians in the *Panarion* and the *Letter to Arabia* by raising further questions about Epiphanius's rhetorical representation of his opponents. The Six Books' description of annual bread offerings in the Virgin Mary's name affords the advantage of considering these nearly identical rituals through the lens of a sympathetic source, rather than a polemical one. For instance, Epiphanius repeatedly insinuates that the Kollyridians offered the bread to Mary as a Eucharist, on one occasion arguing that since there is no commandment to offer the Eucharist (τὸ μυστήριον) to a man, let alone to a woman, the Kollyridians' practices constitute blasphemous mockery of the Eucharist.⁷⁰ While modern scholars have occasionally followed Epiphanius in identifying the Kollyridians' rituals as a commemoration of the Eucharist offered to Mary instead of God, it is not at all clear that those observing these rituals understood them in this way.⁷¹ To the contrary, the Six Books narrative indicates no linkage between its annual bread offerings in Mary's name and the Eucharist; in fact, one sixth-century manuscript of the Six Books specifically identifies the vesper service, rather than the liturgy, as the proper context for the ceremony.⁷² Consequently, it would appear that those who were sympathetic to these liturgical offerings, and indeed may have actually practiced them,

69. A brief remark by Leontius of Byzantium in the early sixth century concerning the "Philomarianites" who offered bread in the name of Mary may offer further confirmation that this group and its practices were not all Epiphanius's fantastic invention, although it is also possible that despite the name change this passage depends on Epiphanius's account. Leontius of Byzantium, *Nest. et Eut.* 3.6 (PG 86:1346B).

70. Epiphanius, *haer.* 79.7.5 (Holl and Dummer, eds., *Epiphanius*, 3:482). See also Dölger, "Die eigenartige Marienverehrung," 124.

71. For example, Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church*, 122.

72. Göttingen MS syr. 10, fol. 31b.

understood these ceremonies as something quite distinct from the Eucharist. Most importantly, however, the Six Books apocryphon reveals a very similar sort of Marian piety contemporary with Epiphanius that does not identify Mary as a goddess or a part of the Christian Godhead, affording instead evidence of Marian veneration that, in contrast to the black and white terms of Epiphanius's polemic against the cult of the saints, does not inevitably devolve into some form of idolatry.

CONCLUSIONS

By the later fourth century, veneration of the Virgin Mary had begun to emerge within the churches of the eastern Mediterranean, and Epiphanius's *Panarion* forms an important, if hostile, early witness to this phenomenon. Despite his polemical and, it would seem, distorting account, careful reading of Epiphanius's attacks against the Kollyridians finds hidden beneath his rhetoric and in its gaps evidence of a nascent Marian piety embedded within the emergent veneration of saints. Epiphanius opposes both equally and, it would seem, absolutely. While much previous scholarship has characterized Epiphanius's invective as a fairly ordinary, "orthodox" response to the Kollyridians' excessive worship of Mary as divine, such interpretations are perhaps partly generated by an interest to reconcile this church father with what became the "orthodox" practice of venerating Mary and the saints by coloring his opponents as "extreme." Yet to look again at Epiphanius's attack on the Kollyridians within its broader context of his rejection of the veneration of saints suggests something rather different from Benko's conclusion that the Kollyridians reflect "an extremist fringe" within late ancient Christianity.⁷³ Closer examination of Epiphanius's rhetoric, as well as comparison with the Six Books apocryphon, suggests that the Kollyridians, or whomever Epiphanius is opposing, were not in fact worshipping Mary as some sort of deity. To the contrary, it would appear that these opponents were merely offering to Mary the kind of prayer and veneration that many Christians at this time had begun to offer to holy men and women of the past and present. Epiphanius, however, seems to have regarded any act of worship or veneration offered to another human being as idolatrous, a theological position that comports with his general conservatism in matters of piety, evident also in his early opposition to images. Yet one can be relatively certain that many other

73. Benko, *Virgin Goddess*, 194.

Christians in Epiphanius's milieu would not have found such veneration of Mary so objectionable.

Thus, Epiphanius's evaluation of these ritual practices as reflecting an eagerness "to substitute her for God" is by no means the only possible interpretation and very likely was not the self-understanding of those communities that observed this liturgical practice. The Six Books apocryphon, for instance, presents an entirely different understanding of an almost identical ritual that involves no goddess worship or offerings to a divine Virgin. Nevertheless, the Six Books presents a highly exalted view of the Virgin that could easily be misinterpreted by an unsympathetic opponent, such as Epiphanius. And while there is no shortage of parallels between Greco-Roman worship and the rituals of the Kollyridians and the Six Books, this is equally true of the veneration of many other saints, not to mention many other liturgical ceremonies, including the Eucharistic liturgy and the celebration of Christmas. Such parallels, while important and illuminating, in no way exhaust the interpretation of these phenomena or reveal the theological intentions of their practitioners.⁷⁴ Historically, however, opponents of Marian piety have shown an eagerness to seize on Mary's elevated status and such pagan parallels in attacking her veneration,⁷⁵ and it is certainly no surprise to find such objections voiced from the very beginning by a zealot like Epiphanius, who, as one scholar puts it, was given to an "intolerant fanaticism" that trafficked in "shouting formulae rather than careful argument."⁷⁶ Yet hidden behind his highly agitated rhetoric, one can now discern, particularly with the help of the Six Books apocryphon, an emergent Marian piety that is rather different from the Christian goddess worshippers of much modern scholarship. Thus, while it will do no harm to "leave aside" this traditional view of the Kollyridians, it would appear that their place as potential pioneers in the veneration of Mary deserves newfound recognition.

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74. See Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 1–22; Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*, 21–23, 213–21, 229–30.

75. See, e.g., Graef, *Mary*, 2:2–12.

76. Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and its Background* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1983), 133.

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