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Volume 13
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Anne Kreps

Ancient Anatomy, Embryology, and the Gestation of Early Christian Heresy

An zwei Stellen greift Irenäus in *Adversus haereses* einen Ausspruch der Häretiker auf, dass Jesus durch Maria hindurchgegangen sei „wie Wasser durch eine Röhre“ (καθάπερ ὕδωρ διὰ σωλήνος). Antike und moderne Leser haben angenommen, dass sich Irenäus damit auf doketische Positionen bezieht. Die Betrachtung dieses ungewöhnlichen Ausdrucks im Kontext antiker medizinischer Schriften zeigt jedoch, dass Irenäus unwissentlich eine Theorie wiedergibt, nach der Maria ein menschliches Kind körperlich zur Welt brachte. Verschiedene konkurrierende christliche Theorien über die Geburt Jesu waren Teil einer verbreiteten Debatte über die Entstehung und Belegung von Embryos, wie sie in den medizinischen Schriften von Galen, Soranus und Porphyrius belegt ist. Irenäus' Verteidigung der christlichen Orthodoxie wurde hier also durch ein Missverständnis zeitgenössischer wissenschaftlicher Theorien geprägt, die möglicherweise von christlichen Häretikern aufgenommen wurden. Die Tatsache, dass Irenäus über eine medizinische Theorie berichtet, selbst wenn er sie nicht verstand, legt außerdem nahe, dass er als zuverlässigere Quelle für christlich-agnostische Ansichten gelten kann, als häufig zugestanden wird.

Keywords: ancient medicine, docetism, Gnosticism, heresy, Irenaeus, virgin birth, women

1 Introduction¹

In two places in his *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus (ca. 130–202 CE) recorded a saying of heretics: Jesus traveled through Mary “like water through a tube” (καθάπερ ὕδωρ διὰ σωλήνος).² It is an obscure phrase, and Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, did not seem sure of its meaning, only that it was wrong. The analogy is unusual and prompts some questions: How does one travel

1 Thanks to the Group for Religion, Medicine, Disability, and Health in Antiquity (ReMeDHe) for offering feedback on this article in the 2021 article workshop. I am grateful to Monica Amsler, Candace Buckner, Kendra Eshelman, Susan Homan, Molly Jones-Lewis, Heidi Marx, Candida Moss, Tara Mulder, Isaac Soon, Jared Secord, and K. Upson-Saia for their comments and suggestions.

2 See Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.7.2 and 3.11.3 (SC 264.103 and SC 211.147).

like water through a tube? Is the phrase metaphorical or mechanical? Biological or philosophical? Who were the ones who said such things? Why did Irenaeus decide that the ones who did had fallen into “an abyss of madness and blasphemy”?³

Ancient and modern readers alike have interpreted the phrase as an expression of docetic Christology – Jesus’s body only *seemed* human, but was really an apparition. In this line of thinking, Jesus was not born from a woman; his physical body was a phantasm that passed through Mary “like water through a tube.” Epiphanius of Salamis (310–403 CE), whose heresiological *Panarion* drew extensively from Irenaeus’s work, insisted that Jesus was born from the Virgin Mary and did not “pass through her like water through a tube, taking nothing from her, his body being from above.”⁴ However, this phrase cannot simply be explained away as docetism because docetism was not a discrete category. Ronnie Goldstein and Guy Stroumsa remind us that the concept can be as amorphous and as problematic a concept as Gnosticism. One cannot write a systematic docetic theology. There was not a single sect we can call “The Docetists”; several competing groups shared docetic beliefs.⁵ It is better, as Allan Brent proposed, to think of docetism as a matter of degree.⁶ Many different kinds of Christians claimed that Christ only seemed to suffer on the cross – perhaps Jesus was an apparition, and never even human, or perhaps his soul was taken up, leaving only a bag of bones. Both Christologies might be termed “docetic” but represent the positions of Marcion and Valentinus respectively, two Christian teachers who held very little in common, except, from the perspective of Irenaeus, being heretics.⁷

Yet, ancient and modern readers alike presume that the phrase “like water through a tube” carried the same meaning in the second century as it did in the fourth. Goldstein and Stroumsa write: “According to Irenaeus, Cerinthus taught that Christ descended upon Jesus at the time of baptism and went back to heaven after crucifixion, while Marcion thought that Christ ascended to the Pleroma before suffering, and had passed through

3 Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.2 (SC 264.23).

4 Epiphanius, *Pan.* 31.7.4 (GCS NF 10.396).

5 R. Goldstein and G.G. Stroumsa, “The Greek and Jewish Origins of Docetism: A New Proposal,” *ZAC* 10.3 (2007), 423–441, here 423–424.

6 A. Brent, “Can There Be Degrees of Docetism?,” in *Docetism in the Early Church: The Quest for an Elusive Phenomenon*, ed. J. Verheyden et al., WUNT 402 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 5–26.

7 W. Löhr, “A Variety of Docetisms: Valentinus, Basilides, and Their Disciples,” in Verheyden et al., *Docetism in the Early Church* (see n. 6), 231–260.

the body of his mother ‘as water through a tube.’”⁸ Irenaeus, in fact, never attributed the phrase to Marcion, who regarded Jesus as a heavenly body. It was the fourth-century theologian Rufinus, who first credited “like water through a tube” to Marcion.⁹ The majority of heresiographers attributed it to Valentinus, the second-century Christian Platonist who vexed Irenaeus into writing *Against Heresies* in the first place. Irenaeus himself never attributed the idea to a specific person or group, and although he stated in the introduction to *Against Heresies* that he was chiefly interested in Valentinus, Irenaeus took aim at several different circles.

Tracking this wording inside and outside of Christian discourse yields a more complicated picture. This article locates Irenaeus’s reports in the context of ancient Greek and Roman physiology. While Plato used similar imagery to explain how souls entered the body, classical and late antique medical scientists drew on the image of air through a tube to explain the embryo’s physical formation. These theories influenced the medical landscape of Irenaeus’s Roman Empire – finding expression both in Porphyry’s *On the Ensoulment of Embryos* and in the theology of the early Christians whom Irenaeus was criticizing. Rather than describing the docetic theory of Jesus’s body, Irenaeus was unknowingly recounting a theory that Mary physically gave birth to a human child. Those he labeled heretics were steeped in the medical world of the Roman Empire and found the science informative, not inimical, to Christian belief.

The second part of this article turns to the writings of fourth-century Christians – Jerome, Cyril, and Epiphanius – where the phrase carried a docetic meaning. For these Christians, “like water through a tube” described a human giving birth to an apparition: a divine Jesus who did not suffer on the cross, did not cause his mother to suffer during birth, and was not himself polluted by delivery. Jerome, Cyril, and Epiphanius rejected

8 Goldstein and Stroumsa, “Origins of Docetism” (see n. 5), 424. The assumption that “like water through a tube” signifies a docetic Christology is ubiquitous, beginning with H. von Campenhausen, *Die Jungfrauengeburt in der Theologie der alten Kirche* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1962). For additional examples, see G. Emmenegger, *Wie die Jungfrau zum Kind kam: Zum Einfluss antiker medizinischer und naturphilosophischer Theorien auf die Entwicklung des christlichen Dogmas*, Paradosis 56 (Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg, 2014), 221. Also N. Constatas, *Proclus of Constantinople and the Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Homilies 1–5, Texts and Translations*, VCSup 66 (Leiden: Brill, 2003); and B.H. Dunning, *Specters of Paul: Sexual Difference in Early Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

9 M. Tardieu, “Comme à travers un tuyau: Quelques remarques sur le mythe valentinien de la chair céleste du Christ,” in *Colloque international sur les textes de Nag Hammadi* (Québec 1978), ed. B. Barc, Bibliothèque copte de Nag Hammadi: Section Études 1 (Québec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1981), 151–177, here 154.

this theory as heresy that denied the dual human and divine nature of Jesus. From the second through the fourth centuries, then, formative orthodoxy made clear that only heretics thought Jesus was born from Mary like water passing through a tube, whatever that might mean, and its meaning changed. Irenaeus's second-century opponents used this wording to describe a human Jesus's conception, gestation, and birth, whereas representatives of fourth-century Christian orthodoxy accused their contemporaries of using the same wording to reject the humanity of Jesus.

While parsing "like water through a tube" might seem pedantic, there are larger lessons to be learned from this small phrase. The early reports of Irenaeus might not be so useful to understand the theological import for Christians who used "water through a tube" to describe the birth of Jesus. The evidence of Galen and Porphyry, and the debates about Hippocratic and Aristotelian theories of conception and embryology provide some context. Irenaeus was reporting (accurately) that some Christians used the phrase "water through a tube" to describe the birth of Jesus, and (unwittingly) reporting a scientific theory of gestation. Irenaeus shows us that some Christians were familiar with the cutting-edge medical research of the second century and that he was not one of them. His demonstrated confusion about the phrase indicates that he did not understand the medical terminology of his time. However, the fact that Irenaeus reported an obscure phrase such as "like water through a tube" indicates that he was genuinely recording the words of his Christian opponents, even as he disapproved of them, and suggests that Irenaeus is a more reliable ancient source than historians acknowledge.

2 Traveling like Water

The phrase under investigation is attested twice in Irenaeus's *Against Heresies*. In both instances, Irenaeus was critiquing gnostic theories of Jesus's birth, reporting that "heretics" say Jesus traveled through Mary like water through a tube. In the first book of *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus wrote:

Now, there are some who say that the [Demiurge] bore Christ as his very own son, albeit of an animal nature, and further, this had been declared through the prophets. Now he traveled through Mary like water through a tube, and at the time of his baptism, this Savior from the Pleroma, made from all, came upon him in the form of a dove. The spiritual seed of Achamoth resided within him. Therefore, they say that our Lord is a composite of these substances, while preserving the type of the first begotten and primary tetrad: of the spiritual, he being from Achamoth, and animal, being from the Demiurge,

from the *oikonomia*, being crafted with unspeakable art, and of the Savior, as a dove landed upon him.¹⁰

In this passage, Irenaeus described certain Christians who viewed Jesus as a composite character, with animal, spiritual, and psychic parts. Christ possessed an animal nature, a spiritual seed, and the “savior who belonged to the Pleroma” descended on him at the time of baptism. Irenaeus indicated that they maintained an adoptionist Christology – Christ initially possessed an animal nature, because the demiurge formed him. He was only adopted as the Savior when a dove appeared at his baptism, and he was infused with the spiritual seed. In the logic of these heretics, Irenaeus explained, these spiritual components were taken up before Jesus was crucified, leaving only the animal part to suffer. Jesus’s death, then, was a reversal of his birth, in which he received his animal nature first and his spiritual nature second. The animal nature was human nature. The heretics, Irenaeus explained, claimed that “animal men, having been instructed by animal things, are established through works and faith and they do not have full knowledge.” Animal men were not evil, but they lacked the metaphysical sophistication of the spiritual ones. He continued, “They say that these people [the animal] are we from the Church.”¹¹ In this context, “this Christ traveling like water through a tube” referred to Mary giving birth to the animal Jesus, the same kind of Jesus who was left to suffer on the cross as his spiritual component was taken up. Yet the phrase itself seems extraneous to the discussion, and Irenaeus made no attempts to explain it.

Irenaeus offered a variation of these theories in the third book of *Against Heresies*. Here, Irenaeus reported several competing heretical ideas about Jesus’s birth and identity:

Now according to these [heretics] the Word did not become flesh, nor did Christ or Savior come from the All. Neither the Word nor the Christ came into this world, nor did Savior become flesh or suffer. But rather, he came down as a dove upon the ministerial Jesus [...].

¹⁰ Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.7.2 (SC 264.103): Εἰσὶ δὲ οἱ λέγοντες προβαλέσθαι αὐτὸν καὶ Χριστὸν υἰὸν ἰδίον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ψυχικόν. [καὶ] περὶ τούτου διὰ τῶν Προφητῶν λελαληκέναι. Εἶναι δὲ τοῦτον τὸν διὰ Μαρίας διοδεύσαντα, καθάπερ ὕδωρ διὰ σωλήνος ὁδεύει, καὶ εἰς τοῦτον ἐπὶ τοῦ βαπτίσματος κατελθεῖν ἐκείνον τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ Πληρώματος ἐκ πάντων Σωτήρα, ἐν εἶδει περιστεράς· γεγενῆναι δὲ ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ αὐτὸ [ἀπὸ] τῆς Ἀχαμῶθ σπέρμα πνευματικόν. Τὸν οὖν Κύριον ἡμῶν ἐκ τεσσάρων τούτων σύνθετον γεγενῆναι φάσκουσιν, ἀποσώζοντα τὸν τύπον τῆς ἀρχηγόνου καὶ πρώτης τετρακτύο· ἕκ τε τοῦ πνευματικοῦ, ὃ ἦν ἀπὸ τῆς Ἀχαμῶθ, καὶ ἐκ τοῦ ψυχικοῦ, ὃ ἦν ἀπὸ τοῦ Δημιουργοῦ, καὶ ἐκ τῆς οἰκονομίας, ὃ ἦν κατεσκευασμένον ἀρρήτῳ τέχνῃ, καὶ ἐκ τοῦ Σωτήρος, ὃ ἦν κατελοῦσα εἰς αὐτὸν περιστέρα.

¹¹ *Haer.* 1.6.2 (SC 264.92–93).

Now some say that the *ministerial Jesus, who passed through Mary like water through a tube, did become flesh and suffer*. Others say, the ministerial Jesus descended on the son of the Demiurge, and still others say, *Jesus was born from Joseph and Mary and that a Christ from above, who was without flesh and preexistent, descended on him*. But according to not a single one of the heretics was the Word of God made flesh.¹²

In this passage, Irenaeus created four categories of heretics who held four different ideas about Jesus's birth. He seemed more concerned with articulating this orthodox perspective, rather than refuting his adversaries. Irenaeus presented these four gnostic theories about Jesus, which he contrasted to his own argument: that Jesus was the Word of God made flesh. To delineate his own position as orthodox, Irenaeus magnified small differences he perceived among the many varieties of Christianity. This included noting things like the phrase "like water through a tube" as a sort of throwaway line without interpretation, as in "look what these funny people say." In this interpretation, the phrase, as preserved by Irenaeus, sounds authentic as a sort of *lectio difficilior potior*. Yet those funny people, in his estimation, also adopted the Christology of an incarnate, suffering Jesus, not a phantasm who only seemed to suffer. While the precise meaning of "like water through a tube" remains elusive in Irenaeus's accounts, the expression points towards the body – "Jesus did become flesh and suffer" – not the docetic – "Jesus who was without flesh and pre-existent."

3 The Myth of Er

A docetic meaning of "like water through a tube" has been identified as an import from Greek philosophy. As Michel Tardieu has thoroughly demonstrated, the expression was neither a product of docetism, nor even an invention of Christian discourse. Tardieu located the idea in a larger Platonic context that presented souls as leaving and joining the body

12 *Haer.* 3.11.3 (SC 211.147): Κατ' ἐκείνους δὲ οὔτε ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο οὔτε ὁ Χριστὸς οὔτε ὁ ἐκ πάντων γεγονὼς Σωτὴρ. Καὶ γὰρ τὸν Λόγον καὶ τὸν Χριστὸν μηδὲ παραγεγονέναι εἰς τοῦτον τὸν κόσμον θέλουσιν, τὸν δὲ Σωτῆρα μὴ σεσαρκῶσθαι μηδὲ πεπονθέναι, κατελθεῖν δὲ ὡς περιστερὰν εἰς τὸν ἐκ τῆς οἰκονομίας Ἰησοῦν [...]. Σεσαρκῶσθαι δὲ καὶ πεπονθέναι τινὲς μὲν τὸν ἐκ τῆς οἰκονομίας λέγουσιν Ἰησοῦν, ὃν διὰ Μαρίας φασὶ διοδεῦσαι καθάπερ ὕδωρ διὰ σωλῆνος, ἄλλοι δὲ τὸν τοῦ Δημιουργοῦ Υἱόν, εἰς ὃν κατελθεῖν τὸν ἐκ τῆς οἰκονομίας Ἰησοῦν, ἄλλοι δ' αὖ πάλιν Ἰησοῦν μὲν ἐξ Ἰωσήφ καὶ Μαρίας γεγεννησθαι λέγουσιν, εἰς δὲ τοῦτον κατεληλυθέναι τὸν ἄνωθεν Χριστόν, ἄσαρκον καὶ ἀπαθὴ ὑπάρχοντα. Κατὰ δὲ οὐδεμίαν γνώμηγ τῶν αἰρετικῶν ὁ Λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ σὰρξ ἐγένετο.

through holes in the heavenly barrier to earth. Plato had concluded his *Republic* by narrating the story of Er, son of Armenius, a Pamphylian who had died in battle. After Er's soul ascended to the heavens, he learned that he had been selected as an intermediary to return to the world and report what he had seen. When Er's soul left his body, Plato wrote, "he went on a journey with a great company, and they came to a mysterious place at which there were two openings in the earth; they were near together, and over against them were two other openings in the heaven above."¹³ Plato's cosmology provided a porous boundary for souls to traverse as they entered and left the world through holes. As an import into Christian theology, the expression came to describe how and when the soul entered Jesus's body. In Tardieu's estimation, when Irenaeus was reporting what heretics say about "water through a tube," he was referencing a concept found among later interpreters of Plato – the tradition of souls entering and leaving the world through holes.¹⁴

It is unlikely that Irenaeus saw a Platonic cosmological myth in his opponents' theory of Jesus's birth. In such a case, he may not have found such a reading problematic. Despite his claims to be simple, ministering to barbarians in the cultural backwater of Gaul, a general Platonic influence permeated Irenaeus's own world-view.¹⁵ Irenaeus may have lacked formal philosophical training, but he knew enough about Platonic theory to recognize it in gnostic cosmological speculation and he encountered it enough for Plato to shape his own ideas of God. Irenaeus presumed that one could become acquainted with the deity through the mediating agents of wisdom and the word. He defined virtue in the language of Platonic wisdom: One could come to know the deity through creative works, which themselves were generated by divine "love and infinite kindness," and through the love and kindness the deity comes "within reach of human knowledge."¹⁶ This distinction served to refute gnostic theories of an utterly unknowable God.¹⁷ Irenaeus was also familiar with Plato to refute contemporary Christian Platonists. Irenaeus deliberately set up theology in opposition to philosophy, calling philosophers "those who are ignorant of God."¹⁸ Throughout *Against Heresies*, he routinely complained that the Christians he referred to as gnostics had been utterly corrupted by Platonic thought.

¹³ Plato, *Resp.* 10.614c (trans. P. Shorey, LCL 276.327).

¹⁴ See Tardieu, "Comme à travers un tuyau" (see n. 9), 153–163.

¹⁵ A. Brigman, "Revisiting Irenaeus' Philosophical Acumen," *VC* 65.2 (2011), 115–124.

¹⁶ *Haer.* 3.24.2.

¹⁷ *Haer.* 3.24.2–3.25.5.

¹⁸ *Haer.* 2.14.2.

When they claimed that things in this world have “a true image above,” they simply “copy the doctrine of Plato,” Irenaeus opined.¹⁹ Yet Irenaeus did not accuse them of copying the doctrine of Plato in these instances. Perhaps, then, while such a theory has points of contact with Platonic speculation, second-century Christians may have encountered the idea through other channels.

4 Ancient Bodies, Ancient Selves

Despite the many Christian groups in antiquity who adopted docetic views of the crucifixion, the phrase “like water through a tube” was one of the few descriptions that became connected to the mechanics of a docetic birth. Jesus’s death, not his birth, was the more common testing ground for docetic ideas. Yet this phrase has been taken to mean something about Jesus and not Mary, a reading influenced by what Stephen Shoemaker has identified as a false impression of a “Marian ‘dark age’” when she was not a prominent subject of Christian interest.²⁰ Shoemaker has persuaded us that Marian piety was far more developed in the second century than scholars have appreciated, although, he notes, references to her “are scattered and often faint.”²¹ Perhaps this strange formulation of the virgin birth is a trace of such an interest. By shifting focus from what it says about Jesus’s body to Mary’s, new questions arise: How does a woman conceive, gestate, and give birth to a deity?

The physiological possibilities of “like water through a tube” are suggested by classical theories of female anatomy. The classical model proposed that the anatomical woman was a defective version of the anatomical man: Aristotle declared, “The female is a deformed male.”²² As a less perfect, underdeveloped version of the male body, the female possessed testicles and seminal ducts, albeit located internally, due to the cold nature of the woman.²³ Aristotle posited that women possess “a tube (καυλός), just as

19 *Haer.* 2.14, see additionally 2.25.2 and 19. Although he never quoted Plato, or made reference to specific works of Plato, as J. Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, VCSup 127 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 40, has argued, “Irenaeus’ failure to engage philosophy on a large scale might not be the result of ignorance, but understanding.”

20 S.J. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 23.

21 Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (see n. 20), 5.

22 Aristotle, *Gen. an.* 737a.

23 See R. Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 296. Also M.F.

men have the penis, but within the body.”²⁴ He compared the tube to the nose. Just as a nose has small openings at one end and a larger opening to the larynx, the penis-like tube has a small opening at one end and, at its other end, is connected to a larger opening at the uterus.²⁵ The famous physicians of Irenaeus’s era, Soranus of Ephesus and Galen of Pergamum, also envisioned a correspondence between the body parts at the head and pelvis – just as a mouth (στόμα) possesses lips that open and close, and is connected to the neck, the external opening of the female body has lips and is connected to the “neck” of the uterus.²⁶

The female reproductive organs, then, were incorporated into a larger tube-like system. Paola Manuli posited that ancient anatomical experts imagined a passage (ὁδός), where all the orifices of a woman’s body were connected to one another, communicating through an open channel, essentially “an uninterrupted vagina from nostrils to womb.”²⁷ A blockage in the channel could cause infertility and menstrual disorders. To determine whether a blockage had occurred, a physician might insert a clove of garlic into the vagina and smell the patient’s breath for garlic the next day. Such a practice is attested in both the Hippocratic corpus and Egyptian medical papyri.²⁸ Late antique Christian sources exhibit knowledge of this anatomical model – fourth- and fifth-century authors from Zeno and Ephrem the Syrian to Augustine and Gaudentius, Bishop of Brescia, theorized that the deity impregnated Mary through her ear, suggesting a passage that connected it to the womb.²⁹

Foskett, *Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginit* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 31.

24 Aristotle, *Hist. an.* 10.5.637a23–24 (trans. D.M. Balme, LCL 439.519). Also see *Hist. an.* 3.1.510b13; cf. Foskett, *Virgin Conceived* (see n. 23), 31.

25 Aristotle, *Hist. an.* 10.5.637a30–35.

26 Soranus, *Περὶ γυναικείων παθῶν* 16; Galen, *De uteri dissectione* 4; Aristotle, *Gen. an.* 1.12.720a. Cf. A.E. Hanson, “The Medical Writers’ Woman,” in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. D.M. Halperin, J.J. Winkler, and F.I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 309–338, here 317.

27 P. Manuli, *Medicina e antropologia nella tradizione antica* (Turin: Loescher, 1980), 399. Cf. H. King, *Hippocrates’ Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1998), 28.

28 Cf. A. Nifosi, *Becoming a Woman and Mother in Greco-Roman Egypt: Women’s Bodies, Society and Domestic Space* (London: Routledge, 2019), 164.

29 S.P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, rev. ed., Cistercian Studies Series 124 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1992).

Ancient medical professionals were unsettled on whether or not this tube was sealed with a hymen in virgins. Soranus considered, then rejected, the existence of such a barrier. He wrote in his treatise *Gynecology*:

In virgins the vagina is flattened and comparatively narrow, since it possesses furrows held together by vessels which take their origin from the uterus. And when the furrows are spread apart in defloration, these vessels burst and cause pain and the blood which is usually excreted follows. For it is a mistake to assume that a thin membrane causes pain when it bursts in defloration or if menstruation occurs too quickly.³⁰

This passage demonstrates that Soranus envisioned the vagina as a tube. In virgins, the sides of the tube were pleated, like an accordion. The accordion folds were attached to one another with blood vessels. He theorized that sexual intercourse broke these vessels, causing bleeding by unraveling the accordion pleats, and elongating the vaginal tube.³¹ Soranus, though, rejected the existence of a hymen. His model serves an example of what Julia Kelto Lillis has identified as a “puerperal” definition of virginity. Lillis has shown us that virginity in the second century was multifaceted, rarely defined by the presence of a hymen, and more often thought of in terms of childbirth. That is, the term “virgin” has been used to describe women who have not given birth and not women who have not had sexual intercourse.

This was the operative definition of virginity at work in the Protevangelium of James, a text directly contemporary to Soranus. This second-century text narrates a biography of Mary, her birth, childhood, pregnancy, and delivery. The Protevangelium was focused on demonstrating Mary’s life-long commitment to purity and holy living, a point illustrated in a vignette about her labor and delivery. The text explained that Mary was raised dedicated to the temple and spent her childhood weaving the curtain that hung at the entrance to the holy of holies. The text aimed to convince its audience, likely in response to suspicion, that every moment of Mary’s life was conducted in perfect purity. Even after childbirth, the text argued, Mary remained a virgin physically. The Protevangelium narrated how a skeptical midwife subjected Mary to an invasive post-partum exam. When the midwife performed the test on Mary, her finger withered, became consumed by fire, and was only healed by picking up the baby Jesus. In Lillis’s words, in the Protevangelium, “Mary’s birthing is remarkable and virginal not because a hymen is present, but because the ordinary signs of

30 Soranus, Περὶ γυναικείων παθῶν 16–17 (trans. O. Temkin, *Soranus’ Gynecology*, Publications of the Institute of the History of Medicine [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956], 15).

31 Cf. Y. Malinas, P. Burguière, and D. Gourevitch, “L’anatomie gynécologique dans Soranos d’Éphèse,” *Histoire des sciences médicales* 19.2 (1985), 161–167, here 166.

childbirth are absent: her body does not release the usual materials and fluids, her labor and delivery are not painful, and her genitals have not needed to expand, stretch, or tear.”³²

The Ascension of Isaiah shares the outlook of the Protevangelium. The Vision of Isaiah, which comprises the second half of Ascension (6–11), is roughly contemporary to the Protevangelium.³³ This portion of the text was set in the court of King Hezekiah. Isaiah, the state prophet, saw a vision which transported his mind into seven layers of heaven.³⁴ There, he saw the birth of the Lord. Isaiah described how he witnessed Mary give birth to Jesus without any pain. Rather, “she looked with her eyes and saw a small infant and she was astounded. And after her astonishment had worn off, her womb was found as it was at first, before she had conceived” (11:8–9). Joseph had not noticed the birth of his son either, and “many said, ‘she did not give birth [. . .]. We did not hear any cries of pain’” (11:14).³⁵ Ascension’s interest in Mary resembles the Protevangelium, which is, as Shoemaker has noted, strikingly developed for a second-century text.³⁶ They demonstrate that Mary the mother of Jesus had captured the Christian imagination far earlier than often acknowledged. These texts addressed interest in the physical nuances of the virgin birth. Rejecting the claims of other Christians, whose views were represented by the Gospel of Luke, they detailed the miracle of a woman remaining physically intact after the birth process.³⁷ The Protevangelium presumed the anatomy of Soranus, who would not have expected birth to rupture a hymen.³⁸ Even without a hymen, the trauma of childbirth would have been unavoidable. But both the Protevangelium and Ascension rejected a traumatic birth. Mary’s womb was “found as it was at first, before she had conceived,”³⁹ as though she had a supernaturally easy labor and delivery, perhaps Jesus passing through her like water through a tube.

32 J.K. Lillis, “Paradox *in partu*: Verifying Virginity in the Protevangelium of James,” *J ECS* 24.1 (2016), 1–28, here 17.

33 The Martyrdom of Isaiah (1:1–3:12 and 5:1–16) contained a Hebrew narrative of Isaiah’s persecution and death at the hands of the seventh-century Israelite king Manasseh. The intervening part (3:13–4:22) is thought to be a Christian addition to the Martyrdom.

34 M.A. Knibb, “The Ascension of Isaiah,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J.H. Charlesworth, vol. 2 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985), 164–176, here 150.

35 Trans. Knibb, “Ascension of Isaiah” (see n. 34), 175.

36 Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (see n. 20), 23.

37 Foskett, *Virgin Conceived* (see n. 23), 1–22.

38 Lillis, “Verifying Virginity” (see n. 32), 7–8.

39 Cf. Lillis, “Verifying Virginity” (see n. 32), 18–19.

5 The Zeal of the Male

Christian debates about the extent to which Mary's body was involved in birthing the infant Jesus can also be considered in light of classical and late antique discussions about embryology and fetal formation. Physician contemporaries of Irenaeus and Valentinus, swept up in the "second sophistic" revival of classical Greek thought, revisited ancient debates about fetal formation and the ensoulment of the embryo: Hippocrates of Cos and the later acolytes who wrote in his name held that the embryo was formed from a combination of both semen and menstrual blood. The fetus took shape and solidified through alternating sources of heat and cooling starting at the moment of conception and continuing through gestation.⁴⁰ In the Hippocratic corpus, the male and female contributed equally to the formation and growth of the fetus. Aristotle, on the other hand, theorized that female blood and semen were the same substance that existed in two states – at low temperatures, menstrual blood, and in hot conditions, semen.⁴¹ Both male and female produced sperm, but the heat of the male allowed the sperm to become a life-generating force, while the female sperm cooled into menstrual blood to provide food for the fetus.⁴²

Aristotle's disagreement with the Hippocratic school was driven by his theory of causality. He posited that things were driven into existence by four causes: the efficient (that by which), the material (that from which), the instrumental (that by means of which), and the final cause (for the sake of which). For Aristotle, the man and his seed were both the efficient and instrumental cause in the formation of the fetus, while the woman was simply the material cause, producing a seed that acted as food for the fetus.⁴³ The potential of the soul existed in the father's seed alone. When the female seed met the male seed, it triggered the potential soul into becoming an

40 Hippocrates, *Nat. puer.* 4. Cf. J. Wilberding, "Plato's Embryology," *Early Science and Medicine* 20.2 (2015), 150–168.

41 Aristotle, *Gen. an.* 726b; 727a–b; 729a; 732a; 765b; 775a. Cf. R. Smith, "Sex Education in Gnostic Schools," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. K.L. King (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000), 345–366, here 346.

42 As Rebecca Flemming has documented, the distinction between Hippocrates, Aristotle, and others has typically been couched as "one seed" and "two seed" theories, but the ancient sources do not allow such a tidy division. Instead, she follows Susan Connell, who distinguishes between "parallel" and "differentiated" seeds as more accurate categories. See R. Flemming, "One-Seed, Two-Seed, Three-Seed: Reassessing the Fluid Economy of Ancient Generation," in *Bodily Fluids in Antiquity*, ed. M. Bradley, V. Leonard, and L. Totelin (New York: Routledge, 2021), 158–172.

43 J.-B. Bonnard, "Corps masculin et corps féminin chez les médecins grecs," *Clio* 37 (2013), 21–39, here 26; Flemming, *Medicine* (see n. 23), 303–304.

embryo with a vegetative soul, like a plant. The embryo gradually developed an animal soul as it turns into a fetus. By the end of the pregnancy term, the fetus has developed a rational soul.⁴⁴ The fetus is formed, Aristotle explained, conjuring an image the very opposite of water through a tube, like “milk curdling into cheese.”⁴⁵

The disagreement between Hippocrates and Aristotle persisted in late antique medical circles as well as theological ones.⁴⁶ Second-century medical sources, influenced by Aristotle’s theory of causality, were conflicted about the extent to which the woman contributed formation of an embryo. Soranus of Ephesus posited the existence of a female seed, but this seed was not useful for generation and evacuated by the bladder. The fetus, in Christian theological terms, “neither accepted nor used” anything from the mother and only required the male seed for generation.⁴⁷ Soranus’s colleague Galen disagreed. He investigated whether it was necessary for the female animal to absorb the male seed to become pregnant, that is, does the semen become part of the embryo, or is it a catalyst for embryo formation?⁴⁸ Galen’s research was not theoretical. He interviewed women in brothels and followed up by dissecting a number of pregnant animals, confirming his findings by finding the “uterus wrapped around the embryo.”⁴⁹ For Galen, then, both male and female seeds were necessary for fetal formation.

However, in the write-up of his experiments, Galen considered the implications of Aristotle’s theory. If male and female seeds were really the same substance at different temperatures, Galen pondered, a female could theoretically impregnate herself, but the suboptimal substance would form a monster.⁵⁰ Some of Galen’s Christian contemporaries experimented with this idea as well. As Richard Smith demonstrates, in the cluster of stories we conveniently refer to as the “gnostic creation myth,” a divine Sophia impregnated herself, thus begetting the evil demiurge who created the ma-

44 Nifosi, *Becoming a Woman and Mother* (see n. 28), 139. Cf. Aristotle, *Gen. an.* 731a25; 734b.

45 Aristotle, *Gen. an.* 729a10ff.

46 A useful introduction to the variety of theories can be found in J. Needham and A.F.W. Hughes, *A History of Embryology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1959). Also, Emmenegger, *Wie die Jungfrau zum Kind kam* (see n. 8); Wilberding, “Plato’s Embryology” (see n. 40).

47 Soranus, Περὶ γυναικείων παθῶν 1.4.93–98. Cf. Hanson, “The Medical Writers’ Woman” (see n. 26), 315.

48 Galen, *De semine* 515.10–12 (P. De Lacy, *Galen, On Semen*, *Corpus medicorum Graecorum* 5.3.1 [Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1992], 66–67).

49 Galen, *De semine* 515.11 (De Lacy, *Galen, On Semen* [see n. 48], 67).

50 Galen, *De usu partium* 14.6 (Kühn, 4.162). Cf. Smith, “Sex Education” (see n. 41), 349.

terial world. The Apocryphon of John, for instance, recounted how Sophia, “without the consent of the Spirit, who had not given approval, without her partner and without his consideration,” conceived “a thought from herself.” The text explained, “something came out of her that was imperfect and different in appearance from her, for she had produced it without her partner” – a lion-faced serpent with fire eyes.⁵¹ If understood in the medical knowledge of its time, the Demiurge of the Apocryphon of John was made only with the mother’s seed and therefore grotesque; the tube Jesus was made only of the Father’s substance and therefore perfect.

The third-century Neoplatonic philosopher Porphyry also weighed in on the relative merits of Hippocratic and Aristotelian theories of embryo development. His treatise *On the Ensoulment of Embryos*, which was once attributed to Galen, attempted to articulate a basic theory of embryology.⁵² This work investigated the question at what point the embryo becomes ensouled. Before staking his own position, Porphyry proceeded to outline the dominant theories of his time. He found one theory quite laughable. He wrote:

Now I have heard some maintaining to us that the zeal of the male in the act of “riding” and the womb, affected by like feelings, snatch the soul from the surrounding air through heavy breathing, changing the nature that was the seed’s conductor through the qualities to attract the soul, which leaps through the male with the sperm as though through a tube, carried along by the desire in the womb, when it is fitting to seize it. And this is the reason both have intercourse, so that the binding and confinement of the soul occur through both.⁵³

51 Ap. John 9:25–10:19 (trans. M. Meyer, “The Secret Book of John,” in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The Revised and Updated Translation of Sacred Gnostic Texts*, ed. M. Meyer [New York: Harper Collins, 2007], 103–132, here 114–115).

52 For a comprehensive history of *Ad Gaurum quomodo animetur fetus*, including its initial attribution to Galen, see H. Marx, “Medicine,” in *Late Ancient Knowing: Explorations in Intellectual History*, ed. C.M. Chin and M. Vidas (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 80–98, here 81 and 86–92.

53 *Ad Gaurum* 2.3 (K. Kalbfleisch, *Die neuplatonische, fälschlich dem Galen zugeschriebene Schrift Πρὸς Γαῦρον περὶ τοῦ πῶς ἐμψυχοῦνται τὰ ἐμβρυα*, Abhandlungen der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Philosophisch-historische Klasse [Berlin: Verlag der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1895], 35): ἤκουσα δ’ ἤδη τινὸς ἐγὼ διατεινομένου πρὸς ἡμᾶς τὴν προθυμίαν τοῦ ἄρρενος τὴν ἐν ταῖς ὀχλείαις καὶ τὸ συμπαθεῖς τῆς μήτρας ἀρπάζειν ψυχὴν ἐκ τοῦ περιέχοντος ἀέρος διὰ τῆς ἀναπνοῆς γιγνομένης μετακινήσαντα τὴν φύσιν ἢ χορηγὸς ἦν τοῦ σπέρματος σὺν ιδιότητι ἐλκτικῆ ψυχῆς, διὰ δὲ τοῦ ἄρρενος ὡς διὰ σωλήνος συνεκθοροῦσαν τῷ σπέρματι πάλιν ὑπὸ τῆς ἐν τῇ μήτρᾳ προθυμίας συλλαμβάνεσθαι, ὅταν ἐπιτηδείως ἔχη πρὸς κράτησιν αὐτῆ· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο μίγνυσθαι ἄμφω, ὅτι δι’ ἀμφοῖν ὁ τῆς ψυχῆς δεσμὸς καὶ ἡ κάθειρξις, σύλληψιν τε εἰρηθῆαι τὸ πάθος διὰ τὸ ἀρπαγῇ πτηνοῦ ἑοικέναι τὰ γιγνόμενα.

Porphyry reported that certain people thought the soul entered the womb as though through a tube. The tube is anatomical, although Porphyry's account does not make clear whether it referred to the male or female member. By his own admission, Porphyry found the theory ridiculous. He claimed that it was the product of those who wanted to place the rational soul's entrance into the body *in utero*. In contrast, Porphyry argued, the rational soul does not enter the body until after a person is born. Porphyry wished to align himself with Aristotle, arguing that "the fetus is not actually an animal, nor even potentially an animal"⁵⁴ but rather a vegetable soul, capable of growth, but certainly not intellect, or even movement. On the other hand, those who claimed a fetus has a rational soul claimed it enters the womb "as if through a tube" in the act of sexual intercourse. As an embryological phenomenon, Porphyry's report suggests, the phrase under investigation related to conception and gestation, the spiritual substance of the Father traveled through Mary as though through a tube. It did not curdle like milk into cheese as it fed on the substance of the mother, as Aristotle thought. It did not feed on Mary at all.

Early Christians frequently used medical knowledge to think through their own Christological positions. For example, it was widely held that the images a woman saw at the time of conception influenced the appearance of her offspring. The theory flourished in the second century. Studying the record of Hippolytus, Jared Secord demonstrates that the Theodotians, a Christian community who followed the leather-worker Theodotus, drew on this theory to support their adoptionist Christology. They claimed that Mary had a vision of Melchizedek when the "holy spirit rushed through her," lending Jesus a regal appearance.⁵⁵ Secord shows us that Hippolytus – Irenaeus's intellectual heir – was familiar with medical demonstrations, even though he did not approve of them. His *Refutation of All Heresies* attached several medical theories to different heretical groups, including the little-known Peretae, who attended autopsies to understand how the holy spirit worked on the human body. Hippolytus noted that they "attempted to discern the Hebdomad from medicine, having become fascinated by the dissection of the brain."⁵⁶ It seems that these Peretae were, in fact, very knowledgeable about the anatomy of the human brain. For example, Hippolytus summarized one of their writings, which contains an

⁵⁴ *Ad Gaurum* 2.5.

⁵⁵ J. Secord, "Galen and the Theodotians: Embryology and Adoptionism in the Christian Schools of Rome," *StPatr* 81 (2017), 51–63. Cf. Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.36.1; 10.24.1.

⁵⁶ See Hippolytus, *Haer.* 4.51.10 and J. Secord, "Medicine and Sophistry in Hippolytus' *Refutatio*," *StPatr* 65 (2013), 217–224.

accurate description of the pineal gland as a “little pinecone.”⁵⁷ However, in his exposition of Valentinian Christianity in the *Refutation* and *Against the Valentinians*, Hippolytus was strangely silent.

Hippolytus was a student of Irenaeus, and his *Refutatio* of gnostic Christians closely tracked Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies*. He has even been called “somewhat derivative of Irenaeus.”⁵⁸ Yet, Hippolytus did not tie heretics to tubes. Instead, Hippolytus used Irenaeus’s report to delineate two distinct Valentinian theories about how Jesus was born.⁵⁹ The first, which he claimed was emblematic of “eastern Valentinianism,” held that the body of Jesus was strictly spiritual. The western Valentinian theory, according to Hippolytus, taught that Jesus’s body was animal – a physical, fleshy body that was only later made Christ by a dove descending at his baptism. Hippolytus’s western Valentinians held the same Christology as Irenaeus’s “like water through tube” Valentinians. Yet, Hippolytus, for all his medical knowledge, did not copy Irenaeus here. He left out any mention of a Valentinian theory that Jesus passed through Mary “like water through a tube,” possibly because he understood it as a physiological description more than a theological signifier.

Medical knowledge sculpted the way Christians understood spiritual health.⁶⁰ Wendy Meyer has demonstrated how medical analogies of health or sickness of a single body reflected the health or sickness of individual souls.⁶¹ Mary’s spiritual superiority, then, and Jesus’s divinity were tethered to the purity of Mary’s physical body – not just virginity but the painless birth and the nature of the pregnancy itself. Several ancient sources exhibit discomfort about Mary’s pregnancy. In *De carne Christi*, Tertullian reported that the Marcionites were repulsed by the thought of a pregnant Mary. Tertullian argued that “Christ came from the law of corporeal

57 Hippolytus, *Haer.* 4.51.12; cf. Secord, “Medicine and Sophistry” (see n. 56), 222.

58 E.F. Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 226.

59 On the existence of an eastern and western Valentinian school, see J. Kalvesmaki, “Italian versus Eastern Valentinianism?,” *VC* 62.1 (2008), 79–89.

60 For some neat examples of the way contemporary medical theories shed light on the meaning of obscure early Christian rituals and stories, see J.D. Penniman, “‘The Health-Giving Cup’: Cyprian’s Ep. 63 and the Medicinal Power of Eucharistic Wine,” *J ECS* 23.2 (2015), 189–211; J. Jacobsen Buckley, “Presenting the Poison in the Gospel of John,” in *Violence, Utopia, and the Kingdom of God: Fantasy and Ideology in the Bible*, ed. T. Pippin and G. Aichele (London: Routledge, 1998), 60–71, here 60; Smith, “Sex Education” (see n. 41).

61 W. Mayer, “Medicine and Metaphor in Late Antiquity: How Some Recent Shifts Are Changing the Field,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 2.4 (2018), 440–463.

substance, from the fluids of the woman.”⁶² Marcion, on the other hand, insisted that “Christ was not deemed flesh before being formed, nor called a fetus after being formed, nor delivered after ten months of torments, nor in sudden pain with the filth of those months ejected onto the ground through the sewer of the body.” Tertullian delighted in taunting Marcion with the gory details of gestation and birth, “the filthy curdling of moisture and blood, and of the flesh to be for nine months nourished on that same mire.”⁶³ In light of these debates, as an alternative to “tube” or “pipe,” an equally viable translation of σωλήν/σωλήνος is “gutter.” We might also translate the phrase as “Jesus traveled through Mary like water through a gutter,” referencing Mary’s birthing body.

6 Not of Our Substance

Marcion was hardly alone in his disgust, nor was his position uniquely heretical. In the fourth century, Jerome held a similar view of pregnancy and childbirth. He refuted one Helvidius, who contended that Mary bore other children after Jesus. Jerome, advising that virginity was always preferable to marriage, added, if Helvidius considered the “humiliations of nature, the womb for nine months growing larger, the sickness, the delivery, the blood, the swaddling-clothes [...],”⁶⁴ he would not consider marriage and childbearing to be a spiritually superior state than virginity. Jerome, like Tertullian, pointed to the grossness of childbirth, if only to argue that the blessed Mary delivered only once. For Jerome, the virgin birth was a necessary degradation for Jesus that foreshadowed his death on the cross.

Jerome also confronted the docetic theologies of his time. The phrase “like water through a tube” became explicitly attached to docetic Christologies in fourth-century sources. Epiphanius, Cyril, and John Chrysostom interpreted the idea that Jesus passed through Mary like water through a tube to mean that Jesus was not born with a material body. Such a shift should be viewed as part of Christian interest in Mary that gained

62 Tertullian, *Carn. Chr.* 4.1 (trans. T.F. Heyne, “Tertullian and Obstetrics,” *StPatr* 65 [2013], 419–433, here 425). See P. Kitzler, “Tertullian and Ancient Embryology in *De Carne Christi* 4,1 and 19,3–4,” *ZAC* 18.2 (2014), 204–209.

63 Tertullian, *Marc.* 3.11.6 (trans. E. Evans, *Tertullian, Adversus Marcionem*, OECT [Oxford: Clarendon, 1972], 203). Cf. G.D. Dunn, “Mary’s Virginity *in partu* and Tertullian’s Anti-docetism in *De carne Christi* Reconsidered,” *JTS* 58.2 (2007), 467–484.

64 Jerome, *De Mariae virginitate perpetua* 19.

official traction with the ecumenical councils of the fifth century. The 431 Council of Ephesus decreed that Mary could be called God-bearer and not just “Christ-bearer.” This decision elevated the status of Mary while simultaneously giving Ephesus its mother goddess back albeit with a Christian identity. The 451 Council of Chalcedon, in an effort to refute Nestorian Christology, declared that a human and divine nature exist simultaneously within Christ. Discussions about the theological role of Mary and Christology of Jesus were inseparable.

In his *Panarion*, Epiphanius of Salamis attested to this interpretation in his own account of Valentinian Christianity, which closely tracked Irenaeus’s version: His chapter on the Valentinians opened by placing Valentinus in the context of other gnostic teachers, proceeded to give an overview of Valentinus’s theory of creation and incarnation, then the remaining two thirds of the chapter reproduced Irenaeus’s *Against Heresies* from the preface to 1.11.1. Yet Epiphanius did not quote Irenaeus’s passage on water through tubes. Instead, he attested the phrase in two other contexts. Epiphanius wrote of the Valentinians: “They want to call him Savior, Limit, Cross, Limit-Setter, Conductor, and the Jesus who passed through Mary like water through a tube.”⁶⁵ In this instance, the phrase was titular, perhaps referring to the spiritual body of Jesus, in contrast to the animal one that was later adopted by the holy spirit. The “Jesus who passed through Mary like water through a tube” was listed alongside other well-known titles for Jesus found inside Nag Hammadi and heresiographic literature alike. The tube signaled that Jesus was not corrupted by Mary, Epiphanius reported: “They say he has brought his body down from above and passed through Mary the Virgin like water through a tube, taking nothing from the virgin womb, his body being from above, as I said.”⁶⁶ In Epiphanius’s understanding, the Valentinians argued that Jesus’s body was only heavenly, there was no indication of the animal Jesus that Irenaeus described. It is significant that Epiphanius did not follow Irenaeus here, especially since Epiphanius’s *Panarion* cited all five books of *Against Heresies*. Instead, Epiphanius interpreted Irenaeus’s second-century attestation in light of fourth-century Christological debates about the physical nature of Jesus’s body.

The career of Epiphanius’s contemporary Cyril, the sometimes-bishop of Jerusalem, was severely shaped by these debates, including his teaching

⁶⁵ Epiphanius, *Pan.* 31.4.3.

⁶⁶ Epiphanius, *Pan.* 31.7.4 (GCS NF 10.397): φασὶ δὲ ἄνωθεν κατενηνοχέαι τὸ σῶμα καὶ ὡς διὰ σωλήνος ὕδωρ διὰ Μαρίας τῆς παρθένου διεληλυθῆναι, μηδὲν δὲ ἀπὸ τῆς παρθενικῆς μητрас εἰληφῆναι, ἀλλὰ ἄνωθεν τὸ σῶμα ἔχειν, ὡς προεῖπον.

about Jesus and tubes, as attested in one of his catechetical lectures. Cyril delivered his lectures in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and forbade his students from divulging what they learned. In one of these secret lectures, Cyril taught his students the following Christology:

Not seeming and appearing to become man, but truly born of the Holy Virgin and Holy Spirit. He did not pass through the Virgin as though through a tube but was truly of her flesh.⁶⁷

Cyril's career has been described as a series of "depositions and reinstatements."⁶⁸ He had been consecrated as bishop of Jerusalem by the Arian bishop Acacius, and some whispered that Cyril achieved this office by adopting Arian beliefs. However, Cyril was also deposed several times while he was bishop, specifically for defending Nicene orthodoxy. When Valens, a champion of Arian Christianity, became emperor, Cyril was deposed a fourth time. His entire career had been staked on questions about the nature of Jesus's body provoked by the Arian controversy. When he taught that Jesus did not pass through Mary as though through a tube, he was objecting to one of the core features of Arianism – that Jesus's body, though begotten, was not composed of matter.

Jesus's gestation was important to Cyril because he regarded the womb as a significant site of spiritual transformation. The last five of his catechetical lectures, the *Mystagogue*, described the mysteries of Christian sacraments to those who had been initiated. Cyril drew on the language of the womb to explain the workings of Christian rites. After a declaration of faith and confession, baptism involved full immersion three times into a ritual pool. This ritual was heavily symbolic, representing the threeness of the Trinity and the three-day burial of Christ, where he descended into the heart of the earth, then ascended. The initiate learned a form of *imitatio dei* – the transformation into a Christian by copying Christ and mimicking the phases of his life. As Christ emerged from a womb (and not a tube), so did a Christian emerge from the baptismal pool, the water of salvation that was both "grave and womb."⁶⁹ The Christians were thus born again as they emerged from the womb of the baptismal pool. Cyril, then, recast Jesus's gestation as an essential part of his divinity rather than an accident of birth.

67 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses illuminandorum* 4.9 (PG 33.465B–468 A): Οὐ δοκῆσει καὶ φαντασίᾳ τῆς ἐνανθρωπήσεως γενομένης, ἀλλὰ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ οὐδὲ ὡσπερ διὰ σωλῆνος διελθὼν τῆς Παρθένου, ἀλλὰ σαρκωθεὶς ἐξ αὐτῆς ἀληθῶς.

68 P. Van Nuffelen, "The Career of Cyril of Jerusalem (c.348–87): A Reassessment," *JTS* 58.1 (2007), 134–146.

69 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catecheses* 20.4.

In his *Commentary on Matthew*, John Chrysostom, a contemporary of Cyril, chastised those who claimed that Jesus entered the world as through a tube. Chrysostom considered this theory seriously. “I am censuring the ones who say that Christ passed through Mary as through some tube. For if this is so, what need is there of a womb? If this is so, he has nothing in common with us, but his flesh is something else, not of our substance.”⁷⁰ Like Cyril, Chrysostom did not connect the phrase specifically to a Valentinian context and ultimately rejected the idea that Jesus entered the world through a tube because it would support a doctrine that denied the humanity of Jesus.

By the fourth century, then, the tube theory was presented as the antithesis of gestation. Even the verb change from Irenaeus’s account to the fourth-century attestations also demonstrated how the phrase came to take on an increasingly docetic meaning. Irenaeus preserved the wording διόδυσαντα, καθάπερ ὕδωρ διὰ σωλήνος ὁδεύει (*Haer.* 1.7.2), presenting the passage as an active journey. Jesus traveled, or “made way,” through Mary, like the soul zealously “leapt through” the tube from male to female in Porphyry’s account. In the writings of Epiphanius, Cyril, and Chrysostom, the traveling was replaced by a form of the generic ἔρχομαι, an ephemeral motion, “to go through.” With such movement, Jesus left Mary untouched and was untouched by Mary.

7 The Tube Monologues

Ancient medicine and early Christianity intersect when moral health is linked to bodily health, and when divinity and the soul are located within the flesh. Some of the most contentious issues for the developing Jesus movement and early Christianity revolved around embryology. Was Jesus’s body human or divine? How does conception between a deity and a human happen? How does a woman gestate and give birth to a deity? Answers to these questions created the orthodox and the heretic.

Particularly when it comes to the intersection of ancient medicine and early Christianity, as Julia Kelto Lillis has cautioned us, we should not project later doctrinal reasoning onto earlier views or hold them to the

⁷⁰ John Chrysostom. *Hom. Matt.* 4.3 (PG 57.43.20–24): ἐπιστομιζῶν τοὺς λέγοντας ὅτι ὡσπερ διὰ τίνος σωλήνος παρήλθεν ὁ Χριστός. Εἰ γὰρ τοῦτο ἦν, τίς χρεία τῆς μήτρας; Εἰ τοῦτο ἦν, οὐδὲν ἔχει κοινὸν πρὸς ἡμᾶς· ἀλλ’ ἄλλη τίς ἐστὶν ἐκείνη ἢ σὰρξ, οὐ τοῦ φυράματος τοῦ ἡμετέρου.

standards of a future orthodoxy.⁷¹ When we leave each source to speak for itself, rather than interpreting earlier sources in light of later ones, a complex conversation about Mary, medical science, and philosophy emerges. The meaning of “water through a tube” evolved over time – as Christian orthodoxy solidified – and some interpretations lay on the orthodox side of the fence, and others on the heretical side. By the fourth century, the phrase came to mean “pass through Mary like water through a conduit,” suggesting a spiritual Jesus traveling from heaven to earth through Mary the pipe, perhaps similar to the way Plato theorized souls traveling between realms. After all, in antiquity, there was not a clear division between philosophical speculation and medical practice. Galen insisted the best doctor is also a philosopher, and Heidi Marx shows us how many ancient medical writers engaged with Plato, even as they took his philosophy to different ends.⁷²

The description of the birth of an animal Jesus was also well within the norms of the second-century medical landscape. The image of the tube recalled Soranus’s anatomy, and the idea that Jesus passed through this tube can be interpreted as an opinion about the theories explaining the nourishment and ensoulment of the embryo that Galen, Soranus, and Porphyry debated. Yet fourth-century Christians, and the historians who study them, have read the phrase theologically rather than biologically. Why? Ellen Muehlberger argued that “the central role granted to science as an opponent has conditioned scholars in that field who work with early Christian sources not to consider certain non-Christian, medical texts as important contexts for the authors and arguments they seek to understand.”⁷³ She invites more engagement between ancient Christian and ancient medical sources by reminding us that science and religion were not at odds as methods of inquiry in antiquity. The phrase this article has investigated should be taken as one such example of such a collaboration.

The meaning and attribution did not stay fixed over time. A brief look at the reception of the phrase beyond the fourth century shows that many writers were content to attribute the expression to the heretic of the moment in their own times and places:⁷⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390) attributed the heresy to Apollinaris, Bishop of Laodicea (d. 390), who also

71 J.K. Lillis, “No Hymen Required: Reconstructing Origen’s View on Mary’s Virginity,” *CH* 89.2 (2020), 249–267.

72 Marx, “Medicine” (see n. 52), 81.

73 E. Muehlberger, “Theological Anthropology and Medicine: Questions and Directions for Research,” *StPatr* 81 (2017), 37–49, here 40.

74 These citations are collected in Tardieu, “Comme à travers un tuyau” (see n. 9).

opposed the Arianism that Gregory attacked. But while Arius argued that Jesus was a similar, but not the same substance of the Father, divine, but not a deity, for Apollinaris, Jesus had a divine mind, but a human body, delivered through a tube. Philoxenus of Mabbug (ca. 440–523) attributed the idea to Eutyches (d. 456), the head monk of a large monastery outside of Constantinople, who contended that Mary should not be considered the mother of God because God-the-Word and Jesus-the-man were distinct subjects, separate from one another. Other authors, such as Cyril of Jerusalem and John Chrysostom, mark the idea as heretical but did not name their opponents.

Irenaeus, the second-century figure who recorded the phrase, and his attribution – that the phrase was used by heretics – can be taken at face value. He gave no particular interpretation, and perhaps we should not guess whether he had an interpretation or even cared for one. We can only surmise that Irenaeus had something in mind that was unorthodox to him, to paint a consistent heretical portrait of the disparate groups he called gnostics.

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