

**The Alexandrian Roots
of the *Maria Habuit Parvum Agnum* Motet
as a Mystical Expression of Marian Ascendency
and Polemic contra Arianism**

It is my contention that the motet *Maria habuit parvum agnum* is a fourth century attempt to promote the notion of Marian ascendency while also combating the heretical teachings of Arianism. It is probably a product of the School of Alexandria composed to counterattack the false doctrine, specifically Arianism, adopted by the School of Antioch.

The practice of using popular “ditties” or motets, similar to the *Maria habuit*, to promote theological positions and distortions was a clear fourth century practice. Adam Westoby points out in his work *The Ecology of Intentions: How to make Memes and Influence People*:

The Arians succeeded partly by increasing the infectiousness of their meme¹, setting their theological ideas to music as popular songs. In the 320's common folk from Alexandria to Constantinople could be heard singing ditties to the uniqueness of God the Father.²

The ditties of Arius were very effective. One church historian states:

Arius was quite a character. He was ascetical to the extreme. He was tall, thin and unkempt. With his hair tangled, uncombed and matted on his head he would stride around gloomy and brooding as he preached his doctrines with great eloquence. He was impressive and seen as one of the prophets of old by many people. One of the first real marketing geniuses he knew how to effectively spread his false doctrines simply by putting them to music with little jingles and songs. He would go about teaching people the little ditties he had composed. *The tunes and rhymes would stick in people's heads and pretty soon, even though they might not necessarily believe his doctrines, people from every sort of background were singing his little songs every where.* (italics mine)³

I contend that the *Maria habuit parvum agnum* motet was composed for the purpose of combating in the public arena the heresy being spread by the tunes and rhymes of Arius.

While most have assumed that the text of the “Mary and the lamb” motet is a simple children’s ditty, others have called into the question the intention of the ditty. Professor Stanley Fiske of Duke University, in a paper presented at the convention of *The National Association of Public School Psychologists* urged the elimination from all classrooms of the nursery rhyme “Mary Had a Little Lamb.” Fiske stated that the rhyme is not only sexist, it is hopelessly confusing to young minds. Fiske also questions the phrase that Mary “had a little lamb.” He comments, “Could he mean that Mary *gave birth to the lamb?*”⁴ One might also conclude that Fiske fears the cryptic theological implications of the motet, which is not strange within the present public school God-paranoia. Why else would he suggest that *Mary gave birth to the lamb?*

¹ A “meme” is a thought or idea that is transmitted and replicated from one mind to another. The word was first coined in 1976 by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Blind Watchmaker*. The study of the evolution of ideas or “memes” is called “memetics.” For a treatment of the subject see *Virus of the Mind* by Richard Brodie or *The Meme Machine* by Susan Blackmore.

² Adam Westoby, *The Ecology of Intentions: How to make Memes and Influence People*, at <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/ecointen.htm>.

³ *Heresies and Heretics*, <http://www.roman-catholic.com/Roman/Articles/heretic/heretics1.htm>

⁴ See: “Noted Scholar Deconstructs Nursery Rhyme” at <http://www.quandaryhouse.com/deconst.htm>

Many have noted the theological language in the motet and have presented various Christian versions.⁵ Modern day Christians are using the motet to speak against the “rules” that no longer allow Mary to bring “the Lamb,” (Jesus Christ) to school.⁶ Such practices are indicative of the fact that within human consciousness there is the realization that this motet is not merely child’s play.

While most suggest that the motet is of late origin, the 19th century, and even offer stories of little Mary Sawyer who was supposedly the owner of the lamb⁷, there is evident controversy regarding the actual source of the ditty. Was it the work of Sarah Josepha (Buell) Hale who worked for the Massachusetts’s Episcopal clergyman John L. Blake or was it the work of John Roulstone who was born in 1805 and died on Feb. 20, 1822 in Boston at the age of 17? He was a nephew of the Reverend Lemuel Capen a minister in Sterling Mass. from 1815 – 1819.

One who has researched the roots of both the words and melody of the motet concludes:

It is interesting that although there is a huge controversy over who wrote the lyrics of this popular children's poem, there is absolutely no concern about who wrote the music for it. I have not been able to discover any clues as to who may have come up with the tune.⁸

Another researcher suspects that “the poem was written by an English author in the late 1700's.”⁹

I suggest that the motet is of 4th century origin. It is an intriguing melody that easily fits into the mind and memory. The words have an evident theological significance and many have taken in hand to re-write the poem underlining that significance. Since the theological school at Alexandria was known for mysticism, internalized contact with the images of the unconscious mind, I suspect that the Mary/Lamb motif, using the terminology of the noted psychiatrist Carl G. Jung, is archetypal in nature. In other words, through repetition the “meme” becomes ingrained into the content of the collective unconscious and appears and reappears in various stages of human spiritual development. Both of the alleged authors of the motet have evident connections to “liberal spirituality.” Concerning the Jungian definition of archetypes, one analyst says:

Archetypes are essentially quasi-autonomous functions, which give rise to specific motifs, as common in all mythology as in any individual's life. They are often discussed in terms of personifications, which appear in dreams, but *they can also be seen in themes of stories, mythological or lived* (italics mine).¹⁰

Obviously, we are not dealing with simple children’s ditty. The theological implications are too profound. The evident defense of Trinitarian theology in the text together with the promotion of a mystical Marian theology leads to the conclusion that we are dealing with a polemic against Arius and a promotion of the Alexandrian School’s allegorical method of hermeneutics.

There is no doubt, with the threefold repetition within each verse of the *Maria habuit*, similar to the *trisagion* of Isaiah 6:3 and the threefold repetition of “The Lord...” within the Aaronic Benediction (Numbers 6:24), that the *Maria habuit parvum agnum* motet is Trinitarian in nature.

There is also evidence to suggest that the text was originally in Latin. For one thing, the threefold repetition of one-day (*una die*) is too closely related to the word for God (*deus*) to be merely coincidental. The text was actually saying that the little lamb is a part of the one God repeated three times. Thus, the divinity of Christ is merged with the Trinitarian declaration. In addition, the couplet in Stanza 2 seems to be a Latin theological dictum: *Passim Maria processit; quippe Agnus procedit.*

⁵ See for example: <http://graceland.gentle.org/xmascel/lamb.html>

⁶ See for example: <http://www.awwwsome.com/bugler/inspire/mary.htm>

⁷ See for example: <http://www.wayside.org/research.html>

⁸ See: <http://www.andrews.edu/~sheila/maryslamb/composer.html>

⁹ See: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/3041/lamb.html>

¹⁰ See: <http://www.wynja.com/personality/jungarchf.html>

Let us now consider text of the *Maria habuit parvum agnum* motet:

1. Mary had a little lamb,
Little lamb, little lamb,
Mary had a little lamb,
His fleece was white as snow.

The theological implications of the first stanza are obvious. The truth presented is orthodox theology. Mary gave birth to a “Lamb whose fleece was white as snow.” How else can we interpret such clear theological intentions? Do we not hear the voice of the Baptist declaring, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? (John 1:29)” Do we not recall the words of the prophet, “Come now, let us reason together, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool?” (Isaiah 1:18)

The threefold repetition of the *parvum agnum* is an obvious reference to the Divinity of Christ, similar to the historic liturgical trisagion: *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dominus Deus exercituum Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua.*

Perhaps, in the fourth century, there was only one stanza to the original motet that stood in direct opposition to the Arian heresy and added later were the stanzas that clearly presented the Marian ascendancy heresy. Let us consider those questionable stanzas.

2. Everywhere that Mary went,
Mary went, Mary went,
Everywhere that Mary went,
The lamb was sure to go.

The second stanza introduces the heresy *Passim Maria processit; quippe Agnus procedit* (Everywhere that Mary went the Lamb was sure to go.) We will see this theological distortion also evident in the final stanza.

It was probably the intention of the author by the using the threefold repetition of *Maria processit* to indicate that Mary is also included in the Godhead. One scholar suggests:

Perhaps we should try approaching God from another angle. After all, the all-knowing and all-powerful God of Western tradition is very masculine, stuck in his head, if you will, and often seems cold and distant, impersonal. There are, however, certain mystical traditions that give God a much more feminine character. The Jewish Kabbalists, for example, speak of Shekinah, the Hebrew word for God's glory, which Yale Professor Harold Bloom calls the feminine presence of God. *In Catholicism she is the Virgin Mother Mary. Carl Jung went so far as to conclude Mary completes the Godhead, transforming the Trinity into a Quaternity.* (italics mine) ¹¹

The relationship between Mary and “the Lamb” is questionable. The “Lamb” follows Mary. Could this be a reference to the John 2 wedding at Cana account where Mary takes the lead and Jesus follows her directions?

The development of the cult of Mary places her in the lead. She was the first to be immaculately conceived – and Jesus followed. The motet is also obviously concluding that the pain of childbirth experienced by the Virgin was a redemptive act. Therefore Mary performed the first redemptive act and the sacrifice of the “Lamb” followed after. As one Catholic scholar expresses:

It suffices here to cite the clear text of *Lumen Gentium*, 61, where it is affirmed expressly that the divine Maternity of Mary was a redemptive Maternity, entirely aimed at “restoring supernatural life

¹¹ See <http://www.cliftonunitarian.com/toddstalks/uupooh.htm>

to souls," for which the Virgin Mary is our "Mother in the order of grace," viz., has begotten us to that true life—the life of grace—which makes us "living."¹²

Is the motet further suggesting that Mary was assumed into heaven prior to the Ascension of the Lamb even though the Acts 1:14 reference indicates that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was present prior to the day of Pentecost? Yet, it is strange that this is the only reference to Mary in the remainder of the New Testament. Perhaps she was only spiritually present with the Apostles. Is the motet following an early tradition stating that *Maria processit* into heaven and the Lamb followed? The use of *passim* or "everywhere" suggests both heaven and earth. As Heyen suggests:

While the Immaculate Conception of Mary Supported Christology (How could Jesus the saviour have been born of a woman tainted by original sin?), the dogma of the Bodily Assumption of Mary was a total elevation of Mary's theological status and greatly contributed to goddess-like devotion expressed by the Cult of Mary and increased number of Marian apparitions. The Bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary was defined as a dogma of faith by Pope Pius XII in 1950.¹³

For the mystical theologians of the Alexandrian School to suggest that Mary proceeded Jesus into heaven is not strange. How else can we read the statement, *Passim Maria processit; quippe Agnus procedit*. The Doctrine of the Bodily Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, even though dogmatized in 1950, has early roots in Catholic mysticism. Both St. Theresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross had mystical visions of Mary, Queen of Heaven. Concerning the Feast of the Bodily Assumption, Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange comments:

It is probable that the revelation made to the Apostles, or to one of them, was even explicit, since otherwise it is hard to explain the universal tradition in the East and the West from the 7th century at the latest, which manifests itself in the celebration of the Feast.¹⁴

As the years have passed since the fourth century, we have witnessed the development of the *Passim Maria processit; quippe Agnus procedit* heresy. There is again a strong tendency in our age within Rome to dogmatically establish the co-redemptrix role of Mary. In both practice and piety, Rome has affirmed the early notion that Mary "leads the way" and the Lamb follows.

3. He followed her to school one day,
School one day, school one day.
He followed her to school one day,
Which was against the rules.

Within the Christian Church of the early 4th Century there were two great schools of theology: the School at Alexandria and the School at Antioch. In his *History of the Christian Church*, Philip Schaff distinguishes the two schools:

Far more important was the theological school of Antioch, founded about 290 by the presbyters Dorotheus and Lucian. It developed in the course of the fourth century a severe grammatico-historical exegesis, counter to the Origenistic allegorical method of the Alexandrians; now in connection with

¹² Rev. Fr. Stefano M. Manelli, FI, STD, *Mary Coredemptrix in Sacred Scriptures*, http://www.marymediatrix-resourceonline.com/publication/cor/archives/cor2000_jf1.htm.

¹³ Cecil Heyen, *The Place of Mary in Catholic Spirituality* at <http://www.acu.edu.au/ren/HEYEN1.HTM>

¹⁴ Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *The Mother of the Saviour and Our Interior Life* (Golden Eagle Books, Dublin, 1948) (henceforth RGL), p. 164.

the church doctrine, as in Chrysostom; now in a rationalizing spirit, as in Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius.¹⁵

Even though the school of Antioch adopted the rules of a literal/historical hermeneutic, nonetheless, that school embraced the heresy of Arianism. Theologian John Murphy points out:

Arius was a native of Libya but was attached to the church of Alexandria. He evidently studied at Antioch under Lucian; at any rate, his doctrine is assuredly inspired by that of Lucian. Arianism breathes the spirit of Antioch even though it came to light in Alexandria; it was, moreover, accepted very quickly by the school of Antioch while failing to capture Alexandria or Egypt throughout the fourth century. In its concern for the literal meaning of Scripture, and its deceptive use of the arguments of human reason, *Arianism reflects the approach of Antioch rather than the allegory of Alexandria* (italics mine).¹⁶

There is little doubt that within the 4th century Christian environment, the two schools at Antioch and at Alexandria were in competition with each other. It is evident that the *Maria habuit parvum agnum* arose out of Alexandria to combat the ditties that were promoted by the School of Antioch to further the Arian heresy.

It is true that the school of Alexandria initiated much of the early Marian theology. The Father's of Alexandria were the first to speak of Mary as the "Mother of God" or "*Theotokos*."¹⁷ The Church Father Alexander of Alexandria writes:

We acknowledge the resurrection of the dead, of which Jesus Christ our Lord became the firstling; he bore a body not in appearance but in truth derived from Mary the Mother of God.¹⁸

In a prayer of St. Cyril of Alexandria we see the emphasis upon the Trinity and the praise of the ever-virgin Mary as the very Temple of God:

Let us fear and worship the undivided Trinity as we sing the praise of the ever-virgin Mary, the holy temple of God, and of God himself, her Son and spotless Bridegroom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.¹⁹

This promotion of Mary was in direct opposition to the Christology at Antioch as one scholar has noted:

The Alexandrians adhered to the allegorical interpretation of Scripture; the Antiochenes were devoted to literal exegesis. The subject of Christology, however, elicited emotional and religious responses and distinctions that were to transcend these academic environs and affect the political and religious life and practice of Christianity in the Syrian Orient for centuries to come. Diodore of Tarsus helped initiate this controversy in the last decades of the fourth century by speaking of Christ as simultaneously representing the "Son of God" and the "Son of Mary." Mary was viewed by this Antiochene scholar as the mother of a man, rather than a mother of God. The Word of God and the Son of Mary were both Sons of God; the one by nature, the other by grace.²⁰

I conclude that the phrase: "The Lamb followed Mary to School" is a promotion of the theology of Alexandria over the literalism of Antioch. "The Lamb followed Mary to School" even though it was

¹⁵ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* at http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/3_ch05.htm

¹⁶ John Murphy, *The General Councils of the Church* at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/chistory/gencounc.txt>

¹⁷ See: <http://www.antonius.org/docs/library/orthodoxy/coptic/history/mary.htm>

¹⁸ *Letter to All Non-Egyptian Bishops* A.D.324, at <http://home.att.net/~catholicuniversal/BVM.htm>

¹⁹ See: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PRAYER/LITTLE.TXT>

²⁰ <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/junillus.intro.html>

against the strict rules of interpretation established by Antioch. But what good were those rules if they embraced the anti-Trinitarian heresy of Arianism?

One can envision the proponents of the Arianism spreading their heretical notions by singing their little ditties and motets giving glory to God the Father alone only to be countered by the chorus of the *Maria habuit* giving unique praise to the Lamb who affirmed both the Marian theology and thus the hermeneutical methods of Alexandria. It must have been a sight to behold.

4. It made the children laugh and play,
Laugh and play, laugh and play,
It made the children laugh and play,
To see a lamb in school.

One is struck by the simplicity of this stanza. The imagery of children laughing and playing in the midst of the deep theological arguments of the fourth century is probably a reference to the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:25 in which he prays, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.”

The theological school of Antioch was driven by rationalism while the interpretative methodology at Alexandria was a more simplistic, allegorical methodology with a strong emphasis upon the mystical, experiential “seeing” of Jesus through the eyes of faith. While one school emphasized the profundity of human reason, the other school emphasized the simplicity of human imagination. While one school catered to the intellectual, the other to the simple faith of children. While the one, out of rationalism, denied the supreme Divinity of the “Lamb” the other welcomed him into their midst. Thus the children laughed and played to “see” the “Lamb” at school. Jay Rogers points out:

During the fourth and early part of the fifth centuries, theological speculation in the Church revolved around two great centers, Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in Syria. The tendency of the Alexandrian school was mystical. With this school the divinity of Christ was everything, and His humanity was de-emphasized. The tendency of the school of Antioch was to rationalism, an emphasis on moral duties and independence of the human will.²¹

One can truly sense the sarcasm of this stanza. As the proponents of the Arian heresy spread their false doctrine through the use of ditties and motets, you can hear the response coming from the “children” of Alexandria. They “laugh and play” with great joy for the Lamb himself is present in their midst and viewed through the eyes of faith, not through the constructs of reason or intellectual hermeneutical rules.

5. And so the teacher turned him out,
But still he lingered near.
And waited patiently about
Till Mary did appear.

Those who hold to the erroneous notion that this ditty is a mere children’s nursery rhyme are forced to deal with the language of this final stanza. While it presents a distinct meter, as opposed to the first four stanzas, the reason is obvious. This stanza presents the culmination – the *parousia*.

Even though Arius the teacher rejected the Divinity of the Lamb and “turned him out” of the Church as one worthy of praise and adoration, yet the Lamb lingered near and waited patiently – *etiamtum Maria apparet*. (until the appearance of Mary).

²¹ Jay Rogers, *Christology*, at http://forerunner.com/orthodoxy/X0006_5._Christology.html

If the text is a mere children's rhyme the use of the word "appear" is suspect. If this is the lamb of little Mary Sawyer from Massachusetts, how does she "appear" outside the schoolhouse? Is she an apparition? Clearly, the "appearance of Mary" has theological intentions.

Here again we find the restatement of the heresy first introduced in the second stanza - *Passim Maria processit; quippe Agnus procedit*. Many today believe that the appearances of Mary, following the final dogmatizing of her bodily assumption, herald and are a portent for the second coming of Christ. A Marian theologian states:

As John the Baptist prepared the way for the first coming of Jesus, Mary prepares the way for His Second Coming. Mary proclaims that a new world and era is upon us, and the triumph of Her Immaculate Heart and the Second Pentecost (the outpouring of the Holy Spirit) will usher in the Reign of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.²²

A careful examination of the *Maria habuit* motet reveals five themes presented in ascending order: Incarnation; Redemption (Mary as co-redemptrix); the teaching of the Church; the joy of a relationship with "the Lamb"; and the second-coming of the Lamb (the parousia). It is clearly an attempt to combat the heresy of Arianism and to promote a mystical Marian theology.

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We are living in an age today that in many respects mirrors the fourth century. Theology is being presented in the form of little ditties or choruses. Many Christian congregations have turned their back on the richness of their liturgical heritage only to embrace little ditties that, more often than not, reflect a questionable theology. The legacy of the Reformation was a rich hymnody teaching deep theological truths rather than repeating the lines of a little ditty over and over again until the "worshipper" entered some hypnotic state of emotional euphoria.

For example, the words of the popular ditty *Shine, Jesus Shine* and *Blaze, Spirit Blaze* are more reminiscent of cheers offered at a high school basketball game than songs offering a rich theology. Are we the ones who tell Jesus to shine or command the Holy Spirit to blaze? Is not the opposite true? What effect will these words, once engrained into the human psyche, have upon what is believed and what is taught in the Church? The fourth century heretic Arius knew very well that the repetition of questionable ditties would eventually impact the Christian's *credo*.

If for some reason or another this generation is motivated by the use of ditties in their life of worship, I suggest that the theology of those ditties must receive careful scrutiny. Rather than using the questionable words of ditties the likes of *Shine, Jesus Shine*, Christian congregations might choose to reacquaint themselves with the orthodoxy of the past and use the first stanza of the *Maria habuit*. At least the doctrine of the Trinity and the reality of justification would be presented in the singing. Perhaps in the future we will again here the church sing forth:

*Mary had a little Lamb,
Little Lamb ,little Lamb,
Mary had a little Lamb
His fleece was white as snow.*

²² <http://www.maxkol.org/tchap01.htm>

A Note to the Reader: April Fool!! What you have read is an obvious “spoof.” If, in the course of reading, you entertained even a passing thought that my premise might have credibility, you would score rather high on a gullibility test.

I recently read an essay by the 19th century Anglican cleric Richard Whately. By using the same higher critical methodology employed by liberal theologians, specifically David Hume in his assessment of the Gospel accounts, and applying the method to news reports chronicling the exploits of Napoleon Buonaparte, Whately concluded that Buonaparte never existed nor accomplished what had been attributed to him. My “scholarly” work on the “*Maria habuit*” motet was motivated by the work of Whately.

In writing the article about “Mary had a little lamb,” I attempted to use the same methodology that is employed by liberal theologians. 1) Begin with a premise. 2) Establish your own “dot system” whereby you will attempt to prove the premise. 3) Connect the dots in what appears to be a scholarly fashion. 4) Arrive at a conclusion that is not merely abstract but has practical and “feel good” implications.

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