



---

August 2022

## The Lactans and the Lachrymose: The Nursing Virgin as Intercessory Type in an Early Coptic Monastic Context

Katharine Davidson Bekker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua>



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), [History Commons](#), and the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Davidson Bekker, Katharine. "The Lactans and the Lachrymose: The Nursing Virgin as Intercessory Type in an Early Coptic Monastic Context." *Studia Antiqua* 21, no. 1 (2022): 1-12. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol21/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studia Antiqua* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# THE *LACTANS* AND THE LACHRYMOSE

## THE NURSING VIRGIN AS INTERCESSORY TYPE IN AN EARLY COPTIC MONASTIC CONTEXT

KATHARINE DAVIDSON BEKKER

*Katharine Davidson Bekker recently completed an MA in Comparative Studies, with an emphasis on northern European art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. She has particular interests in Christological and Marian imagery as well as medieval mystical theology and hopes to teach art history in some capacity in the future.*

**Abstract:** The Marian iconographical type of the *Maria lactans* shows the seated Virgin offering her bared breast to the infant Christ child on her knee. Often understood to indicate Mary's literal nourishment of Christ's physical body, the *lactans* type seems to have proliferated disproportionately in Egypt during the late Antique period. Several 7th-century examples of the *Maria lactans* type are found at Apa Jeremias, a Coptic Monophysite monastery, in Saqqara, Egypt. Because of the human-centered nature of Christ in the *lactans* image, it is a surprising choice for a Monophysite context. This paper suggests that *penthos*, an ascetic practice of holy weeping that originated in the earliest practices of Egyptian desert monasticism, acts as a mediator between these monks and the *Maria lactans* image. Through the intimate confluence of milk and tears, the *Maria lactans* type became an image of intercession for the penitent ascetic praying before it.

Although the Cult of the Virgin Mary is often considered a largely Medieval phenomenon—particularly in art and other devotional representations—its roots had already started to take hold in the centuries immediately following the birth of Christianity. Veneration of the Virgin was being explored textually by the fourth century, drawing from sources like the Protoevangelium of James (second century CE), and Origen (d. ca. 253 CE) is thought to have coined the title “Mother of God” for Mary in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* even in the third century.<sup>1</sup> Thus, various types of Marian iconography originated

---

1. John McGuckin, “The Early Cult of Mary and Inter-religious Contexts in the

from the textual and spiritual discussion about and reverence for this holy figure in both eastern and western Christianity. One such type is the *Maria lactans* or, in Greek, the *Galaktotrophousa*, showing the seated Virgin offering her breast as nourishment to the infant Christ on her knee. Often understood to indicate Mary's literal nourishment of Christ's physical body—the fleshy mechanism for his great salvific act—the *lactans* type seems to have proliferated disproportionately in Egypt during the Late Antique period.<sup>1</sup>

One such Egyptian example of *Maria lactans* images was excavated from the seventh century Apa Jeremias monastery at Saqqara, Egypt (fig. 1 and 2). The representations of Mary and Christ were painted in fresco on the walls of several individual cells. The frescoes show the Virgin Mary, enthroned and nimbed, offering a bared breast to the rather large and mature-looking Christ child on her lap. This location is somewhat unusual for *lactans* images, considering that the monks who lived and worshipped there likely followed the Monophysite tradition of Christianity, which emphasized the exclusively divine (that is, not simultaneously divine and mortal) nature of Christ.<sup>2</sup> This uniquely human depiction of the Virgin and her divine Son—that of the infant at his mother's breast—then, must have had a particular significance for the monks at that monastery to have merited multiple representations of it and private venues for its devotion.

A potential mediator between these monks and the *Maria lactans* is the ascetic practice of *penthos* that originated in the earliest practices of Egyptian desert monasticism. *Penthos* was a kind of holy weeping that touched on “a core element of desert spirituality,” that of compunction or sorrow for the sins of oneself and others.<sup>3</sup> *Penthos* was practiced as part of a monk's ongoing and acute acts of penance; it is thus a key aspect of monastic repentance and divine forgiveness of sin. The shedding of these holy tears was also an unusually affective practice in the deeply ascetic and bodily-denying milieu of desert monasticism, and it is this largely unexplored aspect of *penthos*, alongside its repentant objective, that may connect it to the *Maria lactans* type.<sup>4</sup>

---

Fifth-Century Church, in *The Origins of the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (London: Burnes and Oates, 2008), 1; 9.

1. Sabrina Higgins, “Divine Mothers: The Influence of Isis on the Virgin Mary in Egyptian Lactans-Iconography,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Coptic Studies* 3-4 (2012): 73.

2. Elizabeth S. Bolam, “The enigmatic Copt *Galaktotrophousa* and the Cult of the Virgin Mary in Egypt,” in *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium*, ed. Maria Vassilaki (Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 14.

3. William Harmless “Remembering Poemen Remembering: The Desert Fathers and the Spirituality of Memory,” *Church History* 69, no. 3 (2000): 490.

4. Harmless, “Remembering Poemen Remembering,” 491; see Andrew Mellas, “Tears of Compunction in John Chrysostom's *On Eutropius*,” *Studia Patristica* 83 no. 9 (2017): 162 for



Figure 1: *Maria lactans* from cell 1725, ca. sixth to seventh century CE, Monastery at Apa Jeremias, Saqara, Egypt, Coptic Museum, Cairo.



Figure 2: *Maria lactans* from a cell wall, ca. sixth to seventh century CE, Monastery at Apa Jeremias, Saqara, Egypt, Coptic Museum, Cairo.

Contemporary writings of desert monastics and relevant theologians, the larger Egyptian cultural and Christian environment in which the images were produced, and early Marian veneration point to the possibility that the seventh century Apa Jeremias *Maria lactans* frescoes were in conjunction with monastic devotion. The affective nature of *penthos* makes it well suited to accompany the sweet and intimate moment depicted in these images of Mother and Child, which, in tandem with that tearful devotion, become particularly pertinent images of intercession for the ascetic Monophysite monk.

## THE MONASTIC ENVIRONMENT

As mentioned above, the monastic setting of the *Galaktotrophousa* frescoes is, at first glance, a rather unusual one; Monophysite Christians emphasized the divine rather than the human Christ, and monasteries were distinctly and strictly male spaces. Monophysite Christianity, which during the seventh century was largely synonymous with Coptic Christianity, believed that Christ did not have a dual nature; even during his earthly ministry when he took on a human body, his nature was (and remains) exclusively divine, not simultaneously human and

---

further discussion of the affective nature of *penthos* and the paucity of literature on the subject.

divine.<sup>1</sup> After the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, Coptic Christians diverged from the determined orthodoxy and, despite calls of heresy, maintained their theology of Christ's single divine nature.<sup>2</sup> Thus, an image of the infant Christ receiving bodily nourishment from his human mother seems an unusual scene for this Monophysite monastic context.<sup>3</sup>

However, the placement of these images in the Apa Jeremias monastery, alongside the potential genesis of this image type and specific teaching from monastic fathers, suggests that the figure of the nursing Mary was of particular importance for these monks. At Apa Jeremias specifically, multiple tombstones in the monastery cemetery include references to the Virgin Mary, suggesting that Marian devotion was more common here than perhaps in other comparable contemporary Christian groups.<sup>4</sup> Within the monastery, as mentioned, the frescoes are placed in individual cells. A monk's cell was a deeply important location for his personal spirituality.

The practices and, indeed, very existence of Coptic monks like the ones at Apa Jeremias were borne from the tradition of the early Desert Fathers—figures such as St. Antony the Abbot, Arsenius the Great, and, most pertinently to this paper, Abba Poemen who, in the third and fourth centuries, ventured into the harsh environ of the Egyptian deserts in pursuit of proximity to God via deep spirituality, continued penance, isolation, and often extreme asceticism.<sup>5</sup> The writings and teachings of these early monks were compiled into a text known as the *Apophthegmata Patrum*

---

1. Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica, "Monophysite Christianity," Encyclopedia Britannica, July 31, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/monophysite>

2. Derek Krueger, "Mary at the Threshold: The Mother of God as Guardian in Seventh-Century Palestinian Miracle Accounts," in *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium*, ed. Leslie Brubaker and Mary B. Cunningham, 31-38, (Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011) mentions several contemporary stories and writings that brand Monophysites as heretics, including John Moschos's *Spiritual Meadow*, wherein a Monophysite woman is able to enter the tomb of the Holy Sepulcher only after she renounces her belief and takes the Chalcedonian Eucharist.

3. Bolman, "The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa," 2005, 14. Bolman states here that it is assumed that these *lactans* frescos were created in a Monophysite environment; that is, the environment of the monastery where Monophysite beliefs were held.

4. Bolman, "The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa," 2005, 17. Bolman also suggests in this article that "if a survey of the principle textual source for the monastic life [the *Apophthegmata Patrum*] is any indication, early Coptic monks were certainly not devoted to the Virgin Mary," further emphasizing the unique focus on Mary at the Jeremiah monastery. However, in Elizabeth S. Bolman's "Theodore, 'The Writer of Life,' and the Program of 1232/1233," in *Monastic Visions, Wall Paintings in the Monastery of St. Anton at the Red Sea*, ed. Elizabeth S. Bolman, 37-76 (Cairo: American Research Center in Cairo), 2002, Bolman says that "the Copts are well known for their particular devotion to the Virgin Mary." An exploration of this discrepancy is beyond the scope of this paper. Coptic veneration of Mary will be addressed in more detail below.

5. Harmless, "Remembering Poemen Remembering," 485.

(The Sayings of the Desert Fathers) and translated into many languages, including Coptic; this widespread text informed later monastic beliefs and practices including those in the monasteries at hand.<sup>6</sup> Many sayings from the fathers as recorded in the *Apophthegmata* speak to the importance of the monk's cell, where the *lactans* frescoes are found in Apa Jeremias. One writing counsels the monk to "stay in your cell, for your cell will teach you everything."<sup>7</sup> St. Antony (d. 356 CE) similarly said that "as a fish must return to the sea, so must we to our cell, in case by staying outside, we forget to watch inside."<sup>8</sup> It is likely, then, that the monks spent a significant amount of time in their cells, praying and pondering on their interior state. The other common activity of the cell-bound monk was weeping. Evagrius of Pontos (d. 399 CE), as quoted in the *Apophthegmata*, guided the time in the cell by suggesting to the monks that "when you sit in your cell, recall your attention, and remember the day of your death and will see that your body is decaying," during which ponderings on the sorrow and strife of the mortal world and the souls in hell, "the tears cannot cease to flow."<sup>9</sup> According to Abbot Isaiah, ultimate departure from "the world of men" is to be achieved "by sitting along in your cell, weeping for your sins."<sup>10</sup>

It is in this most personal and privately sacred space where the confluence of the Virgin's milk and the ascetic's tears would have occurred. Given the recorded importance of staying and weeping in the cell, the placement of this image of the Virgin must have been intentional for, as Elizabeth Bolman claims, "virtually everything in the intentional communities of early monasticism was charged with meaning."<sup>11</sup> The frescoed cell is, literally and figurately, where the ascetic practice of *penthos* connects the monks' weeping to Mary's nursing in an act of joint communion and intercession.

## **PENTHOS: TEARS OF PENANCE**

The practice of *penthos* was introduced to monasticism by the early Desert Fathers as part of their rigorous programs of penance for the sins of oneself and of the world at large.<sup>12</sup> *Penthos* as a term and practice derives from the second

6. Harmless, "Remembering Poemen Remembering," 485.

7. Hannah Hunt, *Joy-bearing Grief: Tears of Contrition in the Writings of the Early Syrian and Byzantine Fathers*. (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 43.

8. *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, trans. Benedicta Ward. (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 8.

9. *Desert Fathers*, 12.

10. Hunt, *Joy-bearing Grief*, 46.

11. Elizabeth S. Bolman, "A Staggering Spectacle: Early Byzantine Aesthetics in the Triconch," in *The Red Monastery Church: Beauty and Asceticism in Upper Egypt*. ed. Elizabeth S. Bolman. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 129.

12. Kimberly Christine Patton, "'Howl, Weep and Moan, and Bring It Back to God': Holy

beatitude, which promises, “blessed are the sorrowing [*penthountes*] for they will be comforted,” and largely focuses on the idea of compunction.<sup>13</sup> While weeping and lamentation were often acts associated with women, monks were allowed and encouraged to shed holy tears because of the male example of weeping created by Jesus in the Bible.<sup>14</sup> Many theologians—monastic and otherwise—discussed the efficacy of tears as part of the processes of penance and repentance. *Penthos*, according to John Chrysostom (d. 407 CE) is or begins as an “expression” of the awareness of sin and eventually allows for a “return to God across the abyss of sin and despair.”<sup>15</sup> Weeping that accompanied prayer was the result of Christ touching the striving eyes of the monk, and the subsequent tears were thought to be a source of joy for God.<sup>16</sup> John Climacus (d. 649 CE) suggested that tears signified the presence of the Holy Spirit with the penitent monk and that weeping was an indication of a joyful reunion with God, like that of a child to a parent, after sinning and engaging in penance.<sup>17</sup>

This second point that John Climacus makes refers to the most pertinent and widespread interpretations of tears, which considers their assistance in, as well as the signification of the process of penance, repentance, and, ultimately, divine forgiveness. Tears of *penthos* not only “signif[ied] repentance” but, according to Origen, also “incline[d] God to mercy” when offered with proper intensity and “prolonged prayer.”<sup>18</sup> Evagrius of Pontos also suggested that prayers would receive more divine help when offered with “fountains of tears” because when you “pray

---

Tears in Eastern Christianity,” in *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, ed. Kimberly Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley, 255-273 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 262.

13. Matthew 5:4. Discussion of the *penthos* in relation to this verse can be found in Harmless, *Remembering Poemen Remembering*, 491 and Irénée Hausherr, *Penthos in the Christian East* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1982), vii. Hunt, *Joy-bearing Grief*, 16 mentions John Chrysostom’s distinction between *penthos* and compunction: *katanuxis* (compunction) is an indication of becoming aware of sin, whereas *penthos* is an expression of that awareness.

14. Patton, “Howl, Weep and Moan,” 259, discusses how weeping was often connected to death and “female lamentation” and that mourning in the context of death (rather than sin) was “largely the province of women.” Page 260 mentions Christ as a “male paradigm for weeping.”

15. Patton, “Howl, Weep and Moan,” 258.

16. Bishop Kallistos Ware, “An Obscure Matter’: Mystery of Tears in Orthodox Spirituality,” in *Holy Tears: Weeping in the Religious Imagination*, ed. Kimberly Christine Patton and John Stratton Hawley, 242-254 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 243 quotes Evagrius of Pontos’ saying that “the Lord rejoices greatly when you pray with tears”; pg. 244 quotes St. Mark the Monk on tears being a gift from Christ’s touch.

17. Michael J. McClymond, “Holy Tears: A Neglected Aspect of Early Christian Spirituality in Contemporary Context,” in *The Spirit, the Affections, and the Christian Tradition*, ed. by Coulter Dale M. and Yong and Amos (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 93; Hunt, *Joy-bearing Grief*, 103.

18. Patton, “Howl, Weep and Moan,” 262.

with tears...all you ask would be heard.”<sup>19</sup> Tears, then, especially those that accompany prayer, seem to have had a kind of intercessory power inherent in them that aided prayer and helped it to fall on merciful divine ears.<sup>20</sup> Abba Poemen (d. 450 CE), mentioned previously as one of the early patriarchs of desert monasticism in Egypt, was a particularly well-beloved figure and perhaps the greatest monastic proponent of *penthos*; almost half of the sayings in the *Apophthegmata* that mention *penthos* come from him.<sup>21</sup> Several of these sayings support the notion of intercessory tears: he suggested that “the one who wants to pay the ransom for sins pays for them with tears”; when asked by a charge how to address his sins, Poemen told him that “he who wishes to purify his faults purifies them with tears and he who wishes to acquire virtues, acquires them with tears; for weeping is the way the Scriptures and our Fathers give us, when they say “Weep!” Truly, there is no other way than this.”<sup>22</sup>

Abba Poemen’s personal and pedagogical emphasis on weeping also makes a connection to the Virgin Mary that other accounts of weeping do not. A story in the *Apophthegmata* tells of Abba Poemen being roused from a state of ecstasy by another monk and telling him that “my thoughts were with the St. Mary the Mother of God when she stood beside the Cross of the Saviour and wept. And I too wish that I could always weep as she did.”<sup>23</sup> In this account, which one scholar describes as having “an almost late medieval flavor to it” with its affective devotion to and veneration of the Virgin, Poemen makes a direct connection between weeping and the *Theotokos*.<sup>24</sup> This distinctly monastic episode that combines weeping with the veneration of Mary in an unusually affective manner once again suggests a potential connection between weeping and another rather affective image of the Mother and Son, the *Galaktotrophousa*. In this image, as in Poemen’s vision of the Crucifixion, Christ is joined to his mother through holy liquid as he was in other important moments in his life: at the wedding of Cana, wherein the liquid miracle requested by Mary introduced Christ as the divine incarnate *Logos*, and on the cross when blood and water poured from Christ’s side before his grieving mother.<sup>25</sup>

19. Ware, “An Obscure Matter,” 244.

20. Many writings and sayings, such as those from the *Apophthegmata* and John Climacus’ *Ladder of Divine Ascent* clarify that the tears must be offered earnestly, purposefully, and with great humility; tears for show or for excessive grieving are harmful rather than helpful.

21. Harmless, “Remembering Poemen Remembering,” 491.

22. Harmless, “Remembering Poemen Remembering,” 491; Ware, “An Obscure Matter,” 245; Poemen, 119, in Benedicta Ward, translator, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 184.

23. Ware, “An Obscure Matter,” 243.

24. Harmless, “Remembering Poemen Remembering,” 491.

25. John 2:1-11 tells the story of Christ turning water to wine at the wedding at Cana; John 19:34 tells that Christ shed blood and water from his side wound after it was pricked by



Figure 3: Isis and Harpocrates (“House of the Child”), wall painting from the southern wall of House B50E, ca. fourth century CE, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, Michigan.

In the case of the nursing virgin, too, the scene is witnessed by the devout—and weeping—monk, shedding his own form of holy fluid.

### THE VIRGO LACTANS

The genesis of the image of the nursing Virgin Mary is uncertain, despite the type being widespread for much of Christian visual history. Much of the scholarship concerning the origins of the *Galaktotrophousa* suggests that the type has its root in images of the Egyptian goddess Isis nursing the infant Horus, which scene proliferates in sculpture and fresco, as in the fresco of Isis *lactans* at Karanis (Kom Oshim) Egypt, (fourth century CE, fig. 3). Visually, the depictions of Isis and Mary are quite similar—the mother exposes one breast to the infant son ensconced on her lap—leading many to support the notion of an ancestral link from the Pagan image to the Christian.<sup>26</sup> The location of early *lactans* images also supports this notion; the first uncontested paintings of this type of Mary and Christ are those found in Egypt in the seventh century—including the monastic images at hand—further suggesting that the type has specifically Egyptian roots.<sup>27</sup> The similarities between images of Isis and Mary nursing extend beyond their visual similarities: the assigned meaning and purpose of the act and results of nursing are comparable between them as well.

The tradition of the Isis images elevated the new form they took as depictions of Mary and Christ; the Coptic *Galaktotrophousas* reflect the “long-standing associations between royalty and nursing” that was established by the Isis images, as this female deity was, before Mary, also called the Mother of God.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, salvific and life-giving elements of both Mary’s and Isis’s milk have been ascribed to the images: one scholar suggests that as Isis points her breast toward her divine and all-powerful child, she “indicat[es] the *mythos* that she is the source of divine

the lance.

26. Gawdat Gabra and Marianne Eaton-Krauss, *The Treasures of Coptic Art in the Coptic Museum and Churches of old Cairo*, A Supreme Council of Antiquities Edition (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 42; McGuckin, “The Early Cult of Mary,” 11; Higgins, “Divine Mothers,” 72; Bolman, “The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa,” 2005, 19.

27. Higgins, “Divine Mothers,” 73.

28. Bolman “The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa,” 19; McGuckin, “The Early Cult of Mary,” 9.

life”; it is from her that nourishment flows to her child and to “her devotee” and, through this nourishment, she acts as “their *Soter*.”<sup>29</sup> This idea of salvific milk transfers to Mary as her breast, too, nourishes the Christ child and, subsequently, the supplicant to the image.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the title *Galaktotrophousa* itself, meaning “she who nourishes with milk” speaks to this purpose of Mary.<sup>31</sup>

As mentioned above, the *lactans* frescoes in the Apa Jeremias monastery were produced and venerated in a Monophysite context, making the very human aspects of this type an incongruous choice. However, the proposed origin and substance of the Virgin’s milk explain how and why this image is better suited for a Monophysite group than, perhaps, another type of Marian image might be. In the second century, Clement of Alexandria explained that, because of Mary’s virginal status, she was unable to produce the milk necessary to nourish her child; the milk, then, according to Clement and fellow Alexandrine Cyril (d. 444 CE), came from God as the *Logos* itself and was thus entirely and always divine.<sup>32</sup> As divine food and Word, Mary’s milk did not adulterate Christ’s divinity, allowing him to maintain his requisite Monophysite status of being purely divine while still being nourished at his mortal mother’s breast.<sup>33</sup>

Mary’s milk as devotionally and redemptively nourishing indicates another important aspect of the *Virgo lactans* type: its Eucharistic implications, which are particularly present in Coptic contexts.<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Bolman cites early texts that attest to the “significance of milk and the ritual of the baptismal Eucharist,” to highlight the Eucharist implications of the image.<sup>35</sup> Newly baptized initiates took a special Eucharist of milk and honey between taking the bread and the wine; according to the *Canons of Hippolytus*, this Eucharist was a type not only for the sweet flesh of Christ but also for the milk drunk by an infant, as baptism indicated a new life and rebirth.<sup>36</sup> The *lactans* imagery in the Red Monastery, in Sohag, Egypt, may be interpreted as a literal reconfiguring of the Eucharist: depicted in

29. McGuckin, “The Early Cult of Mary,” 11.

30. McGuckin, “The Early Cult of Mary, 11, also suggests that the Isis type where she indicates her son with her breast is “the original subtext for” the *Hodegetria* icon type.

31. Bolman, “A Staggering Spectacle,” 142.

32. Bolman, “The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa,” 17; Bolman, “A Staggering Spectacle,” 144, also mentions Cyril of Alexandria’s claim that Mary received the milk in her breasts in heaven.

33. Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*, I. VI, 39, 2-40, I, ed. H.-I., in *Clément d’Alexandrie, Le pédagogue* (SC, 70), ed. Henri Marrou (Paris: éditions du Cerf, 1960-70), 183-5; Cyril of Alexandria, “Discourse on the Virgin Mary,” BMO 6782, fol. 31a, 1-2, in *Miscellaneous Coptic Texts in the Dialect of Upper Egypt*, ed. E. A. Wallis Budge (London: British Museum, 1915), 719, via Bolman, “The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa,” 2005, 17.

34. Bolman, “The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa,” 19.

35. Bolman, “The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa,” 17.

36. Bolman, “The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa,” 18.



Figure 4: *Maria lactans* from the Red Monastery Church, ca. 550-600 CE, Sohag, Egypt.

one of the semi-domes in the monastery's church, the nursing Virgin is surrounded by a host of angels, reflecting the contemporary belief that angels participated in their own heavenly Eucharistic liturgy and descended to attend earthly liturgies when they were performed (ca. 550-600 CE, fig. 4).<sup>37</sup> The image of Mary nursing as a Eucharistic pertains closely to Mary's role as intercessor, activated by the weeping monastic supplicant. Taking these considerations of Mary's holy effluvia alongside the broader interpretations of the *Galaktotrophousa* type, the Apa Jeremias *lactans* frescoes become images of the intercessory Mother to not only Christ, but also the monks and, indeed, all of humanity.

## TEARS AND THE INTERCESSORY MOTHER

A fraction of papyrus from the third-fourth century, found in Egypt, holds what is thought to be the first prayer to the Virgin Mary, in Latin called the *Sub Tuum Praesidium* or *Beneath Thy Protection* (University of Manchester Greek P 470, fig. 5). This particular fragment, likely originated from a Coptic tradition because of its location in Egypt, carries the invocation, "Mother of God (hear) my supplications: suffer us not (to be) in adversity, but deliver us from danger."<sup>38</sup> This Coptic prayer to Mary suggests that, in a larger context, devout Egyptian Christians prayed to Mary—specifically in her aspect as a mother—for assistance and protection. Therefore, it is apparent that Mary was being conceived of as an intercessor in this period and context. The combination of *penthos* as monastic penitential action and the *Virgo lactans* type in the setting of the monastery together figure Mary as a particularly potent intercessor for souls.

37. Bolman, "A Staggering Spectacle," 144; 140.

38. Translation from C.H. Roberts, *Catalogue of the Greek and Latin Papyri in the John Rylands Library Manchester*, Volume III, *Theological and Literary Texts* (Nos. 457-551). (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1938).

<https://www.digitalcollections.manchester.ac.uk/view/MS-GREEK-P-00470/1>. Bolman, "Theodore," 2002, 57 mentions that the Copts are well known for their particular devotion to the Virgin Mary."

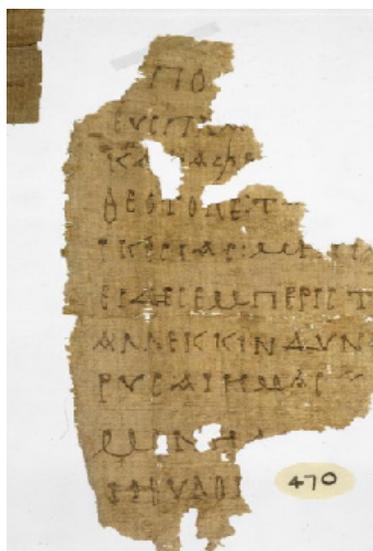


Figure 5: Prayer to Mary, ca. third to fourth century CE, Egypt, University of Manchester Greek P 470.

In both *Maria lactans* frescoes found at Apa Jeremias, the Christ child seated on his mother's lap is distinctly un-childlike: he is disproportionately large in comparison to his young mother, and his heavily browed face, grasping hands, and lush head of hair seem more mature than would be expected on a suckling infant. Mary's nourishing of this "infant" Christ, then, may be extended to her nourishing of all humanity, encapsulated and synecdochized in the holy man-child, as she both holds and administers the divine and salvific power of the *Logos* on her lap and through her breast. This universal intercession between Mary and Christ as she saves the lives of all those implied in the Child— as Isis does for Horus before them—becomes personalized to the monk through the practice of *penthos*.<sup>39</sup>

As previously discussed, the *Galaktotrophousa* frescoes at Apa Jeremias are found in two individual cells in the monastery. It is here that the monk would engage in his most fervent prayer and most heartfelt weeping for grief, penitence, and hope for forgiveness—in front of the figure who, as Cyril of Alexandria put forth, was "the mother of all the monks and all the nuns."<sup>40</sup> In this intimate context of a monk weeping before the nursing Virgin as if to his own mother, the monk himself becomes like the Christ child on the holy lap, maintained by her loving care and cleansed by the baptismal nature of her divinely gifted milk. Clement of Alexandria deemed the Virgin's milk the "drink of immortality" having "the same composition of as the flesh and blood of Christ"; it was the milk "which the Lord promises the just, to show clearly that the *Logos* is at one and the same time alpha and omega, the beginning and the end."<sup>41</sup> The monks' simultaneously sweet and bitter tears, shed in hopes of drawing toward salvation and onto the lap of the nursing Mother, bring the divine and salvatory blood of Christ to the mundane space of the monk via the pictorial milk that is also Christ's flesh and blood. And as the tears mystically elevate the monk and, if shed with proper humility and

39. McGuckin, "The Early Cult of Mary," 11.

40. Cyril of Alexandria, "Discourse on the Virgin Mary," BMO6782, fols. 32b1-32b2; Bolman, "Theodore," 57.

41. Clement of Alexandria, Paed. I. VI, 36, 174-5 via Bolman, "The enigmatic Coptic Galaktotrophousa," 17.

purpose, propel him up the divine ladder and closer to God, they allow him to meet the blood in that liminal space between earthly and divine, held by Mary and broached by the weeping supplicant and the divine infant Christ.<sup>42</sup>

The intercessory implications of tears, specifically in the context of affective monastic *penthos*, make this practice one that, by nature, aligns it with the intercession of the Virgin Mary made pictorially present and theologically accessible through the *Maria lactans* type. Placed in the Monophysite Coptic context of an all-male monastery, the two frescoes of this image of Mary at Apa Jeremias in Saqqara, Egypt make this alignment explicit and personal for the devout monks, as, through their prayerful tears, they approach the seat of Mary's throne and her body as the throne of Christ, and themselves are cleansed and nourished by the same divine fluid that gave Christ life in his mortal body. Kimberly Patton says, in her exploration of writings and practices of *penthos*, that is "to weeping, and weeping alone [that] God will pay attention."<sup>43</sup> The intercession of Mary before both the penitent and before Christ belies that claim. In the dual intimacy of penitent weeping and nursing a child, monk and Mother are brought together to allow the tears of *penthos* to enliven and embody Mary's intercessory role and to "pay for [sins] with tears," co-present as they are with holy milk and saving blood.<sup>44</sup>

---

42. St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Archimandrite Lazarus Moore. (New York, Harper and Row: 1959), 7:7 discusses this point. The purpose and specifications of holy tears are discussed in many places throughout this treatise; Krueger, 31 discusses early seventh century Palestinian texts that put Mary forth "not as an open and concave space, but rather as the threshold of space, the *limen* separating the sacred and profane."

43. Patton, "Howl, Weep and Moan," 262.

44. Harmless, "Remembering Poemen Remembering," 491, quotes Abba Poemen: "the one who wants to pay the ransom for sins pays for them with tears... Weeping: that is that path the Scriptures and our Fathers handed down to us."