

ABSTRACT

EVER VIRGIN: THE ALEXANDRIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE THEOLOGY AND DEFENSE OF MARY'S EVER VIRGINITY BEFORE THE COUNCIL OF EPHESUS 431

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This study argues for the primacy of the early Alexandrian tradition in promoting and effectively defining the doctrine of Mary's ever virginity prior to the Council of Ephesus 431. In doing so, it argues against W. Burghardt, who has argued that the East, unlike the West, was slow to adopt the doctrine, and against H. von Campenhausen and O. Stegmüller, who have charged the early Alexandrian tradition with an underdeveloped Marian doctrine. Among Alexandrian theologians as diverse as Clement, Origen, Athanasius, and Didymus we find the first scriptural proofs of the doctrine of Mary's ever virginity, the first Christological, ecclesiological, and ascetical defenses of it, as well as the first uses of the term ἀειπάρθενος (ever virgin) with reference to Mary. Even the greatest defenders of Mary's ever virginity in the late fourth century—Epiphanius, Ambrose, and Jerome—can be shown to have extensively borrowed their arguments from Alexandrian writers.

One of the principal claims of this study is that, long before the ever virginity of Mary was employed for socio-political or ascetical ends, the doctrine was primarily understood and appreciated theologically. Mary's ever virginity was an item within the Alexandrian church's *depositum fidei* that not only helped illuminate teachings concerning the nature of Christ, the Church, and the scriptures but also helped distinguish true believers from false ones. This study further argues that these early discussions of Mary's ever virginity show a deeper and more obvious conceptual and terminological indebtedness to Philo of Alexandria than has been recognized or acknowledged.

This study thus challenges previous scholarly tendencies that have exaggerated the importance of Mary's ever virginity for promulgating and defending the burgeoning ascetical movements of the fourth century and serves as a corrective to studies that have overestimated the Latin theological tradition in 'dogmatizing' the doctrine.