The Dormition of the Theotokos and Dionysios the Areopagite

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Much of the hymnography and the tradition surrounding the Dormition of the Theotokos have been based on a passage from the *Divine Names* of Dionysios the Areopagite, which includes the phrase *ζωαρχικόν καὶ θεοδόχον σῶμα*. This phrase was read by John of Scythopolis as a reference to the Dormition, and subsequent scholarship never questioned this until recently. In recent years, however, this reference has been questioned repeatedly. This article examines the significance of this issue and this confusion for Eucharistic and for Marian theology.

Strange as it may sound, we derive much knowledge by accident and error. We can sometimes receive an insight on a certain process by noticing what it is being confused with, as it develops. Inscriptions or documents with misspelled words for instance, allow us to understand how pronunciation is changing, and how when we start finding the name of Matthew the Evangelist spelled as *Ματθέος* instead of *Ματθαῖος* (such as in the sixth-century mosaic of St Catherine's on Sinai), we realize that there is no phonetic difference between *ε* and *αι* anymore. Naturally, we can find many such examples in the manuscript tradition, some of which may not be very important or meaningful, whereas others sometimes lead us to serious mistakes.

In a strangely similar way, what I am going to talk about here is largely what can be thought of as a theological misspelling, which may likewise allow us to make some observations about the development of early Christian spirituality and the developing cult of Mary.

Before we proceed with the study of the historical or theological misspelling though, let us take a wider look in order to establish the field. Our field of observation starts with the feast of the Dormition. Much work has been done on the textual and theological origins of the feast itself (mostly the impressive work of Stephen Shoemaker on the subject[1]), and we have a fair idea of the way the significance of the feast developed from a more general Marian celebration to a feast that focusses on the historical—even if apocryphally attested—death of Mary, even if the theological implications of that particular death transcend history. The Dormition in the iconographic tradition is often portrayed on the western wall of a church, as the last

[1] Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

image that the faithful see on their way out, a reminder of their own mortality and the hope of their salvation by Christ. In this way, Mary is presented as a model for all humanity, even in her death.

In addition, the Dormition is a rather problematic issue from an interdenominational point of view, because not all Christian traditions wish or are able to engage with it in the same way. The problem here is not restricted to the discussion of the validity or canonical status of the sources, although this is certainly part of it. As the Marian material developed after the canonical Scriptures (even if one of the reasons for the composition of the text that describes the life of Mary and the infancy of Jesus, known as the *Protevangelion of James*[2] was to safeguard the authority of the canonical gospels, and explain some of their discrepancies), several Protestant traditions dismiss it on the basis of this ambiguity, arguing that there is very little in the canonical gospels on Mary and her life. However, it needs to be stressed that the nature of the interest of the denominations who take it seriously is almost completely theological rather than historical—and by this I mean that most of the arguments surrounding the question of whether Mary died and was subsequently raised from the dead before she was taken up to heaven, or whether she was spared the fate of humanity by being assumed before she tasted death, concentrate on what this death meant for Christianity two thousand years ago and what it means today. As Shoemaker notes in his work on the Dormition, the relevant Roman Catholic doctrine is less than clear.[3] Anglican theologians have an even more equivocal approach, as some tend to follow the quests and questions of the Roman Catholic tradition, while others take a Protestant view more extreme than Luther's. The difficulty here has very much to do with the fully human nature of Mary, and whether her fate (the reception of her soul by Jesus Christ at her death) may be shared by the fate of any other Christian. It is for this reason, as Brian Daley reminds us in an article dedicated to the subject, that in the Western tradition especially (although also in the Eastern) Mary's intercession anticipates 'the hour of our death'.[4]

In addition, as John Romanides has demonstrated in his finest work on the Ancestral (rather than Original) Sin,[5] the different approaches and arguments for or against the death of Mary touch on the systematic problematics of sexuality as the vehicle through which the sin of Adam is transmitted, and whether Mary herself needed to be protected from the effects of the rotten fruit, by being conceived in an immaculate way herself. The implication here, however, is that if her nature was not corrupted by Original Sin, it would not be necessary for her to be protected from its effects, and therefore it would not be necessary for her to die. Nevertheless,

[2] The most recent critical edition can be found in Ronald Hock, *The Infancy Gospels of James and Thomas* (Polebridge Press, 1995).

[3] Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 1.

[4] Brian Daley, '"At the Hour of Our Death": Mary's Dormition and Christian Dying in Late Patristic and Early Byzantine Literature', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 71-89.

[5] John Romanides, *The Ancestral Sin* (Ridgewood, NJ: Zephyr Publishing, 2002).

the rationale for this connection is highly problematic. To be fair, it is possible to find even among Eastern Christian theologians similar attitudes about the transmission of sin through sexuality, although this could certainly not be said to be the normative Orthodox position.

The feast of the Dormition underwent several stages of development since its origins, which shaped its current form in an unusual way. First, because of its proximity to the feast of the Transfiguration, what used to be two separate fasts preceding the two feasts, at some point were combined into one, which became known as the fast of the Dormition, as if the intent was from the beginning to establish an unusually long fast for the Dormition, surpassed only by the fast of the Nativity and Easter. Moreover, because of the daily chanting of the Paraklesis service since the beginning of August, the Biblically based Christological feast of the Transfiguration is experienced as a slight interruption in the two-week long preparation for the feast of the Dormition. This fast is, incidentally, as strict as the fast of Great Lent, rather than the lighter fast of the Nativity, and this adds more gravitas to the feast of the Dormition—once again, in the way it is experienced.

In addition, in some ways the Dormition 'behaves' like a Christological feast: it is the only non-Christological feast that gets a full liturgical octave (eight days) rather than four days, as the Nativity of Mary, or one day, as the Annunciation. The Christocentric message of the epistle reading (Phil 2:5-11) mentions the Incarnation of Jesus with no further reference to Mary, and the Gospel reading from Luke 10 and 11 (the same as the one read in her Nativity) ends by drawing a connection between her womb and the Word of God. There are several other minor peculiarities, such as that the tone of the feast is not the fourth, which is usual in Marian feasts, but the first, which makes the canon of Matins sound similar to the canon of the Resurrection or of the Nativity of Christ. There are certainly different bits and pieces that were added at different times and shaped the hymnology of the feast as it is now, making the end result look quite strange, since there is no strong connection and coordination between these parts. In addition to the aforementioned liturgical amalgamation or rather absorption of the fast of the Transfiguration by the fast of the Dormition, we can see another strand that connects (and perhaps confuses) the feasts, as they both include a celebration of the glory of God as light: in the case of the Transfiguration the entire event revolves around the brightness of the face and the garments of Christ, while the Dormition recalls the appearance of Christ in a flash of light. The icons of the events demonstrate this very clearly, as they both feature large and elaborate mandorlas around the body of Jesus Christ—two of the four icons that are made in a similar way. When we consider all these connections and similarities, it is hard for us to tell precisely how much interaction there has been between the two feasts, but it is clear that in certain cases the celebration of the Dormition was built on the celebration of the Transfiguration, which has been marginalized.

All this is important in order to demonstrate the magnitude of the context of the feast of the Dormition. To return to the historical misspelling that we mentioned earlier, the hymnography of the feast includes an expression that is taken from the *Divine Names*[6] of Dionysios the Areopagite: '*ζωαρχικόν καὶ θεοδόχον σῶμα*'—which could be translated as 'life-principled and god-receiving body'.[7] While at first glance the whole passage of DN 3:2 appears problematic or cryptic, to say the least, John of Scythopolis read this as a reference to the presence of Dionysios at the death and burial of Mary,[8] and subsequent tradition accepted this reading unequivocally. 'Tainted' by this tradition as it were, the two most popular translations of the *Divine Names* to English—the 1920 translation by C. E. Rolt[9] and the 1987 translation of Liubheid[10]—approach this passage with the conviction that it refers to the Dormition of Mary, and in order to make this more evident, add the word 'mortal' in their translation, although no such word appears in the original text.

Overall, Dionysios does not say much about Mary. The entire Corpus Dionysiacum contains only one reference to her (if we assume that the passage from *Divine Names* does not refer to her), in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. To put it like this, the philosophical and liturgical direction that Dionysios has taken throughout his work does not really need Mary.

Let us proceed by reading the problematic section:

> As you know, we and he and many of our holy brothers met together for a vision of that mortal body, that source of life, which bore God. James, the brother of God, was there. So too was Peter, that summit, that chief of all those who speak of God. After the vision, all these hierarchs chose, each as he was able, to praise the omnipotent goodness of that divine frailty. But next to the sacred writers themselves was my teacher. He surpassed all the divinely-rapt hierarchs, all the other sacred-initiators. He was so caught up, so taken out of himself, experiencing communion with the things praised, that everyone who heard him, everyone who saw him, everyone who knew him (or rather, did not know him) considered him to be inspired, to be speaking divine praises.[11]

[6] The most recent critical edition of the works of Dionysios is in Beate Regina Suchla (ed.), *Corpus Dionysiacum*, 2 vols (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990–1).

[7] These words appear separately in several places. As an expression in its most complete form it can be found in the Doxastikon of the Dormition Vespers.

[8] John of Scythopolis, *Commentary on the Divine Names* (PG 4:236-237).

[9] Rolt, CE, *The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, (London: SPCK, 1920).

[10] *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987)

[11] This is the text as it appears in Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 146-147. Rorem maintains the insertion 'mortal' referring to the body, which can be found in earlier translations, such as in John Parker, *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite* (London: James Parker, 1897), 30, and does not question the 'traditional' reading of the passage as referring to the body of Mary.

And here it is in the original:

Ἐπεὶ καὶ παρ᾽ αὐτοῖς τοῖς θεολήπτοις ἡμῶν ἱεράρχαις, ἡνίκα καὶ ἡμεῖς, ὡς οἶσθα, καὶ αὐτὸς καὶ πολλοὶ τῶν ἱερῶν ἡμῶν ἀδελφῶν ἐπὶ τὴν θέαν τοῦ ζωαρχικοῦ καὶ θεοδόχου σώματος συνεληλύθαμεν, παρῆν δὲ καὶ ὁ ἀδελφόθεος Ἰάκωβος καὶ Πέτρος, ἡ κορυφαία καὶ πρεσβυτάτη τῶν θεολόγων ἀκρότης, εἶτα ἐδόκει μετὰ τὴν θέαν ὑμνῆσαι τοὺς ἱεράρχας ἅπαντας, ὡς ἕκαστος ἦν ἱκανός, τὴν ἀπειροδύναμον ἀγαθότητα τῆς θεαρχικῆς ἀσθενείας, πάντων ἐκράτει μετὰ τοὺς θεολόγους, ὡς οἶσθα, τῶν ἄλλων ἱερομυστῶν ὅλος ἐκδημῶν, ὅλος ἐξιστάμενος ἑαυτοῦ καὶ τὴν πρὸς τὰ ὑμνούμενα κοινωνίαν πάσχων καὶ πρὸς πάντων, ὧν ἠκούετο καὶ ἑωρᾶτο καὶ ἐγιγνώσκετο καὶ οὐκ ἐγιγνώσκετο, θεόληπτος εἶναι καὶ θεῖος ὑμνολόγος κρινόμενος.[12]

Stephen Shoemaker gives us the history of the confusion of this passage in recent years,[13] since the earliest challenge of the traditional view, by Martin Jugie in 1944, who argued, not without disagreements, that this passage refers to the Eucharist rather than to the Dormition of Mary.[14] I do not think it is easy to get to the bottom of some of the most problematic expressions, but I am nevertheless likewise convinced that the correct interpretation of the passage points towards a Eucharistic rather towards a Marian direction.

At any rate, while this obscure reference may not be of tremendous importance to Marian scholarship, it presents a different kind of interest for Eucharistic theology. Although most of the research and public dialogue about the significance of the Corpus Dionysiacum—the work of the unknown writer who composed several treatises in the fifth or sixth century—has read it in the context of the dialogue of ideas between the Christian and the pagan world, I would tend to situate this dialogue in the framework of the experiential and cultic (as opposed to an only philosophical) context of these ideas. In other words, I think of Dionysios as a mainly liturgical theologian.

To return to the text itself, one of the difficult expressions here is *θεοδόχον σῶμα*, or god-receiving body. This looks straightforward if we took it as a reference to Mary—which is probably the main reason for the Marian reading of the passage—and a little less typical if we look at it as a reference to the Eucharistic body.

Nevertheless, the same expression can be found in Gregory of Nyssa's *Catechetical Oration* 37, where he talks about the Eucharistic body. Therefore, the use of this expression in the *Divine Names* seems to me as a direct use of Cappadocian, or rather specifically Nyssene theology, to the extent that it could urge us to suspect

[12] *Διονυσίου Αρεοπαγίτου*, *Περί Θείων Ονομάτων* 3:2, 681D, 70.

[13] Shoemaker, *Ancient Traditions*, 25-30.

[14] Martin Jugie, *La Mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge: Étude historico-doctrinale, Studi e Testi*, 114 (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944).

a correspondence between the person of Hierotheos, who appears as the teacher of Dionysios, and Gregory of Nyssa—if not a complete correspondence between the two characters, at least a partial one. The catechetical-level titles of the works of Hierotheos that precede the passage in question, along with the admiration for the depth of his thought, certainly fit with the content of Gregory's *Catechetical Oration*. Names play a symbolic role in the entire work of Dionysios, and the name of Hierotheos (sacred + God) shows an unparalleled admiration for Gregory's source of inspiration, which may or may not correspond to a single person. At the very least we could say that while it may be possible that this particular passage has been inspired by Gregory of Nyssa, this may not be true for other references to Hierotheos.

The point is nevertheless that there is a solid and well- known precedent for calling the Eucharist 'god-receiving'. In addition, the focus of the entire section in the *Divine Names* is the eloquence of Hierotheos in a gathering of bishops. The narrative continues and in the same section Dionysios mentions how Hierotheos, as he was celebrating the mysteries (the Eucharist), was 'wholly entranced, wholly raised from himself'. And further on, he writes that 'we were not able to look at his spiritual radiance'.[15] This resonated with a favourite Nyssene theme, of the correspondence between the personal and the liturgical ascent.

The text refers to a gathering of bishops, which could be taken to mean a Eucharistic service or the Dormition. As the gathering, the synaxis of the celebrants points naturally to the Eucharistic service, it would seem clear that this is the celebration of the Eucharist, but what makes the interpretation unclear is how and why the aforementioned bishops were gathered in order to look at the body in question. Although this could be taken more easily as a reference to the dead body that is placed in the middle of the church during the funeral service, rather than to the celebration of the Eucharist, the act of active viewing ('we gathered *to look* at the body') does not naturally correspond with either one. However, the whole section includes comments about the transcendence of physical vision, and an ecstatic spiritual radiance. The presence of Hierotheos here has to do precisely with seeing beyond looking, and with recognizing what is beyond physical vision.

Now, this actually makes the connection with Gregory of Nyssa even stronger. The sacramental analysis that Gregory does in the aforementioned section of the *Catechetical Oration* discusses the Eucharistic body and its identification with the body of Christ. While the expression *θεοδόχος* in this context would imply that the reception of God refers to the Holy Spirit—consistent with Cappadocian theology and hymnography—the Eucharistic analysis of Gregory is decisively Christocentric. This, according to some theologians, reflects a problematic step, and it marks the time when Christian liturgy shifted from the model of the Lord's Prayer, which is

[15] *Divine Names* 3:2, 681D.

addressed to the Father in a clearly corporate manner, to the historization of the institution narrative and the Passion of Christ.[16]

What are we talking about, precisely? Although little changes at the surface, much changes underneath. The earliest Christian communities were gathering around the Table of the Lord, and were sharing the one loaf and the one chalice, but the spiritual struggle had to do with the community itself which addressed the Father by becoming part of the Body of the Son, through the operation of the Holy Spirit. The emphasis that we find in the church of the Pentecost and in the early writings of Justin Martyr or Ignatios of Antioch has to do with the much-researched unity of the people who were gathering in the same place under the same celebrant. The bread and the wine provided the indispensable focus for this gathering and the transformation of the people, but it is hard to find any reference in the early church that describes the sacramental sanctification of the people and their union with the Godhead without a strong reference to this gathering. The role of the Son is to provide the locus where the people of God can meet and be united with the divinity that originates from the unoriginate Father, and the whole dispensation of the Incarnation, the Passion, and the Resurrection are understood according to the sacramental model of the Lord's Prayer, with a clear focus on the bread that is identified with Jesus. In addition, the theological analysis of the sacrament itself is given in John 14-17, the long narrative before the Passion and the Hierarchical prayer of Jesus, which, in contrast to the synoptics, downplayed the historical context in favour of the analysis of the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son, and also the mutual indwelling of the people and the Son. The image that we can reconstruct from the importance that is given both to the nature of the gathering and the rite itself is that there is no difference between the Eucharistic elements and the people, as the transformation takes place in both of them.

The *Great Catechetical Oration* of Gregory of Nyssa is perhaps the first text where we see that the focus of the Eucharist has shifted from the community to the bread and the wine.[17] Gregory here has either actively avoided or has not found it necessary to mention a single word about the gathering, and speaks instead about the change of the bread and the wine. His main question is how it is possible for the one Christ to be present and to sanctify the entire Church, to be broken and not divided, eaten and not diminished. His approach is a top-to-bottom theology of the Incarnation, a sanctification of the Bread and the Wine through the blessing, and the *μεταστοιχείωσις*—a word that Gregory of Nyssa uses in several other places,[18] and it anticipates the word transubstantiation, even if it does not try to take the technical

[16] Cf. Thomas O' Loughlin, *The Eucharist: Origins and Contemporary Understandings* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 105-118.

[17] Gregory discusses the Eucharist as the real Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the 37th chapter of his *Great Catechetical Oration*, PG 45: 93C-98B.

[18] Cf. Gregory of Nyssa, *Sermon on the Resurrection,* PG 46:604C and *Refutation to Eunomios* 4, PG 45:468D, in addition to the *Great Catechetical Oration* PG 45:98B.

weight that transubstantiation later carried—of what is natural to what is immortal. It has to be noted that Gregory's use of *μεταστοιχείωσις* refers both to the Bread and to the people though, even if this is not evident in the *Catechetical Oration*.

The approach is clearly Christocentric, grounded in the historical Last Supper, which Gregory mentions in connection with the blessing of the Bread and the Wine, and implies a personal, rather than collective way to salvation, although it has to be said that this is mostly a difference of emphasis. Most of the *anaphoras* of the fourth century maintain their orientation towards the Father, although the anaphora that bears the name of Gregory the Theologian is addressed to the Son, and in some places recalls the *μεταστοιχείωσις*. Nevertheless, for Gregory it is the words of the institutional narrative that bring about the change. The words of the Last Supper, which are extended as a historical memory, above and beyond the meaning of the timeless offering and sharing between the Father and the Son and also between the Son and the people of God, perhaps are sufficient to demonstrate that a change does take place somewhere in the church (in the people and/or in the bread), but they limit the explanation for the change to the divine commandments, as if what is happening is something similar to the miracle of the Wedding in Cana.

One of the difficulties that the *Catechetical Oration* addresses at some length is the distance between what we see in the Bread and the Wine and what it actually is. Gregory argues this along the lines that will later develop into the arguments of the defenders of icons: we see the bread as bread, in precisely the same way Christ was seen because he was fully human. The Incarnation helped the defenders of icons to develop the argument of the legitimacy of representation, by recognizing that while the divine nature cannot be limited in a physical form, the voluntary emptying of the divine nature into the human nature, and their union into one hypostasis, made it possible for us to behold Jesus Christ, either in person or in representation, and consider the presence of the divinity in him. Gregory's justification of the presence of the divinity in the Eucharist, in what is also Bread and Wine, anticipates the same argument.

However, the additional difficulty we face here is that the Bread and the Wine, originally used in the context of a Passover *seder*, and given the legitimacy of the divine nature through the sharing of the common meal, are not natural symbols of the divine, especially if they are taken out of the context of this sharing, even if there is a long background to the concept of the ritual sacrifice and common meal. The historical background of the animal sacrifice as an offering to the gods, was too far removed from the Eucharistic practice to be able to explain the symbolism. In addition, in the absence of an animal sacrifice that tried to please the gods, what makes these symbols capable of carrying the presence of God and invoking the Holy Spirit, is the act of gathering and sharing in the name of God, the name of Jesus Christ. The focus of the Christian ritual has been removed very far from the pagan sacrificial offering, and what gives the Eucharist meaning is not only the presence

of the Holy Spirit and act of the offering, however it is understood, but also the gathering of the community in the name of Jesus Christ, which initiates it. The ritual, to put it in another way, focuses on the Bread and the Wine, but the meaning of the transformation necessarily includes the gathering of the community as a *sine qua non*.[19] To understand this is a challenge in looking and discerning, something that the *Catechetical Oration* addresses several times. One of the main concerns of Gregory is to explain that what looks like bread is not just bread, and what looks like wine is not just wine.

When Gregory refers to the body of Christ as *θεοδόχος σάρξ* (god-receiving flesh), he points to the union between the two natures. In the same sense, the Eucharistic bread is the Body of Christ because it, too, consists of two natures. The same term is used by early writers such as John Cassian, Theodoret, and Pachomios of Gaza, with the meaning of the Eucharistic body, but Gregory, and several other writers also use it in order to refer to Mary, encouraging the development of a Marian liturgical theology, or, more correctly, a liturgical theology which includes a central role for Mary. Therefore, by the time of Dionysios, there was enough background for both possible meanings of this word, and this indicates that the confusion at hand is a symptom of this growing Marian liturgical theology.

Nevertheless, everything else in the paragraph from the *Divine Names* discourages the Marian reading. The gathering of the bishops, the admiration for the eloquence of Hierotheos, which would sound anywhere between inconsiderate and gruesome if it were understood in the context of Mary's death and funeral, and the place of this reference in the *Divine Names*, in the section that examines the power of prayer, point towards the interpretation of the body as the Eucharistic body. What makes this more difficult is the expression *θέα τοῦ σώματος*—the beholding of the body—which does not resonate clearly with anything in the sacrament. It is certainly too early in the sixth century to try to look for the roots of the Roman Catholic ritual of the Adoration of the Eucharistic Body, even if the practice of the reservation of the Eucharist is attested since at least the time of St Basil. It may be possible that Dionysios here understands the elevation of the Eucharistic bread as an act of presentation, whereby the main celebrant elevates the body in order to present it to his concelebrants, something that seems consistent with Dionysian theology since this presentation would be restricted to the celebrating bishops and not to the laity. This also seems more consistent with the earlier liturgical instincts, which make more sense in the context of the continuous revelation of God in the community of the faithful rather than as a historical memory of the life of Jesus Christ. The elevation, by the time of Germanos of Constantinople, is only understood as a memory of the ascent of Jesus to Calvary, but this historical interpretation is probably a later development of an act that started with a different meaning—and here the 'viewing

[19] Cf. Andreas Andreopoulos, *Gazing on God: Trinity, Church and Salvation in Orthodox Thought and Iconography* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2013), 39-58.

of the body' that Dionysios mentions seems to fit, although it is risky to think of this as anything more than a hypothesis. Of course, 'viewing' the body here could then be taken in the meaning that is implied in the *Catechetical Oration*, as a contemplation of the significance of the Eucharist, which is also consistent with Dionysian thought. It is nevertheless an unusual and problematic expression. What follows is equally cryptic, and it may refer to a number of occasions, from the Incarnation to the Dormition, or simply the contemplation of the mystery of the Eucharist itself: the praising of the 'Omnipotent Goodness of the supremely Divine Weakness' by each bishop.

The difficulty of interpretation remains. Of course, this difficulty does not give more credence to the Marian reading, since the main act of any such gathering of bishops for that purpose could be described as a celebration, a mourning, a contemplation of death, but not as a 'viewing'.

As argued so far, I believe that the difficult passage contains echoes of the *Catechetical Oration* of Gregory of Nyssa, and perhaps takes them one step further in his particular way. Either way, despite the fact that some phrases and words are difficult to interpret here, there are many reasons to take it as a reference to the Eucharist rather than as a reference to Mary. But the theological misspelling that we mentioned in the beginning is precisely that: it was possible for John of Scythopolis to read—or rather to misread—this reference in connection to Mary, and this reading was not seriously challenged for many centuries.

The fact that the Eucharistic reference was mistaken for a Marian reference demonstrates that the transition from a community-based sacramental theology to a Christological one, is fairly complete by the sixth century, and by the same token Mary was becoming more central in theological thought. If the most obvious way for the interpreters of the Dionysian corpus was to miss the consideration of the Eucharistic body in favour of a historical moment in the life of the early Church, it clearly shows that sacramental subtleties like that had given their place to historical memories.

Can we infer a Eucharistic role or analogue for Mary, precisely on the basis of this confusion? The significance of Mary has always been to stress, or rather to confirm, the truth and the fullness of the human nature of Christ. Looking at, or contemplating her body, is similar in many ways to the contemplation of the Eucharistic body, in the sense that in both cases there is something else that goes on beyond the visible part. This proved to be an effective defence against iconoclasts for whom the humanity of Christ was not enough to make his divinity expressible in a concrete manner, but in this case it is most likely a symptom of the increasing tendency to historicize the Liturgy. If by the time of Gregory of Nyssa we can attest to the transition from a community-based Liturgy that is addressed to the Father to a Christocentric Liturgy that provides individual pathways of connection with the Saviour, the confusion with the mortal body of Mary implies that historical Christology takes over (as opposed to a higher Christology which can be understood as the presence of the eschaton in history).