Lost Scriptures
Books that Did Not Make It into the New Testament

Bart D. Ehrman
Author of Lost Christianities
The Proto-Gospel of James

This book is sometimes called a "Proto-Gospel" because it narrates events that took place prior to Jesus' birth (although it includes an account of the birth as well). The ancient manuscripts that preserve the book have different titles, including "The Birth of Mary," "The Story of the Birth of Saint Mary, Mother of God," and "The Birth of Mary; The Revelation of James." Its author claims to be James, usually understood to be Jesus' (half-) brother known from the New Testament (e.g., Mark 6; Galatians 1). Here he is assumed to be Joseph's son by a previous marriage.

Focusing its attention on Jesus' mother, Mary, the book provides legendary accounts of (a) her miraculous birth to the wealthy Jew, Joachim, and his wife, Anna; (b) her sanctified upbringing in the Jerusalem Temple; (c) her marriage as a twelve-year old to Joseph, an old widower miraculously chosen to be her husband; (d) her supernatural conception of Jesus through the Spirit; and (e) the birth of Jesus in a cave outside of Bethlehem. Parts of the book rely heavily on the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, but with numerous intriguing expansions, including legendary reports of Joseph's previous marriage and grown sons, Mary's work as a seamstress for the curtain in the temple, and the supernatural events that transpired at the birth of Jesus, including a first-hand narrative told by Joseph of how time stood still when the Son of God appeared in the world (chap. 18). In one of the most striking of its narratives we are told that an originally unbelieving midwife performed a postpartum inspection of Mary to be assured of her virginity (chap. 20).

Since the book was already known to the church father Origen in the early third century, and probably to Clement of Alexandria at the end of the second, it must have been in circulation soon after 150 CE. The book was enormously popular in later centuries, and played a significant role in pictorial art of the Middle Ages.

1For a fuller discussion, see Ehrman, Lost Christianities, 207–10. 2See David R. Cartlidge and J. Keith Elliott, Art and the Christian Apocrypha (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), chap. 2.
The Birth of Mary, the Revelation of James

1 In the "Histories of the Twelve Tribes of Israel" there was a very wealthy man Joachim, who used to offer a double portion of his gifts to the Lord, saying to himself, "The portion that is a surplus will be for all the people, and the portion that is for my forgiveness will be for the Lord my God as my atonement."

2 The great day of the Lord drew near, and the sons of Israel were offering their gifts. And Reuben stood before him and said, "You are not allowed to offer your gifts first, since you have produced no offspring in Israel."

3 Joachim was very upset and went away to consult the book of the twelve tribes of the people, saying to himself, "I will examine the Book of the Twelve Tribes of Israel to see if I am the only one not to produce offspring in Israel." And he searched and found that everyone who was righteous had raised up offspring in Israel. He remembered the patriarch Abraham, that at the end of his life God had given him a son, Isaac.

4 Anna was very upset, and she wrapped herself up in her clothes of mourning; she then washed her face and put on her bridal clothes, and in mid-afternoon went down to walk in her garden. She saw a laurel tree and sat beneath it, and after resting a bit she prayed to the Master, saying, "O God of my fathers, bless me and hear my prayer, just as you blessed the womb of Sarah and gave her a son, Isaac."

5 While she was gazing at the sky she saw a nest of sparrows in the laurel tree, and she mourned to herself, "Woe is me. Who gave me birth? And what kind of womb bore me? I have been born as a curse before the sons of Israel and am despised; they have mocked me and banished me from the temple of the Lord my God."

6 Now his wife Anna wailed and mourned twice over, saying "I mourn for being a widow, I mourn for being childless."

7 The great day of the Lord drew near, and her servant Judith said to her, "How long will you humble your soul? See, the great day of the Lord is drawing near, and you are not allowed to lament. But take this headband that my supervisor gave me; I am not allowed to wear it, since I am your servant and it is of royal quality." 3 Anna replied, "Go away from me. I did none of these things and yet the Lord my God has severely humbled me. For all I know, some scoundrel has given this to you, and you have come to defile me with your sin." Judith said, "Why would I curse you, just because you have not listened to me? The Lord has closed your womb to keep you from bearing fruit in Israel."

8 Anna was very upset, and she wrapped herself up in her clothes of mourning; she then washed her face and put on her bridal clothes, and in mid-afternoon went down to walk in her garden. She saw a laurel tree and sat beneath it, and after resting a bit she prayed to the Master, saying, "O God of my fathers, bless me and hear my prayer, just as you blessed the womb of Sarah and gave her a son, Isaac."
O Lord. Woe is me. What am I like? I am not like this soil, for even this soil produces its fruit every season and blesses you, O Lord.

Then, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared and said to her, “Anna, Anna, the Lord has heard your prayer. You will conceive a child and give birth, and your offspring will be spoken of throughout the entire world.” Anna replied, “As the Lord God lives, whether my child is a boy or a girl, I will offer it as a gift to the Lord my God, and it will minister to him its entire life.”

Behold, two angels came to her, saying, “See, your husband Joachim is coming with his flocks.” For an angel of the Lord had descended to him and said, “Joachim, Joachim, the Lord God has heard your prayer. Go down from here; for see, your wife Anna has conceived a child.” Joachim immediately went down and called his shepherds and said, “Bring me here ten lambs without spot or blemish, and they will be for the Lord God; and bring me twelve young calves, and they will be for the priests and the council leaders; and bring a hundred male goats, and they will be for all the people.”

And behold, Joachim came with his flocks and Anna stood beside the gate and saw him coming; and running up to him she hung on his neck and said, “Now I know that the Lord God has blessed me abundantly. For see, the widow is no longer a widow and the one who is childless has conceived a child.” Then Joachim rested that first day in his home.

On the next day he brought his gifts as an offering, saying to himself, “If the Lord is gracious to me, the leafed plate of the priest’s mitre* will make it known to me.” And Joachim offered his gifts and looked closely at the priest’s leafed mitre as he went up to the altar of the Lord; and he saw no sin in himself. Joachim then said, “Now I know that the Lord has been gracious to me and forgiven all my sins.” He went down from the temple of the Lord justified and came to his house.

Some six months came to completion for Anna; and in the seventh month she gave birth. She asked the midwife, “What is it?” The midwife replied, “A girl.” Anna said, “My soul is exalted today.” And she laid the child down. And when the days came to completion, Anna washed off the blood of her impurity, gave her breast to the child, and named her Mary.

The child grew stronger every day. When she was six months old, her mother set her on the ground, to see if she could stand. She walked seven steps and came to her arms. She lifted her up and said, “As the Lord my God lives, you will not walk at all on this ground until I have taken you up to the temple of the Lord.” Then she made a sanctuary in her bedroom and did not allow anything impure or unclean into it. And she called the undefiled daughters of the Hebrews and they entertained her.

When the child had her first birthday, Joachim held a great feast and invited the chief priests, priests, scribes, council leaders, and all the people of Israel. Joachim brought the child out to the priests and they blessed her, saying, “May the God of our fathers bless this child and give her a name that will be famous forever, to all generations.” And all the people replied, “Let it be so! Amen.” They brought her to the chief priests, and they blessed her, saying, “May the Most High

*Literally: the priest’s leaf
God look upon this child and bless her with an ultimate blessing, equal to none.”

3 Her mother lifted her up and took her back to the sanctuary in her bedroom, and nursed her. And Anna made a song to the Lord God, saying, “I sing a holy song to the Lord my God, for he has visited me and removed from me the reproach of my enemies. The Lord God has given me his righteous fruit, unique and abundant before him. Who will report to the sons of Reuben that Anna is now nursing a child? Listen closely, you twelve tribes of Israel: Anna is nursing a child!” And she laid her down in the sanctuary of her bedroom and went out to serve the others. When the feast ended they descended happy, giving glory to the God of Israel.

7 Months passed for the child. When she turned two, Joachim said, “Now we should take her up to the temple of the Lord, to fulfill the promise we made; otherwise the Master may send some harm our way and our gift be deemed unacceptable.” Anna replied, “Let’s wait until she is three; otherwise she may be homesick for her father and mother.” Joseph agreed, “We will wait.”

2 When the child turned three, Joachim said, “We should call the undefiled daughters of the Hebrews and have them take torches; let them set them up, blazing, that the child not turn back and her heart be taken captive away from the temple of the Lord.” They did this, until they had gone up to the Lord’s temple. And the priest of the Lord received her and gave her a kiss, blessing her and saying, “The Lord has made your name great for all generations. Through you will the Lord reveal his redemption to the sons of Israel at the end of time.”

3 He set her on the third step of the altar, and the Lord God cast his grace down upon her. She danced on her feet, and the entire house of Israel loved her.

8 Her parents went away, amazed and praising God, the Master, that the child did not turn back. Mary was in the temple of the Lord, cared for like a dove, receiving her food from the hand of an angel.

2 But when she reached her twelfth birthday, the priests held a council and said, “See, Mary has become twelve years old in the Lord’s temple. What then shall we do with her, to keep her from defiling the sanctuary of the Lord our God?” They said to the chief priest, “You have stood on the Lord’s altar. Go in and pray about her, and we will do whatever the Lord God reveals to you.” 3 The chief priest went in, taking the robe with twelve bells into the Holy of Holies; and he prayed about her. And behold, an angel of the Lord appeared and said to him, “Zacharias, Zacharias, go out and gather the widowers of the people, and have each of them bring a rod; she will become the wife of the one to whom the Lord God gives a sign.” And the heralds went out to all the countryside of Judea and the trumpet of the Lord was blown, and everyone came running.

9 Joseph cast aside his carpenter’s axe and went to their meeting. When they had gathered together they went to the chief priest, bringing their rods. And when he had taken everyone’s rods he went into the temple and prayed. When he finished his prayer, he took the rods, went outside, and gave them back. And no sign appeared among them. But Joseph took the last rod, and behold! A dove came out of the rod and flew onto Joseph’s head. The priest said to Joseph, “You have been called to take the Lord’s virgin into your safe-keeping.” 2 But
Joseph refused, saying, "I have sons and am an old man; she is but a child. I do not want to become a laughingstock to the sons of Israel." The priest replied, "Fear the Lord your God, and remember everything that he did to Dathan, Abiram, and Korah, how the earth split open and they were all devoured because of their dispute. Now, Joseph, you should be afraid of this happening to your house as well.

3 Joseph was afraid and took her into his safe-keeping. And he said to Mary, "See, I have received you from the temple of the Lord. Now I am leaving you at home, while I go out to construct my buildings; later I will come back to you. The Lord will watch over you."

10 Then the priests held a council and said, "We should make a curtain for the Lord’s temple." And the priest said, "Call to me the undefiled virgins from the tribe of David." The servants went out looking for them and found seven virgins. The priest then remembered that the child Mary was from the tribe of David, and that she was undefiled before God. The servants went out and led her back and brought her into the Lord’s temple. And the priest said, "Cast lots before me to see who will spin the gold, the asbestos, the fine linen, the silk, the sapphire blue, the scarlet, and the true purple." Mary drew the lot for the true purple and the scarlet, and taking them she returned home. At that time Zacharias became silent. Samuel took his place, until Zacharias spoke again. But Mary took the scarlet and began to spin it.

11 Mary took a pitcher and went out to fetch some water. And behold, she heard a voice saying, "Greetings, you who are favored. The Lord is with you. You are blessed among women." Mary looked around, right and left, to see where the voice was coming from. She then entered her house frightened and set the pitcher down. Taking up the purple she sat on her chair and began to draw it out. 2 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before her and said, "Do not fear, Mary. For you have found favor before the Master of all, and you will conceive a child by his Word." But as she listened she was asking herself, "Am I to conceive from the living Lord God and give birth like every other woman?"

3 The angel of the Lord said to her, "Not so, Mary. For the power of God will overshadow you. Therefore the one born from you will be called holy, the Son of the Highest. And you will name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Mary replied, "Behold the slave of the Lord is before you. May it happen to me as you have said."

12 She made the purple and the scarlet, and brought them to the temple. The priest took them and blessed her, "Mary, the Lord God has made your name great; you will be blessed among all the generations of earth."

2 Full of joy, Mary went off to her relative Elizabeth. She knocked on the door; and when Elizabeth heard, she cast aside the scarlet and ran to the door. When she opened it she blessed Mary and said, "How is it that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For see, the child in me leapt up and blessed you." But Mary forgot the mysteries that the archangel Gabriel had spoken to her, and gazed at the sky and said, "Who am I, Lord, that all the women of earth will bless me?"

3 She stayed with Elizabeth for three months. Day by day her own belly grew. Mary then returned home in fear, and hid
herself from the sons of Israel. She was sixteen when these mysteries happened.

13 When she was in her sixth month, Joseph returned from his buildings. As he came into the house he saw that she was pregnant. Striking his face he cast himself to the ground on sackcloth, weeping bitterly and saying, "How can I look upon the Lord God? How can I utter a prayer for this young girl? For I received her from the temple of the Lord God as a virgin, but I did not watch over her. Who has preyed upon me? Who has done this wicked deed in my home and defiled the virgin? Has not the entire history of Adam been summed up in me? For just as Adam was singing praise to God, the serpent came and found Eve alone, and led her astray. This too has now happened to me."

2 Joseph rose up from the sackcloth, called Mary, and said to her, "You who have been cared for by God: why did you do this? Have you forgotten the Lord your God? Why have you humiliated your soul—you who were brought up in the Holy of Holies and received your food from the hand of an angel?" 3 But she wept bitterly and said, "I am pure and have not had sex with any man." Joseph replied to her, "How then have you become pregnant?" She said, "As the Lord my God lives, I do not know."

14 Joseph was very afraid and let her be, debating what to do about her: "If I hide her sin, I will be fighting the Law of the Lord; if I reveal her condition to the sons of Israel, I am afraid that the child in her is angelic, and I may be handing innocent blood over to a death sentence. What then should I do with her? I will secretly divorce her." Then night overtook him.

2 Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Do not be afraid of this child. For that which is in her comes from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. For he will save his people from their sins." Joseph rose up from his sleep and glorified the God of Israel who had bestowed such favor on him; and he watched over her.

15 But Annas the scribe came to see Joseph and said, "Why have you not appeared before our council?" Joseph replied, "I was tired from my journey and rested on my first day back." Annas then turned and saw that Mary was pregnant. 2 He left and ran off to the priest and said to him, "Joseph, the one you have vouched for, has committed a great sin." The priest replied, "What has he done?" He said, "He has defiled the virgin he received from the Lord's temple and has stolen her wedding rights. And he has not revealed this to the sons of Israel." 3 The priest asked, "Joseph, has done this?" Annas the scribe replied, "Send some servants, and you will find that the virgin is pregnant." The servants went off and found that it was just as he had said. They brought her back to the judgment hall, along with Joseph.

3 The priest said, "Mary, why have you done this? Why have you humiliated your soul and forgotten the Lord your God? You who were brought up in the Holy of Holies and received your food from the hand of an angel, and heard the hymns, and danced before him—why have you done this? But she wept bitterly and said, "As the Lord my God lives, I am pure before him and have not had sex with any man."

4 The priest then said to Joseph, "Why have you done this?" Joseph replied, "As the Lord my God lives, I am pure towards her." The priest said, "Do not bear false

Or: eloped with her
witness, but speak the truth. You have stolen her wedding rights and not revealed it to the sons of Israel; and you have not bowed your head under the mighty hand that your offspring might be blessed.” Joseph kept his silence.

16 The priest said, “Hand over the virgin you received from the Lord’s temple.” And Joseph began to weep bitterly. The priest said, “I will have both of you drink the Lord’s ‘water of refutation,’ and it will reveal your sins to your own eyes.” 2 The priest gave it to Joseph to drink, and sent him away to the wilderness. But he came back whole. He then gave it to Mary to drink and sent her off to the wilderness. And she came back whole. All the people were amazed that no sin was revealed in them.

3 The priest said, “If the Lord God has not revealed your sins, neither do I judge you.” And he released them. Joseph took Mary and returned home, rejoicing and glorifying the God of Israel.

17 An order went out from the king, Augustus, that everyone from Bethlehem of Judea was to be registered for a census. Joseph said, “I will register my sons. But what should I do about this child? How should I register her? As my wife? I would be too ashamed. As my daughter? But all the sons of Israel know that she is not my daughter. This day of the Lord will need to turn out as he wishes.”

2 He saddled the donkey and seated her on it; and his son led it along, while Joseph followed behind. When they approached the third milestone, she turned to Joseph and he saw that she was gloomy. He said to himself “Maybe the child in her is causing her trouble.” Then later she turned to Joseph and he saw her laughing. He said to her, “Mary, why is it that one time I see you laughing and at another time gloomy?” She replied, “Because my eyes see two peoples, one weeping and mourning and the other happy and rejoicing.”

3 When they were half way there, Mary said to him, “Take me down from the donkey. The child inside me is pressing on me to come out.” He took her down from the donkey and said to her, “Where can I take you to hide your shame? For this is a wilderness area.”

18 He found a cave there and took her into it. Then he gave his sons to her and went out to find a Hebrew midwife in the region of Bethlehem.

2 But I, Joseph, was walking, and I was not walking. I looked up to into the air, and I saw that it was greatly disturbed. I looked up to the vault of the sky, and I saw it standing still; and the birds of the sky were at rest. I looked back to the earth and saw a bowl laid out for some workers who were reclining to eat. Their hands were in the bowl, but those who were chewing were not chewing; and those who were taking something from the bowl were not lifting it up; and those who were bringing their hands to their mouths were not bringing them to their mouths. Everyone was looking up. And I saw a flock of sheep being herded, but they were standing still. And the shepherd raised his hand to strike them, but his hand remained in the air. I looked down at the torrential stream, and I saw some goats whose mouths were over the water, but they were not drinking. Then suddenly everything returned to its normal course.

19 I saw a woman was coming down from the mountains, and she said to me, “O man, where are you going?” I replied, “I am looking for a..."
Hebrew midwife.” She asked me, “Are you from Israel?” I said to her, “Yes.” She asked, “Who is the one who has given birth in the cave?” I replied, “My betrothed.” She said to me, “Is she not your wife?” I said to her, “Mary is the one who was brought up in the Lord’s temple, and I received the lot to take her as my wife. She is not, however, my wife, but she has conceived her child by the Holy Spirit.” The midwife said to him, “Can this be true?” Joseph replied to her, “Come and see.” And the midwife went with him.

2 They stood in the cave, and a bright cloud overshadowed it. The midwife said, “My soul has been magnified today, for my eyes have seen a miraculous sign: salvation has been born to Israel.” Right away the cloud departed from the cave, and a great light appeared within, so that their eyes could not bear it. Soon that light departed, until an infant could be seen. And it went and took hold of the breast of Mary, its mother. The midwife cried out, “This is a great day for me, for I have seen this new wonder.”

3 The midwife went out of the cave and Salome met her. And she said to her, “Salome, Salome, I can describe a new wonder to you. A virgin has given birth, contrary to her natural condition.” Salome replied, “As the Lord my God lives, if I do not insert my finger and examine her condition, I will not believe that the virgin has given birth.”

20 The midwife went in and said to Mary, “Brace yourself, for there is no small controversy concerning you.” Then Salome inserted her finger in order to examine her condition, and she cried out, “Woe to me for my sin and faithlessness. For I have put the living God to the test, and see, my hand is burning, falling away from me.” 2 She kneeled before the Master and said, “O God of my fathers, remember that I am a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not make me an example to the sons of Israel, but deliver me over to the poor. For you know, O Master, that I have performed my services in your name and have received my wages from you.”

3 And behold, an angel of the Lord appeared and said to her, “Salome, Salome, the Master of all has heard your prayer. Bring your hand to the child and lift him up; and you will find salvation and joy.”

4 Salome joyfully came and lifted the child, saying, “I will worship him, for he has been born as a great king to Israel.” Salome was immediately cured, and she went out of the cave justified. And behold a voice came saying, “Salome, Salome, do not report all the miraculous deeds you have seen until the child enters Jerusalem.”

21 And behold, Joseph was ready to go into Judea. But there was a great disturbance in Bethlehem of Judaea. For wise men came saying, “Where is the king of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east, and we have come to worship him.” 2 When Herod heard, he was troubled; and he sent servants to the wise men. He then summoned the high priests and asked them in the praetorium, “What does Scripture say about where the messiah is to be born?” They replied, “In Bethlehem of Judea. For that is what is found in Scripture.” He then released them and asked the wise men, “What sign did you see concerning the king who has been born?” The wise men said, “We saw a magnificent star shining among the stars and overshadowing them, so that the other stars disappeared. And thus we knew that a king had been born in Israel, and we came to worship him.” Herod replied, “Go and look for him. If you find
him, let me know, that I too may come to worship him."

3 The wise men then left, and behold, the star they had seen in the east preceded them until they entered the cave, and it stood over the entrance of the cave. The wise men saw the child with its mother, Mary, and they took from their packs gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

4 When they were warned by a revelation from an angel not to enter Judea, they went home another way.

22 When Herod realized that he had been mocked by the wise men, he grew angry and sent murderers, saying to them, "Kill every infant, two years and under."

2 When Mary heard that the infants were being killed, out of fear she took her child and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and placed him in a cattle manger. 3 But when Elizabeth heard that they were looking for John, she took him and went up into the mountains, looking for a place to hide him. But there was no hiding place. Elizabeth moaned and said with a loud voice, "Mountain of God, receive a mother with her child." For Elizabeth was not able to climb the mountain. And straight away the mountain split open and received her. And a light was shining around them, for an angel of the Lord was with them, protecting them.

23 Herod was looking for John, and he sent servants to Zacharias, saying, "Where have you hidden your son?" He answered them, "I am a minister of God, constantly attending his temple. How could I know where my son is?" 2 The servants returned and reported everything to Herod. Herod became angry and said, "His son is about to rule Israel." He sent his servants to him a second time to say, "Tell me the truth: where is your son? For you know that I can shed your blood with my hand." The servants went to report these things to him. 3 Zacharias responded, "I will be God's witness if you shed my blood. For the Master will receive my spirit, since you will be shedding innocent blood in the forecourt of the Lord's temple." And Zacharias was murdered around dawn. But the sons of Israel did not know that he was murdered.

24 The priests came out at the time of greeting, but Zacharias did not come out to meet them with his blessing, as was customary. The priests stood, waiting to greet Zacharias with a prayer and to glorify the Most High. 2 When he did not come, everyone grew afraid. One of them took courage, entered the sanctuary, and saw blood congealed beside the altar of the Lord. And he heard a voice, "Zacharias has been murdered, and his blood will not be wiped away until his avenger comes." When he heard this word he was afraid and went outside to report to the priests what he had seen and heard.

3 Taking courage they entered and saw what had happened, and the paneling around the temple cried out aloud; and they ripped their clothes from top to bottom. They did not find his body, but they found his blood turned to stone. They left in fear, and reported to all the people that Zacharias had been murdered. All the tribes of the people heard and grieved for him, mourning for three days and nights.

4 After three days the priests decided to put someone in his place, and the lot fell to Simeon. For this is the one who learned from a revelation of the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he should see the messiah in the flesh.

25 But I James, the one who has written this account in Jerusa-
lem, hid myself away in the wilderness when there was a disturbance at the death of Herod, until the disturbance in Jerusalem came to an end. There I glorified God, the Master, who gave me the gift and the wisdom to write this account.

2 Grace be with all those who fear the Lord. Amen.