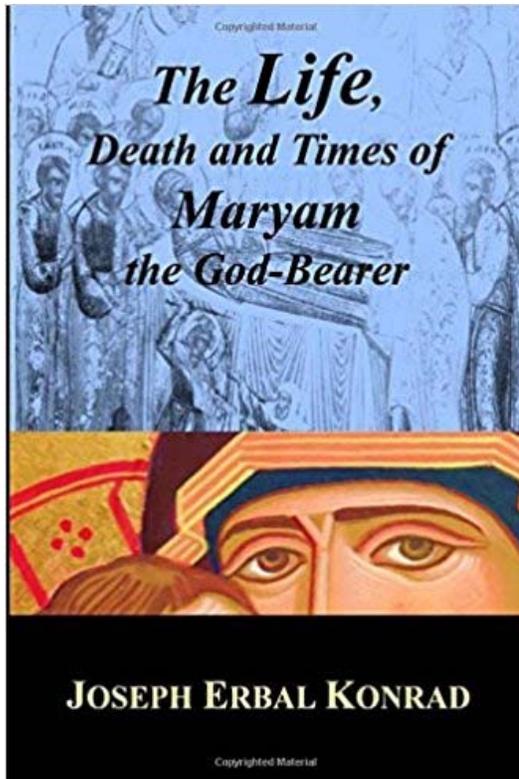


Joseph Erbal Konrad. *The Life, Death and Times of Maryam the God-Bearer*, 2015. ISBN 978-1517189662



Reviewed by:
Deacon Stephen Sharman, PhD

This book contains an account of the life of the Theotokos, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. It was a pleasure to read. Its narrative moved along quickly and was full of incidents and people. At the same time, it is also a puzzling and troubling book. It is neither fish (a work of fiction) nor fowl (a work of history). It can be described best as a work of historical fiction and a competent one at that. Its cover

carries a disclaimer, 'this book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.' The trouble lies in distinguishing between fiction and historical fact. In his book, the author sends his narrator back in time by means of time travel to Ephesus where he meets the Theotokos and hears from her lips an account of her life and then witnesses her death. Her account is an autobiography, a biography of Her Son and a history of the early Christian community in Jerusalem and the Near East in her times. After hearing her account, the narrator returns to the present. Time travel is a not uncommon way in works of fiction of connecting a modern reader with events in the past. The narrator's task, then, is to record the Theotokos' account of her life without

intruding his personality into the narrative. There is, however, a brief account of his reaction to his experience in the last few pages of the book. The reader's task is to distinguish fiction from history and that in this book is not an easy task.

The author's chief sources are the Gospels and the Book of the Acts of the Apostles and for the most part he follows them carefully. He has enlarged the story with descriptions of buildings, events and people which has produced a readable narrative. He does not identify the sources for his additions with one exception. That exception is the brief reference to the Protevangelium in his 'Afterword' (p.354). A work of fiction does not usually contain a scholarly apparatus of notes and bibliography but this book would have benefited from them. If he had done this, the readers would have a better knowledge of the sources which he has used in creating this book. Three examples of the author's use of sources may be helpful. The author uses the Protevangelium attributed to St James as a source for the birth, early years and residence in the Temple of the Theotokos. The Protevangelium is not usually considered to be a particularly good historical source. Second, the author describes two celebrations of the Eucharist the first in the Theotokos' home in Ephesus (p. 120) and the second in Jerusalem following Pentecost (p. 308). He does not use the word 'Eucharist' for the services. Here his accounts have been influenced by the Didache an early source for Liturgy. (for a translation of the text of The Didache, see Lucien Deiss *Springtime of the Liturgy* pp 71-77) Similarly echoes of the Didache are found in the account of the Last Supper. (p. 259) Third, his account of the Burial of Jesus contains words from a hymn, 'Give me the stranger' (p. 284). These words come from the Orthodox Church's hymnography for Good Friday and Holy Saturday. A translation of the complete text which begins 'Come and let us bless Joseph of everlasting memory' may be found in Mother Mary and Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Lenten Triodion* pp. 654-655. There are doubtless many other echoes, allusions and references scattered throughout the book. These three examples, however, provide a hint of the problem. The author is clearly a well-read writer who has researched his subject but prefers to hide the light of his learning under the proverbial bushel basket. This is puzzling. As a result, it is difficult to distinguish between his creative work and the sources which he used.

Further there are other puzzling features of the book. One is the vocabulary which he uses. He avoids using such words as church, apostles, angels and Eucharist and uses terms such as 'the assembly of the called', 'the sent-forth', 'messengers' and 'the Bread and the Cup'. Another puzzling feature is his use of the words 'and do not bring us to the time of trial' instead of 'lead us not into temptation' in his descriptions of The Lord's Prayer. (pp 120 & 195) The author's comment that the Theotokos suffered the pains of childbirth will puzzle and surprise those who have read in other places that the birth was without pains. There are many places in the book where the author might be presenting insightful interpretations of the Gospels but they are difficult to assess without a better knowledge of his sources.

How may we conclude? If we treat the book solely as a work of fiction, we have a readable, lively book. If we treat it as something more than that, such as a work of history or devotion, we have the problem of determining where fiction ends and history or devotion begins. This leaves us troubled about the book, its author's motives and its value for readers.

About the reviewer. Dn. Stephen Sharman is a deacon at St. Nicholas parish in Narol, Manitoba. He received his PhD from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in 2013. The title of his dissertation was *Visions of Light in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*.