



Jacobus de Voragine

The Golden Legend

Readings on the Saints

TRANSLATED BY

William Granger Ryan

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Eamon Duffy



Princeton University Press

PRINCETON AND OXFORD



Copyright © 1993 by Princeton University Press
Introduction to the 2012 edition
copyright © 2012 by Princeton University Press
Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street,
Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press,
6 Oxford Street, Woodstock,
Oxfordshire OX20 1TW
press.princeton.edu

Cover illustration: Menabuoi, Giusto de (fl. 1349–1390).
Ceiling frescoes in the
Baptistry of the Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary,
Padua, Italy. Photo courtesy of Scala/Art
Resource, NY.

All Rights Reserved

First printing, 1993
First paperback printing, in two volumes, 1995
First single-volume paperback edition,
with an introduction by Eamon Duffy, 2012

Library of Congress Control Number 2011939496
ISBN 978-0-691-15407-7

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

This book has been composed in Adobe Bembo

Designed by Jan Lilly

Printed on acid-free paper. ∞

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2



56. *Saint Mary of Egypt*

Mary the Egyptian, who is called the Sinner, led a most austere life in the desert for forty-seven years, beginning about the year of the Lord 270 in the time of Claudius. A priest named Zozimus crossed the Jordan and began to wander through the broad forest, hoping to find some holy father there, and saw a figure walking about naked, the body blackened and burned by the fiery sun. It was Mary the Egyptian. She immediately took flight, and Zozimus ran after her as fast as he could. She said to him: "Father Zozimus, why are you pursuing me? Forgive me, I cannot face you because I am a woman and naked, but lend me your mantle so that I may see you without being ashamed." Astonished at being called by name, he gave her his mantle and prostrated himself on the ground, asking her to bless him. "It behooves you, father," she said, "to give the blessing, since you are adorned with the dignity of priesthood." When he heard that she knew both his name and his office, he marveled still more and urgently besought her to bless him. Then she said: "Blessed be God, the redeemer of our souls!" She extended her hands in prayer, and he saw her lifted some feet above the earth. The old man began to suspect that this might be a spirit pretending to pray. "May God forgive you," she said, "for thinking that I, a sinful woman, might be an unclean spirit."

Now Zozimus adjured her in God's name to tell him about herself. Her answer was: "Excuse me, father, because if I tell you who and what I am, you will flee as if frightened by a serpent, your ears will be contaminated by my words, the air will be polluted with filth."

The old man forcefully insisted nonetheless, so she began: "I was born in Egypt, brother, and went to Alexandria when I was twelve years old. There, for seventeen years, I plied my trade as a public woman and never refused my body to anyone. But there came a time when some people of that region were going up to Jerusalem to pay homage to the holy cross, and I asked the sailors to allow me to go with them. When they asked me for my fare, I said: 'Brothers, I have no other fare, but take my body in payment for the passage.' So they took me aboard and I paid my fare with my body.

"I arrived at Jerusalem and went to the church with the others to worship the holy cross, but suddenly, by an invisible force, I was pushed back from the door and not allowed to enter. Again and again I got to the threshold of the entrance and suffered the pain of being repulsed, while the others went in freely and encountered no obstacle. Then I came to myself and realized that this was happening to me because of my dreadful crimes. I began to beat my breast, I shed

bitter tears and sighed from the bottom of my heart. Then, looking up, I saw there an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I began to pray tearfully to her, asking her to obtain pardon for my sins and to let me go in and worship the holy cross, promising that I would renounce the world and thenceforth live chastely. Having offered this prayer and putting my trust in the name of the Blessed Virgin, I went again to the door of the church and entered without difficulty.

“When I had worshiped the cross with the utmost devotion, someone gave me three coins with which I bought three loaves of bread, and I heard a voice saying to me: ‘If you go across the Jordan, you will be saved.’ I therefore crossed the Jordan and came into this desert, where I have stayed for forty-seven years without seeing a single human being. The loaves I had brought with me turned hard as stone, but they have sufficed me for food all these years. My clothes fell to pieces in time. For seventeen years I was troubled by temptations of the flesh, but now by the grace of God I have conquered them all. There now, I have told you my whole story, and I beseech you to pray God for me.”

The priest knelt and blessed the Lord in his handmaid. She said: “I beg you to come back to the Jordan on the day of the Lord’s Supper and to bring with you the Body of the Lord, and I will meet you there and receive the sacred Body from your hand, because since the day I came here I have not received the communion of the Lord.” The old man returned to his monastery, and the following year, when Holy Thursday was drawing near, he took the sacred Host and went to the bank of the Jordan. He saw the woman standing on the other bank, and she made the sign of the cross over the river and walked across the water. Marveling at this, the priest prostrated himself at her feet. She said: “Do not do that! You have the sacrament of the Lord on your person and you shine with the dignity of priesthood. But I pray you, father, that you may deign to come again to me next year.” Then, once again making the sign of the cross over Jordan waters, she went over and returned to the solitude of the desert.

The father went back to his monastery and a year later sought the place where he had first spoken to the woman. He came to the place and found her lying there dead. He began to weep and did not dare to touch her, saying to himself: “I wish I could bury the saint’s body, but I fear this might displease her.” As he was thinking about this, he noticed something written in the sand beside her head, and read: “Zozimus, bury Mary’s little body, return her dust to the earth, and pray for me to the Lord, at whose command I left this world on the second day of April.” Thus the old man knew for certain that she had reached the end of her days immediately after receiving the Lord’s sacrament and returning to the desert, and that she had crossed this expanse of desert in one hour and migrated to God, whereas it took him thirty days to cover the same distance.

Zozimus tried to dig a grave but could not. Then he saw a lion meekly coming toward him and said to the lion: “This holy woman commanded me to bury her body here, but I am old and cannot dig, and anyway I have no shovel. Therefore you do the digging and we will be able to bury this holy body.” The

lion began to dig and prepared a suitable grave, and when that was finished went away like a gentle lamb, while the old man made his way back to his monastery, glorifying God.



57. *Saint Ambrose*

The name Ambrose comes from *ambra*, amber, which is a fragrant, precious substance. Ambrose was precious to the Church and spread a pleasing fragrance both in his speech and in his actions. Or Ambrose is derived from *ambra* and *syos*, which means God, he being, as it were, the amber of God, because through him God diffused fragrance everywhere, as amber does; for Ambrose was and is the good odor of Christ in every place. Or the name comes from *ambor*, which means father of light, and *sior*, small, because he was a father in begetting many spiritual children; he was luminous in his expounding of Holy Scripture; and he was small in the humble way he dealt with others. Moreover, in the *Glossary* we find *ambrosia*, the food of angels, and *ambrosium*, the heavenly honeycomb; for Ambrose was a heavenly perfume by the fragrance of his renown, a supernal flavor due to his contemplative prayer, a celestial honeycomb by the sweetness of his exposition of the Scriptures, a food for angels in his glorious fruitfulness.

Paulinus, bishop of Nola, wrote the saint's life and gave it to Saint Augustine.

Ambrose, son of Ambrose the prefect of Rome, lay asleep in his cradle in the atrium of the palace when all of a sudden a swarm of bees flew in and covered his face and mouth so completely that the bees seemed to be moving in and out of their hive. Then they soared upward to such a height that the human eye could barely follow them. Witnessing this, the infant's father was astonished, and said: "If this child lives, something great will come of him." Later on, when Ambrose, now an adolescent, saw his mother and his sister, a professed virgin, kissing the hands of priests, he playfully offered his right hand to his sister, saying that she might well do the same for him.¹ She regarded this as coming from one too young to know what he was talking about, and refused.

Ambrose made his studies in Rome and pleaded cases in the courts with such eloquence that the emperor Valentinian appointed him to govern the province

¹ Jacobus omits Paulinus's explanatory clause, ". . . if she kept in mind that he was to be a bishop."