THE DEATH OF THE VIRGIN MARY ACCORDING TO ST. JOHN DAMASCENE

LA MUERTE DE LA VIRGEN MARÍA SEGÚN SAN JUAN DAMASCENO

José María Salvador-González
Complutense University of Madrid
jmsalvad@ucm.es

Abstract This article1 seeks to highlight the doctrine of St. John Damascene about the Death and Assumption of the Virgin Mary. To expose his thoughts as completely as possible, we analyze in detail three homilies that this syrian author produced on these topics. We can see in them that the Damascene, even assuming many elements from the Jerosolimitan oral tradition and certain apocryphal writings, adduces some very original theological arguments to try to demonstrate the Assumption of Mary in body and soul to heaven.

Keywords: Virgin Mary; Koimesis; Assumption; Mariology; Damascene.

Resumen: Este artículo busca poner en luz la doctrina de San Juan Damasceno sobre la muerte y la Asunción de la Virgen María. Para exponer su pensamiento lo más completamente posible, analizamos en detalle tres homilías que este autor sirvió produjo sobre esos temas. En ellas apreciamos que el Damasceno, aun asumiendo muchos elementos procedentes de la tradición oral jerosolimitana y de ciertos escritos apócrifos, aduce algunos argumentos teológicos muy originales para intentar demostrar la asunción de María en cuerpo y alma al cielo.

Palabras clave: Virgen María; Koimesis; Asunción; Mariología; Damasceno.

Introduction: In tune with the apocryphal tradition

Priest, monk and influential theologian, considered one of the last Fathers of the Greek-Eastern Church, St. John Damascene, also known as John of Damascus (c. 650-ante 753),2 was the most staunch defender of the cult of images during the bitter debates that worsened in the Byzantine Empire between iconodules and

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1 Inserted within the works that I carry out in my research group CAPIRE “Collective for the Multidisciplinary Analysis of European Religious Iconography”, attached to the Complutense University of Madrid, this article greatly expands and deepens the essential content that I developed in a paper presented at the 1 International Congress of Social History, held at the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico (UAEM), in Toluca, Mexico, from February 21 to 23, 2007. This Congress did not publish its Proceedings.

iconoclasts, especially on the occasion of the iconoclast repression promoted by the emperors Leo III the Isaurian and Constantine V.\(^3\)

As a partial sample of the extensive and heterogeneous theological doctrine of the Damascene, we will now analyze his approach to the Death or Dormition (\textit{Koimesis}) of the Virgin Mary,\(^4\) as exposed by him in three homilies,\(^5\) which he pronounced in the Garden of Gethsemane, on the Mount of the Olives of Jerusalem,\(^6\) where, according to an ancestral tradition, Mary was buried.\(^7\) In these three homilies,\(^8\) that will serve as a solid and unquestionable doctrinal foundation for the

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\(^3\) The bibliography generated by the personality and doctrinal work of St. John Damascene is immense, and it is not possible here to even try to offer a minimum part of it. Only by way of example, the following studies can be consulted: Daniel J. Sahas, \textit{John of Damascus on Islam}, Leiden: Brill, 1972; Andrew Louth, \textit{St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology}, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; and Daniel J. Janosik, \textit{John of Damascus: First Apologist to the Muslims}, Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2016.


\(^5\) Those three homilies were collected by Jacques-Paul Migne in volume 96 of his \textit{Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca}, under the titles: \textit{Joannes Damascenus, Homilia I in Dormitionem B. V. Mariae}. PG 96, 699-722; \textit{Homilia II in Dormitionem B. V. Mariae}. PG 96, 722-754; and \textit{Homilia III in Dormitionem B. V. Mariae}. PG 96, 754-762.


\(^7\) According to Pierre Voulet, the saint of Damascus pronounced those three homilies on the same day August 15, date that, since the fifth century, had been set as the feast of Death or “Memory” of the Virgin, before being, from the Next century, designated as the feast of the Dormition. (Pierre Voulet, \textit{Introduction}, in: Pierre Voulet, \textit{S. Jean Damascène, Homélies sur la Nativité et la Dormition}, Op. Cit., p. 9).

\(^8\) Because I am using the French translation of those sermons of St. John Damascene, in the subsequent notes of this study I will cite those three homilies as follows: after the name of its author (Damascène), the title of the corresponding homily appears, followed by the Arabic number, indicative of the epigraph in which the quotation is inserted, and, finally, the number of page(s) of Voulet’s book in which said quotation appears.
Byzantine iconography of the Marian *Koimesis*, the master of Damascus develops a complex rhetorical dissertation, conceived in order to “legitimize” certain early apocryphal writings and a presumed oral tradition from Jerusalem through some biblical and theological arguments.9

According to these anonymous accounts, Mary, shortly after being buried in Jerusalem, rose again by divine will and ascended to heaven in body and soul.10 This oral, anonymous and apocryphal tradition will constitute the referential basis – founded on spontaneous beliefs and popular devotion of Christianity of the first centuries— on which the teachers of Christian doctrine will base their arguments throughout history on behalf of the assertion of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in body and soul to heaven,11 an assertion that in 1950 Pope Pius XII will proclaim as an official dogma of the Catholic Church.12

Now, to better understand the position of the Damascene on this decisive Marian theme, we will order his fragmentary and chaotic discourse around three fundamental and complementary axes: 1) the death of Mary; 2) her burial in the Garden of Olives; 3) her resurrection and assumption in body and soul to heaven.

1.1. Mary’s death

As the original foundation of his approach in this regard, John of Damascus unrestrictedly accepts an apocryphal Jerosolimitan oral tradition, assuming the account offered by Juvenal, archbishop of Jerusalem, to the Byzantine empress

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9 That oral tradition and those apocryphal writings, designated as *Transitus Mariae*, are documented in the fourth century, before being confirmed in multiple texts a century later, and directly related to the apocryphal Gospels.

10 As Pierre Voulet (1961, p. 28) points out, the Feast of the Dormition, Translation, Transit or Assumption of the Virgin Mary was celebrated on August 15 in the East, replacing with these denominations the feast of the “Memory” of the Virgin (in memory of her death), celebrated that same day. According to Voulet, the indecision produced between these two meanings (“death-sleep” and “assumption”) led Emperor Mauritius to set, at the end of the 6th century, the aforementioned date of August 15 as the feast of the Dormition of Mary. (Ibidem.).


12 In the field of literature in Spanish, this important topic has been brilliantly studied—based on patristic sources and doctrinal arguments—by José María Bover in his pioneering book *La Asunción de María. Tratado teológico y antología de textos*, Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1947. 452 p.
Pulcheria, wife of Emperor Marcian, when she came to that city looking for the body of the Virgin Mary for taking it to Constantinople. Juvenal’s testimony—which the Damascene subscribes letterally—refers to the following fundamental facts: despite the silence of the Gospels about the circumstances of Mary’s death, it is told from immemorial time that, when she was going to die, the apostles, scattered throughout distant places on the planet, were miraculously moved over clouds through the air, and gathered around the bed of the dying Virgin in Jerusalem, where they were joined by prophets and saints; then, after numerous angels, singing heavenly songs, appeared to them next to the dying one, she gave her soul into the hands of Christ himself, who came down from heaven to receive it; the corpse of Mary was then transferred in a coffin and buried, between songs of angels and apostles, in a magnificent monument in the garden of Gethsemane, on the Mount of Olives; when the angels’ songs ceased on the third day, the apostles opened the coffin so that his colleague Thomas, the only one absent during the funeral and who had just come from distant lands, could venerate the body of the Mother of Jesus; after finding the sarcophagus empty, where only the funeral garments remained, oozing with ineffable fragrances, the apostles deduced that God had resurrected the immaculate body of the Virgin, granting her incorruptibility, and had taken it to heaven without waiting for the universal resurrection in the Last Judgment.

13 The Damascene expresses that this way: “Those [the apostles] who were scattered throughout the Earth for their mission as fishers of men [...] are here that by a divine order the cloud carried them, in the manner of a net, toward Jerusalem, squeezed them and gathered them, like eagles, from the ends of the earth.” (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 6, p. 139).
14 “Taking the floor, Juvenal replied: ’In the Holy Scripture inspired by God, what happened in the death of Saint Theotokos Mary is not told, but we rely on an ancient and very true tradition that at the time of his glorious i, all the holy apostles, who traveled the earth for the salvation of the nations, were gathered in an instant through the air in Jerusalem. When they were close to her, angels appeared to them in a vision, and a divine concert of the superior powers was heard. And so, in a divine and heavenly glory, the Virgin gave her holy soul in the hands of God in an ineffable way’.” (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 18, p. 171-173).
15 The archbishop Juvenal continues his story before Empress Pulcheria: “As for her body, a receptacle of divinity, it was transported and buried, in the midst of songs of angels and apostles, and deposited in a coffin in Gethsemane, where for three days the singing of the angelic choirs persevered relentlessly. After the third day, those songs having ceased, the attending apostles opened the coffin at the request of Thomas, who was the only one who had been away from them, and who, on the third day, wanted to venerate the body that had brought God. But they couldn’t find out in any way her body worthy of all praise; they found only the funeral garments put there, from which an ineffable perfume emanated that penetrated them, and they closed the coffin. Overwhelmed by admiration before the mysterious prodigy, here is the only thing they could conclude: the one who in his own
surprising discovery, the emperors Marcian and Pulcheria asked the archbishop Juvenal to send them, sealed, the Virgin’s coffin with her fragrant dresses, which they deposited in the sanctuary of the great church of St. Mary of Blachernae in Constantinople.  

After transcribing the legendary testimony of Juvenal, St. John of Damascus proceeds to demonstrate the need for the death of Mary. In his opinion, the Virgin, like her Son Jesus, really needed to die “according to the corruptible flesh”, in order to achieve incorruptibility, so that with her death Death was defeated and it became a source of resurrection. Mary, who had given human life to God the Son in her womb, was to return her body to the earth, from which it was formed, to ascend to heaven, after being resurrected, incorrupt and incorruptible. Thus, assuming the centuries-old Eastern tradition, the Damascene assures that the ultimate trance of Mary is not properly a death, but rather a sleep, a transitus or, better, a triumphal entry into the house of God the Father.

Our author states that, at the time of Mary’s death, while the demons trembled, a large army of angels in their different hierarchies escorted her with person deigned to incarnate in her and become a man, God the Word, the Lord of glory, and who kept her mother’s virginity intact after his birth, had still wanted, after his departure from below, to honor his virgin and immaculate body with the privilege of incorruptibility; and with a translation prior to the common and universal resurrection.” (Ibidem.).

16 “Faced with this response, the sovereigns asked the archbishop Juvenal to send them, duly sealed, that holy coffin with the funeral garments of the glorious and most holy Mother of God, who were within it. Having received it, they deposited it in the sanctuary erected in the Blachernae in honor of the Holy Mother of God.” (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 18, p. 175).

17 “Oh! How is the source of life led to life through death? […] It is necessary, in effect, to depose what is mortal to cover incorruptibility, for the Lord of nature himself has not refused the experience of death. For he dies according to the flesh, and by his death destroys death, confers incorruptibility to corruption, and makes death a source of resurrection. Oh! this holy soul, at the moment it leaves the abode that had welcomed God, how the Creator of the world receives it with his own hands, and what legitimate honor he pays it! ” (Damascène, Première homilie sur la Dormition, 10, p. 107-109).

18 “So, she is dead, the source of life, the Mother of my Lord! Yes, it was necessary for the being formed of the earth to return to the earth, and by this way it ascended to heaven, receiving from the earth, after having delivered its body, the gift of a perfectly pure life. It was necessary that like gold, once the terrestrial and opaque weight of mortality was rejected, the flesh, made incorruptible and pure in the crucible of death, clad in the splendor of incorruption, rose from the grave.” (Damascène, Troisième homilie sur la Dormition, 3, p. 187).

19 “Thus, I will not say of your holy departure that it is a death, but a sleep, or a transit, or more properly an entry into the dwelling place of God. Leaving the domain of the body, you enter a better condition. ” (Damascène, Première homilie sur la Dormition, 10, p. 111). Y en otro pasaje anterior asienta: “su domición fue gloriosa, verdaderamente sagrada y digna de una religiosa alabanza” (Damascène, Première homilie sur la Dormition, 3, p. 87).

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reverence, looking at her with respect and love under the glow of the Holy Spirit.\textsuperscript{20}

All the angelic hierarchies were responsible for moving in triumph to Mary and raising her to heaven:

The angels, with the archangels, have transported you together. On your way out the impure spirits that pollute the air have trembled. [...] Then the Powers escort you, the Principalities bless you, the Thrones sing to you, the Cherubim, stupefied, rejoice, the Seraphim glorify whom, by nature and in truth, is the mother of their own Lord.\textsuperscript{21}

Always according to the story of Juvenal, together with the angels, also all the apostles, who come solicitously to give the last care to the Mother of Jesus, attended the Virgin in her last trance and in her funerals.\textsuperscript{22} Among them, John, the favorite disciple, stands out, who, because of his status as a virgin, best serves the perpetually Virgin Mother of God,\textsuperscript{23} while Mary is also escorted by the main patriarchs and the prophets who foretold her divine motherhood.\textsuperscript{24} According to the apocryphal tradition subsumed by the archbishop Juvenal and shared by the Damascene, also St. Timotheus, first bishop of Ephesus, Dionysius Areopagite and Hierotheus attended the death of the Virgin together with the apostles.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{20}“but the assembly of angels itself was not excluded. [...] They were next to her; the light of the Spirit shone, and its glowing rays illuminated them, while, with respect and fear, motionless in an attitude of love, they fixed on her the pure gaze of their spirit.” (Damascène, \textit{Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition}, 6, p. 141). And at another time he points out: "The armies of the angels saw you without a doubt and awaited your departure from the human lives." (Damascène, \textit{Première homilie sur la Dormition}, 10, p. 109).

\textsuperscript{21}Ibidem. p. 111.

\textsuperscript{22}“Behold, in Zion the ark of the Lord God of armies, and bodily the Apostles have come to take care of her; they give the last care to the body that was the principle of life and receptacle of God. Immaterially and invisibly, the angels surround it with fear, assisting as servants the Mother of his Master.” (Damascène, \textit{Troisième homilie sur la Dormition}, 4, p. 191-193). He had already proclaimed before: "What escorts of angels make shine the sleep of the Mother that was the beginning of life! With what divine words the Apostles beatify the funerals of the body that received God!" (Damascène, \textit{Première homilie sur la Dormition}, 4, p. 91).

\textsuperscript{23}“Thus the prophets celebrate you, the angels submit to you, the apostles are at your service; the disciple who remained virgin and the oracle of God, serves you, the ever-Virgin and the Mother of God.” (Damascène, \textit{Première homilie sur la Dormition}, 9, p. 107).

\textsuperscript{24}“It was also fitting that the main righteous elders and prophets should join her escort, to take part in this sacred guard, they, who had foretold that the Divine Word should be born of this woman for our sake, and should be incarnated for the love of men.” (Damascène, \textit{Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition}, 4, p. 141).

\textsuperscript{25}“The Apostles, the holy apostle Timothy, first bishop of Ephesus, and Dionysius Areopagite, were present, as the great Dionysius himself testifies, in his speeches addressed to the apostle Timothy,
synthesizes the heavenly courtship that accompanies Mary in her supernatural transit:

On this day when you went to your Son, the angels, the souls of the righteous, of the patriarchs, of the prophets surrounded you with honor; the apostles escorted you, with the immense crowd of the divinely inspired Fathers; from the ends of the earth, by order of God, they were gathered, transported like on a cloud to this divine and holy Jerusalem, and to you, who were the source of the Lord’s body, the beginning of life, they were directing sacred hymns in a totally divine trance.26

And, in another passage of his second sermon on the Dormition of Mary, John of Damascus further specifies the fabulous scene, with significant details, many of which will be later collected by the iconography of the Byzantine Koimesis:

I imagine the broken and moved elements, voices, rumors, rumbles, and, as it is convenient, the hymns of the angels that precede, accompany and follow. Some fulfilled their duty and escorted the irreproachable and all holy soul, and accompanied it on his ascent to heaven, to the royal throne, where they led the Queen, while others stood in a circle around her divine and sacred body, and with their angelic songs they celebrated the Mother of God. As for those who stayed very close to that holy and sacred body, with fear and ardent love, with tears of joy, they surrounded that divine and very happy tabernacle, they hugged it, they kissed all its members, they touched that body, filled with its holy and blessing contact. Then the diseases fled, the bands of demons were defeated, expelled everywhere towards the underground dwellings.27

According to the Eastern fable accepted by the Damascene, God himself assumes an obvious role in the final moments of the Virgin’s life, a role that our author justifies for two complementary reasons: first because God the Father could not be absent there, because of his necessary omnipresence;28 and also, with greater reason, because God the Son could not refrain from taking care, with infinite filial

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26 Damascène, Première homilie sur la Dormition, 9, p. 107.
27 Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 11, p. 151.
28 “The Lord himself is there, he, the omnipresent, he, who fills everything, that embraces the universe, and who is nowhere, for the universe is in him, as in the cause that created it and that contains it.” (Damascène, Troisième homilie sur la Dormition, 4, p. 191-193).
piety, of his mother in her last trance, and from receiving in his hands her soul, especially when the privilege that any just has to be welcomed by God in heaven corresponds with even greater justice to the Mother of God herself.\textsuperscript{29}

1.2. The burial of the Virgin in the Garden of Olives in Gethsemane

Always according to the apocryphal tradition accepted by John of Damascus, the body of Mary was carried on the shoulders by the apostles in the midst of a procession of saints and faithful present in Jerusalem, and then was buried in a monument in the Garden of Olives in Gethsemane, where he rose on the third day.\textsuperscript{30} The funeral procession was escorted by cohorts of angels, who, inspired by the Holy Spirit, intoned with the apostles heavenly hymns and played musical instruments,\textsuperscript{31} until they prepared the grave and embalmed the body with fragrant perfumes.\textsuperscript{32} Dead and buried, the body of the Virgin, far from being corrupted, was blessed with incorruptibility, by virtue of her immaculate virginity and the unique privilege of being the Mother of God; and, instead of staying on Earth, her virgin body was raised into heaven. There, present in body and soul, Mary presides with her divine Son as Queen of Heaven. For this reason, the holy theologian of Damascus proclaims, exultant: "Let the earth rejoice" to receive the body, and that the air tremble for the ascension of the spirit! May the breezes blow, soft as dew and full of grace! May all creation celebrate the rise of the Mother of God [...]!\textsuperscript{33}

To reinforce his argument, St. John Damascene points out that Mary’s burial

\textsuperscript{29} “Because, if it is true, according to this divine scripture, that ‘the souls of the righteous are in the hands of the Lord,’ how is she, with even greater reason, not would give her soul to the hands of her Son and her God?” (Damascène, \textit{Première homilie sur la Dormition}, 4, p. 91).

\textsuperscript{30} “Then the body is taken to the most holy place of Gethsemane. There are still kisses and hugs, even praises and sacred hymns, invocations and tears; the sweat of anguish and pain expands. And so the most holy body is placed in the glorious and magnificent monument. From there, after three days, it is taken on high to the heavenly abodes.” (Damascène, \textit{Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition}, 14, p. 157).

\textsuperscript{31} “Here is why your holy and spotless body was delivered to its holy grave. The angels preceded it, surrounded it in a circle, followed it: what did they not do to serve the mother of their Lord with dignity? The Apostles and the Church in their fullness sang divine hymns and played instruments to the breath of the Spirit.” (Damascène, \textit{Première homilie sur la Dormition}, 12, p. 115-117).

\textsuperscript{32} “May the angels precede the transit of the divine abode and prepare the grave; may the radiance of the Spirit decorate it. Prepare scents to embalm all immaculate body and all full of a delicious perfume. Let a pure wave come, and it collect the blessing at the spotless source of the blessing.” (Damascène, \textit{Troisième homilie sur la Dormition}, 4, p. 193).

\textsuperscript{33} Ibidem.
was foreshadowed in the Old Testament in several ways. He compares, for example, the Virgin with the Jewish Ark of the Covenant, because, just as it contained within her the virtual presence of God (her revealed word), so Mary is the new and most genuine divine Ark, for having contained in his womb to God himself in real presence; and, just as in the past the ancient Ark of the Covenant was shouldered by the Jewish priests in the midst of their people, crossing the Jordan to reach the Promised Land, thus the body of the Virgin, a new and genuine Ark of present God, is transported on the shoulders by the apostles to the grave, to introduce it into the Promised Heaven, the heavenly Jerusalem. Our theologian compares even the burial of the body of Mary and the entrance of her soul into heaven with the definitive transfer of the Ark of the Covenant to the interior of the temple newly built by Solomon in Jerusalem, in whose sancta sanctorum, by order of this king, the priests introduced it under the wings of the cherubs: this is also the case with the death of Mary, when, God himself –the genuine Solomon, King of Kings and the true builder of the entire Universe— moves the divine Ark-body of his mother on the shoulders of the apostles to the grave, while her soul is carried by angels directly to heaven.

Therefore, in a passage from his second homily on the Dormition of the Virgin, the Damascene asserts:

Through the angels, he introduces the soul in the Holy of Holies, in the true and celestial archetypes, on the wings of the animals of quadruple figure, and establishes it near his own throne, inside the veil, in which Christ himself, as a precursor, has penetrated bodily. As for the body, it is carried in procession, while the King of kings covers it with the glow of his invisible divinity, while the entire assembly of the saints walks before it, emits holy acclamations and offers "a sacrifice of praise", until the moment it is introduced into

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34 “The Apostles together carried you on their backs, to you, the true ark, as in the past the priests transported the figurative ark, and deposited you in the grave: then, through it, as through another Jordan, they made you to reach the true promised Land, I mean, to 'the heavenly Jerusalem'.” (Damascène, Première homilie sur la Dormition, 12, p. 115-117).

35 “to make the spiritual ark rest, not of the Lord's covenant, but of the person of the Word of God himself, the new Solomon, prince of peace and Lord Worker of the universe, today summoned the hypercosmic orders of the celestial spirits and the chiefs of the new covenant: the Apostles, with all the people of the saints who were in Jerusalem.” (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 12, p. 153-155).
1.3. The resurrection and assumption of Mary in body and soul to heaven

Fully subscribing to the Eastern apocryphal traditions recapitulated by the archbishop Juvenal, St. John Damascene affirms that Christ came down from heaven to receive in his hands the immaculate soul of his beloved mother, to repay her for having fathered him, nurtured and accompanied him at all times, until his death in cross and his funeral. On the other hand, Mary entrusts in the hands of her Son her immaculate soul and also her body, so that the receptacle within which he dwelt when he became incarnate is not corrupted. The Virgin also asks her Son to take her with him to live in his heavenly abode, just as he temporarily inhabited her belly like in his own fleshly abode. In those requests to her Son Jesus, Mary intercedes before him too for the believers, for whom she asks for comfort and blessings. After receiving the invitation of Christ to accompany him to heaven, the Virgin puts her soul in the hands of her divine Son, who takes her with him to heavenly paradise, to share with him the glory and power he holds as God, and make her enjoy all good and all happiness.

36 Ibidem.
37 "At that time certain events had to happen, according to those circumstances and claimed by them, it seems to me: I mean the coming of the King to his own mother, to welcome, with his divine and pure hands, her holy soul, all clear and immaculate." (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 10, p. 149).
38 "Descend, descend, O Sovereign, come to pay your mother the debt she deserves for having nourished you! Open your divine hands: receive the maternal soul you, who on the cross gave your spirit into the hands of the Father." (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 4, p. 191).
39 "And she, no doubt, then says: in your hands, my Son, I entrust my spirit. Receive my soul, which is dear to you, and that you have preserved from all sin. To you, and not to the earth, I entrust my body; keep this body in which you deigned to live healthy and safe, and from which, at birth, you preserved my virginity. Take me with you, so that wherever you are, the fruit of my entrails, I am also, to share your abode! I hasten to return to you, who descended towards me, suppressing all distance." (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 10, p. 149).
40 "As for my well-loved children, whom you wanted to call your brothers, comfort them yourself after my departure. Add the one who already they have a new blessing by imposing my hands. — And, raising her hands, you can believe she blessed the assembled attendants." (Ibidem.).
41 "Come, oh beautiful 'my beloved one', for the virgin beauty more resplendent than the sun; you have made me share your goods: come, enjoy with me what belongs to me. Come closer, oh Mother, to your Son: come closer and share the real power with Who, born of you, lived with you in poverty." (Damascène, Troisième homilie sur la Dormition, 4, p. 191).
42 "After those words, she heard a voice: Come, my blessed mother 'to my rest'. 'Get up, come, my beloved one', beautiful among women: 'well, behold, winter has passed, and the time for pruning the branches has arrived.' ¡My beloved is beautiful, and there is no defect in you.' The smell of your
By assuming the apocryphal tradition referred to by Juvenal, the Damascene accepts that Mary, three days after her royal death, her incorrupt body rose miraculously and was taken to heaven, where she will remain united to the soul of Mary for all eternity. This is what our writer says:

How then call that mystery which is fulfilled in you? A death? But if, as nature demands, your soul, all holy and blessed, is separated from your blessed and immaculate body, and, if that body is delivered to the grave according to common law, however, it does not remain in death nor is it destroyed by corruption. For the one whose virginity remained intact at birth, at the beginning of this life, the body is preserved without decomposition, and placed in a better and more divine abode, outside the clutches of death, and capable of lasting for all the infinity of the centuries.\(^{43}\)

2. An original reasoning

After having exposed the essential elements that the Damascene assumes from the oral stories and apocryphal writings then in force in the East, it is now necessary to highlight the novel arguments that our author formulates to defend his personal opinion on the subject analyzed here. In fact, far beyond his foreseeable acceptance of the Jerosolimitan oral tradition transmitted by the archbishop Juvenal, and of his consent to the essentials of certain apocryphal writings, St. John Damascene manifests a genuine originality in the approach of this Marian theme. Such originality is evident in the various arguments – based on biblical figures and theological reasoning— that he proposes to try to demonstrate the immediate resurrection of Mary and her assumption in body and soul to heaven. And, although the ascent of the soul (\textit{assumptio animae}) of the Virgin to heaven was then accepted almost unanimously, her bodily assumption (\textit{assumptio corporis}) did not yet enjoy such universal assent. Hence the decisive relevance that John Damascene’s plot explanations acquire in this topic. In his view, in fact, the anticipated resurrection and the assumption of Mary in body and soul to heaven are justified by the following reasons

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1) For being the Mother of God, symbolically figured as the bodily abode in which the divine Word became flesh. For our author it is clear that, if heaven is the abode of those who enjoy perpetual happiness, with greater reason it must be the abode of who is the source of happiness, for having been the Mother of God, and, much more, due to the need that who was the earthly tabernacle of God the Son in his incarnation immediately dwell in the heavenly tabernacle, where He resides.\footnote{“It was necessary that the one who had given asylum to the divine Word in her womb came to dwell in the tabernacles of her Son, and as the Lord had said that he should be in the measure of his own Father, it was necessary for his Mother to dwell in the palace of his Son, ‘in the house of the Lord, in the house of our God.’ Because, if there is ‘the abode of all who are in joy’, where would the cause of joy inhabit?” (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 14, p. 157-159).}

Thus, the Virgin could not be “the living city of the Lord God”, if it is not assumed in body and soul to heaven.\footnote{“the living city of the Lord God of armies is elevated to the heights, and the kings bring an invaluable present, from the temple of the Lord, the illustrious Zion, in the Jerusalem above, that who is free, who is his mother: those whom Christ established as chiefs of all the earth — the Apostles — escort the Mother of God, the perpetual Virgin.” (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 3, p. 135).}

2) For the virgin purity and the perfect holiness of Mary. For the holy theologian of Damascus it is indisputable that these excellent virtues exempt the perpetual Virgin from seeing her body corrupted after death,\footnote{“I represent her, more holy than the saints, sacred among all, venerable among all, as this sweet abode of manna, or, better and more truly, as its source, extended on a bed of rest, in the divine and celebrated city of David, in this illustrious Zion crowned with glory.” (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 4, p. 137).} which is essentially linked to sin, and guarantee her as immediate reward her immediate assumption in body and soul to heaven. Being Mary united to Jesus Christ in his fight against sin and death, her effective victory against both in her earthly life will be effective only when she is excluded from sin and corruption. God thus grants the Virgin the exclusive privilege of resurrecting before the universal resurrection, for two essential reasons: a) for having been conceived in an exceptional way (the miracle of being born of a sterile mother);\footnote{“Then God in his goodness, seeing and pitying the work of his own hand [Mankind], and wanting to save it, ended the sterility of grace, that is, of Anne, of divine thoughts: and she gave birth to a girl, like no other was born before her, nor will ever be born. And the healing of this sterility showed clearly that the sterility of the world, incapable of producing goods, was also to cease, and that the trunk of forbidden happiness was going to bear fruit.” (Damascene, Première homilie sur la Dormition, 5, p. 95-97).} b) and for having preserved her virginity both in conceiving Christ and in giving birth to him. Therefore, God safeguards the human
integrity of Mary by preserving her immaculate body from death and corruption, because the one who was granted the prerogative to receive earthly life in an extraordinary way, and the exclusive privilege of being the source of life divine, could not be defeated by Death.\textsuperscript{48}

3) \textit{For her intimate union and her indissoluble alliance with her son Jesus.} According to Saint John of Damascus, two complementary affective links made the assumption of the Virgin in body and soul to heaven possible: \textit{maternal love} and \textit{filial piety}. a) Because of her vehement maternal love, Mary wants to unite with her Son in body and soul.\textsuperscript{49} b) Because of his filial piety, Jesus wants to meet his Mother and take her with him to heaven in body and soul.\textsuperscript{50} And, because of the mystery of the incarnation of the Word and the divine motherhood of Mary, God wanted to unite effectively with the one whom he chose as his mother and took him into her womb. In this way, associated with the mystery of Christ from the beginning and until his passion, death and resurrection, it would not be understood that Mary, when she died, had to separate forever from her divine Son.

4) \textit{Because of the need to assimilate and associate herself with Jesus.} According to John of Damascus, the claim that the Virgin should also die, as her Son died, is unquestionable, but, like him, she also rose on the third day. The Damascene proclaims that, just as the body of Christ, the fruit of the virgin entrails of Mary, rose again on the third day, so the body of the latter had to leave incorrupt its grave.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48}”Because your soul, surely, has not descended ‘to hell’, but, rather, your flesh itself ‘has not seen corruption.’ Your body without blemish and very pure was not abandoned to the earth; on the contrary, you were taken to the royal abodes of heaven, you, the queen, the sovereign, the lady, the Mother of God, the true Theotokos.” (Damascène, \textit{Première homilie sur la dormition}, 12, p. 115–117).

\textsuperscript{49}After pointing out that Christ came down from heaven to receive the dying Mary’s soul in his hands, the Damascene continues: “And she, no doubt, said then: In your hands, my Son, I entrust my spirit. Receive my soul, that you love, and that you have preserved from all lack. To you, and not to the earth, I give my body. Keep safe and sound this body in which you deigned to live, and from which, at birth, you preserved virginity. Take me with you, so that wherever you are, you, the Son of my entrails, may I also be, to share your abode! I hasten to return to you, who descended towards me, suppressing all distance.” (Damascène, \textit{Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition}, 10, p. 149).

\textsuperscript{50}“How the Word of God, who mercifully deigned to become his Son, serves, with his sovereign hands, this woman, all holy and all divine, as a mother is served, and receives her sacred soul! Oh, the perfect legislator! Without being subject to the law, he fulfills the law that he himself has brought. For it is he who prescribed the children’s duty to the parents: ‘Honor, he says, your father and your mother’.” (Damascène, \textit{Première homilie sur la Dormition}, 4, p. 91).

\textsuperscript{51}“Get away, oh Sovereign, get away! It is no longer the order given to Moses: ‘Go up –and die...’ Die, rather, and then rise through this death itself! Surrender your soul in the hands of your Son, and
and, after being resurrected after three days, be promoted directly to the sancta sanctorum of heaven, to associate with Jesus, to enjoy with him the heavenly glory, and to preside, from the royal throne of her Son, as queen of the angels, the patriarchs, the saints, the prophets and the whole heaven, in the most perfect and joyful happiness.

5) Because of the need to establish herself as a link between God and men, as the ark or dwelling place of God in the midst of mankind. In the Damascene's opinion, Mary is the bond through which God ensures close contact with men, not only because Christ has incarnated in her, but because God associates her as an intercessor. Comparing her with the ark of the covenant –testimony of Yahweh's presence in the midst of his chosen people— our author conceives the Virgin as the tabernacle of God in the Church, which remains on the ground, and as guarantor of the divine covenant with mankind. That explains the insistence with which John of Damascus uses several Old Testament' stories and symbols, which foreshadow the assumption (transitus) of Mary as Mother of God: ark of the covenant, contentive of the presence of God, dwelling place of God in the middle of Israel, temple of Zion, hill of Zion, city of God and even scale of God. Among all these biblical figures, the references to the ark of the covenant stand out, in three successive moments or situations in its history: a) the ark that, carried by priests and escorted by the people of God, passes the Jordan and enters the Promised Land; b) the ark that David orders to transport on the shoulders of the priests to the city of Jerusalem; c) the ark that return to earth what is of the earth: that will also be taken with you.” (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 4, p. 191).

52 “But, in the same way that the holy and pure body, that the divine Word, through her, had united her person, rose again on the third day from the grave, she must also be torn from the grave, and the mother be associated with her son. And, as he descended towards her, so she herself, object of his love, should be transported to 'the greatest and most perfect tabernacle', 'to heaven itself.'” (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 14, p. 157-159).

53 “but you have advanced to the real throne of your Son himself, in direct vision, in happiness, and, with great and unspeakable security, you remain with him: for the angels ineffable joy, and with them for all the powers that dominate the world; for the patriarchs, endless delight; for the righteous, inexpressible joy; for the prophets, perpetual exultation.” (Damascène, Première homilie sur la Dormition, 11, p. 113).

54 “Today, the spiritual and living scale, by which the Most High descended to become visible and converse with men, has risen, through the steps of death, from earth to heaven.” (Damascène, Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition, 2, p. 181).
Solomon sends to the sanctuary of the newly built temple in Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{55} Thus the Virgin, true ark that contained the living and real God (and not merely the scroll in which her word was written), is assumed (\textit{transitus}) in body and soul, and enters the spiritual and imperishable temple of heaven.\textsuperscript{56} For this reason, in multiple rhetorical reference to the pre-announcing Old Testament’s figures of the death and assumption of the Virgin, the Damascene proclaims:

Today, from the earthly Jerusalem the living city of God is led to ”the Jerusalem from above”; the one who had conceived as her firstborn and only child the Firstborn of every creature and the only Son of the Father, comes to dwell in ”the Church of the firstborn”: the living and spiritual ark of the Lord is transported to the rest of her Son. The gates of Paradise open to welcome the producing land of God, where the tree of eternal life that has erased Eve’s disobedience and the death inflicted on Adam germinated. It is Christ, the cause of universal life, who receives the excavated cave, the unworked mountain, from which the stone that filled the earth separated without human intervention.\textsuperscript{57}

3. Two possible projections

After the synthesis of St. John Damascene’s approach to the death and assumption of the Virgin Mary to heaven, it seems reasonable to infer a couple of relevant projections:

1) Regarding the circumstances of death, burial and assumption of Mary, although it is true that the thinker of Damascus does not offer greater originality, since he fully assumes previous oral traditions and apocryphal writings, however, almost all those fanciful circumstances, as they are referred to by him, will be taken up letterally by the Byzantine iconography during subsequent centuries. Thanks to the unquestionable authority of the Damascene as a theologian and mariologist in

\textsuperscript{55} These symbolic figures of the ark, which now proclaim the \textit{Assumption} of the Virgin, are —as we hav said before— exactly the same as the Damascene used to foreshadow the \textit{burial} of Mary.

\textsuperscript{56} ”Today the holy and only Virgin is taken to the hypercosmic and celestial temple. [...] Today the sacred and living ark of the living God, which carried its Author within it, rests in the temple of the Lord, not made by human hand, and David, his ancestor and ancestor of God, exults; and the Angels direct their choirs with him, the Archangels applaud, the Virtues pay glory, the Principalities exult with him, the Dominations rejoice, the Powers are content, the Thrones are celebrating, the Cherubim sing praises, the Seraphim proclaim: ‘Glory!’ For it is not for them a weak glory to glorify the Mother of Glory.” (Damascène, \textit{Deuxième homilie sur la Dormition}, 2, p. 127).

\textsuperscript{57} Damascène, \textit{Troisième homilie sur la Dormition}, 2, p. 183.
the Eastern Church, the Byzantine artistic representations of the Koimesis usually incorporate the main fabulous details described by him, in accordance with the Jerosolimitan oral tradition and apocryphal texts, namely: Christ receiving in his hands the soul of his mother, presence of angels, apostles, patriarchs and saints around the bed of the dying Virgin, kisses and hugs to her body, attendance of bishop St. Timotheus, Dionisyus Areopagite and Hierotheus. These and other minor narrative details are evidently reflected again and again, with relative structural similarity, in the mosaics, frescoes, icons, miniatures and other Byzantine artistic expressions of the centuries after the Damascene.

2) As for the arguments to justify the assumption of Mary in body and soul to heaven, the originality of St. John Damascene is as unquestionable as decisive. In fact, by virtue of his uncontested prestige as Father of the Eastern Church, his arguments will be retaken as essential theological and patristic supports in the bull Munificentissimus Deus, with which Pope Pius XII proclaimed on November 1, 1950 the dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin.