

III. PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

THE BYZANTINE REPRESENTATION OF THE 'ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE NATIVITY OF THE THEOTOKOS' – UNDERLYING APOCRYPHAL TEXT, PATRISTIC REFLECTIONS, LITURGICAL PERSPECTIVES, THEOLOGICAL HIGHLIGHTS, AND ICONOGRAPHIC PATTERN

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ABSTRACT. The present study aims first and foremost to provide (ikon) painters with the theological content required to carry out a theoretical process of familiarisation with the basic notions that they would be recommended to take into consideration before starting to work on an ikon. In the absence of this information, a painter would find it difficult to understand the theological message of the event they are rendering in art form and therefore encounter significant hindrances in attaining the final goal of their confession of faith. Furthermore, by highlighting the way the pattern of representation of the ikon/scene has evolved and subsequently crystallised, this paper seeks to enable (ikon) painters to understand the defining elements that lie at the foundation of the Byzantine model for representing an event are, to avoid the exclusion of certain essential details from their renditions, which need to fit into the dynamism of Church Tradition. To that end, we have set out to apply these theoretical rigors to a scene from the life of the Mother of God – the announcement of her birth – to provide the reader with the opportunity to take note of the steps to follow before creating an ikon/scene.

Keywords: annunciation of birth, apocryphal, Church Fathers, hymnography, hymnographic pattern

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Introduction

The Announcement of the Nativity of the Theotokos is one of the most significant events in the history of humankind, as it marks the arrival into the world of her who would give birth to our Saviour. We have therefore found it suitable to apply to it the model through which we seek to outline the theological preparation that the (ikon) painter needs to go through before creating their piece of art. Another reason that led us to select the episode of the Announcement of the Nativity of the Theotokos is related to the underlying text that the entire narration is based on. As it is not a biblical text, but an apocryphal one, the theoretical content of the event might be treated with reluctance or suspicion by artists. However, considering that this apocryphal text has been embraced by some of the representative Fathers of our Church (St. Maximus the Confessor being of particular note), it has acquired credibility as a source. One is compelled to also mention the fact that the sources employed by painters are not limited solely to the Holy Scriptures, as they may also take inspiration from apocryphal writings, especially if the events they render (the youth of the Mother of God in particular) are not found in the pages of the sacred texts.

The methods we have resorted to in conducting this research are specific to each subsection of the study. We have capitalised on the analysis paradigms used by specialists in the fields concerned to produce brief synthetic overviews. We started from a critical edition of the *Protoevangelium of James*³ and compared its content with the information we found in the works of the Fathers who wrote accounts either of the entire life of the Mother of God or significant events in her life. The patristic texts we looked to belong to Epiphanius the Monk⁴, Saint Simeon Metaphrastes⁵, Saint Maximus the Confessor,⁶ and

³ *Descoperirea sau Protoevanghelia lui Iacob* [The Revelation or Protoevangelium of James], in *Trei vieți bizantine ale Maicii Domnului* [Three Byzantine Lives of the Mother of God], translated by Ioan I. Ică (Sibiu: Deisis, 2007), 221-235.

⁴ Epiphanius the Monk and Priest, *Cuvânt despre viața Preasfintei Născătoarei de Dumnezeu și anii ei* [On the Life of the Most-Holy Theotokos and Her Years], in *Trei vieți bizantine ale Maicii Domnului* [Three Byzantine Lives of the Mother of God], translated by Ioan I. Ică (Sibiu: Deisis, 2007), 7-26.

⁵ St. Simeon Metaphrastes, *Cuvânt despre câte s-au întâmplat de la nașterea și creșterea Preasfintei Stăpânei noastre de-Dumnezeu-Născătoarea, de la nașterea cu dumnezeiască cuviință a lui Hristos Dumnezeu nostru și până la săvârșirea ei de-viață-purtătoare, încă și despre arătarea veșmântului ei scump și cum această mare bogăție s-a făcut comoara creștinilor* [On the Events from the Birth and Upbringing of Our Most-Holy Lady Theotokos, from the Divinely Ordained Nativity of Christ Our Lord, to Her Life-Bearing Passing, as well as on the Apparition of Her Precious Garment and on How This Great Prize Became the Treasure of Christians], in *Trei vieți bizantine ale Maicii Domnului*, translated by Ioan I. Ică (Sibiu: Deisis, 2007), 27-70.

⁶ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Cânt de preamărire, slavă și laudă a Preasfintei Împărătese, Preacuratei și Preabinecuvântatei Născătoare de Dumnezeu și Pururea-Fecioară Maria, și însemnarea cu privire la viața sa neprihănită și fericită de la naștere și până la moarte* [Extolling, Glorifying and

Saint John Damascene⁷. For the section dedicated to the way the event of the announcement of the Nativity of the Theotokos is captured liturgically, we used an edition of the December Menaion⁸ that mentions the conception of the Mother of God on the ninth day of the month. The iconographic references we have identified originate from the first half of the second millennium (11th-16th century), from the main orthodox areas – Greek, Macedonian, Serbian, and Russian – and exist in the form of either mosaics or frescoes. Aside from emphasising the details present in the Byzantine pattern that has become generalised in the Christian East, we sought to identify the connections between the artistic representations and the underlying text, which, in this case, is of an apocryphal nature.

The analysis paradigm preceding the actual act of artistic creation takes inspiration from several volumes in the literature, authored by prominent specialists in the field: Daniel Rousseau⁹, Leonid Uspensky, Vladimir Lossky¹⁰, and Constantine Cavarnos¹¹. We identified the essential points in these writings that should be considered, and we organised them within a well-defined structure, outlining the theological fields that iconography deems as both sources and reference points: the biblical / inter-testament / apocryphal one; the patristic one, the liturgical one, and the dogmatic one. These fields of reference, followed by a section dedicated to the manner of artistic representation of the event, make up the main components of the study: the underlying apocryphal text, patristic reflections, liturgical perspectives, and theological highlights.

1. The Underlying Apocryphal Text

The Nativity of the Mother of God is not mentioned in the texts of the canonical Gospels. The accounts regarding the Holy Virgin begin with the event of the Annunciation. However, there is one apocryphal writing from the early Church, dating from the first part of the 2nd century, which records several moments in the childhood and youth of the Holy Mother. The *Protoevangelium*

Praising Hymn of the Most-Holy Pure Blessed Empress, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary and Notes on Her Chaste and Blissful Life from Birth till Death], in *Trei vieți bizantine ale Maicii Domnului*, translated by Ioan I. Ică (Sibiu: Deisis, 2007), 79-212.

⁷ St. John Damascene, *Despre Sfânta Născătoare de Dumnezeu* [On the Holy Theotokos], in *Trei vieți bizantine ale Maicii Domnului*, translated by Ioan I. Ică (Sibiu: Deisis, 2007), 262-266.

⁸ *Mineiul pe Decembrie* [The Menaion for December] (Bucharest: Tipografia cărților bisericești, 1992).

⁹ Daniel Rousseau, *Icoana – lumina feței Tale* [The Ikon – the Light of the Face], translated by Măriuca Alexandrescu (Bucharest: Sofia, 2004).

¹⁰ Leonid Uspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *Călăuziri în lumea icoanei* [Guidance through the World of the Ikon], translated by Anca Popescu (Bucharest: Sofia, 2003).

¹¹ Constantine Cavarnos, *Ghid de iconografie bizantină* [Byzantine Iconography Guide], translated by Anca Popescu (Bucharest: Sofia, 2005).

of James mentions the events preceding the birth of the Mother of God. This source would be embraced by Church Tradition and subsequently, become the main text to lie at the foundation of four feasts dedicated to the Mother of God (the Conception – 9th December; the Nativity – 8th September; the Entrance into the Temple – 21st November; the Dormition – 15th August)¹².

Her parents, Joachim and Anna, were devout people, who constantly took part in the ordinances at the Temple of Jerusalem. Joachim would bring a double gift each time, to thank God for the blessings they had received. However, they were elderly and had no children. When Joachim's gift is rejected by the temple due to his not having a 'begotten issue in Israel', he is aggrieved and retires into the wilderness to fast for 40 days. Remembering that Abraham the patriarch was granted a child in his old age, Joachim prays to the Lord to bless him with one as well. His wife, Anna, herself filled with sorrow at her barren womb, joins her husband in his cry: 'O God of my fathers, bless me and regard my prayer, as you blessed the womb of Sarah, and gave her a son, Isaac.'¹³ Her sorrow turns to joy as soon as the angel of the Lord brings her news that: 'the Lord has heard your prayer; you will conceive and bring forth, and your progeny shall be spoken of in all the world'¹⁴. Anna promises the angel that, be the child a son or a daughter, she will devote it to the Lord. Joachim, too, is informed by an angel that his wife has become pregnant and will give birth to a child. He is joyful and brings many offerings to the Lord at the temple of Jerusalem, then returns home. Anna comes out to meet him, embraces him and exclaims: 'Now I know that the Lord hath greatly blessed me. For behold, I who was as a widow am no longer a widow, and I who was barren shall conceive!'¹⁵.

2. Patristic Reflections

Epiphanius the Monk and Priest also provide a few details regarding the parents of the Holy Mother. Anna was the daughter of Matham, a priest from Bethlehem, while Joachim was the son of Panther and the brother of Jacob, the father of Joseph. Thus, Joseph's father and the Virgin Mary's were brothers.

¹² Ioan Ică, *Viețile Maicii Domnului – sinteze narative ale tradițiilor mariologice ale Bisericii* [The Lives of the Mother of God – Narrative Syntheses of the Church's Mariological Traditions], in *Trei vieți bizantine ale Maicii Domnului*, translated by Ioan I. Ică (Sibiu: Deisis, 2007), 270.

¹³ *Protoevanghelia lui Iacob* [The Protoevangelium of James], 222. T.N.: The English version of the citations from the Protoevangelium of James in this paper have mostly been extracted from the Internet Archive

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080605060200/http://ministries.tliquest.net/theology/apocryphas/nt/protevan.htm>.

¹⁴ *Protoevanghelia lui Iacob*, 223.

¹⁵ *Protoevanghelia lui Iacob*, 223.

Anna married Joachim and they lived in Galilee for fifty years without having any children. At the time of the Feast of Dedication, Joachim was in Jerusalem. While he was praying in the temple, he heard a voice from the sky tell him that he would have a child and that he would be praised through that child. Following that event, Joachim returned home, and Anna conceived a child, whom she named Mariam, after her elder sister. This miracle brought joy to all her relatives¹⁶.

Saint Simeon Metaphrastes records several details regarding the events preceding the birth of the Mother of God, which he borrowed from a sermon by Saint Gregory of Nyssa (*In Diem Natalem Christi*, in PG 46, 1137D-1141B). The content of this writing mentions that a 'hidden history' (the *Protoevangelium of James*) suggests that Joachim was one of the most rigorous followers of the Law, a man of good repute in Israel. Saint Gregory's account focuses on Anna, the mother of the Holy Mother, who is thought to resemble Anna, the mother of Samuel. Similarly, to the latter, the former went to the temple and prayed to God for a child, whom she promised she would devote to the Lord, should she be given one. Anna received a divine sign that her prayer had been heard in due time, she gave birth to a baby girl, whom she named Mary, thus showing the grace that God had bestowed upon her¹⁷.

Saint Maximus the Confessor states that Joachim and Anna were respected by the community, as they were perceived as descendants of the royal family of David. He further mentions that the tribe of Judah and that of Levi became intertwined through marriages. Thus, Saint Maximus also emphasises the sacerdotal quality of some of David's descendants: 'The blessed Anna was a chosen branch of the same house, which foretold that the King who was to be born of their child would be a Priest in the highest meaning of the word, as he would be God and man'¹⁸. Both Anna and Joachim prayed to God for children, not only to relieve them of the shame that the gossip of dishonourable people burdened them with but also for the glory of the entire world. Joachim heard a voice from the sky while he was in the temple, while Anna, having received the news from her husband, was herself delivered an announcement from God, while she was praying in their garden at home. The announcement was followed by conception and birth. The girl was named Mary, which translates as 'the enlightener'. Joachim gave a great feast, inviting all his neighbours, who were in awe at the birth and praised God¹⁹.

¹⁶ Epiphanius the Monk and Priest, *Cuvânt despre viața Preasfintei Născătoarei de Dumnezeu* [On the Life of the Most-Holy Theotokos], 9-10.

¹⁷ St. Simeon Metaphrastes, *Cuvânt despre nașterea și creșterea Preasfintei Stăpânei* [On the Nativity and Upbringing of the Most-Holy Lady], 28-9.

¹⁸ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Cânt de preamărire, slavă și laudă a Preasfintei Împărătese moarte* [Extolling, Glorifying and Praising Hymn of the Most-Holy Empress], 82.

¹⁹ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Cânt de preamărire, slavă și laudă a Preasfintei Împărătese*, 83.

Saint John Damascene is another one to confirm the genealogy mentioned by Epiphanius the Monk, stressing the intertwining of the two tribes: ‘... Thus, Jacob and Heli became brothers from the same mother: Jacob, of the tribe of Solomon, and Heli, of the tribe of Nathan. Heli, of the tribe of Nathan, died childless and Jacob, his brother, of the tribe of Solomon, took his wife and brought forth issue in the name of his brother and so, Joseph was born. Thus, Joseph is by nature the son of Jacob, who is a descendant of Solomon, but, by law, he is the son of Heli, who is a descendant of Nathan’²⁰. Similarly to Saint Simeon Metaphrastes, he, too, notes the resemblance between Anna, the mother of the Mother of God, and Anna, the mother of Samuel, showing that the Virgin Mary is the fruit of prayer and promise. Saint John implies that Joachim lived in Jerusalem, not far from the Sheep Gate ²¹.

3. Liturgical Perspectives

The event of the conception of the Mother of God is celebrated in the Orthodox Church on 9th December. The hymns of Vespers and Matins (written, among others, by St. Andrew of Crete) provide a lyrical portrayal of various moments of those mentioned in the *Protoevangelium of James* and highlight the importance for the whole of humankind of the conception of the Theotokos in the womb of her mother, Anna.

The hymns begin with the call to rejoice addressed by Anna to all the tribes of Israel: ‘The barren woman who, in manner past hope, beareth as fruit her who will give birth to God in the flesh is made radiant with joy and danceth, rejoicing and crying aloud: “Let all the tribes of Israel rejoice with me! For, lo! I have conceived in my womb and put away the disgrace of barrenness: for thus hath the Creator been well pleased, and, hearkening unto my prayer in those things which I have desired, He hath healed the pain of my heart.”’²² Anna, filled with immeasurable joy, calls upon everyone to rejoice with her who until recently had been barren. This highlights the kindness, care, and almightiness of God, who turned a mortified womb into a source of life.

The troparion of the feast places the news of the birth of the Virgin and the incarnation of God in close connection: ‘Today, the bonds of barrenness are loosed, for God, hearkening unto Joachim and Anna, doth manifestly promise

²⁰ St. John Damascene, *Despre Sfânta Născătoare de Dumnezeu* [On the Holy Theotokos], 263.

²¹ St. John Damascene, *Despre Sfânta Născătoare de Dumnezeu*, 263-4.

²² *Mineiul pe Decembrie* [The Menaion for December], 115. T.N.: English version from *Menaion, December* Tr. by Isaac Lambertsen, 2000 (<https://www.ponomar.net/maktabah/MenaionLambertsenDecember2000/1209263.html>).

them that they will, beyond all expectation, give birth to the divine Maiden, from whom the Infinite One Himself, becoming man, shall be born. And He commanded the angels to cry unto her: Rejoice, thou who art full of grace, the Lord is with thee!' ²³. The hymnographer stresses the miracle of the conception as well: Joachim and Anna, who was barren, received the news of the conception of a child, despite their physical limitations. This same context also contains a reference to the news of conception brought by another angel to the Virgin Mary in Nazareth.

The feast's kontakion focuses on the joy imparted upon the world by this conception: "Today the whole world doth celebrate Anna's conceiving, which was brought about by God; for she gave birth unto her who ineffably gave birth unto the Word.'²⁴. Even though it is said that the conception 'was brought about by God', one is not to take that to mean that it was like the conception of the Son of God. Had that been so, the conception of the Word through the descent of the Holy Spirit and the overshadowing of the Father would not have been anything new to humankind. Here, too, the hymnographer underscores the connection between the conception of the Holy Mother and the supernatural birth of the divine Logos.

The ikos traces a resemblance between this conception and two similar events in the Old Testament: "You are He Who once gave the great Isaac as a son to Sarah in deep old age by Your overshadowing and Your promise. You, o Almighty, are He Who opened the barren womb of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, Your Prophet. And now You look upon me and accept my supplications and fulfil my entreaties," cried the chaste and barren Anna with lamentation; and the Benefactor heard her plea. Wherefore, with joy, she conceived the Virgin who beyond comprehension conceived the Word of God.'²⁵. Using the text of the *Protoevangelium* and the writings of the Fathers who embraced the apocryphal text, the hymnographer associates Anna's situation with that of Sarah, the wife of Abraham the patriarch (Gn 18:10-15) and with that of Anna, the mother of the prophet Samuel (1Kgs 1). In the latter case, there is also a prayer through which Anna asked the Lord for a son in the temple. She was unable to have children, which is why her husband would bring twice as many offerings to the temple. She promised the Lord that she would devote the child to the temple, in the same way, that the mother of the Mother of God did.

²³ *Mineiul pe Decembrie*, 117. T.N.: English version from *Menaion, December* Tr. by Isaac Lambertsen, 2000

²⁴ *Mineiul pe Decembrie*, 124. T.N.: English version from *Menaion, December* Tr. by Isaac Lambertsen, 2000

²⁵ *Mineiul pe Decembrie*, 124. T.N.: English version from <https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2015/12/synaxarion-for-conception-of-saint-anna.html>

4. Theological Highlights

The apocryphal writing the *Protoevangelium of James* tends to claim that Anna became pregnant without Joachim's intimate embrace: 'For an angel of the Lord has also come down to Joachim [who was in Jerusalem, emphasis added], and said: "Joachim, Joachim! The Lord God has heard your prayer. Make haste and go from here, for behold Anna, your wife, [who was in Nazareth, emphasis added] has conceived."' ²⁶. Even though the author of this writing sought to indirectly highlight the chastity of the Mother of God, the latter was born following the physical intercourse of her parents. It is only the conception of the Son of God that is endowed with uniqueness, through the descent of the Holy Spirit and the overshadowing of the Highest.

5. Iconographic Representation

The Byzantine mosaic at Dafni Monastery (11 km from Athens, Greece), dating back to the 11th century, portrays the good news of the birth of the Mother of God, brought by angels to both Anna and Joachim. The elements presented in this mosaic are inspired by the *Protoevangelium of James*, apocryphal writing which enjoyed great credibility in early times, so that the iconography, hymnography, and patristic writings describing the life of the Mother of God draw their inspiration from it. Anna's presence in the garden, the laurel, the sparrows and their chicks nesting in it, the maidservant Judith showed standing on the threshold, Joachim's stay in the wilderness, and the angels bringing the good news are all details present in the narration of the apocryphal text. The same pattern of representation can be found in the Byzantine mosaic of the Chora Church in Constantinople (today Istanbul, Turkey), which was transformed into a mosque (Kariye) in the 16th century. This mosaic exhibits a new detail that appears in the apocryphal text: two shepherds are portrayed next to Joachim. The content of the *Protoevangelium* informs us that Joachim ordered them to prepare an impressive number of animals for sacrifice: ten unblemished female lambs for the Lord God, twelve calves for the priests and elders, and one hundred kids for the people²⁷.

The group of frescoes dedicated to the life of the Mother of God in the Cathedral of the Transfiguration in Mirozhsky (Pskov, Russia), dating from the 12th century, offers one the chance to observe the way painters have conceived the sequence of events leading to the birth of the Mother of God. The artists portrayed the main stages within small frames separated by borders. The

²⁶ *Protoevanghelia lui Iacob*, 223.

²⁷ *Protoevanghelia lui Iacob*, 223.

details provided by the apocryphal text and the models of representation that have already come to dominate the Christian East have determined painters not to stray from the Byzantine pattern that had become generalised even in the Russian area.

In Serbia, Macedonia, and Greece (including Mount Athos), the iconographic pattern has been followed faithfully. The details that differentiate the examples that we provide do not concern the defining elements of the pattern, whether it be scenes that are part of a sequence of events or individual scenes. Most frescoes portraying the two moments of the announcement of the Nativity of the Mother of God tend to establish a connection with the events preceding this scene: the priests' refusal to receive the gift that Joachim and Anna brought to the Temple of Jerusalem and the encounter/embrace of the two after receiving the good news from the angels. The fresco at the Monastery of Saint Dionysius, dating from the 16th century, is part of the first category. The scene shows the husband and wife before the priest, although the *Protoevangelium* only records the presence of Joachim before the cleric. Moreover, the author of the apocryphal text claims that Joachim said nothing to his wife about what had happened at the temple, to avoid distressing her further, but retreated into the wilderness instead, for prayer and askesis²⁸. To capture both the sorrow and the joy of the two, the painter thought it fit to represent Anna before the priest as well. This does not undermine the relationship between the underlying text and the artistic representation. The painter is granted the freedom to interpret and insert additions or modifications into the event recorded by the apocryphal text, but also by the biblical one, with the aim of highlighting the message the artist seeks to convey. Furthermore, to stress God's intervention that defeats the order of nature, the painter chose to replace the angel with a semi-calotte (symbolising the sky) with three rays coming out of it.

Among the frescoes that continue the scene of the announcement of the nativity of the Theotokos with the scene of the married couple – Joachim and Anna – embracing, we name the following: the fresco of the Church of the Holy Virgin in Peribleptos (Ohrid, Macedonia – 14th century), which is part of a wonderful group of paintings illustrating events from the life of the Mother of God; the fresco of the Monastery of the Mother of God in Pec (Serbia, today's Kosovo), dating from the same century; and the fresco of the Vatopedi Monastery, from the 14th century. It is worth noting that none of these scenes leaves out the servants ordered by Joachim to prepare the animals for his sacrifice of thanksgiving. In the case of the Pec fresco, one of these servants appears before Anna as well. He is probably the one sent by Joachim to inform her that he had returned from the wilderness and was going to the temple to bring an offering. A particular detail is remarkable in

²⁸ *Protoevangelia lui Iacob*, 221-2.

the Athonite fresco, where Joachim is represented in two situations: the first marks the announcement of the angel, while the second shows his command to the servants regarding his gift for the temple.

The iconographic pattern specific to the Byzantine area which dominated the most important territories in that area is recorded in the *Hermeneia* of Dionysius of Fournā: 'Houses and a garden with many kinds of trees and, in the middle, Saint Anna praying and an angel (in flight) above her, blessing her. And, outside the garden, on a mountain, Joachim praying and an angel blessing him as well.'²⁹. The title given to this pattern in the *Hermeneia* is 'the conception of the Theotokos'. The description of the scene suggests that it concerns the announcement of the conception of the Mother of God. We would like to specify once again that the conception of the Theotokos in her mother's womb is different from the one recounted in the Gospel of Luke (1:34-35). It is highly possible that the painters who thought out this representation might have had in mind Luke's version of the conception of the Lord in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Therefore, we stress that the conception of the Mother of God was carried out through the intimate embrace of her parents. Consequently, the pattern described by the *Hermeneia* needs a different name.

Conclusions

The working paradigm and the case study we have analysed provide (ikon) painters with a substantial starting point in terms of both knowledge and scientific analysis in view of outlining an enterprise preceding the actual act of artistic creation. The reader has been able to ascertain the way in which the theoretical and theological concepts are found, intertwined, and complete one other in the fields of reference that we approached: the biblical / inter-testament / apocryphal one; the patristical one, the liturgical one, and the dogmatical one. It would be desirable that, in the future, this initiative should be embraced and applied further to other events in the life of our Lord, found either in the apocryphal literature or in the biblical one. It would be interesting to see the manner of perceiving the influence of apocryphal writings on the way in which events in the Holy Scriptures are represented iconographically. The Annunciation could make the object of such an approach.

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²⁹ Dionysius of Fournā, *Erminia picturii bizantine* [Hermeneia of Byzantine Painting] (Bucharest: Sofia, 2000), 138.

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