

Appendix A: The Feasts of the Theotokos

The feasts of the Theotokos contain both Scriptural material and non-scriptural religious poetry that is often chanted. However, even this non-scriptural poetry is “in its deeper reality profoundly Scriptural”; and these services are “in the last analysis little else than one vast and extended meditation upon Holy Scripture” (Mary & Ware, 1969, p. 16).¹ Yet at the same time, because of the non-Scriptural material within the services of these feasts, Tradition offers important clues for interpreting the meaning of the feasts.

Furthermore, as Georges Florovsky (1969) stresses, Christian worship is both personal and corporate; and although there is at times tension between these two dimensions of worship, “the ‘faith of the Church’ must be always personally appropriated, and continually maintained by [individual] spiritual effort” (p. 22). Christian worship is an encounter between a person and God—a meeting that has been initiated by God to which we respond in the light of how “He has revealed Himself through the ages, in special events, through special messengers, and finally in . . . Jesus Christ” (p. 25). In reflecting upon the cycle of feasts of the Mother of God, one needs to retain this tension between the personal and the corporate, between the personal call that the Mother of God received from God (and its impact on us as individuals) and the response of the Theotokos that makes possible the formation of the Church as a worshipping Christian community.

The Birth of the Theotokos (8 September)

Just as the Orthodox Church year begins on September 1st, so, in a sense, the roots of the Church itself begin with the birth of the Mother of God on September 8th and the Exaltation of the Cross on September 14th. With her birth, the Theotokos also links the Jewish people to their Messiah. In *The Festal Menaion* (1969), Mother Mary and Metropolitan [then Archimandrite] Kallistos remind us that:

The long sequence of patriarchs, prophets, priests, and kings reaches its culmination in the daughter of Joachim and Ann[a].

¹ Full references are given at the end of this appendix.

Born under the Old Covenant, she is the last and greatest of the righteous men and women of Israel; in her is summed up all the holiness and faith of God's chosen people, the children of Abraham. When she answered at the Annunciation, 'Be it unto me according to thy word', she spoke not only for herself, but as their representative, in the name of them all. (p. 48)

Rather than see the Sanhedrin that inaugurated the crucifixion as the representative of the Israelites, it is more theologically appropriate to see the Theotokos as the representative of "God's chosen people."

The emphasis upon Abraham as a precursor in faith is especially strong in *The Protoevangelion of James*, an important traditional source for this cycle of feasts, which notes how Abraham and Sarah at the end of their lives had been given Isaac, just as Joachim and Anna were given Mary (1:5). A chant in Tone 2 of the Small Vespers for the feast boldly proclaims that Mary "is the [burning] Bush [of Exodus 3:2] springing from barren ground and burning with the immaterial fire that cleanses and enlightens our souls." In a sense, Mary can be seen as a burning bush, because just as the bush burned but was not consumed so Mary gave birth to Jesus but remained a virgin (Davis, 2009).

An important theme opening the feast at Small Vespers is how the Theotokos "purges all the indignity of Adam" (Tone 1), thereby "releasing all from the bonds of sin" (Tone 3). Small Vespers concludes that through her birth from the formerly barren Anna, the Theotokos is "renewing our nature that had grown barren." Thus the link to Abraham and Isaac, Joachim and Mary is traced through to the possibility of our own barrenness. Here, as elsewhere, the Orthodox love of paradox in its hymnody is evident as dignity and indignity, sin and grace, barrenness and fruitfulness, are juxtaposed (Davis, 2009).

Great Vespers then emphasises how the Theotokos "was foreordained from generations of old as Mother and Virgin and Receiver of God" (Tones 1 and 8). The fulfilment of Luke 1:28 ("Hail, thou who are full of grace: the Lord is with thee") and Luke 1:42 ("Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb") is remembered in Tone 8. Then in Tone 4, Great Vespers ends by reminding us that "Thy birth, O Theotokos, has brought joy to all the inhabited earth" because "from thee has shone forth the Sun of Righteousness, Christ our God. . . [who has] bestowed on us eternal life."

Throughout the services for this feast the focus is on the Theotokos as “the bridge that leads us to the Maker” (Matins, Canticle 9, First Canon). “Mary is honoured by the Church, not primarily for herself, but as Mother of the Lord,” point out Mother Mary and Metropolitan Kallistos, “because it was within her womb that the hypostatic union between God and man was brought to pass” (p. 49). Appropriately, the Epistle for the Divine Liturgy is Philippians 2:5-11, proclaiming that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

The Entry of the Theotokos into the Temple (21 November)

The meaning of the second feast of the cycle is grounded in the tradition that Mary danced into the Temple at the age of three, was fed by an angel, educated by a dove and remained happily in the Temple until the age of twelve, “and all the house of Israel loved her” (*Protoevangelion of James* 7:3-8:3). There is no Biblical source for this tradition, but it is strongly held within the Orthodox Church, based on Anna’s response to the angel when she is told that she will conceive: “As the Lord my God lives, whatever I bring forth, whether it be male or female, I will devote it to the Lord my God, and it shall minister to him in holy things, during its whole life” (*Protoevangelion of James* 4:2).

Mother Mary and Metropolitan Kallistos insist that “what matters is not the historical exactness of the story but its inner meaning” (p. 51). In *Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim suggests such an inner meaning—that “a rationally necessary element in Scripture history” is the “inward preparedness [of persons such as Mary] in which the higher [i.e. angels] and the Divine afterwards find their ready points of contact” (1886, Vol. I, p. 147). The point is well phrased, because the scene which this feast celebrates is not within Scripture, yet it does indicate powerfully the extent to which Mary was open to the Lord’s plan for her life. Mother Mary and Metropolitan Kallistos suggest that “this account of Mary’s entry into the temple of her dwelling there signifies her total dedication to God” and that the key theme of the feast is the “indwelling grace of the Spirit, present and active within her from her earliest moments” (pp. 51-52).

We do not know precisely how Mary lived prior to the Incarnation. Bishop Nikolai Velimrović (1985) reflects that Mary's life when she was under the care of the Temple priests was probably similar to her life in the home of Joseph—reading the Sacred Scriptures [i.e. the Old Testament], praying, fasting and handcrafts (Vol 1., p. 326). Orthodox tradition is that Mary was fourteen years old when Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit in her womb (Protoevangelion of James 9:23).²

This feast focuses on how the presentation and upbringing of Mary within the Temple precinct is a metaphor for her holiness. Great Vespers Tone 8 proclaims that “All the powers of heaven stood amazed, seeing the Holy Spirit dwell in thee” (cf. Matins, Canticle 9, First Canon). The service not only follows the tradition set out in *The Protoevangelion of James*, but even claims that Mary was “brought up in the Holy of Holies” (Great Vespers, Tone 8; Matins, Canticle 9, First Canon). Since the high priest alone entered the Holy of Holies, and only once a year on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), it would be impossible for Mary to be raised there. The claim is a figurative one referring to The Temple precincts to establish the idea proclaimed at the procession after the reading from the prophet Ezekiel (43:27-44:4) that Mary “is led today into the temple, as an offering without blemish [to] be brought up, to become the dwelling place of [Christ]” (cf. Matins, Canticle 9, First Canon).

Prior to the reading of Hebrews 9:1-7 describing the tabernacle, Antiphon Two has been chanted: “This is the gate of the Lord, by which the righteous shall enter” (Psalm 117:20). Thus the main service for this feast stresses the holiness of Mary, linked to a prayer for each of us: “Grant to my

² *The Protoevangelion of James* gives Mary's reply to Elizabeth when St John the Baptist leapt in Elizabeth's womb: “Mary, being ignorant of all those mysterious things which the archangel Gabriel had spoken to her, lifted up her eyes to heaven, and said, ‘Lord! What am I, that all generations of the earth should call me blessed? But perceiving herself daily to grow big, and being afraid, she went home, and hid herself from the children of Israel; and she was fourteen years old when these things happened.’” (9:22-23). Mary's perplexity and her awareness of her own sexuality is also expressed in her conversation with Gabriel in the opening prayer of Great Vespers for the Annunciation: “I have not known pleasure; I have not entered into wedlock. How then shall I bear a child?”

soul, O Theotokos, the calm peace that comes from thy gifts of grace” (Matins, Canticle 9, First Canon).

The Annunciation (25 March)

This feast is very much a celebration in faith of the Incarnation. As St Maximus the Confessor (c.1470-1556) suggests, “Faith alone can embrace these mysteries, for it is faith that makes real for us things beyond intellect and reason” (quoted by Manley, 1984, p. 999). The challenge—both to Mary when the angel Gabriel appeared to her, as well as to us—is that God in “His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” in order that we “may be partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:3-4). The services of the feast of the Annunciation clarify how this deification takes place, both fully in the Theotokos and partially in committed Christians.

Many of the services for this feast set out dialogues between Gabriel and Mary. Although Gabriel initiates these conversations, Mary’s probing responses seek to understand “how shall my womb contain Him whom the wide spaces of heavens cannot contain” (Small Vespers, Opening Prayer; Great Vespers, Opening Prayer). Even Gabriel is at times somewhat overwhelmed by his task. “I stand before thee in fear,” the archangel tells Mary, “as a servant before his mistress, and in awe I am afraid to look at thee now” (Matins, Canticle Four). Lev Gillet suggests that it is in the concluding chanted prayer for Matins that the full meaning of the feast is evident: “Today is revealed the mystery that is from all eternity. The Son of God becomes the Son of man.” (p. 128). However, it is important to note that the revelation of the mystery is possible not only because of God’s initiative, but also because of Mary’s freely given and obedient response (cf. Mary & Ware, pp. 60-61).

The process of how the annunciation occurred is hinted at in certain images:

The most Holy Spirit of God shall come upon thee,
O pure Lady, thou dwelling-place of the divinity. (Small Vespers)

He shall come down as rain upon a fleece:
and as the dew which falls upon the earth. (Psalm 71:6) (Liturgy)

‘When God so wishes,’ said the bodiless angel, ‘the order of nature is overcome, and what is beyond man comes to pass.

(Great Vespers, Opening Chant)

That Gabriel is “ever filled with light” (Great Vespers, Opening Chant) is possibly linked to the fuller description in *The Potoevangelion of James* of how Joseph and the midwife watched the birth of Jesus in the cave in Bethlehem.³ The final reading of the liturgy says simply “the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee” (Luke 1:35); and that is perhaps the most we can know of how the Incarnation occurred.

Although the Incarnation remains a mystery, a deeper understanding is possible of what the annunciation means for a Christian. Lev Gillet frames the meaning of the Feast of the Annunciation as a personal challenge to each of us:

In the life of every Christian there will be divine annunciations, moments when God lets us know his will and his intention concerning us. But all these annunciations must unite to become the one essential Annunciation: the Annunciation that Jesus can be born in us, can be born through us—not in the same way that he was conceived and bought into the world by the Virgin Mary, for that is a unique miracle that cannot be equalled—but in the sense that the Saviour takes spiritual and, at the same time, very real possession of our being. (p. 128).

Gillet also reflects that “every authentic Annunciation is immediately followed by Visitation”—a “loving word or act” as when Mary then visits Elizabeth to share the grace she has received (Luke 1:39, Gospel reading for Matins). Thus the Feast of the Annunciation links Gabriel’s announcement to Mary with a response from us of either belief or unbelief, action or inertia, worship or its avoidance.

The Meeting of Our Lord (2 February)

The presentation of Our Lord in the Temple and the purification of his mother Mary forty days after the birth are linked to the prophetic awareness of Simeon (Luke 2:25-35) and Anna (Luke 2:36-38) that the event is not only an

³ “And the midwife went along with him [Joseph] and stood in the cave. Then a bright cloud over-shadowed the cave, and the midwife said, ‘This day my soul is magnified, for my eyes have seen surprising things, and salvation is brought forth to Israel.’ But suddenly the cloud became a great light in the cave, so that their eyes could not bear it. But the light gradually decreased, until the infant appeared and nursed at the breast of his mother Mary. Then the midwife cried out and said, ‘How glorious a day is this, wherein my eyes have seen this extraordinary sight!’” (14:9-13)

act of obedience to Mosaic regulations, but also the proclamation of a long awaited fulfilment—the entry of the Messiah into the world. Small Vespers begins with Simeon’s embrace of Jesus as “the Word uncircumscribed and supreme in being.” This affirmation from the elderly man was more significant than first appears, because several rabbinical texts suggest that Simeon was the son of the famous rabbi, Hillel, and the father of the Pharisee, Gamilel (Gillet, 1980, p. 106, n. 75). In the next hymn, Simeon’s taking up of Jesus into his arms and receiving “Christ, the coal of fire” is explicitly linked to the lips of Isaiah being touched by a seraphim with a live coal (Isaiah 6:6)—a significant reminder of the Eucharist and the words of Isaiah 6:7 (“Behold, this has touched your lips. Your lawlessness is taken away, and your sin is cleansed”) which an Orthodox priest says immediately after receiving communion (OSB, p. 1063). Great Vespers continues to stress the importance of Simeon as the first witness who “proclaims the union of the Godhead with mankind”; and Canticle One of Matins emphasises that Simeon has “run straight to Christ”, amazed at holding in his arms “the Maker and Master of the Law who fulfils the order of the Law . . . the Cause of all being” (Canticle Four; cf. Canticles Five to Nine).

There is much rejoicing in these services, especially during the Divine Liturgy which begins with Psalm 44:2: “My heart overflowed with a good word; I tell my works to the King; My tongue is the pen of a swift-writing scribe.” The Prokimenon is Mary’s affirmation of the Lord at the Annunciation (Luke 1:46-48); the Epistle celebrates the change in priesthood (Hebrews 7:7-17); and the Gospel states once again the joy that the Meeting brings to all its participants and to us (Luke 2:22-40). The Meeting is indeed that “of Christ with His people” (Mary & Ware, p. 60).

The Dormition of the Theotokos (15 August)

The cycle of feasts for the Mother of God closes with a commemoration of her entering into rest in the final feast of the Church’s year. Although this is often considered the most important of the five feasts and is preceded by a two-week fast, many of the themes of the services are repeated from the

earlier feasts. The new meaning is expressed in the opening chant of Great Vespers: “O marvellous wonder! The source of life is laid in the tomb, and the tomb itself becomes a ladder to heaven” (cf. Gillet, p. 243). In other words, the Theotokos is laid in the tomb and her body is then physically assumed up to heaven. Thus her body is not held in the earth, because she is herself the source of new life—the birth of Jesus Christ (see Prayer by Theophanes, Great Vespers, Mary & Ware, p. 509).

The Dormition of the Theotokos has been linked with a number of traditional narratives that form the basis for the celebration of the feast. There is, as Stephen J. Shoemaker (2002) sets out, a “scandalous lack of any formal testimony regarding the end of the Virgin’s life in the earliest Christian writings”; however, by the end of the fifth century, there was a strong awareness that although Mary’s death was “in some sense special”, the Theotokos did actually die and this was “important proof of her son’s consubstantiality with humanity” (pp. 13-14). Among the many traditions, perhaps the most helpful for understanding the Feast of the Dormition is the *Acts of John* by Ps.-Prochorus, with its many variants, in which a narrative of the death of the Theotokos is set out in some detail. Specific passages from the different services have been linked below with notes from *The Acts of John*.

In Small Vespers there is the assertion that “the assembly of the disciples is gathered together . . . from the ends of the earth; and they stood round thy deathbed”⁴, as the Theotokos was “attended by ranks of angels” who commended “her most pure soul into the hands of her Son.”⁵ Great Vespers opens with the chant that “today thou [the Theotokos] are translated from earth to heaven. Thy glory is full of majesty, shining with grace in divine

⁴ “. . . after the sound of the thunder, behold, suddenly the apostles descended on a cloud, from the corners of the world to Mary’s door. . . . Mary called Peter and all the apostles, and she brought them into her inner chamber and showed them her funeral garments And after praying, she [Mary] went in and lay down on her bed, and she fulfilled the course [of] her life. Peter sat at her head, and John at her feet, and the others were in a circle around her bed” (*Acts of John*, par. 22, 30, 32).

⁵ “And behold, suddenly the Lord Jesus arrived on the clouds with an innumerable multitude of angels. And he entered into the inner room, where Mary was, along with [the archangels] Michael and Gabriel, while the angels sang hymns and remained outside the inner room” (*Acts of John*, par.33).

brightness.”⁶ In Matins, the hymn is of how Christ “has translated into the heavenly mansions her who bore Him without seed.”

In both the troparion and communion verses of the Divine Liturgy of the feast a human response is proposed to the Dormition of the Theotokos: “What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me? I will receive the cup of salvation, and call upon the Name of the Lord” (Psalm 115.3-4). The chant in Tone 5 in the Great Vespers of the Dormition urges us: “Sing, O ye people, sing ye the praises of the Mother of our God” (Mary & Ware, p. 510). Such a response is appropriate for all the Feasts of the Theotokos.

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⁶ “And the Lord told Michael to take the body of Mary up onto the cloud and to set it down in Paradise” (*Acts of John*, par. 47).

----- *The Protevangelion of James: An historical account of the birth of Christ and the perpetual Virgin Mary, his mother, by James the Lesser, cousin and brother of the Lord Jesus, a chief apostle and first bishop of the Christians in Jerusalem, on the web at: <http://ministries.tliquest.net/theology/apocryphas/nt/protevan.htm> [To see this reference hold mouse on the blue line and press the "Control" key.]*