

# The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple: The Illustration of a Feast

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# THE PRESENTATION OF THE VIRGIN IN THE TEMPLE

## The Illustration of a Feast

JOANNA LACE discusses the degree of importance given through the ages to the event known as the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* with particular reference to its depiction in paintings.

Amongst the exhibits in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta is an icon, painted in traditional eastern Orthodox style, and depicting what we in Western Europe know as “The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple”. (Fig.1) There is much of interest in this scene to those of us rather more conversant with paintings of events in our own New Testament, perhaps in particular with “The Presentation of Christ in the Temple” described in Luke’s Gospel.<sup>1</sup> The icon on the other hand illustrates an episode of the childhood of Mary, and one that is told, not in the New Testament, but in the ancient Book of James, a book that from very early times circulated widely amongst the faithful throughout Eastern Europe. It is dated by some scholars to the end of the first century (soon after the writings that later made up the canonical New Testament), and was certainly current among the learned by the second century.<sup>2</sup> The passage illustrated in the icon tells how Mary, at the age of three, was welcomed into the Temple of Jerusalem. For a child, this was an event hitherto unheard of. Its inner meaning lies at the root of an ever-increasing devotion to Mary as the Mother of the



Fig. 1 The Presentation of Mary at the Temple. 17th century (?) (National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta, Malta.  
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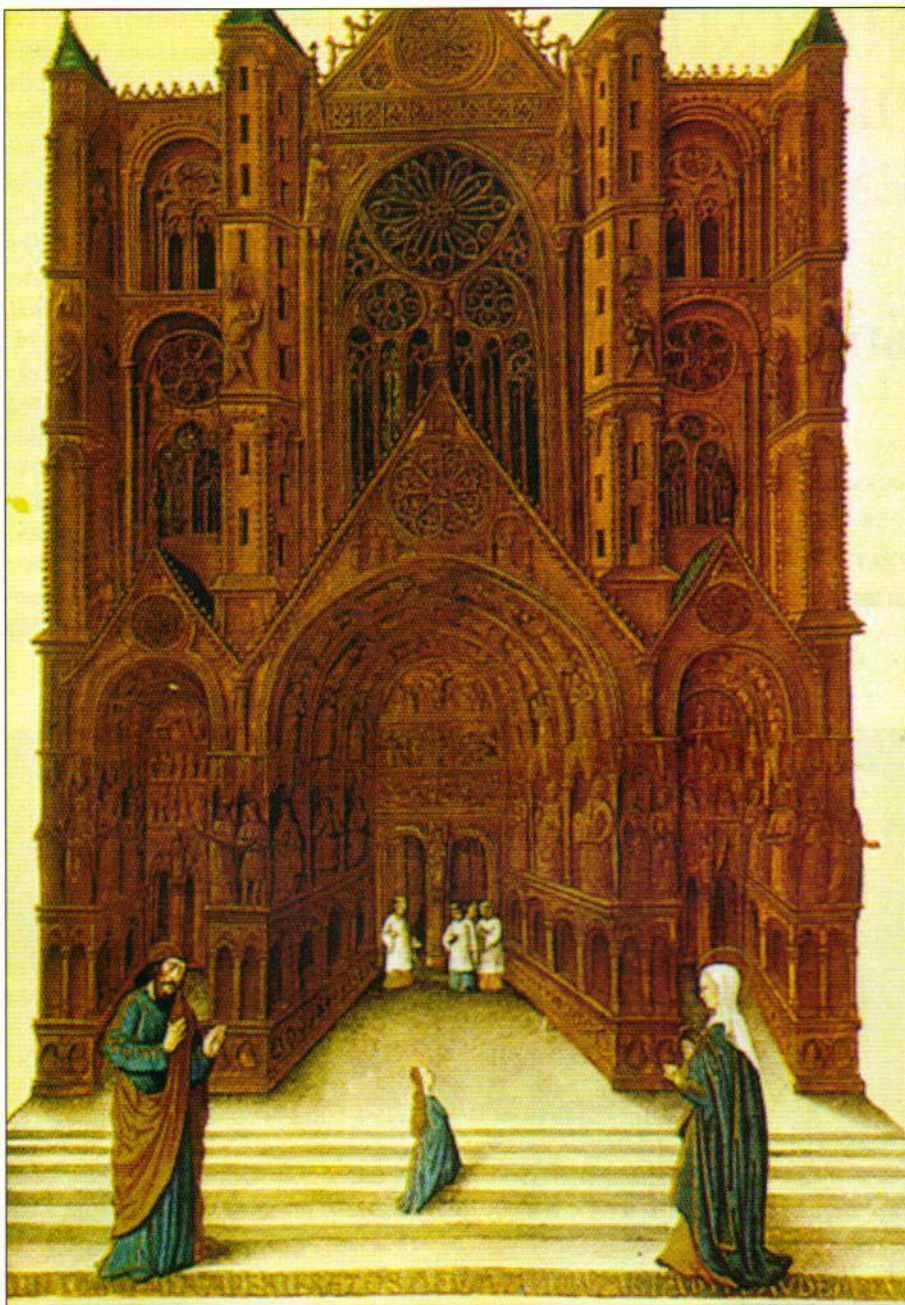


Fig. 2 The Presentation of the Virgin, c. 1411. The Limbourg Brothers, *Les Très Riches de Duc de Berry*, (fol. 137. Musée Conde, Chantilly, France.)

Incarnate God. It was a devotion that was to culminate in the official sanction of her cult at the Council of Ephesus in 431, when she was given the title of 'God-bearer', in Greek, *Theotokos*<sup>3</sup> - hence the title we see inscribed on the present icon in Greek - "The Entry of the Theotokos".

We do not know the history of this particular icon, and tradition holds out several possibilities. Illustrations of Mary's life had followed the custom already established in Byzantium for representations of saints' Lives, and which evolved as a chronological sequence. For instance, a selection from the sequence of events, according to choice, and in smaller format, would be included in the panel of a holy figure, or in the case of the whole sequence this might be arranged to form a frame around

the figure. Accordingly the Entry of the Theotokos is often seen as a subsidiary illustration in an icon of the Virgin, being part of what became known as the 'Virgin cycle'. But its place of highest honour is as one of the five Feasts of the Mother of God that are illustrated on the Church Feast Tier on the iconostasis of an orthodox church.<sup>4</sup>

The Feast of the Entry of the Theotokos was inaugurated in Constantinople, probably by Patriarch Germain (715-730), and then in 1166 it was pronounced by the Emperor Manuel I Comnenus as a liturgical feast of the highest class - of particular solemnity. During this time it became the subject of a vast literature, with Mary's *Entry* being compared with Moses' ascension of Mount Sinai and the mystic raising of the soul





Fig. 3 The Presentation of the Virgin, 1501-11. Albrecht Dürer, *The Life of the Virgin* (woodcut). (Courtesy Staatliche Graphische Sammlung, Munich)

towards God. Such questions lie far beyond the scope of a short article, but just how and why this episode became so important to the faithful becomes a little clearer when we look closely at the text itself.<sup>5</sup>

The writer had borrowed a theme from the Old Testament, in this case from the story of Samuel: a child born after much prayer to an elderly childless couple is taken in gratitude to Yahweh (i.e. to the Temple), to “stay there for ever”. Similarly he gave Mary’s parents symbolic names: ‘Joachim’ (a form of Eliachim, a diminutive of Elie) means Preparation of the Lord<sup>6</sup>, and Anna (the Hebrew for Grace) is the equivalent of Hanna, the name of the mother of Samuel. Accordingly the Book of James opens with a moving passage describing how Joachim and his wife Anna were

distraught because they were childless, and then how, when Anna was told by an angel that she would bear a child, and one that would be “spoken of in the whole world”, she promised that she would “bring it for a gift to the Lord (her) God, and that it (would) be ministering unto Him all the days of its life.”<sup>7</sup> But before he relates the temple episode, which comes a little later in the text, the writer introduces a fundamental point of difference: whereas the Samuel story expressly states that after fervent prayers the child was conceived between husband and wife in the normal way<sup>8</sup>, in the Book of James the angel of the Lord appears to Anna when she has changed into her bridal garments, and is praying alone in the garden, seated under a laurel tree; he tells her the Lord has heard her prayers and she will “conceive and bear [a child]” (IV)



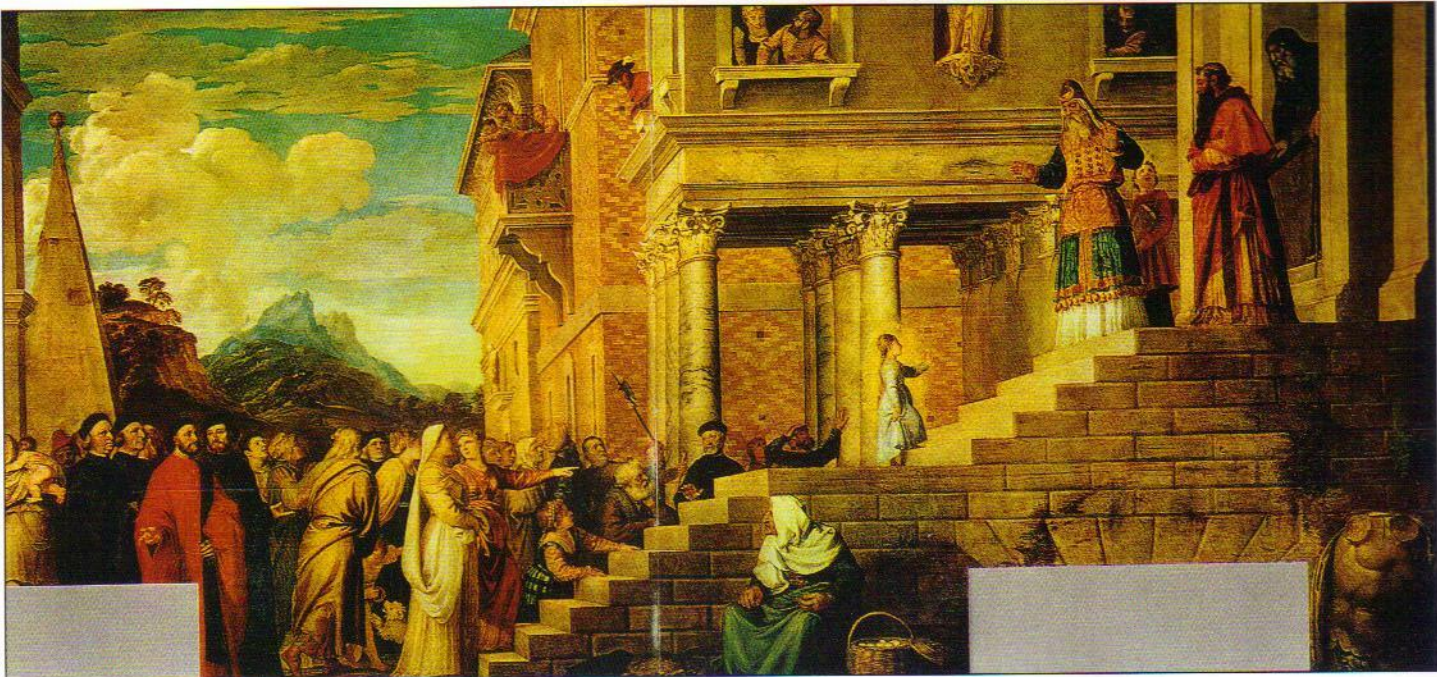


Fig. 4 The Presentation of Mary at the Temple. 1534-38. Titian, *Galleria dell'Accademia, Venice*.

In effect, the Book of James was seen as strengthening the appeal of the Gospels. Already Matthew had accepted Christ's birth as God's fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in the Old Testament of the birth of a son, Immanuel; and in Luke's account of the Annunciation, the angel's reply to Mary's question "How can this come about.....?" was, again, that her conception would be effected by God.<sup>9</sup> Now the Gospel of James was revealing to the faithful how, even before Christ's own, miraculous birth, his mother Mary had herself been brought into the world by Divine Will, and had then undergone a unique process of sanctification within the Holy Temple, to render her worthy of bearing the Living God. It is this unique sanctification that is being celebrated in the icon.

This brings us to the unprecedented notion of the presence a child within the Holy Temple. There is no historical evidence for this. But we learn that the High Priest had also received a message from God when we are told that he is saying, whilst welcoming and blessing Mary: "The Lord hath magnified thy name among all generations.....in thee shall the Lord make manifest his redemption... 'And he made her to sit upon the third step of the altar.'" (VII.2) The event thus confirms God's plan for Mary, and the angel's earlier pronouncement to Anna that her child truly would be "spoken of in the whole world".

The reason that Mary's sanctification takes place specifically within the Holy Temple is explained in the context of the symbolism of the ancient temple. Like all sacred places, the temple was understood by the faithful not merely to 'represent' another reality, but to *be*, quite literally, this other reality - another world, ungoverned by space and time in the usual sense, and actually encompassing all space and all time (eternity). The temple episode was thus celebrated for its inner meaning, just as it has continued to be celebrated by Orthodox Christians ever

since. As we learn from the liturgy, the feast celebrates Mary's readiness to fulfill her Divine destiny, due to the presence and activity within her, from her earliest moments, of the Holy Spirit. Her placing "upon the third step of the altar" signifies a placing within the Holy of Holies<sup>10</sup>, where she subsists on holy nourishment in order that the Holy Spirit dwelling within her might prepare her to be herself a Living Temple, the New Ark, a Holy of Holies fit to conceive the Incarnate God. And coming as it does on November 21st, a few weeks before Christmas, the feast is one of joyful anticipation, and a spirit of rejoicing permeates the hymnology.<sup>11</sup>

Turning to the painted representation of the feast, if the architectural background to the figures appears somewhat puzzling, we can identify its main features by looking at the actual layout of a temple building. For example, the ideal temple that is shown to Ezekiel in a vision, can be taken as reflecting long-held traditions.<sup>12</sup> It is built upon a hill, approached by a series of courtyards, each in turn representing an area of increased sanctity. It is rectangular, divided from east to west into the porch (the Ulam), the temple area (the Hekal), and the Holy of Holies (the Debir). The Hekel and Debir together form the House; and the Debir is a perfect cube, raised above the floor level of the Hekel.

In the painting the action takes place within the Hekel: the fact that it is an indoor scene is indicated in the traditional manner by curtains draped up and over the roofs of buildings - in this case they are brilliant red, richly embroidered in gold. Proceeding from right to left, Mary, Anna and Joachim have come out of the door of the imposing porch building (the Ulam) on the extreme right, and entered into the Hekal. A group of young maidens remains by the door: they are the "undefiled daughters of the Hebrews" whom Joachim had ordered to accompany them up to the temple, each with a lighted lamp, to attract the child so that she "would turn not



backward....away from the temple of the Lord.” (VII.2). Over on the left the High Priest, his mantle decorated with a rich pattern of fictive Hebrew lettering, inclines towards the visitors, his left hand raised in welcome, while with his right he blesses the three-year-old child Mary. She is shown small but dressed as an adult, in the traditional way, as a sign of her spiritual maturity. The High Priest stands between two massive pillars<sup>13</sup> at the door leading up to the Debir, the Holy of Holies. Up in the left-hand corner is a view of the Debir’s interior, at a later stage, with Mary seated where the High Priest had had her placed, “upon the third step of the altar”, under its dome-like canopy, the *ciborium*. She stretches out both hands “as a dove that is nurtured, and receive(s) food from the hand of an angel”(VIII.1).

Once familiar with the story and some of its implications, the painting is seen for what it is - a clear and concise rendering of the text, with the essential figures and architecture arranged to form an ordered and balanced whole: nothing added, no basic component left out. It has been said in fact, that in Byzantium, to omit the image of Mary being fed by an angel while in the Holy of Holies would be to deny the sanctity of the event. And a similarly solid textual basis characterised the illustrations of the other major events that evolved to make up the Virgin cycle. This is not to say that certain superficial variations did not occur: for example, the action might proceed from left to right, or vice versa; and draperies, vestments, physiognomy, all differ to a degree according to time and place, just as architecture tends to reflect local styles. But such variations in no way obscure the simple message of the basic text.

## ‘The Presentation’ in Western European Culture

In Western Europe the ‘Presentation of Mary in the Temple’<sup>14</sup> has had a chequered career, and it never became more than a minor feast. Just a few decades after Mary’s official recognition in Byzantium as *Theotokos*, the Book of James was one of the texts excluded from the official Canon of Books of the Old and New Testaments by what is known as the Gelasian Decree.<sup>15</sup> It was to be centuries before some of these excluded texts (known collectively as the Apocrypha) began to circulate widely in the west, largely through the publication of the Golden Legend, a thirteenth-century treatise by James de Voragine. Besides the New Testament Gospels, this included the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, itself an amalgam of most of the Gospels of James and of Thomas, with various omissions and amplifications. Such was its popularity that by 1372 Pope Gregory XI had been persuaded to introduce the Feast of the Presentation at Avignon, and a few years later Pope Urban VI (1378-89) announced its extension to the whole church.<sup>16</sup>

Not unexpectedly the Golden Legend became a major source for western artists, and one episode of Mary’s life that became popular as an independent topic was her Presentation in the Temple. It was at this point that ‘avant-garde’ artists usually forsook ancient traditions, creating their own ‘modern’, and often beautiful versions. Also, whereas in traditional icons the event always takes place within the temple, western artists usually

illustrated Mary’s approach to the temple, as related in the Golden Legend, which gave plenty of scope for variety. In particular the fifteen steps up to the temple mentioned in the Golden Legend, and which Mary ascends unaided, became a common feature. Above all, these artists engaged the viewer’s interest in the wonder of the sacred event by ascribing it to a particular time and place, sometimes stressing the contemporary by bringing in personal references. In *Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, for example, of c.1411, by the Limbourg Brothers, diminutive figures are placed against the enormous portico of the Cathedral of Bourges, capital city of their own illustrious patron the duke. (Fig.2). Early the following century Durer, scholar as well as artist, creates a richly-detailed ‘historical’ event with Renaissance clarity and precision: Mary runs unaided up the steps of a massive ‘classic’ temple. (Fig. 3) A few decades later Titian’s dramatic masterpiece for the Scuola della Carita in Venice was a vast cityscape, set like Venice itself against the distant Dolomites (Fig. 4). The temple, decorated with Venetian brickwork, towers over an assembled crowd, and the spectators include portraits of noble members of the confraternity; the focal point of such civic splendour is the solitary, softly-glowing figure of the child Mary, blithely ascending a great stone stairway.

All this activity seems a long way from the quiet ‘Hekel’ and ‘Debir’ of our icon, and the contrast is demonstrably one of content rather than merely one of style. Western versions show the sacred event as factual and as beautiful, and often, at the same time, quite commensurate with personal experience. At the same time it might be questioned whether this change of emphasis masks something of the spiritual depths revealed by a study of the ancient text, and portrayed by the eastern church with such constant simplicity over the centuries.



# Notes

- 1 Luke 2:22-39: Joseph and Mary take the infant Jesus to the Temple to be consecrated, forty days after his birth. This event is also known as "The Purification of the Holy Virgin", as it combines both themes; also as "Candlemass", from the custom going back to the fifth century of holding lighted candles during the office of the Hyperpante ("Meeting" - of the Old and the New Testament), as it is known in the east.
- 2 The book has also been known from the sixteenth century as the *Protoevangelium* of James, from the Latin translation by Postel (implying that its contents were older than those in the canonical Gospels). From recent archaeological finds we have learned a great deal about how the early texts circulated: often in ones and twos, translated into half a dozen different languages, with no one authoritative version of a text, and no fear of heresy. See Christopher de Hamel, *The Book: A History of the Bible*, London and New York 2001, p. 321 ff, for an up-to-date and lucid account of recent studies.
- 3 This Council concerned the controversy between the patriarchs of Alexandria and Constantinople over the dual nature - human and divine - of the person of Christ. The Alexandrians, who judged His two natures to be inseparable, won the day; and thus the council sanctioned the use of the title *Theotokos* for Mary, since she had in fact given birth to God. The debates nevertheless continued; for a concise survey see M. Cunningham, *Faith in the Byzantine World*, Oxford, 2002.
- 4 The iconostasis of an orthodox church, like the chancel in a Latin church, separates the presbyterium from the nave. Originally it was an open screen but later became a closed screen decorated with paintings.
- 5 I have used the translation by M.R. James throughout: M.R. James, trans. *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1953. For a later study see J.K.Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1993, p. 46 ff.
- 6 See L.Reau, *Iconographie de l'art cretien*, Tome 2, p. 165.
- 7 M.R. James, *op. cit.* above, p. 40.
- 8 *The Jerusalem Bible*, London, 1966; I Samuel 1: 19-20.
- ix *The Jerusalem Bible*, *op.cit.* above; Matthew 1:23 (accepting Isaiah 7:14), and Luke 1:34-35.
- 10 Reference to the altar being within the Holy of Holies is found in *The Letter to the Hebrews* of c.64 A.D.: "beyond the second veil an innermost part which was called the Holy of Holies to which belonged the gold altar of incense..." See *The Jerusalem Bible*, *op.cit.* above, Hebrews 9: 3-4.
- 11 For a fuller explanation of the feast, see Kallistos Ware, 'The Feast of Mary's Silence: the Entry in the Temple', in ed. A. Staapool, *Mary in Doctrine and Devotion*, Dublin, 1990; and Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, trans. *The Festal Menaion*, London, 1969.
- 12 See *The Jerusalem Bible*, *op.cit.* above, Ezekiel 40-44.
- 13 The pillars - the subject of much scholarly interest - had no role in temple ritual; texts refer to them as Jaclin and Boaz: Jaclin represents the moon, which establishes the feasts for Israel (Psalms 104: 19), and Boaz the sun, which comes with fire and strength, "and nothing can escape his heat" (Psalms 19:6). See R. Patai, *Man and Temple*, London, 1947, p. 108 ff and footnotes.
- 14 Titles of the feast vary in the west, e.g. *Presentation* (*Dedication*)(*Oblation*) *of the Blessed Virgin in the Temple*.
- 15 Pope Gelasius (492-496) was long considered the author of the Decree, but its date and its source are now matters of dispute; according to M.R. James its date cannot be later than the sixth century. See M.R. James, *op.cit* above, p. 21.
- 16 In the event, it was deleted from the Roman calendar in the sixteenth century by Pope Pius V (1566-72), only to be re-established by Pope Gregory XIII in 1585, with the Feasts of St. Anne and St. Joachim.