

The Mother of God and the Ladder of Jacob: Some Reflections on the Mediating Role of the Theotokos in the Work of Redemption according to the Tradition of the Eastern Church

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Hail, O Pious one, who gave birth to God in the flesh for the salvation of all. Through you, humankind has found salvation. Through you, O pure and blessed Mother of God, may we reach heaven! (*Troparion* of Matins)¹

The Virgin Mother of God, by virtue of her divine motherhood, remains in close union with her Son even after the Incarnation, cooperating intimately with Him in the divine economy of salvation.² As exemplified in the *troparion* cited above, in the Byzantine liturgy the hymnic compositions for both Christological and Marian feasts make constant reference, in fact, to the mystery of divine motherhood with a view to the reconciliation of humanity with its Creator.

In meditating on the theme of man's return to his heavenly homeland and on the role of the Virgin Mary, the homiletic reflections of the Fathers of the Church (which were later incorporated into the liturgical texts) often refer to Old Testament images that emphasize the symbolism of the passage between the earthly and heavenly worlds, such as those of *the gate* and *the bridge*, combined with the symbolism of ascent: *the tree, the mountain, the ladder*.³

Among these symbolic images interpreted from a Marian perspective, I would like to dwell on that of *the ladder*, which refers to a gradual,

¹ *Horologion*, Rome, 1937, 90, quoted in *TMPM* [= GHARIB G. et al., (edd.), *Testi mariani del primo millennio*, Città Nuova, Rome, 1988-1991], I, 923.

² KNIAZEFF A., "Mariologie biblique et liturgie byzantine", *Irenikon* XXVIII (1955), 280-281.

³ CHAMPEAUX – STERCKX, *Symboles* [= CHAMPEAUX G. – STERCKX S., *Introduction au monde des symboles*, Zodiaque, St. Léger Vauban, 1972], 161-162.

bidirectional ascending movement.⁴ The research will explore the rich hymnic production of the great feasts of the Byzantine liturgical year, in order to then consider the figurative heritage, especially the monumental iconography, paying special attention to the place assigned to the representation of the ladder of Jacob's dream.

The Divine Ladder in Byzantine Hymnography

The image of *the ladder*, used especially in the Christmas festive cycle to indicate the divine maternity as the channel for the descent of the Son of God to earth, is already echoed in the hymns of the feast of the Conception of St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, to indicate the beginning of the fulfillment of the plan of salvation, when "the divine ladder was planted on earth".

The prophets' proclamation is fulfilled: the holy mountain rises from the loins; *the divine ladder is planted on the earth*; the great throne of the King is prepared; the place where God will tread is prepared; the unburned bush begins to sprout; the jar of the fragrances of holiness already gushes out and stops the rivers of barrenness of Anne, the divinely inspired, whom we with faith call blessed. (*Troparion* of the Feast of the Conception of St. Anne, mother of the Mother of God)⁵

Through the Virgin Mary, "the divine ladder," the Creator of all things chose to carry out the work of elevating the fallen man. The hymns of the Feast of the Entrance into the Temple of the Most Holy Mother of God subsequently emphasize the privileged role of Mary, elected as the "mediatrix of the mystery" of the Incarnation in view of Adam's return to his heavenly home:

⁴ CHEVALIER – GHEERBRANT, "Scala" [= CHEVALIER J.– GHEERBRANT A., "Scala", in *Dizionario dei simboli*, Rizzoli, Milano, 1986], 889 ss.

⁵ Vespers, troparion tone 4. *Anthologhion* [= *Anthologhion di tutto l'anno*, Lipa, Roma, 1999], I, Lipa, Roma, 1999, 1033. Our emphasis and our translation from Italian for all quoted liturgical texts.

The Creator of all things, the Architect and Sovereign, bending down with indescribable compassion, only out of His love for mankind, pitied the one whom He had formed with His hands and whom He saw fallen, and *was pleased to raise him up again*, reshaping him in a more divine way, by His own annihilation, because He is good and merciful by nature. That is why He takes Mary, virgin and pure, as *the mediatrix of the mystery*, to take from her, according to His plan, what is ours: she is the heavenly dwelling place. (Orthros Preortia of the Feast of the Entrance into the Temple of the Most Holy Mother of God)⁶

Before this mystery, even the heavenly messenger sent to announce the glad tidings of the Incarnation was enraptured:

The bodiless one, knowing the order given him, went with solicitude to Joseph's home and said to her, who knew no marriage: "He who in *His descent* bows down the heavens comes all and unchangeable, enclosed in your womb. I, contemplating Him made a slave in your womb, remain ecstatic and exclaim: Hail, Virgin and Bride!" (Preface III, *Akathist Hymn*)

Hail, thou guide to supernal counsel; Hail, thou proof of arcane mystery; Hail, thou Christ's first prodigy; Hail, compendium of His truths. Hail, thou *heavenly ladder that descended the Eternal*; Hail, thou bridge that leads men to heaven. (*Kontakion III, Akathist Hymn*)⁷

Gabriel, O maiden, who hastened to reveal to you the plan ordained by the Eternal, greeted you and said: "Hail, unseeded earth; Hail, unburned bush; Hail, unfathomable abyss! Hail, chariot that leads to the heavens, and *lofty ladder that Jacob saw*; Hail, divine vessel of manna; Hail, deliverer of the curse; Hail, call of Adam, the Lord is with you" (Sticherà Prosomoia of the Vespers for the Feast of the Annunciation).⁸

The path of salvation for the recall of Adam is, in fact, a new creation: Christ, the New Adam, descends to reshape man with the cooperation of Mary, the New Eve; the deception and the chain of sin induced by

⁶ Preortia of the feast, Orthros, Ikos, Hymn of the humble George. *Anthologhion*, I, 926. Our emphasis.

⁷ Akathistos, *Horologion*, Rome, 1937, 887-900, quoted in *TMPM* I, 954-955. Our emphasis.

⁸ *Menea*, IV, 170, quoted in *TMPM*, I, 935. Our emphasis.

the serpent are dissolved and the access to Paradise is reopened so that Adam, hitherto exiled, can return. The joy of the fulfillment of this mystery shines forth in every hymn of the feast of the Nativity of the Lord, as an echo of the rejoicing of all creation, which heralds its fulfillment:

Rejoice, Jerusalem, be glad, all you who love Zion. Today the ancient bond of Adam's condemnation has been loosed; Paradise has been opened to us; the serpent has been destroyed, for now he has seen her whom he once deceived, become the Mother of the Creator. O abyss of the riches, wisdom and science of God! She who brought death to all flesh as the instrument of sin has become the firstfruits of salvation for all the world through the Mother of God, for from her the most perfect God is born a child: by His birth He seals her virginity, by His swaddling clothes He loosens the chains of sin, and by His infancy He heals Eve's painful pangs. Let all creation dance and rejoice, for Christ has come to recall them from exile and to save our souls.⁹ (Vespers of the Nativity of the Lord)

The work of remodelling and elevating the human person requires, as the liturgical texts first indicated, the "annihilation" that the Creator undertakes, stooping in compassion toward His creature, descending to the abyss of death. This descent into the depths of the earth, which began with the Incarnation and the birth in the cave of Bethlehem, continues with the immersion in the waters of the Jordan, foreshadowing the Passion and the death on the Cross, followed by the burial in the womb of the earth and the descent into the abyss of the underworld.¹⁰

Christ descends into the waves of the river with the human flesh assumed from the Virgin, in order to regenerate Adam's flesh and to elevate him to heaven, anticipating the mystery of the Passion:

⁹ Vespers, idiomela tone 4, by John Damascene the monk. *Anthologhion*, I, 1160.

¹⁰ BEINAERT, "Le symbolisme ascensionnel" [= BEINAERT L., "Le symbolisme ascensionnel dans la liturgie et la mystique chrétiennes", *Eranos Jabrbuch* XIX (1950)], 48.

With material flesh clothed in the immaterial fire of divinity, the Lord incarnate of the Virgin is enveloped in the waves of the Jordan: for He has glorified Himself. (...)

When by Your Epiphany You enlightened the universe, the brackish sea of unbelief fled, and the Jordan, which flowed downward, turned round, *lifting us up to heaven*; therefore, O Christ God, guard us on the heights of Your divine commandments, through the intercession of the Mother of God, and have mercy on us. (Orthros, Feast of the Holy Theophanies of Our Lord Jesus Christ)¹¹

According to primitive baptismal catechesis, such as that of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, the Lord, emerging from the waters of the Jordan, inaugurates the path of the elevation of the souls of the redeemed to the heights of the heavenly kingdom.¹² The ascension is accomplished by climbing the "steps" of the Passion: indeed, in contemplating the mystery of the Cross, homiletic and liturgical texts attribute the image of *the ladder* to the Cross itself, emphasizing the fulfillment of the prophecy announced in the vision of the Patriarch Jacob:

O extraordinary miracle! The breadth and length of the Cross are equal to heaven, for by divine grace it sanctifies the universe. In it the barbarian nations are conquered, by it the scepters of rulers are firmly established. O *divine ladder by which we ascend to heaven*, exalting with songs Christ the Lord! (Orthros, Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross)¹³

Come, faithful, let us worship the life-giving tree: Christ, the King of glory, who voluntarily stretched out His hands upon it, *has raised us to the ancient beatitude*, whom the enemy once made exiles from God, despoiling us by pleasure. (Orthros, Idiomela of Emperor Leo, Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross)¹⁴

¹¹ Odes 1 and 3, Canon of Cosmas, Orthros feast of the Holy Theophany of Our Lord Jesus Christ, in *Anthologhion*, I, 1274-1275. Our emphasis.

¹² BEINAERT, "Le symbolisme ascensionnel", 47, quoting Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* III, 16, PG 33, 448 B.

¹³ Orthros, ode 9, troparion tone pl. 2. *Anthologhion*, I, 626. Our emphasis.

¹⁴ Orthros, idiomela of Emperor Leo, tone 2. *Anthologhion*, I, 628. Our emphasis.

In the light of the Gospel of John, which interprets the Crucifixion of the Lord as an "exaltation" and "glorification" (cf. *Jn* 8:28; 12:32-33), and of the Letter of St. Paul to the Philippians (cf. *Phil* 2:5-9), the Cross is revealed as a *ladder* that goes both ways:¹⁵ the Son of God, who humbled Himself in the Incarnation, now descends into the abyss of sin and death in order to "lift us up to the ancient blessedness". Having ascended the "ladder" of the Cross, Christ chooses to reopen to humanity the access to new life with the collaboration of the New Eve: with the human nature assumed from the Virgin, He is able descend into the darkness of death to trample it underfoot and annihilate its power:

Death, which came upon our race because of the fruit of the tree, is today destroyed by the Cross, for the curse that affected the whole race in the progenitor is annulled thanks to the offspring of the Mother of God: she we magnify all the powers of heaven. (Orthros, Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross)¹⁶

Christ, who overcame the sting of death and descended into the abyss of Hades to bring to the imprisoned there the good news of their liberation and of the opening of the gates of Paradise, opens the way of salvation by ascending with the human nature to the throne of glory which He had before with the Father:

The sword of fire no longer guards the gate of Eden: the tree of the cross has fallen upon it, to arrest it admirably. The sting of death and the victory of Hades have been driven away, and You have come, my Savior, crying to the inhabitants of Hades: Enter paradise again! (Orthros Sunday of the Adoration of the Cross)¹⁷

¹⁵ MIHOC, "Crucea, adânc al deșertării și scară către cer" [= MIHOC P. V., "Crucea, adânc al deșertării și scară către cer" ("The Cross, abyss of self-emptying and ladder to heaven"), in <https://ziarullumina.ro/teologie-si-spiritualitate/evanghelia-de-duminica/crucea-adanc-al-desertarii-si-scara-cartre-cer-94542.html>], accessed the 18.05.23.

¹⁶ Orthros, ode 9, irmos. *Anthologhion*, I, 624.

¹⁷ Orthros, Ode 6, ikos, Sunday of Adoration of the Cross the third Sunday of fasting of Lent. *Anthologhion*, II, 713. Our emphasis.

Descending from heaven to earth, You took up with You, for You are God, the human nature that was in the prison of Hades, and by Your ascension, O Christ, You took it up to heaven and made it a partaker with You of the throne of Your Father, for You are merciful and the friend of men. (Orthros of the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord)¹⁸

Let us recall the words of the Lord in His conversation with Nicodemus on the subject of rebirth from above (cf. Jn 3:13): "No one has ever ascended into heaven except the Son of Man, who descended from heaven". In this double movement of the descent-ascension of the Redeemer, summarized by the image of the *ladder* of the Cross, the presence of the Mother of God, willed by the Lord, at the foot of the Cross is essential. Although the image of the "ladder" is not explicitly used in reference to the Virgin Mother on Golgotha, the reality of her mission of mediation signified by it is reaffirmed and expanded by the Redeemer Himself: that "yes" that Mary pronounced at the Annunciation is fully renewed on Calvary; her mediation in the mystery of the Incarnation now reaches its climax, when the New Adam chooses to extend the motherhood of the New Eve now to all men. The Virgin Mother, praised in the feast of the Annunciation as the "high ladder that Jacob saw" by which God descended, becomes the mediator of men born by the Holy Spirit from the water and blood that flow from the pierced side of the Redeemer:¹⁹

You have become, O Virgin, the great mountain on which Christ has taken up his abode, as the divine David proclaims; *through you we have been lifted up to heaven*, made sons by the Spirit, O most blessed one. (Theotokos Sunday of the Adoration of the Cross)²⁰

¹⁸ Orthros, kathisma tone pl. 1. *Anthologhion*, III, 446.

¹⁹ MIHOC, "Crucea, adânc al deșertării și scară către cer", in <https://ziarullumina.ro/teologie-si-spiritualitate/evanghelia-de-duminica/crucea-adanc-al-desertarii-si-scara-cartre-cer-94542.html>, accessed the 18.05.23.

²⁰ Orthros, ode 9, theotokion Sunday of the Adoration of the Cross on the third Sunday of fasting of Lent. *Anthologhion*, II, 716. Our emphasis. Here the liturgical text uses another image from the ascension repertoire, that of *the mountain*, in reference to the Virgin Mary.

Come near and draw from the inexhaustible rivers that flow through the grace of the Cross: behold, we see before us the Sacred Wood, fountain of gifts, irrigated with the water and blood of the Sovereign of the Universe, *who voluntarily rose on it and lifted up mortals*. (Troparion Sunday of the Adoration of the Cross)²¹

Toward the Mother who accompanies her crucified Son on Calvary are addressed the petitions of the faithful who trust in her maternal intercession:

To you, O Virgin Mother of God, *who are the mediatrix of the salvation of our race*, we give praise: in the flesh which He assumed from you, accepting to undergo the Passion of the Cross, your Son and our God has redeemed us from corruption, as the friend of men. (Theotokia Apolitikia Anastasima)²²

Since we have no *parresia* for our many sins, O Virgin Mother of God, pray to the One who was born of you. For the prayer of a mother can do much to make the Lord merciful. Do not despise the supplications of sinners, O Most Holy One, for He is merciful and mighty to save, who also agreed to suffer for us. (Theotokion Antiphons of the Passion, Good Friday)²³

The privileged role of the Virgin Mother confirmed by her Son on Golgotha is revealed with renewed power at the moment of the birth of the Church in the Upper Room and is prolonged even after the Dormition of the Mother of God. The Virgin is the first creature to follow the ascending path opened by the Risen Son, having conformed her whole life to that of the Savior; she inaugurates the entrance into the heavenly glory prepared by Christ for every baptized person "reborn from above." After the Passion-glorification of her Son through the cross, from being a *heavenly ladder* for God the Virgin

²¹ Laudes, troparion tone 4, Sunday of the Adoration of the Cross on the third Sunday of fasting of Lent. *Anthologhion*, II, 717. Our emphasis.

²² Theotokia Apolitiki Anastasima, Troparion mode III, *Horologhion*, 771, quoted in *TMPM*, I, 926. Our emphasis.

²³ Theotokion 8 of the Antiphons of the Passion, Good Friday, *Triodion*, Rome, 1879, 666ss., quoted in *TMPM*, I, 931.

Mother becomes a *heavenly ladder* for men by her own example and powerful maternal intercession.²⁴

In your birth you preserved your virginity and in your dormition you did not abandon the world, O Mother of God. You have entered into life as the Mother of life, and *by your intercession* you deliver our souls from death. (Troparion of the Feast of the Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary)²⁵

The great theologian-hymnographers of the late seventh and early eighth centuries, such as Germanus of Constantinople, Andrew of Crete and John Damascene, who as it were closed the Greek Patristic era,²⁶ emphasize the intercessory role of the Mother of God confirmed by Christ at the culmination of His life. We reproduce some excerpts of great poetic beauty from Damascene's homilies composed for the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin:

I was almost leaving out Jacob's ladder (cf. *Gen.* 28:12). Well? Is it not clear to all that it prefigured and represents your image? Just as that one saw heaven united to earth by means of the extreme points of the ladder and the angels descending and ascending along it and He who is truly the Strong One and the Invincible symbolically wrestling with him (cf. *Gen.* 32:25); so also you, *having become the mediator and ladder for the descent to us of God*, who took on the weakness of our substance, embracing it and uniting it intimately to Himself, and made man a spirit that sees (cf. *Gen.* 32:31), have reunited what was divided. Therefore the angels came down to Him to serve Him (cf. *Mt.* 4:11) as God and Lord, and men, leading an evangelical life, are lifted up to heaven. (Homily I on the Dormition)²⁷

²⁴ MIHOC, “Crucea, adânc al deșertării și scară către cer”, in <https://ziarullumina.ro/teologie-si-spiritualitate/evanghelia-de-duminica/crucea-adanc-al-desertarii-si-scara-cartre-cer-94542.html>, accessed the 18.05.23.

²⁵ *Apolitikion* for the feast of the Dormition of the Holy Mother of God, *TMPM*, I, 939, quoting *Menea*, VI, 40. Our emphasis.

²⁶ TONIOLO E., “Padri della Chiesa”, in DE FIORES S. - DE MEO S., *Nuovo Dizionario di Mariologia*, Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo 1983, 1079.

²⁷ John Damascene, *Homily I on the Dormition*, 8; *TMPM*, II, 515; *PG* 96, 699-722. Our emphasis.

The hymnographer contemplates the Virgin as the compendium and fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, dwelling on the image of *the ladder* at the end of his homily: ladder-mediation for God's descent to man and ladder for man's elevation to God. Significantly, in other homiletic compositions, the author speaks of the Mother of God's passage to eternal life using the image of death as a ladder to reach immortality. The Mother follows and conforms to the path traced out by her Son, which is the only possible path to full life: the ascent to heaven presupposes the descent into death,²⁸ thanks to the saving action of the Risen Lord, death loses its sting and can neither hold back nor corrupt the flesh of the Ever-Virgin, but is transformed into an instrument, a "ladder," to enter life:

Today *the symbolic and living ladder, by which the Most High, once descended, made Himself visible on earth and lived with men, using death as a ladder has ascended from earth to heaven.* (Homily III on the Dormition)²⁹

The Blessed Mother, who opens the way to the heavenly homeland and intercedes for all humanity, is praised with gratitude by the mouths of the progenitors Adam and Eve in the name of all the redeemed:

Then, yes, Adam and Eve, the progenitors of the lineage, with lips full of joy, cried out loudly: 'Blessed are you, O daughter, who has blotted out for us the penalty of transgression! (...) We had closed the Garden of Paradise, but You have made the Tree of Life accessible. Because of us, from the good things had come pains; because of you from pains greater goods have returned to us. And how will you taste death, o you who are immaculate? For you death will be a bridge to life, *a ladder to heaven*, a passage to immortality. (Sermon II on the Dormition)³⁰

²⁸ BEINAERT, "Le symbolisme ascensionnel", 48.

²⁹ John Damascene, *Homily III on the Dormition*, 2; *TMPM*, II, 538; *PG* 96, 753-761. Our emphasis.

³⁰ John Damascene, *Homily II on the Dormition*, 8; *TMPM*, II, 526-527; *PG* 96, 721-754. Our emphasis.

Iconographic references

The depiction of the Ladder of Jacob's Dream is found sporadically in early Christian iconography, both within the funerary scope (table 1) and in that of ordinary worship church-buildings for as early as the IVth century,³¹ as an expression of the Patristic typological reading of Old Testament passages illuminating the mystery of the Incarnation.³²

The abundant homiletic and hymnic literature, which devoted special attention to typological Marian images during the Christmas season, finds an iconographic synthesis in the depictions of illustrated

³¹ NUZZO D., "Giacobbe", in BISCONTI F., *Temi di iconografia paleocristiana*, Città del Vaticano, 2000, 188-190. See also the reliefs of some sarcophagi such as the one from the catacomb of St. Sebastian, which dates from the IVth century. For the monumental sphere of ordinary buildings of worship, the scholar mentions the mosaics of the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome from the early Vth century (the scene is the result of later restorations, which most likely respected the original scene), or the mosaic depictions (now lost) of the Vth century basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. Another work dating from the IVth century, this time a minor art object, is the ivory Brescia Casket reserved in the Civic Art and History Museum. See also CRIPPA M.A. - ZIBAWI M., *Early Christian Art. L'arte paleocristiana. Visione e spazio liturgico*, Jaca Book 1998, Milan, 170, table 56.

³² GRABAR A., *L'arte paleocristiana*, Rizzoli 1967, Milano, 230-231. The antecedent of Christian depictions is the fresco on the Septentrional wall of the Synagogue of Dura Europos, Syria, dating from the first half of the IIIrd century. In the synagogue's iconographic program as a whole, the depiction of Jacob's Dream is part of the cycle of narrative scenes dedicated to the providential history of Israel, in which Yahweh's universal sovereignty is manifested, assuring His saving intervention and revealed in the promised messianic kingdom. See also GRABAR A., "Le thème religieux des fresques de la Synagogue de Doura (245-256 après J.C.)," in *L'art de la fin de l'Antiquité et du Moyen Age*, Paris, Collège de France 1968, II, 59. 689-734, table 6; *Revue de l'histoire des Religions*, CXXIII, 2-3, et CXXIV, 1, 1941; *Las vías de la creación en la iconografía cristiana*, Alianza, Madrid 2003, 96. The scholar recognizes in the composition of the scene inspiration from Daniel's vision of the four beasts, symbolizing the four universal kingdoms, as a reference to the establishment of the Messiah's kingdom after the fall of the last of these four impious kingdoms, the kingdom of Edom. See also BIANCHI D., "Il sogno della scala da Giacobbe a Giovanni Climaco: un percorso tra arte ebraica e cristiana", in BARICCI E., *Sogno e surreale nella letteratura e nelle arti ebraiche*, *Consonanze* 5, (2019), 186ff.

manuscripts from the ninth century onward (table 2),³³ and knows a significant development in the XIIth-XIIth centuries in both East and West. For the East we mention the miniatures in the illustrated manuscripts of the Homilies on the Virgin, composed by James, monk of the monastery of Kokkinobaphos.³⁴ In these miniatures placed as frontispieces before each of the homilies (distinct from the narrative scenes that illustrate the text), the depiction of Jacob's Dream and the vision of the Heavenly Ladder precede the sermon on the Nativity of the Virgin (table 3):³⁵ the ladder that rests on the ground, on the stone

³³ SCHILLER, *Iconography* [= SCHILLER G., *Iconography of Christian Art*, Greenwich 1972], I, 13, 71; NERSESSIAN, "Iconography of Paraccesion" [= NERSESSIAN S., "Program and Iconography of Paraccesion", in UNDERWOOD P., *The Kariye Djami*, New York 1966], 311. The oldest preserved depiction of four of the most common prefigurations dates back to the IXth century: this is the Homilies manuscript of Gregory of Nazianzus MS Paris gr. 510, which depicts the Burning Bush, the Flowering Rod of Aaron, the Closed Door and Gideon's Fleece on the same page where the Nativity scene appears; the depiction of the Jacob's Dream Ladder theme precedes Homily 28 "On Theology," which interprets the Genesis 28:10-15 passage in relation to the mystery of the Incarnation (the angel represents the Word made man, the stone is Christ consecrated for us), without explicitly alluding to the Virgin Mother of God. See BRUBAKER, *Vision and meaning* [= BRUBAKER L., *Vision and meaning in ninth-century Byzantium. Image and exegesis in the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001], 207-209. See also GOTIA, "L'Annunciazione con simboli profetici" [= GOTIA I., "L'Annunciazione con simboli profetici. Le Porte Regali dell'iconostasi della cattedrale della Santissima Trinità di Blaj, Romania", *STUDIA UBB THEOL. CATH.*, LXIII, 1-2, (2018)], 105-144. For the XIth-XIIth centuries, the illustrations in the Evangelary of Vysehrad, Prague (1085-1086), those in the Legendary of Citeaux (1110-1120) or those in the Stammheim Missal (1160-1180) bear witness to this for the West.

³⁴ NERSESSIAN, "Iconography of Paraccesion", 312. There are preserved two copies of these manuscripts: Parisinus gr. 1208 and Vaticanus gr. 1162. See also GRABAR, "Les Sources peintures byzantins des XIII^e- XIV^e siècles" [= A. GRABAR, "Les sources des peintures byzantins des XIII^e-XIV^e siècles", *CabArch* 12 (1962)], 351-380.

³⁵ NERSESSIAN, "Iconography of Paraccesion", 312. The other Old Testament Marian prefigurations depicted are: Moses in front of the Burning Bush, which precedes the sermon on the Presentation in the Temple; Moses distributing the staffs to the high priests and the Flowering Staff to Aaron is the frontispiece for the sermon on the Visitation; and the miracle of Gideon's fleece of wool is the frontispiece for the sermon on the Annunciation.

that Jacob placed it as a pillow, rises up to heaven from where the Word sends His angels to bring His saving message to mankind.

Also dating to the same period is the icon of the Virgin Kykotissa from the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai (table 4), which associates the mystery of the Incarnation with Old Testament prefigurations.³⁶ The enthroned Virgin with the Child is depicted in the center, while the upper part of the composition represents Christ in glory, flanked by the four living beings and four seraphim; all around are arranged on five levels the paired figures of the prophets and patriarchs.³⁷ Although these are portrayed accompanied only by the symbol of their prophecies or the scroll with the text of their vaticinium,³⁸ for Jacob the iconographer chose to illustrate the context of the vision, with the sleeping patriarch lying on the ground, with an angel ascending the rungs of the ladder towards heaven. Moreover, the interpretive key to the icon's composition is provided by the

³⁶ IDEM, 313. This Constantinopolitan icon of the enthroned Virgin and Child, called Kykkotissa, is a copy of another icon of the Virgin, sent by Emperor Alexios Comnenos to the Kykko monastery in Cyprus. See WEITZMANN, 'The Icon [= WEITZMANN K., *The Icon*, Evans Brothers Limited, London, 1982], 17. See also the twelfth-century icon of the Virgin Kykkotissa from Mount Athos (now in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia), and which bears strong compositional and stylistic similarities to the icon of the Virgin Kykkotyssa from Mon. St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. Both icons depict the enthroned Virgin and Child, surrounded by prophets with Marian symbols. See PIATNITSKY, BADDLY, BRUNNER, *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia* [= PIATNITSKY Y., BADDLY O., BRUNNER E., *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia. Orthodox Art from the sixth to the twentieth century*, St. Catherine Foundation, London, 2000], 110, table B 90.

³⁷ PIATNITSKY, BADDLY, BRUNNER, *Sinai, Byzantium, Russia*, 110. Significantly, the icon's compositional scheme seems to suggest the arrangement of the monumental iconographic program of a church interior: Christ in Glory in the dome, the Virgin and Child in the apse, and Joachim, Anne, and the prophets on the side walls.

³⁸ IDEM. The other patriarchs and prophets depicted are: Moses with the burning bush, Aaron, Ezekiel with the closed door and David with the temple, Balaam points to the star, Habakkuk with the mountain, Isaiah with a cherubim purifying his mouth with the burning carbuncle, Daniel with the stone detached from the mountain, Gideon with the fleece of wool.

inscription placed under the throne of the Virgin with the Child, taken from the Hymn on the Nativity of Mary composed by Roman the Melodist: "Joachim and Ann conceived, Adam and Eve were set free."³⁹ The epigraph, interpreted in connection with the scene of the vision of Jacob's Ladder, would take on the meaning of liberation through the Savior born of the Virgin Mother, who makes possible again man's access to communion with God.

In monumental iconography, we note, on the one hand, that in various church buildings the representation of Jacob's Ladder was included in the extended cycle of Old Testament scenes, arranged in the upper register of the side walls of the nave, which narrates the salvation story of the First Covenant, in parallel with the cycle of New Testament scenes from the life of Christ: this is the case with mosaics of Santa Maria Nuova cathedral in Monreale (table 5), or with those in the Palatine Chapel in Palermo, both dating from the XIIth century and found in Sicily.⁴⁰

On the other hand, we notice, as early as the XIth century, a tendency to reserve for the representation of Jacob's Ladder certain privileged placements, with the intention of emphasizing an explicit connection with the mystery of the Incarnation contemplated in the liturgical

³⁹ THOMAS, "Christian in the Islamic East" [= THOMAS T. K., "Christian in the Islamic East", in EVANS H. C. –WIXOM W. D., *The glory of Byzantium. Art and culture of the Middle Byzantine Era*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1997], 372, table 244.

⁴⁰ Other examples: the frescoes of the Marcellina church (Tivoli, Italia, XIIth-XIIIth century); the XIth century frescoes of Saint Angelo in formis basilica, Italy. See QUATTROCCHI, "Strategie artistiche" [= QUATTROCCHI C., "Strategie artistiche per la costruzione ecclesiologica del *patrimonium sancti Petri*. Tre cicli biblici nell'Italia mediana fra XII e XIII secolo", in SCIREA F. *L'Esegesi in figura. Cicli dell'Antico Testamento nella pittura murale medievale*, Publications de l'École française de Rome, 2022], 231-254, footnote 34. <http://books.openedition.org/efr/5030B>. These monuments continue a pattern of arrangement of monumental iconographic programs found as early as the Vth century, as in the case of the mosaics of the basilica Santa Maria Maggiore and that of St. Paul's Outside the Walls, both in Rome. See here footnote 31.

context. Thus we find it depicted in the area of the sanctuary of the cathedral of St. Sophia in Ohrid (1037-1056), Macedonia, in the upper register of the northern side wall (table 6), along with another Old Testament scene (The three Hebrew children in the furnace) and two scenes from the life of St. Basil the Great (St. Basil celebrating the Divine Liturgy and the Vision of St. Basil); on the southern wall of the sanctuary two Old Testament scenes from the life of Abraham (The hospitality of Abraham and the Sacrifice of Isaac, each divided into two episodes) are depicted in parallel.⁴¹ This iconographic choice underscores the significance of the two closely related central themes present in the sanctuary's iconography, namely, the Incarnation (the Virgin Mother enthroned with the Child Jesus, in the upper register of the apse) and the Eucharistic Sacrifice (Christ celebrating the heavenly Divine Liturgy in the presence of the apostles, in the central register of the apse).⁴² Dwelling especially on the interpretation of the scene of the Ladder of Jacob's dream, according to André Grabar's observation, the mystery of the communion of heaven and earth announced in the Old Testament episode is realized through the mediation of the Virgin Mary in the Incarnation, when the divine and the human are united, a mystery that is prolonged in the bloodless Eucharistic sacrifice.⁴³

Let us mention some other later examples with the depiction of Jacob's Ladder in the Proskomidia of the Protaton monastery church in Mount Athos (XIVth century) and the contemporary fresco in the Dečani

⁴¹ GRABAR, "Sainte Sophie d'Ohrid" [= GRABAR A., "Les peintures murales dans le choeur de Sainte Sophie d'Ohrid", *CahArch* 15 (1965)], 260-262. See also QUATTROCCHI, "Strategie artistica", footnote 34.

⁴² GRABAR, "Sainte Sophie d'Ohrid", 259. The scholar interprets this scene as a depiction of the Proskomedia prayer that the priest utters after the Great Entrance procession during the Divine Liturgy.

⁴³ IDEM, 261.

monastery church in Serbia (table 7)⁴⁴ in the same location:⁴⁵ the visual connection between this sanctuary space where the priest prepares the Eucharistic gifts of bread and wine for the celebration of the Divine Liturgy and the painted image of the Old Testament passage reflects the union between the prophesied mystery of the Incarnation and its sacramental actualization in the liturgical celebration. Although in Protaton's fresco the ladder resting on the earth reaches the sky indicated only by the luminous clypeus, at Dečani in the celestial sphere the figure of the Virgin Mary is depicted in a prayerful attitude, prefiguring the realization of the mystery of the Incarnation through her response of assent to the divine will.

Another privileged location for the representation of Jacob's Ladder is that of the *narthex* (or that of the *exonarthex*), which provides access toward the nave of the church building. This passage area between the profane space and sacred space symbolizes the earth-heaven passage and is equivalent in meaning to the facade, the door and the architectural barrier between the nave and the sanctuary.⁴⁶ We recall the frescoes of the church St. Mary Peribleptos in Ohrid (today St. Clement's, 1294-1295)⁴⁷ (table 8) and the slightly later Paraclesion frescoes of the Church of the Holy Savior of Chora in Constantinople (today Kariye Djami in Istanbul, Turkey, 1315-1320) (table 10).⁴⁸ In

⁴⁴ ȘTEFĂNESCU, *L'illustration des Liturgies* [= ȘTEFĂNESCU I. D., *L'illustration des Liturgies dans l'art de Byzance et de l'Orient*, Bruxelles, Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientale, 1936], II, 133-134.

⁴⁵ www.decani.org/en/photo-albums-church/decani-frescoes/fresco-cycles/prophecy-of-salvation, accessed il 14.01.2024.

⁴⁶ CHAMPEAUX – STERCKX, *Symboles*, 152. See also MUZJ, *Mistagogia* [= MUZJ M. G., *Mistagogia ed edificio ecclesiale*, Class taught at the Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Rome, 2006], 26.

⁴⁷ SCHROEDER, "Looking with words and images" [= SCHROEDER R., "Looking with words and images: staging monastic contemplation in a late Byzantine church", in *Word & Image* 28:2 (2012)], 117-134, table 3.

⁴⁸ NERSESSIAN, "Iconography of Paraclesion", 311 ss. The scholar also mentions the frescoes in the northern portico of the church of St. Sophia in Trebizond, Turkey, from 1260, depicting the Ladder of Jacob's Dream, Jacob's Struggle with the Angel, the Burning Bush, the Tree of Jesse's and the Hospitality of Abraham. In the

Ohrid the glorious figure of the winged Christ Emmanuel, enclosed within a clypeus sustained by four angels, stands out in the center of the vault, while on the tympanum above the central door one can see the depiction of the Christmas stichera (table 9), with the Virgin Mother enthroned with the Blessing Child Jesus: the shepherds, the magi, the angels, the personifications of the earth and the desert, along with the assembly of the Church, surround the throne of the Virgin, each offering their gifts, as indicated in the text of the Christmas hymn; then, the scenes decorating the other walls of the narthex form a cycle of typologic compositions inspired by Old Testament passages, and recall the role of the Virgin in the economy of salvation as the instrument of the Incarnation: Moses before the burning bush; the Ladder of Jacob's dream (in the tympanum of the west wall); Nebuchadnezzar's dream with the stone detached from the mountain and Daniel explaining the dream to him; Moses and Aaron before the Tabernacle of Meeting; Ezekiel's Closed Door and the episode of the angel purifying Isaiah's lips with burning coal; Wisdom built herself a dwelling place; Solomon's bed.⁴⁹

Significantly, in each of these typological images (also present in a concise formula in the icon of the Virgin Kykotissa of the Monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai mentioned earlier) there is an explicit reference to the mystery of the Incarnation through the depiction of the Mother of God within a clypeus (either half-length alone or with

exonarthex of the Church of the Holy Apostles in Salonica, frescoes from the late XIVth-early XVth century depict, in addition to the Ladder of Jacob's Dream (northeast wall), the Tree of Jesse, the Tent of Meeting, Gideon with Wool, and the Burning Bush. See also www.journeymacedonia.com/churchmonasteries/ohrid-clement-our-lady-the-most-glorious/nggallery, accessed the 26.11.2023. The depiction of Jacob's Dream Ladder and "Wisdom who built herself a house" is also mentioned in the iconographic program of the Western Chapel of St. Theodore Stratilate Church in Novgorod, Russia, dating from the late XIVth century. See LAZAREV V., *L'arte dell'antica Russia. Mosaici e affreschi*, Jaca Book, Milano 2000, 280-281.

⁴⁹ NERSESIAN, "Iconography of Paraclesion", 314.

the Child Jesus),⁵⁰ or, as in the scene of Jacob's Ladder, through the depiction of Christ alone, placed in the clypeus of the celestial sphere.

At Chora, the dome of the Paraclesion hosts the medallion of the Virgin with the Emmanuel at half-length, surrounded by angels, while the following Old Testament prefigurations are deployed in the lower levels: along with the scene of the Ladder of Jacob's dream and that of God's revelation to Moses in the burning bush (paired on the same north-east tympanum of the Paraclesion), the other compositions center mainly on the theme of the entry of the Ark of the Covenant into the Holy of Holies (the procession with the Ark of the Covenant, the procession with the sacred vessels of the Tabernacle, Solomon and the people of Israel before the Temple, the deposition of the Ark in the Holy of Holies, Aaron and his sons before the altar). Therefore, the role of the Mother of God to be the Ark of the New Covenant in which the incarnate Word of God dwells and to mediate man's entry into the heavenly Tabernacle is emphasized.⁵¹

Before going further, it should be mentioned that in the same period of the XIIIth-XIVth centuries the narthex (or exonarthex) area of the church building was also assigned to the depiction of various liturgical

⁵⁰ In the composition with the Tent of Meeting, the clypeus with the Virgin is depicted several times: on the Ark of the Covenant, on the urn with the manna, on the menorah and on the altar.

⁵¹ NERSESIAN, "Iconography of Paraclesion", 317ss. In addition to the scenes mentioned above, the prophecy of *Isaiah* 37:21 and the defeat of the Assyrians through the intervention of the archangel Michael is also depicted, probably as an expression of the personal devotion of the commissioner Theodore Metochites to the archangel St. Michael. Then, according to scholar Sirarpie der Nersessian observations, the emphasis on the role of "Ark" and "Temple of God" assigned to the Virgin Mary and indicated by the Old Testament typological images of the Paraclesion is also present in the four scenes grouped in the central axis between the two narthexes of the church, which are The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple, The Virgin in the Temple receiving "the bread of the angels," The Virgin Instructed in the Temple, and The Virgin receiving purple to weave the temple veil. See also anche ARYUREK E., "The Marian iconography of the west bay in the Paraclesion of Kariye", in *Sanat Triji Yilligi* XV, Istanbul 2002, 2-4.

hymns of the Christmas cycle (as we have already seen in the case of the church St. Mary Peribleptos in Ohrid),⁵² and that they often include references to the image of Jacob's Ladder in a more or less succinct formula. In Prizren (1308), for example, in the exonarthex of the church of Bogorodica Ljeviska, Serbia, we find in addition to the extended scene of Jacob's Ladder (on the gable of the northern bay) the composition of the Tree of Jesse and that inspired by the Christmas hymn "From on high the prophets" with the figures of the prophets with the symbols of their prophecies (including Jacob with the symbol of the ladder) grouped around the figure of the Virgin with the Child in half-length in the tympanum above the door leading toward the nave of the church.⁵³ In the exonarthex of the Church of the Virgin Odigitria of the Patriarchate of Pec, Serbia (1334), on the intrados of the arch placed south of the tympanum with the Virgin Source of Life above the doorway are unfolded the figures of six prophets with their

⁵² SENDLER, *Icone Madre di Dio* [= SENDLER E., *Le icone bizantine della Madre di Dio*, San Paolo, Torino 1995], 177-207. See also GRABAR, "Origine" [= GRABAR A., "L'origine des façades peintes des églises moldaves", *AAM*, 1968, II], 906 ; DUFRENNE S., "L'Enrichissement du programme iconographique dans les églises byzantines du XIII^{ème} siècle", in DJURIC V., *L'Art byzantin du XIII^{ème} siècle*. Symposium de Sopocani, Beograd 1967, 43. The liturgical feasts to which these images correspond are the two Sundays preceding Christmas, namely, the Lord's Ancestors Sunday and Christ's Genealogy Sunday. The liturgical texts for the Sunday of the Lord's Ancestors were composed in the mid-XIth century by Christopher of Mytilene and inserted in the XIIIth century in the Menaion for the month of December. See UNDERWOOD, *Kariye Djami* [= UNDERWOOD P., *The Kariye Djami*, New York 1966], 54.

⁵³ NERSESSIAN, "Iconography of Paraclesion", 315. For a more in-depth analysis on the theme of the depiction of the hymns "From Above the Prophets" and the Tree of Jesse see GOTIA, "L'Annunciazione con simboli profetici", 105-144; IDEM, *Quale è la nostra origine? L'Albero di Iesse e l'Iconostasi della Cattedrale della Santissima Trinità di Blaj, Romania*, in *Studi sull'Oriente Cristiano*, 22.1(2018), Roma], 143-169. In great probability, the iconographic motif of the sleeping Jesse from whose side the trunk of his lineage is born (*Isaiah* 11:1) followed the compositional pattern of the scene with Jacob's Dream. See SCHILLER, *Iconography*, I, 17.

symbols, with Jacob standing pointing to the ladder that reaches to the celestial sphere (table 11).⁵⁴

The choice of the location assigned for representation of these iconographic compositions centered on the mystery of the Incarnation is particularly significant: in this zone of transition from profane to sacred space, iconography points toward the mystery of the descent of the Word of God from heaven to earth through the mediation of the Virgin Mother, with a view to the restoration of the communion of man with God. With the movement initiated by the passage from the narthex toward the nave of the church building, symbolizing Christ's descent and entrance into the reality of the human condition that He assumes and saves, is joined by the ascending movement, which reaches its culmination in the zone of passage between the nave and the sanctuary (horizontally) and between the nave and the dome (vertically), and which symbolizes the passage from the earthly to the heavenly sphere.⁵⁵ The re-opening of the access between the two spheres is made possible by the Savior's entry into the heavenly sanctuary through the "veil" of His flesh offered as a sacrifice on the altar of the cross and glorified in the resurrection. When in the apex of the architectural barrier between the two spaces stands the cross, it is made manifest that it is true "ladder" connecting the two worlds by

⁵⁴ NERSESSIAN, "Iconography of Paraclesion", 316. See also www.blagofund.org/Archives/Pec/Narthex/Pictures/EasterNave/5thEasternArch/IMG_3969.html, accessed the 18.01.2024. The most precise location is the intrados of the south arch of the fifth bay of the eastern nave of the exonarthex. The iconographer placed the celestial sphere in the center of the intrados and arranged the figure of Jacob on one side and the figure of Ezekiel with his symbols on the other, so that the staircase and the door touch the celestial sphere. On the south arch are depicted scenes from the Menologion of Dec. 25-28, with the Nativity of Christ in the upper register, then the Phunga in Egypt, the martyrdom of St. Stephen the deacon, and the 20000 martyrs of Nicomedia.

⁵⁵ SCHNEIDER, "Le haut et le bas" [= SCHNEIDER P., "Le haut et le bas. Réflexions sur l'architecture proto-chrétienne et byzantine", *Esprit* 200 (1964)], 23-40. CHAMPEAUX – STERCKX, *Symboles*, 128. MUZJ M. G., *Visione e presenza* [= MUZJ M. G., *Visione e presenza*, Milano, Matriona, 1995], 55.

means of that two-way movement: the descent into the abism of death and the victorious ascent to heaven.⁵⁶

We point out that, especially from the XIIIth-XIVth centuries onward, an iconographic interpretation of the Passion cycle spread in the Byzantine sphere, according to which Christ is depicted in the act of climbing the cross, ascending on a ladder that rests on the horizontal arm of the cross.⁵⁷ It emphasizes the Savior's willingness in the sacrifice of the Passion and His obedience to the Father's will, according to the words of the Savior Himself: "This is why the Father loves Me: because I give My life, only to take it up again. No one takes it away from Me: I give it from Myself. I have the power to give it and the power to take it back again." (Jn. 10:17-18). We recall, for example, the frescoes in the Church of the Virgin Peribleptos in Ohrid (1295), those in the Church of St. Nicholas in Prilep (1298; table 12), those in the Church of St. George in Staro Nagoricane (1317), all three in Macedonia, or those in the Dochiaruou Monastery on Mount Athos (XVIth century). The scene is part of the Passion cycle reproduced on the side walls of the nave of the church building.

⁵⁶ BEINAERT, "Le symbolisme ascensionnel", 48. See also CHEVALIER – GHEERBRANT, "Scala", 890. Generally, in the Byzantine area the cross crowns the iconostasis, even the most simplified iconostases; however, there are churches that have an iconostasis with only one level, that of the despotic icons, without a cross crowning the architrave, as for example in various churches in Cyprus.

⁵⁷ SCHILLER, *Iconography*, II, 87. This iconographic motif originated in the East and spread to the West, mainly to Italy. The oldest preserved example is a miniature from Vehapar's Armenian Gospel Book, Matenadaran, from the XIth century. See the study of Victoria Emily Jones in www.artandtheology.org/2023/03//29/the-ascent-of-the-cross/, accessed the 18.01.2024. See also MILLET G., *Recherches sur l'iconographie de l'Evangile aux XIV^e, XV^e et XVI^e siècles d'après des monuments de Mistra, de la Macédoine et du Mont Athos*, E. de Boccard, Paris 1960, 388; EORSI A., "Haec scala significat ascensum virtutum. Remarks on the Iconography of Christ mounting the Cross on a Ladder", *Arte Cristiana* LXXXV (1997), 151-166. This parallel between Jacob's ladder with Christ's ascending path to His immolation on the cross and resurrection is echoed in the teaching of the monk St. John Climacus on the Ladder of Paradise, an ascetic path of conformation with the life of Jesus. In the present research we do not dwell on the analysis of this topic, which would require a separate study.

Beneath the cross, on which Christ ascended to "draw all to Him" (cf. *Jn.* 12:32), the Virgin Mother stands in a contemplative-prayerful attitude (tables 13-14). With her upright posture, echoing the vertical of the cross, the Virgin expresses her unreserved assent to her Son's mission⁵⁸ and participates in it, converting herself into the "ladder" that unites heaven and earth. The intercession of the Crucified Lord for the salvation of mankind is joined by the intercession of the Mother: chosen by the Savior to be the New Eve, "mother of the living," Mary accepts with a prayerful gesture her mission to lead the children born "of water and the Spirit" to full communion with God.

This mission is made more explicit in the depiction of the Virgin in the midst of the apostles at the moment of Christ's ascension-glorification, a scene placed on the vault of the sanctuary (as at Panagia Araku of Lagoudera, Cyprus, 1192), or in the lower part of the central dome of the church (as at Hagia Sophia of Thessalonica, IXth century; tables 15-16; or at St. Mark's in Venice, XIIth century), thus on the same vertical axis altar-cross-dome.⁵⁹ As the scholar Maria Giovanna Muzj argues, it is, however, not a contemplation of the historical event of Christ's Ascension into heaven (the presence of the Virgin is not explicitly referred to in the Gospels), but a vision of the invisible presence of the glorious Lord in the midst of His Church.⁶⁰ In the mosaic of Hagia Sophia of Thessalonica, the praying Virgin, in a frontal position, is represented in the midst of the apostles witnessing the theophany, enveloped in the light of the glorious Lord. For the interpretation of the composition, it is important to evoke the fact that, in both

⁵⁸ MUZJ, "Maria e i tempi dell'attesa" [= MUZJ M. G., "Maria e i tempi dell'attesa", *Riparazione mariana* 1991/2], 14-15; IDEM, "La Vergine Madre e la Trinità nell'iconografia cristiana", *Acta Congressus mariologici-mariani interantionalis in civitate Romae anno 2000 celebrati*, Pont. Academia Mariana Internationalis, Città del Vaticano 2004, 466-467.

⁵⁹ GRABAR A., *L'Iconoclasmе byzantin*, Flammarion, Paris 1984, 268, 283. According to Grabar, the church of St. Sophia in Thessalonica is said to be the oldest preserved monument that features the depiction of Christ's Ascension in the dome.

⁶⁰ Muzj, "Maria e i tempi dell'attesa", 15.

homiletic and iconographic reflection, the mystery of Christ's glorification and Ascension to heaven has often been paralleled with Jacob's Dream, as the fulfillment of the prophetic vision.⁶¹ In this light, a new nuance of the meaning of the gesture of Mary's arms opened upward in prayer is revealed: it sums up the attitude of her whole life, that of an active openness to the divine will, translated into that "Yes" to the Savior's descent and entrance into the world in the Incarnation, a faithful "Yes" renewed at every step of the redemptive plan, culminating in the return of the victorious Christ to the Father. He was pleased to resort to the same path, climbing "the steps" of the same "ladder" by which He entered the world, associating until the end of time the Virgin Mother in the saving work through her prayerful mediation.

Finally, I would like to mention a particularly eloquent composition depicting Mary praying in Paradise: in the manuscript Parisinus Grec 1208 (fol. 66r; table 17) with the Marian homilies of James of Kokkinobaphos, already mentioned, the composition structured on three levels summarizes the design of salvation, and depicts Christ the New Adam who descends with the victorious cross into the darkness of death and tramples the infernal Hades, liberates the righteous and ascends, taking with Him into the re-opened Paradise the proto-parents Adam and Eve; in Paradise there is Mary the New Eve in praying attitude: after having inaugurated in the Dormition the path of return to the heavenly homeland, she intercedes with her Son on behalf of humanity still on pilgrimage on earth (right side of lower register).

Conclusion

By this exposition, in which the rich tradition of the Church of the East was explored in its liturgical and iconographic expression, the prophetic image of Jacob's Ladder interpreted in a Marian key allowed us to discover with renewed amazement numerous nuances of the

⁶¹ SCHILLER, *Iconography*, II, 128-130.

mystery of the mediation of the Virgin Mother of God in the plan of salvation. The "Ladder" chosen by the Savior for His descent and entry into the world, Mary the New Eve cooperates throughout her life with the redemptive plan of Christ the New Adam. With an attitude of prayerful openness, the Virgin accompanies her Son to the immolation of the cross and intercedes for the return of lost humanity to communion with God the Father: the path of return is the one opened by the crucified Redeemer, who descends "the steps of the ladder" of the cross to the abyss of Hades and, having conquered death and sin, raises with Himself the progenitors Adam and Eve. Moreover, Mary continues to be a "ladder" for humanity from Paradise as well: by divine will, she is the first creature who followed in body and soul the ascending path opened by her Risen Son, and from being a "heavenly ladder" for God, she becomes a "heavenly ladder" for mankind by her own example and powerful maternal intercession.

Tables of Iconography on the Ladder of Jacob



Table 1. Fresco Hypogeum Dino Compagni street, Cubiculum B, Rome, IVth century.

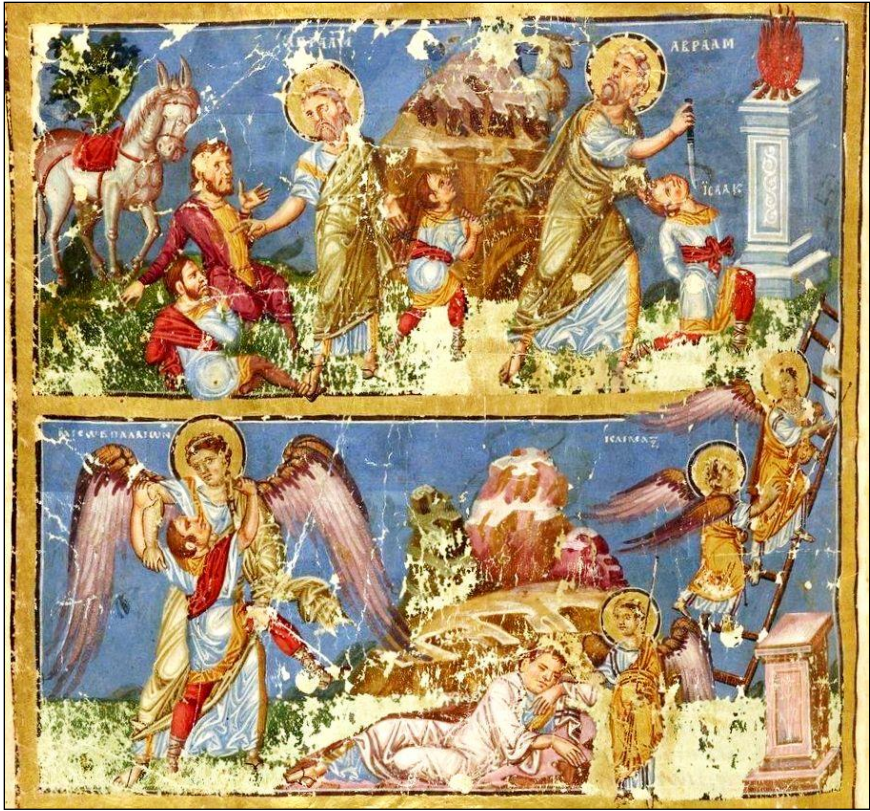


Table 2. Manuscript Homilies Gregory of Nazianzus. MS Paris.gr. 510, f. 174v.
879-882.

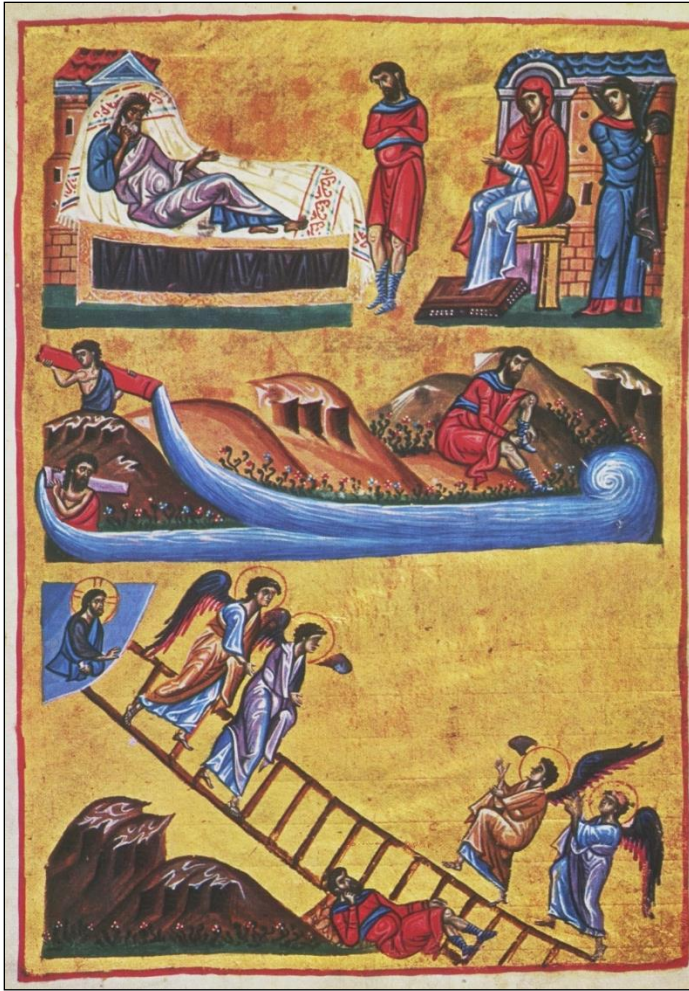


Table 3. Manuscript miniature, Homilies on the Virgin Mary by James of Kokkinobaphos. MS Vaticanus Gr.1162. f.22.v. XIIth century.



Table 4. Icon of the Virgin Kykotissa, S. Catherine of Sinai Monastery. XIIth century.

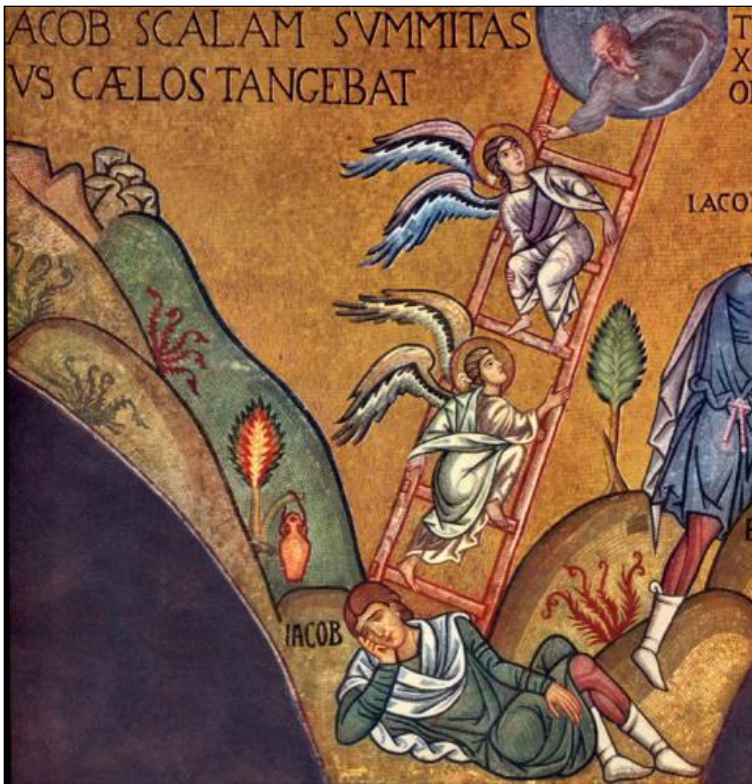


Table 5. Nave Mosaic of the Palatine Chapel, Palermo. 1140.



Table 6. Fresco sanctuary Cathedral St. Sophia Ochrid,
Macedonia. 1037-1056.



Table 7. Fresco Proskomidia of Dečani Monastery Church, Serbia. XIVth century.



Table 8. Narthex fresco of Holy Mary Peribleptos, Ohrid, Macedonia. 1294.



Table 9. Christmas Stichera. Narthex fresco of Holy Mary Peribleptos, Ohrid, Macedonia. 1294-1295.



Table 10. Narthex fresco of the Paraclesion of the Holy Savior's Church of Chora, Constantinople (nowadays Kariye Djami, Istanbul, Turkey). 1315-1320



Table 11. Exonarthex fresco of the Hodigitria Church of the Patriarcat of Pec, Serbia. 1334



Table 12. Nave fresco of Saint Nicholas Church of Prilep, Macedonia. 1298.



Table 13. Iconostasis of the Holy Trinity Greek-Catholic Cathedral of Blaj, Romania. 1765.



Table 14. Iconostasis of the Holy Trinity Greek-Catholic Cathedral of Blaj, Romania. 1765. Detail.



Table 15. Dome mosaic of Hagia Sophia church, Thessalonica, Greece, IXth century.

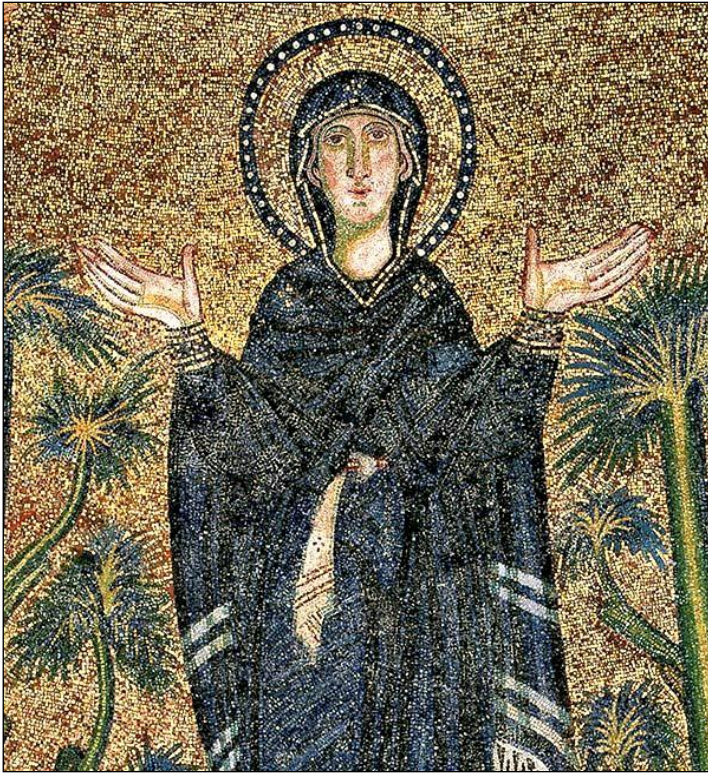


Table 16. Dome mosaic of Hagia Sophia church, Thessalonica, Greece, IXth century. Detail.



Table 17. Manuscript miniature, Homilies on the Virgin Mary by James of Kokkinobaphos. MS Parisinus Grec 1208, f. 66r. XIIth century.