

THE PREPARATION FOR THE INCARNATION OF GOD IN ICONOGRAPHY: THE FRESCO PAINTING “TREE OF JESSE”

Abstract

The study explores the intricate iconographic composition of “The Tree of Jesse,” an important subject in Orthodox Christian art, depicting the genealogy of Jesus Christ. The fresco visually narrates the preparation for the Messiah’s arrival, showcasing the lineage of Christ, Old Testament prophets, and prefigurative scenes that highlight the connection between the Old and New Testaments. Originating in the 12th century, “The Tree of Jesse” became widespread in Orthodox mural programs, with notable examples across the Balkans and Eastern Europe. The study also examines the inclusion of Hellenic philosophers and the Queen of Sheba in these compositions, symbolising the broader divine revelation beyond Israel. Their presence reflects the theological concept that wisdom and prophecies from pagan sources also anticipated Christ’s coming. The iconography serves as a liturgical tool, intertwining biblical and philosophical traditions to emphasise the universal scope of salvation history.



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Introduction

Icon painting brings together the gospel of salvation and the image of salvation (Стоядинов [Stoyadinov] 2009, 2) and this fully applies to the fresco painting that will be discussed – “The Tree of Jesse” [1]. Every dogma finds expression in the icon painting, and through this scene, the entire preparation for the coming of the

long-awaited Messiah is presented – In Israel and in the rest of the pagan world, which is not deprived of God’s providence and care. The whole composition is crowned by Christ, because “all things were created by him, and for him” (Col 1:16, KJV). The horizontal and vertical lines of images of the prophets, prefigurations, and pagans, who reveal the long preparation of the fallen world for the coming of the Living God, are gathered in the image of Christ.

Christ is the hermeneutical key that discovers the meaning of this long journey from Eden to Bethlehem.

“The Tree of Jesse” (or “The Vine of Jesse”) is a complex iconographic composition depicting the ancestors of the Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh, prophets, Old Testament types and their fulfilment (New Testament scenes), Hellenic wise men (sages). The model is directly related to the liturgical life of the Church, depicts the dogmatic teaching about the incarnation of God and the idea of revelation among Israel and the Gentiles before the coming of the Savior. The composition is a visual expression of the unity between the two covenants, clearly expressed in the worship of the Church.

According to researches, the wall painting in the Studenica Monastery (Serbia), dating from the forties of the twelfth century, is considered one of the earliest examples in the Balkans (Серафимова [Serafimova] 2012, 5-6). In the period from the 13th to the 17th century, the “The Tree of Jesse” became a widespread theme in the mural program of Orthodox churches. Samples from this period are found in the monastery “Holy Trinity” in Sopočani, Serbia (ca. 1265); the Church “St. Achilles” in Arile, Serbia (1296); Žiča Monastery, Serbia (1310-1313); the Monastery of Visoki Dečani in Kosovo (1348-1350); the Monastery “St. Mother of God Mavriotissa” (*Μονή Παναγίας Μαυριώτισσας*) in Kastoria (1259–1265); the Church “St. Sophia” in Trebizond (now Trabzon) (1260-1270); the Church “St. Apostles” in Thessaloniki [2] (after 1315); the Church “St. Peter and Paul” in V. Tarnovo (end of the 15th century); in the Athos Monasteries – the Great Lavra (1536) and Dohiar (1568); the refectory (dining room) of the Bachkovo Monastery (1623), Kučevište Monastery “St. Archangels Michael and Gabriel” in North Macedonia (1630-1631), the Church of the Nativity of Christ in Arbanasi (1681) [3]. Numerous samples of the composition are preserved in the Moldavian Monasteries – Humor (1530-1535), Suceava (1532-1534), Moldovița (1537), Voroneț (1547) and Sucevița (ca. 1600) (see more Taylor 1980/1981, 130).

Suzy Dufrenne, in her article dedicated to the iconographic program of Byzantine churches from the 13th century, points out that at the time when the Sopočani

Monastery was painted, images from the Old Testament entered to enrich the narthexes (Dufrenne 1967, 43 – cited by Taylor 1980/1981, 165). Just as the Old Testament prophets foretold the incarnation and redemptive suffering of the Savior, so the narthex and side galleries of the temple stand *before* and lead to *the place* where the sacrament of the Eucharist is performed (see also Taylor 1980/1981, 166). As architecturally the narthex and galleries lead to the nave and altar, so do the frescoes of these parts are an introduction to salvation.



Tree of Jesse (detail). The image is cited by: Прашков, Любен. Църквата „Рождество Христово“ в Арбанаси. С., 1979, с. 111, ил. 94. [Lyuben Prashkov, The Church of the Nativity in Arbanasi (Sofia, 1979), 111, ill. 94].

The main text from the Scriptures, from which the composition “The Tree of Jesse” originates, is Isaiah’s prophecy – “And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots” (Is 11:1, KJV). The image can also be connected with other texts in the Scriptures that relate the Messiah to the Jesse (David) family and texts from the hymnography. In the Revelation, the Lord Jesus Christ is called “the root and seed of David” (Rev 22:16), and the prophecy of Isaiah is also quoted by the Apostle Paul: “The root of Jesse will exist” (Rom 15:12). The main

New Testament texts with which the composition is connected are the two genealogies of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospels (Mt 1:1-17; Lk 3:23-38).

The pericope from the book of Isaiah (11:1-10) is one of the paroimias for the Nativity of Christ. The first Christological interpretations of this prophecy of Isaiah were found in the “Dialog with Trypho” by St. Justin Martyr (Св. Иустин Философ и мученик [St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 86,87,126] 1892 (1995), 274-7, 335-7) and “Against Heresies” and “Proof of the Apostolic Preaching” by St. Irenaeus of Lyons (St. Irenaeus. *Against Heresies* 533 and 3.17 – cited by Ladouceur 2006, 39). The liturgical texts express the same interpretation of the prophecy – the Holy Virgin is the branch, and the rod and flower is Christ (irmos of the fourth ode of the 1st canon of the Nativity of Christ, 5 ode of the 1st canon of the Nativity of the Virgin).

According to several researchers, the iconography of the “Tree of Jesse” originated in the West. The first examples of the depiction of the Savior’s genealogy could be found as a miniature in the frontal gospels to the text of Mt 1:1 (Codex Aureus of Lorsch, 810) (КВИЛИВИДЗЕ [Kvilividze] 2007, 269) and in a miniature in the Gospel of King Vratislav of 1085-1086 (University Library Prague, Cod. XIV, 1085) (Серафимова [Serafimova] 2012, 5), in which the scene is placed on the same page as the miniature of the prophet Ezekiel’s vision of the closed doors [4]. Despite numerous studies, it is still debatable where and when this pattern originated but it is a fact that around the 12th century “The Tree of Jesse” already appears in manuscripts and from the 13th century in wall paintings (see more in Taylor 1980/1981, 125-176; Серафимова [Serafimova] 2012, 5; McVey 2009, 18).

In his extensive study of the “Tree of Jesse”, Michael Taylor points to eighteen examples – one on the facade of the cathedral in Orvieto from 1262-1264 (Italy), the others in Serbia, Greece, Romania and North Macedonia – sharing common iconographic characteristics, which may lead to the conclusion of the existence of a compositional archetype that appeared ca. 1262–1264 (Taylor 1980/1981, 125). According to Michael Taylor, this archetype had two lines of evolution – western and eastern, with the eastern being richer and more developed (Taylor 1980/1981, 125-76).

In Orthodox iconography, the image of the “The Tree of Jesse” has been known since the 13th century (Серафимова [Serafimova] 2012, 5). Some art critics determine the existence of two variants of the scene in Byzantine art. The basis of one is the genealogy according to Matthew, and in these cases, the pattern is defined as the “Genealogy of Christ” and is considered separately from the “The Tree of Jesse” [5].

In the other version, the ancestors of Christ are depicted, and there are images of prophets, scenes from the Old Testament (mostly with prefigurative characters – Balaam with the star/donkey, the burning bush, Gideon’s fleece, etc.) and the New Testament’s scenes, corresponding to the theme of the incarnation, birth and atoning sacrifice of Christ. The composition can include ancient philosophers, poets, sybill with scrolls. Both versions present the genealogy of Christ – one is more accurate compared to Matthew’s genealogy, and the other is more extended, presenting, along with the kings and prophets, the types and the history before the incarnation. The main vertical of the Tree, which originates from Jesse in all compositions, consists of Old Testament kings, at the top are the figures of the Holy Mother of God and the King of Kings – Christ. This is how the royal ancestry (Серафимова [Serafimova] 2012, 4; McVey 2009, 19) of the “flower from the Jesse root” is visualized (irmos, 4 ode of the 1st canon of the Nativity of Christ).

The iconography of the “Tree of Jesse” is a whole, made up of two thematic circles: Christ’s ancestors in flesh (single figures) and biblical events that are interpreted prefiguratively [6], or as fulfilled messianic prophecies (mainly New Testament scenes such as the Nativity of Christ, descent into hell, etc.). This second thematic circle differs in the samples, although the prefigures are broadly the same, and in some cases have been replaced by similar ones (such as the replacement of the miracle of Gideon’s fleece with Moses and the burning bush – both events are prefigures of Theotokos).

The image has an indisputable liturgical basis and must be interpreted in a liturgical context – the mentioned main texts from the Scriptures are part of the liturgy for the Nativity of Christ (Is 11) and the Sunday before the Nativity of Christ [7]. The more extensive examples of the “Tree of Jesse” are based on a combination of texts from the Scriptures, all of which are typologically interpreted in the Church’s worship, and liturgical texts dedicated to the incarnation of God, and hence to the Theotokos, as a “ladder” by which God descends into the world. For this reason, a large part of the prefigurative images in the composition are of the Holy Virgin (the fleece, Jacob’s ladder, the burning bush, etc.) [8] and point to the incarnation of God.

The images of the Hellenic philosophers and the Queen of Sheba in the composition “Tree of Jesse”

At the base of the composition in Arbanasi are pictured 12 Greek sages and philosophers [9] – Cleomides, Aris, Solon, Diogenes, Pythagoras, Socrates, Homer,

Aristotle, Galen [10], Sibylla, Plato, Plutarch. They are located on both sides of Jesse, six on each side. They hold scrolls with prophecies and, unlike the wall painting in the refectory of the Bachkovo Monastery (1623), they are painted with halos [11]. “Some of the names belong to very famous historical figures of antiquity, others present distorted forms of names that can hardly be positively identified” (Дуйчев [Duychev] 1978, 14). The presence of the philosophers and the Sibyl is a common element of the paintings of the “Tree of Jesse” (Orvieto, Sucevița, Suceava, Kučevište Monastery, the Great Lavra, etc.).



Hellenic philosophers (Tree of Jesse, detail. Jesse's left side.). The image is cited by: Прашков, Любен. Църквата „Рождество Христово“ в Арбанаси. С., 1979, с. 111, ил. 95. [Lyuben Prashkov, The Church of the Nativity in Arbanasi (Sofia, 1979), 111, ill. 95]

The first pagans who appear in the frescoes of the churches are Balaam and Sibyl. One of the earliest images is considered to be that in the church of “St. Achilles” in Arile, Serbia (1296) (Војводић [Vojvodih] 2005; see also Серафимова [Serafimova] 2012, 16), followed by the images of Hellenic sages (Plato, Sibyl [12] and Plutarch) in the Church of “Theotokos Levishka” (Prizren, Kosovo) from 1310 [13]. Until the fall

of Constantinople (1453), Hellenic philosophers were not so often present in frescoes, except for the two examples mentioned above. But in the late Middle Ages, they already became a common part of the “Tree of Jesse” – either as part of the medallions or painted on the side without scrolls (in Sucevița and Suceava, 14 Hellenic sages are depicted in the “Three of Jesse” scene, in Orvieto – 11, in the Great Lavra, the refectory of the Bachkovo Monastery and Arbanasi – 12) (Серафимова [Serafimova] 2012, 17; Taylor 1980/1981, 136). In his Painter’s Manual (*Erminia*) Dionysius of Fournà, after the description of the holy forefathers according to the genealogy and other forefathers, righteous men and women of the Old Testament, also indicates a description of the images of the Hellenic philosophers and their quotes about the incarnation of God (Ерминия [Erminia] 1993, 88-9).

What is the purpose of painting the Hellenic philosophers in a scene showing the genealogy of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Icon painting is not an end in itself, it is part of the liturgical life of the Church and through it, theological ideas are conveyed in images.

First, the place of the patriating of Hellenic philosophers must be clarified: in the case from Arbanasi, the philosophers are under the “Tree”, outside the “branches”. The purpose of the composition is to show the prophecies, types and ancestors in flesh of Christ, therefore the presence of the philosophers under the other images [14] has a connection with the expectation of the Messiah and shows that the pagan nations are not deprived of God’s revelation. This is an idea deeply rooted in Orthodox theology and liturgy. One of the paroimias for the Nativity of Christ (Nm 24:2-3.5-9.17-19) is dedicated to the pagan soothsayer Balaam, who, by God’s instruction, pronounced a blessing over Israel instead of a curse. Another example from the worship showing the revelation among the Gentiles is the healing of the Syrian noble Naaman (2 Kg 5:9-14) – paroimia for Epiphany. Gentiles before Christ are not rejected, but it is assumed that they also receive a revelation that leads to Christ. As Viorel Guliciuc notes in his article devoted to the images of the philosophers in the monastery of Voroneț (Romania), the philosophers and the Sibyl are “the only representatives of the pagan pre-Christian world, who enjoyed the honour of being represented in the outdoor Byzantine painting, together with the prophets and the kings of the Old Testament (Moses, Solomon, David) as portraits/icons of peoples who have not been in Church, but would like to be in it, and wise individuals that have predicted Christ’s living Church. Thus, they

have prepared the intellectual world of their time for the arrival and acceptance of the Messiah” (Guliciuc 2013, 171).

In his extensive study of the “Tree of Jesse” archetype, M. Taylor notes that the Hellenic sages are included because they foretold various events related to Christ. In Voroneţ, “Plato holds a scroll which reads (roughly translated): “Christ is born of Mary. I believe in Him” (Taylor 1980/1981, 136). Taylor defines as the original source of the scrolls the writing “The Prophecies of the Seven Sages” – created probably before 560. In general, the sentences in the scrolls of the Hellenes, depicted in the “Tree of Jesse”, proclaim the “trinitarian nature of God, the incarnation of the Logos and the immaculate Virgin” (see Taylor 1980/1981, 136).

The positioning of the philosophers under the Tree in a horizontal line could also convey the idea of linear and non-linear history, horizontal and vertical. Philosophers are representatives of human time and human linear history, prophets, kings and prefigurative events are located vertically, which can be perceived as a visual expression of non-linear history and time, the history of salvation and the incarnation of God. Such is the understanding of liturgical time, which is beyond our linear human understanding of time. The placement under the ancestors in flesh of the Lord Jesus Christ shows the fruitlessness of human wisdom to lead to Christ, as the Apostle Paul says “For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.” (1 Cor 1:21).

There is complete agreement among the researchers of the “Tree of Jesse” about the influence of apocryphal texts on the depictions of the Hellenic philosophers and especially the scrolls with texts they hold. In her studies devoted to the images of Hellenic sages in Russian Church painting [15] in the 16th-17th century, N.A. Kazakova focuses her attention on the apocryphal work “Prophecies of the Hellenic Sages” (Казакова [Kazakova] 1961, 358-68). I. Franco, the researcher who published the text of the Apocrypha, expressed the opinion that the “Prophecies of the Hellenic Sages” represent a compilation of Byzantine sources [16], “Palæi”, “Sayings of Hermes Trismegistus”, “Words of Aphroditianaë” and the legend “On the twelve Sibyls” (Франко [Franco] 1899, 35 – cited by Казакова [Kazakova] 1961, 358). Later researchers (Щеголев [Shchegolev] 1890-1899, 89-93) noted the presence of the Apocrypha in the articles of the Chronograph [17] and in a number of collections in the 16th-17th century.

Chapter 82 of the Chronograph, entitled “On the Hellenic Sages” begins with a brief introduction that clarifies the point of view of the compilers of the text, namely that

the Hellenic sages also prophesied about God: The Hellenic sages prophesied before the prophets, and God gave them a partial touch of the truth (Казакова [Kazakova] 1961, 359). Then the names of thirteen Hellenic sages are listed, among which are Thucydides, Aristotle, Plato, etc. and the three wise men (the Magi) who came to adore the Christ Child. Their sentences are dedicated to the Trinity and the incarnate Christ (Казакова [Kazakova] 1961, 359). In the transcript of the Chronograph of Guria Tushin (a book writer from the Cyril-Belozher Monastery, ГИБ, №1468) are listed 19 Hellenic sages, among them Homer, Plutarch, Euripides. The three wise men (Magi) are not mentioned, but Joshua son of Sirach and the pagan soothsayer Balaam appear. As N.A. Kazakova notes Tushin's transcript is distinguished by the Chronograph not only by the wise men listed but also by the ideological emphasis in their prophecies. If in the chronographic transcript, the sentences are mainly dedicated to the Trinity and the incarnation of God, here the theme of the incarnation is emphasized more (Казакова [Kazakova] 1961, 360).

Another person who appears in the fresco painting “Tree of Jesse”, also a representative of the pagan world, is the Queen of Sheba. At first glance, the presence of this image in the fresco is surprising and strange, but the explanation is found in the tradition of the Church.

According to the story of 1 Kgs 10:1-10 and 2 Chron 9:1-12, the Queen of Sheba, hearing about Solomon's wisdom, went to Jerusalem with incense, gold and precious stones “to prove him with hard questions” (1 Kgs 10:1-3). She is also mentioned in the New Testament as the “queen of the south” (Mt 12:42; Lk 11:31). Number of traditions and legends have been preserved [18] about the meeting between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. In Arabic legends, she is known as Bilkis (*The Queen of Sheba*, 2000; D.A.H. / П.Н. Савска царица [D.A.H. / П.Н. The Queen of Sheba] 2007, 1204). Flavius Josephus in “Jewish Antiquities” calls her “queen of Egypt and Ethiopia” (Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities* VIII,6,2), mentions her name – Nicaule (Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities* VIII,6,2), and dedicates a chapter of his history to the meeting (Josephus Flavius, *Jewish Antiquities* VIII,6).

In church tradition, the Queen of Sheba is a type of the pagan nations who enter the Church and of the Magi (also pagans) (Brueggemann, 138) who worship the Christ Child. In the interpretations, the narrative from 1 Kgs 10 and 2 Chron 9 connects with Is 60, Song of Songs and the references to the “queen of the south” in Mt 12:42. This is how a complete symbolic interpretation of the Queen of Sheba is formed, which also

becomes an occasion for her to be included among the personalities portrayed in the fresco painting “Tree of Jesse”.



Queen of Sheba (a detail from “The tree of Jesse”). The image is cited by: Прашков, Любен. Църквата „Рождество Христово“ в Арбанаси. С., 1979, с. 111, ил. 94. [Lyuben Prashkov, The Church of the Nativity in Arbanasi (Sofia, 1979), 111, ill. 94]

St Gregory of Nyssa in his interpretation of the book Song of Songs (3:9-4) calls the Queen of Sheba “queen of the Ethiopians” (святител Григорий Нисский. Изъяснение Песни песней Соломона. Беседа 7 [Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *Exposition of the Song of Solomon. Lecture 7: Interpretation of Song. 3:9-4*]1861, 173) and refers to her visit as a foreshadowing of the entrance of the Gentiles into the Church after “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men” (Tit 2:11) (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Exposition of the Song of Solomon. Lecture 7: Interpretation of Song. 3:9-4*]1861, 176). Origen connects the queen of the south from the words of the Savior in Mt 12:42 with the Queen of Sheba and the book Song of Songs. “From the ends of the earth comes the southern queen, the Church, and condemns the people of this generation, i.e. the Jews...she comes from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon,

not He who is glorified in the Old Testament, but He who in the Gospel is more than Solomon.” [19] In interpreting Mt 12:42 emphasizes “And this is this queen of Sheba (Sheba), about whom we read in the scrolls of Kings and Chronicles; she, regardless of the difficulties, left her people and kingdom and came to Judea to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and brought him many gifts. After all, under the names of Nineveh and the Queen of Sheba, the faith of the Gentiles is secretly preferred to the faith of the Israelite people” (Иероним Стридонский [Jerom of Stridon] 1903, 113). According to the Blessed Theodoret, Queen of Sheba, is a type of all well-intentioned and honest pagans who justify themselves without the law (Бл. Феодорит, Толкование на 3 книгу Царствъ [Theodoret of Cyrus, Commentary on 3 Kings] – cited by Плаголев, 54) in the words of the apostle in Rom 2:14-15.

The image of the Queen of Sheba and her meeting with King Solomon is also mentioned in the Apocrypha works, and in some cases she is identified with the Sibyl. Prophecies related to the cross of Christ are also attributed to the queen.

One of the first identifications of the Queen of Sheba with Sibyl belongs to the Byzantine historian and geographer Pausanias (5th century). In Book X of his description of Hellas, in the section devoted to Phocis, he says that after the prophetess Demos “... among the Jews who inhabit northern Palestine, there lived a prophetess named Savva.” They say that her father was Berosus, and her mother was Erymantha. Some consider her a Babylonian, and others call her “an Egyptian Sibyl.” (Павсаний, Описание Эллады. Книга X, 12:5 [Pausanias. Description of Hellas. Book X, 12:5]). A clear identification of the Queen of Sheba with Sibyl in Byzantine literature is also found in the chronicle of monk George (842-887) – “And the Queen of Sheba, whom the Greeks call Sibyl, heard his name (Solomon’s), came in Jerusalem to test him with riddles...” (Chronicle of George the Monk (Chronicle of George Amartola)] 2000, 129). From the writings of the monk George, the identification passes to the “Synopsis historion” of Georgios Cedrenos (also known as “A concise history of the world”) (Baert 2004, 217-8).

In the widespread medieval Apocryphas, the identification of the queen with the Sibyl has already been accepted.

The reason why the Queen of Sheba is present in the composition “The Tree of Jesse” is her interpretation as a type of the Gentiles who enter the Church. A probable influence on the appearance of the image, which does not contradict the above opinion, but is influenced by it, is the identification of the Queen of Sheba with the Sibyl.

As Taylor notes, the images of the three youths in the fiery furnace (Dn 3:15ff.) and the Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10:1ff.) are the two images that are often present in the samples of the East, but are not met in Orvieto, but both images share the conceptual framework already established in the Orvieto scenes (Taylor 1980/1981, 134).

Following the arrangement of the images of the individual persons and scenes, both in the sample in Arbanasi and in the other mentioned samples, we can conclude that the composition develops vertically and shows God's providence for the divine incarnation being prepared. The central vertical axis of the “Tree” is the royal line, in which kings from David to the King of Kings – Christ are painted. On either side of the central line are pictured prefigures or their fulfilment – this is the most visible part of the composition and shows God's providence, which prepares mankind for the coming of the Messiah through real historical events that point to future ones. The following verticals are mainly the prophets who transmitted God's words and predicted various events of the Savior's earthly life. The most peripheral vertical line depicts the forefathers, most of those are included in the genealogies of the two evangelists, Matthew and Luke.

“The Tree of Jesse” in Arbanasi follows the supposed archetype in the prefigurative scenes and the depiction of the Hellenic sages. It is interesting that in this example, at the base of the “Tree” mostly ancestors are painted, with prophets depicted between the branches of the tree (vine) appearing in ascending order between them. In the scene in Arbanasi, the last line is entirely with apostles located on both sides of Christ and represents a kind of counterpoint to the first horizontal lines.

Some examples from the Old Testament personalities and types in the composition “The Tree of Jesse”

The Three Youths in the Fiery Furnace – the pericope is one of the Holy Saturday paroimia, together with the song of the three youths (Dn 3:1-56, Dn 3:57-88 – the song of the youths). The iconographic pattern is presented even in early Christian art. According to the interpretations, the Angel of the Lord, who appears in the fiery furnace, is the second Person of the Holy Trinity. The furnace is sung in the hymnography as prefiguring the womb of the Holy Virgin, which contains the divine fire, but remains untouched: the fertile furnace prefigured the Virgin, like the divine fire, without burning the womb (irmos on the seventh ode of the first canon of the Nativity of the Theotokos) [20].

Moses and the burning bush – this scene is also situated on the first line. Through the miracle of the burning but not burned bush (Ex 3), Moses was called by God to lead his people out of Egyptian slavery. In Exodus 3:14 God is first revealed as the Eternal. The miracle with the bush foreshadows the Holy Mother of God – just as the bush burns, but remains undamaged by the fire, so does the Holy Mother of God remain Virgin: “The shadow of the law passed when Grace came. As the bush burned, yet was not consumed, so the Virgin gave birth, yet remained a virgin. The Righteous Sun has risen instead of a pillar of flame! Instead of Moses, Christ the salvation of our souls.” (dogmatikon, 2 tone). The prophecy about the burning bush (Ex 3:1-8) is one of the paroimias for the Annunciation.

The Angel of the Lord appears to Balaam with the donkey – as in the scenes mentioned above, this one is also on the first line. The Angel of the Lord appearing and speaking to the donkey occurs on Balaam’s way from Mesopotamia to the lands of the Moabite king Balak (Nm 22).

The image of Balaam is one of the persistent images in the “Tree of Jesse” – it is present in the samples from Sopoćani, Arile, Dechani, Moracha, the Great Lavra (Sveta Gora), the Moldavian monasteries (Suceava, Voroneţ, Suceviţa).

The reason why Balaam is depicted in the composition (with the donkey or with the star) is the prophecy he utters about the “star of Jacob” and its interpretation in the Church’s worship as a type of the wise men (the Magi) who bring gifts to the Child and the conversion of the pagans nations, which will follow after the coming of Christ. Images of Balaam are present even in early Christian art – in wall paintings in the catacombs and in reliefs on sarcophagi, where two types of images are found – Balaam with the star (catacombs of Peter and Marcelina in Rome, from the second half of the 3rd and the first half of the 4th centuries), and the appearance of the Angel of the Lord to Balaam (Via Latina catacombs from the 4th century).

Notes

[1] The image in the Church of the Nativity of Christ in Arbanasi village (7 km northern from Veliko Tarnovo) will be used as an example. The fresco is located in the north wall of the narthex. The narthex also served as a women’s ward during time.

[2] The fresco is dated after 1315, badly damaged. It follows quite closely the genealogy of the Matthew gospel. From the prefigurative scenes characteristic of the composition, the vision of Ezekiel, the star of Jacob, the stone cut not by human hands, the anointing of David, the fleece of Gideon, and the receiving of the law from Moses are depicted.

The New Testament scenes are the Nativity of Christ, Meeting of the Lord and Christ's Truth and Justice. In the Middle Ages, the church was the catholicon of a monastery dedicated to the Theotokos and the scene was painted among scenes depicting images of the Virgin Mary. See more: Дионисопулос [Dionysopoulos] 1990, 62-70).

[3] The dating of the scene in Arbanasi is by Мутафов [Mutafov] 2010, 15. For the specified samples, see more: Квилевидзе [Kvilividze] 2007, item 16, 269; Серафимова [Serafimova] 2012, 5-6; Taylor 1980/1981, 125; Мутафов [Mutafov] 2010, 15-19.

[4] Ezk 43:27; 44:1-4 – paroimia for all the feasts of the Mother of God, incl. for the Entrance of the Most Holy Theotokos in the Temple. In the hymnography, it is interpreted as a type of the perpetual virginity of the Mother of God.

[5] The example from the church “St. Peter and Paul” (15th century) in Veliko Tarnovo belongs to this type – see Пенкова [Penkova] 2007, 507-30.

[6] This confirms the liturgical element at the heart of the composition since all depicted Old Testament scenes participate as paroimias or are interpreted in the tradition as types of the incarnation of God.

[7] The liturgical gospel on the Sunday before the Nativity of Christ is the genealogy according to Matthew (Mt 1:1-25).

[8] Suzy Dufrenne, examining the samples in Sopočani and Arile, connects them with the Sunday of the holy forefathers – a liturgical prelude to the Nativity of Christ (Dufrenne 1967, 43 – cited by Taylor 1980/1981, 165). Nikos Dionysopoulos cites S. Dufrenne and connects the image with the Sunday before Nativity of Christ when Mt1:1-25 is read (Дионисопулос [Dionysopoulos] 1990, 69). McVey, in his study of exterior frescoes in Moldavian monasteries, associates the “Tree of Jesse” with the third week of the Great Lent, which ends with the Sunday of the Holy Cross. According to him, the tree in the mural symbolizes the tree of life, which bears Christ as opposed to the Cross. The Lenten Triod speaks of the Cross and of the life found in the birth and crucifixion of Christ (McVey 2009, 20).

[9] The names of the Hellenic sages and philosophers are indicated according to the research of E. Mutafov (Мутафов [Mutafov] 2010, 16), in which he presents an identification, different from what was spread according to the research of Prof. Duychev (Дуйчев [Duychev] 1978).

[10] The famous physician is rarely present in the composition. Except from Arbanasi and Bachkovo, it is also painted in the fresco in the Kučevište Monastery – Серафимова [Serafimova] 2012, 12.

[11] Philosophers are also depicted with nimbus in the Kučevište monastery in North Macedonia, (see Серафимова [Serafimova] 2012, 8), but unlike the scene in Arbanasi, they are included in the branch of the vine, while in “Nativity of Christ” Church in

Arbanasi they are under the tree, outside the branches. The presence of nimbus in the images of the Hellenic philosophers in no way indicates their recognition as saints of the Church. The inscription indicates belonging to the saints, and nowhere are the philosophers signed as saints. The nimbus is a symbol indicating enlightenment. It began to be used late in Christian iconography under the influence of ancient art, where it was a common attribute of emperors. More about nimbus see: Cvetković 2015, 287-99.

[12] Signed as “Sibyl Queen of Ethiopia” – Дуйчев [Duychev] 1978, 30.

[13] At the end of his research, E. Mutafov presents a list of the images of the Hellenic philosophers in chronological order and with their location (Мутафов, 17-18).

[14] In the sample from the Bachkovo Monastery, the philosophers are painted in the “branches”, but again they are on the line of Jesse. In the samples from Moldova, they are placed vertically on both sides of the “tree”. Thus, in all cases, they are on the periphery of the main line of the tree, thus guiding the interpretation of their images.

[15] The earliest depictions of the Hellenic sages and the Sibyl in Russia are found in the gallery of the Annunciation Church in Kremal. The gallery was painted for the first time in 1564, and then in 1648 and partially in 1667. For more on the depictions of the Hellenic sages in Russia, see Казакова [Kazakova] 1961, 365-7.

[16] For the Byzantine manuscripts and transcripts of works dedicated to the Hellenic sages and their prophecies, see Мутафов [Mutafov] 2010, 16-17.

[17] Chronograph or chronographic works are chronicle works that are a compilation of the historical books of the Old Testament, translated Greek chronicles (George Amartolus, John Malala, etc.) and other historical works (e.g. the “The Jewish War” by Flavius Josephus). They are widespread in Russia and partly in Bulgaria (e.g. Bulgarian chronograph, 10th century – Горина [Gorina] 2005; Вилкул [Vilkul] 2007, 56).

[18] According to Ethiopian legends (Kebre Negast – “The Glory of Kings”), the Queen of Sheba was the ruler of Ethiopia and gave birth to a son from Solomon who became the founder of the Ethiopian dynasty.

[19] Origen wrote an interpretation of the Song of Songs in ten books, but only two discourses, translated by Jerome in Latin, have come down to us. Probably because they were issued in the collected works of Jerome, very often noted in the literature as interpretations of Jerome (*Works of Blessed Jerome* 1906, 137-174 – cited by Glagolev 1987, 54).

[20] See also irmos from 8 ode of the first canon of the Nativity.

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