

The Virgin And The Priest The Making Of The Messiah

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3 Zacharias and Mary

The paternity of Jesus was always a highly sensitive subject, and we will never know how much relevant material was lost or destroyed in the past. What is certain, however, is that once the victorious Roman Church had made the virgin birth an absolute, only those with a death wish would have dared to suggest otherwise in public.

Mary was much maligned by enemies of the early church, but as far as we know, she was never accused by them of having had an illicit sexual relationship with a priest. Conversely, one would hardly expect Jewish anti-Christian propaganda to accuse a priest of fathering Jesus.¹ Even if that were known, it would not be widely disseminated lest it ruin the myth of the priestly status.

As mentioned previously, the notion that Jesus' contemporaries were ignorant of his parentage is absurd. He would have explained it to his followers in light of scriptural tradition, because that was how everything was justified in ancient Palestine. The highly educated, whom Jesus might otherwise have expected to have supported him, failed to do so. Consequently, he resorted to healings, and teaching in parables because his audience was, for the most part, illiterate or uneducated in the scriptures. But even for normal Jews sympathetic to Jesus' message, the issue of his illegitimacy would have been a major stumbling block.

PROTOVANGELIUM OF JAMES

Zacharias and Mary feature prominently in the non-canonical Protovangelium (pre-Gospel) of James. Purportedly written by James, the brother of Jesus, it is a pseudipigraphical work (not authored by the name attributed to it). Dated early-mid second century C.E., it was rejected for inclusion in the New Testament most probably because of its fantastic tales of Jesus' childhood, which invited ridicule into the Church. In addition, it exalted John the Baptist in a manner that would have been uncomfortable for most Christians. For example, the Massacre of the Infants was described as a product of Herod's desire to kill the infant John, and not Jesus, as Matthew explained it.

The Protovangelium is essentially a devotional infancy gospel, and displays the typical stylizations of the genre. Although heavy on apologetics, doctrine, and myth making, its main appeal was likely as an early source of Mary veneration. The reader is provided with information, missing from other gospels, to strengthen the developing cult of Mary that had begun to form outside Jewish-Christian circles in the second-century C.E. It may also have been written in response to accusations against Mary's character from opponents who accused her of harlotry.

Although most scholars dismiss it as a work of pure fiction, more Greek manuscripts of the Protovangelium have survived than of any other gospel, which indicates that it had a high level of popularity at one time. Of special relevance is the inclusion of elements that suggest the writer was familiar with Baptist traditions that paid tribute to Zacharias.

Today, in southern Iraq, an ancient religious sect known as the Mandaeans claims to be the ancestral remnant of John the Baptist's original disciples. They possess several Aramaic texts centered on John the Baptist, which are difficult to date accurately, but some are believed to go back to the second-century C.E. In all likelihood, John's disciples kept written records, and some early Christians were acquainted with these texts. This material was twisted, revamped, and expanded upon, but traces of it are perceptible in Christian literature, including Luke's gospel.

The first seven chapters of the Protovangelium are an account of Mary's elderly and childless parents, Joachim and Anna, based loosely on the model of Abraham and Sarah. When Mary was born, her special destiny was immediately recognized and, at three years old, she was given to the care of the Temple priests. In Jewish tradition, however, only first-born sons were presented at the Temple. This was done forty days after birth to fulfill a specific requirement of the Mosaic Law. The existence of a kindergarten or an orphanage on Temple grounds is unlikely, and is not mentioned in relevant archives. If a type of boarding school existed, it would unquestionably have been for boys only, and limited to the training of priests and Levites.² Most emphatically, young girls would not have been placed into the care of the all-male priesthood. All the same, we are told that when Mary was twelve years old, a council of priests decided she would no longer be able to stay, as she was approaching puberty and her continued presence could defile the Temple.

Evidently, the writer knew little about the workings of the Jerusalem Temple. This ignorance was further compounded by his claim that Zacharias was High Priest when he entered the Holy of Holies to pray about Mary. Not only was Zacharias never High Priest, the Holy of Holies was visited only once a year on the Day of Atonement, and on no other occasion. This storyline was invented; first, to demonstrate the purity of Mary, second, to elevate the status of Zacharias, and third, to explain a connection between them.

While inside the Holy of Holies, an angel appeared to Zacharias and instructed him to organize a lottery of eligible widowers to choose Mary's husband. Joseph was the widower selected. But he refused to take Mary, saying that she was too young and he will become a laughing stock for marrying her. Zacharias convinced him to accept after threatening him with God's punishment. At the start of their betrothal period, Joseph instructed Mary to stay at his house, and wait until he returned after his work at a building project was finished.

Meanwhile, at a further meeting of the council of priests, it was decided to make a new veil for the Temple. Seven virgins were summoned to weave the thread in the special colors as required by the Law. Mary was one of the virgins chosen,

And the priest remembered the child Mary, that she was of the family of David, and undefiled before God. And the officers went away...And they brought them into the temple of the Lord. And the priest said: Choose for me by lot who shall spin the gold, and the white, and the fine linen, and the silk, and the blue, and the scarlet, and the true purple. And the true purple and the scarlet fell to the lot of Mary, and she took them, and went away to her house. ...And Mary took the scarlet, and span it. And at that season Zacharias became dumb, and Samuel was in his stead until the time when Zacharias spake again. But Mary took the scarlet and began to spin it.³

Next, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce that she will give birth to Jesus. At first she doubted, but later accepted her fate, “behold the handmaid of the Lord is before him: be it unto me according to thy word.” Mary went home, spun the thread, and returned.

And she made the purple and the scarlet and brought them unto the priest. And the priest blessed her and said: Mary, the Lord God hath magnified thy name, and thou shalt be blessed among all generations of the earth. And Mary rejoiced and went away unto Elizabeth her kinswoman: and she knocked at the door. And Elizabeth when she heard it cast down the scarlet and ran to the door and opened it, and when she saw Mary she blessed her and said: Whence is this to me that the mother of my Lord should come unto me? For behold that which is in me leaped and blessed thee. And Mary forgot the mysteries which Gabriel the archangel had told her, and she looked up unto the heaven and said: Who am I, Lord, that all the generations of the earth do bless me? ⁴

This section is reminiscent of Luke’s *Visitation* scene, except that for some reason colored threads have been drafted into the narrative. Scarlet was an essential color of the Temple veil and in the tapestries of the Temple. It also figured in the Yom Kippur scapegoat ritual and other Temple sacraments. The Hebrew phrase for scarlet thread, *chut hashani*, occurred twice in the Old Testament.

The first instance was recorded in Tamar’s story as described in Genesis. Disguising herself as a temple prostitute, Tamar seduced Judah, her father-in-law, and was made pregnant with twin boys. During childbirth, one of the unborn twins, Zerah, extended his arm through the birth canal, and the midwife tied a scarlet thread around his wrist to identify him as the first-born. But in the birth struggle, the second twin Perez emerged first.

And the midwife took and bound a scarlet thread, saying, “this one came out first.” But as he drew back his hand, behold, his brother came out.....his name was called Perez. Afterwards his brother came out with the scarlet thread upon his hand; and his name was called Zerah.
Gen 38:28-29

Following in the footsteps of his grandfather Jacob, Perez assumed the birthright of his older brother. According to Jewish tradition, the messianic bloodline descended from Perez, and he was listed by Matthew and Luke as an ancestor of Jesus.

Scarlet thread was also mentioned in the story of Rahab from the Book of Joshua. Rahab invited two Hebrew spies to stay in her home in Jericho, but when questioned by the king’s men, she denied knowledge of their whereabouts. In return, the Hebrews spared Rahab and her family from the massacre of the city’s inhabitants. She was told to display a scarlet thread from her window to distinguish her house from the others.

The men said to her... Behold, when we come into this land, you shall bind this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down: and you shall gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your father’s household. ...and they departed; and she bound the scarlet cord in the window.
Joshua 2:17-21

In later rabbinic traditions, Rahab was highly venerated -- even to the extent that she was

described as the ancestor of some of the greatest prophets of Israel. Matthew listed her as a maternal ancestor of Jesus, and in a tradition not found elsewhere, claimed that Rahab married Salmon, a prince of the tribe of Judah.

The color scarlet has an obvious association with blood. In the stories of Tamar and Rahab, it was used to signify the messianic bloodline. In the Protovangelium, Elisabeth “cast down the scarlet,” and rushed to greet Mary. Jettisoning the scarlet thread was the signal that the messianic birthright had passed from the first-born John to the second-born Jesus.

Purple was a color long associated with priestly authority throughout the Mediterranean region. The distinguishing color of the divine Roman Emperor as head of the state religion, purple was also adopted as the official color of the Pope and of the British monarch as head of the Anglican Church.

That Mary made the scarlet and the purple threads meant that her son would fulfill a dual purpose. Jesus’ destiny was to unify the roles of both messianic king *and* High Priest. Although Elisabeth had been given a special responsibility as a mother in the providential family, she was linked only briefly with scarlet thread, and never with purple. Her son John, therefore, would have no responsibility in the kingdom of God.

Mark recorded that soldiers ridiculed Jesus by putting a purple robe on him before his crucifixion. Matthew, on the other hand, stated that the robe was scarlet. Either he possessed a more accurate source than Mark, or more likely, Matthew correctly understood that scarlet was the color representative of the Davidic Messiah.

And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe upon him, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on his head, and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"
Matt 27: 28-30

The Protovangelium explained that Mary stayed at Zacharias’ house for three months, but left lest “the people of Israel” discovered her condition and “accused her of fornication.” Six months after leaving his fiancé behind, Joseph returned home to find her pregnant. If he exposed Mary she could be stoned to death, but if he were to hide her away to conceal the sin, he would be violating the law of God. What was Joseph to do? Remarkably, an angel appeared to him in a dream and provided a solution based on Christian theology. Mary’s child “will save the people from their sins.” Joseph awakened, “glorified the God of Israel,” and the matter was thus satisfactorily resolved.

THE KORAN

Non-Islamic scholars maintain that certain materials in the Koran have their sources in the apocryphal books of Christianity. In the time of Mohammed, the majority of Christians in Arabia belonged to sects deemed heretical by the Church, and many had taken refuge outside the borders of the Roman Empire. These groups clung to some noncanonical writings and unorthodox oral traditions, and theoretically, compilers of the Koran used them to appeal to Christians in the region. In particular, the third Surah, which contains references to Zacharias and Mary, is suspected of having directly drawn sections of its content from the Protovangelium. Mary’s parents are described giving their daughter “to the care of the Lord.” In return, the Lord put Mary into the custody of Zacharias:

And her Lord accepted her with full acceptance and vouchsafed to her a goodly growth; and made Zachariah her guardian.
Surah 3:37

If the Koran borrowed from the Protovangelium, then this storyline was adopted for the same reason -- to sanction a relationship between Zacharias and Mary.

In the next verses, Zacharias asked the Lord to “Bestow upon me of Thy bounty goodly offspring.” Angels responded that his wife Elisabeth will have a son named John. They then announced that Mary had been especially chosen and sanctified by Allah,

Then Zachariah prayed unto his Lord and said: My Lord! Bestow upon me of Thy bounty goodly offspring. Lo! Thou art the Hearer of Prayer. And the angels called to him as he stood praying in the sanctuary: Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a son whose name is John, who cometh to confirm a word from Allah lordly, chaste, a prophet of the righteous. He said: My Lord! How can I have a son when age hath overtaken me already and my wife is barren? The angel answered: So it will be. Allah doeth what He will. He said: My Lord! Appoint a token for me. The angel said: The token unto thee shall be that thou shalt not speak unto mankind three days except by signs. Remember thy Lord much, and praise Him in the early hours of night and morning. And when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above all the women of creation. O Mary! Be obedient to thy Lord, prostrate thyself and bow with those who bow in worship.
Surah 3:38-43

Mary was asked to “be obedient to thy Lord” which carries the same meaning as the biblical *doule* or “handmaiden of the Lord.” The essence of obedience is self sacrifice, precisely what was required from Mary. She was a “preferred” woman because she will conceive Jesus, and her “obedience” was substantiated in the sacrificial act of conception.

In the Protovangelium, Joseph was selected from a group of eligible widowers called to take part in a lottery to decide who would be Mary’s husband. In the Koran, not only is Joseph never mentioned, the lottery described (throwing of pens) was to select a priest, not a widower. The chosen one would be the “guardian” of Mary, not the husband. Zacharias was the priest selected. Such a significant alteration in the plot dynamic indicates that the writers of the Koran also drew from traditions outside the Protovangelium.

This is of the tidings of things hidden. We reveal it unto thee (Mohammed). Thou wast not present with them when they threw their pens to know which of them should be the guardian of Mary, nor wast thou present with them when they quarreled thereupon. And remember when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near unto Allah.
Surah 3:44-45

As Mohammed was not present at the “throwing of pens,” he did not witness the controversy it had caused. As a euphemism, “guardian” barely conceals the sexual aspect of Zacharias and Mary’s relationship that was undoubtedly the reason for the priestly

outrage. The “tidings of things hidden” related to the birth of Jesus, and the hitherto secret identity of his father, now revealed as Zacharias. Mohammed is reminded that Mary’s “obedience,” linked to the outcome of the lottery, resulted in the birth of Jesus.

HERETICAL ART

The secret of Jesus’ parentage endured in the region. Europeans, who had visited the Holy Land during the crusades of the twelfth and thirteen centuries, brought it back it back home, where it took root in non-conformist intellectual circles and was a crucial part of a powerful antiestablishment heresy. But to publicize blasphemous ideas during this time was tantamount to signing one’s death warrant. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, even an institution as influential as the Knights Templar -- a major participant in the crusades -- was brought down following charges of heresy.

In the stringently controlled feudal theocracy of medieval Europe, painting was the obvious medium to express subversive ideas. The Renaissance provided the occasion and the opportunity to broadcast unorthodox opinions as never before. As European civilization grew richer, its private citizens and public institutions increasingly commissioned paintings with religious themes both for decoration and prestige. The most talented artists became society celebrities, and a select few, who held heterodox religious views, took advantage of the assumed gullibility of their patrons to include profane images and symbols in what were supposedly wholly devotional works with conventional Christian themes.

Folklorists and Jungian psychologists tell us that through art, the psychological truth emerges as it is shared by the collective unconscious. In great paintings, the psychic background of our ancestral and primal past is revealed. In reality, many great artists of the past manipulated symbols and archetypes of the “collective unconscious” to advocate specific “truths.” And the most famous perpetrator was Leonardo Da Vinci.

In recent years, many people have come to acknowledge that Leonardo’s brilliant artwork was not the product of a devout Catholic, but rather the work of a strident anti-church heretic who delighted in undermining, even ridiculing, traditional Christian beliefs whenever an opportunity presented itself for him to do so. Yet he was far from being an atheist. Leonardo definitely held religious views, but they were so radical he could never declare them openly. Although most current interest has centered on Leonardo’s representation of Mary Magdalene, his greatest obsession was John the Baptist.

In their book , *The Templar Revelation*, Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince brought attention to Leonardo Da Vinci’s apparent infatuation with the figure of John.⁵ In his religiously inspired paintings, it was the Baptist and not Jesus who featured most often, and their traditionally accepted roles appear to be reversed. Leonardo’s final painting, for which he was not commissioned, was a portrait of John the Baptist [Plate 1].

A particularly significant element in Leonardo’s art is what Picknett and Prince describe as “the John gesture,” made by pointing the right hand forefinger directly upward.



Plate 1. Leonardo Da Vinci, *John the Baptist*, c 1513, Louvre, Paris

Earlier artists had shown John the Baptist more subtly making this same hand signal, but Leonardo chose to make it the dominant feature of his famously enigmatic portrait of John. But nobody is sure what it means. Probably the gesture's most baffling appearance is in his unfinished work known as *Madonna and Child with Saint Anne and Saint John the Baptist* [Plate 2]. Above and between the infants Jesus and John, a mysterious, almost masculine, hand gives the "John gesture." Controversially, Jesus' two blessing fingers rest on the elbow fold of Anne's arm. Fingers positioned in this way constitute an extremely offensive gesture in Western Europe, particularly in Italy, where it is used specifically to denote the sex act. And the look on Anne's face suggests this is precisely her meaning. This is an unlikely coincidence because, although Leonardo rarely finished his projects, nothing in them was left to chance.



Plate 2. Leonardo Da Vinci, *Madonna and Child with St. Anne*, c 1510, National Gallery, London

The large hand makes the “John gesture.” Note Anne’s knowing smile as her arm and Jesus’ fingers combine to give the well known sign for sexual intercourse.

Raphael, a younger contemporary of Leonardo, painted the figure of Plato in *The School of Athens*, clearly modeled on Leonardo Da Vinci making the “John gesture” [Plate 3]. He also famously painted a young John the Baptist as a boy in the desert, making the same sign. Other renowned artists of the period, including Ghirlandaio, Caravaggio, Guercino, and Fontana also painted John giving this sign. Manifestly, it represented an idea or principle that had important connotations for members of an elite group.

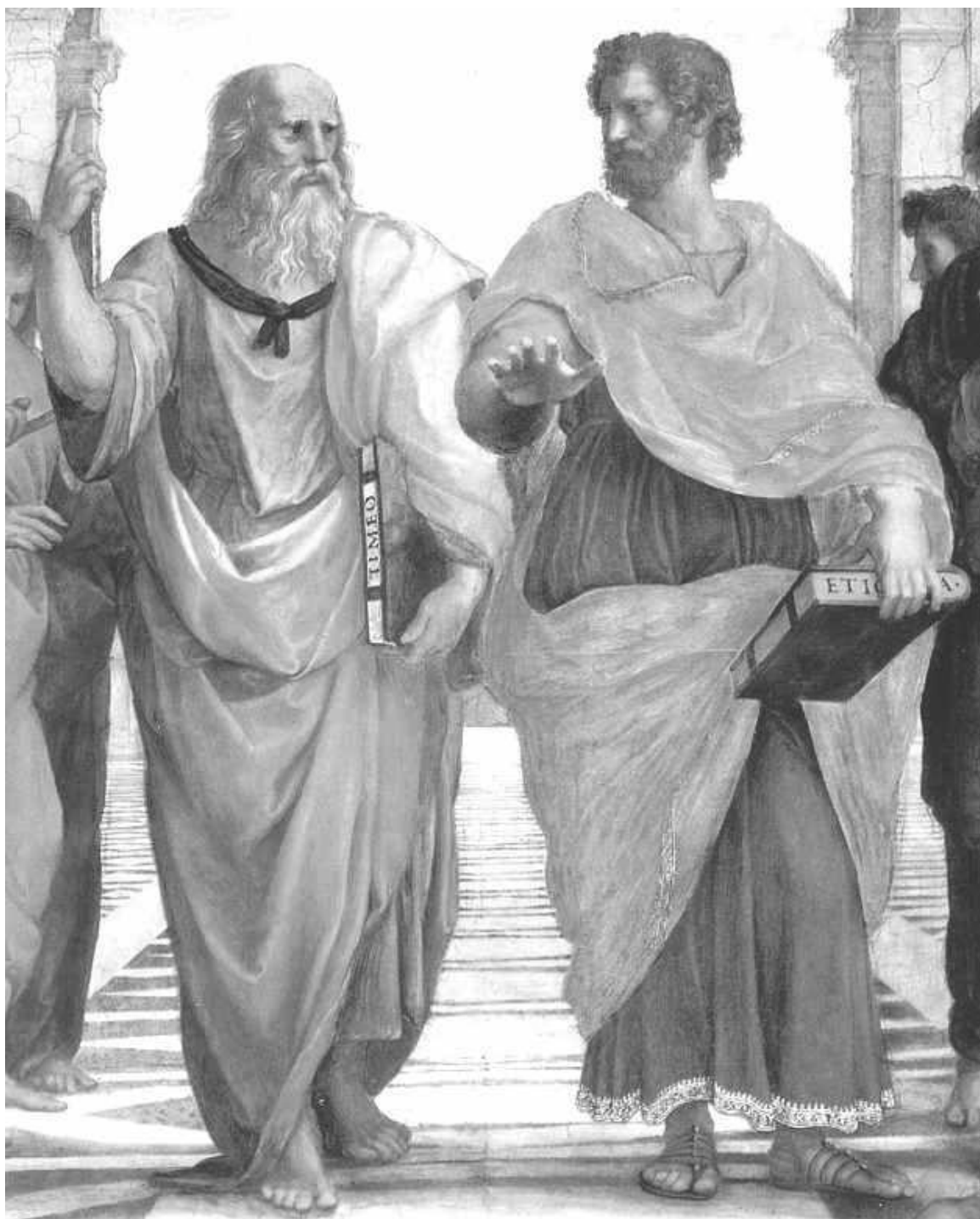


Plate 3. Raphael, *The School of Athens (Detail)*, 1511 , Vatican, Rome

The German artist Andrea Mantegna, working at the same time as Leonardo, painted a disturbing scene of the Holy Family [Plate 4]. In the center foreground, Mary looks on adoringly as she holds the baby Jesus. Standing on her left is the elderly Elisabeth, and on her right side is Zacharias, clean shaven and bald. Not to be mistaken for Joseph, because Mantegna had already painted Joseph in his *Adoration of the Shepherds*, a much younger man, bearded and with a head full of hair. In the lower right-hand corner of the painting, the infant John the Baptist looks straight ahead, while raising his right-hand forefinger. Elisabeth's expression as she looks past Jesus is one of bitterness, even contempt, while Zacharias stares forward dispassionately. Mouths turned down at the sides, they do not make a picture of the happy couple.

The forefinger and index finger raised together constitute the “blessing gesture,” which Popes give to crowds during their public appearances. Jesus was often depicted making this sign, but the single raised forefinger is not part of any recognized Christian iconography.⁶ However, Hermes, the Greek god of shepherds, was frequently depicted by medieval alchemists making this exact same gesture. Moreover, Botticelli -- one of Leonardo’s mentors -- also painted Hermes in this way. Ancient hermetic mystical traditions experienced a revival during the Middle Ages, and Hermes was revered by initiates as “the revealer of all wisdom.” In the Middle East, Hermes was equated with Enoch, the father of Methuselah, who reputedly never died but was taken directly by God to be instructed in the deepest secrets of heaven.⁷

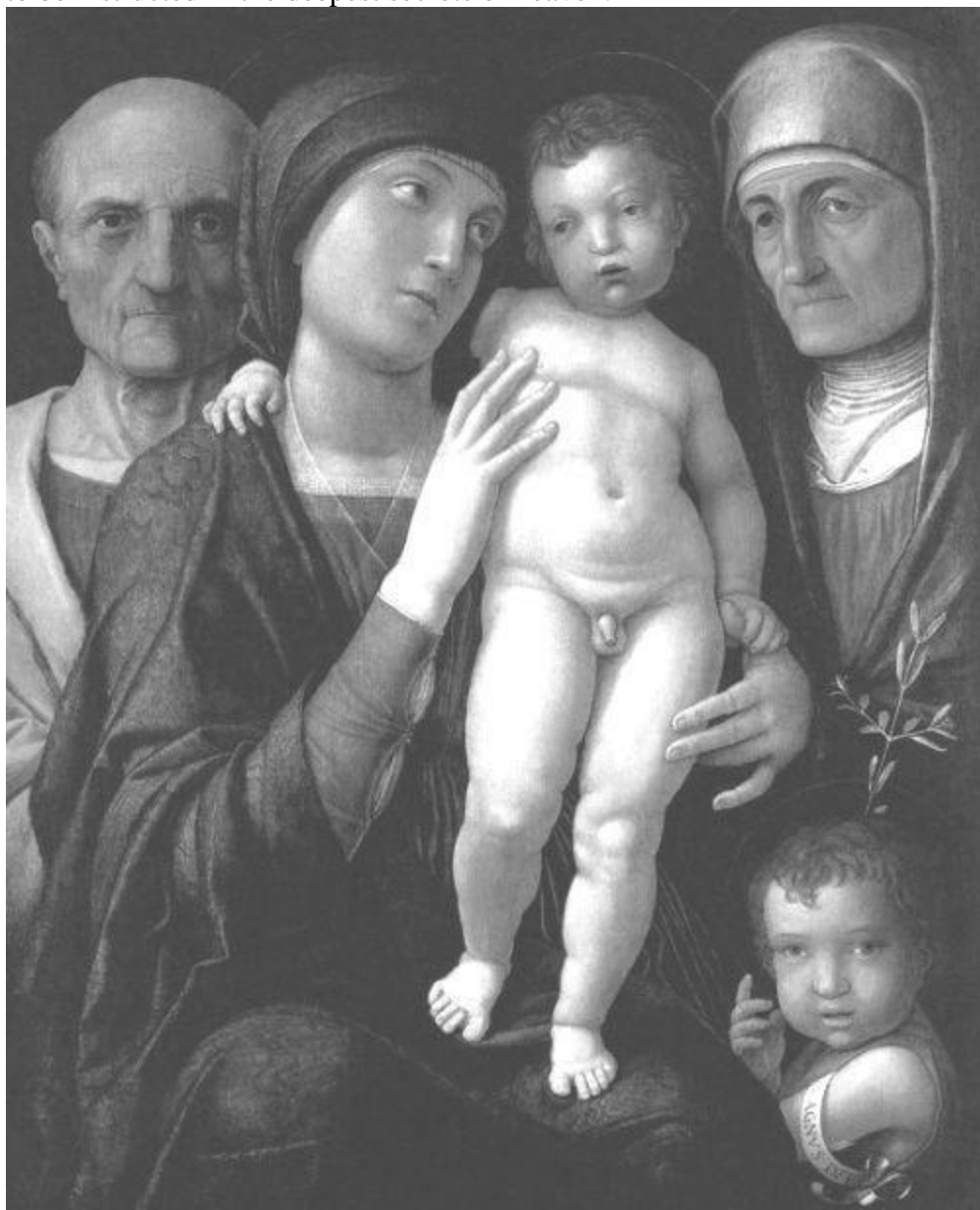


Plate 4. Andrea Mantegna, *The Holy Family*, 1495, Dresden

In popular culture, however, the “John gesture” always had a well recognized meaning. Customarily given for emphasis -- “mark my words” -- an upright forefinger also conveys the message, ‘number one,’ or ‘first.’ Thousands of cartoon raised forefingers, waved by spectators at sports events in the United States, prove that the “John gesture” made publicly, is still used to assert supremacy. In Renaissance art, this sign was contrived by heretics to show that John the Baptist was superior to Jesus. John was *first*,

the original and true Christ, and the fount of all knowledge.

Jesus, on the other hand, was the false Christ. Though schooled by John, he not only betrayed his teacher but usurped his birthright to claim everything for himself. It was fraud on the grandest scale, and the Roman Church was a co-conspirator.

Leonardo Da Vinci produced two separate paintings of the same scene. Known as *The Virgin on the Rocks*, one currently hangs in the Louvre Museum in Paris, the other in the National Gallery in London. The subject matter is a non-canonical Christian myth, in which the Holy Family flees to Egypt to escape Herod's legendary "Massacre of the Infants." On the journey, they meet the infant John and his protector angel Uriel, in a remote mountain cave. According to the Church, this was the time when Jesus bestowed upon John the authority to baptize him in later life. This was supposed to explain why the adult Jesus, as a member of the Holy Trinity, had allowed himself to be baptized.

The Virgin on the Rocks was originally commissioned by Milanese monks as a celebration of the "Immaculate Conception," but Leonardo contemptuously mocked that idea in his finished work. His first canvas was rejected, and only after a lengthy dispute mediated by Leonardo's sponsor, King Louis XII of France, was a later second version deemed acceptable.

In the original artwork, Jesus and John were painted to resemble brothers. Indeed their features are so similar that they could be taken as identical twins. Mary sits with her arm around Jesus. The angel Uriel sits with John. However, Jesus directs his prayer toward John, who blesses him in return. This inversion of their customary roles would have horrified Leonardo's customers [Plate 5].

In the later version of the painting [Plate 6], the infant with Mary appears exactly as in the original except that he has been given the familiar staff of John the Baptist to hold. His identity was switched, so that Mary is now understood to be holding John, not Jesus. The baby formerly known as John the Baptist, and who sits with the angel Uriel, is now Jesus. The face of Jesus, however, has been radically altered from the original to be less cherubic and not as appealing as John.

Although he featured prominently in the original myth on which the commissioned artwork was based, Joseph does not figure in either painting. As it was Joseph who purportedly received the instruction to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt, his omission from the scene is strange. However, the father of Jesus *is* represented in *The Virgin on the Rocks*. In both versions, towering above Mary and emanating from behind her, is a huge phallic rock formation. To compensate for changing the positions of Jesus and John, Leonardo highlighted the rock in the second painting to replicate the correct proportions of a phallus. This rock structure cannot have been accidental or copied from nature. It is not a crystalline stalagmite, and is impossible to find inside caves. Besides, nothing was accidental in Leonardo's work. Even the cave itself is symbolic of the womb. Rather than affirm Mary's virginity, the phallus behind Mary was an outrageously bold statement to contradict it. The phallus symbolized the real, or biological, father of Jesus.



Plate 5. Leonard Da Vinci, *Virgin on the Rocks*, Louvre Paris

John and Jesus have identical features. Jesus (left) prays to John. But for reasons of theological correctness, their positions were later reversed (Plate 6). Jesus was given the

staff of John the Baptist and thus became John. The new Jesus (right) lost his blonde curls and cherubic face, replaced with a much less attractive and darker look. The large phallic rock formation is highlighted more in the second version.



Plate 6. Leonardo Da Vinci, *Virgin on the Rocks*, National Gallery, London

Two smaller phallic rock formations in the background of the painting are noticeably patterned after the large central phallus. As Leonardo originally depicted John and Jesus as brothers, he assumed Zacharias was Jesus' father. The two background rock formations, therefore, represented Zacharias' two male offspring. Presumably, John and

Jesus both fathered children.

Before Leonardo, Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-1469) was the prototype of the rebellious Florentine Renaissance artist. Lippi was raised in a Carmelite friary and took vows as a friar in 1421. Following an affair with a nun, he was released from his vows and married shortly afterward. Celebrated today as an innovative and accomplished painter, his work was widely respected in his time, receiving constant patronage from the wealthy and powerful Medici family. He specialized in Cathedral frescoes, including one famous series of scenes depicting the life of John the Baptist. One section, *The Birth of John the Baptist* [Plate 7], shows a young woman staring disconsolately at the floor and away from the newborn baby, as midwives take him from Elisabeth. The aggrieved woman is Mary. Even though Luke's gospel stated that Mary left Zacharias' home before John's birth, she was often included in birth scenes of John. Lippi's sympathies are clearly with Elisabeth, who wears a halo, and not Mary.

In 1490, Domenico Ghirlandaio painted the *Naming of John*, with even less ambiguity [Plate 8]. On the right, Elisabeth holds the baby John, but she gazes, ashen-faced, away from the scene. Zacharias looks at her as if to say, "What is the problem?" Above Elisabeth, is an obviously pregnant woman with a similar face. She is also downcast, and clearly unhappy, as a friend advises or consoles her. This is a depiction of the spurned Mary. Elisabeth's refusal to acknowledge Mary and her child had left Mary distraught and fearful. The painting makes sense only if Zacharias was the father of Mary's child.

The Italian Parmigianino (1503-1540), like most Renaissance masters, painted scenes of the Holy Family. Though it was commonplace for artists to omit Joseph, it was not standard practice to include Zacharias. *The Holy Family* [Plate 9] shows Zacharias casting a watchful eye over Mary's shoulder at the young Jesus and John, which taken by itself might not be especially meaningful, were it not for the astonishing boldness of the *Madonna and Zacharias* -- another of his Holy Family paintings [Plate 10]. In this picture, Mary sits outdoors with Zacharias, as she holds Jesus. A young girl kisses Jesus, who is generally believed to be Mary Magdalene, as a maid holds a jar of anointing oil over their heads. A concerned looking Zacharias watches the scene. A certain level of familiarity between Mary and Zacharias is clearly observable. Mary's attire is extremely inappropriate for a woman in Jewish society, even if the man with her was supposed to be her brother-in-law. Only in the privacy of the home, and with her husband, could a woman be so dressed. The intent behind Parmigianino's picture was to imply that they were as a conjugal couple, and Zacharias was the father of her son.



Plate 7. Fra Filippo Lippi, *The Birth Of John*, c. 1460



Plate 8. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Naming of John*, 1490



Plate 10. Parmigianino, *Madonna and Zacharias*, 1535



Plate 9. Parmigianino, *Holy Family*, 1535

Zacharias was often the only man in depictions of the “Holy Family.” In this scene, Zacharias’ wife, Elisabeth, is conspicuous by her absence.

As he casts a watchful eye over Mary’s shoulder at John and Jesus, is Zacharias checking on the welfare of his sons?

Jewish women were required to wear veils and to cover themselves unless in private with their husbands.

In his paintings, Parmigianino portrayed a familiarity between Mary and Zacharias that was inappropriate. What was his purpose?

Inside the Museum of Fine Arts in Dijon, France, is an anonymous fifteenth century wood carving believed to be of south German origin. It is an astonishing wood sculpture of Zacharias holding a type of shrine in the form of a miniature house or room. Inside the shrine is a bed [Plate 10a]. On the exterior, the figures of Elisabeth and Mary are painted

together in greeting -- the famous *Visitation* scene from Luke. Zacharias looks down at the two women, as he holds the bedroom 'shrine.' The meaning implied by this sculpture is self-evident, as is the reason why the artist remained incognito.

PRESENTATION AT THE TEMPLE

November 21 is the Feast Day of the Roman Catholic Church to commemorate the Virgin Mary's non canonical 'Presentation at the Temple.' In the Orthodox Church, this day is one of the twelve holiest in the calendar. The Presentation was also a common theme for artists during the Renaissance. Usually, Mary was depicted as being prompted by her parents, Joachim and Anna, to climb the Temple steps as Zacharias waited for her. Certain artists, however, chose *not* to portray Mary as the three year old girl mentioned in the Protovangelium, the sole source for this tradition. Instead, they painted Mary as a young woman.



Plate 10a. *Wood Carving of Zacharias*, Anonymous, c. 15th

The Venetian artist Vittore Carpaccio (1455-1525) painted a cycle on the Life of Mary that included a scene of Mary's Presentation [Plate 11]. As a teenage Mary approaches, Zacharias's arms are outstretched in greeting. Beneath Mary, a horned antelope rests tethered to a young boy, and to the right of him sits a rabbit. Above the archway in the background, an alchemical sun symbol is depicted with the customary hermetic/mystical representation of Adam and Eve at either side.



Plate 11. Vittore Carpaccio, *Presentation at the Temple*, 1505

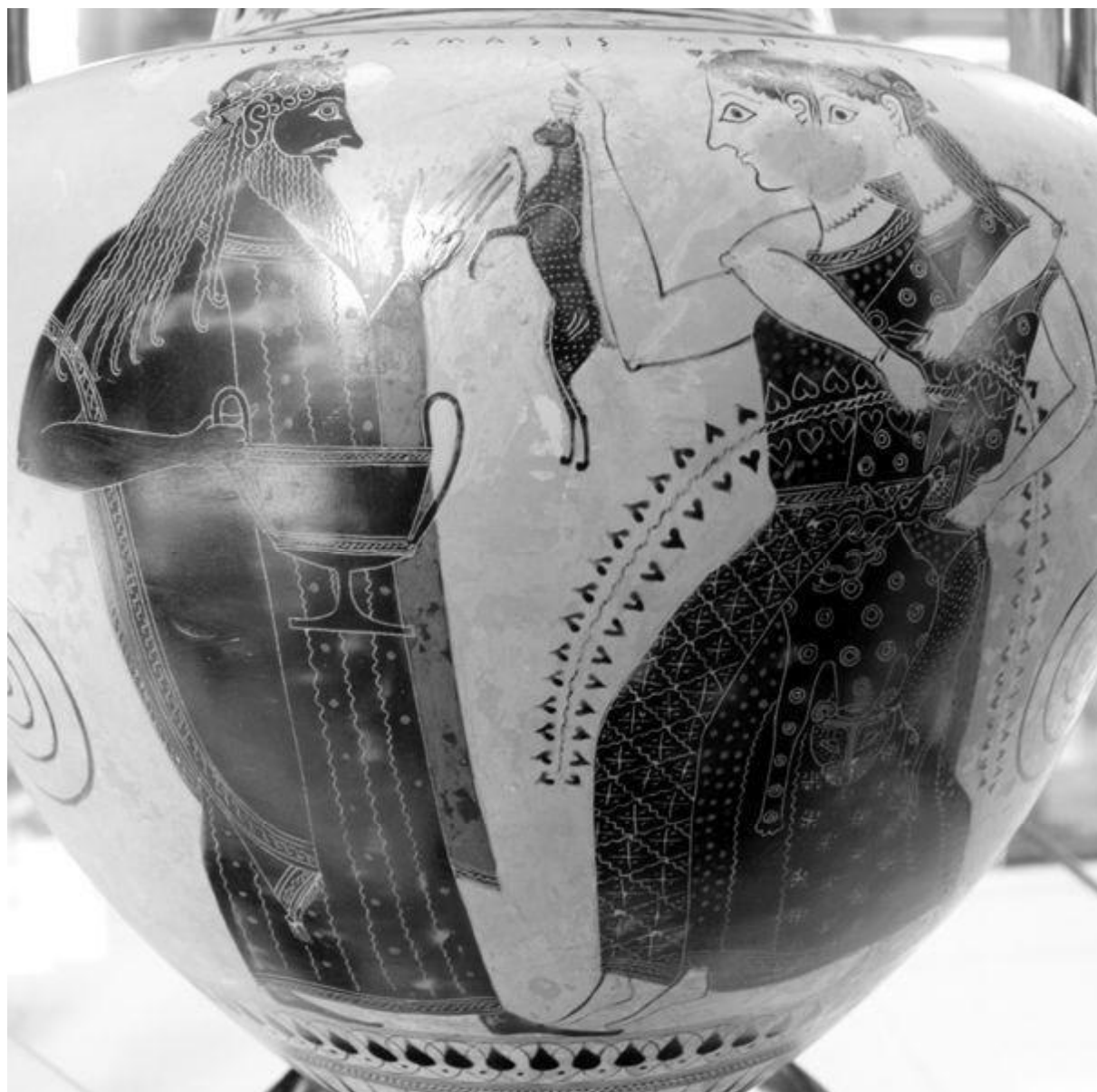
The sexual or reproductive principle is implied by the rabbit, and the horned antelope emphasizes the same point. As previously stated, horns were used as symbols of fertility in a variety of ancient cultures. In medieval art, Adam and Eve, as the primordial man and woman, were often represented together with horned animals (rams, deer, goats, and so on) to symbolize their role as the original ancestors of humankind [Plate 12]. Carpaccio's illustration of Adam and Eve, and his inclusion of the rabbit and the horned antelope, was to signify that Zacharias and Mary had the same responsibility to reproduce.



Plate 12. Anonymous twelfth century woodcut Adam and Eve were a recurrent theme in esoteric medieval imagery. Depicted here with horned animals, which signified their destiny as the original ancestors of all humankind.

Horns were symbols of fertility and lineage in diverse cultures.

Vikings, for example, displayed their ancestral pride, by attaching horns to their battle helmets.



Dionysus, the Greek fertility god, with female worshippers who hold a rabbit and a horned deer (center right). Vase, 6th century BCE

Domenico Ghirlandaio's version of the *Presentation of the Virgin* is even more demonstrative [Plate 13]. Mary, as a fully developed woman, hurries enthusiastically up the Temple steps to greet Zacharias. She holds a book of Scripture to signal her actions are the fulfillment of prophecy. At the top of two broad columns in the center, is a statue of the naked Adam and a partly obscured Eve with the serpent. Beneath then, at the top of each column, babies are carved into a decorative trim. Zacharias waits to receive Mary with open arms, as pregnant young women scurry behind him, suggesting her immediate destiny should she enter his orbit. In the bottom right, a forlorn John the Baptist watches the scene with obvious misgivings. In the bottom left, three female spectators watch as Mary ascends the steps. Ghirlandaio loaded their physical postures with palpable meaning [see note, Plate 13a].

The Spanish artist Juan Sevilla (1643-1695) painted a *Presentation at the Temple* that currently hangs in the Museo del Prado in Madrid [Plate 14]. In his version, Mary has clearly reached child-bearing age. As Zacharias is set to embrace her, Mary offers him

her hand. However, people in the foreground seem troubled by the scene. And although Mary's mother holds an obligatory scroll to signal the fulfillment of scripture, she and her husband have worried, not joyful expressions. Meanwhile, an androgynous looking character in the bottom left of the canvas, turns away from the scene to face the viewer. He or she displays a highly ornate jar, the type used to hold something precious. In other words, a container for anointing oil or ointment.

Such a blatant insertion in the picture must have been intended as a reference to Jesus' anointing by Mary Magdalene/Mary of Bethany as described in all four gospels. The overt message of Sevilla's painting was that the union of Zacharias and Mary produced Jesus.

Artists such as Carpaccio and Sevilla knew that the general public saw in a painting only that which it was preconditioned to see, and disregarded the rest. This maxim is as true as ever today.





Plate 13. Domenico Ghirlandaio, *Presentation of the Virgin*, 1486

The girl on the left makes a gesture with her fingers that can only be construed as a crude reference to the sex act. The girl in the center puts her hands together, to represent the

union of two bodies coming together. The girl on the right stands with her knee bent and hand on hip, in a classic coquettish pose. The only reason to incorporate these characters and gestures into the picture was to suggest that Mary's relationship with Zacharias was sexual.

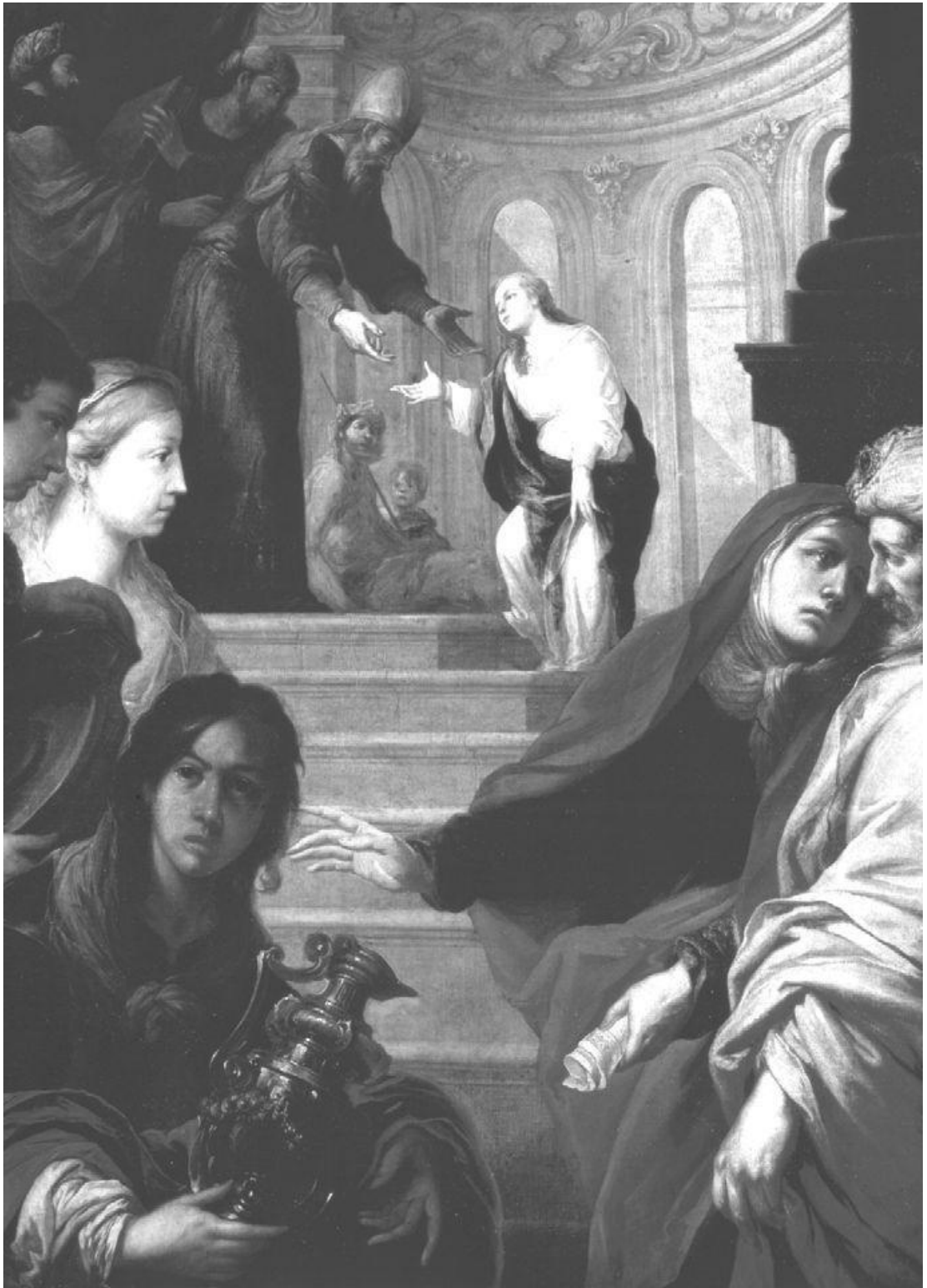
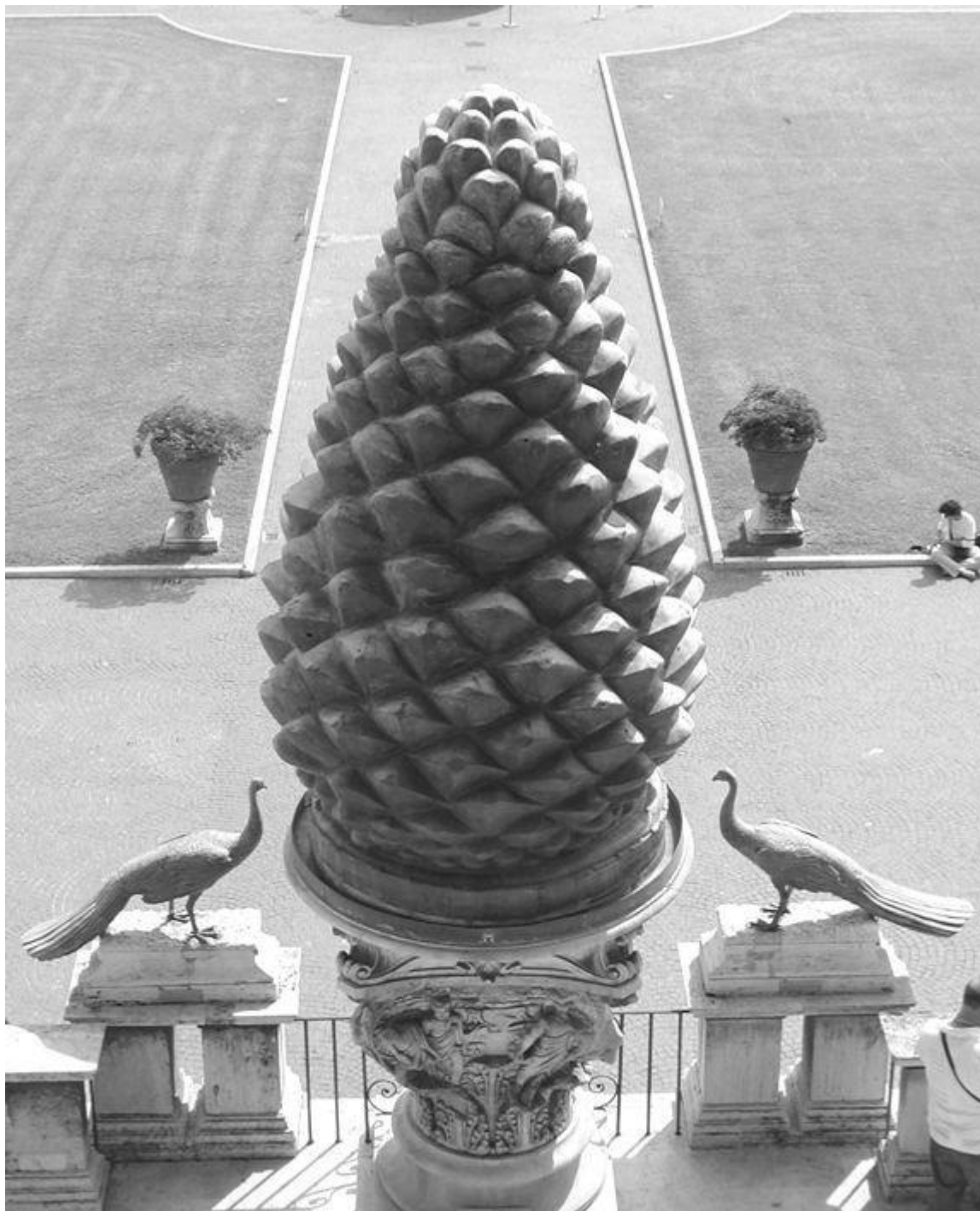


Plate 14. Juan Sevilla, *Presentation of Mary at the Temple* (Art Resource).

THE PINE CONE

Within the Vatican's museum complex is a courtyard known as the Giardino della Pigna,

or Place of the Pine Cone, named after a four meter high bronze statue of a pine cone that stands there (below). The cone was modeled and cast during the first or second century C.E. by Publius Cincius Calvius whose signature is on the base. Historians understand that it was originally used in the pre-Christian era as a water fountain and was confiscated several centuries later by the Papacy who used it for ornamental purposes. The provenance of the two bronze peacocks that flank the pine cone is unknown.



Pine cones became an important element in Catholic iconography. Decorative cones were sculpted into Church and Cathedral masonry, and were incorporated into the designs of candlesticks and ceremonial artifacts. The Pope's staff still includes a silver pine cone. The official Church explanation is that the pine cone, as a symbol of regeneration, represents new life in Christ. But this was not its original meaning.

All ancient cultures had male fertility deities who it was believed could increase the rate of child birth, improve the livestock count, and make the land more productive. In Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Indian, Greek, and Roman art, these fertility gods or their cultic priesthood were often depicted with pine cones (below). So much so, that the pine cone was universally understood as the symbol of a divine or especially blessed bloodline.



Assyrian bas relief, dating from the 6th century B.C.E. The bearded winged figure holds a pine cone in his right hand. The bucket is thought to hold water, or a special fluid, with which he purified the devotees. Note the horns of fertility on his cap.

Greek vases, dating between the sixth and fourth centuries B.C.E., feature the fertility god Dionysus (the Roman Bacchus) with his female consort Ariadne. In the example below, which is a typical illustration, Dionysus holds the cornucopia or “horn of plenty” with his left hand and a sprig of pine cones with his right.



Although historians still debate the suitability of the term “Renaissance,” it is undeniable that artists with heretical leanings drew inspiration from ancient sources. In *The Presentation at The Temple*, Andreas Mantegna painted Zacharias and Mary after the model of Dionysus and Ariadne [Plate 14a]. Zacharias wears a robe decorated with pine cones, and Mary wears a dress with a similar five-pointed floral motif to that which Ariadne wears. In this non-canonical scene, reminiscent of Hannah giving the infant Samuel to Eli the priest, Mary hands over the baby Jesus to Zacharias. The pine cone symbolizes the aged Zacharias’ virility and the sacred nature of his lineage.

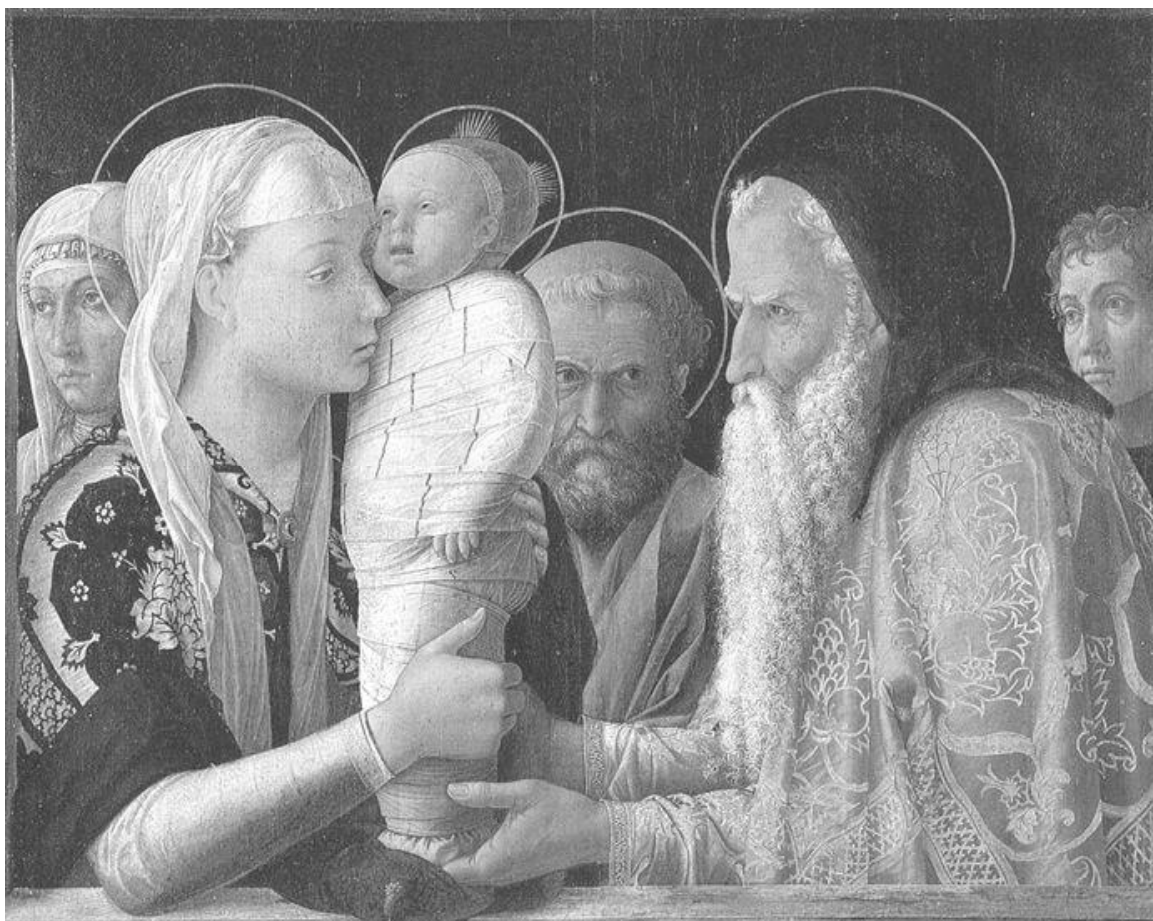
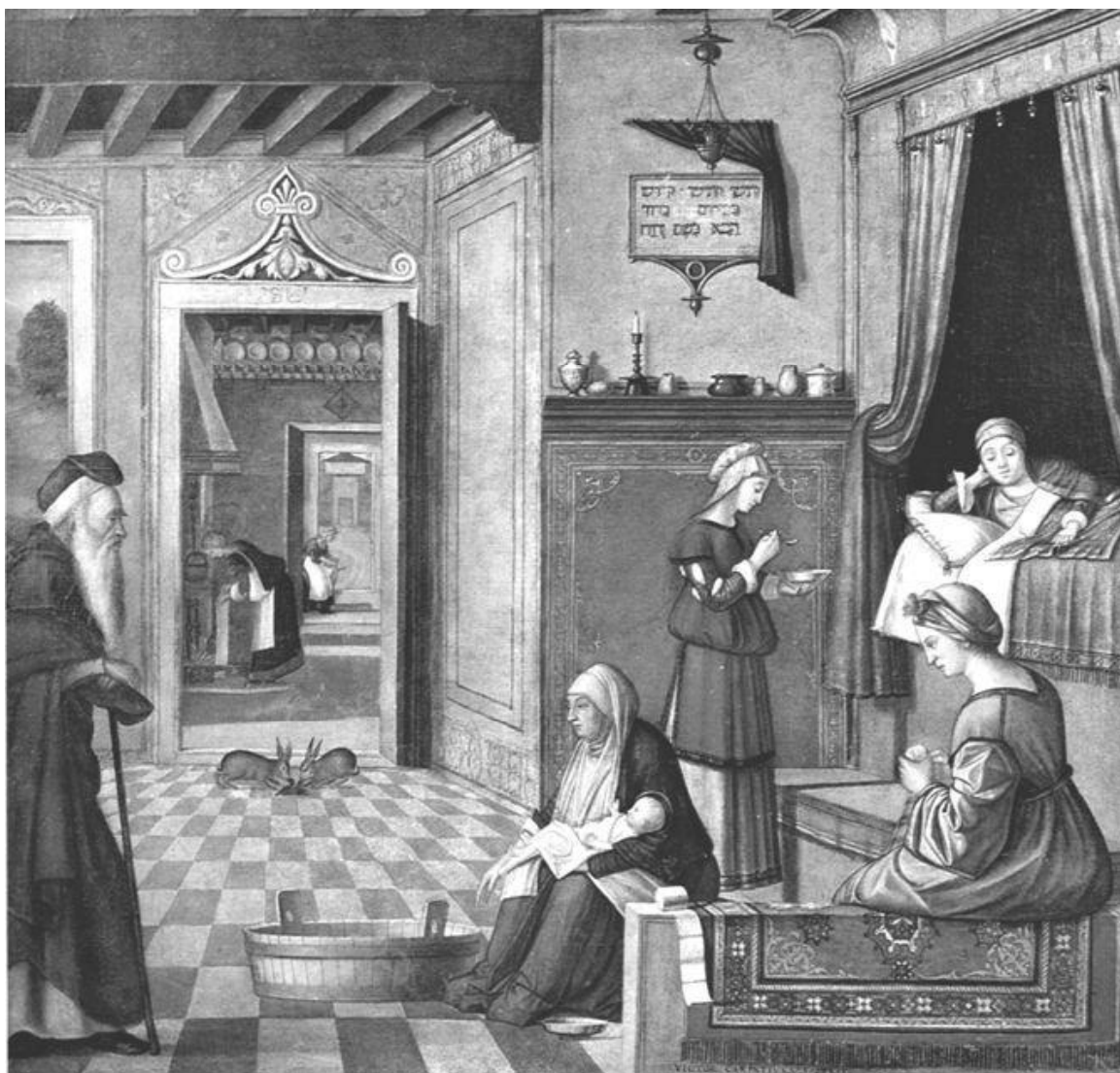


Plate 14a. Andreas Mantegna, *The Presentation at the Temple*, 1460.

In his *Birth of The Virgin*, Vittore Carpaccio used the pine cone to signify Mary's special status in the messianic bloodline but also to refute the theological notion that she was conceived "immaculately." Accordingly, he painted a pine cone motif above the door of her parent's bedroom. Furthermore, two rabbits were painted on the bedroom floor, in front of the doorway. Needless to say, rabbits were not typical items of decoration or background detail, especially indoors. Known popularly for their unrestrained breeding, Carpaccio inserted rabbits into the scene to subliminally suggest sexual activity and thus ridicule the doctrine of Immaculate Conception.

Conventional historians blithely assume that Renaissance artists promulgated mainstream Roman Catholicism, but this contradicts the evidence of the artwork itself. Moreover, the Church did not, and could not, brainwash everybody. By nature and tradition, intellectually astute artists everywhere tend to hold antiestablishment views, especially in tightly controlled societies as existed in medieval Europe where freedom of expression was severely restricted. Art was censored by the Inquisition, so heretical messages had to be cloaked by the artists so as to be unrecognizable to unsubtle minds.



Vittore Carpaccio, *Birth of The Virgin*, 1504

Fertility gods were always venerated in the Middle East, even among the Israelites. During the Second Temple era, Jews living in rural areas clung to traditions that predated formal Judaism. Ezekiel complained that Jewish women cried for Tammuz, a Babylonian fertility deity, outside the gates of Jerusalem. Later, as Christianity and Islam emerged, Zacharias was adopted by women in the region as a fertility “god,” over the claims of Abraham, Jacob, and other patriarchs with seemingly better track records of producing offspring.

The Grand Mosque at Aleppo, the largest city in northern Syria, is known as ‘Jami'a Zakariyyeh.’ According to legend, a shrine located inside the mosque contains the head of Zacharias interred within a wooden pulpit after his martyrdom. On most days, it is surrounded by large numbers of female pilgrims kneeling in prayer, touching and kissing the outside of the shrine, because it is widely believed that women who pray there will improve their chances of a successful pregnancy, especially of having a boy [Plate 50]. This is clearly a legacy from the pre-Islamic era. Evidence an oral tradition existed, before, during, and after the lifetime of Mohammed, that Zacharias was the father of John the Baptist and Jesus, beloved by God and admired by millions worldwide. Every mother wanted sons like these.

DEATH OF ZACHARIAS

Zacharias has no part in any accounts of Jesus' adult life. He might not have survived to witness his son's public ministry. Early Christians, however, had traditions that Zacharias was martyred. Several ancient cave churches in Cappadocia, Turkey, have frescoes on the walls and ceilings painted in a fashion similar to the Sistine Chapel. After centuries of neglect, the authorities have recently made efforts to preserve and restore them in recognition of the income potential they represent. The oldest church in the area, the Church of St. John the Baptist at Cavusin, and its paintings, date back to the 5th century.

Western tourists might be surprised to see among scenes from the New Testament, a depiction of sword-bearing soldiers attacking an elderly priest, titled *The Killing of Zacharias*. The image is based on an episode from the Protovangelium. Herod hears of John's birth, and decides to kill him. Elisabeth takes John into the mountains to hide. Herod's men ask Zacharias for John's whereabouts, but he claims not to know. For his defiance, Zacharias is slaughtered while performing his duties at the Temple. The other priests search but, as with Jesus, Zacharias' body was never found, but as he delayed to come, they were all afraid: and one of them took courage and entered in: and he saw beside the altar congealed blood: and a voice saying: Zacharias hath been slain, and his blood shall not be wiped out until his avenger come. And when he heard that word he was afraid, and went forth and told the priests. And they took courage and went in and saw that which was done: and the panels of the temple did wail: and they rent their clothes from the top to the bottom. And his body they found not, but his blood they found turned into stone.⁸



Plate 50. Women Pilgrims at the Shrine of Zacharias, Grand Mosque, Aleppo Syria

Why was a non-canonical scene painted alongside recognized episodes from the New Testament? The answer lies partly in the geographical location of the cave churches, because for an indeterminate period, the cult of John the Baptist was strong in the region. Their numbers dwindled over time, but doubtless many joined the growing Christian

church and brought with them a legacy of veneration for John, and the death of Zacharias was preserved in their works of art. The Orthodox Church, therefore, believes that the killing of Zacharias *is* canonical and is a part of New Testament tradition. It was mentioned by Jesus during a heated confrontation with scribes and Pharisees:

The blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zacharias, who perished between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, it shall be required of this generation.

Luke 11:50

According to the Orthodox view, Jesus referred to Abel and Zacharias to signify the span of all historical time. From Adam's family to the present day. Jesus was bringing *all* salvation history to fruition, so restitution for *all* wrongdoings of the past had to be made. By this definition, Zacharias must have been a contemporary of the current generation. Abel's death was a murder in the first dispensational family. Zacharias' death was a murder in the final dispensational family.

The Orthodox interpretation of Luke 11:51 was rejected by the Western Church on the grounds that the story of Zacharias' death originated from the Protovangelium, a dubious non-canonical text. The Catholic Church, however, maintains that Joseph was a widower when he married Mary, and still celebrates Mary's Presentation at the Temple -- concepts whose only source is the same Protovangelium.

Catholic and Protestant biblical scholars argue that the Zacharias whom Jesus mentioned was as an obscure figure from the distant past. The Second Book of Chronicles records the story of a priest, Jehoida, whose son Zacharias was stoned to death in the Temple by an angry crowd, after he demanded they change their ways. This took place during the First Temple era, before the exile and return from Babylon, and over seven hundred years before Jesus. Theoretically, both Jesus and his audience would have understood that the slaying of the ancient Zacharias was the last known or recorded event of its kind.⁹ Accordingly, even though Jesus excoriated the current generation, he considered it responsible only for murders that occurred before, and not after, the death of the Zacharias in 2 Chronicles.

This argument does not merit serious consideration. The Hebrew Bible as a unified form did not even exist in the time of Jesus, and the chronology of events was obscure. Luke had already identified Zacharias earlier in his gospel, so there was no reason for him to do so again. Clearly, the details of Zacharias' death as described in the Protovangelium are questionable, as the story patently owes its source to a devotional Baptist tradition. But Jesus' saying is likely to be authentic, as there was nothing to gain by its inclusion. Critics have suggested that these verses were invented to explain the slaughter of Jews that accompanied the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E. But that event followed two generations after Jesus. If indeed his father had been murdered, then his harsh words resonate. Jesus demanded justice.

Other legends of Zacharias' passing have survived, and one cannot help but get the distinct impression from them that he did not die of natural causes. The church father Epiphanius (c. 320-403 C.E.), was a renowned heresiologist¹⁰ who traveled extensively to track down and record unorthodoxies wherever he discovered them. He quoted an account of Zacharias' death from a lost book known as *The Descent of Mary* that originated from a Christian Gnostic sect in Egypt. According to Epiphanius, this sect

believed that God appeared in the shape of an “ass.” This was a common allegation thrown at Jews by their enemies.

In *The Descent of Mary*, Zacharias was offering incense at the Temple when he had a vision that shocked him. He wanted to disclose it to the people, but he had been struck dumb. What he had seen was a vision of a man, standing in the form of an ass. And the figure that appeared to him took away his power of speech. Once verbal communication had been restored, Zacharias declared what had happened, and the people killed him for blasphemy. Gnostics viewed Zacharias as a martyr because Gnostics themselves believed God often materialized as an ‘ass.’ In point of fact, many cults in antiquity represented God as an ‘ass.’ Evidently, these Gnostics reinvented the story of Zacharias’ death to serve their own purposes, as John the Baptist’s followers also built a fanciful myth around it.

Tertullian (c. 155-230 C.E.) was one of the earliest Church fathers and a giant of the pre-Nicene period. He lived in Carthage all his life, from where he wrote at length against heresies and paganism, and advocated the strictly disciplined religious life. Although married, he saw no contradiction in that. His reputation was for scrupulous honesty, practicality, and commitment, which is apparent in his writings. Toward the end of his life, he broke with the Catholic Church and joined the stricter Montanist movement. His quest for perfectionism eventually forced him to leave the Montanists and found his own church. The name of Tertullian was restored to its former glory by future Church leaders, but his defection always prevented him from attaining sainthood.

In a letter to his wife, Anastasia the Deaconess of Antioch, Tertullian addressed the issue of the identity of Zacharias slain in the Temple. He rejects the notion that it was Zacharias from 2 Chronicles, forcefully makes the case that Jesus was concerned with contemporary events, and concludes that Zacharias was the father of John the Baptist. To support his argument, he relates an oral tradition that Zacharias was killed because he had allowed Mary into the Temple while she was pregnant, which was in violation of the Law:

Whom a tradition not contained in Scripture relates that the Jews slew between the temple and the altar, because he plainly prophesied or rather showed the God-bearer to be a virgin, and him that is born of her, the great God and Savior Jesus Christ, like some King and chief and Lord over their people, and did not remove the holy Virgin herself after the incomprehensible conception by the Holy Spirit from the virgins' place in the temple, between the temple and the altar, as one that was married, but knew her to be still a virgin, and allowed her to stand in the same accustomed place as usual. For this reason (they say) those who heard of it fell into a rage and took weapons in their hands against him.

The final sentence is instructive, “for this reason (they say) those who heard of it fell into a rage and took weapons in their hands against him.” The insinuation is that Tertullian did not think Zacharias was killed for the reason given. That is not surprising because it was clearly a fabrication. Under no circumstances would a priest have allowed a pregnant girl into the sacred Temple area, and neither would a pregnant girl have wished to go there. Death at the hands of a Jewish mob was almost always for reasons of adultery and fornication. But as Tertullian believed in the “incomprehensible conception” of Jesus, he had no desire to publicize details of the accusation against Zacharias. Nevertheless, Zacharias, as a Jewish priest, could not have proclaimed the Gentile doctrine of the virgin birth, as Tertullian states.

The meaning behind this story is clear. Zacharias was accused of adultery. He had impregnated Mary while she was betrothed to another man. For breaking the Law of Moses, he was punished accordingly. Mary herself would only have escaped capital punishment if she were considered an innocent victim, and not a willing participant in the sexual act.¹¹ Zacharias sealed his own fate by prophesying to the crowd that the child of his unlawful tryst would be their future king and redeemer. Although Tertullian stated that this tradition was not “contained in Scripture,” Zacharias’ made precisely the same prophecy about Jesus in the *Benedictus* (see Page 39).

The story of Zacharias’ death spread far and wide. It traveled eastward to reach Persia, and was recorded in *The Prophets, Their Lives, and Their Stories*, by Abdul-Sâhib Al-Hasani Al-âmilîis, a Shiite work from the early Middle Ages that is a collection of biographies of the prophets of Islam based on much earlier sources.¹² Zacharias is honored as both the father of John the Baptist and the guardian of Mary. Even though both Sunni and Shiite branches of Islam accept the doctrine of the virgin birth, the author detailed a sexual accusation made against Zacharias:

They say that when Mary the daughter of Imram got pregnant with Jesus and her pregnancy showed up, they accused Zacharias and that the Satan made them imagine and induced them to believe so and made them think truly that the one who made her pregnant was Zacharias because no one can enter her place except of him because he is her guardian...

This matter was carried in their hearts and they never saw a woman that gets pregnant without a man, so the silly folks of the Jews chased him until he left Jerusalem. When he went out, the evil got even greater and the charge got bigger in the hearts of the bad people and they talked about the sin of Zacharias, so their silly folks chased him, and he went to a valley and they followed him, and when he was in the middle of it he saw a tree so he went to it and it opened up for him and he went inside it and then it closed upon him, and then the Satan came chasing him with the others until he reached the tree and he said to them: he is inside it here, and he put his hand on the position of his (Zacharias’) heart, so he ordered them to saw it and so they did and he was sawn with the tree from the middle, and then they left him apart. Then God sent the angels to wash him up and pray upon him for three days before being buried, and then the good people of the Israelites took him and buried him, and the details about that shall come later by God’s will.

The biographer refers twice to Zacharias’ accusers as “silly folks,” presumably because they failed to recognize that Mary’s conception of Jesus was miraculous. Evidently, these Jews did not share the peculiar Gentile theology that insists God exists apart from the laws by which He creates. But in stating that Zacharias was the only man with access to Mary, “no one can enter her place except of him because he is her guardian,” the writer gives enough reason to doubt the validity of his thesis. Despite being a mythological account of Zacharias’ death, two realities were at its heart. First, Zacharias fathered Jesus, and second, he was murdered because of it.

PHARISEES

To some extent, the killing of Zacharias might account for Jesus’ antipathy toward the Law. In his confrontations with Pharisees, there is a hint that both sides were distrustful of each other because of past events. Pharisees, who knew the circumstances of

Zacharias' death, would be apprehensive of Jesus because his followers included some who might easily be persuaded to violence. And Jesus might seek revenge. In that case, getting rid of him would have been a priority for some Pharisees.

In John 8:41, Jesus accused the Pharisees of trying to kill him; and their response was telling, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God." This could be interpreted as an accusation that Jesus was illegitimate, and if so, the Pharisees must have known details of his parentage to make that charge. As the family background of public figures was subject to a great deal of scrutiny, chances are that many could not accept lessons from Jesus because they considered him a *mamzer*, and worthy only of disdain. The charge of illegitimacy was the most damning of all because it summarily disqualified Jesus from leadership of the Israelite community. This, apparently, was a source of deep frustration,

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning.
John 8:43-44

Abel's was the first murder, which Jesus had linked elsewhere with Zacharias' death. He now suggests that the Pharisees have the same fate in store for him. Assuming the saying is genuine, it betrays a profound resentment and, considering the numerous other instances where Jesus showed contempt for Pharisees, the underlying reasons must have been more than a difference of theological opinion. Jesus accused them of "shedding the blood of the prophets," but there is no record in scriptures of Jews killing any of their prophets. According to Josephus, Essenes were reputedly "prophets" during the Pharisaic era, but were expelled from the Temple and mainstream Jewish society around the turn of the century. Possibly, blood was shed over this event. Whether Jesus had the Essenes in mind is unknowable, but he charged the Pharisees,

You witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.
Matt 23:31-32

The simple explanation for Jesus' scorn was that Pharisees had killed his father, Zacharias, who he acknowledged as a prophet.

The Pharisees were a religio-political movement with diverse factions. Dissenters from the party line were tolerated so long as they did not threaten to overthrow the leadership. Although they were not a monolithic bloc, a hard-line fundamentalist Palestinian faction was dominant. The movement had its origins in the Temple, and many priests were Pharisees. One of the main aims was to spread practice of the purity laws among the general population as well as the priesthood. By the time of Jesus, their opposition to the puppet Herodian dynasty and the aristocratic rule of the Sadducees had built the Pharisees a reputation as champions of the people. As a result, the general public trusted their leadership, and if encouraged to do so, would doubtless have supported the killing of a recalcitrant priest who had transgressed the law on adultery.

If Mary were in her period of betrothal, then she would not have been recognized as a concubine, so by definition Jesus was born a *mamzer*. As the illegitimate son of a priest, he would have been barred from holding priestly office. Pharisees were strong advocates of this principle, and in the past had demanded that High Priests resign on account of

their presumed illegitimacy.¹³ A family register kept in Jerusalem recorded details of births, and it is certain that illegitimate births were registered for the sake of the purity of the community.¹⁴ The genealogy of the priesthood was of the utmost importance and the relevant documentation could be accessed by anyone with appropriate credentials. Families with this blemish would of course have tried to keep it secret whenever possible, and the genealogies of Jesus given in Matthew and Luke were formulated with this in mind.

There is a mention of this family register, and a possible corroboration of John 8:41, in a reference to Jesus in the Mishnah, the oldest and most authoritative part of the Talmud. In rabbinic literature, Jesus is habitually referred to as *peloni*, usually translated as “so and so,” an expression reserved exclusively for Jesus and for no one else. One passage revolved around a Simeon ben Azzai, who according to tradition was one of most respected holy mystics of Israel before the destruction of the Temple. He read the birth of “so and so” recorded in Jerusalem and he was clearly a “mamzer,”

Simeon ben Azzai has said: I discovered a family register in Jerusalem; in which it was written: That so and so is a mamzer (bastard), son of a married woman.¹⁵

Today the English equivalent of *mamzer* -- ‘bastard’ -- is a strong insult, but it had far more serious ramifications in first-century Palestine. Anyone using the word incorrectly was sentenced to thirty-nine lashes with the whip. So the “mamzer” charge was not made lightly. Based on Deuteronomy 23:2, the stigma of *mamzer* marked a man’s descendants forever, “Those born of an illicit union shall not be admitted into the assembly of the Lord. Even unto the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.”

Jesus’ birth status was the obsession of rabbis, but Jewish Christians would have strongly contested any *mamzer* charge. In the Mishnah, there is a reference to a dispute over an unnamed *mamzer*:

He who says, “This, my son, is a mamzer,” is not believed. And even if both parties say concerning the foetus in the mother’s womb, “It is a mamzer,” they are not believed. Rabbi Judah says, “They are believed.”¹⁶

Frequent references in rabbinic literature claim that Mary admitted her adultery, so the “foetus in the mother’s womb” was most likely a reference to her child. The first line reads as though Zacharias -- “He who says,” -- publicly acknowledged Jesus’ status, which gels with the oral tradition Tertullian recorded. Those who refuse to believe Jesus was a *mamzer*, despite both parent’s confession, are the Christians whose theological arguments failed to impress Rabbi Judah. The facts speak for themselves. The parents corroborate them. The child is a *mamzer*.

The circumstances behind Zacharias’ death must surely have influenced the relationship between the Pharisees and John the Baptist. Despite his widespread popularity, John did not have much support from them. Jesus was even reported to have used the fact that the Pharisees did not believe in John to score a point against them. John was also not well disposed towards the Pharisees:

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Matt 3:7

Whether or not John took his hereditary right to the priesthood is uncertain. As a rule, the son of a priest would be ordained at the age of twenty, but first his legitimate descent would first have to be proved, and that could have been problematic in John's case. He was probably not ordained because the judgment against his father had disqualified him in the eyes of the Pharisees who controlled the Sanhedrin. One thing seems certain -- the Pharisees were well aware of both John and Jesus, and kept track of their activities in adult life. As Jesus had a much smaller support base than John, he was the more cautious in public.

Now when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), he left Judea and departed again to Galilee.

John 4:2-3

SUMMARY

The notion that Jesus had a biological father no longer belongs in the contemplative realm -- where many would prefer it remain. It has crash landed with a resounding thud, and is narrowed down to one distinct individual. But knowing that Zacharias was the father of Jesus is much more than just another interesting tidbit of information. Not only does it turn two thousand years of Christian theology upside down, the truth of Jesus' parentage opens up the possibility to understand other aspects of his life.

Although the Church always denied him a genuine father-son relationship, awareness of Jesus' origins was not detrimental to the faith of early disciples. The Lucan school of Christianity explained events through the prism of Abraham's family. But what about the branch of Christianity to which Matthew belonged? How did Matthew reconcile Jesus' messianic status with the apparently sordid details of his birth? The answer is so simple as to be inconceivable. And though Matthew was unaware of Luke, in essence he told the same story.