

## THE PRE CHRISTIAN ROOTS OF CHRISTIAN ART

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Christianity has its roots in Hebrew culture, but we need to distinguish between Hebrew culture and the major development within Hebrew culture that is known as Judaism. The name Judaism cannot properly be used until about 500 BCE, when a group of people from Jerusalem and the area around it were allowed to return to their homeland after 70 years of enforced exile in Babylon. This group identified themselves as 'Jews', meaning the people of the land of Judah. They were not the only people who lived in the land. Others who had not been taken into exile were still living in the land, but they did not call themselves Jews. They were the older Hebrews.

In the time of Jesus, the founder of Christianity, there were several groups living in the land of Palestine who were heirs to the older religion. The Samaritans are well known, but there were other groups too. The followers of Jesus came to be the largest of these groups. Many of them would have called themselves Hebrews but not Jews.

**This historical background information is important, because the various heirs of the ancient religion had different attitudes towards art.**

At the centre of the Jewish religion was the figure of Moses to whom the LORD revealed the Ten Commandments. The second of these commandments was: 'You shall not make for yourself a graven image, nor any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or in the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them ...' (Exodus 20.4-5).

Now, as I will gradually explain, the text of Exodus as we now read it is in fact a combination of several different traditions about Moses and what he experienced. On a first reading it seems quite clear: the Jews were forbidden to make statues and worship them. As we study the history of the Hebrews and the Jews, the question is: how was this commandment understood and applied? Three-dimensional art was forbidden, but some Jewish synagogues, their meeting places, have been found with wall paintings and mosaic floors.

**1, 2.** The synagogue at Dura Europos in eastern Syria was built and decorated in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, and shortly afterwards filled with sand, perhaps to serve as a town defence in the war of 256 CE. It was rediscovered about a century ago with its wall paintings well preserved. At first scholars were surprised to find a synagogue whose walls were painted in the provincial Graeco-Roman style, but all the scenes were from the Jewish scriptures, often called the Old Testament. The style was the current fashion, but the themes were clearly Jewish.

**3, 4** Several synagogues have been found in Israel, dating from the 5-6<sup>th</sup> century CE, which have mosaic floors. They too have scenes from the Old Testament but they also have motifs that seem, at first sight, to be drawn from another culture. There are Zodiac wheels with a sun god figure at the centre, driving his chariot with four horses. There is no obvious mention of a sun god and his chariot in the Old Testament, and so the initial assumption was that this was Helios, a figure from Greek mythology.

The people who identified as Hebrews rather than Jews, however, preserved ancient traditions and customs that could explain why there were zodiac wheels and sun god figures on synagogue floors. These people emphasised the world of Solomon's temple with its stories and symbols, not the simpler second temple that was built about 520 BCE.

Solomon's temple dominated Jerusalem for about 350 years. It was completed about 950 BCE and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, the time when people of the ruling class were taken into exile in Babylon. When they returned, these people built a second temple that was very different from the first. They also changed the emphasis in their religion, giving central place to the Law of Moses with that commandment to make no graven images. The old believers never accepted the new temple; they said that its builders were an impure generation of apostates.

The people who did not call themselves Jews kept alive the ways of Solomon's temple, and the central place was given not to Moses and the Law, but to the king of the house of David who also served as high priest. They believed he had been the visible presence of their God, the LORD with his people. He had been the image of God, the LORD in human form. These people had no problem with art and images. The interior of Solomon's temple had been decorated with golden cherubs, gourds and flowers were carved on the walls, and golden pomegranates decorated the pillars. In the innermost holy place was a golden chariot throne formed from two great winged cherubs (2 Chronicles 3—4), and in the courtyard was a huge water bath supported by twelve bronze oxen. Other furnishings were decorated with bulls and lions.

When the priest-prophet Ezekiel was in exile in Babylon with his people, he had a vision of how the temple should be rebuilt. He gave precise measurements - these all had a symbolic meaning - and he described the interior walls carved with cherubs and palm trees (Ezekiel 41). The people who knew Solomon's temple and remembered it either did not know, or else did not observe, the commandment about no graven images.

**There are two distinct streams in the Old Testament: one forbids graven images, and the other accepts them as part of the temple. In addition, one tradition believed that human beings were created as the image of God, and so the LORD could be present in a human being or could be seen as a human form.**

Let me give you one clear example:

The older account of Moses on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments says that he saw the God of Israel on a sapphire pavement (Exodus 24.9-10); the later account says that

only the voice of the LORD was heard: 'You saw no form' (Deuteronomy 4.12). The people who became known as 'the Jews' said that it was not possible to see God, but the older religion had at its heart the belief that certain chosen people had seen God, and that the king was his visible form on earth. One of the king's titles was 'Immanuel' which means 'God with us'.

**5.**The Christians had their roots in the older form of Hebrew religion, and their Hebrew name, *nosrîm*, meant 'preservers'. Jesus said: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' (Matthew 5.8). St John taught that Jesus, like the ancient kings, was the human presence of the LORD. He emphasised: 'We beheld the glory of the only Son' (John 1.14), and 'We have seen with our eyes, looked upon and touched with our hands...' (1 John 1.1). This is why a full-face picture of Jesus became so important in Christian art.

In the older religion, the high priests had given a special blessing:

May the LORD bless you and keep you.

May the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you

May the LORD lift up his face upon you and give you peace (Numbers 7.24-26).

Seeing and experiencing the 'face' of the LORD was the greatest blessing of the older religion, and yet by the time of Jesus, this blessing was so controversial that it was forbidden for a Jew to translate it or to explain it to anyone. The Christians, however, believed it had been fulfilled in Jesus; they had seen the face of the LORD.

In the early 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, responding to the emergence of Islam, many Christians took the view that images were forbidden and so should be destroyed. They were called the iconoclasts, the destroyers of images. **Much of the earlier Christian art was destroyed as a result.** It is often said that little early Christian art survives because little was produced due to the low socio-economic status of the early Christians, but in fact such art as they did produce would not have survived the constant persecutions which they endured in the early years of the Church and then the destruction wrought by iconoclasm. The wall paintings in the catacombs in Rome did survive and are important evidence for early Christian art.

St John of Damascus, who died in 747 CE, opposed the iconoclasm of his time and wrote three treatises to show why and how Christians should use images. At the heart of the Christian faith is the belief that God came among us in human form. This is called the Incarnation, meaning 'being in the flesh'. St John of Damascus wrote: 'Therefore I boldly draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes, by partaking of flesh and blood' (*On the Divine Images* 1.4).

## 6

Depict, then, His birth from the Virgin, His baptism in the Jordan, His transfiguration on Tabor, His sufferings which have freed us from passion, His death, His miracles which are signs of His divine nature, since through divine power He worked them in the flesh. Show us His saving cross, the tomb, the resurrection, the ascension into the heavens. Use every kind of drawing, word or colour (*On the Divine Images* 1.8).

St John of Damascus continued by arguing that there are other kinds of images: words written in books are images of speech, and certain objects symbolise teachings beyond themselves. In particular he mentioned the temple and its furnishings, all of which represented heavenly mysteries (ODI 1.15).

This was the programme for Christian art in the 8<sup>th</sup> century: illustrations of events in the life of Jesus and certain symbols whose meaning was known to the Christian community, and just as teachings could be written in many languages, so images could be made in many styles.

We, however, are looking for the roots of this art and so we return to the different attitudes of the Jews and other heirs of the Hebrew tradition.

Some of the texts preserved by those who did not call themselves 'Jews' show that those zodiac wheels in the synagogue floor mosaics may not have been alien elements creeping into their art. The style may have been whatever was fashionable at the time, but there are texts - not in the Old Testament - which show that the Hebrews had been great astronomers. One of these astronomy texts, known as *1 Enoch*, has been preserved only by the Christians of Ethiopia, but small pre-Christian fragments of the book were found among the Dead Sea scrolls in Israel/Palestine. A zodiac floor was not necessarily an import from another culture. The Enochic astronomy book describes fiery angels who ordered the heavens and the sun in chariot driven by the winds (1 Enoch 72.5). This is the most likely reason for a sun chariot on a mosaic synagogue floor.

A description of the temple in Jerusalem just before it was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE mentions a sun chariot and horses dedicated to the sun at the entrance to the temple (2 Kings 23.11). About 50 years later, the prophet Zechariah had visions of horses riding out of the temple (Zechariah 1.7-11) and of four horse-drawn chariots coming from the temple and carrying angels to patrol the earth (Zechariah 6.1-8). The best known temple horses are, of course, the four horses of the Apocalypse, seen by St John in his great vision of the Last Judgement and recorded in the Book of Revelation. They too rode out from the temple: a white horse, a red horse, a black horse and a pale horse (Revelation 6.1-8).

When looking for the roots of Christian art, it is important to bear in mind that they knew more of the ancient Hebrew traditions than are recorded in the Old Testament, and since the Christians had their roots in the older religion and in the world of Solomon's temple, it is necessary now to look briefly at that temple. The temple was a larger version of the desert tent that was used in the time of Moses.

**7.**First, we consider its shape. The temple was a rectangular building, 20 cubits wide and 60 cubits long, so approximately 10 metres by 30 metres. These proportions are important, and can be found in later Christian cathedrals. The innermost area was screened by a huge curtain to form a sanctuary that was a cube of 20 cubits. In the temple, this was lined with gold on all surfaces except the sixth, which was the great curtain called the veil of the temple.

The temple represented the creation. The six days of creation described in Genesis 1 were re-enacted in the six stages by which Moses assembled the desert tent, and later tradition remembered how the days of creation represented the various parts of the temple. The innermost sanctuary represented the origin of creation, Day One. The veil of the temple which screened the sanctuary represented matter, separating heaven from earth. It was the Second Day of creation. The other days corresponded to items of temple furnishing, for example, the creation of plants on the third day was represented by the golden table for plant offerings within the temple.

Two things are important here;

- The sanctuary was the beyond both time and matter. It was the state of uncreated light which was the presence of God. It was the realm of the angels and their song, and it was the eternity and unity that underlies all time and matter.
- The sanctuary was called the holy of holies, which meant that it was the source of holiness. Those who entered the holy of holies ‘caught’ the holiness and became holy ones. The holy ones could be either angels or transformed human beings. The temple did not distinguish, and so it became the custom to show angels and holy people, the saints, with halos of light around their heads. This showed that they had ‘caught’ the light and were bearers of the light; they had ‘caught’ the holiness and brought it into the world.

**8.** The veil of the temple separating earth from heaven eventually became the ikon screen in a church, and the saints and angels depicted there were, in effect, a glimpse of what lay beyond in the uncreated light. This is why ikons have a golden background: the figures are set against the eternal uncreated light; and they have no shadows since they depict the state that John Donne called ‘one equal light’.

Christian liturgy expressed the link between earth and heaven. The movements of the priests in and out of the inner sanctuary were the movements of the visible saints and the invisible angels, bringing the teaching, the Gospel, from heaven to earth, and then bringing the heavenly food, the bread and wine which was the body and blood of the LORD. The plan of the earliest churches has often been compared to contemporary basilicas, but it is important to distinguish the current styles of building from the heavenly ritual that was enacted within that building. The Christians saw themselves as the restored temple, the true temple. They were, as St Peter said, ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood’ (1 Peter 2.9), and in their worship they joined with the angels to sing. The earliest pictures of Christian worship are in the Book of Revelation, where every creature in heaven and earth and under the earth is part of the cosmic

liturgy (Revelation 4.11-14). The saints and angels depicted on the walls of churches were part of the worshipping congregation.

The main description of Solomon's temple was written by those who sought to destroy its art and images, those who would later be called Jews. A good source of information is their description of how they purified the temple in 623 BCE, and it shows what they took out and destroyed. This is found in 2 Kings 23. The young king Josiah was persuaded to purify the temple, and so he removed various items. Since these items were too abominable even to mention by their real names in Scripture, the account has to be decoded.

First, he removed all the things for Asherah. Asherah was a Canaanite goddess, but unedited inscriptions from that time show that her real name among the Hebrews was Ashratah. She was the Lady of the Jerusalem temple, and her name meant 'the one who makes you happy' or 'the one who shows you the straight path'. She was the heavenly Mother of the anointed king, who, you will recall, was the earthly presence of the LORD. She was the Mother of the LORD, banished from the temple by King Josiah, but seen by St John when she returned to the temple to give birth to her Son.

**9** At the centre of the Book of Revelation St John set a woman clothed with the sun who gave birth to the anointed king. This was Solomon's temple restored, and the Lady had appeared again. The Lady of the temple had been a sun deity, the source of light, and she was believed to dwell in the holy of holies.

**10, 11** The Christians saw the Lady of the temple as prefiguring Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the LORD. The imagery and titles of the Lady of the temple became the imagery and titles of Mary. Her greatest title is Theotokos, 'Mother of God'. She is often depicted in the apse of a church, which corresponds to the holy of holies of the temple: sometimes she holds her Son, and sometimes she stands alone.

**12.** The oldest ikon form of Mary is known as the Hodegetria, often called 'The Lady of the Way' in western churches. She is depicted holding her Son and pointing to Him as the Way. This title 'The one who shows the way' is the exact meaning of the name Ashratah, the Lady of the temple. How this memory of the ancient Lady passed into Christianity and became one of the titles of Mary is not known, but the correspondence is beyond coincidence.

**13** Mary is also depicted as the Sign, fulfilling the Isaiah's prophetic sign of the Virgin who would conceive and bear a son. She is St John's sign in heaven, the woman clothed with the sun about to give birth, and the ikon shows her unborn Son within her.

Second, King Josiah removed from Solomon's temple all the instruments for astronomy – at least, that is what the Hebrew text seems to mean. The older priesthood watched the stars, as is clear from the Enoch astronomy book, and so the star which appeared when Jesus was born appears not only in the stories in the New Testament, but is also prominent in early Christian art. And those mysterious wise men who followed the star were most likely the ancient priests living in exile and not exotic oriental kings.

Third, King Josiah brought out of the temple the great symbol of the Lady, which he burned by her sacred stream, the Kidron brook. The text does not describe the abominable thing, but from other sources we can be fairly certain that it was a stylised golden almond tree.

**14** This is better known as the seven-branched lamp, the menorah. The Lady's golden almond tree was the tree of life, originally set in the centre of the Garden of Eden.

The story of the Garden of Eden is the story of the old temple. Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden and from the temple because they rejected the Lady's tree of life and chose the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The great theme of the New Testament is how, after the sacrifice of Jesus the great high priest, his followers can enter the Garden again and have access to the tree of life. Jesus said: 'To him who is faithful, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God' (Revelation 2.7). This is why the Garden of Eden, the Tree of life and the expulsion of Adam and Eve are such important subjects in Christian art.

In traditions preserved outside the Old Testament, the throne of the LORD was set under the tree of life, and when he came to the Garden of Eden, that is where sat. Sometimes, as in the Dura Europos synagogue, the throne was set in the branches of the tree and the LORD reigned from the tree.

**15** Here, the Lamb, that is, the LORD, reigns from the tree which is depicted on the back of St Mark's throne, now in Venice. Since 'tree' and 'wood' are the same word in Hebrew, the tree of life eventually became the wood of Jesus' crucifixion cross, and he was depicted reigning from his cross. It was many centuries before the reality of Jesus' crucifixion was depicted in Christian art.

In the final vision of the Book of Revelation, St John saw the servants of God standing again by the tree of life and before the throne. They saw the face of the LORD, just as in the old temple, and his Name was on their foreheads. We shall return to the Name of the LORD in a moment, when we have looked at the other items which King Josiah removed from the temple.

King Josiah destroyed the horses dedicated to the sun and the chariot of the sun, those temple furnishings which later appeared in those synagogue floor mosaics. [Lxx has singular chariot: MT has plural]. Then, after burning the Lady's golden tree, King Josiah turned his

attention to the 'male cult prostitutes'. This is another example of changing a word to avoid the unmentionable, and here the original word was 'holy ones', the Lady's angel priests. By changing one vowel in the Hebrew word for 'male prostitutes' the Lady's 'holy ones' reappear. King Josiah tore up their holy linen garments which women had woven within the temple precincts. These special garments of polished white linen represented garments of light and were worn in the holy of holies which was the place of uncreated light.

**16** That is why angels are usually shown wearing shining white garments.

**17 18 19** The Lady's angel priests, representing her angels in human form, were the inspiration for Christian priestly vestments, another form of their art. The outer garments, although the shape of contemporary Roman dress, were woven from coloured material like the temple veil and so represented matter covering the shining garment of the heavenly messenger. As late as the 15<sup>th</sup> century, St Symeon of Thessalonike taught that the priestly vestments symbolised incarnation (*Treatise on Prayer* 41), and in mediaeval Europe, angels were often depicted wearing vestments: the lesser angels were dressed as deacons, and the archangels as bishops, although I know of no picture which shows how the bishop's cope fitted over their wings.

A few years after this great purge of the temple, the Babylonians destroyed it, and the ruling elite who had purged the temple were taken into exile in Babylon. The people who remained in the land never forgot the glory of the old temple. In the time of the Messiah, they said, the true temple would be restored with its original glory and all the furnishings. It is remarkable that when the Christian writers of the New Testament described the temple, what they had in mind was the original temple, not the one that actually stood in Jerusalem in their own time. Thus the writer of the Book of Hebrews described the ark of the covenant, Aaron's rod and the golden jar of manna, all of which had disappeared some 700 years earlier. St John's vision in the Book of Revelation was set in the heavenly temple with all the old furnishings restored: the ark of the covenant, the fiery throne, the seven-branched lamp, the tree of life, and the Lady giving birth to her Son.

And now we consider the Name on the foreheads of the faithful who stood before the heavenly throne and saw the face. The Name was not a set of letters, but a diagonal cross, X, the ancient sign of the Name of the LORD. The priest-prophet Ezekiel described it about 600 BCE. It was the mark of the LORD, set on the foreheads of his faithful servants (Ezekiel 9.4). Ezekiel said it was the letter *tau*, the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and in the archaic script used at that time, it was a diagonal cross, X. When the high priests were anointed, they were marked on the forehead with this sign of the LORD, showing that they belonged to the LORD and in some sense we do not fully understand, were the presence of the LORD. When the Christians were baptised, they were marked with the same sign, since they were the royal priesthood restored. Later the cross became



**20** The diagonal cross was then re-interpreted as the Greek letter *chi*, the initial letter of the title Christ, and became familiar as the *chi-rho* symbol. Originally, however, the diagonal cross was the sign of the LORD used in Solomon's temple.

One curious characteristic of Christian art is that Jesus himself appears in Old Testament scenes. To understand this apparent anachronism we need to look at how the early Christians understood the Old Testament. They did not read it as most people do today, a monotheistic text describing the role of the one God in the story of his chosen people. The Christians read the Old Testament as the story of one God but known in many manifestations. It was a foreshadowing of what would later be called the Trinity: one God, known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There are many divine names in the Old Testament, and the Jews of the second temple period read them all as titles of the one God, whom they described as the LORD. He had revealed his real Name to Moses, but that Name was too holy to utter, and so they referred to their God as 'the Lord', Adonai. To indicate the holy Name in an English translation of the Old Testament, the word 'LORD' is written in capital letters.

The Christians, and others who remembered and preserved the older faith, said there were three divine beings in the Old Testament: God the Father, known as El Elyon, 'God Most High';

his Son, the LORD; and a female deity who was the Mother of the Son. Her name was El Shaddai, literally 'God with breasts' but now translated 'God Almighty'. She was the God of Abraham. The New Testament observes this distinction, showing that the earliest Christian writers knew of it. Thus, when Gabriel spoke to Mary at the Annunciation, he said that her Son would be called 'the Son of God Most High', in other words, that she would give birth to the son of El Elyon. He would be the LORD (Luke 1.32). The title of the Davidic kings in old Jerusalem had been 'Son of God', and Gabriel told Mary that her son would have the throne of his ancestor David. The Christians proclaimed that Jesus was the LORD incarnate: 'Jesus is the LORD' (1 Corinthians 12.3). St Paul wrote 'For us there is one God, the Father ... and one LORD, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 8.6).

Since Jesus was the Lord, the Christians the Lord in the Old Testament as a reference to Jesus. This can be demonstrated from the earliest writers, and seen in Christian art. The earliest Christian writer outside the New Testament whose work survives in any quantity is Justin, who died in 166 CE. His evidence is very important, and it shows that the appearances of the LORD in the Old Testament were understood to be appearances of the Son of God Most High before his incarnation as Jesus. Thus Justin explained that Abraham saw the LORD, the Son, in human form (*Dialogue with Trypho* 56) and Joshua saw him as a heavenly warrior (Joshua 5.13-15). There are many examples both in Justin and in other

early writers. These particular Old Testament scenes are depicted in Christian art because they show the pre-incarnation appearances of Jesus as the LORD or as the angel of the LORD (Balaam e.g. Num.22.21-35, Catacomb of Via Latina). The Emperor Constantine built a great church Mamre, which Jesus never visited, but where Abraham had seen the LORD, a pre-incarnation appearance of Jesus. The great church marked an appearance of the Lord before he was incarnate as Jesus: 'It is recorded that here the Son of God appeared to Abraham with two angels...' (Sozomen, *History* 2.4). Note that the LORD and his angels were always described in human form; there was no cultural assimilation from Egypt, no gods with animal heads. Only evil beings were described and depicted as, for example, snakes.

This affected how scenes from the Old Testament were presented, and indeed, what scenes were chosen.

**21.** Adam and Eve were created by the LORD, Abraham saw the LORD at Mamre, Noah's ark was closed by the LORD, Isaiah had a vision of the LORD on his throne. St John said in his gospel when speaking of Jesus: 'Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke of him' (John 12.41). The prophet Ezekiel described the LORD as the good shepherd who would come to rescue his people (Ezekiel 34.1-16), and Jesus took this up in his own teaching, telling the parable of the Good Shepherd (Matthew 18.12-14; Luke 15.3-7), and claiming to be that Good Shepherd (John 10.11). This was Jesus' claim to be the incarnation of the LORD prophesied by Ezekiel.

**22** There are many early frescos of the Good Shepherd, for example in the catacomb of Domitilla, and many early statuettes. These usually show Christ as a beardless youth, an interesting point, but this should not be allowed to distract attention from the claim implicit in depicting Jesus as the Good Shepherd. He was the LORD incarnate.

Ezekiel also described the glory of the LORD leaving the temple, a human form on a sapphire throne – elsewhere this is the foundation of the throne - caught up into the fiery chariot throne. **23.** The New Testament accounts of the LORD ascending into heaven give no details, but the illustrated 6<sup>th</sup> century Rabula Gospels show Jesus at his ascension being taken in that fiery chariot throne with a sapphire foundation.<sup>23</sup> This could have been the artist's imagination, or it could be evidence of a largely unwritten understanding of the life of Jesus in terms of the older temple tradition.

**24.** Because of this belief, Jesus often appears in Old Testament scenes, and he is identified as Jesus by a cross in his halo. The 13<sup>th</sup> C mosaics in the narthex of St Mark's Venice, for example, depict the creation. Jesus is shown creating the heaven and the earth, all creatures and finally Adam. Irrespective of the style of these mosaics, they show clearly that the creation was understood as the work of Jesus, the Son, the LORD.

**25** Similarly in the full face ikons of Jesus, the holy Name is written in the cross of his halo, identifying him as the LORD. The earliest surviving example of this is the [possibly] sixth century ikon now at St Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai. The Greek letters HO ΩN are clearly visible, and this is the Greek version of the holy Name. Jesus is the LORD. This means that the earliest evidence in written texts and in ikons shows that Jesus was recognised as the LORD incarnate.

Finally, we consider the pictures of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. A surface reading of the New Testament says very little about Mary, and so those who looked no further than the biblical texts found no justification for the increasingly complex and colourful veneration of Mary.

- **26** Early pictures of her sitting with Jesus on her lap are said to have been influenced by statues of Isis enthroned holding Horus. The style may have been copied, but the image of the Mother of the LORD enthroned and holding her son came from the original temple. There are, after all, only a limited number of ways to depict a mother holding her child on her lap. But the Lady of the temple had been enthroned in her city and was the heavenly Mother of its king. Isaiah described her in this way before 700 BCE, although the English translations call her simply 'the inhabitant of Zion' (Isaiah 12.5). The Hebrew is literally 'the female figure who reigns in Zion'. Depictions of Mary enthroned may have been influenced by an Egyptian style, but the style is all that was borrowed. The substance was deep rooted in Hebrew tradition.
- Mary's great title 'Theotokos, Mother of God, is also said to be drawn from the cult of Isis. It is found, however, in the oldest Hebrew manuscript of Isaiah, the great pre-Christian Isaiah scroll found at Qumran. The prophet challenged King Ahaz to ask for a sign from *the Mother of the LORD* (Isaiah 7.11), and the great prophecy followed: 'the Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son'. This can be dated to 731 BCE.
- **27** Pictures and statues of Mary breast-feeding her Son are also said to be copies of an Egyptian original, even though a disciple of Isaiah in about 500 BCE described the Lady suckling her children (Isaiah 66.10-11). **28** Hundreds of small figurines of a woman with prominent breasts have been found in and around Jerusalem; they are known as the Judean pillar figurines. None has been dated after the time of King Josiah's purge, and many of them were smashed. They were initially identified as dolls, and some museums still describe them as dolls. They are in fact statuettes of the Lady, El Shaddai, God with breasts. She was the Lady of Jerusalem who suckled her children.
- In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Mary had a prominent role as the Protector of the city of Byzantium. Her ikon was displayed on the walls when the city was attacked by enemies. This too had been a role of the Lady of the temple. When Jerusalem was threatened by the Assyrians just before 700 BCE, Isaiah gave an oracle from the Lady who despised and scorned those who came against her: 'I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you

came' (Isaiah 37.29). The Lady was the Queen of Heaven. **29** She protected her city.

**30** This ancient role appears in the Akathist, great hymn to Mary composed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Mary was honoured as the protector of Byzantium.

When looking for the pre-Christian roots of Christian art, it is important to look beyond the Bible itself, and above all to look beyond the simple, one might say simplistic, account of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. We now know that the religious and cultural context of early Christianity was far richer and more complex than anything the earlier generations of scholars could have imagined.

There is no need now to look for alien influences on the initial formation of Christian thought and so of its art. The styles may have been those of current fashion, but the substance was drawn from the ancient temple, because the Christians were, as their original name implied, the preservers.

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