

A NORTON CRITICAL STUDY IN ART HISTORY

Giotto:
The Arena Chapel Frescoes

*Illustrations · Introductory Essay ·
Backgrounds and Sources · Criticism ·*

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BACKGROUND AND SOURCES

they understood the great devotion with which he had pronounced these words.

A highwayman had built a stronghold beside a road, and robbed without mercy all that passed by; but every day he recited the Hail Mary, and allowed nothing to prevent him from so doing. One day a saintly monk came down the road, and the brigand's men made ready to rob him: but the holy man asked to be brought to their leader, saying that he had a secret for him. He was led into the chief's presence, and besought him to call together all that dwelt in the fortress, that he might preach the word of God to them. But when they were gathered together, the monk said: 'You are not all here! There is someone missing!' And when he was told that no one was absent, he persisted: 'Look well, and you will see that someone is missing!' Then one of the brigands cried out: 'Sure enough, one of the varlets is absent!' 'Yes,' said the monk, 'and he is the very one for whom I am looking!' They therefore went in search of him; but when he came within sight of the man of God, he rolled his eyes in fright, threw himself about like a madman, and refused to come nearer. And the holy man said to him: 'In the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, I adjure thee to say who thou art and why thou art come here!' The varlet made answer: 'Since I am forced to speak, know that I am not a man, but a demon, and I have lived at this brigand's side for fourteen years. Our master sent me to lie in wait when he would neglect to recite the Hail Mary; for on that day he would have fallen to us, and I was ordered to throttle him on the spot. Nothing but this daily prayer kept him from falling into our power. But I spied upon him in vain, for not once did he fail to recite it!' Hearing this, the robber was dumbfounded: and he threw himself at the feet of the man of God, begged his pardon, and was thenceforth converted to a better life.

The Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

SEPTEMBER 8

The glorious Virgin Mary took her origin from the tribe of Juda and from the royal house of David. Matthew and Luke did not set down the generation of Mary, but that of Joseph, who, however, did not beget Christ; because the usage of the sacred writers was to describe the descendance of males, not that of females. Nonetheless it is most certain that the Blessed Virgin sprang from the family of David, as is manifest from this, that the Scriptures many times attest

that Christ was of the seed of David. But since Christ was born of a virgin mother, it is apparent that the Virgin herself was born of David's line, through his son Nathan. For among the sons of David were Nathan and Solomon. Of the line of Nathan, as John Damascenus affirms, Levi begat Melchi and Panthar, Panthar begat Barpanthar, Barpanthar begat Joachim, and Joachim begat the Virgin Mary. Mathan had a wife of the line of Solomon, of whom he begat Jacob. When Mathan died, Melchi of the tribe of Nathan, the son of Levi and the brother of Panthar, took the dead man's wife, who was the mother of Jacob, and of her begat Heli. Thus Jacob and Heli were blood brothers, Jacob being of the tribe of Solomon and Heli of the tribe of Nathan. Heli of the tribe of Nathan died without issue, and Jacob of the tribe of Solomon took his brother's wife, and raised up seed to his brother, begetting Joseph. Thus Joseph is by birth the son of Jacob and the descendant of Solomon, but according to the Law the son of Heli, and of the line of Nathan; for the Law considered such issue as being of the defunct brother. Thus Damascenus.

We read in the *Ecclesiastical History* and in Bede's *Chronicle* that all the genealogical books of the Hebrews and of foreigners among the Jews were guarded in the Temple, but that Herod ordered them to be burnt, thinking that he could pretend to noble birth if, in the absence of proof, it was believed that he was descended from Israel. But some of Our Lord's kinsmen, who were Nazarenes, sought out the order of Christ's generation as best they might, partly from the memories of their elders, and partly from certain books which they had kept at home.

Joachim, then, took to wife a woman called Anna, who had a sister named Ismeria. This Ismeria begat Elizabeth and Eliud, and Elizabeth in turn was the mother of John the Baptist. Of Eliud was born Eminent, and of Eminent came Saint Servatius, whose body is preserved in the town of Maastricht, in the diocese of Liège. Anna is said to have had three husbands, namely Joachim, Cleophas, and Salome. Of Joachim she begat one daughter, namely Mary the mother of the Lord, whom they gave in marriage to Joseph. At Joachim's death Anna became the wife of Cleophas, the brother of Joseph, and had of him another daughter, also called Mary, who was later given in marriage to Alpheus, and was the mother of four sons, namely James the Less, Joseph the Just (also called Barsabas), Simon, and Jude. When her second husband died, Anna took a third, namely Salome, of whom she had a third daughter, again called Mary, and given in marriage to Zebedee. This Mary bore two sons to Zebedee,

namely James the Greater and John the Evangelist. All this is set forth in the following verse:

Anna it is said conceived three Marys,
 By husbands named Joachim, Cleophas and Salome.
 These took as husbands Joseph, Alpheus and Zebedee.
 The first gave birth to Christ, the second bore James the Less,
 And Joseph the Just as well as Simon and Jude,
 The third James the Greater and the winged John.*

Nor need we wonder that Mary was kin to Elizabeth, as we have said above. Elizabeth was the wife of Zachary, who was of the tribe of Levi. Now the Law prescribed that every man should take a wife from his own tribe and family; yet Luke affirms that Elizabeth was of the daughters of Aaron, while Jerome says that Anna was of Bethlehem, which was in the land of Juda. But we may note that both Aaron and Jojada the high priest took wives of the tribe of Juda, whence it is proven that the priestly tribe and the royal tribe were always conjoined by ties of blood. This kinship, as Bede says, could also have arisen at a later time, women being given in marriage from tribe to tribe, so that it would be manifest that Mary, who issued from the royal tribe, had bonds of kinship with the priestly tribe. And so it was that the Blessed Mary was descended of both tribes. The Lord willed that these two privileged tribes should have a symbolic relationship; for of them Christ was to be born, Who, being truly King and Priest, would offer Himself for us, and would rule His faithful subjects while they strove amidst the evils of this life, and would crown them after the victory. This is likewise suggested by the name of Christ, which means anointed, because in the Old Law only priests and kings and prophets were anointed; whence we also are named Christians, and are called a chosen generation and a kingly priesthood.

Saint Jerome tells us in his *Prologue* that in his early youth he read the history of the nativity of the Blessed Virgin in a certain little book, and wrote it down as he remembered it, after a long passage of time. He relates therefore that Joachim, who was of Galilee and of the town of Nazareth, took to wife Saint Anna of Bethlehem. Both were just, and walked without reproach in all the commandments of the Lord. They divided all their substance in three parts, allotting one part to the Temple and its ministers, and another to the poor and the pilgrims, reserving the third part to themselves and the uses of their household. Thus they lived for twenty years, and had no issue of their wedlock; and they made a vow to the Lord that if

* Translated from the original Latin [Ed.].

He granted them offspring, they would dedicate it to the service of God. For this they went to Jerusalem to celebrate the three principal feasts of each year. And once, when Joachim and his kinsmen went up to Jerusalem at the feast of the Dedication, he approached the altar with them, in order to offer his sacrifice. A priest saw him, and angrily drove him away, upbraiding him for daring to draw near the altar of God, and calling it unseemly that one who lay under the curse of the Law should offer sacrifice to the Lord of the Law, or that a childless man, who gave no increase to the people of God, should stand among men who bore sons. At this Joachim was covered with confusion, and was ashamed to return to his home, lest he have to bear the contempt of his kindred, who had heard all. He went off therefore and dwelt for some time among his shepherds. But one day when he was alone, an angel appeared to him, surrounded with dazzling light. He was affrighted at the vision, but the angel bade him be without fear, saying: 'I the Lord's angel, am sent to thee, to announce to thee that thy prayers are granted, and thine almsworks have ascended in the sight of the Lord. I have seen thy shame, and heard the reproach of barrenness wrongfully cast upon thee. For God indeed punishes not nature, but sin; and therefore, when He closes a womb, it is only that He may later open it more wondrously, and that all may know that what is born thereof is not the fruit of lust, but of the divine munificence. Did not Sara, the first mother of your race, bear Isaac, to whom was promised the blessing of all nations? Did not Rachel also long remain barren, and yet beget Joseph, who was the ruler of all of Egypt? Who was stronger than Samson or holier than Samuel? Yet both of these were the sons of barren mothers! Therefore believe my words and these examples: those conceived after long delay, and begotten of sterile mothers, are wont to be the more admirable! Thus Anna thy wife will bear thee a daughter, and thou shalt call her name Mary. In accordance with your vow, she shall be consecrated to the Lord from her infancy, and shall be filled with the Holy Spirit from her mother's womb; nor shall she abide without, among the common folk, but within the Temple of the Lord, lest aught of evil be thought of her. And as she will be born of a barren mother, so will she herself, in wondrous wise, beget the Son of the Most High, Whose name will be called Jesus, and through Whom salvation will come to all nations! And this will be a sign to thee: when thou shalt come to the Golden Gate of Jerusalem, Anna thy wife will meet thee there, who now grieves at thy tarrying, and then will rejoice to see thee!' And with these words the angel left him.

Meanwhile Anna wept bitterly, not knowing where her husband had gone. Then the same angel appeared to her, and revealed to her the same things which he had announced to Joachim, adding that as a sign she was to go to the Golden Gate of Jerusalem, to meet her husband at his return. Thus it was that, following the angel's command, they came face to face, and shared their joy over the vision which they had both seen, and over the certainty that they were to have offspring. Then they adored God and set out for their home, awaiting the Lord's promise in gladness of heart. And Anna conceived and bore a girl child, and called her name Mary.

When the Blessed Virgin was three years old, and was weaned from the breast, her parents brought her with gifts to the Temple of the Lord. Around the Temple there were fifteen steps, one for each of the fifteen gradual Psalms; for, since the Temple was built upon a hill, one could not go up to the altar of holocaust from without except by the steps. And the Virgin, being placed upon the lowest of these steps, mounted all of them without the help of anyone, as if she had already reached the fulness of her age.

When they had made their offering, Joachim and Anna left the child with the other virgins in the Temple, and returned to their home. And Mary advanced in every virtue, and daily was visited by the angels, and enjoyed the vision of God. In a letter to Chromatius and Heliodorus, Jerome says that the Blessed Virgin had set for herself the following rule: from dawn to the third hour she devoted herself to prayer, from the third to the ninth hour she worked at weaving, and from the ninth hour she prayed until an angel appeared, bringing her food.

When she had come to her fourteenth year, the high priest announced to all that the virgins who were reared in the Temple, and who had reached the age of their womanhood, should return to their own, and be given in lawful marriage. The rest obeyed the command, and Mary alone answered that this she could not do, both because her parents had dedicated her to the service of the Lord, and because she herself had vowed her virginity to God. The High Priest was perplexed at this, because on the one hand he could not forbid the fulfilment of a vow, since the Scripture said: 'Vow ye, and pay to the Lord your God'; and on the other, he dared not admit a practice which was unwonted in the Jewish nation. When the elders were consulted at the next feast of the Jews, all were of opinion that in so doubtful a matter they should seek counsel of the Lord. They all therefore joined in prayer; and when the high priest went in to take counsel with God, a voice came forth from the oratory for all to hear, and said that of all the marriageable men of

the house of David who had not yet taken a wife, each should bring a branch and lay it upon the altar, that one of the branches would burst into flower and upon it the Holy Ghost would come to rest in the form of a dove, according to the prophecy of Isaias, and that he to whom this branch belonged would be the one to whom the virgin should be espoused. Joseph was among the men who came: but to him it seemed not fitting that a man of his years should take so young a maid to wife, so that when all the others placed branches upon the altar, he alone left none. Thus nothing such as the voice of God had predicted took place, wherefore the high priest again took counsel with the Lord, Who said that he alone to whom the Virgin should be espoused, had not brought his branch. Being thus discovered, Joseph placed a branch upon the altar, and straightway it burst into bloom, and a dove came from Heaven and perched at its summit; whereby it was manifest to all that the Virgin was to become the spouse of Joseph. And when the espousals were completed, Joseph went back to his city of Bethlehem to make ready his house, and to dispose all that was needful for the wedding. Mary, however, retired to her parents' house in Nazareth, with seven virgins of her age who had been nurtured with her, and whom the high priest had given to her as companions because of the miracle. And it was in those days that the angel Gabriel appeared to her as she knelt in prayer, and announced to her that she was to give birth to the Son of God.

For a long time the date of the nativity of the Blessed Virgin was unknown to the faithful. Then, as John Beletel relates, it happened that a certain holy man, who devoted himself diligently to contemplation, each year on the eighth day of September heard the voices of the most joyous company of the angels, raised in solemn song. He therefore most piously implored God to reveal to him the reason of his hearing this on that day alone and on no other: and he received answer that on that day the glorious Virgin Mary had been born into the world, and that he should make this known to the children of the Holy Church, that they might join with the heavenly court in celebrating her nativity. When he had imparted this to the pope and to others, and they had fasted and prayed, and searched through the Scriptures and the testimonies of ancient times, and discovered his revelation to be true, they decreed that this day should be solemnized throughout the world in honour of the nativity of the Virgin.

The octave of the feast was not celebrated in times past, but was instituted by Innocent IV, who was by birth a Genoese. This came about for the following reason. When death took Gregory IX

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