THE “PROSLEPSIS” OF THE BIBLE IN THE PALEOLOGEAN MONUMENTAL PAINTING OF THESSALONIKI *

Talking about the presence of the Bible on the wall decoration of a Byzantine church at first it may be considered self-evident. What is more important to deal with in this paper is the way the Byzantine artist and the believer also perceive the biblical text and express it artistically. The strictly hierarchical iconographic programme as it was articulated after the end of the Iconoclastic controversy (843) is adjusted perfectly to the microcosm of a Byzantine church.

The notion of the sacred edifice as a microcosm, where the heaven meets the earth and the ascending course to the Divine begins from that point, is found mainly in patristic literature. We mention as an example a relevant text written by Germanos, Patriarch of Constantinople (715-730), because it is characteristic and particularly enlightening “The church is the heaven on earth wherein the heavenly God “dwells and walks”. It typifies the crucifixion, the Burial and the Resurrection of Christ. It is glorified above Moses’ tabernacle of Testimony on which was the mercy-seat and the holy of holies. It was prefigured by the Patriarchs, foretold by the Prophets, founded by the Apostles and adorned by the Hierarchs”1.

The palaeologean era begins with the end of the Latin occupation of Constantinople and its recapture by Michael VIII

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1 Germanos Patriarch of Constantinople, Ιστορία Εκκλησιαστική και Μυστική Θεωρία, PG 98, 383-384. For the translation in English see C.Mango, The Art of the Byzantine Empire 312-1453, Toronto 1986, 141-142.
Palaeologos in 1261. It is a period of gradual disintegration and inevitable dissolution of the Empire ending with the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks. Besides the political and economical threats the cultural development reached its peak during this Late Byzantine period. As for the monumental painting of that era a pluralism is discerned, namely, a multiplication of scenes and figures. The churches are completely adorned with lengthy narrative iconographic cycles the number of which is increased by the addition of cycles inspired by the Hagiological literature, by the Divine Worship, by the Ecclesiastical history and others. In the context of this abundance of images, we considered it would be very interesting to explore the Bible as an inspiration source of the painters and to what extent it defines the hierarchy of the depicted themes.

We focus on Thessaloniki because undoubtedly Thessaloniki was the most important artistic centre of the Byzantine Empire, second to Constantinople since the first half of the 13th c., with intense presence in the cultural life of that time because Constantinople remained subjugated to the Latins\(^2\). It played a

significant role in spiritual, artistic and financial levels and it was through Thessaloniki that the ideology and cultural influence of Byzantium were communicated to the Balkans. Despite the fact that for many decades of this era the city was found in the centre of sociopolitical and religious tumults and agitations, its artistic creation was not suspended. The monumental painting has acquired a distinct physiognomy. The choice and grouping of the pictorial sequences were not random but were made according to the established iconographical practice based on theological and liturgical considerations going back to the 8th and 9th centuries. There is a unified iconographic programme carefully structured. Thessaloniki is privileged to preserve some of the most exquisite ensembles of monumental painting of this late and crucial era. The ecclesiastical writers of that time project repeatedly the piety of Thessalonians which is witnessed by the numerous churches and monasteries erected in the city at that period. The Palaeologean churches of Thessaloniki, apart from the variety of their architectural types, are endowed with rich iconographic programmes by which one may discern not only the development of the style but also the theological knowledge of the creators of these edifices.

“Saint Catherine’s” church (end of 13th -beginning of 14th century), formerly Katholikon of a monastery dedicated probably to Christ Pantocrator, according to some scholars, [fig. 1] cross-in-square with a dome and ambulatory, preserves part of its mural decoration dated around 1315-1325 and which can be seen mainly in the naos. The figure of Pantokrator in the dome [fig.2] exists no

longer but the angels and the Prophets of the Old Testament are preserved at a lower level on the dome drum. In the nave [fig.3] the frescoes are arranged in three zones from which only the lower one is better preserved. There are actually three different iconographic cycles. At the upper zone only the depiction of the Dormition of Theotokos from the cycle of Dodekaorton (festival cycle) is preserved, while exactly beneath it, in the middle zone, the cycle of the Passion should have been depicted as the remains from the scene of Pilate’s judgment prove. The scenes from Christ’s ministry cycle (miracles and parables) are well-preserved at the lower zone which is closer to the spectator believer. The rationale of the order of the scenes is defined by the chronological sequence of the relevant events in the Gospels and by the common liturgical sacramental symbolism which combines certain events as well. Consequently the narration starts at the eastern part of the south wall with the miracle in Cana, the first miracle accomplished by Christ and goes on with the expulsion of the merchants from the temple, [fig.4] the healing of the paralytic of Besthaida, Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman [fig.5] and the healing of the blind man at the pool of Siloam [fig.6]. These three incidents are gathered together because they are related typologically to the sacrament of Baptism. The cycle of the ministry of Christ goes on with the healing of the bowed woman, of the two lame men, of the ten lepers, the parable of the Royal Wedding Feast and Christ walking on the waters in the Sea of Galilee. We notice that the placement of the iconographic cycle of Christ’s miracles in such a prominent position in the nave of the church and not as it is accustomed in the lateral areas consists one of the reasons that led the researchers to seek the primary dedication of the church to Pantokrator Christ.

The church of “Holy Apostles” by the western walls of Thessaloniki [fig.8], once the Katholikon of a monastery, probably dedicated to Panaghia was founded by Patriarch’s Niphon I sponsorship circa 1310-1314. Second founder of the monastery was

Paul, Niphon's disciple and abbot of the Monastery. This church is one of the most important, outstanding churches of the late-byzantine era as far as its elegant and refined architecture (five domed cross – in – square type), masonry with opulent decorative brickwork and also its luxuriant and attentive wall painting is concerned. Specific historic religious circumstances did not allow the completion of the entire wall decoration with the expensive technique of the mosaic. Thus, the decoration was supplemented with frescoes by Abbot Paul. Its iconographic programme follows the pluralism of the era and an organized plan obviously with the guidance of the sponsors. The high quality mosaics decorate the upper parts of the naos, above the marble cornice which runs along the inner surfaces of the church. The figure of Pantokrator dominates at the top of the dome, [fig.9] flanked by the four evangelists at the pendetives [fig.10]and at the lower level of the dome drum among the windows by ten full-length prophets, on whose open scrolls selective passages from their prophecies are written[fig.11]. In the intrados of the barrel vaults of the four cross
arms,[fig.12] the main scenes of the festival cycle, the *Dodekaorton*, are depicted: the Annunciation (part of it), the Nativity [fig.13], the Baptism [fig.14], the Transfiguration [fig.15], the Entry into Jerusalem [fig.16], the Crucifixion [fig.17], Christ’s Descent into Hell [fig.18], and the Dormition of Theotokos. The placement of the Holy Mandylion, [fig.11] the renowned *acheiropoietos* (not made by human hands) icon of Christ, a visible evidence of the Incarnation of the Word has not been placed at random at the eastern part of the church and mainly between the evangelists Matthew and John who emphasize in their gospels the genealogy of Christ, the human and the divine, respectively. What is the most interesting in this church is the thematology of the wall paintings in the secondary places (ambulatory, narthex). At the southern part of the ambulatory [fig.19] the cycle of the prefigurations of Theotokos is unfolded. These are scenes from the Old Testament which, according to patristic literature, have a typological relation with the incarnation of God. We see the Tabernacle of Moses [fig.20], Gedeon with the fleece [fig.21], Moses receiving the Law, Habbakum and also a magnificent composition with the tree of Jesse [fig.22] according to the prophecy “Rod from the root Jesse…” (Jesaja 11,1) which concerns the genealogy of Panaghia emphasizing the origin of Christ from David. In the narthex [fig.23] Panaghia continues to be the honoured person since the main part of this area is covered by the cycle of the childhood of Mary such as: Anne’s Prayer, Joachim’s Annunciation, Panaghia’s Nativity, Panaghia’s blessing by the priests [fig.24], the Entrance to the Temple and others. At the eastern end of the northern part of the portico [fig.25] the honoured person is John the Precursor the last one of the prophets. He himself is depicted in the niche, while he is surrounded by his biographical cycle, the embrace of Zachariah and Elisabeth, the appearance of the angel to Zachariah inside the temple, the nativity of the saint, his retreat to the wilderness with the angel’s guidance, Herod’s supper [fig.26], the beheading [fig.27] and the burial. At the northwestern small cupola and at the southwestern one, figures of prophets flank Christ’s figure in the keystone of the domes[fig.28].
At the Upper Town, in the elegant church of saint Nikolaos Orphanos, single timber-roofed nave, with an ambulatory along three sides [fig.29], founded in the second decade of 14th c., the frescoes are among the best preserved in Thessaloniki and in the clarity of the layout of its iconographic programme they reflect the classical perceptions of Palaeologean monumental painting. The frescoes cover the restricted surfaces of the small and plain church and with the inventive chromatic combinations, the multifaced compositions with numerous graphic details and the various thematic cohesions create a sense of familiarity and introduce the spectator believer to a profound experience of faith. In the nave [fig.30], two mainly Christological iconographic cycles dominate in the upper zones. These are the cycles of Dodekaorton and of Passion [fig.31-32]. The scenes of the first cycle in the upper zone succeed one another according to their chronological order in the evangelical text. So from left to the right, that is from the north to the south clockwise the Annunciation, the Nativity, the Presentation at the Temple, the Baptism, the Transfiguration, the Raising of Lazarus, the Entry into Jerusalem, the Crucifixion, the

Resurrection, the Ascension and the Dormition of Theotokos unfold. With vividness and lucidity the most important events of the New Testament are expressed artistically. At the next zone, exactly under the Festival cycle, the Passion cycle is depicted with vivid narrative mood and emotional power. The painter chooses not to separate at that point the partial scenes with bands as it was characteristic in the previous cycle, so that the flow of the narration of the dramatic historical events should not be interrupted. We see the Washing of the disciples’ feet, the Last Supper, the Betrayal of Judas [fig.33], the Mocking of Christ, Christ being led away to be crucified and the Deposition from the Cross. The unfolding of the holy story is completed with hopefulness since in a prominent position at the eastern pediment above the Sanctuary an event after the Resurrection as Christ’s appearance to the Myrrh-bearing women is chosen to be depicted with bright and vivid colours. At the rest of the surfaces and specifically on the walls of the ambulatory, secondary iconographic cycles complete the wall decoration as in the church of “Holy Apostles”. At the south aisle [fig.34] there are scenes from Christ’s miracles (the healing of the bowed woman [fig.35], the man afflicted with the dropsy, the lame, the man possessed by devil [fig.36], the miracle at Kana [fig.37] the paralytic of Besthaida [fig.38], the blind man by the pool at Siloam) including the incident of the conversation of Jesus Christ with the Samaritan woman too [fig.39]. From the cycle of the Prefigurations of Virgin Mary, at the same area, only the scene from the Old Testament with the blazing and not burning bramble bush [fig.40] is preserved with Moses depicted twice and Panaghia discerned through the foliage of the bush a hint to the relation of the theme to an iconographic type of Virgin. At the opposite position at the northern part [fig.41] of the ambulatory the cycle of Akathistos Hymn [fig.42] is depicted, an artistic commentary on the renowned, since 6th c., hymn for Panaghia as vehicle to the Incarnation of the Word. From an iconographic programme so well articulated the figures of the evangelists, the apostles and the prophets should not be absent. Simply the selection of the position for their depiction is adjusted to the architectural type of the church which has a timber saddle roof and not a dome. Thus we
see the two Evangelists Matthew and John covering the eastern part of the intrados of the arcades in the nave, while from the prophets we find, Daniel in the lions’ den and Elijah in the chariot being drawn heavenwards by two horses while Elisha receives his mantle [fig. 43]. We notice here that the two prophets are not depicted as separate figures but in a narrative context, in events from their biographical cycle.

The wall paintings, mosaics and frescoes, we have examined so far belong to the first half of the 14th c. This is an era of prosperity and progress not only for the city of Thessaloniki but also for the entire empire. During the second half of the 14th c., a turbulent period for the city with social and religious conflicts and upheavals, the churches continue to be adorned with wall-paintings with themes reflecting the atmosphere of the era. Three churches preserve parts of their fresco decoration, representative samples of the artistic creativity in this remote period. Despite their fragmentary state of conservation it is possible to have a hermeneutical approach of the whole. In terms of architectural type all three of them belong to three different plans. The most impressive one is the cross-in-square (triconch, athonite variant) domed church of “Prophet Elijah” [fig. 44] once Katholikon of a monastery dedicated to Christ 6. The naos is preceded by the lite namely the spacious narthex, typical architectural feature of monastic Katholika since 9th century. There are also four small domed annexes in the corners of the main buildings known as typikaria. The wall-paintings, artifacts of the period 1360-1370, are preserved mainly in lite. The scenes, although indiscernible, depict Christ’s miracles and incidents from Christ’s earthly life.

Two of the better preserved ones are placed in topographic correlation [fig.45]: the Massacre of the infants and the Healing of the lame, the blind and others. The unprecedented realism in the scene of the Massacre [fig.46] is met for the first time according to the standards of the Byzantine painting and also the anxiety on the faces of the crushed patients waiting for their healing in the depiction of the miracle could only be related to the insecurity and instability that the previous oppressive disputes had caused. The inhabitants of the city had experienced sociopolitical tumults which later on in 1387 would lead to the first occupation of Thessaloniki by the Ottoman Turks.

In the tiny tetraconch cross-in-square domed church of Christ the Saviour [fig.47] of the middle of the 14th c. we notice between the windows in the drum of the dome the well-preserved full-length figures of the eight Prophets [fig.48] with passages from their prophecies written on their unfolded scrolls related to the triumphant Theophany of the Ascension of Jesus Christ which is depicted [fig.49] at the keystone of the dome. They stand there in such a prominent position representatives of the Old Testament who announce the New Testament.

Lastly at the Katholikon of the Vlatadon monastery[fig.50], the sole surviving and still functioning Byzantine monastery in Thessaloniki, founded by Dorotheos Vlatis, disciple of Gregory Palamas, bishop of Thessaloniki and spiritual leader of Hesychasm, segments of the wall-paintings of the period 1360-1380 are preserved. These wall-paintings are the latest ones of the

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Byzantine city. In the nave, the established iconographic programme with Pantokrator in the dome [fig.51] flanked by angels and prophets and Dodekaorton on the arches that support the cupola is repeated [fig.52]. We notice two scenes, one from the New Testament and one from the Old Testament located in conspicuous position on the western wall of the nave in two niches on either side of the central entrance [fig.53], Christ’s Baptism and the Three Hebrews in the fiery furnace [fig.54].

The elaboration of the iconographic programmes through which the history of the Divine Economy is projected, denotes a profound theological knowledge addressed to an audience which is aware of the biblical and the liturgical texts. In the Divine Worship the believer is instructed and experiences the Orthodox doctrine and ethos. The Christological and soteriological character of the Divine Worship should only be annotated by relevant artistic interventions. The meeting with the mystery of Christ in the Liturgy is realized by the wall paintings and the mosaics. The identity of the founders who are clergy or lay men from the upper social class is definitely very significant. Besides, the majority of these churches were katholika of monasteries and because of that nothing could be accidental in the selection and the arrangement of the wall decoration. The complex decoration is quite rationally adjusted to the vaults and the walls of the church. The different cycles unfolding in the nave and side aisles supplement one another. What we wanted to point out with the concise presentation of the relevant depictions is the symmetrical presence of themes from the Old Testament which, placed in selected positions, frame the depictions of the New Testament by projecting them at the same time. The difference is that these themes are not chosen with narrative mood as it used to happen

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during the palaeochristian period (Santa Maria Maggiore) and also the middle-byzantine period (Sicily) but having as a rule the indisputable relation of the Old and New Testament and the recognition of this relation. The dialogue between the Old and the New Testaments through art warmed the faith and the piety. Since only through this dialogue it is possible the divine intervention of the Saviour in the history of human kind to be completely understood. It is really a recapitulation of the mystery of the Divine Economy. The palaeologean monumental painting of the city beyond its plain biblical historical character is involved in a complex of symbolisms which combine visions of the Old Testament with the revelation of the New Testament. A multi-leveled reading is indispensable so that one may perceive the way the unknown artists of the 13th-14th and 15th centuries receive the Bible in these iconographic programmes. The outcome messages are interrelated and interwoven in history as much as in theology. In history because they bring to memory those historical events which start the period of grace and salvation for the humanity. In theology because they reveal their deeper theological background which is the spark for the religious experience and spiritual uplift. There is a hierarchy and an escalation of the levels in the way the depicted figures are arranged with the figure of Pantokrator at the highest point of the church as the absolute dominant of earth and heaven, of Old and New Testament. The apostles and the evangelists follow along with the prophets who foresaw and foretold the Incarnation and the Passion. Certainly the New Testament constitutes the main and basic source of inspiration of the Byzantine painters. Definitely the scenes which highlight the presence of the Word of God on earth (Dodekaorton, Miracles, Parables) possess the most prominent positions. However, a considerable part of the iconographic programmes is dedicated to selected scenes and figures from the Old Testament. Scenes and figures that indicate the way to the New Testament, the forthcoming of the Kingdom of God. For instance, Daniel in the lions’ den and Elijah ascending to heaven, the Three Hebrews in furnace are themes with lucid soteriological and eschatological meaning. The scenes with the Prefigurations of the ever virginity of Theotokos which span the Old with the New Testament but
mostly the permanent iconographic element of the prophets by whom the presence of the Old Testament becomes visible.

In the churches of the Byzantine Thessaloniki during this last period of the once mighty empire with the comprehensive and succinct wall decoration the sense of the cosmic time is abolished, the limits of the past, present and future are raised and the Bible is revived for the glory of the Incarnated Word. Consequently, we do not consider incidental the fact that the painter of “Holy Apostles” church, one of the most significant churches that bears the hallmark of profound theological knowledge of the era, chooses to place in a prominent position towards the exit from the church one meaningful image inspired by the Old Testament which compresses the theological concern that proceeds from the anxiety for the eschaton but also the deep faith for the salvation. It is the fresco [fig.55] with the pictorial representation of the renowned passage from the Old Testament *the souls of the righteous ones in God’s hand* (Sap.3,1) on the western wall above the exit to the exonarthex. The souls in the guise of swaddled infants nestle up into the broad divine palm. The faithful leave the church with this hopeful and optimistic depiction after they had attempted to meet God and receive from the Bible the message of salvation which gives meaning to their lives by beholding the frescoes and the mosaics.
Fig. 1 “Saint Catherine’s” church

Fig. 2 “Saint Catherine’s” church
Fig. 3 “Saint Catherine’s” church

Fig. 4 “Saint Catherine’s” church
Fig. 5 “Saint Catherine’s” church

Fig. 6 “Saint Catherine’s” church

Fig. 7 “Saint Catherine’s” church

Fig. 8 “Holy Apostles” church
Fig. 9 “Holy Apostles” church

Fig. 10 “Holy Apostles” church
Fig. 11 “Holy Apostles” church

Fig. 12 “Holy Apostles” church
Fig. 16 “Holy Apostles” church

Fig. 17 “Holy Apostles” church

Fig. 18 “Holy Apostles” church
Fig. 19 “Holy Apostles” church

Fig. 20 “Holy Apostles” church
Fig. 21 “Holy Apostles” church

Fig. 22 “Holy Apostles” church
Fig. 23 “Holy Apostles” church

Fig. 24 “Holy Apostles” church
Fig. 25 “Holy Apostles” church

Fig. 26 “Holy Apostles” church
Fig. 27 “Holy Apostles” church

Fig. 28 “Holy Apostles” church
Fig. 29 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church

Fig. 30 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church
Fig. 31 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church

Fig. 32 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church
Fig. 33 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church
Fig. 34 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church

Fig. 35 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church
Fig. 36 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church

Fig. 37 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church
Fig.38 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church
Fig. 39 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church
Fig. 40 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church

Fig. 41 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church
Fig. 42 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church

Fig. 43 St. Nikolaos Orphanos church
Fig. 44 “Prophet Elijah” church

Fig. 45 “Prophet Elijah” church
Fig. 46 “Prophet Elijah” church

Fig. 47 Christ the Saviour church
Fig. 48 Christ the Saviour church

Fig. 49 Christ the Saviour church
Fig. 50 Katholikon of the Vlatadon monastery

Fig. 51 Katholikon of the Vlatadon monastery
Fig. 52 Katholikon of the Vlatadon monastery

Fig. 53 Katholikon of the Vlatadon monastery
Fig. 54 Katholikon of the Vlatadon monastery

Fig. 55 “Holy Apostles” church