

St. Anne and her infant daughter in medieval texts and images Santa Ana y su hija niña en textos e imágenes medievales

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Abstract: People are used to thinking of breastfeeding as a rather private biological act. Still, both the New and Old Testaments refer to its spiritual value. Milk nursing and nourishing in general belong not only to the mundane, but also to the divine realm. When St. Anna had the mystical experience through which she knew that she would conceive, she might well have felt instinctively at least some of the above. My paper is concerned with how St. Anna is represented milk-nursing her child in literature in general and in medieval iconography.

Keywords: St. Anna, spiritual value, milk, medieval iconography.

Resumen: La gente suele pensar que el amamantar es un acto biológico más bien privado. Aun así, tanto el Nuevo como el Antiguo Testamento se refieren a su valor espiritual. Cuidar y alimentar con leche pertenece en general no solo a lo mundano, sino también a la esfera divina. Cuando Santa Ana tuvo la experiencia mística a través de la cual supo que concebiría, ella bien podría haber sentido instintivamente al menos algunos de los precitados. Mi trabajo se ocupa de cómo se representa a Santa Ana amamantando a su hija en la literatura en general y en la iconografía medieval.

Palabras clave: Santa Ana, valor espiritual, leche, iconografía medieval.

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People are used to think of breastfeeding as a rather private biological act. Still, both the Old and the New Testament refer to the spiritual value milk represents. Within them, feeding on milk and nourishing in general are a basis for spiritual development and affiliation. They belong not only to the mundane, but also to the divine realm. When St. Anne had the mystical experience through which she knew that she would conceive a child, she might have felt instinctively at least some of the above. As it is known, the story of Anna, Joachim, and their daughter, narrated mainly in the *Protoevangelion*¹ and *Pseudo-Matthew*,² is that after twenty years of

¹ *Protoevangelion*; this is the first book to contain the story of Mary's birth and infancy where St. Anne occurs and has been used as a source of information especially in Eastern Christianity. Origen speaks about a Book of James as early as the second century. Guillaume Postel gave the name *Protoevangelion of James* to the previously known 'Book of James' in 1564 (according to Jacqueline Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Iconographie de l'enfance de la Vierge dans l'Empire byzantin et en Occident*, vol. 1, Brussels, vol.1, 1964, p. 15; she dates this book to the second century there). However, on the basis of palaeographic criteria, De Strycker affirms that the *Protoevangelion* was written in the third century with some parts (Apology of Phileas and Psalms 33-34 –g and h in his classification –) belonging to the early fourth century. Emile de Strycker (ed.), *La forme la plus ancienne du Protoévangile de Jacques. Recherches sur le Papyrus Bodmer 5 avec une édition critique du texte grec et une traduction annotée. En appendice: Les version arméniennes traduites en latin par Hans Quecke* (Subsidia hagiographica 33), Société des Bollandistes, Bruxelles, 1961, pp. 14, 22.

² *Pseudo-Matthew*, in Elliott's *A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives*. This book is the equivalent in the West of the *Protoevangelion*. In Lafontaine-Dosogne's opinion (*Iconographie de l'enfance de la Vierge*, p. 15), the latter influenced the creation of *Pseudo-Matthew*.

barrenness³ and much praying separately and together for an offspring, each of the future parents had an Annunciation. When the angel told them that they would have a daughter, Anne promised to dedicate her to God⁴ (much the way that Samuel was dedicated by his mother Hannah; 1 Kings). Given that the saint waited for a long time to become a mother and escaped the risk of losing the long-desired child very early (some apocryphal sources affirm that Mary was born prematurely at seven months⁵) it is certain that Anne took great pleasure in milk-nursing her baby, regardless that she was aware or not of the spiritual grounding of this act.

The chapter will highlight how the saint's passage from a sterile to a fertile woman and her delight in motherhood are described in literature (mostly, but not exclusively apocryphal) and appear in iconography, with particular emphasis being placed on her nursing the infant Mary. In order to define the terms of our discussion, we should say that the concept of pleasure considered in this paper is that advocated by the Fathers of the Church, to which, had she lived during their lifetime or after them, undoubtedly Anne would have subscribed. Since she was a very faithful person, their view would have suited her own. The same would apply to her husband Joachim. The Temple was central to their family's existence and their concepts about life were formed in that place. Among the Church Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa is to be mentioned with his description of spiritual pleasure as a result of the mystical union with God achieved through constant progress in virtue and godliness (*epektasis*). As Rowan Williams expounds in his book *The Wound of Knowledge*, this upwards effort 'translates' in a movement that is both 'receptive and responsive'.⁶ The Nyssen founds his vision of people enjoying endlessly the divine presence on the notions of God's infinite nature and the human finitude with an unlimited possibility of attaining perfection. Against Origen's notion of satiety (*koros*)⁷ the bishop offers the alternative of hunger for the Divine.⁸ Any person trusting God knows that the substance of people's food is faith; it aids the "growth of our spiritual wings" enabling people to reach a mature understanding of God's Logos and thus to increase their chances for salvation. This kind of awareness and action leads to spiritual joy. In the fourteenth century Gregory

³ J. K. Elliott's *A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives*, Brill, Leiden, and Boston, 2006, Mary 1-2, p. 5.

⁴ Elliott, *A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity and Infancy Narratives*, Mary 1-2, p. 5. I have noticed that this translation follows closely *The Apocryphal New Testament being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses with other narratives and fragments newly translated by Montagues Rhodes James*, Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, Toronto etc., 1985 edition (first edition 1924). There is written: "Righteous before God and charitable to men, they lived a chaste married life for about twenty years without producing children. Nevertheless they made a vow that if God gave them a child they would dedicate it to the service of the Lord. For that reason they were in the habit of visiting the Temple of the Lord at every festival in the year."

⁵ De Strycker (ed.), *La forme la plus ancienne du Protoévangile de Jacques*, pp. 14, 22, and 87-88.

⁶ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1979, p. 67. I have discussed in some details the concept of *epektasis* in the Nyssen's view in my article "How would Gregory of Nyssa have understood evolutionism?", in *Studia Patristica*, Peeters Publishers, Leuven, 2012, SP 67, vol. LIV, pp. 151-169.

⁷ Origen, *De Principiis* - G. W. Butterworth and Paul Koetschau (eds.), *On first principles*, Peter Smith, Gloucester, Mass., 1973. See also Mark S. M. Scott, *Journey back to God. Origen on the problem of evil*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012, pp. 65-67.

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, in H. Wace and P. Schaff (eds.), *A Selected Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (NPNF)*, vol. V, 1893.

Palamas distinguishes between sensual and spiritual pleasures and strongly supports the prevalence of the latter in people's life. He holds that pleasure expresses inner happiness. While such a conviction led the ancient Greeks, with whom the Palamite shared partially in this view, to a form of sensual utilitarianism, the conclusion that the latter attained was that permanent and everlasting happiness is the outcome of true faith. He thinks that pleasure coming from it is the criterion for moral evaluation.⁹

The other important notion we operate with here, already introduced, is that of milk as divine as well as biological nourishment. The Old Testament is rich in references to milk; there are 47 remarks concerning it in that Scripture; in some of those it is mentioned together with honey.¹⁰ The New Testament expresses the idea of spiritual and maternal nourishment throughout; the correlated verb τρέφω/θρέφω – partic. τρεφόμενος and τρεφομένου (which means both nourishing in general and breastfeeding) is used in Mt. 6. 26 and 25. 35 in the general sense: “Look at the birds of the air: for they neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Mt. 6. 26), and “For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in” (Mt. 25. 35).¹¹ Also it occurs with the same meaning in Luke 12. 24, 23.29; Acts 12.20, and Rev. 12. 6, 14. St. Paul uses terms pertaining to the same semantic field to communicate the spiritual understanding of maternity in general, especially in Galatians 4.19¹² and 1 Corinthians 4.14.¹³ In Ephesians 5.29, he adds an extra layer of meaning to this metaphor when referring directly to the relation between Christ and the Church [everyone “nourishes and tenderly cares for [their body], just as Christ does for the church”].¹⁴ Also he sees himself as a tender nurse to the people, in 1

⁹ Gregory Palamas, in “De oratione et puritate cordis”, PG 150. 1117-1121; “Capita CL: psysica, theologica, moralia et practica”. 1121-1225, and “Confessio fidei”, PG 151. 763-767. The actual title of the text, given by St. Nicodemos of the Holy Mountain, is *On Passions and Virtues and the Fruits of the Spiritual Ascent*. See also Georgios Mantzaridis (ed.), *The Deification of Man: St. Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, trans. Liadain Sherrard; Foreword Kallistos Ware (Contemporary Greek Theologians Series); G. Mantzarides, ‘Tradition and Renewal in the Theology of Saint Gregory Palamas’, *Eastern Churches Review* 9, no. 1 (1977), p. 3; J. Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, pp. 183-84; Jacques Lison, *L’Esprit répandu. La pneumatologie de Grégoire Palamas*, Paris, Cerf, 1993; Kallistos Ware, *Act out of Stillness: The Influence of Fourteenth-Century Hesychasm on Byzantine and Slav Civilization*, in Daniel J. Sahas (ed.), *The Hellenic Canadian Association of Constantinople and the Thessalonikean Society of Metro Toronto*, Toronto, 1995, pp. 4-7, and Ch. Yannaras, “The Distinction Between Essence and Energies and Its Importance for Theology,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 19 (summer 1975), pp. 232-245.

¹⁰ Exodus 3. 8: “So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey - the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusi.”; Deuteronomy 26:9, “And thou shalt write upon them all the words of this law, when thou art passed over, that thou mayest go in unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, a land that floweth with milk and honey; as the Lord God of thy fathers hath promised thee.

¹¹ “ἐμβλέσατε εἰς τὰ πετεινὰ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ὅτι οὐ σπεύρουσιν οὐδὲ θερίζουσιν οὐδὲ συνάγουσιν εἰς ἀποθήκας, καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐράνιος τρέφει αὐτά”; “οὐχ ὑμεῖς μᾶλλον διαφέρετε αὐτῶν; τότε ἀποκριθήσονται αὐτῶσι δίκαιοι λέγοντες· κύριε, πότε σε εἶδομεν πεινῶντα καὶ ἐθρέψαμεν; ἢ διψῶντα καὶ ἐποτίσαμεν.”

¹² Galatians 4.19: “My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you”.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 4.14: “I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you”.

¹⁴ Ephesians 5.29: “For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord *does* the church”.

Thess. 2.7, and this relates with the idea of the spiritual importance of milk.¹⁵ From these writings, an entire ‘theology of lactation’ has developed revolving mainly around Christ’s Nativity (‘The cave of the Milk’ nearby Bethlehem reminds us about it; fig. 1). This doctrine has expanded to include references to the birth of Mary herself and to that of John the Baptist. It had reflexes in visual arts. Among other possible instances, a lactating fountain erected in Nürenberg as late as the sixteenth century can be mentioned.¹⁶

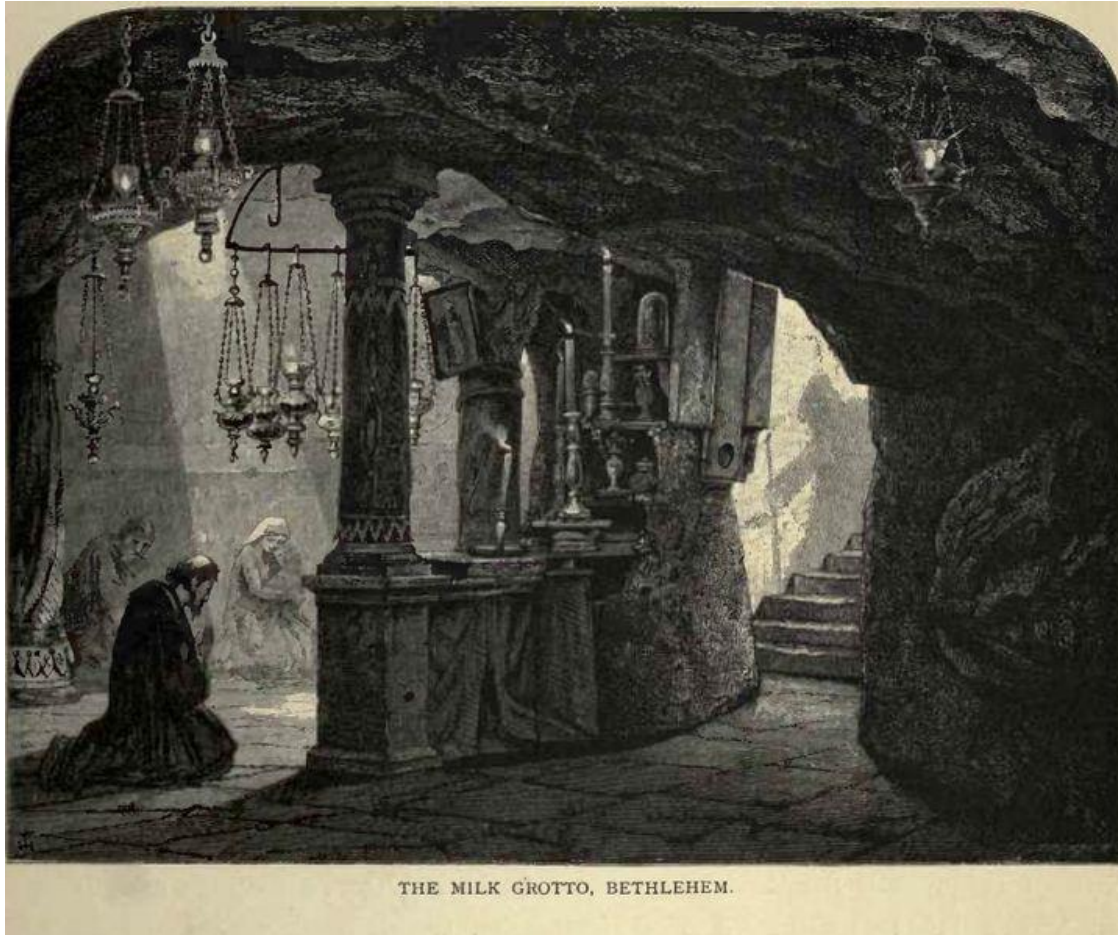


Fig. 1. A sketch of ‘The cave of the Milk’, close to Bethlehem.

A concrete example will illustrate how the Old and the New Testament see milk. While, apparently in an earthly manner, but actually, according to Gregory of Nyssa, having in view a deeper spiritual meaning,¹⁷ in the *Song of Songs* Solomon takes pleasure in affirming “Your lips distil nectar, my bride;/Honey and milk are under

¹⁵ 1 Thessalonians 2.7: “[W]e might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing *mother* cherishes her own children”

¹⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics), University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1987, fig. 16, black and white. The caption says: “Fountain of the Virtues in Nürenberg; all seven allegorical figures lactate as a symbol of the fertility of virtue. Several of the figures also provide nurture in other way, by offering fruit, a chalice, or a jug.”

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, R. A. Norris Jr. (transl., Introduction, and notes), in J. T. Fitzgerald (gen. ed.), *Writings from the Greco-Roman World*, vol. 13, The Society of Biblical Literature, 2012, Atlanta, GA.

your tongue”¹⁸, Paul refers to the spiritual connotations of milk consumption. He does it emphatically in Heb. 5. 11-14, where he complains that he had to give this drink to the citizens, who were like the “little ones” and therefore need “milk to drink, not meat” or “solid food.”¹⁹

References to milk circulated in both Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Clement of Alexandria, in *Paedagogus*, understands, with St. Paul whose sayings he quotes, milk as being the metaphor for the “simple, true natural, and spiritual nourishment” which Logos (‘Christ’s milk’) is; it constitutes the ‘perfect’ sustenance promised by Christ to the righteous to attain eternal life. The ‘already-perfected’ drink it with joy because it also leads to the knowledge of the truth; those who are as yet ‘little children’ in faith, just suck the milk [to live].²⁰

Zuzana Skalova combines information from the Fathers’ writings with that from other sources and reminds readers that in the Christianity of the Near East the Christ child is “the metaphor for the Divine Logos”²¹ and Denise Kimber Buell indicates that in the same geographical area the nurses still call the first flow of maternal milk *manna*.²² Caroline Walker Bynum asserts that the ideas expressed above have been reiterated in later historical periods, adds new dimensions to the connection earthly-heavenly sustenance, and shows concrete ways in which people experienced it in medieval times: “I argue that images of food and drink, of brimming fountains and streams of blood [NB and milk], which are used with special intensity by thirteenth-century women, express desire for direct, almost physical contact with Christ.”²³ One can understand why in the sixteenth century, when the veneration concerning the relics of St. Anne – the holy person associated to the highest extent with milk – reached a climax in Europe, the lactating fountain mentioned above was erected.²⁴ Even though the preoccupation with milk-feeding in various forms has been a long lasting one, nowadays it is less so. But still the Orthodox Church recognises the

¹⁸ *Song of Solomon* 4. 11: “Your lips, O my spouse, drop like the honeycomb: honey and milk are under your tongue; and the fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon”.

¹⁹ Paul in Heb. 5. 11-14 (“About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. For when for the time you ought to be teachers, you have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that uses milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongs to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil).

²⁰ Clement of Alexandria, “Paedagogus”, PG 8, 300-301; Henri-Irénée Marrou (ed.), *Paedagogus*, vol. I, 6, pp. 182-183.

²¹ Zuzana Skalova, “The Icon of the Virgin *Galaktotrophousa*”, p. 244. On the same ideas, see also Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey (eds. and trans.), *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient*, Los Angeles 1998.

²² Denise Kimber Buell, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999, pp. 159-161.

²³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1984 (first edition 1982), p. 8.

²⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987, Plate 16, black and white. The caption says: “Fountain of the Virtues in Nürnberg; all seven allegorical figures lactate as a symbol of the fertility of virtue. Several of the figures also provide nurture in other way, by offering fruit, a chalice, or a jug.”

importance of nourishment, particularly of breastfeeding, by dedicating a feast to the Mother of God Lactating [*Galaktotrophousa*]; this is celebrated on the 12th of January.

Pleasure, milk-feeding, and St. Anne's maternity

With respect to the connection between the two notions defined above – pleasure and feeding with milk, this is how the *Protoevangelion* reflects Anne's joy regarding the coming into the world of her daughter and her being nourished: “[When] her months were fulfilled; in the ninth month [or seven, as shown] Anna gave birth. And she said to the midwife: ‘What have I brought forth?’ And she said, ‘A female.’ And Anna said, ‘My soul is magnified this day.’ And she lay down. And when the days were completed, Anna purified herself and gave suck to the child and called her Mary.”²⁵ (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. The mosaic icon of St. Anna nursing the child Mary. Twelfth century, Vatopedi Monastery. (Detail on the right). Image taken from E. Tsigarides, 1998, vol. 2, p. 370.²⁶

The saint continually expressed her gratitude for the gift she received – this is what Mary was for her family– in words and chants as the narration continues: “And Anna sang this song to the Lord God: ‘I will sing a hymn to the Lord my God,/for he has visited me and removed from me the reproach of my enemies/ And the Lord gave me the fruit of his righteousness, unique yet manifold before him./ Who will proclaim to the son[s] of Reuben that Anna gives suck.’”²⁷

²⁵ James Keith Elliott, *A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity Nativity and Infancy Narratives*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2006, Protev. 5: 2 F, p. 12.

²⁶ The mosaic icon of St. Anna nursing the child Mary. Twelfth century, Vatopedi Monastery, E. Tsigarides, ed., in *The Holy and Great Monastery of Vatopaidi*, Mount Athos 1998, vol. 2, p. 370. (Detail on the right.) Wulf and Alpatoff reproduce (in black and white) the mosaic icon of St. Anna nursing the child Mary from Vatopedi Monastery in *Denkmäler der Ikonmalerei.*, fig. 18 on 57 in that book. Copied (with the acknowledgment of the source as being Wulf and Alpatoff's book) in Lafontaine-Dosogne, *Iconographie de l'enfance de la Vierge dans l'Empire byzantin et en Occident*, vol. 1, fig. XII, p. 43.

²⁷ Elliott, *A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity*, p. 13.

Among the non-apocryphal sources concerned with Mary's parents are, for instance, the writings of Romanos the Melode (c. 490-c. 556). He attempts to describe Anna's feelings when she became a mother at an old age and fathomed how she would have celebrate this miracle through a hymn joyfully addressed to God:

Who hath visited me and taken away from me the reproach of mine
enemies, and the Lord hath given me a fruit of his righteousness...
Hearken, hearken, ye twelve tribes of Israel that Anne giveth suck.²⁸

Jacob of Serug (fifth-six centuries),²⁹ John of Damascus (c. 675-749), and Photius of Constantinople (Patriarch in 858-67 and 877-86) also wrote and preached about Anna's joy at her transformation from a barren woman to a mother nourishing her infant with her own milk. The first homilist to celebrate the Nativity of Mary is John of Damascus; the motifs and images he employs to express his reverence to the Virgin were to be used by later theologians. He praises Mary's parents thus: "O blessed couple, Joachim and Anna, all nature is indebted to you! [...] O most blessed all-blessed loins of Joachim, from which a wholly unblemished seed was sent forth! O renowned womb of Anna, in which slowly, with additions from her, an all-holy infant grew, and once it had taken shape, was born! O belly that contained within itself a living heaven, vaster than the immensity of [all] the heavens!"³⁰ John mentions Anne as "grace [which] sprouted its fruit"³¹ and gives praise to the "breasts that suckled her who feeds the Feeder of the world,"³² while addressing her thus, "O most holy little daughter: you were nourished on breast-milk and surrounded by angels!"³³ The apocryphal texts also indicates that Anna milk-fed her daughter.³⁴

Also, Patriarch Photios of Constantinople (c. 810/20 - c. 893) comments with reference to Anne, implying that when it comes to the human relationship with God (as when it comes to God in general), nothing is impossible:

How can dried-up breasts gush with streams of milk? For if old age is
unable to store away blood, how can the teats whiten into milk what they
have not received?³⁵

²⁸ P. Maas and C.A. Typanis, *Sancti Romani Melodi cantica*, Oxford 1963, 276. 6-7, 280. 6-7. Quotes from M. Carpenter (trans.), *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*, vols. 1-2, Columbia, Miss. 1970-1973. I follow here Cutler and his sources, "The Cult of *Galaktotrophousa* in Byzantium and Italy", 174-176.

²⁹ Jacob of Serug, *On the Mother of God*, trans. Mary Hansbury, Introd. Sebastian Brock, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1998, pp. 46-54.

³⁰ St. John of Damascus, "An Oration on Nativity of the Holy Theotokos Mary", PG 96. 664 A-B. Mary B. Cunningham (trans.), in *Wider than Heaven. Eight-century Homilies on the Mother of God*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press Crestwood, 2008, pp. 54-55.

³¹ Idem, p. 54.

³² Idem, p. 55.

³³ Idem, "An Oration on the Nativity", PG 96. 664B; Cunningham, *Wider than Heaven*, p. 63.

³⁴ Elliott, *A Synopsis of the Apocryphal Nativity*, p. 13

³⁵ Homily IX. 4, trans. Cyril Mango, *The Homilies of Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople*, Harvard University Press, Dumbarton Oaks series, Cambridge, Mass., 1958, p. 166.

Anne and Joachim's life as new parents was expectedly joyful. The *Sinaxarion*,³⁶ which marks the 9th of September as the 'Day of St. Anne' in the Byzantine and later the Orthodox liturgical calendar – where the year still begins on the 1st of September –, narrates that after breastfeeding for the first time, Anna gave their daughter to her husband in order to share in the pleasure of having her.³⁷ We can see here how iconographers represented this family event; fig. 3:



Fig. 3. Anna Gives the Mother of God to Joachim “Life of the Mother of God,” walls of the *gropnița* (burial chamber), church at Humor Monastery. Image taken from Balaban Bara, 2012, Annex 1, p. xxii.

One should remember that this feast of Joachim and Anna has a specificity: it does not celebrate their death, as in the case of the other saints, but the birth of their child, whom Christians see as the supreme mediator for salvation. Adriana Balaban Bara, in her recently defended doctoral thesis³⁸, expounds with regard to the image reproduced in fig. 3: “This sort of scene is rare. Researchers have tried to find the literary source of this depiction. Alfredo Tradigo considers the Homilies of St. John Damascene (especially his Homily on Nativity 2),³⁹ and the Homilies of St. Photius on the Birth of the Virgin⁴⁰ as sources of inspiration for this iconic depiction.

³⁶ Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra “Saints Joachim and Anna”, in *The Synaxarion. The Lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church*, transl. Christopher Hookway, vol. 1, p. 60. See also, Gaetano Passarelli, *Icônes des grandes fêtes byzantines*, translated from Italian by Jacques Mignon, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 2005, p. 32.

³⁷ *Sinaxarion*, vol. 1, p. 60.

³⁸ Adriana Balaban Bara, *The Political and Artistic Program of Prince Petru Rareș of Moldavia (1527-1538 and 1541-1546) and the Fresco Series Depicting the ‘Life of the Mother of God’ in the Church of Humor Monastery*; doctoral dissertation defended in 2012, University of Montreal, Annex 1, p. xxii.

³⁹ Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli, Mondadori Electa, Milan, 2004; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2006. He considers St. John of Damascus, *Homily on the Nativity* discussed above - Cunningham, pp. 54-55.

⁴⁰ Photius/Cyril Mango (ed. and transl.), *The Homilies of Photios Patriarch of Constantinople*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958.

Anna took care of Mary as any loving mother does. Iconographers strove to put into colours their thoughts of the pleasant and happy life Anna, Joachim, and their infant had. The scenes in figs. 2-5 revealing aspects from Mary's childhood are proofs of their efforts. Fig. 4 and perhaps also 5 represents the child's first steps taken at six months.⁴¹ Seven is the number of sanctity and perfection, therefore there is no wonder that the idea of seven steps and that of Mary being born at seven months have been circulated; in some sources even Jesus Christ was born at this term-date.

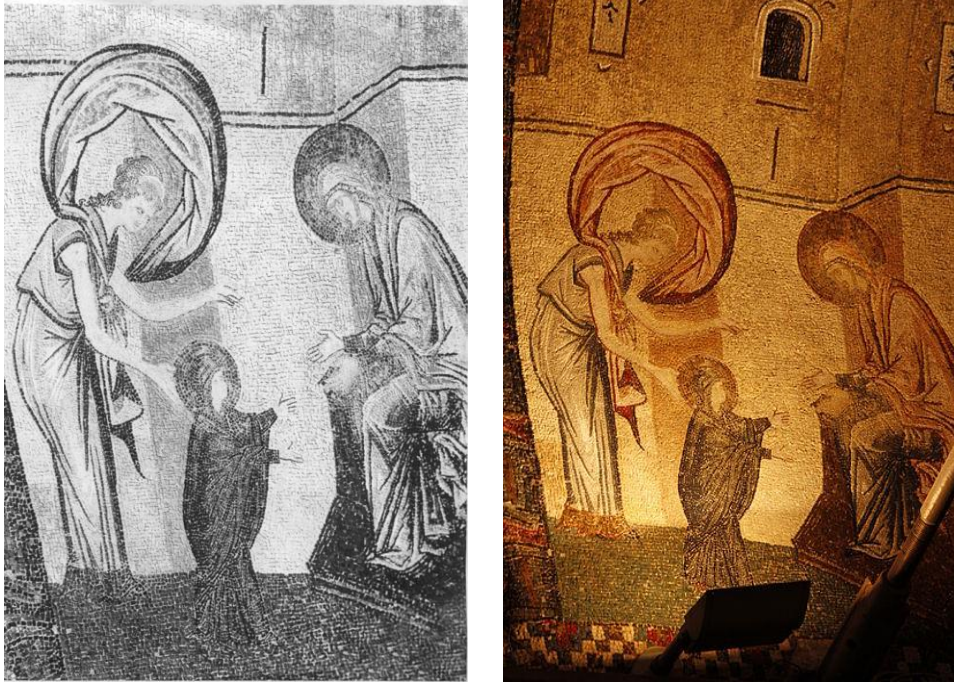


Fig. 4. The Virgin's first steps. Mosaic (the source below names this image a 'fresco', but the actually it is a mosaic, c. 1320). Kariye Djami (Chora Monastery), Istanbul. Black and white image taken from Cartlidge and Elliot, 2001, p. 28, fig. 2.6. (I have also included a colour image from the Internet because it shows better that the respective image is in fact a mosaic).



Fig. 5. St Joachim and Anna with the child Mary, St. Sophia Cathedral, Thessaloniki, twentieth century. My photo August 2011.

⁴¹ The *Protogospel* and the *Synaxarion* describe how, at six months, Mary walked for the first time and they continue with the story of the blessings Mary received from the priests at the age of one.

Another hailed event in the life of the saintly family is the banquet Mary's parents organised on the first anniversary of her life. Important members of the community were invited to join into festivities and to witness the blessing of the girl by the High Priest. The *Protoevangelion* narrates the episode:

After the first year of the child was *fulfilled*, Ioacim made a great feast and bade the priests and the scribes and the assembly of the elders and the whole people of Israel. And Ioacim brought the child to the priests, and they blessed her, saying: O God of our fathers, bless this child and give her a name renowned for ever among all generations. And all the people said: So be it, so be it. Amen. And he brought her to the high priests, and they blessed her, saying: O God of the high places, look upon this child, and bless her with the last blessing which hath no successor. And her mother caught her up into the sanctuary of her bedchamber and *gave her suck*.⁴²

For Anne that was another opportunity to renew her (chanted) thanksgiving prayer:

I will sing a hymn unto the Lord my God, because he hath visited me and taken away from me the reproach of mine enemies, and the Lord hath given me a fruit of his righteousness, single *and* manifold before him. *Who shall declare unto the sons of Reuben that Anna giveth suck? Hearken, hearken, ye twelve tribes of Israel, that Anna giveth suck.* And she laid the child to rest in the bedchamber of her sanctuary, and went forth and minister unto them. And when the feast was ended, they sat them down rejoicing, and glorifying the God of Israel.⁴³

In telling and rendering scenes of Anne, Mary, and Joachim's happy family life, the writers and the iconographers have themselves produced pleasure – for the reader and respectively, beholder. This is because, as Christopher Butler states⁴⁴, arts direct us to intimate and particularized relationships with people represented in various compositions and with those who produced them. Even though we do not always verbalize our response to cultural achievements, we still appreciate and tend to enhance them through our own thoughts and feelings about and towards them. Examining the questions they raise, we discover how faith and sometimes the curiosity it entails drives us to enjoy told and depicted narratives, regardless if their sources are canonical or apocryphal.

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⁴² Rhodes James (ed.), "Protoevangelion", *The Apocryphal New Testament being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses with other narratives and fragments newly translated by Montagues Rhodes James*, Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, Oxford, Ney York, Toronto etc., 1985 edition (first edition 1924), p. 40; emphases added.

⁴³ Rhodes James, "Protoevangelion", p. 40; emphases added.

⁴⁴ Christopher Butler, *Pleasure and the Arts: Enjoying Literature, Painting, and Music*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.

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