A Note on the Beauteous Joseph in Late Byzantine Painting

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The interest in the iconography of the Beauteous Joseph in Byzantine art articulated long since is constantly being augmented by new studies, based less on fresh material but rather on differing interpretations of the already published Joseph cycles in fresco, miniature and the applied arts. The authors vary to a considerable extent in their explication of representations of the righteous Joseph, a fact which has inspired us to return to these representations and offer a new interpretation based, above all, on the texts used at services in the Byzantine church. It seems important, already at this moment, to point out the admonition expressed by A. Grabar that it is virtually impossible to find a uniform explanation for all the preserved images of the cycles due to the diversity of their programmes and an iconography with a tradition of its own. Indeed, the illustration of the Biblical text in the Vienna Genesis, the Cotton Bible or the miniatures of the two Vatican Octateuchs (Vat. gr. 747 and Vat. gr. 746) are of an anecdotal nature and are tied closely to the Old Testament text (Genesis 37-50). Such a choice of images could hardly be tied to the exegesis of the Christian fathers or to liturgical readings.

Those who have written on Joseph, especially M. Schapiro, S. Der Nersessian, A. Grabar, G. Montanari and M.-D. Gauthier-Walter, saw in him a role-model for rulers or bishops or a symbol of the good ruler in general, a presumption difficult to accept as an overall and universal interpretation for two reasons: first, for the lack of such evidence in written sources, and, second, because of the liturgical function of the texts on Joseph which seems to have been disregarded and the appearance of his image and scenes of his life on church walls thus to have remained without explanation. Namely, one should not disregard the fact that Joseph is rarely mentioned as an ideal ruler, as opposed to Moses, Hosea, David or Solomon, in literature or other written sources, just as his rare portraits always have a different meaning. Almost as a rule, Joseph’s turbulent life is represented in the figural arts through a more or less extensive cycle, with its numerous temptations and difficulties, sufferings and triumphs. Such a life could hardly have served as an analogy, much less an example, for the life of an ideal ruler. The extirpation of a single scene (Joseph’s triumph) and the formation of an interpretation on such a basis is methodologically un-acceptable because it leads to incomplete and even wrong conclusions.

The early fathers of the Church (fourth-fifth century) who have written on Joseph, whether in the form of specific works or as a part of various sermons -Tertullianus, Ambrose of Milan, Gregory of Nazianzus, Ephraim the Syrian, Basil, the bishop of Seleucis, John Chrysostomos- speak of him mainly from two aspects: Joseph is, first, the arch-image of Christ, and then an exemplar of those who, through their constant faith in the Lord, have overcome the devil’s numerous temptations and who, as a reward, receive eternal wreaths from the Almighty. Saint John Chrysostomos builds this metaphor on contrasts between Joseph and Pentefry’s wife: Ὄ ‘Ιωσήφ περί στεφάνου ήγωνίζετο, ή Αἰγύπτια ...

2. P. Fabre had already, very reasonably, pointed that out (Le développement de l’Histoire de Joseph dans la littérature et dans l’art au cour des douze premiers siècles, Mélanges d’archéologie et d’histoire, 1921-1922, p. 193-211), but the results of his very good study have lately been unjustly ignored.
In his interpretation Joseph grows into a moral beacon for Christians in general, an example to follow: 'Ὅρθρος πῶς διὰ σωφροσύνην ἐδικαιώθη, διὰ σωφροσύνην ἐν οὐρανοῖς βασιλεύει; Ταύτα δὲ ἡμῖν εἰρήται, ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς τὴν αὐτὴν πολιτείαν ζηλωθῆτε, τὴν αὐτὴν δόξαν περὶ θεοῦ κομίσῃν'. It is my opinion, and in that respect I agree with P. Fabre, that it was this didactic sermon of St John Chrysostomos which was crucial for the popularity of the Joseph theme in medieval art— it was addressed to emperors and bishops (especially responsible for the folk under their care) but likewise to all believers, as attested by the fact that the episode speaking of Joseph's chastity in the quarters of the Egyptian lady is never missing from the otherwise very variable choice of scenes of the Joseph's
cycle as well as by the allegories of virtues accompanying this cycle in the church of San Marco in Venice. That, most probably, was the reason behind the appearance of a Joseph cycle in the illumination of a sermon by Gregory of Nazianzus Εις ἑυτόν καὶ ὕλη τοῦ πατέρα καὶ Ἰωάννη τῶν Μέγαν in the manuscript Par. gr. 510, as an illustration of moral constancy and the power of faith, therefore, an example to those addressed by the author. It is in this miniature that we first see a different edition of the cycle which has precluded the illustrative quality characteristic of the earlier monuments: all details unimportant for emphasizing Joseph’s suffering, his chastity and his constancy in the faith of his fathers and his final triumph (Joseph’s dreams, episodes with the cup bearer and the baker, the pharaoh’s dreams and their interpretation, etc.) have been excluded, only those scenes of a very probable didactic quality within the cycle as a whole were represented.

After the ninth century representations of Joseph’s cycle become scarce in Byzantine art. The carving on a box from Sens (tenth-eleventh century) and the miniatures of Vat. gr. 747 (eleventh century) and Vat. gr. 746 (twelfth century) prove that the anecdotal-illustrative form was kept in use. A close following of the text is apparent in illustrations of Psalm CIV, while the iconography of the scenes follows that of cycles created after the Genesis text, as is the case with psalters of the late Byzantine epoch, the only difference being the scenes of Joseph’s triumph with elements of courtly ceremonial and imperial iconography which become increasingly popular in the illumination of these psalters.

An abundance of material in manuscripts dating from the ninth to the thirteenth century testifies that the memory of Joseph had definitely been included into church services and that it was tied to two dates—the Sunday of the Holy Ancestors and the Monday of the Holy Week—thus indicating that the Orthodox Church had designated Joseph as a forefather and a prototype of Christ. It is characteristic that the only sermon read on services preceding Christmas is that of St Ephraim the Syrian, “On the Beauteous Joseph” (Ὁ θεός τού Ἀδρατών), the same sermon, or that of St John Chrysostomos Εις τοῦ Ἰωάννη καὶ περὶ σωμοφυόνθες (Ọ ἐκ πελάγους μεγάλα σαλέυντες εὐρεθεὶται) is read on the services of Good Monday. In his sermon St Ephraim the Syrian offers first a series of parallels between Joseph and Christ and then tells the story of Joseph’s life, dwelling especially on the adversities with his brothers, the resistance of sin with the Egyptian lady, his rise to glory in Egypt, the proceedings with his brothers and Jacob’s coming to Egypt. The sermon of St John Chrysostomos is more didactic, it speaks of Joseph as an Old Testament personification of virtues, just like Job, Moses, David, Daniel and Susanna. He dwells mainly on the description of Joseph’s rejection of the sinful desire of Pentefry’s wife and then gives a brief account of his further exploits: the interpretation of the cup bearer’s dreams and the arrival of his brothers, to finish off with drawing a parallel between the sale of Joseph by his brothers and Judas’ betrayal of Christ. In hymns sung on Good Monday, the Triodus of Andrew of Crete, two hymns by Roman Melodus, as well as in that best known, though anonymous, hymn, still in use today, “Ὁ Ἰακώβ ὁ ἑστήκετο τοῦ Ἰωάννη τήν στέφην” Joseph is celebrated as “the one who has evaded...
We have, thus far, quoted the most significant texts meant to be read or sung at church services. They represent the framework delineating the bounds out of which one should not venture when interpreting figural representations of Joseph, especially so when they appear as a part of a church decoration programme. Which of its meaning was to be more emphasized—whether the christological or the didactic—depended on the context in which it was employed, and that means the location in the church interior where it was painted and the other scenes which surrounded it. In Early Christian churches, for example, the representations of Joseph as a prototype of Christ’s suffering were predominant: in the Constantinian Lateran basilica of St John (fourth century) the scene of “Brothers Selling Joseph off” corresponds to that of the “Betrayal of Judas”, as was also the case in a certain basilica in Ravenna, attested by Rusticus Elpidius. In late Byzantine art, however, the “Sacrifice of Abraham” becomes the most favored prefiguration of Christ’s passion, while the pictures of Joseph’s cycle lose such connotation.

It is characteristic of late Byzantine art that Joseph begins to be portrayed as a single figure, among the other Old Testament righteous. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, a figure of the Beauteous Joseph appears in the Omorphi Ecclessia in Athens as an Old Testament witness of Christ, above whom he is painted; his role as a prophet is further underlined by the text on his unrolled scroll. The services of the two weeks preceding Christmas are dedicated to the memory of Christ’s human ancestors and in general to all the righteous of the Old Testament who had awaited his coming. In the Service of the Forefathers many names are mentioned, among them those of Jacob, Joseph, Job, Levi, etc. We have already seen that the “Sermon on Joseph” by St Ephraim the Syrian is read before Christmas which presented the painters with the opportunity to include the figure of Joseph in the series of Old Testament personages painted during the thirteenth and the fourteenth century in the uppermost zones of churches, around apses or in domes above narthexes. Since it is the function of these paintings with Christ’s ancestors, shown one beside the other, to demonstrate Christ’s incarnation, Joseph is very often left out for he was not an ancestor of Christ in flesh (Protaton, Kilisse Kamii in Constantinople, the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki, the King’s Church in Studenica and other examples). Occasionally, however, he is shown as a part of this group of saints, based on the mentioned readings before Christmas as well as on the Gospel of Matthew, and was, thus, incorporated in the iconography of Christ’s incarnation. In the church of the Virgin Perivleptos in Ohrid (1295) we find a row of medallions painted on the triumphal arch before the apse with Christ Emmanuel at the summit flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel and numerous busts of the Old Testament righteous. Among them there stands a portrait of the Beauteous Joseph (Ο ΠΡΟΠΟΙΟΤΟΝΟΣ ΙΩΑΦΗΠΟΙ ΠΑΝΑΛΟΙΟΣ) as an Old Testament witness of Christ, above whom he is painted; his role as a prophet is further underlined by the text on his unrolled scroll. The services of the two weeks preceding Christmas are dedicated to the memory of Christ’s human ancestors and in general to all the righteous of the Old Testament who had awaited his coming. In the Service of the Forefathers many names are mentioned, among them those of Jacob, Joseph, Job, Levi, etc. We have already seen that the “Sermon on Joseph” by St Ephraim the Syrian is read before Christmas which presented the painters with the opportunity to include the figure of Joseph in the series of Old Testament personages painted during the thirteenth and the fourteenth century in the uppermost zones of churches, around apses or in domes above narthexes. Since it is the function of these paintings with Christ’s ancestors, shown one beside the other, to demonstrate Christ’s incarnation, Joseph is very often left out for he was not an ancestor of Christ in flesh (Protaton, Kilisse Kamii in Constantinople, the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki, the King’s Church in Studenica and other examples). Occasionally, however, he is shown as a part of this group of saints, based on the mentioned readings before Christmas as well as on the Gospel of Matthew, and was, thus, incorporated in the iconography of Christ’s incarnation. In the church of the Virgin Perivleptos in Ohrid (1295) we find a row of medallions painted on the triumphal arch before the apse with Christ Emmanuel at the summit flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel and numerous busts of the Old Testament righteous. Among them there stands a portrait of the Beauteous Joseph (Ο ΠΡΟΠΟΙΟΤΟΝΟΣ ΙΩΑΦΗΠΟΙ ΠΑΝΑΛΟΙΟΣ)
In the upper zones of the naos of the church of St George at Staro Nagoričino (1316-1318) there are also paintings of the Old Testament virtuous: Samuel, David, Solomon, Noah, Job, Zaccharia, Moses, Melchisedek, Aaron, Joshua and the Beauteous Joseph (ΩΠΑΓΑΛΟΟΣ) (Fig. 2)27. In the northwest dome of Gračanica (1318-1321) Joseph, along with Joshua, joins the Old Testament kings Manasseh, Amon and Hosea and the inscription running beside him is well preserved: Ο ΔΙΚ(ΑΙΟΣ) ΩΙΩΧΘΦ Ο ΠΑΝΚΑΛΟΟΣ28. In all these monuments the painters Michael and Eutychios depict Joseph as a young man and, probably influenced by his triumph in the cycle, in regal attire, wearing a crown, a divition and a loros. His appearance and the iconographic context within which he figures at the Chora in Constantinople (1316-1321) are somewhat different from the above mentioned. Joseph (ΩΙΩΧΘΦ) is shown as an old man with a long beard, dressed in a chiton and a chimation29, together with the other sons of Jacob. The choice of personages painted in the south dome of the Chora is based on the reading from Matthew 1, 2 (“And Jacob gave birth to Judas and his brothers”). In the older illustrated tetraevangelia this verse is differently illustrated30. In the Chora, in accordance with the new practice in Palaeologan art of depicting the geneology of Christ, the sons of Jacob are set apart and painted as separate figures without, however, breaking their ties to the theme of Christ’s incarnations.

In late Byzantine art, during the thirteenth and fourteenth century, two interesting Joseph cycles were painted in Sopočani in Serbia and in the Hagia Sophia in Ohrid31. The older of the two, that in Sopočani (1263-1268) (Fig. 1)32 has so far been interpreted as an example to church prelates or as a portrait of the good ruler34. Only R. Mercenier, op.cit., p. 99. 

23. The fact that the cycle in Sopočani is located right across from the Last Supper by no means negates our opinion. This composition is placed with the oecumenical councils as their prototype (cf. Chr. Walter, L’iconographie des Conciles dans la tradition byzantine, Paris 1970, p. 187, 199-200; Z. Gavrilović, Divine Wisdom as Part of Byzantine Imperial Ideology. Research into the Artistic Interpretations of the Theme in Medieval Serbia. Narthex Programmes of Lesnovo and Sopočani, Zograf 11 (1980), p. 50-51).
24. 'Α. Βασιλάκη-Καρακατσάνη, Οι τοιχογραφίες της 'Ομορφης Εκκλησίας στην Αθήνα, Athens 1971, p. 61, pl. 41a.
31. The Joseph cycle at San Marco in Venice (1258-1270) is part of an extensive Genesis cycle, created, probably, under the influence of the Crib Cotton Bible (Demus, op.cit. (note 8), p. 130-140).
Hamann-Mac Lean seems to notice its christological 
significance but not even he relinquishes the thesis 
of Ljubinković that this cycle stands also as the prototype 
of the lives of the Serbian saints Simeon and Sava. Let us, 
first, remind that the cycle is to be found on the 
western wall of the narthex and consists of the 
following scenes arrayed in four zones: Jacob sends 
Joseph to his brothers, Joseph finds his brothers at 
Sechem, Brothers throw Joseph into a pit, A blooded 
shirt is shown to Jacob; Joseph travels with the Ismaelite 
merchants to Egypt, Joseph on Rachel's grave, Joseph 
is sold to Penteefy, Joseph's chastity before Penteefy’s 
wife, Joseph in prison, Joseph led out of prison, the 
Pharaoh designates Joseph as governor, Joseph distributes 
grain to his brothers, Brothers inform Jacob of Joseph; 
Jacob's arrival in Egypt, Joseph welcomes Jacob, Jacob 
blesses Joseph's sons, Jacob's death. Beneath this 
cycle there are standing figures of the holy emperor 
Constantine and Helen, St Paul of Thebes with a sermon 
on salvation written on an unfolded roll and the figures of 
two holy hymnographers also bearing rolls. The northern 
wall is occupied by a Last Judgement and, in the lowest 
zone, the death scene of the Serbian queen Anna Dandolo. 
On the eastern wall there are depictions of the Last 
Supper and the seven oecumenical and one local council, 
an enthroned Christ and, in the southeast corner, the 
donor, king Uroš I with family, before the Virgin. The 
location of the Joseph cycle in Sopočani, between 
the Tree of Jesse and the Last Judgement, was, ap­ 
aparently, crucially influenced by the sermon of St 
Ephraim the Syrian on Joseph, read, as we have already 
seen, on the eve of Christmas and on Good Monday. At 
the very beginning Ephraim says: “For this young man, 
Joseph, was since his boyhood days the personification of 
the two comings of Christ: the first, that through the 
Virgin Mary, and the second, that by which all shall be set 
into fear”. This is one of the rare parallels between 
Joseph and Christ from the Last Judgement. It is of an 
anagogical nature but must, nevertheless, be disregarded 
when interpreting the Joseph cycle, located by the Last 
Judgement not only in Sopočani but in the Hagia Sophia 
in Ohrid as well. St Ephraim dwells only on those 
episodes of Joseph's long life which can be given a 
christological interpretation or on those whose didactic 
character is easily pointed out: Jacob sends Joseph to his 
brothers ("just as the Lord was sent forth from the bosom 
of the Father to save us all")37, Joseph approaches his 
brothers, Brothers sell Joseph off, Joseph's arrival in 
Egypt, Joseph refuses to sin with the Egyptian woman, 
Joseph in prison. The leading of Joseph out of prison, 
Joseph takes up government over entire Egypt, The 
arrival of Joseph's brothers in Egypt, Joseph appears 
before his brothers ("so will it be on that terrible day 
when the Lord comes on clouds of air, He shall sit on the 
throne of His Kingdom and before Him shall be brought 
those who have been tied up by fearsome angels, those 
who have denied His reign")38, Jacob's arrival in Egypt. 
All of the above episodes found their place on the 
Sopočani fresco, while those less significant in regard of 
the basic idea of the painting were left out. St Ephraim 
had, after all, also just mentioned without any further 
description, the dreams of Joseph, the cup bearer and the 
baker and their interpretation, for example -episodes 
otherwise widely discussed in the Book of Genesis (37, 
5-11; 40, 5-13; 41, 1-32). On the other hand, he did 
introduce an apocryphal detail to his sermon, that of 
Joseph's lamentation on Rachel's grave, a scene ex­ 
haustively illustrated by the painters in Sopočani, 
closely following the text: upon seeing his mother's 
grave, Joseph cries embracing it39, while the Ismaelite 
merchants threaten him (one is shown with a raised club 
in his hand) and lift him up from the sepulchre40. 
Joseph's cycle in Sopočani is, therefore, beyond any 
doubt, based on St Ephraim's sermon εις τον παγκαλον 
Τιομιφ and its meaning is both christological (certain 
episodes of Joseph's life are arch-images of Christ's 
incarnation, his Passion and his Second Coming) and 
didactic. In Sopočani, Joseph is not the personification of 
an ideal ruler or a bishop, but one of the righteous “who 
has evaded sin and gained the appearance of the image 
and the chastity and the true symbol of Christ” (the 
Triodus of Saint Andrew of Crete on vespers)41. As such, 
Joseph could stand as an example to both rulers and 
bishops just as he could to Christians in general, thus, 
also, to the patron of Sopočani, the Serbian king Uroš I, 
portrayed on the opposite wall. The influence of imperial 
iconography on certain of the scenes of the cycle is not to 
be disputed at all42, but the cycle as a whole should not, 
vise versa, automatically be characterized as imperial. 
The mainly didactic significance was preserved also in 
the Joseph cycle at the Hagia Sophia in Ohrid, painted ca 
1355, in the open gallery on the upper floor of the narthex. 
True, we have here a cycle based on a literary source 
different from that of Sopočani which, in its forty 
episodes approaches the extensive cycle of San Marco in 
Venice. The iconography of the scenes is also different, it 
follows more closely the text of Genesis and combines 
elements of imperial iconography. By unfolding over all 
four walls of the narthex and its relation to the 
remaining themes, the cycle in Ohrid keeps the basic 
meaning of a didactic story supplemented by an 
eschatological note which permeates the programme of
the frescoes in this space\(^{43}\). The cycle begins on the north wall with Christ the Righteous Judge in a Deisis (the Last Judgement just above), spreads across the east wall (above it is the ruling family before an enthroned Christ), the south and the west wall (beneath the cycle of Ἀγίων Νεκράριων, ending with the scene of Joseph’s death located beneath the Last Judgement). The placement of Joseph’s cycle beside that tied to the deliverance of the soul is certainly not accidental: as was accurately noticed\(^{44}\), they are mutually complementary in representing an Old Testament model of a just and honorable life of a Christian monk, whose soul is the subject of a duel between angels and demons. In the end, before Christ, the soul of each gains its place in heaven. Life on earth is made up of constant confrontations of good and evil, the inclination towards sin and its evasion, which is described as a conflict between demons and angels. Such is, also, the case in the story of Joseph: Ἡ γὰρ ὁ Ἰωσήφ ἐν τῷ σκάμματι τοῦ πειρασμοῦ μαχόμενος· τὸ στάδιον ἠμαθωτοῦ, οἱ ἀγώνες ἐπετελοῦντο, ἢ σάλπιγξ ἔβοα, ὁ ἀγώνιθος ἄνωθεν ἐπέθεε τῇ πάλη, καὶ ὁ δήμος τῶν ἄγγελών ἐπικεκυφώσες ἐθεώρει· οἱ δαίμονες κάτω τὰ δραματεῖα προετίθον τῇ Ἀιγυπτίᾳ, καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι ἀνω τῶν ἐπάλεον τῷ Ἰωσήφ τοῖς στεφάνοις· τῇ γάρ Ἀιγυπτία συνέτρεχον δαίμονες, καὶ τῷ Ἰωσήφ συνέπνεον ἄγγελοι (John Chrysostomos)\(^{45}\) and τῷ Ἰωσήφ συνέπραττον ἄγγελοι, τῇ γυναικὶ συνέτρεχον δαίμονες· ἄνωθεν δὲ θεωρῶν ὁ δεσπότης τὸν νικητήν ἐστεφε τοῖς ἐπάνοις (Roman Melodus)\(^{46}\). On the other hand, Ἀγίων Νεκράριων usually ascribed to Saint Andrew of Crete, is full of descriptions of angels fighting demons over the souls of the righteous\(^{47}\), meticulously transposed into painting by the masters working in Ohrid, and those working at a somewhat earlier date in the church of St George in Chilandar\(^{48}\).

It can, thus, be concluded, from all of the above, that the original illustrative-anectodal character of the Joseph cycle becomes, at some time around the ninth century, enriched with new meanings. On the one hand, its didactic significance is emphasized, Joseph becoming an exemplary righteous undergoing various temptations only to triumph in the end. The cycle is, thus, almost never left without the scenes of “Brothers Selling Joseph Off”, “Joseph’s Chastity” and “Joseph’s Triumph”, while its other episodes remain variable and inconstant. On the other hand, the cycle retains its christological meaning, apparent already in monuments of the Constantinian era, but altered to a considerable extent under the influence of religious services and the writings of the Church fathers. In Sopočani, where the cycle follows the text of St Ephraim the Syrian, its undisputed didactic meaning is topped by a christological significance resulting from its disposition between the Tree of Jesse and the Last Judgement, none the less, after all, from its very location in the narthex itself.

The influence of the liturgy on paintings of Joseph is best attested by the inclusion of his figure among the Old Testament righteous and saints in general, is considered a locus generalis of all medieval hagiographies. It is not clear why, after a good analysis of the cycle, Mrs. Z. Gavrilović (op.cit. (note 23), p. 48-50) still accepts the thesis of Ljubinković.


37. Ibid., p. 117.

38. Ibid., p. 119.

39. The partly preserved inscription by the scene (…pade na grob) is analogous to Ephraim’s text: “And as soon as Joseph saw the sepulchre of his mother Rachel, running, he fell on the grave...”, ibid., p. 124.


43. The cycle in Ohrid was best described and explained by C. Grozdanov, Ohridsko zidno slikarstvo XIV veka, Belgrade 1980, p. 94-100, figs 63-67. His only unadoptable thesis is that of a connection between the cycle and the contemporary legal acts of the Emperor Stefan Dušan.


45. PG, 56, col. 588.

46. Romanos le Mélode, Hymnes, I, p. 278.

47. J. P. G oar , Εὐχολόγιον sive rituale graecorum, Venice 1730, p. 585-587.

48. Radojičić, op.cit., p. 44; Grozdanov, op.cit., p. 89, drawings 24-25.
Testament righteous and forefathers in Palaeologan art. We have made an attempt to explain that phenomenon, as well as the renewal of the cycle in wall painting during the last centuries of Byzantine art, on the basis of liturgical readings, above all, the sermons of St Ephraim the Syrian and St John Chrysostomos and hymns of the Sunday of the Holy Ancestors and those of Good Monday. Illustrations of Joseph’s life found in psalters of the ninth-fourteenth century, accompanying Psalm CIV (CV) are most often taken over from cycles based on the text of the Genesis. The iconography of any particular scene from those psalters and those cycles was not the matter of our study, because that problem requires specialized and considerably more extensive studying.