

The Making of Mary and the Jerusalem Episcopate in Late Antiquity

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On August 15th the Jerusalem liturgical cycle called on believers to march from Jerusalem towards Bethlehem in remembrance of a fateful journey, the one that bore a pregnant virgin to Bethlehem. Eulogies of Mary's imminent maternity survived only in fragments that nevertheless confirm the adoption of a mid August date as the feast of Mary's memory. No less than two 'Kathismata' (resting) churches in close proximity provided ample room for believers to follow the appropriate Scriptural readings which included the famed verses of Isaiah (7:10-15) anticipating virginal pregnancy, as well as relevant passages from the New Testament.

Scripture provides no authority for the specific calendrical choice of August 15. In fact, the Virgin's earliest feast appears an anomaly since, unlike saints' days, it commemorated not her earthly death and heavenly birth but her divine maternity and the events of the Nativity (later indeed 'corrected' to mark her assumption). Yet, the August 15 date of the first ever recorded memorialization of the Theotokos in Jerusalem was situated precisely at the moment when the Jewish community marked the darkest day in its history, the destruction of the Jerusalemite Temple on the 9th of Av. That the overlapping of dates between the Christian and Jewish liturgical calendars was a mere coincidence is hardly the case. More likely, Mary's movable feast had been chosen by the Jerusalem episcopate as a peculiar reanimation of the Jewish national day of mourning, illuminating a type of exchange that completed the Christianization of the Jewish calendar in late antiquity.

Such operations marked the modifications of the temporal space that modulated relations between believers and the creed. Between the bearing of Jesus and the destruction of the central sanctuary of Judaism, both 'fixed' for the same day, stood two fatalities that the Jerusalem Christian calendar sought to intertwine. The inception of Mary's feast is difficult to pinpoint. Precise calculations of the year depend on the date of the Armenian lectionary which appears to hark back to the late fourth century. The reckoning highlights two crucial stages in an ongoing effort to elevate Mary and Jerusalem in late antiquity. One is the manipulation of the calendar as a result of Christian-Jewish contending calculations of the past. The other is the appropriation of the Virgin as a cornerstone in a new a religious discourse that centered on the city, its bishops and its environment. I have dealt with the first process elsewhere. Here I hope to trace how the making of Mary in a Jerusalemite context led to her empire-wide promotion at the ecumenical council of Ephesos (431) followed, two decades later, by that of Jerusalem to the coveted rank of patriarchate at Chalcedon.