

Presbeia Theotokou, Presbeia mētros: Reconsidering the Origins of the Feast and the Cult of the Theotokos at the Kathisma, on the Road to Bethlehem

This article complements my former article on the cult of Mary at the archaeological site of the Kathisma (commemorating a rock where allegedly the Virgin sat to rest on her journey to Bethlehem, prior to the birth of Jesus). The archaeological remains of the site were excavated by me on the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.¹ In the former study I dealt with the influence of the cult to the Theotokos at the Kathisma site on the calendar of Jerusalem, and on the early celebrations for Mary in Jerusalem and elsewhere. I already pointed-out to the similarities between Rachel's death after she gave birth to Benjamin (Gn 35.16–20) and the legend mentioned in the Protoevangelium 17, i.e., the legend that later hallowed the site of the Kathisma. The geographical proximity between the site of the Kathisma and the tomb of Rachel on the road to Bethlehem were also presented and discussed.²

In this study I will focus on the exegetical imageries of Rachel in Christian and Jewish exegesis, including the differences between the Christian and the Jewish imagery of Rachel as the weeping mother. I will argue that the origin of the Theotokos cult and her feast in the Kathisma emanated from Rachel's veneration in the rural area near to Bethlehem. I also will suggest in this article that the original date of the Theotokos feast in the Kathisma and its theme corresponded with the celebration of the 15th of Av.³ This Jewish feast is connected to Rachel in the role of the mother of the nation of Israel, a powerful advocate who successfully intercedes on behalf of her children.

As Averil Cameron observed:

*One of the problems of understanding the early growth of attention to the Theotokos is the apparent gap between the second-century apocryphal writing as the Protoevangelium of James ... and the beginnings of real attention to the Virgin in our sources from the late fourth century, and particularly the fifth century onward.*⁴

The results of my excavations in the Church of the Kathisma accord with Cameron's conclusion. In spite the fact that the hallowing tradition of the site is found in the Protoevangelium, there is no evidence from neither archaeology nor ancient written texts that the site of the Kathisma existed before the fifth century CE. Therefore, we are compelled to investigate the question of the beginning of the Theotokos cult at the Kathisma in the historical context of the fifth century CE.⁵

The site of the Kathisma was hallowed by the legend transmitted by the *Protoevangelium* (17.2–3), according to which Mary sat to rest on the journey to Bethlehem. The gap in question with regard to the Kathisma Church is the lack of the material evidence that predates the fifth century and the lack of ancient written sources that point to a date for the Kathisma prior to the fifth century. Today, the remains of the Church of the Kathisma are situated in an old olive grove on the road to Bethlehem, about 5 km from the Jaffa Gate in the city walls of Jerusalem. Archaeological excavation conducted in 1992, 1997 and 1999 on the modern highway to Bethlehem, revealed the remains of a large octagonal church (measuring 38 m north–south x 41 m east–west) built around a rock at the

¹ R. Avner, 'The Initial Tradition of the Theotokos at the Kathisma: Earliest Celebrations and the Calendar', in: L. Brubaker and M. B. Cunningham, eds., *The Cult of the Mother of God in Byzantium. Texts and Images* (Aldershot, Hampshire 2011), 9–15, bibliography on the archaeological excavations in nn.1, 9, 21, 22, 28.

² Avner, 'The Initial', 26–27, with bibliography in the notes.

³ The case of the development of the Kathisma sites is a test case challenging R. A. Markus, 'How on Earth Could Places Become Holy?', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2/3 (1994), 257–271.

⁴ A. Cameron, 'Introduction – The Mother of God in Byzantium: Relics, Icons, Texts', in: Brubaker and Cunningham, eds., *The Cult*, 3–4.

⁵ Although it is possible that after the Arab conquest of Jerusalem in 638 CE the Muslims bridged between the reality of a holy Christian site at the Kathisma and the Qur'ānic narrative related to birth of Jesus by the Muslim ascribing tradition to the Christian site. R. Avner, 'The Kathisma: A Christian and Muslim Pilgrimage Site,' *ARAM* 19 (2007), 541–557, esp. 548–552; Avner, 'The Initial', 17–19.

center,⁶ the alleged place where Mary sat to rest on her journey with Joseph to register for the census (Lk 2.1–6). The date of its construction – the fifth century CE – and the architectural changes inside the building during the sixth century, the modest size of the rock, the remains of an installation for producing holy water, and the poor state of preservation of the walls of the church – all accord with the historical written sources relating to the church and its site. The archaeological finds also includes architectural remains that pre-date the construction of the octagonal church in c. 456 CE.⁷ These remains were ascribed to the period of the Armenian Lectionary (i.e., 417–439 CE).⁸ The Armenian lectionary, which reflects the liturgy of Jerusalem in the early fifth century mentions the feast of the Theotokos celebrated on August 15th in the Kathisma, which it describes as situated on the road halfway from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

Two homilies for this feast were written during the fifth century in Jerusalem, the earlier one of the two, was composed by Hesychios.⁹ It influenced the later one, which was written by Chrysippos of Jerusalem.¹⁰ Both homilies focus on the virtues of and the super-natural nature of the Virgin's maternity and ignore the charming apocryphal stories of the *Protoevangelium* 17 about the events involving Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem.

The Armenian lectionary reveals that by 439 the site of the Kathisma was a known established holy place. In other words, by that time the legend of Mary resting on her journey to Bethlehem was attached to a specific place, where the Armenian lectionary says the feast of the Theotokos was celebrated. Since the homilies for the Theotokos feast by Hesychios and Chrysippos post-date the council at Ephesus and also post-date the establishment of the *locus sanctus* of the Kathisma (i.e. before 440), I find it odd that neither preacher drew from the *Protoevangelium*'s narrative about Mary's repose during the journey to Bethlehem. Perhaps they refrained from doing so because, unlike the local lay community, the official ecclesiastical institution of Jerusalem had doubts about the orthodoxy of the texts in the *Protoevangelium* or the nature of the cult there. This observation fits well with Mary Cunningham's conclusions that before the middle of the sixth century, the Fathers of the Church were reluctant to ascribe too much authority to the *Protoevangelium* and that Romanos the Melodist had been a pioneer in drawing inspiration from the *Protoevangelium*.¹¹ According to Cunningham, there was no formal expression in theological and liturgical sources before the beginning of the fourth century, but such expression reached a peak as a result of the affirmation of Mary as Theotokos in the creed at the council of Ephesus in 431.¹² Therefore, it seems that perhaps the beginning of the cult of the Theotokos in the Kathisma emerged from popular devotion of the local community in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Unlike many other Christian holy places, there is nothing that indicates that the Kathisma was invented in a dream or in another miraculous way, which were common methods to create and to establish holy places.¹³

⁶ Avner, 'The Initial', 12–15.

⁷ Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita Theodosii*, 236.20–237.2; J. Binns and R. M. Price, *Cyril of Scythopolis: The Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, Cistercian Studies (Kalamazoo MI, 1991), 262–263; L. Di Segni, *Cyril of Scythopolis, The Lives of the Monks of the Judaean Desert. Introduction and Translation* (Jerusalem, 2005), 251–252 n.3 (in Hebrew).

⁸ A. Renoux, *Un manuscrit du lectionnaire arménien de Jérusalem* 121, *PO* 36/2 (1971), 181.

⁹ Hesychios, Homily V, De S. Maria deipara, in: M. Aubineau, *Les homélies festales d'Hésychius de Jérusalem*, vol. 1, *Subsidia Hagiographica* 59 (Brussels, 1978), 158–169.

¹⁰ Chrysippos, Oratio in sanctam Mariam Deiparam 3, in: M. Jugie, ed., *Homélies Mariales Byzantines*, *PO* 19 (Paris, 1925; repr. Turnhout, 1990), 340.40–341/10, 35.

¹¹ M. B. Cunningham, 'The Use of the *Protoevangelium of James* in Eighth-Century Homilies on the Mother of God', in: Brubaker and Cunningham, eds., *The Cult*, 165–166 with bibliography in the notes.

¹² Cunningham, 'The Use of the *Protoevangelium*', 164 n. 6, bibliography on the John Rylands Papyrus 470; N. Smelova, 'Melkite Syriac Hymns to the Mother of God (9th–11th centuries): Manuscripts, Language and Imagery', in: Brubaker and Cunningham, eds., *The Cult*, 118 n. 3.

¹³ For example, the discovery of the Tomb of Christ, J. W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta, the Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of her Finding of the True Cross* (Leiden, 1992). Other examples are the prophets' tombs in the territory of Eleutheropolis in Judea: see Z. Rubin, 'The See of Eleutheropolis in the Conflict of Supremacy between the See of Caesareans and the See of Jerusalem in the 4th and the Early 5th Century CE', in: J. Geiger, H. M. Cotton and G. Stiebel, eds., *Israel's Land. Papers Presented to Israel Shatzman on his Jubilee*, (Ra'anana, 2009), 255–256; D. Satran, *Biblical Prophets in Byzantine Palestine. Reassessing the 'Lives of the Prophets'*, *Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha* 11 (Leiden, New York and Cologne, 1995), 1–33.

The feast of the Theotokos in the Kathisma has been studied and discussed by many scholars, among them Capelle, Jugie, Raes, Renoux and Aubineau.¹⁴ Two Ph.D. dissertations deal with the question of the origins of the date of the feast on August 15th.¹⁵

RACHEL IN EARLY CHRISTIAN EXEGESIS

The written historical sources, namely pilgrims' accounts, indicate that the Tomb of Rachel on the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem was a pilgrims' station and a place of Christian veneration long before the establishment of the site at the Kathisma.¹⁶ In addition to the account by the Bordeaux Pilgrim, who mentioned the Tomb of Rachel in 333, also Jerome, who lived in Bethlehem in 398 while he wrote his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, insisted that the Tomb of Rachel was located near Bethlehem, i.e., somewhere in the southern part of the territory of the tribe of Benjamin and bordering the territory of the tribe of Judah. Jerome discusses this in his commentary on Matthew 2.16–18 and cites Jeremiah 31.14 as quoted in Matthew 2.18, as follows:

Then was fulfilled what was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet: 'A voice was heard in Rama, weeping and much wailing, Rachel weeping for her children, and she was unwilling to be consoled, because they are not' (Matthew 2.18).¹⁷

Jerome claims that Rama should not be identified as a place near the city of Gabaa in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin, but should be translated as 'on high' in terms of the weeping: 'the voice has gone forth far and wide'.¹⁸

The quotation of Jeremiah 31.14 in the Gospel of Matthew is the partial citation of a prophecy of consolation that continues in the following verses. Verses 15 and 16 include God's compassionate words to Rachel, comforting her and promising to bring back her exiled children to their land:

Thus says the Lord: Refrain your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; For your work shall be rewarded, says the Lord, And they shall come back from the land of the enemy. There is hope in your future, says the Lord, that your children shall comeback to their own border.¹⁹

This poetic, comforting prophecy is read in the synagogue on the 2nd of Tishrei, a week before the Day of Atonement. In the Gospel of Mathew 2.18 the quotation of verse 14 by itself de-contextualizes the content of God's consolation to Rachel. The Gospel indicates that the matriarch wept because she foresaw the death of the Innocent. In so doing, Matthew totally diverted Rachel's image from a powerful mother whose tears and action engender rewards ('for your work shall be rewarded'); Rachel is instead transformed in Matthew into a winning mother, bereft of hope, crying desperately but in vain because she knows that the death of her children is the inevitable outcome of the birth of Jesus. Following the exegesis of Matthew, the interpretation of Rachel weeping for her

¹⁴ B. Cappelle, 'La fête de la Vierge à Jérusalem au V^e siècle', *Le Muséon* 56 (1943), 19–20; M. Jugie, 'La première fête mariale en orient et en occident: l'Avent primitif', *EO* 22 (1923), 129–152; *idem*, 'La fête de la dormition et l'assomption de la sainte Vierge en orient et en occident', *L'année théologique* 4 (1943), 11–42; *idem*, *La mort et l'assomption de la Sainte Vierge*, ST 114 (Vatican City, 1944); A. Raes, 'Aux origines de la fête de l'Assomption en orient', *Orientalia christiana periodica* 12 (1946), 262–274; A. Renoux, 'Un manuscrit du lectionnaire arménien de Jérusalem (Cod. Jer. Arm. 121)', *Le Muséon* 74 (1961), 361–385; *idem*, *Un manuscrit du lectionnaire arménien de Jérusalem* 121, *PO* 35/1 (1969); *PO* 36/2 (1971); M. Aubineau, ed., *Les homélies festales d'Hésychius de Jérusalem*, Subsidia Hagiographica 59 (2 vols, Brussels, 1978), vol. 1.

¹⁵ W. D. Ray, *August 15 and the Development of the Jerusalem Calendar*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2000; S. Verhelst, *La liturgie de Jérusalem à l'époque byzantine: genèse et structures de l'année liturgique*, Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1999; *idem*, 'Le 15 août et le 9 Ave et le Kathisma', *Questions liturgiques* 82 (2001), 161–191.

¹⁶ Avner, 'The Initial', 25–28, 27; Bordeaux Pilgrim, *Itinerarium*, 12; P. Geyer, ed., *Itinera Hierosolymitana saeculi III–VIII*, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 39 (Vienna, 1989), 25. On the two traditions on the location of the Tomb of Rachel see Ch. Ritter, *Rachels Klage im antiken Judentum und frühen Christentum: eine auslegungsgeschichtliche Studie*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums*, 52 (Leiden and Boston, 2007), 29–32, 257–259; F. Strickert, *Rachel Weeping: Jews, Christians, and Muslims at the Fortress Tomb* (Collegeville MN, 2007), 57–83.

¹⁷ Jerome Commentary on Matthew, 1.2.17; T. Scheck, trans., *St. Jerome Commentary on Matthew*, The Fathers of the Church, Th. P. Halton, ed. (Washington D.C., 2008), 66.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.2.19; Scheck, trans., *St. Jerome*, 67.

¹⁹ New King James Version from <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=NKJV&search=Jeremiah%2031> (accessed on January 9, 2015), is the closest translated text to the Hebrew Masoretic text.

sons is a prefiguration of the mothers of the massacred Innocents, which evidently appeared in Justin Martyr. The latter wrote in the second century, about the same time as the *Protoevangelium* was circulating.²⁰

Jerome further developed the interpretation of Rachel's weeping:

*'She weeps for her sons and does not receive consolation' may be understood in two ways: either that she considered them to be dead forever, or that she did not console herself about those she knew would live.*²¹

The idea of two peoples, one that was destined to die and the other to live, could connote the vision of the two peoples that Mary saw on the journey to Bethlehem shortly before she asked Joseph to halt for a rest (*Protoevangelium* 17.1–2).

The issue of Rachel's imagery as a weeping mother in Jewish, apocryphal and Christian exegesis has been studied in depth by Christine Ritter.²² She also studied the interpretations of the Jacob's wives Rachel and Leah as a pair representing types – Leah representing the active life and Rachel, the contemplative life. Ritter argued that this interpretation was drawn by the Fathers of the church from Philo. The Fathers of the church also employed Rachel as a type of the Church and Leah as the Synagogue²³ (Gn 29.17: 'Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel was lovely in form, and beautiful'). This verse was reiterated by Justin Martyr:

*Now, Leah represented your people and the Synagogue, while Rachel was a figure of our Church. And Christ still serves for them and for his servants that are in both... As the eyes of Leah were weak (Gn 29.17) so, too, are the eyes of your souls should exceedingly weak.'*²⁴

Ambrose related to the imagery of Rachel as the church in the context of pilgrimage and the location of her tomb on the way to Bethlehem:

*That Bethlehem is the very same as Ephrata a passage in Genesis makes clear, when it says: 'So Rachel died, and was buried on the way to Ephrata, that is Bethlehem' (Gn 35.19) The tomb of holy Rachel is on the road, for she is a type of the Church so that passers-by may say: 'The blessing of the Lord may be upon you!' (Ps. 128.8) and 'Coming they shall come with rejoicing.' (Ps. 126.6)*²⁵

Paulinus of Nola, a friend of Jerome who traveled with him in the Holy Land, conflated the imageries of Rachel as the Church and as the weeping mother. He thus ascribed to her the role of a transitional mother figure linked to the old era of the law from the Old Testament, which ended with the birth of Jesus and the rise of Christianity. In the following exegesis, Paulinus of Nola ascribes to Jacob prophetic ability to foresee the birth of the Gospel that is oblivious of the Old Testament:

Jacob, too, honored the church much beloved and eagerly awaited Rachel with a famous tomb and inscription, so that this pious duty might lighten his present sorrow and be a witness to posterity. And yet with prophetic mind he marked that spot with the inscription of his wife's death, foreseeing that at the birth of the Gospel the Law must fall into disuse. By this mystery the wife of the patriarch, who lived in many places as an image of the Church, died there, I think, to symbolize the death of the synagogue, having brought forth in labor the son of grief in that place (Gn 35.16–20)²⁶ where the end of the Law was to be announced in the childbirth of the Virgin. 'For the end of the law is Christ' (Rm 10.4).²⁷

This interpretation also provides a Christian answer to the question of Jacob's choice to bury Rachel on the road to Bethlehem and not in the burial cave of the Jewish patriarchs and matriarchs that Abraham bought at He-

²⁰ Ibid., xi–xii; J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament. A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation* (Oxford, 1993), 49 ascribes most parts of the *Protoevangelium* to the second half of the second century.

²¹ Jerome, Commentary on Matthew 1.2.18; Scheck, trans., *St. Jerome*, 66.

²² Ritter, *Rachels Klage*.

²³ Ritter, *Rachels Klage*, 262–265.

²⁴ Justin Martyr 134.3,5; St. Justin, *Dialogue with Tryphon*, trans. Th. B. Falls, rev. by Th. Halton, ed. by M. Slusser. (Washington, D.C., 2003), 202.

²⁵ Ambrose, Letter 45 to Honorantius bishop of Verona, the letter was dated to ca. 387 (M. Melchior Beyenka, *Saint Ambrose, Letters*, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, L. Schopp, ed. (Washington D.C., 1954), 236, 231.

²⁶ The exegetical meanings of Benjamin's name in Jewish, Samaritan, apocryphal, and Christian contexts deserve a separate study on which I intend to work.

²⁷ Paulinus of Nola, Letter 13.4, trans. P. G. Walsh, *Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola Translated and Annotated*, in J. Quasten, W. J. Burghardt and T. Comerford Lawler, eds., *Ancient Christian Writers. The Works of the Fathers in Translation* (New York, NY and Ramsey, NJ, 1966), 121.

bron (Gn 23.1–20). We will discuss below the exegetical Jewish answer to the same question – the attribution to Jacob of a prophetic mind.

Obviously, the imageries of Rachel discussed above can be compared with some of the early images of the Virgin. For example, both were mothers who foresaw the death of their sons: Rachel according to the interpretation in the Gospel of Matthew, Mary according to Origen's interpretation²⁸ of Simon's allegorical prophecy about the sword that would pierce her soul (Lk 2.34–35).²⁹ But most important was the role of intercessor, in addition to Mary's role in the Gospel story of the wedding in Cana (Jn 2.12) and the earliest written evidence of the cult of the Theotokos, i.e., the *Sub tuum* papyrus we mentioned above, and Irenaeus of Lyon. In the second century Irenaeus posited Mary as the advocate of Eve.³⁰ Jewish exegesis attributes the role of intercessor to Rachel, presenting her as the mother of the nation who intervenes on behalf of the Children of Israel and earns the compassion of God, who promises her to save her children.

RACHEL IN JEWISH EXEGESIS

The complete prophecy in Jeremiah 31.14–16 is as follows:

Thus said the Lord: Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work shall be rewarded; saith the Lord; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy. And there is hope in thine end, saith the Lord that thy children shall come again to their border.

This image of Rachel as a weeping mother who has appealed to God to save her sons and is able to alter God's action in their favor, as expressed in Jeremiah 31.14–16, was elaborated in Jewish exegesis by the fifth century. These elaborations appear mainly in midrashic literature – in *Genesis Rabbah*, and *Lamentations Rabbah*, two texts whose final reductions are dated to the fifth century. Both present Rachel as a potent 'Presbeia Mētēr': a woman who appeals on behalf for herself and is answered, who pleads for her children and whose supplications are fulfilled by God.

Rachel was to become the ultimate intercessor for Israel. A midrash in *Genesis Rabbah* reveals why Jacob buried Rachel on the road to Bethlehem and not in the Cave of the Patriarch in Hebron, the burial place of all the other Jewish matriarchs and patriarchs:³¹

Why did Jacob bury Rachel on the way to Ephrat? Jacob foresaw that the exiles would pass by there [en route to Babylonia]. Therefore he buried her there, so that she should seek mercy for them: 'A voice in Ramah ... and there is hope for your future. (Jr 31.14–16).'

In *Lamentations Rabbah*, Rachel's pleas surpassed those of Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, who tried but failed to intercede for Israel. After God rejected their entreaties, Rachel stood up and spoke:³²

'I paid my sister kindness and I was not jealous of her and I did not allow her to be shamed ... How come then you are jealous of idolatry, which is nothing, and so have sent my children into exile, allowed them to be killed by the sword, permitted the enemy to do whatever they wanted to them?' Forthwith the Mercy of the Holy One, blessed be He, welled up, and he said, 'For Rachel I am going to bring the Israelites back to their land,' That is the line with the verse of the Scripture: 'Thus said the Lord: A cry is heard in Ramah ... and there is hope for your future declares the Lord your children shall return to their country' (Jr 31.14–16).

²⁸ Origen In Mat. Comm. 10.17; E. Klostermann, ed., *Origines, Commentarius in Matthaeum*, vol. 1, GSC 40 (Leipzig, 1935), 21–22.

²⁹ For this parallel I am indebted to Ritter *Rachels Klage*, 269 n. 59; P. Allen, 'Portrayals of Mary in Greek homiletic literature (6th–7th centuries)', in: Brubaker and Cunningham, eds., *The Cult*, 69–88, p. 80 n. 75. In the sixth century, Romanos the Melodist employs connections between Rachel and Mary in his homily on the Innocents 1, 9, 12; J. Grosdidier de Matons, *Romanos le Mélode, Hymnes*, vol. 2: *Nouveau Testament (IX–XX)*, SC 110, (Paris, 1965) 207, 215, 219. In the latter Romanos accuses the Jews of murdering Rachel's sons. Thus the Jews become enemies of Rachel's enemies, perhaps similarly to the Jews' hostile relations to Mary in early homiletic literature relating to the Dormition. See S. J. Shoemaker, 'Let Us Go and Burn Her Body': The Image of the Jews in the Early Dormition Tradition', *Church History* 68/4 (Dec. 1999), 775–823.

³⁰ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Demonstration on the Apostolic Preaching*, 33.4; A. Rousseau, trans., *Irénée du Lyon, Démonstration de la Predication Apostolique*, SC 406 (Paris, 1995), 130–131; E. LaVerdiere, 'Mary', in E. Ferguson, M. McHugh and F. Norris, eds., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity New Edition*, vol. 2 (New York, and London, 1992), 733: 'and Eve in Mary, that a virgin advocate of a virgin.'

³¹ *Genesis Rabbah* LXXII.X.1 B–D, in: J. Neusner, *Midrash Rabbah Bereshit. Confronting Creation: How Judaism Reads Genesis: An Anthology of Genesis Rabbah* (Columbia, S.C., 1991), 289.

³² *Lamentations Rabbah*, Ptichta 24 78LL–79PP, in: J. Neusner, *Lamentations Rabbah: an analytic translation. Brown Judaic Studies*, 193 (Atlanta GA, 1989), 79.

Neusner noted that the theme of God's remembering Rachel was made a subject of divine remembrance.³³ One example of God showing favor appears in a midrashic interpretation of Ps 98.3:³⁴

He has remembered his mercy and his faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen salvation of our God (Ps. 98.3) ... But in connection with the children of Rachel it is written 'The sons of Rachel', Jacob's wife: Joseph and Benjamin. (Gn 46.19).

Another example relates to Ps 106.4:³⁵

'Remember me, O Lord when you favor your people, O think of me at your salvation.' Said R. Eleazar; 'On New Year were Sarah, Rachel and Hannah remembered: 'Then God remembered Rachel' (Gn 30.22).³⁶

From this we learn that in the readings in the synagogue for the New Year, Rachel was made the representative and an archetype of other barren women, namely Sarah and Hannah. Origen followed this list, adding Elizabeth at the end, saying:

First of all consider why it is that many holy women in the Scriptures are related to have been barren, as Sarah herself (Gn 11.30), and lo now Rebecca (Gn 25.21). But also Rachel, Israel's beloved, was barren (Gn 30.31). Anna also, the mother of Samuel, is recorded to have been barren (1 S 1.2). But also in the Gospels Elizabeth is related to have been barren (Lk 1.7). But in all these instances this term is used because after sterility they all gave birth to holy persons.³⁷

AUGUST 15TH AND THE 15TH OF AV

As I mentioned above, two dissertations were recently written on the question of the origins of the date 15th of August for the Theotokos feast in the Kathisma. These works were preceded by an article by A. Raes, arguing that the month of August should be equated to the Syrian lunar month of Av and so should be the 15th of August and the 15th of Av. Raes suggested that a pagan feast marking the peak of the vine harvest in the midsummer was celebrated on the 15th of Av, when the moon is full.³⁸ Walter Dean Ray proposed in 2000 that according to a calculation based on the Book of Jubilees, the 15th of Av marked the date on which Sarah conceived Isaac.³⁹ Stéphane Verhelst proposed that the 15th of August was fixed in the calendar of the Church of Jerusalem because it corresponded to the commemoration day on the 9th of Av, the day that the Jews fast and mourn in commemoration of the destruction of their temple.⁴⁰

There is no doubt that the calibration between the solar calendars and the Luni-solar Jewish calendar poses many obstacles that are beyond the scope of my research. Therefore, I relay on works by other scholars, especially on Sasha's Stern recent book.⁴¹ Stern, supported by various historical texts and Jewish tomb stones inscriptions from Tzohar (in Trans-Jordan), argues that these calendars co-related to during the period from the fourth to the sixth centuries. The textual evidence Stern presents indicates that the Jewish feast of Passover could only occurred within the Julian month of March. The most convincing evidence brought by Stern is the list of the Jewish Passover for the period between 328 to 343 CE provided by the Council of Sardica (343 CE) and the decree of Justinian containing information on Jews widely observing Passover before the equinox, as they celebrated it in the fourth

³³ Neusner, *Midrash Rabbah Bereshit*, 269.

³⁴ *Bereshit Rabbah* LXVIII:II.1.A, G; in: Neusner, *Midrash Rabbah Bereshit*, 269.

³⁵ *Bereshit Rabbah* LXVIII I.1.B–C; in Neusner *Midrash Rabbah Bereshit*, 268–269

³⁶ Gn 30.22–24: "Then God remembered Rachel and God hearkened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said: 'God has taken away my reproach, and she called his name Joseph, saying, 'May the Lord add to me another son'.'" *Genesis Rabbah* LXIII: I.1.A – II.1.A; in: Neusner, *Midrash Rabbah Bereshit*, 268.

³⁷ Origen, in Genesis, homily On Rebecca's pregnancy and giving birth 12.1; R. Heine, trans., *Origen Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, 71 (Washington D.C., 1982), 176.

³⁸ Raes, 'Aux origines'.

³⁹ Ray, *August 15*.

⁴⁰ Verhelst, *La liturgie*; *idem*, 'Le 15 août et le 9 Ave'.

⁴¹ The literature on the topic is vast, recent works are S. Stern, *Calendar and Community: A History of the Jewish Calendar Second Century BCE – Tenth Century CE*, (Oxford, 2001); *idem*, *Calendars in Antiquity: Empires, States, and Societies*, (Oxford, 2012); R. T. Beckwith, *Calendar, Chronology and Worship: Studies in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, *Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, (*Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums*, 61), (Leiden and Boston, 2005). A review of Stern, *Calendar and Community* in Beckwith, *Calendar*, 7–12.

century.⁴² Therefore, even if the days of the 15th of Av and August 15th did not overlap, the Jewish feasts of the 15th of Av, similar to the Passover, probably occurred on the same solar months. Moreover, the two dates, August 15th and the 15th of Av are significant because both are the middle days in the months. My interest to investigate a link between the 15th of August and 15th of Av begun after I discovered the links between Rachel and Mary in local geographical and cultural setting of the small area along the road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. These links include the geographical proximity between the site of the Kathisma and the Tomb of Rachel: the similar narratives that hallowed these sites i.e., the story of Rachel giving birth to Benjamin and its parallel to the events reported in the *Protoevangelium* 17 about Mary's vision of Mary and her rest on the road to Bethlehem; as well as the story in the *Protoevangelium* 18 about Mary giving birth to Jesus outside of Bethlehem. Another significant parallel between Rachel and Mary is the similarity of their imageries especially as mother and intercessor – Rachel as mother of the nation of Israel and Mary as Theotokos.

I found support in the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud, which interprets the Mishnah, tractate Ta'anit 4.8. In these sources the 15th of Av was an important feast in the Jewish calendar; along with the Day of Atonement, both were equally considered as the two happiest days of the year. In particular, the feast of the 15th of Av was originally instituted to commemorate the salvation of the tribe of Benjamin, Rachel's younger son. It actually re-enacted that salvation in the custom of young men and women going into the vineyards and, regardless of tribal affiliation or socioeconomic differences, finding suitable marriage partners.

Raban Simeon ben Gamliel said: 'There were no days better for Israelites than the fifteen of Ab and the Day of Atonement ... but what happened on the fifteenth of Ab? – ... Rabbi Joseph said in the name of Rabbi Nahman: It is the day on which the tribe of Benjamin was permitted to re-enter the congregation [of Israel], as it is said, 'Now the men of Israel had sworn in Mizpah saying: There shall not any of us give his daughter unto Benjamin to wife' (Jud. 21.1).'⁴³

The background of the feast is found in the book of Judges Chapters 19–21 – a horrific assault on the concubine of a man of Levite man, who took shelter and stayed overnight in the city of Geva in the tribe of Benjamin, to the shock of the other tribes of Israel. They all gathered to take revenge, launching a war against the tribe of Benjamin, killing its women, children and elders. They almost completely annihilated the Benjaminites, and to ensure completion of the act, vowed not to intermarry with them. When the Israelites realized that they were about to destroy an entire tribe, they sought a solution to ensure Benjaminite continuity without having to break their vow. First, they discovered that one city (Jabesh Gilead) had not joined them in battle, so they launched a war against that city. Killing all its men, they gave the daughters of Jabesh Gilead in marriage to the men of Benjamin. That move, however, did not suffice, and more brides were needed. The Israelites then agreed to allow the Benjaminites to abduct and marry the girls who went dancing in the vineyards during an ancient feast that traditionally was held in Shiloh (Jud. 21). According to the Talmud, this feast was also celebrated during the Second Temple period in Jerusalem, when unmarried girls all exchanged and wore white dresses, purposefully ignoring restrictions on clothing styles in accordance with their social and economic class. The girls would go to the vineyards and let the young men capture and marry them; no one was to be left without a partner:

On these days the Daughters of Jerusalem ... Our Rabbis have taught: The beautiful amongst them called out. Set your eyes on beauty for the quality most to be prized in woman is beauty; those of them who came of noble families called out, Look for [a good] family for woman has been created to bring up a family; the ugly ones amongst them called out, Carry off your purchase in the name of Heaven, only one condition that you adorn us with jewels of gold.⁴⁴

The custom of going into the vineyards in search of a match was a re-enacting the event that allowed the survivors of the tribe of Benjamin, Rachel's younger son, to perpetuate their tribe.⁴⁵ As a consequence of this feast, many weddings followed the 15th of Av; new families were established thus, ensuring the continuation and unifi-

⁴² Stern, *Calendar and Community*, 65–87; *idem*, *Calendars in Antiquity*, 334–333, 382–424.

⁴³ Ta'anit 4.8 p. 30 b; in: J. Rabbinowitz, trans., and I. Epstein, ed., *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud, Seder Mo'ed, Tractates Ta'anit, Megillah, Hagigah* (London, 1984), 30b.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 30b–31a.

⁴⁵ In two illuminated manuscripts including a homily by Gregory of Nazianzus for Christmas, a typological parallel is drawn in images between the assassination and the almost total annihilation of the tribe of Benjamin and the massacre of the Innocents that occurred in the inheritance of the tribe of Benjamin close to Bethlehem in Judea. R. Avner, *A Comparison of the Illustration of the Homily on the Nativity in the Manuscripts Mt. Athos, Esphigmenou Monastery Cod. 14, and Jerusalem, Greek Patriarchate Library, Taphou Cod. 14*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Hebrew University (Jerusalem, 1978), 27–28.

cation of the nation of Israel, allowing inter-marriage between members of different tribes and of different social-economic status.

CONCLUSIONS

The cult of the Theotokos at the Kathisma evidently emerged from local veneration of Rachel as a mother and a successful intercessor that had been popular in the rural area north of Bethlehem. This conclusion relies on more than merely the similarities of the narratives (Gn 31.16–20; *Protoevangelium* 17–18) and the imageries of Mary and Rachel as mothers and intercessors. Rachel was presented in both Christian and Jewish exegesis as a weeping mother. However, while in Judaism she is a mighty interceding ancestor to whom God listens, in Christianity she is a helpless mother, bereft of hope, who predicts the death of her sons. The local Christian community, or the official Church of Jerusalem, established the feast of the Theotokos in the Kathisma according to the date of the great Jewish celebration on the 15th of Av, when there was much rejoicing, because for Jews, it commemorated the salvation of the tribe of Benjamin, the sons of Rachel and ensured its continuity. Ta'anit 4.8 indicates that this feast was a popular feast and a happy annual event. The feast may have been accepted by the ecclesiastic establishment of Jerusalem only after the decree of Mary as Theotokos in Ephesus (431 CE). The fact that neither Hesychios nor Chrysippos relates the specific stories mentioned in the *Protoevangelium*, which hallowed the site of the Kathisma seems to indicate a gap between the popular devotion of the mother-intercessor on the road to Bethlehem by the local lay population, who embraced the (oral?) legends of the *Protoevangelium*⁴⁶ and probably later, by the official doctors of the Church in Jerusalem.

Pauline Allen pointed out at the difficulty that she met in her studies on the Marian feasts, which were introduced in the sixth and seventh centuries, because they 'were often region-specific'.⁴⁷ Furthermore, Allen cites Averil Cameron that: '[a]ny history of the cult of the Virgin would have to allow for multiple developments and a high degree of social and regional variety.'⁴⁸ Indeed, the case study of the Kathisma is a specific instance confined to the small area near Jerusalem where Jewish heritage still had an impact on local customs of the local Christian community during the fifth century CE and on the calendar of the early Church of Jerusalem.

⁴⁶ Elliott, *The Apocryphal*, 49–50.

⁴⁷ Allen, 'Portrayals of Mary', 71.

⁴⁸ Allen, 'Portrayals of Mary', 85 and n. 99 citing A. Cameron, 'Introduction', in: M. Vassilaki, ed., *Images of the Mother of God: Perceptions of the Theotokos in Byzantium* (Aldershot, 2005), xxix.