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PRESENTATION OF JESUS IN THE TEMPLE AND THE SACRIFICE OFFERED BY MARY AND JOSEPH (LUKE 2.22–24) REMEMBERED IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Anni Maria Laato

The presentation of Jesus in the Temple is the theme of one of the oldest feasts of the Church. In different times and churches, it has been celebrated under various names, such as the “Presentation of the Lord,” the “Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” “Meeting” (Gr. ὑπαπαντή, Lat. *occursum*), or “Candlemas,” each name emphasising different aspects of the feast.¹ Today the date of this feast is dependent on the date of Christmas; in most churches it is celebrated forty days after December 25, that is, on February 2. In the Early Church, however, before the separation of Christmas and Epiphany, the date was set at forty days after Epiphany, on February 13 or 14. The earliest description of the liturgical celebration of this feast is found in Egeria’s *Itinerarium*, which tells us that it was a joyous feast.² When writing about the liturgical celebration, Egeria does not specifically name the Gospel reading for this day but describes it so fully that it can be identified as Luke 2.21–38.³

In this contribution, I will explore how one of the details in this Gospel reading, namely the sacrifice offered by Mary and Joseph (Luke 2.22–24), was understood by the early participants at these celebrations.⁴ Because the development of the feast and later interpretations of its Gospel reading are already well presented in the scholarly literature,⁵ I will focus on Ege-

¹ The original feast in Jerusalem had nothing to do with candles; although in Egeria’s times candles were lit at every *lucernarium* as well as whenever needed for practical reasons (see, for instance, *Itinerarium* 36.2; 43.7). The first witness for a procession with candles on this day is Hikelia, a fifth-century woman. Hikelia, as well as the origins of the feast, are thoroughly discussed by Heinzgerd Brakmann, “H ὑπαπαντή τοῦ Κυρίου: Christi Lichtmess im frühchristlichen Jerusalem,” in *Crossroad of Cultures: Studies in Liturgy and Patristics in Honor of Gabriele Winkler* (ed. Hans-Jürgen Feulner, Elena Velkovska, and Robert F. Taft; Orientalia Christiana Analecta CCLX; Pontificio Istituto Orientale: Roma 2000), 151–172.

² *Égérie: Journal de voyage (Itinéraire)*, introduction, texte critique, traduction, notes, index et cates par Pierre Maraval (Sources Chrétiennes 296; Paris: Cerf, 1982; reissued with additions and corrections, 1997, 2002).

³ This is confirmed by its use in the Armenian Lectionary. See below in this article.

⁴ I have identified the central texts with the help of *Biblia Patristica*.

⁵ Brakmann, “Christi Lichtmess,” 158–172; Nicholas Denysenko, “The Hypapante Feast in Fourth to Eight Century Jerusalem,” *Studia Liturgica* 37 (2007): 73–97; Kenneth Stevenson, “The Origins and Development of Candlemas. A Struggle for identity and Coherence,” in *Ephemerides Liturgicae* 102 (1988) 316–346; Paul F. Bradshaw

ria's text, and some of the homilies by her contemporaries or earlier writers, as well as biblical commentaries where Luke 2.22–24, or parts of it, are quoted or alluded to. These are, in particular, Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catecheses* and Jerome's translation of Origen's *Homilies on Luke*. I will also use some additional material from authors both earlier to and contemporary with Egeria.⁶

1. The Gospel reading

In the New Testament, the story of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple is depicted only in the Gospel of Luke.⁷ The passage is merely a few lines long, but it contains many important details upon which the patristic writers have commented:

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." (NRSV)

The verse prior to this passage, v. 21, mentions the circumcision of Jesus in Bethlehem and the announcement of his name by the angel. After vv. 22–24, the story of the meeting of Jesus, Simeon and Anna, including the Song of Simeon, *Nunc dimittis*, follows. Verses 39–40 return to the topic of Mary and Joseph doing what was required by the Law:

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him. (NRSV)

Bart Koet has noted that it is significant that Luke—who often is regarded

and Maxwell Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Alcuin Club Collections LXXXVI; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 211.

⁶ For later Hypapante-homilies in Jerusalem, see Nicholas Denysenko, "The Hypapante Feast," who has focussed on Armenian and Georgian Lectionaries as well as the homilies on Hypapante by Hesychius of Jerusalem (d. 451), and Brakmann, "Christi Lichtmess," who has looked at the homilies up to Sophronios of Jerusalem (634–638/9).

⁷ For a broader context of this passage in Luke, see Bart J. Koet, "Purity and Impurity of the Body in Luke-Acts," in *Dreams and Scripture in Luke-Acts: Collected Essays* (ed. Bart J. Koet; CBET XLII; Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 81–95, and "Holy Place and Hannah's Prayer: a Comparison of LAB 50–51 and LUKE 2:22–39 a propos 1 Samuel 1–21," in Koet, *Dreams and Scripture*, 123–144.

as “a universal-minded Gentile Christian”—is the only New Testament author who tells the story of the circumcision of Jesus and the purification of Mary.⁸ Marcus Bockmuehl and Evangeline Kozitza claim that in many ways, in this passage Luke deeply connects the child Jesus with his native Judaism, and thus highlights his Jewish identity.⁹ Joseph Fitzmyer notes that Luke emphasises that the parents of Jesus obeyed the Law by repeating it three times (22a, 23a, 24a), and exemplifying which laws they fulfilled.¹⁰ Luke mentions two different laws, firstly, the purification of the mother forty days after the birth of a boy by sacrificing two turtledoves and pigeons (Leviticus 12.8), and secondly, the consecration of the firstborn to the Lord and the rite of the redeeming of the firstborn (Exodus 13.2, 12). He presents these laws with quotations from the Old Testament, both introduced with a quotation formula, “as it is written in the Law of the Lord” and “according to what is stated in the law of the Lord;” the story ends in v. 39 with a third reference to the law. Joseph Ratzinger notes that for Luke, it is essential to emphasise the Temple as the place of these events. He also points out that Luke speaks of Jesus’ presentation to God in the Temple that is not required in the Law, and says, “evidently Luke intends to say that instead of being “redeemed” and restored to his parents, this child was personally handed over to God in the Temple.”¹¹

An important topic in the interpretation of this passage is to understand the concepts of ritual purity and impurity in Judaism in the first century AD.¹² Impurity is not to be misunderstood as sin, but rather it is a ritual state in which one is not allowed to come to the sacred, for example to the Temple.¹³ Luke makes it clear that the purification laws were obeyed. One problem in this regard, both for ancient commentators and for modern exegetes, has been how to understand Luke’s expression “*their* purification,” as no purification was required for fathers or new-borns.¹⁴ Grammatically “their” refers to Mary and Joseph, but as this interpretation is not in line

⁸ Koet, “Purity and Impurity,” 92.

⁹ Markus Bockmuehl and Evangeline Kozitza, “The New Testament,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christmas*, online version (ed. Timothy Larsen; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020; DOI:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198831464.001.0001).

¹⁰ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX* (The Anchor Yale Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1981), 423-426.

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (New York: Image, 2012), 82.

¹² See Koet, “Purity and Impurity,” and Thomas Kazen, “Purification,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual* (ed. Risto Uro, Juliette J. Day, Rikard Roitto; Richard E. DeMaris; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), and Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels’ Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within the First-Century Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020).

¹³ Koet, “Purity and Impurity,” 85.

¹⁴ See Koet, “Purity and Impurity,” 92–93.

with the Mosaic law, there have been—from antiquity to modern times—different attempts to solve the problem. In some ancient manuscripts, *their* has been changed to *her*.¹⁵ In his Latin translation, the Vulgate, Jerome writes *eius* (*her* or *his*). According to some modern commentators, *their* can be explained as Luke not being fully aware of the precepts of the Mosaic law,¹⁶ while others think that the plural refers to Mary only, or to Mary and Jesus.¹⁷ As it is difficult to see how the same Luke who takes pains to show the Law-obedience of the parents of Jesus would not have known the contents of the purification-laws after birth, the best explanation perhaps is that “their” refers more broadly to the whole family’s journey to the Temple, including both the purification of Mary, and Joseph’s sacrificial payment of *pidyon ha-ben* (redemption of the firstborn).¹⁸ Egeria writes in the third person plural: Joseph and Mary brought Jesus into the Temple and made an offering (26).

The other liturgical readings for the feast from Egeria’s times are not witnessed, but both the Armenian lectionary, describing the liturgy in Jerusalem in the fifth century, and the Georgian lectionary, reflecting on the situation in the fifth to eight centuries, give Galatians 3.24–29 as the epistle reading. The Georgian lectionary gives Colossians 2.8–18 as the text for the vigil. Both lectionaries render Psalms 97(98) and 96(95) for the antiphon and the Psalm text respectively. The common theme of the texts is the salvation of the nations.¹⁹ The choice of the other readings may show how the Gospel reading was understood.

Despite the fact that Luke 2.22–24 was read aloud every year in Jerusalem during this important feast, there are only a few early Christian texts from that era which retell the story of the sacrifice, comment on or explain it.

2. Egeria, an early witness of the liturgical feast

Quite early on, as with many of the life-events of Jesus, the presentation

¹⁵ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 423–426.

¹⁶ So, for instance, Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, 423–426 and Ratzinger, *The Infancy Narratives*, 81.

¹⁷ For the discussion on this, see Koet, “Purity and Impurity,” 92.

¹⁸ See *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, New Revised Standard Version (ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Mac Zvi Brettler; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 102.

¹⁹ Denysenko, “The Hypapante Feast,” 78, 86, 90; Brakmann, “Christi Lichtmess,” 158. For Ps. 96 see Antti Laato, “The Origin of the Christian Interpolation in Psalm 96:10” and Anni Maria Laato, “‘The Lord Reigns from the Tree’; Psalm 96.10 in Early Christian Writings,” both articles in *David, Messianism, and Eschatology: Ambiguity in the Reception History of the Book of Psalms in Judaism and Christianity* (ed. Erkki Koskeniemi and David Willgren Davage; Studies in The Reception History of the Bible X; Turku: Network for the Reception History of the Bible/Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), 257–268, 269–281.

of Jesus in the Temple became a subject of liturgical celebration. In Egeria's *Itinerarium*, written most probably in the 380s, we have the earliest witness of how the yearly feast was celebrated. It is, however, obvious from the text that the feast is already an established one. Egeria lived in Jerusalem for three years, participated enthusiastically in the liturgical life there, and thus had a good overview of the events during the year. She does not give this feast any special name, but simply calls it "the fortieth day after Epiphany." She states that this celebration was conducted with the "greatest honour" (*summo honore*) and "with greatest rejoicing" (*cum summa laetitia*). Anne McGowan and Paul Bradshaw translate this passage (*Itinerarium Egeriae* 26) as follows:

*The fortieth day after Epiphany is certainly celebrated here with the greatest honor. For on that day the procession (processio) is in the Anastasis and all assemble (procedunt) and everything is done in its order with the greatest rejoicing, as at Pascha. All the presbyters also preach and then the bishop, drawing on that passage in the gospel where on the fortieth day Joseph and Mary brought the Lord into the Temple and Simeon and Anna the prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, saw him, and about their words that they spoke when they saw the Lord and about the offering that his parents made. And after everything that is customary has been celebrated in order, the sacrament is administered and then the dismissal is done.*²⁰

From Egeria's *Itinerarium* it appears that this feast was already an established tradition during her lifetime. Usually, only Epiphany, Encaenia and Easter are seen as major feasts in Jerusalem,²¹ but this feast must also have come close, because Egeria explains that everything is done "as at Pascha [Easter]," which was the greatest feast of the liturgical year.²² Unlike the other major feasts, this feast did not have an octave, but otherwise the celebration must have had something in common with them.²³ McGowan and

²⁰ Anne McGowan and Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria: A New Translation of the Itinerarium Egeriae with Introduction and Commentary* (Alcuin Club Collections XCIII; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2018), 159–160.

²¹ See Juliette J. Day, "Ritualizing Time," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Ritual*, online version (ed. Risto Uro, Juliette J. Day, Rikard Roitto, and Richard E. DeMaris; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018; DOI:0.1093/oxfordhb/9780198747871.013.33).

²² See Denysenko, "The Hypapante Feast," 76. Brakmann ("Christi Lichtmess," 157) interprets this not as describing the events, but attitude.

²³ In the following chapters, she describes in detail how the period before Easter, Easter day itself, and the days after it are celebrated with many liturgical events. In the previous chapter she stated that at Epiphany, the major churches are decorated with jewels, silk, gold and silver (25.8–9). The same kind of decorations and festivities were

Bradshaw discuss what Egeria might have meant when she said that this day was celebrated *summo honore* (“with the greatest honour”), and present two possibilities: either she wanted to contrast the degree of honour accorded to the festival in Jerusalem as compared with her own community, or she wanted to highlight a festival not known in her home region.²⁴ The Latin word *honor* has, however, many aspects. Wilkinson translates these words as “with special magnificence,”²⁵ emphasising the visible elements. I tend to agree with him because what follows is a description of a great and joyful festival.

The Christians in Jerusalem had the advantage of being able to celebrate many of Jesus’ life-events in real places.²⁶ For example, Egeria notes several times that the readings, hymns and prayers were well-chosen regarding the time *and place* (e.g. 47.5). The congregation gathered in different churches and places, or moved between them together in processions. In modern scholarship these kinds of services are called *stational services*.²⁷ The celebration of the presentation of Jesus, however, did not take place at the location where the Temple had stood, but from Egeria we know that the Christians assembled (*procedunt*)²⁸ at the Anastasis, the Church of Resurrection.

In the Armenian lectionary, however, which describes the liturgy in Jerusalem in the fifth century, the celebration is located at the Martyrium, the Constantinian basilica. Nicholas Denysenko has noted that even Egeria does not, strictly speaking, say that they celebrated in the Anastasis (but rather that they assembled there), which leaves the possibility that the liturgy took place in the Martyrium.²⁹ In either case, the choice of the Holy Sepulchre over the Temple area signals that the places of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ had already taken on the role that the Temple had had.³⁰ The area of the Temple was left unbuilt and the Christians did not worship there.³¹ However, even in Jerusalem, a stational service did

possibly used during this feast too.

²⁴ McGowan and Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage*, 159.

²⁵ John Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels to the Holy Land* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1999), 128.

²⁶ For the uniqueness of Jerusalem on this point, see Day, “Ritualizing Time,” 564.

²⁷ McGowan and Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage*, 70.

²⁸ McGowan and Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage*, 158, correctly note that Egeria consistently uses the word *procedere* for “assemble”; so also Brakmann, “Christi Lichtmess”, 154–155.

²⁹ Denysenko, “The Hypapante,” 79.

³⁰ For the Anastasis as the new Holy of Holies, see Wilkinson, *Egeria’s Travels*, 36–38; Eusebius, *Vit Const.* 3.28; Jerome, *Epist.* 46.5.

³¹ For the Christian interpretations of this fact, see Günter Stemberger, *Jews and Christians in the Holy Land: Palestine in the Fourth Century* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 201–206.

not demand that the place was exactly historically correct.

The Gospel text of the day is described by Egeria as being “where on the fortieth day Joseph and Mary brought the Lord into the Temple and Simeon and Anna the prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, saw him, and about their words that they spoke when they saw the Lord and about the offering that his parents made.” This means that the Gospel reading was Luke 2.21–40.³² Egeria mentions that the bishop and the presbyters preached (*tractantes*) on the Gospel text, even about the offering that his parents made (*tractantes ... de oblatione ipsa, qua optulerunt parentes*). In Jerusalem at this time, it was the usual procedure on every Sunday for both presbyters and the bishop to preach (25.1). Finally, she reports that the Eucharist was celebrated (*aguntur sacramenta*), and the service ended with a formal dismissal (*fit missa*).

3. The virgin birth and true humanity: Cyril of Jerusalem and Tertullian of Carthage

Even if Egeria does give quite a lot of information about the celebration of the feast and highlights its magnificence, it is necessary to turn to homilies from her time and earlier, as well as biblical commentaries, to examine what was preached and how Luke 2.22–24 was understood. What then was preached on this important feast day?

The most obvious place to start is with Cyril of Jerusalem, who was contemporary with Egeria, and the bishop of Jerusalem (313–386). In his *Catechetical homilies*, he mentions Luke 2.22–24 only once, in *Cat.* 12.32. In this context he argues for the Christian teaching on the virgin birth (12.21–32), and against both those who claimed that Jesus was born of Joseph and Mary, and those docetics who taught that Jesus was not a real human being. In this argumentation, Cyril emphasised that Jesus is both the Son of God and the Son of David. Against the claims of both Jews and Greeks, he says that the virgin birth of Jesus was a miracle. The child was holy (Cyril quotes Luke 1.35), and the birth was “immaculate and undefiled,” because “where the Holy Spirit breathes, there all pollution is taken away.” Rhetorically, Cyril calls for many figures from Luke 2 to be witnesses to the holy and immaculate birth of Jesus: the manger, the angels, the Temple, “the pairs of turtle-doves, which were offered on his behalf” as well as Simeon and Anna. Cyril does not ask why the offering was needed; its function in this context is to be a witness for the true and immaculate birth of Jesus. It is noteworthy, however, that he says that the turtle-doves were offered on *his* behalf, whereas the Mosaic Law only deals with for whom they were to be offered, expressly for the mother’s

³² The Armenian lectionary from the fifth century informs that the texts for this day were Ps. 98, Gal. 3.27–29, Lk. 2.22–40. Denysenko, “The Hypapante,” 78.

purification. Thus, Cyril does link the offering with Jesus, but he does not deny the link with Mary.

At this point, we will make a short excursus to third-century Carthage. The virgin birth and the true humanity of Jesus were defended with help of this Lucan passage long before Cyril. The earliest use of Luke 2.22–24 against docetic Christology comes from Africa. Tertullian (d. ca. 220) probably had no historically demonstrable effect on the thinking of the Jerusalemite Christians, but nevertheless, in a rhetorically effective way, he poses a thought similar to Cyril's. He uses this passage in his argumentation against Marcion who denied the true humanity and real birth of Christ. In *De carne Christi* 2.2 Tertullian eloquently retells the events in Luke 2, and claims that if Marcion wants to be consistent, he must deny everything told about the birth and childhood of Jesus, and reasons thus:

*“Away,” he says, “with Caesar’s enrolments, always a nuisance, and with inns with no room (Luke 2.1–14): away with dirty rags and hard mangers: let the angel host take the responsibility when it gives honour to its own God, and that by night: the shepherds had better watch over their flocks: no need for the wise men to be fetched along from afar: for all I care, they may keep their gold: also let Herod be a better man, lest Jeremiah have something to boast of (Mat 2.1–18); and let not the Child be circumcised, lest he feel pain, nor brought to the temple, lest he burden his parents with the expense of an offering, nor put into the hands of Simeon, lest he make the old man sorry because he is soon to die: also let that old woman hold her tongue, lest she put the evil eye upon the boy.” (Luke 2.21–38) (De carne Christi 2)*³³

Tertullian insisted that both the prophets and the apostles teach the true humanity of Jesus; Marcion, rejecting the nativity of Jesus, has no proofs for his views. He described human pregnancy and birth in a very physical way in order to show that Christ really became human in order to redeem human beings, and asked Marcion: “In what way were you born yourself?” In ch. 5, Tertullian famously describes the Christian teaching: this is foolish and absurd, but therefore just credible (*carn.* 5). Like Cyril after him, Tertullian connects the offering first of all with Jesus, not Mary, when he says, “lest he burden his parents with the expense of an offering.” Later in the same treatise, Tertullian explains Isaiah 7.14, and interprets the law of purification after childbirth (Exodus 13.2, 12–13) in connection with the virgin birth. Being holy already in his virgin mother’s womb,

³³ Transl. E. Evans, *Q. Septimii Florentis Tertulliani De carne Christi liber: Tertullian’s treatise On the Incarnation. The text edited, with an introduction, translation and commentary* (London: S.P.C.K., 1956).

Jesus fulfilled this law about opening the womb.
Everything male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord
(Luke 2.34).

*Who is truly holy, except that holy Son of God? Who in a strict sense has opened a womb, except him who opened this that was shut? For all other women marriage opens it. Consequently, hers was the more truly opened in that it was the more shut. (carn. 23.4)*³⁴

Tertullian's view on Jesus and the law can be summarised in what he says about circumcision, the Sabbath and offerings in the Old Testament in *Adversus Iudaeos* 1–6: “they were signs which after Christ must be understood spiritually.” He tells his audience that these could not have ceased, “unless He had come who was constantly announced” (*Adv. Iud.* 6). Jesus obeyed the Law and fulfilled it, but after him, Christians no longer needed to follow its precepts.

4. A more thorough explanation: Origen

Jerome translated Origen's *Homilies on Luke* in 389/390, shortly after Egeria's visit to the Holy Land.³⁵ In his introduction to this translation, he refers to some “bad” commentaries on Luke, which Paula and Eustochium had read (he is referring to Ambrose's commentary on Luke³⁶), and justifies translating Origen with the need for a better commentary. Only fragments of the original Greek are preserved,³⁷ but Jerome's translation is

³⁴ Trans. Evans, *On the Incarnation*.

³⁵ Origene, *Homelies sur saint Luc* (SC LXXXVII; Paris 1962). English Translation: Joseph T. Lienhard, ed. and trans., *Homilies on Luke; Fragments on Luke* (ed. Henri Crouzel, F. Fournier, and P. Perichon; FC XCIV; Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1996). English Translation: Joseph T. Lienhard, ed. and trans., *Homilies on Luke; Fragments on Luke* (FC XCIV; Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1996). Origen's preface translated by W.H. Fremantle, “Preface to Translation of Origen on St. Luke,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian church*, Second Series, vol. VI (trans. by W.H. Fremantle, G. Lewis and W.G. Martley, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1893).

³⁶ Ambrose does not really say much about this particular text. He starts by stating that the old Law prefigures the future, and then interprets the Old Testament passages mentioned in Luke as prophecies that are fulfilled in Jesus, who is holy and immaculate. Ambrose used Greek sources extensively. Ambrosius, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam*, SC 45, 52 (ed. G. Tissot; Paris 1956, 1958).

³⁷ Crouzel, Fournier and Perichon, *Origene, Homelies sur Saint Luc*, 89. There is debate about the authenticity of precisely those passages we discuss in this paper, but it seems that the Latin text here is reliable. Kenneth Wilson, *Augustine's Conversion from Traditional Free Choice to 'non-Free Free Will': A Comprehensive Methodology* (Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum CXI; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018),

generally seen as faithful to Origen.³⁸

Origen (d. ca. 253) is the only writer before the time of Egeria whose more thorough explanation of Luke 2.22–24 is preserved. He used this passage several times in his *Homilies on Luke*, based on homilies preached in Caesarea sometime between 234 and 244, as well as in some comments in *Homilies on Leviticus*. These homilies were meant for ordinary Christians, and they offered a biblical interpretation for the building of the character of the Christians.

Homily 14 is an explanation of Luke 2.21–24. Origen starts by stating his main point: Christ had not sinned himself and thus did not need circumcision or purification for his own sake, but all that happened, happened for our sake (14.1). Like Cyril and Tertullian, Origen also used this passage to argue for the true humanity of Christ, for example in 14.4, he says that Jesus had taken on a human body for our salvation. However, he asks further questions. Why was Jesus circumcised? Did he need purification? Does true humanity involve being a sinner?

The circumcision of Jesus was not a problem for Origen. It had happened according to the Law, and after Christ, Christians had no need for a circumcision of the flesh. He argues that baptised Christians participate in Christ and so they are spiritually circumcised along with him. He argues this interpretation by means of two biblical passages: Romans 6.10 “But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him;” and Colossians 2.9–12, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”

The question of purification, however, needed more explanation. Origen asks several questions concerning it, and answers them thoroughly. Whose purification did Luke refer to? What kind of purification does he mean? When Jesus became a true human being, did he need purification? Origen begins by noting that Luke writes “their” purification, not “her” (14.3). That Mary needed purification after childbirth is clear for him, even if he

73.

³⁸ Jerome has not been completely faithful to the original text, but nonetheless the translator of this text in the series *Fathers of the Church*, Joseph T. Lienhard, says, “Contemporary scholarship has a high estimate of the accuracy of Jerome’s translation; it can be read with confidence that one is reading Origen himself, and not some other Origen whom it pleased Jerome to construct” (Joseph T. Lienhard, “Introduction,” in Origen, *Homilies on Luke — Fragments on Luke* [FC XCIV 94; Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996] xxxvi). John N.D. Kelly gives a similar estimation in *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 143–144.

does feel the need to add “because she is a human being,” and his expression “we say boldly (*audaciter*)” also hints that not everybody agreed with him.³⁹ However, he questions why the plural is used here. How can it be thought that both Mary and Jesus needed purification? Was Jesus polluted with some stain (*sorde pollutus*)?

Origen’s answer is based on two laws quoted in Luke 2.22–24. According to Exodus 13.2, 12–13, every male that opens the mother’s womb must be consecrated to the Lord, and according to Leviticus 12.6–8, a sacrifice must be made for purification of a woman after childbirth. “Stain” in connection with birth relates to ritual impurity after a birth. Origen explains “stain” in the light of three Old Testament passages (the following Latin translations are made by Jerome), Job 14.4–5 “none is free of filth” (*nemo mundus e sorde*), Isaiah 4.4 (LXX) “Then the Lord will wash away all the filth of the sons and daughters of Zion” (*lavabit Dominus sordem filiorum et filiarum Sion*), and Zechariah 3.3 “Jesus was clothed in your filth” (*Iesus erat indutum in vestribus sorditis*).⁴⁰ In the Septuagint, the Greek word used for stain in these passages is ῥυπος (or its derivatives), which relates either to filth more generally, or ritual impurity. Based on these passages, Origen clearly thought that ῥυπος/*sors* was something which belonged to all human beings, and by being born a real human being, Jesus took even that upon himself.

The difference between other human beings and Jesus, according to Origen, is that every other human being has their own *sors*, but Jesus was different in this regard. Born from a virgin, he was holy, but he voluntarily took upon himself the stain: “Jesus was stained through his own will, because he had taken on a human body for our salvation” (14.4). Origen clearly thought that stain and sin were two different things. Jesus was without sin, but not without stain. Therefore, he concludes, it was fitting that these offerings for purification were made.

Origen subsequently turns to an often asked (as he says) question about infant baptism.⁴¹ For him the passage from Job, “no one is clean of stain, not even if his life upon the earth had lasted but a single day” (*nemo mundus est sorde, nec si unius quidem diei fuerit vita eius*) is the reason why even infants need baptism. It is to be noted that nowhere does Origen see infant baptism as motivated by “sin,” but rather by the “stains of sin.”⁴² These stains, anyhow, “must be washed away through water and the Spirit” (*Homily on Romans 5.9*).

³⁹ *Audaciter diceremus Mariam, quae homo erat, purgationem indiguisse post partum* (14.3).

⁴⁰ Origen uses an LXX-version that has “Jesus” instead of “Joshua.”

⁴¹ For Origen’s view on infant baptism, see his *Homily on Romans 5.9* and *Homily on Leviticus 8.3*.

⁴² Wilson, “Augustine’s Conversion,” 73.

Origen's claim that Jesus took human stain upon himself in his earthly body and thus needed purification ("Jesus, in the economy of the flesh, was purified by an offering" 14.6), is an unusual thought in early Christianity. John Kelly therefore comments that it is astonishing that Jerome, who did not usually hesitate to correct dubious doctrinal statements when translating other people's texts, left Origen's views on the need for Mary and Jesus' purification without comment.⁴³ Perhaps, however, it is rather that Jerome did not correct Origen because he understood his point: *sors* does not mean *peccatum*, but rather simply something that belongs to every human being and it was that which Jesus took upon himself for the sake of humanity.

Others, for example Gregory Nazianzen, contemporary with Egeria, emphasised that Jesus did not need purification.⁴⁴ He explained the thought that Jesus and Mary were purified in some way by differentiating between two kinds of purifications, the second of which was metaphorical. He applied, according to Christiaan Kappes, "this second kind of purification, bereft of sinful implications, to the human nature of Mary and Jesus equally, implying that their humanity enjoyed total holiness and purity without further qualification."⁴⁵ He shared Origen's thought that Christians participate in the life of Christ, and they are purified and circumcised in him (*In theophania*, 18).

Like Tertullian, Origen also used this passage to argue against Marcion, more specifically against Marcion's idea of two different gods. Origen refers to Galatians 4.4, "God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the Law," and states that it was the same God who gave the Law and sent his Son to be under it "to redeem those who were under the Law" (Galatians 4.5). Mary and Jesus fulfilled scriptural commands (Exodus 13.2 and 34.23).⁴⁶ Based on the same text Origen subsequently comes to the same question dealt with by Tertullian and Cyril of Jerusalem, namely the virgin birth. He tries to explain the words as to how Jesus "opened his mother's womb" (Exodus 13.2) at his birth, by comparing it with the birth of a worm: all others need a mother and a father, but not a worm, which reproduces itself without a father.⁴⁷

Origen explains the birds that were offered according to the Law: a pair

⁴³ Kelly, *Jerome*, 143.

⁴⁴ Gregory Nazianzen, *In theophania* (PG 36.325); *De testamentis et adventu Christi* (PG 37.462).

⁴⁵ Christiaan Kappes, "The Doctrine of the Theotokos in Gregorios Palamas," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, online version (ed. Chris Maunder; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019; DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198792550.001.0001).

⁴⁶ As mentioned before, the Armenian lectionary that describes the liturgy in Jerusalem in the fifth century, gives Gal. 3.24–29 as the epistle reading for this feast.

⁴⁷ The same idea is found even in Augustine (*ep.* 140.8.21).

of turtledoves and two young pigeons. This is the only text from this period where I have found a discussion about the birds; obviously they were not of great interest to the Fathers. Origen, however, says in a wonderful way that he “praises and extolls” these birds, and calls them happy (*beati*) because they were offered on the altar “for our Lord and Saviour” (14.9). First, it is to be noted that even Origen says that the birds were offered for Jesus, even if, according to the Law, this sacrifice was offered for the purification of the mother. Elsewhere this idea is confirmed when he says that it was good to specifically appoint doves for the purification offering for an infant (*sic!*) who had just come into this world (*Comm. Cant.* 3.1). Secondly, he gives a spiritual interpretation for the birds. He thinks that they were not usual birds that fly in the sky, but rather that they were of special kind. As at the baptism of Jesus, when the Holy Spirit came down in the form of (*in specie*) a dove, so now in the Temple “something divine and more majestic than human mind” appeared in the form of a pigeon and a dove. Origen concludes that in this way, Jesus exchanged old offerings for new ones (14.10). This thought is compatible with his explanation of the Song of Songs, where he gives a spiritual interpretation to turtledoves in Canticles 1.15 “Thine eyes are like doves.” The dove is an emblem of the Holy Spirit, and refers to the idea that the bride (the Church) understands the Scripture spiritually.

5. Conclusions

In fourth-century Jerusalem the feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple belonged to the central liturgical feasts. Egeria states that it was celebrated with the greatest joy, and that the Gospel reading was explained in multiple homilies. In order to understand how the early theologians understood the purification and the sacrifice mentioned in Luke 2.22–24, and how they explained it to their audiences, we have looked at some early Christian interpretations of these verses. In particular, the interpreters met two challenges: why, in the first place, was the purification needed, and what should Christians think of the Law-obedience manifested by this particular detail?

Common to all the authors we have studied, is the interpretation of the sacrifice as a proof of Jesus’ true humanity. Against the docetists, such as Marcion, it was stressed that Jesus was born as a real human being. Common too was the emphasis that Jesus was circumcised and purified not for his own sake, but for the redemption of human beings. Most authors stressed the holiness of Jesus and Mary, but Origen had his own views on this: because Mary was a human being, she needed purification after birth, and Jesus needed it because he had voluntarily taken the stain of humanity upon himself.

In early Christian literature, many authors have commented on the purpose

and continuing validity of the precepts in the Mosaic Law; in this study only one detail of this complex question has been discussed. In short, it can be said that against the views of Marcion and others who rejected the Old Testament, the orthodox theologians argued for the positive functions of the Mosaic Law until Christ, and in certain ways even after him, too. In line with this principle, those theologians who commented on the purification and sacrifice at all, either depicted it as a matter of fact or gave it a positive meaning. For Tertullian and Cyril of Jerusalem, it manifests the true human birth of Christ. Origen interpreted it more broadly in the context of his Christology and soteriology: Christ fulfilled the Law. For him, the details of the events in the Temple were spiritual: the birds were symbols of the Holy Spirit. Both the epistle texts of the feast day express similar thoughts: Christian freedom from the law, and the idea that the baptised participate in Christ and are united with him through a spiritual circumcision.

Luke presents Jesus and his parents as Jews obeying the Law of Moses. In homilies and commentaries, it was explained that Jesus' fulfilling of the Law changed everything: Christians no longer needed to obey the precepts of the ritual Law. Egeria does not comment on the Jewish background of the events other than mentioning the contents of the Gospel reading and that the celebration took place in the Holy Sepulchre.

Origen, as well as Tertullian and Cyril of Jerusalem, preached and wrote about the Mosaic Law in a context where they had to take two kinds of challenges into account.⁴⁸ On the one hand, the 'heretic,' that is dualistic renditions of Christianity (such as Marcionism and Gnosticism), challenged the orthodox view that identified the Creator God with the Father of Jesus Christ, and denied the true human birth of Christ. On the other hand, the Jewish people continued to obey the Law and denied the divinity of Christ. Origen's answer was that the Law in the Old Testament was to be regarded as something positive, and was to be obeyed until Christ, the One who fulfilled it completely, came.⁴⁹

After Egeria's times, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord, became more established and spread into the West too. It has always been both a Christological and a Mariological feast, though with different emphases in different times. The focus in the homilies shifted towards Christ as the light of the nations,⁵⁰ and the details concerning the purification and sacrifice do not often occur in them. When they do, the basic models in explaining the text to Christian audiences as presented in this contribution

⁴⁸ For differing views on the Mosaic Law, see Antti Laato (Ed.), *The Challenge of the Mosaic Torah in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Studies on the Children of Abraham VII; Leiden: Brill, 2020).

⁴⁹ Cf. Origen, *Comm. Rom.* 6.7.11.

⁵⁰ Brakmann, "Christi Lichtmess," 171–172.

remain. For example, Hesychius of Jerusalem (d. 451) states in his two homilies on Hypapante, that neither Mary nor Jesus needed purification, but it was done according to the Law, for our sake (*De hypapante* 1.2:25–27). Denysenko summarises Hesychius’ view as the Church needing purification and not the characters of the Gospel reading.⁵¹ The tension between the teaching on the purity of Mary (and Jesus) and the celebration of the purification did not, however, go unnoticed, it was, for example, evident in later debates between Christians and Jews.⁵²

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⁵¹ Denysenko, “The Hypapante Feast,” 82.

⁵² There are no Jewish comments on this particular text from Egeria’s times, but some do exist from the medieval era. The standard Christian view in medieval times was that Mary did not need purification because she was ritually pure. Instead, Mary fulfilled this ritual of her own volition out of humility. Mary’s purification at the Temple had a spiritual, not carnal, meaning. This view was criticised by the Jewish polemicists, who claimed that Jesus had a normal birth and childhood, and the very feast itself proves that. See Irvén M. Resnick, “Odo of Tournai and the Dehumanization of Medieval Jews: A Reexamination,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 98 (2008): 471–484, esp. 473–475.

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