

The Akathist Hymn and Mary Theotokos

The Akathist’s presentation of Mary is the acme of adulation of the Θεοτόκος (*Theotokos*, Mother of God).¹ In its integration of established ritual, theology, and scripture, this hymn is firmly rooted in Byzantine Christianity. Furthermore, the Akathist exemplifies the “cult of the Virgin Mary” that developed as the religion grew from a small Jewish sect to a power backed by a mighty empire. Yet this hymn utilizes devices that work at all levels: within the literary text, between the hymn and its environment, and in the wider historical context of the Akathist. Specifically, the *χαίρετισμοί* (*chairetismoi*, salutations) emphasize the significance of Mary as a temporal conduit for the spiritual realm. Simultaneously, these appeals to Mary’s own powers – and the Akathist’s association with the liberation of Constantinople – depict a Virgin far more potent than any of the Gospels suggest. I argue that, by incorporating all of the above, the Akathist creates a prism through which the entire creative order – from the story of Jesus to the pressing issues of the day – can be reimagined.

Background

The κοντάκιον (*kontakion*, a type of hymn) was first sung “ἀκάθιστον”² – *akathiston* (standing) lent its name to the hymn itself (Wellesz 1956, 143) – on 7 August 626 (Trypanis 1968, 20).³ In this first performance, the Akathist was complemented by the second προοίμιον (*prooemium*, preamble), Τῆ ὑπερμάχῳ στρατηγῷ. This short “prelude to the story of Incarnation” (Wellesz 1956,

¹ All translations from the Greek are my own.

² In discussing the term, Wellesz (1956, 152) quotes the *Συναξάριον* (*Synaxarium*), an official compilation of hagiographies.

³ This date is a *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the Akathist, a date which remains uncertain.

147) still accompanies the hymn in Greek Orthodox liturgy during Lent (Καρακοβούνης 2016). Indeed, this prooemium – written after “the ‘miraculous’ salvation of Constantinople at the time of the siege of the Avars, Persians and Slavs in 626” (Trypanis 1968, 19) – is the best-known section of the hymn today to scholars and laity alike. Most agree that Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople wrote the prooemium in reaction to the siege; in fact, “all three” contemporary accounts of the siege in 626 “credit the Virgin Mary with the city’s salvation” (Mango 2000). Conversely, authorship of the hymn itself is much less certain. Trypanis (1968, 19) lists half a dozen proposals by modern writers,⁴ but scholars mostly favor either Romanos the Meoldist or an anonymous figure as the author of the Akathist. Divisions remain on this issue,⁵ but the most recent scholarship asserts that the hymn definitively pre-dates Romanos and is therefore of anonymous origin.⁶

No matter its authorship, I maintain – in agreement with Cameron (2000, 13) – that the Akathist belongs in the same context as the kontakia of Romanos. The kontakion in question consists of twenty-four strophes, “the initial letters of which form an alphabetic acrostic” (Trypanis 1968, 2). The author of the hymn deliberately deploys literary devices such as rhyme, stress-based meter, and repetition. These elements of the Akathist – characteristics shared by all kontakia – were remarkably innovative. For instance, many of the aforementioned devices were borrowed from Syriac poetry that was just entering Greek churches at the time (Limberis 1994, 91). I argue that this creation of new narrative forms also shaped novel modes of interpretation. For example, the rhetorical use of paradox and paronomasia resembles a concept that Keats would later call

⁴ “Modern scholars have attributed it to authors living as many as five centuries apart: to Apollonius of Laodicea (4th c.), Romanos the Melodist (6th c.), the Patriarch Sergius (7th c.), Georgios Pisides (7th c.), Georgios Sikeliotis (7th-8th cc.), the Patriarch Germanos I (8th c.), the Patriarch Photius (9th c.) and others.”

⁵ Limberis (1994, 89) says the Akathist is “without a doubt, anonymous” while Schork (1995, 11) asserts that “there is good reason to believe that this masterpiece of hymnography was composed by Romanos.”

⁶ “Once attributed to Romanos, it is now thought to pre-date him, probably from the time of Proclus.” (McGuckin 2008, 650)

“negative capability.” This term denotes the pursuit of beauty and contemplation despite intellectual confusion and the seeming impotency of reason.⁷ Specifically, the Akathist hails the manifestations of inconceivable power and beauty: the attributes of the Virgin that defy reason. This “Mariolatry” – as Protestants would later disparagingly term the adoration of the Theotokos – is stimulated by the chairetismoι despite the intellectual confusion that the story of Jesus provoked.

Typology, Ritual, and Embodiment

Besides the Akathist’s literary elements that cleave to the text – rhyme, meter, acrostic, repetition, paradox – the kontakion also uses devices that interweave the hymn and its context. One of the most significant examples is typology. This mode of interpretation diverges from allegory and exegesis in its focus on broad connections rather than deep examination. By connecting a whole constellation of history, myth, and interpretation, typology – the identification of patterns – delineates identity among a religious community. The chairetismoι themselves constitute the most significant typology. Within the Akathist, the repetition of χαῖρε (*chaire*, “hail” or “rejoice”) brings coherence to a text that could be opaque and heterogeneous, especially when only heard in worship and never read. The chairetismoι also place this hymn within a long salutatory tradition stretching to the annunciation as described in Luke 1:28. In this verse, Gabriel hails Mary with “χαῖρε, κεχαριτωμένη, ὁ κύριος μετὰ σοῦ” (Nestle et al. 2013, 179) (rejoice, favored one whom the Lord is with). By associating a canonical gospel, a traditional literary form, and the hymn in question, the Akathist is firmly placed in a Christian context. Typology also works to integrate extrinsic traditions into a single community’s sacred stories. For example, Mary is addressed as “τῶν

⁷ In December 1817, Keats wrote that Negative Capability “is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” (“Selections from Keats’s Letters” 2009)

δακρύων τῆς Εὔας ἢ λύτρωσις” (Trypanis 1971, 374) (the deliverance of Eve’s tears), “κλιμαξ ἐπουράνιε, ἧ κατέβη ὁ θεός” (376) (ladder from heaven that God descends), and “ὄσμη τῆς Χριστοῦ εὐωδίας” (387) (essence of Christ’s scent). Referencing Genesis 3:16, 28:12, and 8:21 respectively, these chairetismoi subtly integrate an essentially foreign source – a Semitic cosmogony – into a Hellenic Christian framework. Typology is put to work within the hymn, within a Christian context, and in relation to other traditions, but always with a view towards integration and interpretation in the hegemonic religious (and cultural) paradigms of the community.

Ritual and embodiment also connect the Akathist to its context. In the literary form of chairetismoi, the hymnist “opens up the biblical narrative” (Krueger 2003, 44) and interpolates a list of Mary’s attributes preceded by the word *χαῖρε* (*chaire*). In the Akathist’s chairetismoi, the Theotokos is repeatedly invoked as an embodiment of the spiritual, a temporal conduit for the divine. She is the “γέφυρα μετάγουσα τοὺς ἐκ γῆς πρὸς οὐρανόν” (Trypanis 1971, 376) (bridge that bears those of earth to heaven), the “παραδείσου θυρῶν ἀνοικτήριον” (378) (opener of the gates of paradise), and the “κλεις τῆς Χριστοῦ βασιλείας” (384) (key to the kingdom of Christ). In my view, these chairetismoi highlight the transportive power of Mary for the faithful. In Byzantine worship, priests often admonished the congregation “to note the smells, sounds, and spaces that attended their Great Stories” (Frank 2006, 59), thus emphasizing contemplation through embodiment. Byzantine liturgy attended all the senses, from incense wafting through the air to twinkling candlelight that illuminated churches and cathedrals. As the faithful listened to the Akathist – in melismatic chant embellished with improvised ornamentation – they also felt the visceral strain of standing for nearly four hours (Wellesz 1956, 144). Through this form of contemplation, the faithful “inhabited” the story of Mary and heeded its implications both temporal and spiritual.

This type of ritual is particularly significant in the theological context of the time. In 431, the Council of Ephesus declared Mary to be the Theotokos (Mother of God). This title is by now so familiar that it is only striking when juxtaposed with Mary's rejected epithet: Christotokos (Mother of Christ). By choosing "Theotokos," the Council of Ephesus made a bold connection between the human – the tangible, quotidian experience of motherhood – and the divine. This connection uniquely positions the Theotokos to negotiate the divine economy – in other words, God's relation with his creative order. In its emphasis on the theme of embodiment, the Akathist interweaves two strands of Byzantine thought and practice: on the one hand the Mariological and Christological disputes that dominated theology at the time, and on the other the rich sensory environment of everyday Byzantine ritual that "not only stretched stories but rendered them permeable, capable of absorbing the Byzantine worshipper" (Frank 2006, 60). The chairetismoi of the Akathist are fundamentally about the connection between ritual and theology, practice and thought, and the temporal and the spiritual, all through fervent appeal to the greatest of mediators and intercessors: Mary Theotokos. Furthermore, I argue that the paradigm presented by the Akathist decisively shaped the reception of Jesus' story and therefore the understanding of the entire divine economy.

The Imperial Mary

The Akathist clearly integrates established ritual, theology, and scripture. But it also presents a novel conception of the Theotokos: an imperial Mary whose great agency transcends the boundaries of gender and hierarchy in the Byzantine Empire. Indeed, in this conception Mary's powers even "encroach on those of the Trinity" (Limberis 1994, 90). It is this puissance that makes the Akathist an emblem apropos for the Christians of Constantinople and a powerful hymn of devotion and yearning for the millions who chant the chairetismoi every Lent. Under the reign of

Justinian, the Byzantine Empire – and its capital Constantinople – endured pandemics, political difficulties, and economic problems (Cameron 1978, 104). In this context, the Theotokos was “a symbol perfectly suited – through the idea of mediation – to belief in a total union of body and spirit, the ultimate possible guarantee of safety and protection” (Cameron 1978, 108). This extraordinarily powerful Mary is reflected in the diction of the Akathist. She is asked to “λύτρωσαι ... τοὺς συμβοῶντας” (deliver those who cry together) from “πάσης ῥῦσαι συμφορᾶς” (every evil and punishment) (Trypanis 1971, 389) as the intercessor through whom “ἐγυμνώθη ὁ Ἄιδης” (Hades was laid bare) and “ἐνεδύθημεν δόξαν” (we were clothed in glory) (379). Furthermore, the Akathist is “akin to imperial panegyrics” (Limberis 1994, 96) in its use of literary devices, including many of the same words: “τεῖχος” (wall), “ἀστέρα” (star), and “τροφέα” (nourishment). This Virgin, saluted by “august theological claims” (Limberis 1994, 90), is far removed from the unembellished – and rarely mentioned – Mary found in the Gospels. Instead, she has become a symbol worthy of a great – though suffering – empire.

Rather than depicting the canonical Mary, therefore, the Akathist’s chairetismoi both shaped and reflected the developing “cult of the Virgin.” This adulation of a potent Mary stretched beyond the textual to the iconographic, theological, and political spheres (Cameron 2000, 3). Figure 1 – a seventh-century encaustic icon from Saint Catherine’s Monastery in the Sinai Peninsula – illustrates the wide reach and formidable strength of the Theotokos. Mary is enthroned and robed in sumptuous colors, highlighting her imperial power – even in a monastery far from the center of Byzantine life. If the periphery held such displays of Mary’s significance, it is no surprise that the capital of the Byzantine Empire was the center of the “cult of the Virgin.” Indeed, by the ninth century Constantinople had even acquired the epithet “Theotokoupolis” (Mango 2000, 22). In other words, it became the city of the Mother of God – in no small part due to the influence of the



Figure 1

Akathist and the associations established by Sergius' prooemium. Considering the socioeconomic, cultural, and theological contexts, it is clear that the Akathist deliberately elevated the Theotokos to a status through which she could serve as the emblem for a great empire and its splendid capital.

Conclusion

In so doing, the Akathist created a prism through which the entire creative order can be reimagined. By drawing on sensory experience in liturgy, apposite theological disputes, and pressing temporal issues, the hymn was made timely and potent. Simultaneously, the adept utilization of literary devices creates a work both beautiful and gripping. However, the core of this hymn lies in its ingenious introduction of negative capability through the chairetismoi as a means of grappling

with the story of Jesus and, by extension, the entire creative order. The Akathist does not tackle theology and ritual head-on. Rather, it focuses on what every Christian can appreciate: beauty and power. Through contemplation of these aspects as manifested in the Theotokos, the worshipper can touch the ineffable: the power of God in shaping the whole divine economy.

The Akathist's integration of established ritual, theology, and scripture places it firmly within the sphere of Byzantine Christianity as the quintessence of the Byzantine Mary. However, the hymn transcends these trappings by elevating the Theotokos to a status whereby she can fulfill the spiritual – and practical – needs of the faithful from Constantinople to Istanbul. As the epitome of the literary genre of *chairetismoi*, the Akathist creates a paradigm with which to comprehend the entire creative order.

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