

The Iconography of the Eucharistic Christ in the Armenian Churches of New Julfa

by

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Introduction

Whereas in the Divine Liturgy the wine is changed into the Precious Blood of Christ, the iconography of the Eucharistic Christ portrays through several themes the changing of the Precious Blood of Christ into wine.

The iconographical themes of the Eucharistic Christ are largely based upon the Old and New Testament imagery and symbolism of the vine. The Old Testament prophets regarded the vine as the symbol of the True Israel. "The wine mourns, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh" (Isaiah 24:7). "Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?" (Jeremiah 2:21). "Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruits. The more his fruit increases the more altars he built" (Hosa 10:1). The New Testament writers saw in the vine a symbolic image of the Messiah, the fulfilment of the True Israel, and thus Jesus Christ claimed to be "the true Vine" (John 15:1). But also the Church, the Body of Christ and the New Israel, are seen as the vine which depends upon its life upon the vinedresser, the Heavenly Father.

The Early Church readily adopted this imagery and related it to its own situation, namely that of suffering due to imperial persecutions. Origen saw in the wine-press the symbol of the unity of the Church, where the suffering body of Jesus Christ is being offered, Whose blood is shed for the redemption of many. And Eusebius of Caesarea identified the wine-press with the altar, since both provide the eucharistic wine of the Saviour of the World. The martyrs are the grapes of the true vine, of Christ, which are crushed by the persecutions. St. Augustine said that he who is crushed as a grape is thus transformed into the life-giving wine. The Old Testament prophecy is hereby transferred to the Church: "I have trodden the wine-press alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath: their lifeblood is sprinkled upon my garments, and I have stained all my raiment" (Isaiah 63:3).

In the Middle Ages the mystical theology elaborated on this theme and

even represented Christ crucified on the vine, since the Tree of Life was identified with the vine. It was believed that the Tree of Life in Paradise was the vine that offered eternal life. According to the *Apocalypse of Abraham* the fruit on the Tree of Paradise was in the form of a grape (23:5), and in the *Apocalypse of Baruch* the vine in Paradise was lost in the Deluge, but rediscovered by Noah who planted it again (Gen. 9:20).

Probably the earliest iconographical representation of the Christian vine-mysticism is found in a 5th century wall-painting in the necropolis of al-Bagawat in al-Kharga Oasis in the Western Egyptian desert, which shows grapes and the monogram of Christ growing out of a vine, thus illustrating John 15:5¹.

A more common theme of the Eucharistic Christ is that of the Crucifixus, Whose blood flowing from His hands and His side is collected by several angels holding chalices in their hands. This theme, which can be traced in the Latin West to the Carolingian Era, becomes quite popular during the later Middle Ages. Well-known illustrations are the central part of the 15th century altar of the Church of St. Nicholas in Niederwildungen² and the marble-relief of the high-altar of St. Eustorgio in Milano³. One of the earliest examples of this theme in the Byzantine world is found in the 11th century Gospel codex gr. 74 of the Bibliothèque nationale⁴, while the earliest Armenian example of the angel symbolizing the Church and collecting the blood of the crucified Christ is in the famous 13th century Cilician Gospel (Erivan 7644) copied and illuminated for Prince Sembat⁵. An excellent modern Armenian illustration of this theme is the very large mosaic of the crucified Christ (1970) in the Armenian section of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. A similar thought is expressed in the 11th century mosaic of the Crucifixion in the Monastery of Daphne near Athens. Here the blood flowing from His hands and from His side is transformed into grapes. It is noteworthy, however, that this theme, otherwise so common, is omitted by the artists of the Armenian churches in New Julfa.

Among the paintings in the 17th century Armenian churches of New Julfa we can distinguish between three iconographical themes of the Eucharistic Christ. In the Church of St. Catherine the altar-painting shows "Christ treading Grapes". In the Cathedral of All Saviour, the Church of the Holy

¹ Dorothea Forstner, *Die Welt der Symbole*. Innsbruck 1967, p. 410. Also »Weinstock«, in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*. Freiburg 1972, vol. IV, p. 491.

² W. Medding, *Der Wildunger Altar des Meisters von Soest*. Bad Wildungen 1949.

³ C. Baroni, *Scultura gotica lombarda*. Milano 1944, p. 127.

⁴ Klaus Wessel, *Die Kreuzigung*. Recklinghausen 1966, p. 67.

⁵ L. A. Durnowo, *Armenische Miniaturen*. Köln 1960, p. 97.

Mother of God, and the Church of St. Stephen⁶ paintings of "Christ the Vine" adorn the north-wall of the chancel, while in the Church of Bethlehem "Christ in the Chalice" is shown on the north-wall of the chancel⁷. All these paintings are inspired by the mediaeval art of the Latin West, and were probably executed by Western artists who were in the service of the Safavid Court. Since all the five churches referred to in this study were constructed in the first half of the 17th century, the *terminus ante quem* is set by the date of the building of the churches.

Christ Treading Grapes

The painting of "Christ treading Grapes" in a wine-press adorns the eastern apse of the Church of St. Catherine (Surb Katarine), where it rests on the third and top step of the step-altar (Pl. 1). The church was built by Khodja Eliazar in 1072 (A.D. 1622/23) and is contemporary with the nunnery, which is situated on the north side of the church-yard.

The painting shows Christ clothed with a loincloth and upholding a cross. From His pierced hands, His side and His feet blood flows into the wine-press. The weight of the cross causes Him to bend forward. On His head He wears a crown of thorns, which is surrounded by a small nimbus. With His feet, which also show the marks of the Passion, He treads out the grapes in a large wine-press. Two angels, the left one clothed with a loincloth, the right one naked, hold to the *pes* and the *fistula* of a chalice and collect the blood-wine, which runs through an opening in the wine-press into the eucharistic vessel.

On the left, standing (partly) in the wine-press, is a beardless youth, probably the donor of the painting since he is shown without a nimbus. On the right we see the Holy Virgin with a nimbus and her hands folded. She stands at the side of the wine-press, and the upper portion of her is painted against a bright background, which may indicate some retouching at a later time. Four additional bearded persons are seen standing behind the youth on the left. The aged man with a white double-pointed beard and a nimbus in the upper right corner of the painting must be understood as representing God the Father. His hands rest on the horizontal beam of the wine-press. The central theme is flanked by two rows of six medallions showing six Apostles on either side and two angels on the top. The idea for

⁶ John Carswell, New Julfa. *The Armenian Churches and Other Buildings*. Oxford 1968, pl. xxxvii.

⁷ *Idem*, pl. xlvii.

this painting is evidently taken from the prophecy of Isaiah: "I have trodden the wine-press alone, and from the peoples no one was with me" (Isaiah 63:3). The Armenian text at the bottom of the painting reads: "This altar is in memory of Simon and his wife Nazlukhan and his late son Manuk (and?) Yeghiazar ... (?) made by Yeghisapet, daughter of Mahdesi, in the year 1180 (A.D. 1731) on April 24".

There is good reason to believe that the donors of the altar and the painting belonged to distinguished New Julfa families. Manuk is undoubtedly a relative of the 17th century Khodja Manuk, whose son Aghazar built the nunnery. According to Yovhaniaantz (1828-1871), the Yeghiazarians were among the leading people of the city, and the name of Mahdesi is mentioned on a tile in the Church of St. Sargis in New Julfa.

Christ the Vine

The theme of "Christ the Vine" is found in three Armenian churches in New Julfa, the Cathedral of All Saviour (Surb Amenaperkitch), the Church of the Holy Mother of God (Surb Astuatsatsin), and the Church of St. Stephen (Surb Stepannos). In all three instances the paintings are located on the north-wall of the chancel. Christ is clothed with a loincloth and is seated on a wooden L-shaped bench. His right leg is placed in front of His left leg. His right foot and His right hand clearly show the marks of His passion. Out of His right side wound grows a vine with grapes and vineleaves. The vine winds around a cross which stands behind the Christ. His head is surrounded by a nimbus. With both hands He presses out the grapes into a chalice.

The most famous and best known illustration of the theme of the vine growing out of the right side of Christ is found in the beautiful stained-glass window (1640) by Linard Gontier in the Cathedral of Troyes (Aube). Here the vine with its branches supporting the Twelve Apostles grows out of the side-wound of Christ, Who is being pressed by the wine-press. The wine-blood runs into a chalice⁸. The arrangement of the Apostles seated on the branches is very similar to the well-known Byzantine theme "Christ the Vine" which is the complementary theme to that of the "Tree of Jesse"⁹.

The painting in the Cathedral of All Saviour (94 × 111 cm.) shows Christ wearing the crown of thorns, He gazes upwards and with both hands He presses grapes into a chalice. The title on the cross is illegible (Pl. 2).

⁸ Kindness of Abbe Ledit of Troyes Cathedral (July 2, 1973).

⁹ Manolis Chadzidakis, *Icones de Saint-Georges des Grecs et de la Collection de l'Institut*. Venice 1962, pl. 71, no. 128.

In the painting in the Church of the Holy Mother of God (86 × 100 cm.) the crown of thorns and the superscription of the cross are omitted, and Christ faces the onlooker. The whole scene is set in a hilly landscape with a tree on either side of Christ (Pl. 3).

A deviation of this theme is found in the Church of St. Stephen. Again, Christ is shown seated on a wooden bench clothed with a loincloth. On His head He wears the crown of thorns and the title of the cross is written in Latin and in Armenian. A vine grows out of the right side wound of Christ and winds around the cross. With both hands He presses out the grapes into a large chalice which is placed on a small stool. To the left of Christ stands a bearded prelate wearing a mitre and a cope. In his right hand he holds a lance with which he pierces the right side of Christ, with his left hand he holds the branch growing out of the right side of the wound. Attached to his vestments are two scrolls with the following texts in Armenian: "The blood for the drinking of the sacrifice", and "the water for the sacrifice of the baptismal font". On his cope are embroidered the Armenian letters for S N, which may stand for Surb Nerses. We assume that this prelate is the 12th century saint Nerses Shnorhali. The size of this painting is 84 × 123 cm. (Pl. 4).

It is difficult to interpret this particular theme and I wonder the legitimacy of suggesting a symbolic representation of the Eucharistic Loaf in the Service of the Prothesis, being quite aware that the only Rite in which the Loaf is pierced is the Byzantine Rite, — and not the Armenian Rite!

Christ in the Chalice

The painting of "Christ in the Chalice" set in a disk (diameter 96 cm.) is found on the north-wall of the chancel of the Church of Bethlehem (Meydani Betghanem). It shows a bearded Christ with His eyes closed and His head inclined towards the right in an eucharistic chalice. His arms hang from His shoulders and are pressed to His naked body. His head is surrounded by a cross-nimbus (Pl. 5).

On first sight this theme appears related to the very common Byzantine representations of "Christ in the Chalice", as we find them in numerous 16th-18th century icons and embroideries. In most instances, however, the Byzantine models portray the Emmanuel Christ, beardless and clothed with a tunic, His hands raised for the blessing, as in the case of the 17th century "Christ in the Chalice" supported by two angels on an altar and flanked by two prelates on either side¹⁰. On the other hand, the "bearded

¹⁰ *Idem*, pl. 66, no. 140.

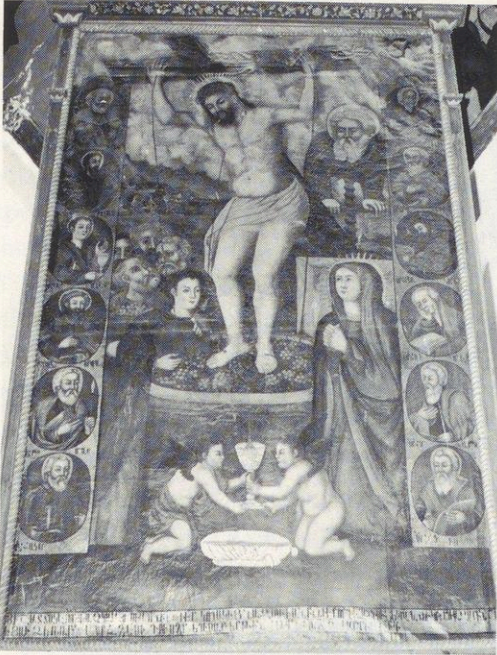


Plate 1:
Christ treading Grapes
Church of St. Catherine



Plate 2:
Christ the Vine
Cathedral of All Saviour

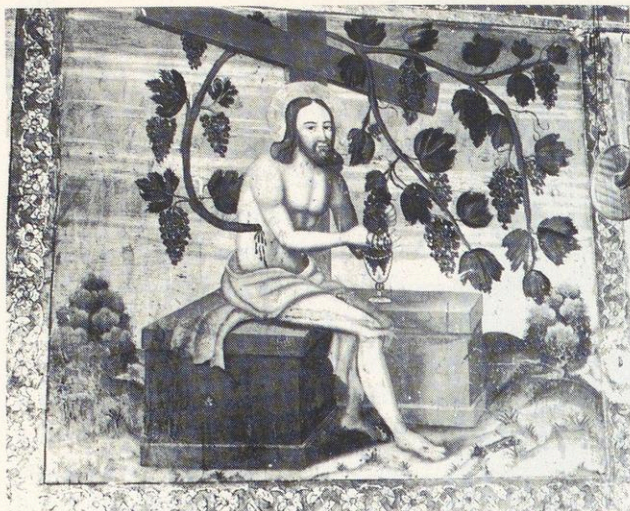


Plate 3:
Christ the Vine
Church of St. Mary

Plate 4:
Christ the Vine
Church of St. Stephen

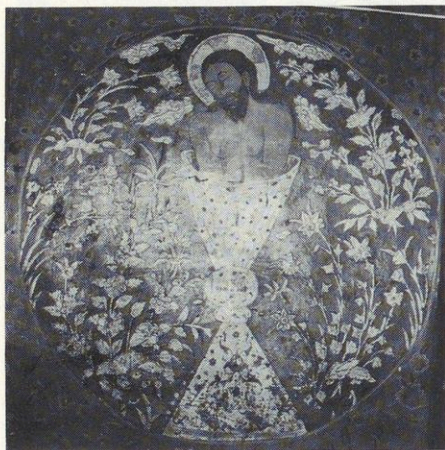
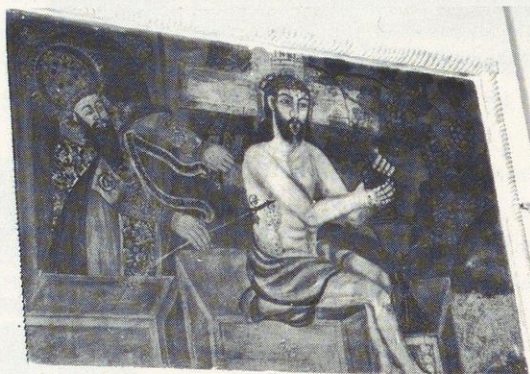


Plate 5:
Christ in the Chalice
Church of Bethlehem

Christ in the Chalice" appears also in Byzantine art, as illustrated by the 16th century icon of "Christ in the Chalice" by Michael Damaskinos. In this icon, Christ with His naked torso and a nimbus around His head invites with His arms the faithful to participate in the Eucharist. His eyes are open and He appears to be standing in the chalice. Two angels support the chalice on the altar, which is flanked by three hierarchs on either side¹¹. A 18th century altar-curtain embroidery portraying this theme, though with some alterations, is exhibited in the Byzantine Museum in Athens. Here the Christ standing in the chalice wears eucharistic vestments, His eyes are open and His hands are raised for the blessing.

The painting of "Christ in the Chalice" in the Church of Bethlehem follows more closely a Western model, which combines two iconographical themes, namely "Christ in the Chalice" and "Christ in the Tomb"¹². It is the Christ of the Passion, the crucified Saviour, Who offers Himself in the eucharistic meal. There can be little doubt that the posture of the bearded Christ with His inclined head and closed eyes and the naked torso is applied from the theme of the "Christ in the Tomb", which in Western art can be traced to the 13th century, in Byzantine art to the 12th century.

All three themes of the Eucharistic Christ clearly betray mediaeval Western iconographical influences, reflecting the eucharistic theology and piety of the Latin Church. The paintings should be assigned to the late 17th or early 18th century.

¹¹ *Idem*, pl. 32, no. 47.

¹² Heinz Skrobucha, *Merveilles des Icônes*. Paris 1969, pl. xxiii.