

Mary and the Temple

Dr Margaret Barker

WE must begin with some background. First, the significance of the shape of the temple. In theory—but not always precisely so in practice—the temple area was formed of two parts: one a square, the holy of holies, and then a double square, the great hall of the temple. They were separated by a curtain called the veil of the temple. The temple represented the creation. The holy of holies was the invisible creation, the state of God and the angels; the great hall represented the visible creation, the state of time and matter. This is well summed up in the words of the hymn: ‘Change and decay in all around I see, O thou who changest not, abide with me.’

The six days of creation described in Genesis 1 correspond to the six stages of erecting the tabernacle described in Exodus 40.16-33. Genesis 1 is Moses’ six-day vision of the creation that he saw on Sinai (Exodus 24.16), and this is what the LORD told him to replicate when he built the tabernacle. The English translations of Exodus 25.9 and 40 do not make this clear. Important for our topic today is that the holy of holies, beyond the veil, represented the beginning of creation, the state of God and the angels. Passing into the holy of holies was passing from earth to heaven, into the divine presence.

Second, something about the transmission of the text of the Hebrew scriptures. At some stage – we do not know exactly when this happened – a guild of ‘correcting scribes’ was set up, to remove or change, according to very strict rules, anything in the scriptures that was deemed offensive or better forgotten. Jewish scholars recognise these *tiqqune sopherim*, ‘restorations of the scribes’, so-called because the text could not possibly have meant what they saw before them, and so they ‘restored’ it. It still happens today, especially with Bible ‘translators’. Some of the ancient ‘corrections’ were made before the time of Jesus, and many were made after the beginning of Christianity. We shall see several in the course of this exploration, since many of the post-Christian corrections changed texts that were important to Christians, and formed part of their claim to have seen the scriptures fulfilled.

In the New Testament Mary appears three times in the temple: when she and Joseph took the infant Jesus to the temple and met Simeon and Anna; when Jesus was a boy and became separated from Mary and Joseph when they were returning after Passover; and when St John saw the woman clothed with the sun in the temple. 'God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen ... and a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun...' She gave birth to a boy child who was taken up to the throne of God (Revelation 11.19-12.5). This was Mary giving birth to her Son. The Lady in the temple has been identified in many ways, but she was originally the Holy Wisdom, one of the many names for the Lady of the Jerusalem temple. In the ancient faith of Jerusalem, she had been the mother of the Messiah, but was banished when king Josiah purged the temple in 623 BCE.

Today I shall show how the early Christians still knew about the Lady in the temple, and told the nativity story within that temple framework.

The *Infancy Gospel of James*, although it has never been included in the New Testament, is the source of the details in the annunciation ikon and in the nativity ikon – Mary spinning red wool when Gabriel spoke to her, the birth in a cave, the midwife bathing the Child, and so on. It was probably written about 150 CE. This gospel is attributed to James the son of Joseph by his first marriage, and it tells the story of Mary's birth and childhood. The earliest certain reference to *material* in this gospel is in the writings of Clement of Alexandria who died in 215 CE.¹

The story in this: as a three year-old child Mary was given to the temple, just as the infant Samuel had been given to the temple, and she lived there, fed by an angel. This probably meant she was fed by a priest, since temple priests were called angels. At the age of twelve she left the temple, and the priests found Joseph, a widower, to be her guardian. She had been trained as a temple weaver, and when a new veil was needed for the temple, Mary was one of the young women chosen to weave it. This is why the Annunciation ikon depicts her spinning red wool.

¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 7.16

There are many details in this gospel that are no longer clear to us, but those that can be recognised show that she was being described as the Lady Wisdom. Mary was placed in the temple as a child, a reference to Wisdom's claim 'In the holy tabernacle I ministered before him, and so I was established in Zion' (Ben Sira 24.10). When the priest received her into the temple, she danced and everyone loved her. This apparently trivial detail was significant because it showed that Mary was Wisdom as described in Proverbs 8.31: the one who rejoiced before the LORD and delighted him. We shall return to this enigmatic poem in Proverbs, which describes Wisdom beside the Creator as the world was made, but also on earth.

Later Mary helped to make a new veil for the temple. This is not impossible, as Herod began rebuilding the temple about 20 BCE, and Jesus was born in 7 or 6 BCE. The *Infancy Gospel of James* tells the story of the Annunciation in two episodes: first, the angel called to her while she was by the well; Mary was afraid and went home. Then, when she was spinning, the angel spoke to her again. Why should Mary be weaving the veil while she was pregnant?

The temple veil symbolised matter. It was woven from threads of white, blue, red and purple, representing the four elements: earth, air, fire and water. This special fabric was used in two places in the temple: as the veil, to hide the glory of God from human eyes; and as the vestment of the high priest which he wore when he was presiding in the outer part of the temple. The high priest represented the presence of the LORD in the temple (that is why he wore the Name on his forehead), and so when he was 'on earth' he was clothed in matter. Mary was weaving the new veil and thus the vestment for the great high priest: 'Veiled in flesh the godhead see; Hail the incarnate deity' (Charles Wesley).

Mary gave birth to Jesus in a cave. Joseph had left her there while he went to find a midwife. As he walked, according to some manuscripts of the *Infancy Gospel*, time stood still. Nothing moved. And then everything resumed its normal state. The timeless had entered time. When Joseph returned with a midwife, 'They stood by the cave, and there was a bright cloud overshadowing it. The cloud withdrew from the cave, and a light appeared there. Gradually the light diminished and the child appeared...'

In the story, the cave had the role of the holy of holies. You will recall that the woman clothed with the sun was seen with the ark of the covenant, that is, she was seen in the holy of holies. She gave birth in the holy of holies, and her Son was enthroned there.

In the Old Testament, when the glory came into the the holy of holies, there was a bright cloud overshadowing: there was the cloud and the glory that came to consecrate the tabernacle (Exodus 40.34); and the cloud and the glory came when Solomon consecrated the temple (1 Kings 8.10-11). Note that the cloud and the glory are distinct. In the story of the Exodus, the LORD travelled with his people *in* (not *as*) a pillar of cloud that was also a pillar of fire (Exodus 13.21). The prophet Ezekiel described the bright cloud as the vehicle for the glory of the LORD; he saw the chariot throne within the bright cloud, and the glory of the LORD upon the throne (Ezekiel 1). He saw the cloud and the glory leave the temple, and he saw them as they arrived in Babylon. The bright cloud enveloping the throne was well known: when Job described the creation he said: 'He covers the presence of the throne and spreads over it his cloud.' (Job 26.9, translating literally). 'The bright cloud' later became a title for Mary,² but in the temple it had been a title for Wisdom: 'I dwelt in high places, and my throne was in a pillar of cloud' (Ben Sira 24.4).

It seems that the bright cloud had also been a symbol for the mother of the temple priests. Here I must say something about a very sophisticated literary convention that characterised temple tradition, but is completely lost in translation. Temple writers – prophets, poets – used pairs of words that sounded similar but had very different meanings, and the point of their sayings was found in the two ways that the oracle or poem could be read or heard.

When the Third-Isaiah was condemning the corrupt priests of his time, he said: 'You draw near, sons of the sorceress,' (Isaiah 57.3). Now 'draw near' can be the technical term for making priestly offerings in the temple, and 'sorceress' is written in the same way as 'bright cloud'. Sorceress is pronounced *'onenāh*, and cloud is pronounced *'anānāh*. For this condemnation to have a point, the true priests must have been known as 'sons of the cloud'. Matthew, who wrote the most Hebraic of the gospels, perhaps because he was writing for Jews who had become

² *Canon of the Akathist*, Ode 6

Christians, described the Transfiguration thus: ‘a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved son...”’ (Matthew 17.5). Why the cloud? And whose voice was it? At Jesus’ baptism, there was also a voice from heaven saying ‘This is my beloved Son’ (Matthew 3.17) but the Hebrew Christians understood this to be the voice of the Holy Spirit, Jesus’ heavenly mother.³

The *Infancy Gospel of James* says time stood still as a bright cloud overshadowed the cave when Jesus was born, and a light appeared from which the Child became visible. This is a theological statement, pointing back to the enthronement rituals of the Davidic kings in Jerusalem. When St John described the woman clothed with the sun and her child born in the holy of holies – the timeless state – he was describing the same event.

Here we need some more temple background.

First, they believed that an angel or heavenly being could have an earthly counterpart: Origen, the great Christian biblical scholar writing in the early third century, had contacts with Jewish scholars. He explained that John the Baptist was also an angel and cited Jewish texts to show that this was what Jews believed. It seems that this belief was ancient, because one thousand years earlier, the Davidic king was believed to be simultaneously the earthly king and the LORD. You recall the royal title ‘God with us’, ‘Immanuel’.

Second, there are several psalms and passages which suggest that the crown prince was made both the king and the LORD with a ‘birth’ ritual in the holy of holies. He was anointed and enthroned, and after this he ‘was’ the LORD. He had many titles: according to Psalm 89: ‘He shall cry to me “Thou are my Father”... And I will make him the Firstborn...’ (Psalm 9.26, 27). The king was the Firstborn. And Psalm 2 is similar: ‘ [The LORD] said to me, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”’ (Psalm 2.7). The king was the divine Son, which meant the earthly counterpart of the LORD. The LORD was himself the Son of God Most High in the angel hierarchy, as we shall see. The perfumed anointing oil was called ‘the sweet dew, fragrant like myrrh’ (2 Enoch 22.9). It was kept in the holy of holies, and later tradition said it represented oil pressed from the fragrant tree of life, which was a symbol of Wisdom (Proverbs 3.18). Thus the king was ‘born’ by the sacrament of Wisdom and he became the divine Son. He was born again. He was then seated on

³ *Gospel of the Hebrews*, quoted by St Jerome commenting on Isaiah 11.2-9

the throne of the LORD – the great cherub throne in the holy of holies – and all the people worshipped him as the LORD (1 Chronicles 29.20-24). This was said of Solomon, but it was true of all the kings.

Much of this is lost in English translations, which have tried to clarify the text for modern readers and have, in the process, lost its meaning. The people ‘worshipped the LORD and did obeisance to the king’, says the RSV, as though there were two distinct actions. The Hebrew says that they worshipped the LORD, the king: one action, one verb.

Third, there was the golden cherub throne in the holy of holies. This was also a symbol of Wisdom, and here too, the English translations have obscured the real meaning of texts. Ezekiel, who was from a first-temple priestly family (Ezekiel 1.3), described the throne as he knew it. In his vision he saw the throne from the holy of holies as it left the polluted temple. The Hebrew of both his accounts (in chapter 1 and in chapter 10) is in places opaque. There are many rare or ambiguous words, and because we do not really know what the text is about, it is not easy to make appropriate choices in a translation. What is clear, though, is that he saw a female living being. This was the Lady leaving the temple.

The English translations say he saw ‘living creatures’, plural, thus AV, RSV; the JB has ‘animals’. The Hebrew has a mixture of singular and plural forms of the word *hayyah* which can mean ‘animal’ but it can also mean ‘Living One’. In Ezekiel 1.20, 21,22, the word is *singular*, and also in Ezekiel 10.15, 17,20. The AV keeps the singular form, but the RSV ignores it and makes every instance plural. What Ezekiel actually saw was a female being whom he called the Living One, who could also be honoured with the plural form of her name (remember ‘God’ is a plural form in Hebrew). This Living One was surrounded with rings of light, and above her the LORD was enthroned. They left the temple. Reading Ezekiel’s vision in this way shows that the Living One was a fiery being, sometimes described as fourfold, and her spirit was within the ‘wheels’. This fiery Living One was the woman St John described as ‘the woman clothed with the sun’ who gave birth to her boy child. He was snatched up to the throne.

We now return to the the king-making ritual in the first temple, the ‘birth’ of the king as the divine Son. It is described in Psalm 110.1,3 :

The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand...'
 From the womb of the morning, like dew *your youth* will come to you...'

This text is confused. Those words are not really a translation at all, but only a guess as to what the Hebrew might have meant. You will recall the 'correcting scribes' and their work, and this is one example. Texts that became important to Christians were altered or removed about 100 CE, in the final phase of their work. The Hebrew scriptures that we have now are not the texts that Jesus knew, as the Dead Sea scrolls have shown. No text of this Psalm has been found among the scrolls, but the Greek translation of this Psalm, made before the time of Jesus, gives some idea of the original. Instead of 'your youth' it has 'I have begotten you', which is a perfectly possible way to read the Hebrew letters. By changing the vowels, and thus the way the word was pronounced, it was possible to make a dramatic change to the meaning, as we have seen with Isaiah describing the corrupt priests. What has disappeared from this verse is the idea of *birth* as the divine Son: 'I have begotten you'.

The holy of holies has also disappeared. Where the AV has 'in the beauties of holiness' and the RSV 'upon the holy mountains', the Greek has 'in the glory of the holy ones', that is, among the angels in the holy of holies. Without giving you the details of how the Hebrew was corrupted, the original of Psalm 110.3 seems to have been: ... 'on the day of your birth in the glory of the holy ones. I have begotten you with dew from the womb as the Morning Star.' Morning Star was a title for Jesus: 'I, Jesus, have sent my angel to you... I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright Morning Star.' (Revelation 22.16).

But what of the word 'womb? 'I have begotten you with dew from the womb' There was a mother goddess in a neighbouring state whose name was written with the same letters. Rahmay was a goddess at Ugarit, and there may have been a similar figure in Jerusalem. The goddess in Ugarit was the sun goddess, and she was the heavenly mother of the crown prince who was called the Morning Star. St John saw the woman clothed with the sun giving birth to the Morning Star just before the great judgement began. Malachi had prophesied that when the LORD came on the day of judgement, Elijah would come first and also 'the true sun'. 'The sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in her wings' (Malachi 4.2). Yes, *her* wings. The English versions say *his* wings (thus AV) or *its* wings, (thus RSV). The Hebrew word for 'sun' could be either masculine or feminine, and here the Hebrew

chosen was feminine, presumably for a reason. Malachi prophesied the return of the woman clothed with the sun. What the Hebrew actually says was not considered by our own correcting scribes who were certain that the text could not possibly mean what it said.

The early Christians read the whole of Psalm 110 as a prophecy of Jesus, but they read the word ‘womb’ as Mary, or rather as Miriam, the Hebrew form of the name. ‘I have begotten you with dew from Miriam as the Morning Star’. In Hebrew, this meant changing only one letter, and in the archaic Hebrew script that was still used for sacred texts in the time of Jesus, those two letters looked very similar.

The next question has to be: Why was the heavenly mother of the Davidic king called Miriam? Here we draw on Jewish traditions, especially from their great commentary on Exodus known as the *Exodus Rabbah*. Miriam was remembered as the great Lady of Israel’s history. She and her two brothers Moses and Aaron were ancestors of the three great institutions: Aaron was the high priest, Moses was the king (curious, but that is how he was described in the time of Jesus)⁴, and Miriam was Wisdom. Miriam, *the older sister*, protected her people in their wilderness wandering by her miraculous well, which moved with them and gave them water. How old are these ideas? There are hints of them even in the Old Testament. According to the book of Numbers, Miriam died before the people reached Canaan, and then there was no more water for the people (Numbers 20.1-2). In the *Infancy Gospel of James*, Mary’s first encounter with the angel was by a well. Miriam was also remembered as the mother of Bezalel who was filled with the Spirit of God and with wisdom to build the tabernacle (Exodus 31.1-11); and she was also the remote ancestor of King David.⁵ She was the mother of the royal house on both senses of the word: of the temple and of the Davidic dynasty.

It is possible – we can say no more – that the early Christians, who read Psalm 110 as a prophecy of Mary, had remembered the Psalm’s original meaning. If their Jewish contemporaries knew that Miriam was the mother of the Davidic kings, then the Psalm that described how the king was ‘born’ in the holy of holies could well have named Miriam/Wisdom as his mother. The crown prince had

⁴ Philo, *Life of Moses* 1.158

⁵ *Exodus Rabbah* XXVI.1 and XLVIII.4

become king in the holy of holies, when he was begotten with 'dew' as the Morning Star, and his mother was Miriam. The correcting scribes may have changed the name to 'womb' and the first Christians could have kept the original sense of the Psalm. The Christmas story as it is told in the Qu'ran may also remember this. The story there is a shortened form of the *Infancy Gospel of James*, with Mary brought up in the temple. She is called Miriam, the sister of Aaron.⁶ Was this just confusion in the Qu'ran, or did the Christians in sixth/seventh century Arabia, from whom the story must have come, still know who Jesus' Mother really was?

The king was enthroned in the holy of holies as the LORD, and at this point we need some more temple background. The older faith of Israel had known El Elyon, usually translated God Most High, the aspect of God whom Christians were to call God the Father, and he was the father of the guardian angels of the nations. Of these, the LORD was the Firstborn, the guardian of Israel, and he became their God. He was 'the Son of God Most High'. Now the text of Deuteronomy 32.8 that was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls differs by two letters from one we use today. It says:

When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance,
 When he divided the sons of Adam
 He set the boundaries of the nations,
 According to the number of *the sons of God*.
 The LORD was allocated his people.....
 (Deuteronomy 32.8-9, my literal translation)

The current Hebrew text says the nations were divided up 'according to the number of the sons of Israel', which makes no sense. This was the work of the correcting scribes; it involved changing two letters (*ysr'l*, instead of *lhym*) and the changes were made later than the old Greek translation, which has 'angels of God' for 'sons of God'.

The distinction between God Most High and the LORD is usually overlooked when reading the Old Testament, but the early Christians were careful to distinguish between the two. Justin, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria, all writing in the second century CE, said that the One who appeared in the Old

⁶ Qu'ran 19.28

Testament was not God Most High, but the LORD.⁷ When Gabriel spoke to Mary, the distinction is clear:

He will be great, and he will be called the Son of God Most High,
And the LORD God will give him the throne of his father David... (Luke 1.32).

Jesus was to be the LORD, and to be set on the throne of David.

Return now to Psalm 110: the king anointed, born as Son of God, and set on the throne. The throne itself was a symbol of Wisdom, and those who sat on the throne were her children. Ezekiel saw the throne leaving Jerusalem, and she was the Living One. Jacob of Serug, a Syriac speaking bishop in the early sixth century, wrote a homily *On the Chariot that Ezekiel Saw*. He said the throne chariot was Mary and the one enthroned was the Son.⁸ Without a temple context, this makes little sense. Now in Egypt in the pre-Christian period, the throne represented the great goddess Isis; she was depicted with the throne as her head-dress, and the throne was the hieroglyph of her name. The throne was called the 'mother' of the Pharaoh, and he was shown sitting on her lap. We do not know if there was anything similar in Jerusalem, but Mary did receive the title 'the seat of Wisdom', and the style of statue known as the 'seat of wisdom', *sedes sapientiae*, is now on the seal of Walsingham.

In Psalm 110, the newly born king was proclaimed as Melchizedek, the eternal priest, and this became a title of Jesus (Hebrews 7.11-28). There is a memory of this high priestly role for Wisdom's child in an early Christian text found in Egypt. The *Teaching of Silvanus* has Wisdom speaking to her wayward children about the gift she offers them:

Christ came in order to give you this gift...
I am giving you a high-priestly garment that is woven from all wisdom...
Return, my son, to your first Father, God, and to Wisdom your mother...'⁹

Wisdom, then, clothed her high-priestly child with a garment of wisdom.

⁷ For detail see my book *The Great Angel*, London, SPCK, 1992, pp.190-212

⁸ *On the Chariot that Ezekiel Saw*, IV.590

⁹ Nag Hamadi Library VII.4, *The Teaching of Silvanus* 88, 89, 91

We now return to that enigmatic poem in Proverbs 8 that I mentioned earlier, the poem that depicts Wisdom beside the Creator. She was there at/in the beginning, before the material world was marked out and established. Now 'beginning' is temple talk for the holy of holies, the part of the temple that represented Day One, the invisible state before the material world was created. In other words, Wisdom was in the holy of holies. That is where she gave birth to her Son, as St John saw in his vision; and that is why Mary, or Mary and her Child, are often depicted in the eastern apse of a church, our equivalent of the holy of holies. She is often shown in ikons sat in the holy of holies, where the holy of holies is a four-pillared area with a red curtain raised to reveal who is within. She had formerly been hidden away, behind the veil of the temple.

Now 'hidden' in Hebrew is the same word as 'eternity'. Beyond the veil was the hidden state, eternity. The controversial word '*almah*, 'Virgin', in Isaiah 7 – behold the Virgin shall conceive' – literally means 'the hidden Lady'. When Isaiah was translated into Greek by the Jews of Egypt, in perhaps the second century BCE, they still knew the identity of the hidden Lady, and they translated the word as Virgin, *parthenos*. This community had fled to Egypt as refugees some four centuries earlier, when the faith of the first temple had been purged by king Josiah, and the actual temple building looted and destroyed by the Babylonians. They kept the older faith, and so it is not surprising to find that texts about the Lady were preserved in Egypt (such as the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira), and new ones were compiled (such as the Wisdom of Solomon).

When the new Greek translations of the Hebrew scriptures were made by Jews after the advent of Christianity, certain words were changed and one of them was 'Virgin'. There was an obvious reason why the Virgin became simply a young woman, *neanis*, in the new Greek versions of Isaiah. Justin complained of this change in about 150 CE; he knew that Jewish scholars – the correcting scribes still at work in his time – had been altering the Hebrew text.¹⁰ Justin was born and raised not far from the Academy in Palestine where this work of 'correction' was done.

The Dead Sea Scrolls preserve the most startling piece of evidence for these changes. The great Isaiah scroll has one letter in the Virgin prophecy that differs

¹⁰ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 71

from the present Hebrew text. The present Hebrew has the LORD say to king Ahaz, ‘Ask a sign from the LORD your God...’ (Isaiah 7.10), but the older Hebrew had ‘Ask a sign *from the Mother* of the LORD your God...’ The prophecy of the Virgin follows – and the Hebrew text does say *the* Virgin, not a Virgin. This was the Lady, in her role as the heavenly mother of the Davidic kings. The relevance of the prophecy to king Ahaz was that the royal line would continue, and that his enemies would not put an end to the dynasty.

What have we found so far?

- That angels in heaven could have human counterparts on earth, as Origen explained about John the Baptist
- That Mary/Miriam was Wisdom, who was with the Creator in the holy of holies before the material world was created, and she gave birth to her Son in the holy of holies
- That the crown prince was anointed with oil from the tree of life, Wisdom’s tree, and when he sat on the throne as king, he became her Son
- That the LORD was the Son of God Most High, just as Gabriel announced to Mary, and he was present in human form in the Davidic king.

Of the key biblical texts we have used to establish these links between Miriam, the LORD as the Son of God who was born in the holy of holies, and the Lady being the Mother of the LORD, all three have been altered by the correcting scribes.

We now return to the story of the Nativity as told by St Luke. He used many temple motifs showing that he knew the traditional understanding of the birth stories and he left signs that his readers would recognise. He probably knew the story as told in the *Infancy Gospel*. He knew there were two episodes to the Annunciation, as in the *Infancy Gospel*. In the first, as he wrote the story, Gabriel simply greeted Mary. This was the angel at the well. Mary was afraid. Then the angel spoke again, and this was when Mary was spinning. It was only when the early Church began to move away from its temple roots that the temple links needed to be spelled out in detail and written down in *Infancy Gospel of James*.

Luke gave three details about the birth:

- Jesus was Mary’s Firstborn son (Luke 2.7)
- She wrapped him round, translating literally (Luke 2.7,12)
- The Child was lying in a manger (Luke 2.7, 12, 16)
- There was no place in the inn (Luke 2.7)

Each of these is temple wordplay. Wisdom bringing forth her Firstborn alludes to Psalm 89.27: 'I will make him the Firstborn'. Mary wrapping him round alludes to Wisdom clothing her son with a garment of Wisdom. An early Christian text, the *Letter of the Apostles*, says that at his incarnation, the LORD was robed with wisdom and power.¹¹ The manger alludes first to the opening oracle of Isaiah:

The ox knows its owner and the ass its master's crib,
But Israel does not know, my people does not understand. (Isaiah 1.3).

Isaiah's original Hebrew wordplay is very intricate, but two points must suffice here:

First, the Hebrew word for 'crib' is almost the same as the old name for Jerusalem.¹² Luke mentions this three times, so it must have been important. Second, God's people did not recognise the LORD, because they had lost the gifts of Wisdom which were knowledge and understanding. The familiar image of the ox and the ass at the crib was implicit in Luke's story, and was part of the nativity story from the beginning, even though it is not mentioned in a written text until about the eighth century.¹³ The earliest pictures of the nativity were just a crib with the two animals, nothing more.

Some more background is needed before we look at the inn where there was no place/room for the birth.

By the time of Jesus, 'place' had become a technical temple term in both Hebrew and Greek. It meant the place where the Word of God or the Glory was present;¹⁴ and those who translated to scriptures into Greek often left technical terms untranslated: they just imitated the sound of the word. Hallelujah is a good example. Here 'inn' is another example. The Greek word is *kataluma*, usually a guest room, but it sounds very like the Hebrew *ta'alumah*, the secret or hidden thing, used in Job to describe wisdom (Job 28.11). The Greek word *kataluma* was also chosen to translate the Hebrew word for the LORD's dwelling place in 2 Samuel 7.6.

¹¹ *Letter of the Apostles* 13

¹² Crib is 'ebus, Jerusalem's older name was *yebus*.

¹³ *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*

¹⁴ See my book *Christmas. The Original Story*, London, SPCK, 2008, p.77

What, then, was the temple meaning of ‘She gave birth to her Firstborn son and wrapped him around and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn’? It meant ‘She gave birth to her Firstborn Son, wrapped him around [with the garment of wisdom] and set him in Jerusalem, because there was no place for the glory of God in the holy of holies.’

What had happened such that the Lady had vanished from the temple? It was rather like the situation in the European reformation, but in this case, it was the purges of King Josiah in the late seventh century BCE. The Lady and everything associated with her were banished from the temple. This was remembered as abandoning Wisdom (1 Enoch 93.8). In the original temple, as we can see from ancient poetry, she had an honoured place. One poem at the end of Deuteronomy described how the LORD became king over the twelve tribes at the annual celebration of kingship:

The LORD came from Sinai...
He came with ten thousands of holy ones
With *flaming fire* at his right hand. (Deuteronomy 33.2)

This is yet another corrected text. The letters translated ‘flaming fire’ are a cleverly re-arranged version of the Lady’s ancient name: Ashratah, the Blessing One, or the One who gives happiness. When the LORD came to the temple as king, the Lady was at his right hand. The correcting scribes changed her name wherever it was occurred in a text. The most common way was to substitute the name of the Canaanite goddess Asherah, but when her name is found in an inscription, for example as graffiti on pieces of pottery that were not ‘corrected’ by the scribes, it has its proper form.

When Mary took the baby Jesus to the temple, Christian tradition remembered this event as the Lady and her son returning to the temple, the coming of the king and his Mother. The *Arabic Infancy Gospel*, perhaps compiled in the sixth century, told the story like this:

Then old Simeon saw him, shining like a pillar of light, when the Lady Mary his Virgin Mother, rejoicing over him, was carrying him in her arms. And angels praising him stood around him in a circle, like guards standing around a king.¹⁵

This was the lady returning to the temple with her Son, the LORD.

The greatest of the Byzantine hymns to Mary was the *Akathist Hymn to the Mother of God*. Together with the *Canon of the Akathist*, it uses many titles for Mary, all of which can be found in the Wisdom traditions of the temple. Arising from the material I have used today are the following:

A throne for the king
The One who revealed the mystery
The one who pours light on the minds of believers
Mother of the Star that never sets
Pillar of fire
All holy chariot of him who rides upon the cherubim
Vessel of the Wisdom of God
The One who enlightens many with knowledge
Beam of the immaterial sun
Perfume of Christ's fragrance
Living temple
Greater holy of holies
Queen and Mother
Fragrant incense and myrrh of great price
Cloud of all light.

This has been a brief exploration of just one strand of the Mary and temple material. Similar studies are possible for all the other images in the ancient hymns and litanies.

¹⁵ *Arabic Infancy Gospel* 6