

Key moments of terrestrial life of the main Biblical characters in sacral iconography of Vojvodina

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SUMMARY

Beside the motif of death, the motifs connected to pregnancy, delivery and childhood are the most often motifs depicted in Christian iconography in general. They indicate the importance of terrestrial life and living among people of the main Biblical characters: Jesus Christ, the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist. Presenting the key moments of any human life, starting from conception, pregnancy and delivery, maternity and childhood, all the way to death, these iconographic themes try to stress out the double nature of given characters, both divine and humane. The first iconographic presentations of these Biblical events in Vojvodina belong to biography (fresco painting) of the Fruška Gora mountain monasteries. In the middle of the 18th century, in Vojvodina, as well as in all other Austrian countries where the Serbs lived, some artists, who marked the beginning of a new baroque period, appeared. This research raised a question: how is it possible to find biological-medical content in dogmatic, theological teachings of the Bible characters, predominantly the Mother of God and Jesus Christ and events related to them, which were described in Bible and artistically depicted in sacral iconography? The sacral works of art in Vojvodina were analyzed in this research from this aspect. The themes were systematized and, with respect to all religious dogmas, some biological-medical and physiological elements in events of these characters' lives were classified into seven thematic groups.

Key words: Christianity; Bible; Paintings; Medicine in Art; Serbia; Fertilization; Pregnancy; Labor Onset; Midwifery; Circumcision, Male; Mothers; Death Non MeSH Vojvodina

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Biological life of humans starts with conception and ends with death. Main Bible characters, Jesus Christ, the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist, lived lives of mortals and passed through all phases of human biological existence according to testimonies of evangelists. Because of that, beside the motif of death, motifs related to pregnancy, birth and maternity are routine and one might say, mostly exercised topics of Christian iconography in general. Their aim is to point out the importance of coming to this world of these divine characters, first of all Jesus Christ, and staying among ordinary people. Showing the key moments of human life, starting from conception, over pregnancy and birth, maternity and childhood, all the way to death, these iconographic themes endeavor to bring out a double nature of mentioned characters, both divine and human. Therefore, the recognition of these characters, besides their theological and philosophical messages, reveals biomedical content too. As the most important sources for such iconographical theme and for the Christian iconography in general, the artists used texts from the Bible (the Old and the New Testament), some apocryphal books (Proto-gospel of Jacob, Gospel of Pseudo Thomas), and later some specific Christian theological popular literature (1).

The development of art of painting in objects of Serbian sacral architecture in Vojvodina passed through two basic periods. The style of the first period is similar to painting of interior walls of most of the Serbian monasteries. During the retreat before the Turks after the fall of the Serbian medieval state, this style was carried over the river Sava to the territory of Hungary and Vojvodina by so-called *zographs*. They were the artists and artisans who depicted church interiors (fresco painting) and painted icons on wood (2).

In the mid 18th century, new artists who belonged to the middle class appeared in Vojvodina and other Austro-Hungarian territories with Serbian

inhabitants. They formed their guilds and accepted new trends in art, which they incorporated in their artistic opus including the one with religious themes. This was the starting point of the second period in development of the painting arts in Vojvodina, *the period of our civil baroque*. During that period, the art of painting was enriched by the masters whose extraordinary works of art belong to the greatest achievements of the Serbian art in general, such as Teodor Kračun, Dimitrije Bačević, Jakov Orfelin, and others.

The progress of baroque influence into the Serbian sacral art of painting and architecture of the 18th century in Vojvodina in terms of baroque decoration of the church interiors led to the occurrence of **baroque iconostasis**. It was a new form of fine arts, which reflected the unique expression of various artistic contents, such as architecture, sculpture, and painting. The sequence of icons at the iconostasis has its strictly defined program in accordance with the significance of the Biblical events and persons, which is, both spatially and thematically limited. Motifs of pregnancy, delivery, maternity, and death are an inevitable part of such a program (3, 4).

Out of 17 monasteries in Srem and 16 at the mountain of Fruška Gora, the old **wall biography** was preserved only in three monasteries. These are monasteries Novo Hopovo, Krušedol, and Petkovića (5-7).

The lack of church wall biography in Vojvodina was overcome by **the baroque iconography of the 18th and the 19th centuries** on iconostases of the Serbian churches (8, 9). The key moments from the mundane life of main Biblical characters, presented in sacral iconography, have some specific biological-medical significance besides their basic theological messages. **The aim of this research** was to discover, systematize, and present this aspect of the sacral iconography of Vojvodina with respect to religious dogma.

Therefore, the motifs with biologic-medical content were classified in several thematic groups:

- (1) Conception
- (2) Pregnancy
- (3) Delivery
- (4) Midwifery
- (5) Circumcision
- (6) Maternity
- (7) Dying and death

1. CONCEPTION

In iconography of the New Testament, the phenomenon of conception is presented by the scene of **Annunciation**, i.e. God's proclamation to future parents of the moment of embodiment and future birth of the main Bible characters: Jesus Christ, the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist.

(a) Annunciation of Mary or Annunciation of the Mother of God is one of the most important themes in Christian iconography, because it does not represent just one of the scenes in cycle of the Mother of God's life, but also the first scene in the cycle of Jesus Christ's life.

The Biblical text on the conception of Jesus Christ, is such as it were made for the painting content of the baroque iconography, which was strictly submitted to morality of civil society. Namely, as the Mother of God during her pregnancy and after the delivery of her child was and stayed a virgin according to the Christian church dogmas and the narrations of the prophet Isaac (Is. 7, 14): "Here, a virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son", the act of Jesus' conception must have been highly specific and divine. It is described in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1.26-38), where the Mother of God addresses the Archangel Gabriel, who brings her the news that she will conceive and give birth to a son by the mercy of God, with a question: "...How will that be, cause I do not lie down with my husband?". "The Holy Spirit will come to you," the angel replied, "the force Almighty shall shine on you, so the child that shall be born shall be holy and shall be called the Son of God..." (10, 11).

As an extremely significant theme in Christian dogma and iconography, the Annunciation of the Mother of God, takes a central place in iconostases of the Orthodox churches in Vojvodina - on the royal doors of each of these iconostases.

Nearly all iconographers from Vojvodina tried themselves in presenting this theme which is essentially, with minor variations presented as: a house with the Mother of God sitting, standing or kneeling in front of it; Her head slightly bent; a book or a knitting in front of Her; one arm on Her breasts, the other outstretched towards the Archangel Gabriel who is giving Her the stalk of lilies, telling Her the important news; the Holy Spirit in the shape of ray with a dove in it is descending from the Heaven over the head of the Mother of God. In some later presentations of the Annunciation of the Mother of God, all accompanying scenography has been rejected and the focus is on the standing figure of the Mother of God usually painted on the left wing of the gate, while the Archangel Gabriel is at the opposite side, giving Her the stalk of lilies and telling Her the important news.

Certain aspects of biological conception can be traced in theological scripts, especially in iconography, including the scene of Annunciation of Mary, which is painted with a sublime and divine scenography. From the point of contemporary biomedical knowledge, one could only very courageously imply a sort of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF) and embryo-transfer (ET)

pattern by some strong cosmic, i.e. divine force. In cases of conception of St. John the Baptist and the Mother of God, where theological texts were used as a motif for iconographic representation of events, the divine force was also present. The Mother of God's parents, Joachim and Anne, and the St. John the Baptist's parents, Zechariah and Elisabeth, were older people with a long-term infertile marriage. In the Gospel of Luke, it was told that after many years of striving for a child, God fulfilled the wishes of these two couples and rewarded them with offspring (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Annunciation to Mother of God (Teodor Kracun- iconostasis of Old church of St. Stefan in Sremska Mitrovica)

(b) The Annunciation to Joachim and Anne: Literary testimonies about St. Joachim and St. Anne, as the Mother of God's parents, are originating from apocrypha. They are abridged to the story according to which St. Joachim, an old-testimony priest, was expelled from the temple because a marital infertility for Jews was a disgrace and the God's punishment. Disgraced, he withdraws from the world and joins the shepherds of his herds. Once, when he was alone among his sheep, he saw an angel who announced that his wife shall have a daughter, who will be the mother of Messiah. The same news was announced to St. Anne, in her garden, under the tree with a nest with two birds. After the angel's news, St. Joachim returns home and meets St. Anne at the Jerusalem Golden gate. Joyous, they kiss and hug each other (1).

Joachim and Anne Meeting, the Mother of God's parents, at the Golden gate of Jerusalem, is the earliest way of iconographic presentation of the Mother of God's conception. As a theme, it was not proper for baroque iconography of Vojvodina. At some iconostases of churches in Vojvodina,

the Mother of God's parents were represented in medallions at the bottom of the Royal doors, under the medallion representing the Annunciation of Mary. This showed the importance of the Mother of God's parents in future events related to conception and birth of Jesus Christ.

(c) The Annunciation to Zechariah: The Bible text, depicting conception of St. John the Baptist (Luke 1, 5-25), mentions his parents' old age and their marital sterility. Father of St. John, Zechariah, a priest in a Jewish temple, saw an angel of God during one of his religious services, who told him joyous news that his wife Elisabeth would stay pregnant and give birth to a son that must be named John and who shall be "great before God." Since Zechariah doubted this news, due to his and his wife Elisabeth's old age, the Archangel Gabriel ordered him to instantaneously become, and stay numb and lose the ability to speak until the child was born. When, after the conversation with the Archangel Gabriel, Zechariah returned home, his wife, Elisabeth conceived (11). Iconography of the mentioned event does not differ from the Gospel texts and is reduced to the conversation between the Archangel Gabriel and Zechariah in the temple beside the sacrificial altar. As a motif, this Biblical event is rarely presented in iconography.

2. PREGNANCY

An iconographic motif, where theological-religious characteristic of pregnancy is subdued to its biological nature, also originates from the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1, 39-45), which describes meeting of two future mothers. Two pregnant women, Mary, in her first months of gravidity and Elisabeth, with a six months pregnancy, who, at the moment of their meeting felt a baby movement in her womb, and recognizing God, exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy...." (10).



Figure 2. Meeting of mothers (Dimitrije Avramović – Mother of God's throne in Ravanica monastery, Vrdnik)

The motif was iconographically elaborated in several variants and is usually presented as a cordial meeting of two women, one of them being with obvious signs of pregnancy. It is often used as a theme in baroque iconography under the title of the **Meeting of mothers**. In great number of churches in Vojvodina, icons, presenting the meeting of the Mother of God and Elisabeth are placed in a lower part of the Mother of God's throne, under the icon presenting the Mother of God with Christ, or at iconostases, as one icon in a line of icons in foundation (6,7) (Figure 2).

3. DELIVERY

The motif of delivery itself is not presented. Instead of true scenes of giving birth, and as a replacement for this holy-mystical event, in Christian iconography there are exclusively scenes of postnatal period, immediately after the birth.

While Jesus Christ's birth was described in two Gospels, the Gospel of Mathew and the Gospel of Luke (Mt. 1, 25 and 2, 1 and Luke 2, 1-7), the births of the Mother of God and St. John were described only in some apocrypha. This description served as a model for iconographic scenography of these events (1). In both cases, scenography is similar and represents the usual atmosphere after a childbirth, which might have been seen in most of the civilian, family houses in Vojvodina in the 18th and the 19th centuries.

(a) The Birth of Mother of God (Nativity of the Virgin Mary), as a motif, often inspired Vojvodinian baroque icon-painters, so icons, with this theme, can be seen in most of the churches in Vojvodina, as well as in some monasteries at the Fruška Gora mountain. With insignificant variations, the scene is the following: the Mother of God's mother, St. Anne, is sitting or lying on a bed, the servants are serving her and the midwives are bathing a newborn or, are preparing the bath. Other women are bringing gifts and St. Joachim is sitting aside reading a book (Figure 3). In thematic order, this icon can, most often, be found in line with the festive icons, at the second floor of iconostases (5, 12).

(b) The Birth of St. John the Baptist is scenographically very similar to the previous event, with the different participants. St. John's father, a mute priest Zechariah, is writing down the child's name on a writing-board or a papyrus („John will be his name") and by the hand's movement is showing that his speech returned at that moment, as it was promised by the Archangel Gabriel during their "conversation" at the temple. His wife Elisabeth, St. John's mother, is sitting or lying on a bed, surrounded by women with gifts and midwives bathing a newborn. As a theme, *The Birth of St. John* is somewhat more rarely represented in a limited space of the artistic complex of iconostases in churches of Vojvodina (5, 6).

(c) Iconography The Birth of Christ (Nativity), far the most often and the most significant motif of birth in Christian iconography in general, had its sources in texts of canonic Gospels, and in its initial phase, more in old apocryphal scripts (Jacob's Proto-gospel and Pseudo-Matthew's Gospel). Theological debates influenced the iconography of The Birth of Christ. They were dealing with the fact whether the Mother of God gave birth in a natural way, so She had to rest after the delivery, as it was depicted



Figure 3. Birth of Jesus (Stefan Tenecki – a fresco in Krušedol monastery)

by the iconographers of the Byzantine cultural circles, or She, as a virgin before, during and after the delivery, had a pain-free delivery, and could sit, kneel or bow to the Newborn. As we already know, first in the West, second opinion prevailed, so in the second half of the 14th century appeared so-called a “western way of bowing,” which, as a motif, had a strong influence to baroque iconography, which accepted and developed it. It consisted of the following: the Mother of God is kneeling with her hands in prayer or crossed and is looking at the Newborn with great devotion and piety. He is lying on Her robe, a handful of hay, or in the crib. Angels, shepherds, and wise men bow to the child. St. Joseph is sitting and supporting himself with a stick, or bowing on his knees. The scene is usually placed in mountain scenery, in the ruins of an old house or under the stable’s eaves. An ox and a donkey are beside, and the choirs of angels are in the skies, singing and celebrating the Lord (1, 13, 14) (Figure 4).

4. MIDWIFERY

Another Biblical event related to delivery, i.e. to midwifery (puerperium), served as a motif for iconography of great Christian holidays. It is about **Candlemas** or **Presentation of Jesus at the Temple** as this iconographic theme is also called. It is mentioned in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 2, 22-40). The text said that, Jesus, as a first-born child, in accordance with the regulations of the Moses’ law (Is. 13.2), was presented by His parents for the first time at the temple where they made a proper redemption sacrifice of the poor, which were a couple of turtle doves. At the same time, the Mother of God performed the, so-called *ritual of purification* after the delivery, which was also prescribed by the Law of Moses (Lev. 12, 1-8). An old man Simeon, a priest in that temple, took Jesus in his hands and, in inspiration, recognized in Him, the promised and expected Messiah.

Besides the primary theological meaning of this theme, information on the Mother of God’s purification, i.e. puerperium on the fortieth day after delivery, which is exactly the duration of the biological puerperium, is very interesting from medical point of view, too.

A common way of artistic presentation of the Candlemas theme, which is one of the important Christian holidays, in baroque iconography of

Vojvodina, puts in the first plane the Mother of God carrying a Child into the temple, where the old man St. Simeon, the God-Acceptor is taking Him, while St. Joseph or some of the accompanying women are offering a couple of sacrificial turtle doves (1, 13).

5. CIRCUMCISION OF CHRIST

A motif in Christian iconography that has a characteristic of a true surgical intervention is circumcision of Christ. It was described in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 2, 21). According to the Law of Moses, on the 8th day of His life, Jesus was circumcised and as every Jewish man, during circumcision, he was given His name. Circumcision was the sign of the Old Testament alliance with God. Christ’s circumcision is celebrated on January 1 (January 14 according to the new calendar), eight days after his birth.

Iconographic scene of this event takes place at the temple. The Mother of God holds Jesus in Her arms, or holds Him by placing him at the altar. The great priest cuts the Child’s preputium with a knife (1). Icons of this content can be found in the sequence of festive icons on the iconostases of some churches in Vojvodina (5-7)

6. MATERNITY

Among the most significant and the commonest motifs of the Christian iconography is the motif of maternity, which is presented by the icons of the **Mother of God with Jesus**, without which, no Christian temple can be imagined.



Figure 4. Birth of the Mother of God (Teodor Kračun – iconostasis of Orthodox cathedral in Sremski Karlovci)

As Lord Jesus Christ in his redemption had to pass through all phases of biological and social aspects of human life, from birth to death and survive both joyous and bitter moments, he had to pass through childhood and the period of connectivity to his mother. Icons **Mother of God with Jesus** and their number and diversity of presentation of intensity of the Child and Mother relationship, testify that this period was very significant (13).



Figure 5. Mother of God with Christ (Jakov Orfelin – a throne icon at iconostasis of church in Kraljevci, Srem)

In Christian iconography, there are four basic types of presenting the Mother of God with Jesus:

(a) *Odigitria (Hodegetria)* type (Greek, *guidance on the way, she who shows the way*) is a Byzantine way of presenting the Mother of God in a dignified position, usually with her eyes fixed to the observer. With one hand, She is pointing to a Child Jesus, who is sitting on her other hand. With His right hand Jesus gives His blessing and in His left hand there is a roll of written paper. The name Hodegetria it given according to the earliest icon of this kind, which was, according to legend, painted by Apostle St. Luke, and which can be found in the Constantinople church at Hodegon, at the “pathway of guides”, professional companions of travelers and caravans. Later, a legend was created, according to which the icon returned vision to the blind and thus became their “guidance on the way.” It is believed that the original of this icon was destroyed by the Turks, when they conquered Constantinople (1, 8).

(b) *Eleousa or Glykophilousa* type (Greek, *She who sweetly loves, merciful*, Russian, *Umileniye – tenderness*) is a Greek or Russian way of presentation of the Mother of God with Jesus, where the motif of maternity is especially emphasized. The Child Jesus gently leans his cheek onto His Mother’s cheek and hugs Her with his arm fondling Her face and chin.

(c) *Nikopoia* type (Greek, *bringer of victory*) is a Byzantine figure of the Mother of God who is sitting and with both hands is holding Jesus on Her knees, while He is giving His blessing with His right hand holding a papyrus in His left one. The name *Nikopoia* was attached to it because this kind of icon often accompanied Byzantine emperors in their military conquests (8,9). It can be seen as a throne icon at some baroque iconostases of Vojvodina.

(d) *Platytera* type (Greek, *more spacious than the Heavens, the holiest*) is also a Byzantine type of frontal figure of Mother of God with her hands upraised in prayer (orans position), and who is carrying on Her chest a round medallion with a portrayed bust of Jesus Christ (1, 8, 9).

In baroque iconography of Vojvodina, the motif of maternity in icons depicting the Mother of God with Christ was not specifically emphasized. The baroque icon of Mother of God with Jesus in Vojvodina is created out of two basic Byzantine types. A baroque modification of the *Nikopoia* type, with the Mother of God sitting, holding Jesus in Her lap who is giving his blessing can be found rarely. Usually, we can encounter the modified *Hodegetria* type with a standing Mother of God with Jesus in Her right hand and with a scepter or a stalk of lilies in Her left one (5, 6, 14) (Figure 5).

7. DYING AND DEATH

When God exiled Adam and Eve from Paradise, he said to Adam: “... cursed is the ground because of you... by the sweat of your face, you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Genesis 3, 19). Mortality became an integral part of a human life, its ending of earthly being. According to the Old Testament, it is a punishment of the human kind for the violation of the God’s law, given to Adam and Eve for eating an apple from the tree of knowledge, i.e. a punishment for *the original sin*.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist, after living their lives as earthly mortals, had to go through that period of life as well and experience the phenomenon of death. Their death, primarily the death of Jesus Christ, had its supreme divine and sublime goal, which is redemption of people for the original sin (10, 11). Due to its tremendous theological importance, the motif of death of main Biblical characters found its place in Christian iconography.

a. Jesus’ death on cross

As a specifically Christian theme, the theme of death, which left numerous traces in sacral iconography of all times, the, so-called **Death on cross**, found its expression in a well-known motif of the **Crucifixion of Jesus**.

Death at cross in antique times was a shameful death. As punishment, it was reserved for slaves who escaped or were rebellious against their masters, or for conquered pretenders to thrones of Roman provinces. A convict, with his arms stretched out, had to be hanged on a cross, made of two heavy beams. He had to carry it from his dungeon to the place of execution. In order for death to occur as later as possible and

his miseries to be prolonged, at the cross, there were two bumps, one under his feet and the other somewhat higher so the convict could support himself by his feet or even sit on it. His hands were tied up around his wrists or hammered with nails. Death, which usually occurred after many hours of torture, actually occurred from choking. Namely, a tensed sideways spread of arms disturbed lung breathing, because chest was always stretched as much as possible. Due to such unnatural position, diaphragm lowered, so the stomach breathing weakened, until it would finally stop. In the end, blood circulation was disrupted because of blood path in lower extremities, in direction of orthostatic circulation collapsed, which was an additional cause of death (8).



Figure 6. Crucifixion (Teodor Popović, 1976 – Matica srpska gallery, Novi Sad)

According to the Evangelists' testimonies, soft tissue injuries contributed to Jesus' death on cross, which was preceded by torture. These injuries had only one goal: to worsen the last moments of His terrestrial life by pain. Besides whipping and wearing of the thorn wreath, which painfully injured that already battered body and made deep, bleeding injuries, such polytraumatism was caused even to a greater extent by some other more life-threatening injuries like stabbing of His hands and feet with nails for nailing the body to the cross. Stabbing of his chest with spear, after which, according to the Gospel of John, blood and water started running from the wound, was the final and fatal injury.

Evangelist's testimonies of suffering, crucifixion and death of Jesus on cross, although they differ in some minor details, mostly agree upon the most significant events (Mat. 27, 31; Marc. 15, 20; Luke 23,33; John 19, 16). The most credible of all, is the testimony according to the Gospel

by John, since he was personally present at these events, besides the Mother of God and Mary Magdalene. Thus, in the *Crucifixion* iconography, beside the crucified Christ, underneath the cross, the figures of the Mother of God, and sometimes Mary Magdalene and Apostle John, can be found.

Jesus himself, at the icons and sculptures, starting from the 18th century, was presented as already dead, with typical probable signs of death: death paleness and death dullness. He hangs on the cross, eyes closed, His head lowered to His right shoulder, His arms slightly bent in elbows and His body bent in waist, while His feet are crossed and nailed to the cross (1, 8).

The *Crucifixion* motif is a mandatory part of every iconostasis and, as a key moment of the Christ's redeeming mission, it is presented as the central part, at the highest floor of iconostasis.

Scenes with Jesus' dead body in the first hours after His death, where the probable signs of death can be recognized, were used by artists as a motif for presentation of some other Biblical events, which followed after His death on cross. This motif was used for the scenes related to His entombment by Nicodemus and Joseph from Arimathea, who asked Pontius Pilate for permission to remove Jesus' body from the cross and to bury it in a tomb. Chronological order of these scenes is the following: **Taking Down off the Cross**, **The Mourning of Christ (Pieta)**, and **The Entombment of Christ**. Each of these themes has a specific scenography, sources of which could be found in gospels' texts, and as an artistic challenge, they tempted artists of all periods and trends for centuries. They could be found in the scope of iconostases of some Vojvodinian churches, as an integral part of *The Passion of Christ* cycle (Figure 6).

b. The Death of the Mother of God (Assumption of the Virgin Mary) in iconography has rather theological than medical content. This theme does not originate from apostle testimonies but it relies upon apocryphal sources. There are two basic iconographic types for the death of the Mother of God: Byzantine type, which was also accepted by the Western iconography all the way to the late Middle Ages, and a Western type, which was formed in the late Middle Ages (1, 8).

A Byzantine type (**Assumption of the Mother of God**) is a large, festive, symmetrical composition: in the middle, at Her deathbed, there is an already dead Mother of God, Jesus is standing behind Her, holding Her soul in His hands, which is presented in a form of a child wrapped in white, as a symbol of her sinless being. Apostles, accompanied by angels on clouds are gathered around Her deathbed. Such scenography is very often in Byzantine and Serbian iconography and fresco painting and its essence is directed to acceptance of Mary's soul by Jesus Christ and its assumption to Heaven.

In a Western type, the Mother of God is presented in the moment of dying. She is surrounded by apostles and she is dying lying on Her bed, sitting on Her bed with a candle in Her hands, or kneeling near Her bed. Since the 16th century, She is usually sitting, which is to emphasize that Her dying is painless. In older presentations, Jesus comes for Her soul, floating, while in more recent presentations, with prevailing more realistic atmosphere of dying of a prominent citizen-woman of the late Middle Ages, Jesus no longer appears (1) (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Death of the Mother of God (Stefan Gavrilović – a church iconostasis in Sremska Kamenica)



Figure 8. Beheading of St. John the Baptist (unknown artist – iconostasis of church in Rumenka)

c. **The Death of St. John the Baptist**, described in Gospels by Mathew (Mat. 14, 1-13), and Mark (Mark. 6, 14-29) was violent and martyred. St. John was executed, after he was caught and thrown into a dungeon because he reproved tetrarch Herod Agrippa for his sacrilegious marriage with the wife of his brother Philip, Herodias. Herod intended to murder St. John, but he was afraid of the people, who saw a prophet in him. However,

at the feast prepared for Herod's birthday, Herodias' daughter Salome enchanted Herod with her dance so that he promised to fulfill any wish that she may have, whatsoever. Persuaded by her mother Herodias, Salome asked for St. John the Baptist's head on a plate. Due to promise that he made in front of all guests, Herod was forced to fulfill Salome's wish and he ordered the beheading of St. John. His head was to be brought on a plate to Salome. She gave the Baptist's head to her mother Herodias and the followers of St. John took his body and buried it (10, 11).

In iconography, the death of St. John, under the name the **Beheading of St. John the Baptist**, is shown in several different ways: St. John is kneeling or is bended, sometimes with his hands and eyes tied. The executioner is swinging his sword. Sometimes, St. John's head is already separated from his body, on the ground or in the air, and sometimes, St. John is holding his decapitated head in his hands (1, 9).

In baroque iconostases of Vojvodina, the motif of the *Beheading of St. John the Baptist* in most cases is placed in a line of icons on the ground floor (5-7) (Figure 8).

CONCLUSION

At the end of this review, a question arises: how is it possible to find a biological-medical content in a dogmatic, theological teaching on the main Biblical characters, Jesus Christ, the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist, and in events related to them, described in the Bible? The answer may be in the following: Mary, although She was given a specific role in realization of Jesus' mission among people, as well as Her later Heavenly status, all the way to Her death and assumption into Heaven, lived an earthly life of mortals with all its biological and medical characteristics. They were in certain, theologically significant, physiological episodes modified by the God's providence and obtained some specifically divine, Heavenly expression. A similar attitude might be applied to St. John the Baptist, having in mind his role in preparation and prophesying of Jesus Christ's arrival.

As for the Lord Jesus Christ, besides His teachings, the supreme significance of His divine redeeming mission was a terrestrial living of the life of a mortal and His martyred death, by which He redeemed all human sins. The most important moments, which in theological scripts pointed to the earthly nature of the divine characters, during their life among people, are the moments of Their arrival to this world (conception, pregnancy and delivery), then, maternity and the period of Their growing-up, as well as the moments of Their death and transition into the cosmic eternity.

These themes found their artistic expression in Christian iconography in general, and they were especially suitable for baroque iconography because they complied with the spirit and morality of that time when such artistic trend was leading in European and world art, and thus, in sacral iconography of Vojvodina, which was experiencing some sort of renaissance at that time (18).

Conflict of interest

We declare no conflicts of interest.

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