"Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God." (Ps 87:3)

✣ Lecture IV: St. Mary's Symbols & Titles ✣

Many indeed are the Old Testament symbols and prophecies that refer to St. Mary because of her intimate role in God's plan of salvation. For example, the first prophecy to be recorded in Holy Scriptures speaks about the seed of the woman who will bruise the serpent's head **(Gen 3:15)**. Now this woman is St. Mary whose seed, Lord Jesus Christ, bruised the serpent's head that is Satan. There are many others prophecies that mention her virginal birth **(Is 7:14) –** Her perpetual virginity **(Ezek 44:1-3)** – Her escape to Egypt **(Is 19:1)** → notice how Isaiah the Prophet calls her a "swift cloud" in this prophecy to signify how exalted and pure she is.

In what follows, we shall, by the grace of God, discuss some of Virgin Mary's symbols in the Old Testament:

1. Noah's ark:

Noah the prophet was a prototype of Lord Jesus Christ as St. Peter explains that by Noah "few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water." **(1 Pet 3:20).** Then he adds, "There is also an antitype which now saves us – baptism …" **(1 Pet 3:21)**

→ While by Noah the Prophet eight souls were saved through the ark, by Lord Jesus Christ we all are saved through baptism. Accordingly, the ark that received the prophet and became the means of salvation is a symbol of St. Mary who received the Word of God giving Him the Human body by which He died for our salvation.

2. Jacob's Ladder:

We sing in Tuesday's Theotokia (*A hymn for the Theotokos – Mother of God*), "You are the ladder seen by Jacob, which is fixed on earth. It rose very high to heaven, and the angels were descending on it."

→ St. Mary is indeed the ladder that connects the heaven and the earth because the Lord descended and came to the world through her.

3. The Burning Bush:

Just like the fire did not consume or damage the bush, the Divinity of our Lord did not consume Virgin Mary, nor her virginity was affected by giving birth

→ The burning bush is also a symbol of Lord Jesus Christ Himself for neither the fire turned into a bush nor the bush into fire, the same way His Divine nature was united with His Human nature without mingling, confusion, or alteration.

4. The Rational Mountain:

God descended on Mount Sinai to deliver to Moses the Prophet His written word **(Ex 19:16-18)** and also He descended on Virgin Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Highest will overshadow you" **(Lk 1:35)** to deliver to us His Incarnate Word. Also Daniel the Prophet spoke of a stone being cut from a mountain without human hand **(Dan 2:34),** the same happened with Virgin Mary from whom the Lord took flesh and was born without human seed.

5. The Tabernacle of Meeting:

At the Annunciation, Archangel Gabriel said, "The power of the Highest will overshadow (Gr. *episkiazein)* you" **(Lk 1:35)** this same verb "episkiazein" (Hebrew "shakan" meaning "dwelling") was used for the Tabernacle, where God was dwelling among His people and at the moment of the Lord's Transfiguration and a cloud overshadowed the disciples.

→ Thus Virgin Mary is the True Tabernacle where God Himself dwelt among His people.

6. <u>The Ark of the Covenant:</u>

The incorruptible wood of the Ark that was overlaid with gold symbolizes St. Mary's purity. Moreover, there is similarity between the history of the Ark and the biography of Virgin Mary: The Ark remained three months at the house of Obed-edom before King David brought it to his house **(2 Sam 6)** – also, St. Mary remained three months at the town of Judea at the house of Ss. Zacharias and Elizabeth. King David leaped Joyfully before the Ark **(2 Sam 6; Chron 15:29)** – St John the Baptist also leaped in his mother's womb joyfully before Virgin Mary **(Lk 1:44).** It is noteworthy to mention that the verb "leap" mentioned in the Holy Gospel of St. Luke is the same as the one mentioned to describe the leaping of King David before the Ark.

7. <u>The Cover of the Ark:</u>

God used to appear between the cherubim on the cover of the Ark and speak to Moses the Prophet; this Cover represents the dwelling place of God and consequently is a symbol of St. Mary's womb where God the Word dwelt for nine months.

8. <u>The Vessel of Manna:</u>

The Holy Gospel of St. John records that the manna was a symbol of Lord Jesus Christ who gives us His true body to eat in the Eucharist **(Jn 6:48-57)**. In the Holy Book of Exodus, we read about the vessel that carried the manna **(Ex 16:33).**

→ Virgin Mary carried the true Manna in her womb for nine months thus the pot of manna symbolizes her. However, it is noteworthy that St. Mary was not merely a vessel but Lord Jesus actually took flesh from her.

9. <u>The Golden Lampstand:</u>

In the Holy Book of Exodus we read about the golden Lampstand that God ordered Moses the Prophet to make **(Ex 25:31-40).** This golden Lampstand is a symbol of Virgin Mary who carried the true light of the world **(Jn 1:4; 8:12).**

10. <u>The Golden Censer:</u>

The golden censer **(Heb 9:4)** used by Aaron, the high priest, is a symbol of Virgin Mary who carried in her womb the live coal as St. Cyril the Great explained that the union between the coal and fire symbolizes the union between the Divinity and the Humanity of Lord Jesus Christ.

11. <u>Aaron's Rod:</u>

The lifeless rod of Aaron that blossomed **(Num 17:1-8)** is a symbol of the virgin who gave birth to the Lord without human seed.

12. <u>Other Symbols & Titles:</u>

a) The City of God **(Ps 87:1-3)**
b) The New Jerusalem **(Gal 4:26)**
c) Ezekiel's Gate **(Ezek 44:1-3)** → The gate of heaven (Agpeya – Third hour prayer)
d) The Swift Cloud **(Is 19:1)**
e) Noah's Dove **(Gen 8:10,11)** → That announced the salvation of the human race symbolizes St. Mary who announced our salvation when she gave birth to our Lord as St. Simeon the elder said, "My eyes have seen your salvation" **(Lk 2:30)**
f) Mother of God → Theotokos / Mother of the Lord **(Lk 1:43)**
g) Mother of Light / Mother of salvation / Mother of life → (Mother + any title of Lord Jesus Christ)
h) The vine, which bore the cluster of life, our Lord Jesus Christ → (Agpeya – Third hour prayer)
i) The Queen **(Ps 45:9; 13,14)**

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* This lecture is adapted from *'St. Mary in the Orthodox Concept'* by Fr. Tadros Malaty.