

## A Biblical Reading of the *Circumcision of the Child Jesus* by Filippo Paladini (at the Jesuit Church in Valletta, Malta)

In order to keep to netiquette, when we write emails, we customarily insert a “Subject.” Heading an essay with a title is normal literary custom. Every chapter in a book is titled. The artist from Tuscany in Central Italy, Filippo Paladini (1544-1614), has also put a title to his undated main *pala d’altare* at the Jesuits Church in Valletta, Malta, depicting the *Circumcision of the Child Jesus*.<sup>1</sup>

### The Retable

Looking at the grand *reredos* framing its high altar painting<sup>2</sup> at the top of the Baroque work of art behind the main altar, one should notice the heavenly

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<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe Fiaccola, “Mannerism, Naturalism in Paladini’s Paintings,” *The Times of Malta* (16 August 2015), @ <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/mannerism-naturalism-in-paladinis-paintings.580904> [accessed 10 February 2023].

<sup>2</sup> See Therese Vella, *The Paintings of the Order of St John in Malta: Hospitaller Art Collections and Patronage from the Late Fifteenth Century to the Eighteenth Century* (PhD dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol, Department of History of Art [Historical Studies], June 2012. This electronic thesis or dissertation has been downloaded from Explore Bristol Research, <http://research-information.bristol.ac.uk>) @ <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/34507538/573754.pdf> [accessed 10 February 2023/].

scene of six angels around the three-lettered monogram 'JHS' engulfed in rays of light. These three letters can be considered as the title of the painting. 'JHS' are the first three letters of the name Ἰησοῦς (*Iēsous*, Jesus) in Greek capital letters, transliterated into Latin letters: IHΣΟΥΣ > JHSOUS.

Paladini's *Circumcision* takes pride of place in the Church of the *Collegium Melitense*, that up to the suppression of the Jesuit Order in Malta by the Portuguese Grand Master Manuel Pinto da Fonseca in 1768 was managed by the Jesuits, and consequently evolved as the University of Malta.<sup>3</sup> Understandably, since the JHS is, as it were, the coat of arms of the Company of Jesus, the three-lettered emblem is given due prominence in the retable of the painting. The foundation stone of the baroque church was laid on 4 September 1595, but had to be rebuilt due to explosions that occurred in the building. The architect was the military engineer of the Order of St John, Francesco Buonamici. Architecturally, it emulates the same style as La Chiesa del Gesù in Rome, with the same title of *the Circumcision of Jesus*. The church in Valletta is the first building in Malta designed by a well-known foreign architect.<sup>4</sup>

Dominic Cutajar expertly informs us that the main altarpiece of the Jesuits Church in Valletta, representing the *Circumcision of the Child Jesus*, was restored in 1995-1996 by George Farrugia, after some accidental damage which took place in the church. "The work reveals the ability of Paladini in handling animated crowded scenes" – nine figures in our painting, besides two angels and the Child Jesus – "with conviction and success, a feat he continued to refine and elaborate in his numerous Sicilian works, a consideration that helps in dating the *Gesù* altarpiece towards the end of his stay in Malta."<sup>5</sup>

### The Name Iēsous - Jesus

The pre-Pauline Christological hymn in the Letter to the Philippians 2:5-11 is contentwise considered by scholars as the Hymn to Christ Jesus in his kenotic annihilation and in his exaltation and glorification.<sup>6</sup> Most probably, the Apostle

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<sup>3</sup> Dominic Cutajar, "Filippo Paladini: His Activities in Malta," *Treasures of Malta* 7, no.1 (Malta: Fondazzjoni Patrimonju Malti, 2000), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> See James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 281-288; Michael J. Gorman, "Philippians: The Hymn of the Crucified Lord in the Crucified Community," in *Apostle of the Crucified Lord. A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 419-423; 434-439; Gordon D. Fee, "Christology in Philippians," in *Pauline Christology. An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson,

Paul found the hymnic eulogy already being used in the liturgical assemblies of the First Christians and inserted it into his letter.<sup>7</sup> In vv. 9-11, Paul writes: “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the *name* that is above every *name*, so that at the *name* of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”<sup>8</sup>

Although Paul writes: “in the name of Jesus,” in the name *that is* Jesus,<sup>9</sup> he then qualifies the expression, explaining what this name is, by writing: “every tongue should confess: ‘Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.’” Consequently, the name Paul is referring to, the name before which every created being bows down to worship, is ‘Lord Jesus,’ Jesus who is Lord.<sup>10</sup>

“Lord” was the title that the Old Testament gave to God creator, saviour, provider, God of the Jewish People. In the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures (the Septuagint version) the title *kúrios* translates the ineffable Name of God, YHWH.<sup>11</sup> But in the New Testament, the same title is applied also to Jesus. The First Christians saw and experienced that Jesus, by rising from the dead, obtained and was worthy of the same glory of God that the Hebrew Scriptures attributed to YHWH. Upon resurrection and glorification, the Church was able to give the title of *kúrios*, Lord, to Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

2007), 370-401; Stephen O. Stout, *The “Man Christ Jesus.” The Humanity of Jesus in the Teaching of the Apostle Paul* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 115-116.

<sup>7</sup> See Gorman, *Philippians*, 434; Bonnie B. Thurston – Judith M. Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*. Sacra Pagina 10 (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier – Liturgical Press, 2005), 77-79.

<sup>8</sup> Italics mine for emphasis. Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture references are taken from *The New Revised Standard Version*.

Part of this verse – “In nomine Iesu omne genu flectatur”, the Latin Vulgate translation for “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend” – is given pride of place at the top of the retable of the painting.

<sup>9</sup> “The name of Jesus,” *en tῇ onómati Iēsou* (v.10), can be considered an exegetical construction, with *Iēsou*, of Jesus, explaining *ónoma*, as genitive of apposition: the name, that is Jesus: see Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics. An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 79-81.95-100. For the meaning of the name Jesus, see Stout, “The Man Christ Jesus,” 67-68; “Ἰησοῦς” [*Iēsous*], in Walter Bauer – Frederick W. Danker – William F. Arndt – F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 373-374.

<sup>10</sup> See Thurston – Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*, 94-85.

<sup>11</sup> See Takamitsu Muraoka, “κύριος” [*kúrios*] and “יהוה” [*Yḥowāh*], in *A Greek-Hebrew/Aramaic Two-Way Index to the Septuagint* (Louvain: Peeters, 2010), 72; 218.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed analysis, see Gottfried Quell, “κύριος” [*kúrios*]: The Old Testament Name for God,” and Werner Foerster, “κύριος [*kúrios*] in the New Testament,” in *Theological Dictionary of*

## The Saving Name Jesus

In the two accounts of the birth and childhood of Jesus, both Matthew and Luke write that the name to be given to the child should be “Jesus”: “She [*Mary*] will bear a son, and you [*Joseph*] are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins... When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus” (Matt 1:21.24-25); “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus... After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb” (Lk 1:31; 2:21).

In Matthew we come across a slight anomaly, but which is actually a more qualified description of the name Jesus. Between the angel ordering Joseph to name Mary’s son ‘Jesus’ and the actual naming by Joseph, Matthew quotes Isaiah’s prophecy: “All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanu-el,’ which means, ‘God is with us’” (Matt 1:22-23). In his earthly life, Jesus was never called by the name of Emmanu-el. Thus, Matthew intends to say that God will be with human beings - Emmanu-el - in the salvation he wants to give them, because the name *Y’shûà* ‘means ‘God saves,’<sup>13</sup> and the Child “will save his People from their sins” (Matt 1:21).<sup>14</sup>

The Hebrew lexeme for salvation is *yeshû’ àh*, from where the name Jesus is derived: *Y’shûà’*, or Isaiah, *Y’sha’ yāhû*, or Joshua, *Y’hôshûa’*. The Hebrew lexeme *yeshû’ àh* is based on the roots y-sh-’ (yud-shin-qayin).<sup>15</sup> It demonstrates the same

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*the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:1058-1081 and 1086-1098 respectively.

<sup>13</sup> See Stout, “The Man Christ Jesus,” 67-68.

<sup>14</sup> Basil the Great comments on the name given to Jesus in his *Homily on Psalm 61:2*: “Now, it is a custom in Scripture to call the Christ of God, salvation, as Simeon says: ‘Now let your servant depart in peace, O Lord, because my eyes have seen your salvation.’ Therefore, let us subject ourselves to God, because from him is salvation. He explains what salvation is. It is not some mere active force, which provides us with a certain grace for deliverance from weakness and for the good health of our body. What then is salvation? ‘For he is my God and my Saviour: he is my protector, I shall be moved no more’ (Psalm 61:3 LXX). The Son, who is from God, is our God. He himself is also Saviour of the human race, who supports our weakness, who corrects the disturbance that springs up in our souls from temptations.” *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament III – Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 49.

<sup>15</sup> See Heinz-Josef Fabry - John F. Sawyer, “יִשׁוּעַ” [y-sh-’] etc, in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds G. Johannes Botterweck – Helmer Ringgren; trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 6:441-448.

roots of the Maltese lexeme “wisa.” The interchangeability of the consonants *j* and *w* is frequent in Maltese: “Qajjem għalina qawwa ta’ salvazzjoni” (“He has raised up an horn of salvation for us” [Lk 1:69]), but “Jekk Kristu hu mxandar li qam mill-imwiet, kif jgħidu xi whud minnkom li ma hemmx qawmien tal-mejtin?” (If Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? [1 Cor 15:12]).<sup>16</sup> The ‘x’ and ‘s’ often correspond;<sup>17</sup> and the Hebrew *qáyin* is the ‘gh’ in Maltese. Thus, in the local context of Paladini’s painting and retable, Jesus’ name gives a subtle interpretation of the concept of salvation: a leading into a spacious place.

The Psalmist groans to God: “For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a spacious place” (Ps 66:10-12).

Salvation does not have to do only with the realm of what is solely spiritual (like, say, the forgiveness of sins or liberation through exorcism), but with everything that helps to bring the person out into the spaciousness of freedom, where they are released from the scrunching and crouching of their person to the breadth and width of their complete personality, to regain their wholeness, in body, soul, and spirit, so much so that when God looks at them, he can yet again say: “It is so very good” (Gen 1:31)! Healing is part and parcel with salvation, and salvation of the whole created person: body and soul.<sup>18</sup>

The miracle of the healing of the paralytic man who was brought down from the roof in front of Jesus (Mk 2:10-12) highlights the concept of universality of salvation. Jesus gives a corporeal sign that points to his power to heal the spiritual realm of the paralytic man: “So that you may know that the Son of Man

<sup>16</sup> For more examples of the interchangeability of the *w* and the *j* in Maltese, consider the verb ‘mejjitha’ (he disheartened her) but also ‘mewwitha’ (he disheartened her); mejjet (dead) – mejtin (dead [plural]) – mewt (death) – miet (he died); dam (he took long) – dewwem (he made someone to take long; kept someone long) – dejjem (always); bidwi (farmer) – bdiewa (farmers) – biedja (agriculture); buq (trumpet, large hollow reed) – bwieq (reeds, trumpets) – bieqja (bowl) – bwieqi (bowls) – bewwaq (cause to become flabby).

<sup>17</sup> In Judges 12:5-6 the pronunciation of *shin* as *sin* in the lexeme *shibbólet* was a password-test used when the Ephraimites sought to cross the Jordan River to return home. Each was asked to pronounce the word ‘shibbólet.’ The ‘sh’ sound did not exist in the Ephraimite dialect, and thus, the Ephraimites pronounced the word in a way that, to Gileadites, sounded like ‘sibbólet.’

<sup>18</sup> John Navone, *Themes of St. Luke* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1970), 146-148; I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1970), 94-102; Jan G. van der Watt – David S. du Toit, “Salvation,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Downers Grove, IL – Nottingham: IVP Academic – Inter-Varsity, 2013), 826-832, especially 829-830.

has authority on earth to forgive sins... ‘I say to you, stand up, take your mat [*a constant reminder of your physical disability*] and go to your home’” (vv.10-11). “He stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We have never seen anything like this!’” (v.12).

The question immediately crops up here: what had they not seen before? They had seen Jesus exorcise a man with an evil spirit, and they had marvelled at the authority of his words, and at his power that even evil spirits were subdued at his command (Mk 1:21-28). They were present when he healed Peter’s mother-in-law (Mk 1:29-31). They had witnessed themselves the healing of all those who were sick and the casting out of a number of demons from those who were possessed (Mk 1:32-34). They had followed him, attracted by his preaching (Mk 1:35-39). They had even witnessed him “cleansing” (*katharisthēti*, Mk 1:40-45) a leper.

Would it be that they had not yet grasped the fundamental issue that physical healing has now become a sign of spiritual healing in Jesus, the Saviour? Or maybe that perhaps physical and spiritual healing together have become the sign of complete salvation?

The healing account of the woman with the haemorrhage (Lk 8:43-48) highlights how salvation through faith is physical healing that comes from God. If she could just touch the hem of his cloak (probably, the tassels – *tzitzit* – at the edges of his praying shawl (*thallit*), the shawl that connected him with God in prayer in an awe-inspiring manner (Lk 11:1), she would be healed. This man, the sick woman reasoned, can unite me to God and from God comes life in its wholeness.

It is interesting to note that when Jesus healed her, he addressed her with very singularly specific words: “Daughter, your faith has saved you (*sēsōkēn se*, v.48); go in peace” (Lk 8:48). Jesus singled out her faith that saved, not that healed, her.<sup>19</sup> When Jesus noticed that someone had touched him and that a power had gone out of him and asked who had touched him, she came forward to confess everything and testified how as soon as she touched the edge of his cloak she was healed (*hōs iáthē*, Lk 8:47), thus identifying salvation with physical healing.

The Greek verb *sōzō*, “to save,” “to heal” and the lexeme *sōma*, body, are derived with a very strong degree of evidence from the Sanskrit in the root *śka*, in Greek *sōs*, that is at the root of words like: *sōzō*, *saōō*, I cure, I save; *sōtēr*, saviour, healer;

<sup>19</sup> Matt 9:21 uses *sōthēsomai* (*saved*, not *healed*).



*sáos*, healthy, integral; *sōos*, *sōs*, prosperous, saved; *sōkos*, strong, in health.<sup>20</sup> *Sōma* probably refers to the *casing, covering, wrapping* (veil or skin), that protects (and “saves”) the body. Later Greek uses it for an animated body, seeing body as the *receptacle* of life, as against the soul, the contents *psychē* as in *sōma psychikón*, the spiritual body. Salvation and saviour definitely do not have only to do with the spiritual realm.<sup>21</sup>

According to the Apostle Paul (1 Cor 12:27): “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it,” and thus we are the Body of the Saviour Christ Jesus who heals and saves – in Christ Jesus we are a saved and saving Body at the same time.

In the gospels, salvation is very clearly not just a spiritual achievement of God in human beings. Salvation is holistic. Salvation is God’s healing finger touching the body, soul, spirit, emotions, feelings, psyche, the will, and indeed the whole person.

## Joy as Right Response to Salvation

Luke’s pattern of personal free response to God’s salvific will is evident when we consider clusters of expressions in his gospel.<sup>22</sup> To mention just one example, Luke groups together verbs and nouns that emphasise receptivity of God’s salvific action in chapter 8:4-21, where we come across the parable of the sower (vv.4-15), the lamp under the vessel (vv.16-18), and his relatives coming in search for him (vv.19-21): “seeds” (vv.5.11), “ears” (v.8), “hear” (vv.8.10.12.14.15.18.21), “understand” (v.10), “see” (vv.10.16), “word” (11.13.15.21), “believe” (vvv.12.13), “receive” (v.13).<sup>23</sup> However, Luke has similarly extensive patterns

<sup>20</sup> See Henry G. Liddell - Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), *ad loc*; also Werner Foerster, “σῶξω, σωτηρία, σωτήρ, σωτήριος [sōzō, sōtēria, sōtēr, sōtērios],” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 7:965-969.

<sup>21</sup> See Paul Sciberras, “The Church as Body of Christ: Pavel Florenskij’s *The Concept of Church in Sacred Scripture*,” *Melita Theologica* 69, no. 1 (2019): 111.

<sup>22</sup> For a detailed analysis of clusters of joy in the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles, see Navone, *Themes of St. Luke*, 71-87; Marshall, *Luke – Historian and Theologian*, 123-124; 202-204; Robert O’Toole, *The Unity of Luke’s Theology* (Good News Studies, 9; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984), 225-260.

<sup>23</sup> For a detailed analysis of these pericopes, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke (I-IX)*. The Anchor Bible 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 699-715; Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol.1:1-9:50. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 716-53; François Bovon, *Luke 1. A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*. Hermeneia, ed. Helmut Koester; trans. Donald S. Deer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 303-316.

about the responses to the experience of God's salvific activity. Luke wants his readers to understand these patterns as the correct reactions to God's salvific will. Joy is, according to Luke, one of these patterns of right responses and reactions. His three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the two lost sons in Luke 15 are dotted with rejoicing.

The Infancy Narratives abound in expressions of joy. Mary greets Elizabeth and the latter's child leaped (*skirtaō*, 1:41; *agalliāō*, 1:44) in her womb. Mary magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God her saviour (*agalliāō*, 1:47). John the Baptist's birth is similarly sprinkled with joy. Elizabeth's neighbours (*perioikoi*, 1:58) rejoiced with her that the Lord had shown great mercy to her. It is also manifested in the restoration of relationships (as in the *Benedictus*: salvation from the hands of enemies, Lk 1:71.74), faith saving body, perspectives, identity, and priorities.

When Jesus was born, the shepherds are encouraged by the angel not to be afraid for he brings them good news "of a great joy for all the people" (*idoũ gār euangelizomai humin charàn megálēn hētis éstai pantì tō laō*, 2:10). Both the heavenly hosts and the shepherds glorify and praise (*doksázō* and *ainéō*) God for the birth of the Saviour Jesus (2:13-14.20).

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus pronounces his sermon on the plain, promising laughter (*gelāō*) in the third blessing (6:21), and ends his four macharisms with "Rejoice (*chárēte*) in that day and leap for joy (*skirtēsate*)" (Lk 6:23).

The return of the Seventy with its expressions of joy is proper to Luke. They come back to Jesus "with joy" (*hupéstrepsan dē hoi hebdomēkonta [dúo] metá charas* (Lk 10:17). Jesus also gives them the reason why they should rejoice: "Do not rejoice... but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (*mē chaírete... chaírete dē...* (v.20). He himself rejoices in the Spirit (*ēgalliásato*, v.21).

As far as the three parables in Luke 15 go, the ending of each parable highlights the joy (*chaírōn*, v.5) that ensues at the recovery: in vv.5-6 the joy of the shepherd at finding his lost sheep who calls in his friends and neighbours to rejoice with him (*sunchárētē moi*, v.6); in v.7 the joy comes in the application of the parable: there will be even more (*houtōs... ē*) joy (*charà*) in heaven for a sinner who returns to God. The father of the two lost sons orders a feast with much merrymaking (*euphranthōmen*, vv.23-24) for the return of his younger son. Similarly, joy and merrymaking fill the rest of the parable, even during the tense moments of the elder son's return from the fields (vv.25.27.29.30.32).

The air of joy both in the parables and in their application is markedly similar "rejoice with me" (*sunchárētē moi*, vv.6.9); the shepherd and the woman invite



their friends and neighbours, and in v.10: “Likewise... there is joy” (*houtōs... gínetai charà*). The father shows his elder son that “we had (*édei*) to celebrate (*euphranthēnai*) and rejoice (*charēnai*), because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found” (15:32).

It is to be carefully noted that neither the shepherd nor the woman rejoice alone for their recovery of their lost sheep and coin respectively. They invite their friends and neighbours to join them in their rejoicing: “rejoice with me” (*sunchárēté moi*, vv.6 and 9). If the two parables (together with the following parable of the lost two sons) are addressed primarily at the Pharisees and the Scribes, grumbling at Jesus for welcoming sinners and eating with them, then it ensues that the Pharisees and the Scribes are also being invited by Jesus to rejoice with him for these sinners who are repenting by coming to listen to him.<sup>24</sup>

In the parable of the lost two sons (15:11-32), the elder son rebukes his father: “Yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends” (v.29). As with the shepherd and the woman in the other two parables, the father wants to be in the midst of the rejoicing with his two sons, his household and friends, and not provide for rejoicing to the elder son and his friends by themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Joy characterises Jesus’ going up to Jerusalem. In the pericope of Zacchaeus, the invitation by Jesus to Zacchaeus to come down the tree “for I must stay at your house today” (Lk 19:5) is cause of great joy for the chief tax collector: “So he hurried down and was happy (*chaírōn*) to welcome him” (v.6). Nearing the city of Jerusalem, “The whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully (*chaírontes ainein*, 19:37) with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen.”

Finally, after his resurrection, leading the disciples as far as Bethany and giving them the Great Command to proclaim him throughout the world, he was ascended into heaven and “they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy (*metà charas megálēs*); and they were continually in the temple

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<sup>24</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, in his *Commentary on Luke, Homily 106* (see *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament III – Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 243, asks the Pharisees: “Tell me, O Pharisee, why do you grumble because Christ did not scorn to be with publicans and sinners, but purposely provided for them this means of salvation? To save people, he yielded himself to emptiness, became like us, and clothed himself in human poverty.”

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed analysis of the parable in its narrative perspective, see Jean-Noël Aletti, *Il racconto come teologia*. Studio narrativo del terzo Vangelo e del libro degli Atti degli Apostoli (Roma: Dehoniane, 1996), 167-205.

blessing God” (24:52-53). Joy pervades the entire gospel of Luke, a characteristic that Paladini did not surely miss in his painting.

In Paladini’s *Circumcision*, we can detect a discreet smile of joy on the child John the Baptist’s face (the only figure that is looking at the viewer), joy that comes both from his Hebrew name *Yôhānān*,<sup>26</sup> meaning ‘God has mercy,’ a sure participation in salvation through his future preaching of loving kindness (Hebrew, *hêsed*)<sup>27</sup> and mercy as well as from his mission (see Lk 1:13-17.78).

Salvation is restoring humankind to the original state of creation in front of which God himself can again exclaim: it is so very good (see Gen 1:31).<sup>28</sup> Salvation is faith saving body, perspectives, identity, and priorities! Salvation is making whole again. Salvation is healing. And if humankind is whole and healed, it shares in the same attribute of God: holiness. Salvation as spaciousness, liberation from restricting, oppressive experiences both physical and spiritual occur frequently in the Old Testament (Ps 4:2; 18:17-20; 25:17; 31:9; 118:5; Est 4:14). However, there must be the right perspective: everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved, not who calls upon some miracle worker. It is in Jesus who died and who conquered death that we can be healed and heal others.

Then, “salvation must be seen as the freeing of a person so that such a person can come out to the freedom of salvation in Christ.”<sup>29</sup> Salvation is wholeness, healing and holiness.<sup>30</sup>

No wonder Filippo Paladini gave so much structural importance to the JHS in his *pala d’altare* at the Jesuits Church in Valletta. It is found at the topmost point of the *reredos*; repeated at the top part of the painting itself, surrounded by putti, and indirectly referred to in the biblical inscription at the circular part of the retable, above the central sculptured Child: “In nomine Iesu omne genu

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed analysis of *hānan*, see Heinz-Josef Fabry - John F. Sawyer, “חָנַן” [*hānan*] etc, in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds G. Johannes Botterweck – Helmer Ringgren, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 5:22-36.

<sup>27</sup> For *hêsed*, see Hans-Jürgen Zobel, “חֶסֶד” [*hêsed*], in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, eds G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, trans. David. E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 5:44-64.

<sup>28</sup> See Gerald O’Collins – Edward Farrugia, “Salvation,” in *A Concise Dictionary of Theology* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991), 212.

<sup>29</sup> Paul Sciberras, “‘All Flesh Shall See the Salvation of the Lord’: The Function of Paul’s Shipwreck Account in Acts 27-28: A Proposal,” *Melita Theologica* 65, no.2 (2015): 62.

<sup>30</sup> See the common etymology of the adjectives healed, whole and holy in *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed. Charles T. Onions, with the assistance of George W.S. Friedrichsen and Robert W. Burchfield (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), and Walter W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005).

flectatur” (at the name of Jesus every knee should bow), taken from the Latin Vulgate translation of Philippians 2:10. Paladini also uses chromatic expertise when he painted the Child Jesus awash in light in contrast to the surrounding figures in the background.

### *Proclaiming the Saving Name of Jesus*

Another type of healing that is needed: salvation comes from proclamation of the name of Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Paul again in Romans 10:14-15: “How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?” The Word of God, as opened and broken for us by Jesus, the Saviour, the Lord, is a mighty way of healing and salvation. Salvation comes from calling on the name of Jesus, whose name points to him as the Saviour. Calling on is the fruit of faith and “faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom 10:17).<sup>31</sup> Indeed, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved” (Rom 10:9-10). This might be yet another reason why Paladini gave such importance to the Name in his *Circumcision*.

### **The Lower Part of the Painting**

A huge and very prominent basin for ritual washing and purification<sup>32</sup> in the foreground of the painting immediately draws the attention of the viewer. It seems that Paladini wanted to give particular emphasis to the Child’s mission as an agent of purification,<sup>33</sup> a cleanser, a saviour of those who look at the picture to meditate on it, rather than on the characters themselves in the painting.

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<sup>31</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*. The Anchor Bible 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 594-601; Daniel Harrington, *Romans. The Good News According to Paul* (New York: New City, 1998), 105-107; Brendan Byrne, *Romans*. Sacra Pagina 6 (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier – Liturgical Press, 1996), 323-328.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed analysis of occurrences of *katharismós*, see Hans-Georg Link – Johannes Schattenmann, “Pure, Clean: καθάρος” [*katharós*], in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 3:102-108.

<sup>33</sup> See Mal 3:2-23: “For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.”

Luke (who writes to Christians from the Gentiles rather than from the Jews) seems to be oblivious to the fact that actually the purification was legally for the mother only, not for the baby as well.<sup>34</sup> He writes: “When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord” (Lk 2:22). The mother would be considered unclean for forty days (eighty for a girl) before she could touch anything sacred (Lev 12:2-8).<sup>35</sup> After eight days the child would be circumcised, and the mother would wait at home for another thirty-three days. After the forty days – when the time of her purification comes to an end (Lev 12:6) – the mother would go to the Temple and make her offering. In the Old Testament and in the Jewish tradition the presentation of the first child is never mentioned.<sup>36</sup> Exodus 13:1-2 says that every first male child had to be redeemed, and Numbers 18:16, that this had to be done after one month from birth. Most likely, Luke gets the idea of the presentation from Samuel’s presentation by Anna (1 Sam 1:22-24). He seems to combine two ceremonies in one: the circumcision<sup>37</sup> with the presentation. Purification and redemption are also part of salvation.<sup>38</sup>

The name that was given to the baby was that of Jesus, the Saviour, but who is Lord, Master, who saves by making the entire creation whole anew: “He [*God*] has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time (*plērōma tōn kairōn*),<sup>39</sup> to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:9-10).

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<sup>34</sup> Luke T. Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*. Sacra Pagina 3 (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier – Liturgical Press, 1991), 54; Bock, *Luke*, 234-236; Bovon, *Luke 1*, 99.

<sup>35</sup> Bede, however, comments on the purification of both the mother and the child: “Mary, God’s blessed mother and a perpetual virgin, was, along with the Son she bore, most free from all subjection to the law. The law says that a woman who ‘had received seed’ (Leviticus 12:2 LXX) and given birth was to be judged unclean and that after a long period she, along with the offspring she had borne, were to be cleansed by victims offered to God.” *Homilies on the Gospels* 1.18, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament III – Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 47.

<sup>36</sup> See David W. Pao – Eckhard J. Schnabel, “Luke,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds Gregory K. Beale – Donald A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic – Apollos, 2007), 268-271.

<sup>37</sup> See Hans-Cristoph Hahn, “Circumcision: περιτέμνω [*peritémnō*],” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 1:307-312.

<sup>38</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 99.

<sup>39</sup> Gal 4:4 links the fullness of the time (*plērōma tou chrónou*) with the birth of Jesus from a woman: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman.”

### *The Circumcision*

Paladini's *Circumcision* depicts the central figure of Simeon, solemnly attired as High Priest, performing the circumcision to the Child Jesus with extreme discreetness:<sup>40</sup> the circumcision knife blade can barely be seen.<sup>41</sup> We might surmise that the fugitive Tuscan painter meant to give more importance to the naming than to the circumcision rite, by giving the three-lettered monogram JHS of the name of Jesus high prominence but almost concealing the circumcision itself.

Leviticus 12:3 lays down that: "On the eighth day the flesh of his [*male firstborn*] foreskin shall be circumcised." Circumcision was the ceremony that sealed the Covenant of Israel with God<sup>42</sup> in the ability to beget children, in the power of generating those who would continue the family, the tribe and indeed the People of Israel as the People of God, that makes Israel a covenant generation, and that binds itself to God in its very life and existence. It is the consecration of the People of Israel in its firstborn sons. "Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine" (Ex 13:2).

Paladini depicts the figures of two couples in the painting: Joseph and Mary on the left side, next to baby Jesus, and another couple on the right side. From the iconographic representation it appears that the baby in the arms of the woman on the right is John the Baptist; the woman should be no one else but Elizabeth. John was a six month old baby by then (see Lk 1:26), and in the *Circumcision* it is the only figure that is looking at the viewer. Later in his life, John would be able to proclaim: "He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's

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<sup>40</sup> See Lynn H. Cohick, "Judaism, Common," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Joel B. Green (Downers Grove, IL – Nottingham: IVP Academic – InterVarsity, 2013), 454.

<sup>41</sup> Bede, in his *Homilies on the Gospels* I.II (see *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament III – Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 44, writes: "He therefore received circumcision in the flesh decreed by the law, although he appeared in the flesh absolutely without any blemish of pollution. He who came in the likeness of sinful flesh – not in sinful flesh – did not turn away from the remedy by which sinful flesh was ordinarily made clean."

<sup>42</sup> Cyril of Alexandria, in his *Commentary on Luke, Homily 3*, describes Jesus' circumcision as "prefiguring in itself the grace and efficacy of divine baptism. Formerly a male who was circumcised was included among the people of God by virtue of that seal; nowadays, a person who is baptised and has formed in himself Christ the seal, becomes a member of God's adopted family." *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament III – Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 45.

voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn 3:29-30).

The central figure in the painting is Simeon, ‘the High Priest,’ not the Child Jesus who is being circumcised: the baby is lying on its side; Simeon in the very centre, both vertically and horizontally. Again, the emphasis is on the presentation and naming,<sup>43</sup> because Simeon is identified with the hymn he sings in the Holy Spirit: the *Nunc Dimittis* (Lk 2:29-32). “Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him” (Lk 2:25), a description that fits those who in the Old Testament are called the ‘*Anāwîm*.’<sup>44</sup>

The name Simeon is the Jewish name *Shimʿôn*, from the verb *sh-m-*, to listen, to hear, reminding us of the female figure of the couple to the left of the painting: the Baby’s Mother, Mary, and the Word to whom she gave flesh as the Son of God with her obedient avowal (Lk 1:38). Most probably that is why we combine it with what Luke wrote in 2:21: “After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb,” in the account of the Annunciation to Mary! There she could “bend her knee” (see Phil 2:10) in obedience to God’s will: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). In a similar vein, Joseph, when he “awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her [*Mary*] as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus” (Matt 1:24-25).

Full extraordinary emphasis is given to the fact that Simeon was led by the Holy Spirit. Three times in three verses: in his description (Lk 2:25); while he was reassured he would not see death before seeing the Messiah with his own eyes (2:26); and when he was moved to utter the hymn of the *Nunc Dimittis* (2:27-28).

The hymn by Simeon, the central figure of Paladini’s painting, proclaims universal salvation that Simeon was perceiving in the eight/forty day old baby he held in his arms. “Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under

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<sup>43</sup> Hans Bietenhard – Frederick F. Bruce, “Name: ὄνομα [*ónoma*],” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 2:648-656.

<sup>44</sup> The humble, meek, poor, as opposed to the wealthy and powerful. See אָנָו [‘*ānāw*], in *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, ed. David J.A. Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 6:502.



the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God... “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Lk 2:27-32).

## Conclusion

Perhaps the fact that the scenes of the presentation and of the circumcision in the Temple are combined together in Paladini's *The Circumcision of the Child Jesus* proffer the idea that it is a timeless scene, one that points to eternity. Consecration to God is lived in the time and space of this earthly life but points to eschatological reality.<sup>45</sup>

In the child Jesus – whose name means God is with human beings in his salvation from their sins and its consequences – Simeon (the one who listens to the Word in the Spirit) sees the Saviour of all humanity. Simeon perceives the long-term work of God in the Saviour, the moment he sees salvation, God's action of liberation, that God took care to prepare for a long time before. Moved by the Spirit, Salvation for Simeon meant light to all nations, and glory to the People of Israel. Light: because faith is compared to it in the lives of human beings, seeing that it illuminates what they are adorned with, even if they are not yet aware of it. Glory: because the Jews were chosen as a model for other nations. That Gentiles receive the light that manifests to them God already at work in them, and that they come to know him is a mission of the Jews.

Paladini's *Circumcision of the Child Jesus* seems to be affirming, ‘Be like this newly born child: light of the world and salt of the earth (Matt 5:13-14) just as “I am the light of the world” (Jn 8:12; 9:5).

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<sup>45</sup> Bock, *Luke*, 234-236.