

A medieval-style illustration depicting the Virgin Mary holding a lily, with a man kneeling before her in a church setting. The Virgin Mary is shown in a long, flowing white robe with a blue mantle, holding a white lily. She has a halo and is looking down at the man. The man is kneeling, wearing a dark tunic with a red and black diamond pattern, and looking up at her. In the background, there are other figures, including a group of men in white robes looking on. The setting appears to be a church interior with stone walls and a large window.

JAN M. ZIOLKOWSKI

READING THE JUGGLER OF NOTRE DAME

Medieval Miracles and Modern Remakings



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2. The Bible and Apocrypha

A. “The Dancing of David before the Ark”

David, the biblical king of Israel, has had two associations that could well have brought him to the mind of medieval (and postmedieval) authors and audiences who dealt with “Our Lady’s Tumbler.” Though famous as the killer of the giant Goliath and infamous as the adulterous lover of the beautiful Bathsheba, he has also been known as a lifelong musician and, in one minor but memorable episode, as a dancer.

The connections with music surface first when David is a young shepherd watching over his flocks and [comforting King Saul](#) in his despondency, later when in his own prime he becomes a king himself, and lastly when he reaches the autumn of life. In medieval European representational art he is pictured again and again, especially in author portraits, in his capacity as alleged composer of many psalms. Traditionally he is depicted with an instrument in hand, typically a lyre, harp, or fiddle.

In contrast, David’s nexus with dancing is not tied to one specific incident alone. For [twenty years](#), the ark of the covenant, which housed the two stone tablets that handed down the Ten Commandments, remained outside Jerusalem. After King David designates the city his capital, he determines to restore the repository to the temple built for it by his predecessor Solomon. The Lord enjoins anyone from touching the wooden chest. In transit, the [driver of the ox-cart](#) steadies the wooden box with his hand and is killed as chastisement for his temerity. In the aftermath of this transgression, David delays the return of the ark into Jerusalem [for three months](#). When [the transfer is finally completed](#), the exultant people celebrate the happy occasion with multiple sacrifices, shouts, and music. The ruler himself strips off all his clothing, except a priestly vestment called an ephod. In this sleeveless and apron-like garment of light linen, he leaps and dances before the ark. This behavior provokes [the contempt of his wife Michal](#), as she surveys the proceedings from a window. The scene was not uncommonly [depicted in art](#).

The circumstances of scanty dress, an exuberant dance near a revered object, and a disapproving onlooker would have struck those medieval people versed in the Bible as they thought through the miracle of “Our Lady’s Tumbler” and its analogues—or perhaps even as they thought them up.



Fig. 4: King David dancing. Miniature. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Vindobonensis 2554, fol. 44r.

1. 2 Kings (= 2 Samuel) 6.13–23

- 13 And when they that carried the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a ram,
- 14 and David danced with all his might before the Lord, and David was girded with a linen ephod.
- 15 And David and all the house of Israel brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord with joyful shouting and with sound of trumpet.
- 16 And when the ark of the Lord was come into the city of David, Michal, the daughter of Saul, looking out through a window saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord, and she despised him in her heart.
- 17 And they brought the ark of the Lord and set it in its place in the midst of the tabernacle which David had pitched for it, and David offered holocausts and peace offerings before the Lord.
- 18 And when he had made an end of offering holocausts and peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts,
- 19 and he distributed to all the multitude of Israel, both men and women, to every one, a cake of bread and a piece of roasted beef and fine flour fried with oil, and all the people departed, every one to his house.
- 20 And David returned to bless his own house, and Michal, the daughter of Saul, coming out to meet David, said, "How glorious was the king of Israel to day, uncovering himself before the handmaids of his servant, and was naked as if one of the buffoons should be naked!"
- 21 And David said to Michal, "Before the Lord, who chose me rather than thy father and than all his house and commanded me to be ruler over the people of the Lord in Israel,

- 22 I will both play and make myself meaner than I have done, and I will be little in my own eyes, and with the handmaids of whom thou speakest I shall appear more glorious.”
- 23 Therefore Michal, the daughter of Saul, had no child to the day of her death.

2. 1 Paralipomenon (1 Chronicles) 15.27–29

- 27 And David was clothed with a robe of fine linen and all the Levites that carried the ark and the singing men and Cheneniah, the ruler of the prophecy, among the singers, and David also had on him an ephod of linen.
- 28 And all Israel brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord with joyful shouting and sounding with the sound of the cornet and with trumpets and cymbals and psalteries and harps.
- 29 And when the ark of the covenant of the Lord was come to the city of David, Michal, the daughter of Saul, looking out at a window saw King David dancing and playing, and she despised him in her heart.

B. “The Dancing of Mary before the Altar”

Both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, despite the many pages they occupy, leave unanswered a host of questions. Not surprisingly, the Christians of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, like the Jews, often craved information and insights that were lacking from Holy Writ. To take a concrete example, the details that the Gospels provide regarding the Virgin Mary are sketchy at best. The evangelists Matthew and Luke tell readers mainly that even after becoming the mother of Jesus she remained a virgin and that her betrothed and husband was Joseph, a man with a lineage that reached back to King David. To stop the gaps, stories took shape outside the canon of Scripture that filled in some of the blanks about her conception, birth, and early childhood.

The extracanonical writings that deal with Jesus’s mother include the apocrypha, such as the so-called Infancy Gospels. These last-mentioned texts offer accounts of the birth and early life of Jesus. Among them the Book of James or, to call it by the name that has been assigned to it since the sixteenth century, the Greek *Protevangelium of James* entered circulation sometime in the middle of the second century or slightly later. In the oldest manuscript the main title attached to it is “The Birth of Mary,” the subtitle “The Revelation of James.” The author purports to be James. This is not James the Great (Mark 3:17), son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles. Rather, readers are probably supposed to recognize in him either Jesus’s brother by this name (Mark 6:3), who was Joseph’s son by a wife before his marriage to Mary, or James the Less or the Younger (Mark 15:40), Jesus’ cousin, son of the Virgin’s half sister, Mary of Cleophas.

The *Protevangelium* supplies details of the Virgin Mary's life from before her birth up to the arrival of the Magi, the three wise men who presented gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus (Matthew 2:11). The apocryphon describes her elderly parents, Joachim and Anna, as wealthy and pious, but saddened by being childless. Then, after angels brought the barely believable news that this lacking would be remedied, Anna conceived Mary and gave birth to her. Though most attention has been devoted to the Greek version, the account exists also in a host of other languages, such as Syriac, Georgian, Armenian, Arabic, Coptic, Ethiopic, and Church Slavonic. The western tradition, including fragments of versions in Latin and Irish, is decidedly slimmer, owing to the censure of the text as forbidden in the so-called Gelasian Decree, a list of canonical works drawn up in the western Church and ascribed erroneously to Pope Gelasius I.

In the episode of concern here, Joachim and Anna visit the temple to make offerings and in the same spirit to entrust little Mary, at the tender age of three, to the convent of virgins there. Their daughter, when deposited within the precincts of the holy place, betrays no sign of distress at being relinquished by her parents to be a temple virgin. On the contrary, she first does a little jig upon being set down and then races up the steps (which total fifteen in the Latin tradition) without so much as a backward glance.

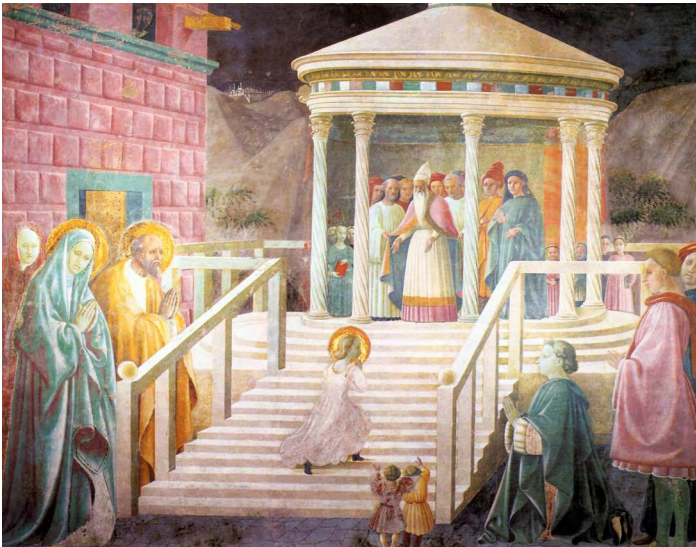


Fig. 5: Paolo Uccello, *Presentazione di Maria al Tempio*, ca. 1435. Fresco. Prato, Duomo di Prato. Image from Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paolo_uccello,_presentazione_di_maria_al_tempio.jpg

The emphasis on Mary's descent from King David helps to explain the motif of her dancing before the altar, paralleling her ancestor's exultation before the ark. All in attendance, counting the priests, are impressed. The girl's mother, Anna, intones a hymn of joy.

Protevangelium of James 7

- 1 The months passed, and the child grew. When she was two years old, Joachim said [to Anna], "Let us **take her up to the temple of the Lord**, so that we may fulfill the promise which we made, that the Lord not send some evil to us and our gift not become unacceptable." And Anna replied, "Let us **wait until the third year**, that the child may then long no more for her father and mother." And Joachim said, "Let us wait."
- 2 And when the child was three years old, Joachim said, "Let us call the undefiled daughters of the Hebrews, and let each one take a torch, and let these be burning, that the child not turn back and her heart not be tempted away from the temple of the Lord." And they did so until they had gone up to the temple of the Lord. And the priest took her and kissed her and blessed her, saying, "The Lord has magnified your name among all generations; because of you, the Lord **at the end of the days** will reveal his redemption to the children of Israel."
- 3 And he placed her on the third step of the altar, and the Lord God put grace on her and she danced with her feet, and **the whole house of Israel loved her**.

C. "The Widow's Mite"

The lesson of the widow's mite, related in two of the synoptic Gospels, has been interpreted in many ways. The episode does not refer to any form of worship, such as dance, that is expressed through physical activity. On the contrary, the pertinence of the biblical account to "Our Lady's Tumbler" stems from the idea that an offering to God has a value independent of the price that society would set upon it. Instead, its worth derives from the sacrifice made by its giver.



Fig. 6: Alexandre Bida, *The Widow's Mite*, 1874. Etching. Published in Edward Eggleston, *Christ in Art; or, The Gospel Life of Jesus: With the Bida Illustrations* (New York: Fords, Howard, & Hulbert, 1874), p. 293.

The mite, as English translates the Greek term *lepton*, was the lowest denomination of Roman coinage. Two of these small copper coins were together worth a quadrans, itself a cast bronze coin of low value.

Gospel of Mark, 12

- 41 And Jesus sitting over against the treasury beheld how the people
cast money into the treasury, and many that were rich cast in much.
- 42 And there came a certain poor widow, and she cast in two mites,
which make a farthing.
- 43 And calling his disciples together, he saith to them, "Amen I say to
you: this poor widow hath cast in more than all they who have cast
into the treasury.
- 44 For all they did cast in of their abundance, but she of her want cast in
all she had, even her whole living."

Gospel of Luke, 21

- 1 And looking on he saw the rich men cast their gifts into the treasury.
- 2 And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in two brass mites.
- 3 And he said, "Verily I say to you that this poor widow hath cast in
more than they all.
- 4 For all these have of their abundance cast into the offerings of God,
but she of her want hath cast in all the living that she had."