Vision of the Afterlife: The Heavenly Jerusalem of Santa Maria Maggiore

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Within the papal basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, whose dedication to the Virgin Mary was a direct result of the Council of Ephesus (431 CE), the concept of the Heavenly Jerusalem is evoked through two different means: in the "gateway" images of *Hiervsalem* and *Bethlehem* on the bottom left and right sides of the triumphal arch, and through the employment of the apsidal mosaic featuring the Virgin as enthroned (Figure 1).[1] It is generally agreed that a representation of the Heavenly Jerusalem provides the medieval viewer with a concrete visual—or target—to work towards in their worship practices. Following this line of thought, scholars such as Joanne Sieger, look to the relationship between sermons by Pope Leo I, which assert that Christ is both divine and human, and the mosaics of Santa Maria Maggiore, with their narrative emphasis placed on Mary.[2] Similarly, Margaret Miles provides another interpretation of the Old Testament scenes in the nave and the New Testament mosaic scenes located on the triumphal arch, suggesting that they work together to signal Christianity's triumph over Judaism. At the same time, Carol Neuman de Vegvar shows that there was a separation of spaces within Santa Maria Maggiore according to gender, relating to the gendered nave mosaic narratives from the Old Testament.[3] What has not been addressed in these discussions, however, is the idea that the nave and triumphal arch mosaics, as a whole, acted to reinforce for the viewer the real attainment of an ultimate goal—specifically, that entry into Heavenly Jerusalem was to be accomplished by way of the spiritual journey *through* the earthly Jerusalem, which was to be experienced both physically and metaphysically within the tangible confines of the architectural building.

It is the argument of this paper that the nave and triumphal arch mosaics at Santa Maria Maggiore served not only as a guide for how medieval viewers should model their spiritual lives, but also that these images functioned to orient those viewers for proceeding into the Heavenly Jerusalem upon their deaths, replicating the actions of those biblical role models depicted above them within the church. It is these images that suggest a path for the eye to follow, creating a horizontal line between the nave mosaics towards the triumphal arch, and then through the depictions of earthly cities of either *Hiervsalem* or *Bethlehem* into the Heavenly Jerusalem through and beyond the apsidal imagery (Figures 2 and 3). Importantly, however, it was in the spatial division of the church, and in the textiles marking those divisions, that the effect of the depicted role models varied depending on where the viewer was situated within Santa Maria Maggiore.

The fifth-century basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, was likely begun in the 420s during the time of Pope Celestine I (422-432) and was completed by his successor Pope Sixtus III (432-440) (Figure 4).[4] The majority of the credit is given to Pope Sixtus III, an argument influenced heavily by this Pope's propagandistic message written at the apex of the triumphal arch, under the *Throne of God* mosaic, asserting his claim for its creation.[5] This fifth-century incarnation of Santa Maria Maggiore consisted of the basic basilica form, with a tripartite curtained

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1 Margaret R. Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics: Triumphal Christianity and the Jews," *The Harvard Theological Review* 86, no. 2 (1993): 158.

2 Joanne Deane Sieger, "Visual Metaphor as Theology: Leo the Great's Sermons on the Incarnation and the Arch Mosaics at S. Maria Maggiore," *Gesta* 26, no. 2 (1987): 83-91.

3 Carol Neuman de Vegvar, "Gendered Spaces: The Placement of Imagery in Santa Maria Maggiore," in *Roma Felix-Formation and Reflections of Medieval Rome*, ed. Eamonn O Carragain and Carol Neuman de Vegvar (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 99; and Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics," 157.

4 Matilda Webb, *The Churches and Catacombs of Early Christian Rome: A Comprehensive Guide* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), 59; Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312-1308* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 46; Herbert L. Kessler and Johanna Zacharias, *Rome 1300: On The Path Of The Pilgrim* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 134; and Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics," 158. Pope Sixtus III dedicated the new church to Mary, because she was proclaimed Mother of God by the Council of Ephesus.

5 Krautheimer, *Rome*, 49; The mosaic inscription states "*Xystus episcopus plebi Dei"* which Krautheimer translated into "Sixtus the bishop to the people of God." There is also the inscription on the southeastern wall by Sixtus dedicating the church to the Virgin in mosaic.

entrance that opened into a large nave and two side aisles terminating in an apse (Figure 5). These side aisles were separated from the nave by large Ionic columns that would have continued behind the apse to form an ambulatory.[6] A series of fifth-century Old Testament mosaic scenes can still be seen above an architrave framed by pilasters. The nave mosaics on the right side of the nave depict scenes from the life of Moses, while the scenes on the left side of the nave are taken from the life of Abraham and Jacob. Above these scenes, the clerestory windows would have allowed a limited amount of hazy light to filter into the basilica.

The imagery on the triumphal arch is separated into registers read visually from the bottom to the top on either side of this arch that separates the nave from the apse (see Figure 1). The triumphal arch itself is located on top of columns, placing the mosaics slightly above the sightline of the viewer. On the left side of the arch, from bottom to top, the scenes illustrate the city of *Hiervsalem*, the Massacre of Innocents, the Epiphany, whereas the uppermost register contains the scenes of Mary Weaving the Temple Veil, the Annunciation, and the Betrothal of Mary and Joseph. The imagery on the right side of the triumphal arch depicts, from bottom to top, the city of *Bethlehem*, the Magi before Herod, the Flight into Egypt, and the Presentation in the Temple. While the images on either side can be read horizontally across the arch, it is at the center of the triumphal arch that these two sides come together to depict the Throne of God as the ultimate culmination (see Figure 4). The fifth-century mosaics on the triumphal arch served to frame the apse mosaic that would have likely featured the Virgin enthroned in the center. The current thirteenth-century apse of Christ crowning the Virgin is believed to be closely aligned to the original fifth-century scene (Figure 6). [7]

The depiction of the "earthly" city of Jerusalem was frequently employed to represent the transition point between this more tangible reality and the vision of the Heavenly city metaphorically above and beyond. As discussed by Bianca Kühnel, the idea of the Heavenly Jerusalem has been traced to the destruction of the Temple of Solomon by the Romans in 70 CE.[8] The earthly city of Jerusalem that was home to this Temple was of extreme importance to the Jewish faith, since it was believed that God dwelled there.[9] When the temple and the city of Jerusalem were destroyed, the belief arose that Jerusalem transcended into the realm of Heaven and God. Christianity elevated the status of the Heavenly Jerusalem because the Book of Revelation stated that the city of Jerusalem would come down from the Heavens to earth, as Christ was triumphant.[10] Augustine discusses in *The City of God*, that the image of the earthly city of Jerusalem is a symbol of the future city, or the heavenly city of God.[11] This importance began to be conveyed by the growing need to display visually the message of Christianity through a building and decorative agenda.

It seems only natural, therefore, that the depiction of the Heavenly Jerusalem came to be employed within apse mosaics as Christianity began to form its own artistic programs within its churches. Thus, as we see in the fourth-century church of Santa Pudentiana, the apse mosaic plainly depicts an image of the Heavenly Jerusalem (Figure 7). Christ is centered within the apse with his holy court on either side. Architecturally, a colonnade is located behind Christ with the heavenly city just beyond. The inclusion of the four evangelists in their beastly forms confirms to the viewer that this is not the earthly city of Jerusalem, but its heavenly incarnation.[12]

As the artistic conventions of Christian imagery changed from the blatant depiction of the earthly city of Jerusalem to represent the Heavenly Jerusalem, the scenes within church apses often featured depictions of Christ, whose physical presence stood as the metaphorical entrance into the Heavenly Jerusalem. This understanding is defined by Alexei Lidov's theory of "hieroplastic" perception, which is the idea of looking beyond an image to the imagined or "recalled" image that the two-dimensional visual creates.[13]

6 Caroline J. Goodson, *The Rome of Pope Paschal I: Papal Power, Urban Renovation, Church Rebuilding and Relic Translation, 817-824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 123. The original apse likely would have allowed an ambulatory space behind the columns. Pope Paschal I, in the ninth-century, complained bitterly of women giggling and chattering from behind him while he sat upon his papal throne, so he elevated the entire space away from the original floor.

7 Miles, "Santa Maria Maggiore's Fifth-Century Mosaics," 159; and Suzanne Spain, "The Promised Blessing," *The Art Bulletin* 61, no. 4 (1979): 518.

8 Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War: Volume 3*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 145; and Bianca Kühnel, *From the Earthly to the Heavenly Jerusalem* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1987), 39 and 44.

9 Kühnel, *Earthly to the Heavenly Jerusalem,* 49.

10 Kühnel, *Earthly to the Heavenly Jerusalem*, 57; and Rev. 21:2.

11 Augustine, *City of God, Volume IV: Books 12-15*, trans. Philip Levine (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 417; and Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 161.

12 Kühnel, *Earthly to the Heavenly Jerusalem,* 65; Kühnel describes the colonnade structure as the twelve gates/gateways into the Heavenly Jerusalem as suggested by Revelation, but this representation can be viewed as a colonnade which would also have signaled an entrance into the city. I argue that if the presence of Hiervsalem and Bethlehem, as suggested by G. B. de Rossi in the 19th century, is accurate, the two cities on either side would have been connected by this colonnade structure.

13 Alexei Lidov, "Spatial Icons. A Hierotopic Approach to Byzantine Art History," in *Towards Rewriting? : New Approaches to Byzantine Archaeology and Art Proceedings of the Symposium on Byzantine Art and Archaeology, Cracow, September 8-10, 2008*, ed. Piotr Grotowski, (Warsaw: The Polish Society of Oriental Art, 2010), 87; Alexei Lidov describes "hieroplastic" perception as not requiring "any mystic perception but rather a special type of consciousness, in which our distinct categories of the artistic, ritual, visual, spatial are interwoven into the inseparable whole."

Herbert Kessler's idea of Christian imagery as a "window onto another world" fits right into the imagery used for the cities of *Hiervsalem* and *Bethlehem* by leading the eye into the apse.[14] This understanding also goes hand in hand with what Henri Lefebvre classified as "lived space," which emphasizes the imagined space where the vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem is located within the mind of the viewer.[15] As a result, the viewers looking into the apse with the image of Christ could then visualize an imagined image of the Heavenly Jerusalem, thus making the connection that it is through their worship of Christ that they would join him in Heaven.

Günter Bandmann provides our understanding of the church building itself acting as a representation of the Heavenly Jerusalem. He contends that the church as the New Jerusalem comes from previous ideas of religious buildings as "the house of god."[16] This is fulfilled by the presence of God in the sacraments and the saints contained within the relics.[17] Ambrose further supports the idea of the Heavenly Jerusalem as being present within the church because he equated the Church with the City of God.[18] As a result, the idea that the Heavenly Jerusalem is inherent within Santa Maria Maggiore is amplified by the use of the city mosaics to convey to the viewers that God is present, especially within the sanctity of the apse.

In Santa Maria Maggiore, the metaphorical Heavenly Jerusalem has been said to be suggested by the two cities of *Hiervsalem* and *Bethlehem* at the left and right sides of the triumphal arch (see Figure 1). Interestingly, however, these two golden, jewel-encrusted cities both contain white colonnades within the entrances. These interior colonnades are angled diagonally towards the central mosaic within the apse. These angles serve to draw the eye from the two arched entries, through the church interiors, and toward the apse mosaic containing the image of the Virgin and Christ. Thusly employing the "hieroplastic" perception, the image of the Heavenly Jerusalem can be visualized as the viewer looks past the earthly gateways of *Hiervsalem* and *Bethlehem* into the heavenly city achieved metaphorically through Christ and the Virgin depicted within the apse mosaic. The depictions of these cities as gateways into the Heavenly Jerusalem can be further supported by the depiction of the two cites as golden and encrusted with jewels. This representation lines up with the golden, jewel-covered gateways leading into the Heavenly Jerusalem as described in *Revelation*.[19]

What makes Santa Maria Maggiore particularly interesting in this regard is that this pathway to the Heavenly Jerusalem actually begins at the curtained entry into the basilica. From this point of entry, one sees that the viewer's route to the Heavenly Jerusalem through Christ and the Virgin was initiated by mimicking the behaviors of the suggested biblical role models found within the nave mosaic panels. These panels are separated into specific gendered story lines, as suggested by Carol Neumann de Vegvar (see Figure 5).[20] From their position on the right side of the church, which corresponds to the left of Christ depicted in the apse, women were situated in a position to view scenes located on the south wall depicting the lives of Abraham and Jacob. These images show an elevated number of known wives of biblical patriarchs, such as Leah the wife of Jacob. Men, on the opposite side of the church, were able to view the scenes on the north wall associated with the life of Moses, which contained a large number of recognizable kings and priests.[21] As these segregated viewers observed what Henri Lefebvre would call "their own 'perceived space'" between themselves and their suggested role models along the nave arcade, their eyes would naturally follow the horizontal progression of the nave mosaics forward toward the entrances of either *Hiervsalem* or *Bethlehem* depicted on either side of the triumphal arch.

These views were, however, dictated by the viewer's specific location within the basilica. Because of gender and class segregations, and compounded by the view-blocking columns separating the nave from the side aisles and the possibility of draped curtains between these columns, any given viewer would have had a limited selection of depicted role models within their range of view. For instance, when standing in either the nave or the aisle of the basilica, the viewers would only have been able to view clearly three panels of the Old Testament nave scenes opposite to their position. For example, standing on the right side of the nave, the fifth panel from the triumphal arch on the left side of the nave would have allowed the female viewer to observe clearly the scene of Rachel announcing the arrival of Jacob with the bottom of the scene showcasing the meeting of Laban and Jacob, with Leah and Rachel leading Jacob into the house (Figure 8).[22] This female viewer would also have been able to make out the female biblical role models of Rebecca to the right, with Rachel and Leah on the left.

[14] Herbert L. Kessler, *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 148.

[15] Rob Shields, "Henri Lefebvre," in *Key Thinkers on Place and Space*, ed. Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, and Gill Valentine (London: SAGE, 2004), 281.

[16] Gunter Bandmann, *Early Medieval Architecture as Bearer of Meaning,* trans. Kendall Wallis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 61 and 65.

[17] Bandmann, *Early Medieval Architecture*, 61 and 63.

[18] O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God*, 56; Ambrose also mentions the church as the "heavenly city of Jerusalem," which O'Daly suggests had a great impact on Augustine's ideas about the city of God.

[19] Rev. 21:19-21.

[20] Neumann de Vegvar, "Gendered Spaces," 104.

[21] Beat Brenk, *Die frühchristlichen Mosaiken in S. Maria Maggiore zu Rom* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, Fanz, 1975), 111-13.

[22] Webb, *Churches and Catacombs*, 62.

While this allowed the female viewer to draw connections between herself and these prominent women, if she was more forward or further back, her view would have been of different sets of role models.

Another factor that needs to be considered is the fact that the panels of the nave mosaics are visually located on the same horizontal plane with the gateway cities of *Hiervsalem* and *Bethlehem* (see Figures 2 and 3). In death, the "role model" figures depicted in the nave would have reached the Heavenly Jerusalem in a horizontal movement forward through these cities (Figure 9). Similarly, as the viewers turn toward the altar and apse, their gender-segregated locations placed them in alignment with the visual plane of these same cities, and had them entering through the same gates that they would have metaphorically entered upon their own deaths. In this sense, both male and female viewers would observe the scenes within the nave and follow the horizontal plane to their own gateways of either *Hiervsalem* or *Bethlehem* based on their gender. Since the identifying inscriptions would not have been visible from about the midpoint between the apse and the entrance of the church, both male and female viewers would therefore observe a more direct correlation between the nave scenes and gateways into the Heavenly Jerusalem without clearly seeing which city was which. It was only as they progressed forward, facing the apse, that the distinction would become clear.

What is particularly telling in this spatial analysis, is that the use of biblical role models extends from the entrance of the cities of either *Hiervsalem* or *Bethlehem* up into the scenes depicted on the triumphal arch (see Figure 1). It is at these upper levels that we see that the ultimate role model is actually the Virgin Mary, who appears four different times within the overall composition (Figure 10). In each incarnation of the Virgin, she is not only employing New Testament stories associated with Christ, but is also providing an example of what the female viewer can strive to imitate, specifically the role of the productive mother. The stressing of Mary as the penultimate biblical role model highlights the strength of women in the early church. While it suggested motherhood as naturally productive, it also stressed Mary's productivity in practical and spiritual terms by depicting Mary Weaving the Temple Veil (Figure 11).

The apocryphal story of Mary Weaving the Temple Veil describes Mary weaving a veil or curtain to be hung within the doorway of the temple in Jerusalem.[23] Metaphorically, Mary's productivity conceals and reveals the truth of the Christ child as the Savior. In a more literal sense, however, the viewer at Santa Maria Maggiore would have entered the basilica through a curtained doorway similar to that described for the entrance to the Temple to proceed to their specific locations. Within the church, the role of the curtain as a spatial division was likely amplified by its actual use in the nave. This impression of the possibility for mystical revelation is further enhanced by the use of curtains between the columns of the ambulatory to "veil" certain aspects of the liturgical ritual. The importance of depicting the *mother* of Christ contributing this mystical element to the temple thus signals or foreshadows the importance of women's contributions to the church. Whether male or female, the placement of the biblical role models in the nave, the images on the Triumphal arch, and the culminating apsidal image of the Virgin all work together to emphasize that this is the triumph of Mary and to signal the path that viewers of both genders could move towards for their own transition from the earthly realm into the Heavenly Jerusalem beyond.

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[23] J.K. Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament. A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M.R. James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 48-67; Elliot reproduces the translation of the *Protoevangelion of James*, 10.1, which provides the story of Mary weaving a veil of purple for the Temple.

Figure 1. Santa Maria Maggiore, Interior, Triumphal Arch. *c*. 432-440, mosaic. Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: Jena Jones.

Figure 2. *Hiervsalem*, on the triumphal arch, left side. *c*. 432-440, mosaic. Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: Tania Kolarik.

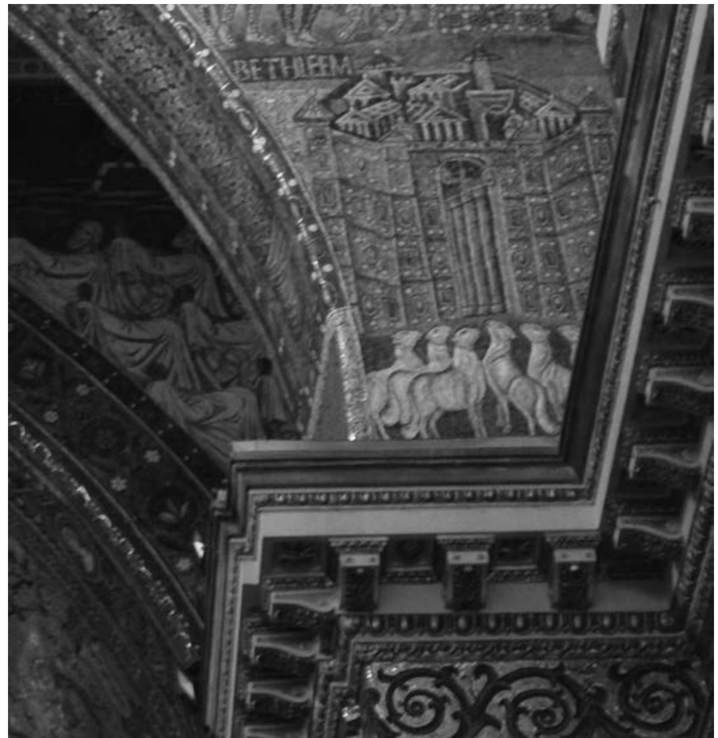


Figure 3. *Bethlehem*, on the triumphal arch, right side. *c*. 432-440, mosaic. Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: Tania Kolarik.

Figure 4. Throne of God, on the triumphal arch, center. *c*. 432-440, mosaic. Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: Tania Kolarik.

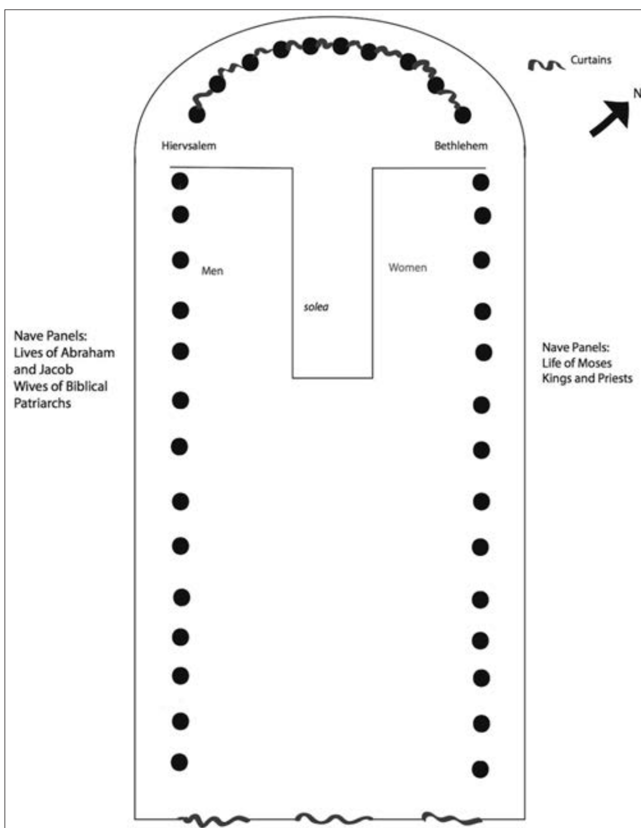
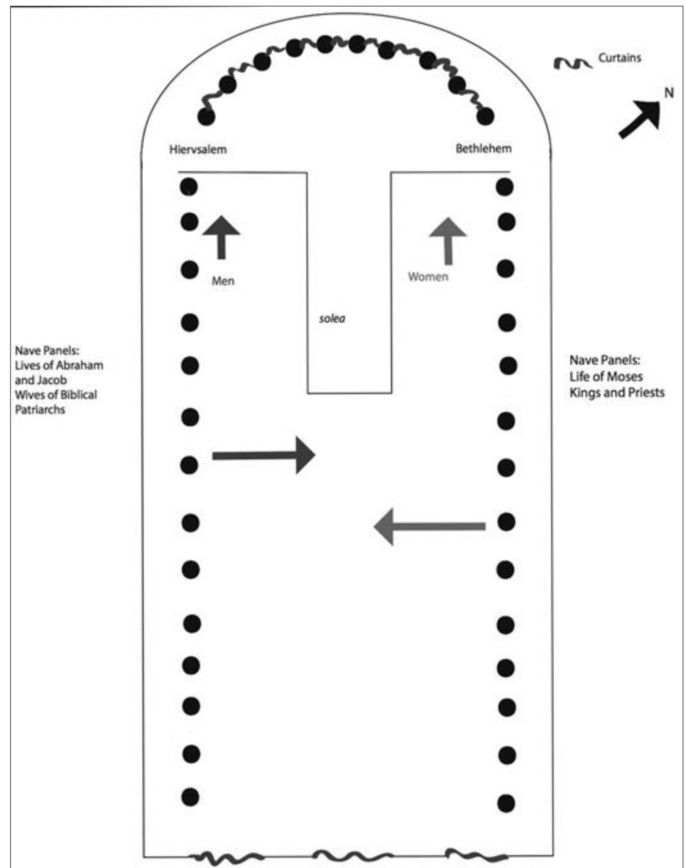


Figure 5. Plan of Santa Maria Maggiore depicting gender separation. Plan credit: Tania Kolarik.

► Figure 6. [*facing page, top*] Jacapo Torriti, Coronation of the Virgin. Late 13th Century, mosaic. Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: Jena Jones.

► Figure 7. [*facing page, bottom*] Altar Apse of Santa Pudenziana. *c*. 407-417, mosaic. Basilica of Santa Pudenziana, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: In public domain.


Curtains
N
Hiervsalem
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Men
Women
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Lives of Abraham
and Jacob
Wives of Biblical
Patriarchs
Nave Panels:
Life of Moses
Kings and Priests

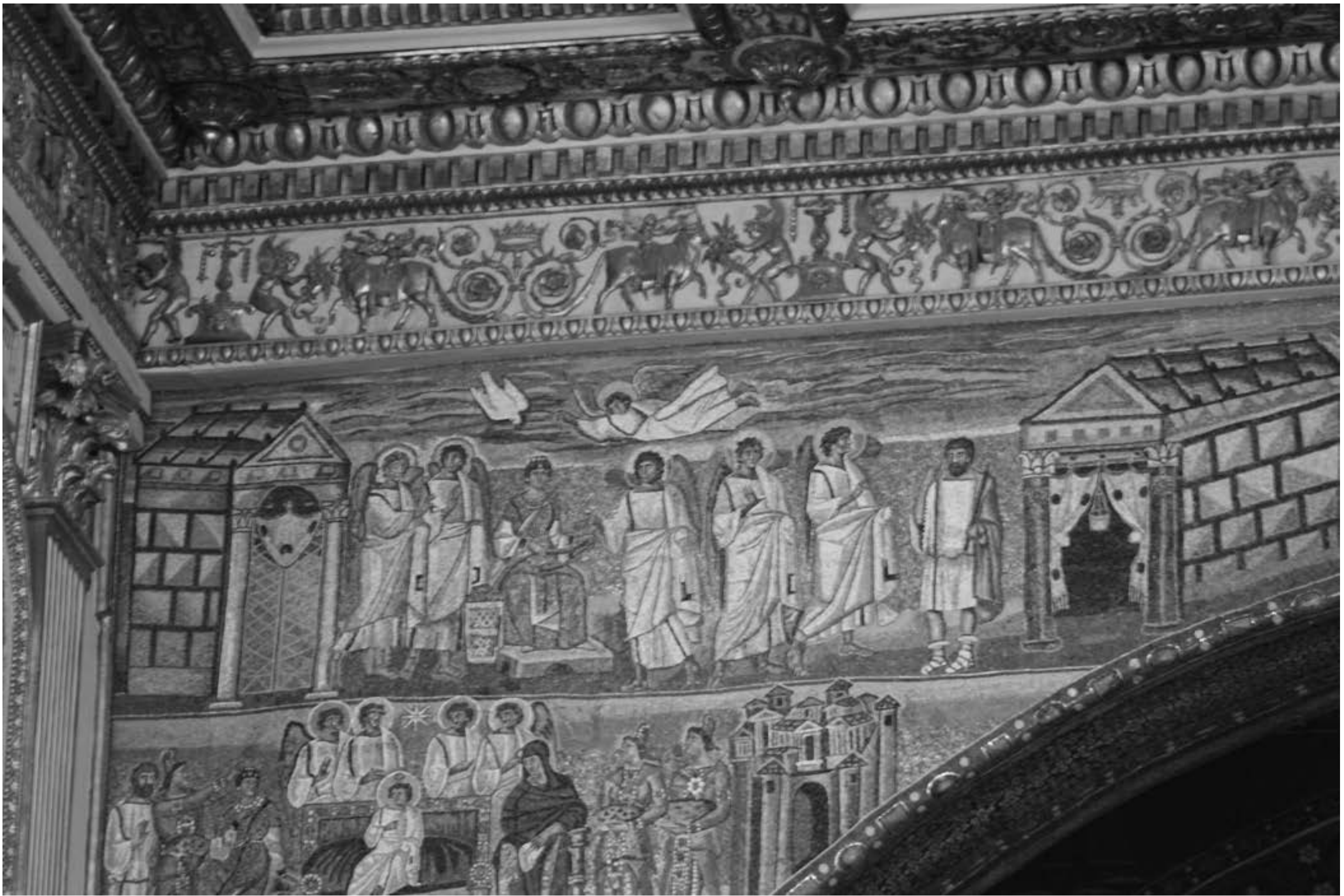

Figure 11. Mary Weaving the Temple Veil and Annunciation. *c*. 432-440, mosaic. Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: Tania Kolarik.

◀ Figure 8. [*facing page, top left*] Rachel Announcing the Arrival of Jacob, nave panel. *c*. 432-440. Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: In public domain.

◀ Figure 9. [*facing page, top right*] Plan of Santa Maria Maggiore with arrows depicting lines of sight and gender separation. Plan credit: Tania Kolarik.

◀ Figure 10. [*facing page, bottom*] Triumphal Arch, highlighting the representations of the Virgin Mary. *c*. 432-440, mosaic. Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome, Italy. Photo credit: After a photo by Jena Jones.