

# *Thalamus Dei*

The Bed in Images of the Annunciation  
Its Iconography and Doctrinal Explanation



JOSÉ MARÍA SALVADOR-GONZÁLEZ

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Its Iconography and Doctrinal Explanation**

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# INTRODUCTION

## 1. The Annunciation: The Event and its Dogmatic Implications

In the doctrinal legacy of Christianity, the Annunciation of the angel to the Virgin Mary is an event of such essential significance that it marks the beginning of the redemption of Humanity. Moreover, Christians believe as a dogma of faith that God the Son's human conception and incarnation in Mary's virginal womb took place at the exact moment in which she accepted unrestrictedly, as a humble "handmaid of the Lord" (*ancilla Domini*), God the Father's design in choosing her as the mother of his divine Son incarnated as a man. Such a plan is precisely what the angel Gabriel communicated to Mary in the event of the Annunciation.

However, despite its decisive impact on Humanity's redemption, the Annunciation to Mary appears documented only by the Gospel of Luke.<sup>1</sup> According to this evangelist, six months after the elderly Elizabeth conceived John the Baptist, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth with a message for a virgin named Mary, married to Joseph, of David's lineage.<sup>2</sup> Upon entering where the girl was, Gabriel addressed her with this laudatory salutation: "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."<sup>3</sup> Deeply

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<sup>1</sup> Lc, 1, 26-38. *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam. Nova editio (logicis partitionibus aliisque subsidiis ornata a Alberto Colunga et Laurentio Turrado)*, Madrid, La Editorial Católica, Col. Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 12ª edición, 2005, 1011. In the subsequent footnotes we will cite this book with the abbreviation *Biblia Vulgata*.

<sup>2</sup> "In mense autem sexto, missus est angelus Gabriel a Deo in civitatem Galilaeae, cui nomen Nazareth, ad virginem desponsatam viro, cui nomen erat Ioseph, de domo David, et nomen virginis Maria." (Lc 1, 26-27. *Biblia Vulgata*, 1011). "26 Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin [e]ngaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the [s]descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary." (Luke 1:26-27. Bible. New International Version (NIV). In the following footnotes we will cite this version of the Bible through the abbreviation NIV.

<sup>3</sup> "Ave gratia plena: Dominus tecum: benedicta tu in mulieribus." (Lc 1, 28. *Biblia Vulgata*, 1011).

moved by such unusual words, whose meaning was mysterious to her,<sup>4</sup> Mary got this surprising announcement from the angel:

30 But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”<sup>5</sup>

Astonished by such an exceptional message, and wondering how she could conceive without having manly intercourse,<sup>6</sup> Mary received this explanation from Gabriel: “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called[a] the Son of God.”<sup>7</sup>

Expanding on his disquisition, the angel asserted that “there is nothing impossible for God,” and, as a proof, informed Mary that her elderly and barren cousin Elizabeth was already in her sixth month of pregnancy.<sup>8</sup> Then,

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<sup>4</sup> “*Quae cum audisset, turbata est in sermone eius, et cogitabat qualis esset ista salutatio.*” (Lc 1, 29. *Biblia Vulgata*, 1011). “Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.” (Luke 1:29. NIV).

<sup>5</sup> “*Non timeas Maria, invenisti enim gratiam apud Deum: ecce concipies in utero, et paries filium, et vocabis nomen eius Iesum: hic erit magnus, et Filius Altissimi vocabitur, et dabit illi Dominus Deus sedem David patris eius: et regnabit in domo Iacob in aeternum, et regni eius non erit finis.*” (Lc 1, 30-33. *Biblia Vulgata*, 1011). “<sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”” (Luke 1:30-33. NIV).

<sup>6</sup> “*Dixit autem Maria ad angelum: Quomodo fiet istud, quoniam virum non cognosco?*” (Lc 1, 34. *Biblia Vulgata*, 1011). “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”” (Luke 1:34. NIV).

<sup>7</sup> “*Spiritus sanctus superveniet in te, et virtus Altissimi obumbrabit tibi. Ideoque et quod nascetur ex te sanctum, vocabitur Filius Dei.*” (Lc 1, 35. *Biblia Vulgata*, 1011). “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called<sup>[a]</sup> the Son of God.” (Luke 1:35. NIV).

<sup>8</sup> “*Et ecce Elisabeth cognata tua, et ipsa concepit filium in senectute sua: et hic mensis sextus est illi, quae vocatur sterilis: quia non erit impossibile apud Deum omne verbum.*” (Lc 1, 36-37 *Biblia Vulgata*, 1011). “<sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup> For no word from God will ever fail.”” (Luke 1:36-37. NIV).



convinced by the angel's explanations, Mary manifested her unconditional obedience to the Omnipotent's project, proclaiming: "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."<sup>9</sup>

The details of this decisive event are so meager according to the canonical account. These scarce data about the Annunciation to Mary transmitted by the Gospel of Luke were later assumed entirely and expanded in some cases with several fabulous details by the subsequent apocryphal legends about Jesus' childhood. The most important apocrypha in this regard are the *Protoevangelium of James* (c. 2nd-3rd centuries),<sup>10</sup> the *Gospel of Pseudo Matthew* (6th century),<sup>11</sup> the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* (c. 6th century)<sup>12</sup> and the *Book on the Nativity of Mary* (9th century).<sup>13</sup> We avoid examining these apocrypha here, since what Luke expressed in his Gospel constitutes the essential basis of the canonical narrative that supports the European representations of the Annunciation in the 14th and 15th centuries that we will analyze later.

Before continuing our presentation of the topic under study, it is crucial to emphasize what already indicated in the first paragraph of this Introduction, namely: the event of angel's Annunciation to the Virgin marks the effective beginning of Humanity's salvation. As already stated, the Redeemer Son of God incarnated as a man in the Virgin Mary's womb at the exact moment in which she manifested her unconditional acceptance of the will of her Most High by designating her as the mother of her divine Son incarnate. Therefore, the event of the Annunciation implies at the same time two essentially interconnected dogmatic contents: first, the supernatural God the Son's

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<sup>9</sup> "Ecce ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum." (Lc 1, 38. *Biblia Vulgata*, 1011). "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." (Luke 1:38. NIV).

<sup>10</sup> *Protoevangelio de Santiago*. Bilingual text Greek/Spanish. In Aurelio de Santos Otero, *Los evangelios apócrifos*, Madrid, La Editorial Católica, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 148, 2006, 130-170.

<sup>11</sup> *Evangelio del Pseudo Mateo*. Bilingual text Latin/Spanish. In Santos Otero 2006, 178-236.

<sup>12</sup> *El Evangelio Armenio de la Infancia. Autor apócrifo*. In Edmundo González Blanco, *Evangelios Apócrifos* (Traductor Edmundo González Blanco), Madrid, 1935, Tomo 2, 88-236.

<sup>13</sup> *Libro de la Natividad de María*. Bilingual text Latin/Spanish. In Santos Otero 2006, 238-252.

conception/incarnation as a man in Mary's immaculate womb; second, and as a necessary correlate, the virginal divine motherhood of Mary.

## 2. Iconography's evolution of the Annunciation

Based essentially on the canonical text of the Gospel of Luke and, to a lesser extent, on some particular details of the apocrypha above, the iconographic theme of the Virgin Mary's Annunciation is one of the most widespread in medieval Christian art. Already documented since the end of the 2nd century in the *cubiculum* IV of Bosius in the catacomb of Priscilla on the Via Salaria Nova in Rome,<sup>14</sup> this theme spread widely from the 5th-6th centuries in plentiful mosaics, miniatures, ivories and bas-reliefs in stone, ceramic, and metal.<sup>15</sup>

After beginning with quite simple narrative formulas, the iconography of the Annunciation began to acquire, from the 11th century, and especially during the Late Middle Ages, a progressive compositional complexity, and a growing conceptual sophistication,<sup>16</sup> through refined symbols and brilliant metaphors. Undoubtedly, the extraordinary communicative success and the great symbolic richness of this iconographic motif are explained by the pedagogical need to disseminate the Christian faith in the context of a growing devotion to the Virgin Mary, in close connection with the deepening and the doctrinal refinement of Mariology, in full harmony with the broad dogmatic improvement of Christology.

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<sup>14</sup> Fernand Cabrol, "I. Annonciation (Fête de l')". In Cabrol, Fernand & Leclercq, Henri (eds.), *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, Paris, Letouzey et Ané, 1924, 2242; Henri Leclercq, "L'Annonciation dans l'art". In Cabrol & Leclercq 1924, Tome I, 2<sup>e</sup> Partie, 2255-2257. See also Giuseppe M. Toscano, *Il pensiero cristiano nell'arte*, vol. I, Bergamo, Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1960, 172.

<sup>15</sup> See Leclercq 1924, Tome I, 2<sup>e</sup> Partie, 2255-2257.

<sup>16</sup> Adriano Prandi, "Annunciazione. 4. Nell'arte". In *Enciclopedia Cattolica*, 1948, vol. I, 1393, highlights the progressive complexity of this iconographic theme. This is also what Giuseppe M. Toscano does in *Il pensiero cristiano nell'arte*, Bergamo, Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1960, vol. I, 172.

The artistic representation of the event of the Annunciation to Mary evolved appreciably over the centuries, as stated by some prestigious art historians and iconographers, such as Manuel Trens (1947),<sup>17</sup> Louis Réau (1957),<sup>18</sup> Giuseppe Toscano (1961),<sup>19</sup> Gertrud Schiller (1971),<sup>20</sup> and Timothy Verdon (2004).<sup>21</sup> During the first nine centuries of the Christian era, artistic images of the Annunciation displayed a straightforward scene, generally lacking scenography's features (furniture or other accessories) or including only some synthetic architectural element to represent a house or a town in metonymy. Thus, the scene of the early medieval images of the Annunciation is almost always reduced to the sole presence of the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary. Furthermore, the two protagonists, depicted in static and expressionless attitudes, are generally silhouetted against an abstract background, such as a homogeneous color in frescoes or the shiny gold leaf in paintings on wood, sometimes even being each other inserted into separate spaces, like independent frames or altarpiece panels.<sup>22</sup>

Already at the end of the Romanesque period, and especially since the 13th century, the Annunciation scene began to progressively include specific narrative-compositional elements of great symbolic relevance: among them, some objects or attributes stand out that complement the figure of each protagonist, like a prayer book or seat in Mary, and a staff or herald's scepter in Gabriel. In parallel, the scenery also becomes more complex, which, from a narrow architectural framework (sometimes a niche), becomes an increasingly larger enclosure or construction to signify the Virgin's domicile. As the centuries pass, significantly since the Quattrocento, the interior of Mary's house –often expressed in the shape of a pergola or porch, a palace or

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<sup>17</sup> Manuel Trens, *María. Iconografía de la Virgen en el arte español*, Madrid, Plus Ultra, 1947.

<sup>18</sup> Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien. Tome 2, Iconographie de la Bible. Part II, Nouveau Testament*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957.

<sup>19</sup> Giuseppe M. Toscano, *Il pensiero cristiano nell'arte*, Bergamo, Istituto Italiano d'Arti Grafiche, 1960, 3 vols.

<sup>20</sup> Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art. Vol I*, London, Lund Humphries, 1971, 32-37.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Verdon, *Maria nell'arte europea*, Milano, Electa, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Prandi 1948, vol. I, 1388.

even a temple— is enriched with a view towards the exterior space, in which sometimes one can see a garden, a city sector or a natural landscape.<sup>23</sup>

During the Late Middle Ages, the pictorial images of the Annunciation were rapidly enriched with architectural elements and furniture until they acquired great compositional complexity in the 14th and 15th centuries.<sup>24</sup> During those last two centuries, the growing humanism and the progressive enjoyment of the earthly world are reflected in the increasingly opulent setting in the images of the Annunciation, with a realistic representation of houses, furniture, household utensils, and everyday objects, and clothing.

Furthermore, almost all images of the Annunciation in the 14th and 15th centuries include certain narrative elements, which contain deep doctrinal symbolism far from being inconsequential decorative details. Among these symbolic elements, a lily stem<sup>25</sup> carried by the angel or placed in a vase,<sup>26</sup> a beam of rays of light descending towards the Virgin,<sup>27</sup> the dove of the Holy Spirit, a prayer book in the hands of Mary, a closed door,<sup>28</sup> or the house of

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<sup>23</sup> Prandi 1948, vol. I, 1389-1390.

<sup>24</sup> On this topic in this period, see, for example, David M. Robb, “The Iconography of the Annunciation in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries,” *The Art Bulletin* 18 (1936): 480-526.

<sup>25</sup> We have interpreted the Christological and Mariological meanings of this lily stem in images of the Annunciation in the articles “*Flos de radice Jesse*. A hermeneutic approach to the theme of the lily in the Spanish Gothic painting of The Annunciation from patristic and theological sources”, *Eikón Imago* 2/2 (2013), 183-222; “*In virga Aaron Maria ostendebatur*. A new interpretation of the stem of lilies in the Spanish Gothic Annunciation from patristic and theological sources”, *De Medio Aevo* 5/2 (2016), 117-144; “*Flos campi et lilium convallium*. Third interpretation of lily in the iconography of *The Annunciation* in Italian Trecento art from patristic and theological sources”, *Eikón Imago* 3/1 (2014), 75-96.

<sup>26</sup> We have explained the doctrinal meanings of this vase in images of the Annunciation in the paper “The Vase in Paintings of the Annunciation, a Polyvalent Symbol of the Virgen Mary”, *Religions* 13/12, 1188 (2022), 1-43.

<sup>27</sup> We have interpreted the doctrinal meanings of this ray of light in images of the Annunciation in the papers “The symbol of light’s ray in images of the Annunciation of the 14th and 15th centuries according to Greek Patrology”, *História Revista*, 25/3 (2020), 334- 355; and “*Facta est Maria fenestra coeli*. The ray of light passing through a window in images of the Annunciation from the theological perspective”, *Biblica et Patristica Thoruniensia* 15/4 (2022), 39-85.

<sup>28</sup> We have explained the doctrinal meanings of this closed door in images of the Annunciation in the articles “*Haec porta Domini*. Exegeses of some Greek Church Fathers on Ezekiel’s *porta clausa* (5th -10th centuries)”, *Cauriensia*, 15 (2020), 615-633; “Christian exegeses on Ezekiel’s *porta clausa* before the Councils of Ephesus, Constantinople, and Chalcedon”, *Konstantinove Listy (Constantine’s Letters)* 14/2 (2021), 3-13; “The symbol of the door as Mary in images of The Annunciation of the

Mary figured as a Christian temple<sup>29</sup> or a splendid palace.<sup>30</sup> The intellectual authors of many artistic images of the Annunciation incorporate deliberately some of these symbolic features into the scene to illustrate the dogmatic contents underlying the salvific event of the Annunciation, namely, the supernatural human conception/incarnation of God the Son, and the virginal divine motherhood of Mary. However, leaving aside these symbols above, we will concentrate in this book exclusively on interpreting the symbolism of the connubial bed, which, with a similar doctrinal purpose, appears included in many images of the Annunciation from the 14th and 15th centuries.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. An iconographic problem in some Annunciations of the 14th and 15th centuries

Before beginning the textual and iconographic analyses that constitute the core of this book, it is necessary to draw attention to the iconographic problem of this conjugal bed included in many pictorial representations of the Annunciation, and to some incorrect interpretations given to it.

As we will explain later, this connubial bed—almost always large and prominent, sometimes in the center of the Annunciation scene—is a powerful symbol, invested with deep Mariological and Christological meanings.

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14th-15th centuries”, *Fenestella. Inside Medieval Art* 2 (2021), 93-110; and “*Porta clausa es, Virgo*. Exegeses on Ezekiel's *porta clausa* by some Latin Church Fathers and theologians between the 6th and the 12th centuries”, *Cauriensia* 17 (2022), 511-537.

<sup>29</sup> We have explained the doctrinal meanings of Mary's house shaped as a temple in images of the Annunciation in the papers “The temple in images of the Annunciation: a double dogmatic symbol according to the Latin theological tradition (6th-15th centuries)”, *De Medio Aevo* 9 (2020), 56-68; “Latin theological interpretations on *templum Dei* until the Second Council of Constantinople: a Mariological and Christological symbol”, *Veritas. Revista de Filosofía y Teología* 49 (2021), 115-133.

<sup>30</sup> We have interpreted the doctrinal meanings of Mary's house shaped as a palace in images of the Annunciation in the article “The house/palace in Annunciations of the 14th and 15th centuries. Iconographic interpretation in light of the Latin patristic and theological tradition”, *Eikón Imago* 10 (2021), 391-406.

<sup>31</sup> We have analysed the doctrinal meanings of the conjugal bed in images of the Annunciation in the paper “The bed in images of the Annunciation (14th-15th centuries): An iconographic interpretation according to Latin Patristics”, *De Medio Aevo* 10/1, (2021), 77-93.

However, this bed and its doctrinal symbolism have produced three different reactions among iconographers and art historians, each one more inappropriate than the other. For most of them, the bed and its symbolism go completely unnoticed. Some experts, however, mention the bed as a simple compositional or decorative detail without any significant value. The third reaction, undoubtedly the most harmful, is that of those who arbitrarily "interpret" the meaning of the bed without justifying their "interpretations" with documentary evidence. Now, unraveling the doctrinal meanings of this conjugal bed in images of the Annunciation constitutes the main research aim of this book.

Thus, from what we will see in Chapter 4 when considering some –and only some– of the multiple unjustified and even erroneous "interpretations" given to the connubial bed included in images of the Annunciation, it is evident that this specific "domestic" piece of furniture in this Marian episode becomes an arduous iconographic problem, whose cryptic meanings we propose to decipher in Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4.

To give a convincing answer to the conceptual and iconographic problem we have just highlighted, we will approach the study according to two complementary methodological strategies.

- 1) First, and with particular emphasis, we will analyse a broad set of exegetical texts through which many Fathers and theologians of the Greek-Eastern and Latin Churches dogmatically interpreted for more than a millennium the *thalamus* metaphor and other analogous expressions allusive to the conjugal union. As a necessary complement to the analyses of these patristic and theological exegesis, we will also examine plentiful poetic expressions through which many medieval liturgical hymns from the 10th to the 15th centuries allude to the symbolic meaning of *thalamus* and other similar metaphors.
- 2) Second, starting from the conceptual findings obtained in the textual analyses of these primary sources of Christian doctrine, we will iconographically analyse a select set of pictorial images of the

Annunciation from the 14th and 15th centuries, that include a conjugal bed in their scene.

It is worth pointing out from the beginning that all those exegetical texts we will evaluate in this book emerged and progressively developed during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages in a warm context, determined by two crucial facts: first, the increasingly widespread, fervent devotion to the Virgin Mary; second, the subsequent epistemic improvement of Mariology, after successive controversies with various heretical currents. As signs of that most profound devotion, the Virgin Mary, who was soon recognized as the virginal Mother of God the Son (Θεοτόκος), would be hailed during those long centuries with lyrical metaphors as “Queen of Heaven” (*Regina Coeli*), “Enclosed Garden” (*Hortus conclusus*), “Sealed Fountain” (*Fons signatus*), “Ark of the Covenant” (*Foederis Arca*), “Closed Door” (*porta clausa*), “Gate of Heaven” (*Ianua Coeli*), “Seat of Wisdom” (*Sedes Sapientiae*), “House of the Lord” (*Domus Domini*), “King’s Palace” (*Palatium Regis*), “Throne Room or King’s Court” (*aula Regis*), and many other symbolic figures.

Among all this profuse panoply of poetic titles referring to the Virgin Mary, we are now interested in shedding light on the endearing metaphorical figure “conjugal bed of God” (*thalamus Dei*). Now, it is necessary to specify, at the outset, that the Latin word *thalamus* means not only “conjugal bedchamber” but also “conjugal bed” (or simply “bed”). These two complementary meanings, the chamber, and the furniture, are precisely what most Church Fathers, theologians, and liturgical hymnographers evaluated here have in mind in their exegeses when they gloss some expressions that include or suggest the concept *thalamus*.

An in-depth investigation into primary sources of Latin and Greek Patristics did not take long to progressively reveal satisfactory answers to the problems posed by this astonishing conjugal bed in images of the Annunciation. In fact, very surprisingly, we found a profuse series of exegetical comments offered for more than a millennium by many Fathers and theologians of the Eastern and Western Churches on the

term *thalamus* (conjugal bed or connubial bedchamber) or other words related to it, such as husband (*sponsus*) and wife (*sponsa*). In most cases, these exegetes were inspired by verses 4 and 5 of Psalm 18: “4 In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. 5 It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course.”<sup>32</sup>

So, in the first three chapters of the book, we will analyse an abundant set of patristic, theological, and liturgical texts referring to the *thalamus*, and, most significantly, *thalamus Dei* metaphor. In Chapter 1 we will consider the doctrinal interpretations of some Fathers of the Greek-Eastern Churches between the 2nd and 9th centuries. In Chapter 2, we will study the similar comments made by Latin Church Fathers, Doctors, and theologians between the 4th and 15th centuries. In Chapter 3, we will expose the poetic allusions to the *thalamus Dei* and other similar metaphorical expressions recorded in stanzas of countless Latin liturgical hymns between the 10th and 15th centuries.

Consequently, in Chapter 4 we will analyse iconographically twenty-five paintings of the Annunciation from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries which include a bed in their scenery, trying to explain it as a Mariological symbol, according to the concordant exegetical tradition of Eastern and Western Church Fathers, theologians and hymnographers during more than a millennium.

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<sup>32</sup> Psalm 19:4-5 (NIV). “*in sole posuit tabernaculum suum et ipse tamquam sponsus procedens de thalamo suo exsultavit ut gigas ad currendam viam*”. (Ps 18,6. *Biblia Vulgata*, 463).