

*Visitation*, by Jacopo Pontormo (1494-1557)

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Jacopo Pontormo painted the *Visitation* (1514-16) for the Church of the Annunciation in Florence, Italy, where the fresco remains. The scene depicts the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45). Elizabeth is the first person to confess that Jesus, even in the womb, is “my Lord” (1:43). Pontormo offers a creative depiction of the scene, adding various details to shape the viewer’s interpretation.

Unlike the biblical narrative, Pontormo's fresco is filled with an entourage of characters. In a complex combination of hand gestures, Joseph and Zechariah guide the viewer to the scene. In the upper portion, the painting depicts the sacrifice of Isaac, suggesting a parallel between the faith of Abraham and Mary, united by the common sacrifice of their sons. Flanking Abraham and Isaac are two angels holding Latin inscriptions which apply to both scenes. Translated they read: "S/he [Mary/Abraham] owes him [Isaac/Jesus] to God" and "Nor does he [God] promise in vain." In Pontormo's visual interpretation, God's promise to provide Abraham with offspring finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ. A third inscription, "Look favorably Most Excellent God," on the wall between the two scenes unites the two by invoking divine favor upon both Abraham's and Mary's faithfulness. A prophet with a codex bears witness to the event.