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THE FASCINATING WOMAN OF REVELATION 12

*Bertrand Buby, S.M.**

A number of years ago, I began reading the book of Revelation for its spiritual benefits. I started to take this book of Scripture seriously and saw a pattern emerging which gave tremendous importance to the end of chapter eleven and all of chapter twelve—the encounter with the “woman.” The “woman,” as she is called, through her prominence in the liturgy, theology and ecclesiology, has had great influence upon Christian theology and prayer.

I asked many questions in relation to her importance, such as: Who does she represent? How is she understood by Christians? Why would Christians identify with her? What makes her so unique? When did her importance begin in Christian history? Where is the factual basis for her importance in Christian history found? What does this “woman” tell us about God, Jesus, the Spirit and our relationship to the Trinity? And, finally, what does she tell us about ourselves?

These tantalizing questions about this fascinating woman led me on a personal journey of research and study of the Book of Revelation which continues as we enter the new millennium. (Erudite students know that in the Christian calendar we are working with a flawed chronology created by a monk named Dennis Exiguus. The second millennium has passed and the third one is already four to six years old historically, according to historians and exegetes.)

The many commentaries on the book of Revelation show how difficult it is to interpret the symbolic narrative of a seer

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telling the story, in spiral-like cycles of thought, which involves an epistolary scroll, a worship scroll and a war scroll all bound together in one complete work. The work also contains elements which are prophetic, eschatological (since it is concerned with judgment and the final victories of the hero), ecclesiological (recall the seven churches of chapters two and three), Christological (some new titles are given to Jesus not found elsewhere in the New Testament), soteriological (God's plan of salvation is shown through the hero-victim, the lamb who is, at the same, the Lion of Judah), and pneumatological (the role of the Spirit is outlined in relation to the Church community).

The focus of this study is upon the fascinating image of "the woman" (chapter 12). This woman has as many as twenty-eight different identifications—some symbolic, others biblical, still others theological or spiritual; there is even an astrological and a mythical identification. Throughout the centuries, saints and sages have seen her as the Blessed Mother.

The Context

Revelation 11:19–12:17

Exegetes believe that the unit, Revelation 11:19 through 12:17, is central to the Book of Revelation. Relating the appearance of the ark of the covenant in the heavenly temple of God with the sign of the woman unites the first part of the Book of Revelation with the second, but also points to the unity of God's revelation from the first to the second covenant. This ark indicates the unity of God's revelation: the covenant of Exodus for the first testament, the woman as church for the second testament. In a secondary application, the ark is a parallel symbol relating to the woman who, in the Catholic tradition, is Mary, the Mother of the Messiah. There is no doubt that, in 12:1, the sign is explained by the "woman." Grammatically, "woman" is in apposition to the word *semeion* (sign).

The Book of Revelation uses over 400 allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) in its 404 lines. In chapter 12, two texts are certainly intended, Isaiah 66:7 and Psalm 2:9. The latter citation is to a messianic psalm and is cited or recalled from the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew text.

The first section of our study (Rev. 11:19-12:6) is a unified pericope. The scene abruptly changes with Revelation 12:7-12, which is a second stage in the conflict—a battle in the heavens between Michael and the dragon. In the third stage of the conflict (Rev. 12:13-17), the dragon pursues the woman and her offspring.

The text of Revelation 11:19-12:17 is one of three sub-texts (also including 12:18-13:18 and 14:1-20) which are framed by the narrative of the seventh trumpet (11:15-18) and the seven bowls (15:1-16:21). It is within the central section of the Book of Revelation and within the context of the war scroll which follows the scroll to the churches (chapters 2-3) and the worship scroll (chapters 4-11). We are not in the heavens nor totally in the present situation of the seven churches. Rather the visionary author takes us back to the beginning of the conflict between God's people and the power of the dragon (Satan). Throughout this section, the historical present tense is used, giving a flashback to the origin of the conflict between the woman and the dragon (12:1-6) and that between Michael and the dragon (12:7-21). Even though this section is easily seen as distinct from the woman and dragon and the ensuing concluding section of 12:13-17, it has an important role in narrating the original status and fall of the devil. Only upon his being driven down to the earth does he continue in the conflict between the woman and her offspring. In a sense, this scene (12:7-12) precedes the scene of the serpent and the woman in the Genesis account (Gen. 3:1-16).

Revelation 11:19 serves as an introduction to the three sections within chapter twelve. (In the liturgy for the Feast of the Assumption, the reading commences at 11:19, leading the reader to compare the woman with the ark of the covenant, and indicating a relation between the first covenant with that of the second covenant.) Both the literary and theological reflection support the importance of 11:19 as an introduction. The latter theological insight is also presented in Isaiah 66:6-7, which is one of the abundant allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures:

Listen, an uproar from the city!
A voice from the temple!
The voice of the Lord,
dealing retribution to his enemies!

Fascinating Woman of Rev. 12

Before she was in labor she gave birth;
before her pain came upon her
she delivered a son.

The messianic note in this introduction confirms the unity 11:19 has with 12:1-6, where a male child is born who fulfills the prophecy of Psalm 2:9, a messianic passage. The messianic references will lead the believer to see the child as Jesus, the messiah. The woman, a universal symbol, which is flexible, can also be seen as a Marian referent, for she alone is mother of the messiah in the historical sense. Exegetes (mostly German and American) are reluctant to see Mary as the woman. However, French exegetes (like Ignace de La Potterie, Andre Feuillet, and F-M. Braun) give the Marian interpretation as a necessary yet secondary one.

Exegetes who have commented on chapter 12 refer to it as a combat myth in which God's power overcomes the power of evil. Babylonian, Egyptian, and Greek myths are chosen by these exegetes to explain the symbolism and the conflict in the Book of Revelation, particularly in chapter 12. I prefer to explain the symbolism through a dependence on the Hebrew Scriptures and on the legends that surrounded this chapter from Judaism. The author John of Patmos was a Christian Jew and his primary source would have been the Hebrew Scriptures which are alluded to in almost every sentence in this book. His sole purpose was to invite everyone to worship the one Lord of All (the *Pantocrator*).¹

¹David E. Aune, in his *Revelation 6-16* (Word Biblical Commentary, 52b; Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1998), asks this question: "Is it reasonable to suppose that the author would have used pagan traditions in addition to OT/Jewish tradition in the composition of Rev. 12, either directly or mediated through Hellenistic Judaism?" (p. 670). He continues to refute the comparison of chapter 12 to the Python myth and says, "The author has not used a coherent pagan myth: rather he has created a pastiche of mythological motifs" (p. 672).

There are flaws in each separate comparison to the Greek combat myths, the Egyptian, and the Greek texts. (See Aune, *Rev. 6-16*, 670-674). Only at a few points do we find similarities and these wane in comparison with what we know from the biblical similarities and allusions present in the combat myth of chapter 12. The comparison of chapter 12 with the structure, function, and morphology of folk-tales is more fortuitous, but this is weak in comparing the combat myth of chapter 12 with the Hebrew Scriptures (Aune, *Rev. 6-16*, 674-676).

A more plausible interpretation of the “ark of his covenant” (11:19) results if one turns to information supplied by the Hebrew Scriptures, wherein the ark is mentioned over one hundred times. Revelation 11:19 is the only New Testament reference to the ark of the covenant in heaven where it functions as the archetype for the ark on earth.

There are over two dozen different interpretations of the woman in Revelation 12. They eventually lead to two possible images: the individual person of Mary of Nazareth, the Mother of Jesus, and the collective image of the Church, which appears primary. From the earliest times, it was this image of the Church which predominated the exegesis of the pastoral theologians of the first five or six centuries. After Oecumenius of the sixth century, the interpretation of the exegetes and theologians chose Mary as the woman. St. Bonaventure was most explicit among them, saying that in its literal meaning chapter 12 refers to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. A magnificent excursus on this identification was captured in the seventeenth century by Cornelius de Lapide who commented on almost every book of the Bible and whom the Protestant scholars considered to be the foremost interpreter. Using the best methods of interpretation for his time, Lapide includes in his commentary on chapter 12 a remarkable synthesis of what was said about the woman prior to his writing (between 1620-1630 C.E.)

What I have assembled are the various opinions of scholars from the initial interpretation to the contemporary.²

1. Marian Interpretation

Prior to 300 A.D., there was a Marian interpretation. This is known indirectly from St. Methodius (died around 312) who opposed such an interpretation, arguing that the male child was not Christ in person, but the children of the Church, and consequently the woman was the Church.³ Likewise, Andrew of Caesarea (6th-to-7th century) also notes that some authors

²See “Select Bibliography” (at end here) for information on the major sources used in preparing this paper.

³Bernard J. Le Frois, *Woman Clothed with the Sun (Ap. 12): Individual or Collective? (An Exegetical Study)* (Roma: Orbis Catholicus, 1954), 17, 19.

before Methodius saw the woman as the Blessed Virgin Mary giving birth to her son. He then gives Methodius' reasons against such a view, namely, that 1) they did not understand well the virgin-birth of Christ, and 2) the birth of Christ is past, but Revelation refers to the future. Andrew then goes on to interpret the woman as the Church.⁴

Among the earliest commentators who see Mary as the fascinating woman of the Book of Revelation are Cassiodorus (who says the woman is the "Mother of Jesus") and Oecumenius (who is the clearest early witness to such an interpretation) and then Pseudo-Epiphanius. Earlier, Clement of Alexandria had identified Mary with the Virgin Church, but he was not commenting on the Book of Revelation. In Irenaeus of Lyon there is an explicit identification of Mary as the New Eve. This may be deduced from Genesis 3:15, a text that is implicit in Revelation 12.

Contemporary scholars who see the woman as Mary do so by saying it is a secondary referent. They are Jean-Louis D'Aragon, S.J.; John J. Scullion, S.J.; Max Thurian; Jean-François Bonnefoy; Josef Dillersberger; John McHugh; Ignace de La Potterie; Andre Feuillet. David Aune, the most recent exegete who has interpreted Revelation, affirms there is a reference to Mary in Revelation 12. (The apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* [1950] states that the Virgin Mary is signified in various figures of the Old Testament but also in the woman clothed with the sun [Rev. 12:1].)

2. Mary/Church Symbolism

There are several commentators who link Mary so closely with the Church that the two appear as one symbol. The "woman" of Revelation 12 could represent a) the Church with the features of Mary; b) Mary as archetype of the Church; c) or one figure of the woman as Mary and Church. These interpretations have the advantage of maintaining the fluidity, plasticity and, even, ambiguity of a symbolic word such as "woman." The author of Revelation uses such ambivalent symbols throughout his work, sometimes helping the reader to understand who or what is meant (e.g., the names of the dragon—

⁴Le Frois, *Woman Clothed with the Sun*, 29-30.

serpent, Satan, the devil—or the numerical symbols which may indicate a person—666 for Nero Caesar). Thus, the symbol of the woman could include both Mary and the Church seen as one.⁵

3. *The Woman, Symbol of Victory*

John J. Scullion offers this interpretation of a collective figure giving us the Messiah who assures us of victory.

4. *The Woman as Eve*

David Barr presents the woman as a “complex symbol,” then mentions the possibility of Eve. John Scullion offers many interpretations of the woman, including Eve. Implicit in this interpretation is a reference to Genesis 3:15.

5. *The Woman as a Faithful Community*

Patrick Sena sees an image of a community of believers in Revelation 12; Paul S. Minear sees the Messianic community as “the woman”; Josephine Massyngberde Ford says the woman is a priestly and prophetic community.

6. *The Woman as the People of God*

This designation combines the *Kahal Yahweh* (Assembly of God) of the Old Testament with the New Testament’s People of God. Under this classification we see the community of “the righteous,” which would include patriarchs and prophets (Old Testament) then apostles and martyrs (New Testament). Wilfrid J. Harrington prefers the Old Testament as People of God; Patrick Sena includes both Old and New Testaments. For John Scullion, the *Kahal Adonai* or *Yahweh* becomes the *Ecclesia*; for Ignace de La Potterie, the People of God give birth to the Messiah.

⁵In listing those who have used the above representations, I find the following: St. Augustine, Quodvultdeus, Ambrose-Autpert, Alcuin, Albert the Great; John Scullion and Ignace de La Potterie. Quodvultdeus presents a unified symbol of Mary and Church; Albert the Great sees the Church and the Virgin Mary as a figure of the Church; Scullion sees Mary as a type of the Church; and La Potterie views Mary as Archetype of the Church.

7. The Woman as the Remnant of the Old Testament

Josephine Massyngberde Ford favors this interpretation, through her idea of the woman being also a priestly and prophetic entity (cf. 1QH3 of the Dead Sea Scrolls).

8. Zion

The symbolism of Zion is another resemblance of the woman of Revelation 12. Both the Old Testament references and the implied references of the New Testament are cited by the theologians and exegetes. Among those who refer to Zion are St. Augustine, Elisabeth Schüssler Firenza, J. Massyngberde Ford, and J. Scullion (stating that the woman is the ideal Zion), Raymond E. Brown and Ignace de La Potterie (who hold that the Zion of the Old Testament becomes the Zion of the New Testament), and Max Thurian (who claims that the Daughter of Zion is Mary).

9. Jerusalem

This title is closely related to the preceding one. There are internal literary reasons uniting the woman with the bride descending as the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 12:1, 10; Rev. 22). Among those who see such a relationship are St. Methodius, St. Jerome, Adela Yarbro Collins (the heavenly Jerusalem), J.-L. D'Aragnon, and R. E. Brown (the new Jerusalem).

10. Israel

H. G. Swete sees the woman as the ideal Israel. A. Yarbro Collins sees a relationship between the woman as Church and Israel as a heavenly Israel. J. Massyngberde Ford, D. Barr, J.-L. D'Aragnon, I. de La Potterie, and R. E. Brown are among those who see Israel as a possible meaning for the symbol of the woman. Brown refers to Genesis 37:9 for such an interpretation.

Ecclesial Interpretations

The next sequence of interpretations and commentators favors the ecclesial meaning of the woman. There are variations in how the Church is understood or the conditions in which the Church exists. Since this identification of the woman with the Church is found in the majority of interpreters, it probably was the original intention of John of Patmos to identify the

woman with the Church, especially in the light of chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation.

11. The Church As the Primitive Apostolic Community

This interpretation is suggested by Hippolytus. Jean-Louis D'Aragon also offers such a possible interpretation and, similarly, so does John Pilch.

12. The Church of the Messianic Age

Only Elisabeth Schüssler Firenza and Paul S. Minear describe the woman as the Messianic community. Information from the Dead Sea Scrolls may have led to such a conclusion (IQH3:7-12).

13. The Ancient Church

Both Victorinus and St. Jerome used this interpretation for the woman of Revelation. Perhaps this is close to those who identify her with the primitive or apostolic church.

14. Church Militant on Earth

Primasius, using Tychonius' fourth rule, interprets the woman in Revelation as the Church militant here on earth.

15. The Oppressed Church (ecclesia pressa)

One of the first interpreters of Revelation 12 sees the Church as oppressed. Wilfrid J. Harrington, in one of the most recent commentaries on Revelation, has a similar interpretation.

16. The Christian Church (Church Universal)

Under this interpretation, there is a considerable tradition starting with Tyconius, and moving then to Pseudo-Augustine, Primasius, Gregory the Great, Paterius, Alulfus, Andrew of Caesarea, and Venerable Bede. Their view is in harmony with the revelation given to John of Patmos for the seven churches (mentioned in chapters 2 and 3).

17. Heavenly Church

Jean-Louis D'Aragon sees a collective personality in the symbol of the woman and identifies it as the heavenly Church.

18. *The Church of the Latter Days*

Pseudo-Augustine identifies the woman as the Church of the final days.

19. *Church as City of God*

St. Augustine, in addition to other interpretations, calls the woman an image of the City of God.

Themes, Biblical Images, Notions

The next set of interpretations for the woman clothed with the sun contains notions that are either thematic or symbolic; often they embrace biblical images or concepts.

20. *Light*

The woman is identified as light personified. Here, we have a Johannine theme. Josephine Massyngberde Ford identifies the woman in Revelation 12 in this manner.

21. *Wisdom*

Adela Yarbo Collins identifies the symbol of the woman as Wisdom personified. Her approach is similar to the use of this same theme (Wisdom) in Marian liturgies.

22. *Mysterious Mother*

In his recent introduction to the New Testament, Vincent Branick identifies the woman as a "mysterious mother."

23. *The Mother of the Messiah (Not Mary!)*

Paul S. Minear identifies the woman as the mother of the Messiah, but she is not Mary of Nazareth!

24. *The Bride of the Heavenly Jerusalem*

Here, the woman of Revelation 12 is paralleled and identified with the bride in chapters 20 and 22 of Revelation. Among those identifying her as the bride are Wilfrid J. Harrington, Raymond E. Brown ("Bride of Christ," but debatably), and Ignace de La Potterie (Mother and Bride, Bride of the Lamb, Victorious Bride: Rev. 19-22).

25. Holy Spirit

Only Simone Weil identifies Mary with the Holy Spirit, who is seen by many feminist exegetes and theologians as a feminine person of the Trinity.

26. Spouse of God

Only Adela Yarbro Collins identifies the woman of Revelation 12 as the Spouse of God.

27. The Heavenly Queen

The woman is said to be the constellation of Virgo in conflict with the Draco or the Hydra constellation. She then becomes the Queen of Heaven (Wilfrid J. Harrington and Elisabeth Schüssler Firenza). Ignace de La Potterie sees a heavenly image reflected in Genesis 3:15. Tina Pippin sees the woman as the queen and goddess of heavenly cults.

28. Mother-Goddess

Influenced by the comparative study of religions, several scholars see similarities between the woman and the mother-goddess. R. H. (Robert Henry) Charles sees the symbol of the woman having as its source a primitive international myth, wherein the woman giving birth to a divine child is pursued by a primeval water monster. Adela Yarbro Collins calls her a high goddess and uses the myth of Leto and Zeus to explain who the woman is.

We have seen how the symbol of the ark of the covenant in the heavenly realm is surrounded by a magnificent theophany of God's power in nature. The scene of the woman clothed with the sun is the sign of God's overwhelming love and protection of the woman as Church or as Mary, the mother of God's son. Only Albert the Great connects the ark of the covenant with Mary in Revelation 11:18, thus leading us into a Marian interpretation of the woman.⁶

⁶Albertus Magnus, *Opera omnia* . . . (38 vols.; Paris: Ludovicum Vives, 1890-1899), 37:186.

New Developments in Marian Theology

In presenting these multiple interpretations of the great sign of the woman clothed with the sun, we may ask whether there are any new developments in Marian theology which issue from the research.

First, from the exegetical research there are several discoveries applicable to Marian theology. David Aune identifies the *protoevangelium* (Gen. 3:15) as one of the texts behind chapter 12 of Revelation: "Revelation 12:9 provides the only explicit biblical identification of Satan with the serpent who tempted Eve in Gen. 3:1-7. However, such an identification may be presupposed in several other NT passages, such as in Rom. 16:20, if the phrase 'crush Satan under your feet' alludes to the 'protoevangelium' of Genesis 3:15 and perhaps also in Luke 10:19, which links the fall of Satan (seen by Jesus in the vision reported in 10:19) with the ability to tread on serpents (and scorpions)."⁷

David E. Aune reaches the conclusion that, by using aliases for Satan, John of Patmos is consciously attempting to expose the real role of this antagonist of God throughout cosmic and human history. Theologians can develop stronger biblical evidence for the role of the woman's seed in the history of salvation. The tradition which develops Mary as a New Eve would also be enhanced by showing she has a place in such a soteriological interpretation.⁸ Aune holds that Genesis 3:15 is "a passage understood in some circles of early Judaism and by early Christians to refer to the birth of the Messiah."⁹

In the book of Revelation there is a reference to the serpent within a definite Christological and ecclesiological symbolism.

⁷Aune, *Rev. 6-16*, 697.

⁸Aune's research is better than the thin exegetical remark of the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* on Genesis 3:15. This biblical commentary reads: "The snake is cursed, condemned to crawl on its belly, eat dirt, and be forever the enemy of the woman whom he deceived and of her offspring. *He shall strike your head*: 'He' refers to offspring, which is masc. in Hebrew. Christian tradition has sometimes referred it to Christ, but the literal reference is to the human descendants of Eve, who will regard snakes as enemies" (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p.12).

⁹Aune, *Rev. 6-16*, 708.

Genesis 3:15 is echoed in Revelation 12.9 which identifies the serpent with the devil or Satan. Other significant verses for consideration in Revelation are 12:4, 5, 12, 15, 16, 17. The Targum of Genesis 3:15 reads:

I will place enmities between thee and the woman, between the descendants of your children and her children, and it will come about that when the woman's children observe the precepts of the Torah, they will take aim and crush your head. Whenever, however, they forget the precepts of the Torah, you will be the one who lays the snares and bites their heels. Nevertheless, there is a remedy for them, while for you there is none. They will find a remedy (or cure) for the heel in the time of the Messiah.¹⁰

In his commentary on John, Raymond E. Brown says:

By way of summary, then, we may say that the Johannine picture of Jesus' mother becoming the mother of the Beloved Disciple seems to evoke the O.T. themes of Lady Zion's giving birth to a new people in the messianic age, and of Eve and her offspring. This imagery flows over into the imagery of the Church who brings forth children modeled after Jesus and the relationship of loving care that must bind the children to their mother. We do not wish to press the details of this symbolism or to pretend that it is without obscurity. But there are enough confirmations to give reasonable assurance that we are on the right track.¹¹

Fr. Brown also develops the relationship between Genesis 3:15 and Revelation 12, both in his commentary on John and in his *Death of the Messiah*, where he links Genesis 3:15 with the scene at the foot of the Cross. Brown is not in agreement with a purely symbolic interpretation of this passage.¹²

Another text which may influence the Book of Revelation is Isaiah 7:14. David Aune cites this text three times in his commentary on chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation. In 12:1, it is

¹⁰This text is found in a recension of the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan which is substantially the same in the foundational codices and fragments of Neofiti Targum.

¹¹*The Gospel According to John*, Introd., transl., and notes by R. E. Brown (2 vols.; The Anchor Bible; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966-70), 2:926.

¹²See Brown, *Death of the Messiah*, 2:1021-1026.

the word "sign" (*semeion*) which occurs three times in Revelation (12:1,3; 15:1). Aune cites the passage from the Septuagint and sees it as having a connection with Isaiah 66:6-7, which also may be a source for the passage concerning the woman. Aune states "Although it is clear that John has incorporated an originally Greek myth (perhaps as mediated by Hellenistic Judaism) into his narrative in 12:4b-6, 13-18, he uses this earlier, older material *allegorically*, perhaps as an *interpretatio Iudaica* or *interpretatio Christiana*. John, however, is not concerned to interpret explicitly any of the figures or actions in the drama (unlike, for example, his procedure in Rev. 17), with the single exception that he wants the reader to know who the dragon is and therefore lists his many aliases, which include Satan and the Devil (v 9; cf. v 12). While it is not a close parallel to Revelation 12:1-4a, there are some important similarities in the Star Hymn quoted by Ignatius (*Eph.* 19:1-3), with its sidereal imagery; an incomparably bright star (=Christ) astonishes the other stars along with the sun and the moon (see the astral imagery in the Joseph story in Gen 37:9-11).¹³

"She was pregnant and cried out in labor, in the throes of childbirth" (Rev. 12:2) is similar to the wording in Isaiah 7:14 and Isaiah 66:7 which use the metaphor of Israel bearing a male child to indicate the arrival of the period of salvation.¹⁴ The concept of "birth pangs" of the woman is associated with the birth pangs of the Messiah, "a well-known eschatological motif for the trials and tribulations that are expected to precede the time of the end." Here Aune has an important observation: "If the woman of 12:1 represents Israel, the problem is that there is no O.T. passage that personifies Israel as a mother and also speaks of her bearing a child Messiah; according to Hedrick, 'there is no precedent for John's description of a personified Israel as giving birth to the Messiah.'¹⁵

Might the theologian develop the notion of the Woman being the mother of the Messiah as an individual person such as

¹³Aune, *Rev. 6-16*, 679-680.

¹⁴Aune, *Rev. 6-16*, 682.

¹⁵Aune, *Rev. 6-16*, 688.

Mary, the mother of Jesus? One would think so, if we are following the exegetical explanation of Aune. There is evidence that Isaiah 66:6-7 is both verbally and structurally similar to Revelation 11:19-12:5a.¹⁶ (There is evidence that Isaiah 66:6-7 has been interpreted messianically in Judaism [Gen. Rab. 38:1; Lev. Rab. 12:2; Tg Isaiah 66:7]. The early church likewise interpreted it messianically [Justin, *Dial.* 85:8-9; Ps.-Epiphanius, *Test.* 11; Methodius, *Sym. et Ann.* 3; *Symp.* 7].)

This passage, as we have seen, also has connection with Isaiah 7:14. There is a similarity to a passage in the Dead Sea Scrolls that has been printed out by several exegetes (cf 1QH3:7-12):

... [and] like a woman in travail with her first-born child, upon whose belly pangs have come and grievous pains, filling with anguish her child-bearing crucible. For the children have come to the throes of Death and she labours in her pains who bears a man, For amid the throes of Death she shall bring forth a man-child, and amid the pains of Hell there shall spring from her child-bearing crucible a marvellous Mighty Counsellor. And a man shall be delivered from out of the throes. When he is conceived, all wombs shall quicken, and the time of their delivery shall be in grievous pains; they shall be appalled who are with child. And when he is brought forth every pang shall come upon the child-bearing crucible.

David Aune mentions that the phrase in Revelation 12:5 "she bore a male" is an allusion to Isaiah 66:7. He also marks it noteworthy that Isaiah 66:8 speaks of Zion as delivering children. Here again Marian scholars would note the title Zion in relationship to Mary.

These observations are exegetical. They offer the Marian theologian an opportunity to develop the relationship between Eve and Mary as well as Mary's relationship to the Messiah. It is important that we remember the principle, "Scripture is the soul of Marian theology" and that sound mariology always links the person of Mary, whether seen as woman, virgin, or mother, to her son.

¹⁶Aune, *Rev. 6-16*, 662.

History of the Tradition in the Interpretation of the Woman in Rev. 12

This theme has been traced carefully in two doctoral dissertations that were published during the past fifty years. The first was that of Bernard Le Frois entitled "The Woman Clothed with the Sun: Individual or Collective (An Exegetical Study)," published in 1954. Father Le Frois also contributed to *Marian Studies* in 1958 with a paper entitled "The Mary-Church Relationship in the Apocalypse" (*MS* 9 [1958]:79-106). Pierre Prigent updated and interpreted the same data in a different manner. Prigent's work, *Apocalypse 12: Histoire de l'exégèse*, was published in 1959 and developed the history more completely for the years prior to and after the Reformation.

The best one-volume commentary for summarizing the question in a reader-friendly way is that by John J. Scullion, S.J., "Revelation (The Apocalypse)," in *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (rev. 1975; pp. 1277-1288). These studies provided me with the information needed to trace many of the interpretations given to the symbolic woman of Revelation 12. Other scholars who touched upon the development of a tradition of interpretations relied on these two works.

In my own research, I added the remarkable commentary of Cornelius de Lapide who, through his interpretation of the earlier theologians, saints, and exegetes, made this research come alive through his clarity of explanation and his familiarity with the earlier interpreters. Lapidé emphasized those which had a Marian dimension without neglecting the ecclesial interpretations. In all honesty, Lapidé was well ahead of his time in exegesis and methodology for the Scriptures.

Issues for the Millennium

The prophetic and eschatological sections of the Book of Revelation may be cited as the source for many of the predictions that abound as we enter the new millennium. This is a perennial problem with the Revelation. The basic call to believers given in this book is the call to "worship God alone." The

heart of the message, therefore, is to make sure that readers and listeners understand that message. The call to conversion is strong in the letters to the seven churches, which comprise a call to put God above all cultures and attractions in this world. Revelation is a liturgical celebration of the Almighty One, the *Pantocrator*. By emphasizing the praises, prayers, and doxologies of the Apocalypse, we can better understand the teaching of the Communion of Saints and the meaning of the Paschal Mysteries. These mysteries are also at the center of this remarkable Scripture. Revelation is a book that could foster our appreciation of the unity of God's plan. Scholars have been strongly opposed to any form of predicting world events of a cataclysmic nature from this book. The book of Revelation is not a book of doom, when read in its proper social location and its own historical setting. The prophetic and eschatological sections are to be read within the context of the entire book which emphasizes reading the signs of the times in the light of true worship of God as our top priority. Since James Nelson Darby started to predict the end of the world from this book, and kept changing his predictions when the end did not occur, solid scholarship would indicate that this book should not be used for predicting the future in specific world events. No prediction based on such premises has ever come true since J. N. Darby's time, and the same holds true for predictions made at times of crisis in the early centuries or the middle ages.

Raymond E. Brown saw this misuse as the "number one" issue for the Book of Revelation, that is, using it as a source of predictions concerning the future. He pointed out that such predictions turn readers away from seeing the book's genuine value. Brown made this balanced remark: "God has not revealed to human beings details about how the world began or how the world will end, and, failing to recognize that, one is likely to misread both the first book and the last book in the Bible. The author of Revelation did not know how or when the world will end and neither does anyone else."¹⁷

¹⁷Brown, *Introduction to the NT*, 809-810.

Concluding Observations

The fascinating symbol of the woman of Revelation 12 offers the challenge of discovering who she is—a symbol, a mythological echo, a constellation, an historical person (Mary). This challenge is a worthwhile endeavor. Moreover, since the Scriptures are the heart and soul of Marian theology, we need to keep the rich resources of biblical scholars alive and at work in our theologizing about Mary. In addition to exegesis, we interpret in the light of the Church's teaching. We present a portrait of Mary as woman of faith, a faithful disciple, and, of course, as the mother of Jesus. Though the scriptural references to her are relatively few, they are like a precious treasure hidden in the field of the New Testament.

Prior to Vatican II, Alois Müller helped us to understand Mary as the archetype of the Church. If Mary is understood as the archetype of the Church, insofar as in her person the mystery of the Church achieves its incarnational fulfillment, we have a context for continuing the interpretations given to the fascinating woman of Revelation 12. Müller summarizes the issues in interpreting:

It is insufficient to say: The Woman is Mary, for she is presented also as the type of the Church. It is insufficient to say: the Woman is the Church: for her features have been borrowed from Mary's portrait; she is the image of Mary. In these two cases the Woman would be playing two different roles: in one she is herself; in the other, she plays the role of another. But this does not represent the truth of the matter, for there is only one role that is played, the bringing forth of Christ: both in its pristine historical reality and its ultimate full-flowering in the history of the world. And this is why the Woman is only one Woman: the Mother of Christ in his primary historical reality and in his ultimate completion in the history of the world.

Müller concludes: "Mary is the perfect [realization of the] Church; the mystery of the Church is, in essence, the mystery of Mary."¹⁸

¹⁸Alois Müller, *Ecclesia-Maria* (2. überarb. Aufl; Fribourg, 1955), 234, 239.

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