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## CRUSHING THE HEAD OF THE SERPENT

### OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE AND THE TRIUMPH OF REVEALED RELIGION IN THE AZTEC WORLD<sup>1</sup>

*Richard H. Bulzacchelli, S.T.D.\**

All human cultures manifest a collective human awareness that our lives are not entirely our own, but that we find ourselves dependent upon forces we cannot control. This awareness is the foundation of the religious sensibility among human beings. Yet, these forces upon which our lives depend, but which lie beyond our control, are not naturally regarded by human beings as completely beneficent. The uncertainty, pain, and tragedy felt in every human life leads to a sense that these forces may not care for us, or may not have our best interests at heart, or may even stand against us. This ambiguity lies at the root of so-called “natural religion,” or “paganism,” and it is what the ancient Hebrew people meant by the use of the term “gentile” in describing anyone who did not belong to the cult of Yahweh—the God who loved the world into being, “like a Father who lifts an infant close against his cheek.”<sup>2</sup> In the absence of this perception of the real truth—that the fundament of being is Love—the human person is a prisoner to the darkness of sin, alienation, and death, which punctuate our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Sections of this article borrow heavily from Richard H. Bulzacchelli, S.T.D., “*Elohim Created*”: A New Look at the First Creation Narrative (Nashville, Tenn.: The Aggiornamento Project, 2012). Text in common has been used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hosea 11:4.

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For the ancient Hebrew people, the pagan error was epitomized by the religion of Babylon. In their forty-seven-year exile, they had become intimately familiar with the religious presuppositions, myths, and practices of their gentile captors, and developed their own versions of the circulating narratives, recasting their figures along the lines of their own awareness of the truth about reality revealed to them in their cultural encounter with the God who is Love.

The pagan myths of ancient Mesopotamia remain relevant to the heirs of the Faith of Abraham and the biblical canon in its final form, even today, not because the ancient pagan cults constitute a living threat to the biblical Faith, but because they help us recall that the biblical Faith rests upon an existential choice that is always before us—a fundamental option for or against a certain understanding of the very character of reality and its meaning and value. This fundamental option is forever vulnerable, in every culture, to the prevailing currents of the secular and, let us say, “gentile” order. Nothing is changed, as far as this point goes, by the passage of time and culture. But, because the myths and allegories of the biblical canon retain the power to inform interreligious dialogue across all times and cultures, they are able to present these cultures with contrasts in perspective capable of drawing into the light the precise points of departure that separate the Judeo-Christian tradition from its alternatives, whatever they may be, and rendering live, in each new context, the fundamental option for or against that Truth that sets us genuinely and radically free, even in states of exile, slavery, and persecution.

In this paper, we will consider this fundamental option at the heart of the Yahwistic Covenant, with a view to the figure of the Lady of Guadalupe. She stands as the crystallization point in the enculturation of the Catholic Faith in the milieu of the Aztec religion,<sup>3</sup> and encapsulates the whole drama of salvation

<sup>3</sup> It was not the characteristically Western-European catechetical strategies of the Spanish evangelists (conditioned as they were by a long tradition of theological and doctrinal developments, with which no Aztec interlocutor could be expected to be familiar), but the figure of a Woman expressed in the images of the Aztec religion (casting the Judeo-Christian metaphors depicting the ineffable truths of salvation and

history in that context. The Aztec's ancient cults would meet their end under the influence of this prophetic and apocalyptic figure, which appears in typological continuity with the creation narratives of the Book of Genesis and the narrative of the Woman of Revelation, and which, therefore, allows us to trace a common kerygmatic thread. For, in the end, the image of the Lady of Guadalupe with her seeming cultural-specificity, communicates something of dogmatic significance—a truth that cuts to the very essence of the Faith.

### **Preliminary Reflections on the Figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe**

Now, the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe is immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with the image of the Woman of Revelation. She is surrounded by the rays of the sun, with the moon beneath her feet, while her mantle appears emblazoned in stars. These symbols are not identical to those in the Book of Revelation in every detail, of course, but that fact should not stand in the way of our identifying the two images with one another. If we understand that typology is not a matter of historical record or documentary verification, but a mode of communication of principally religious ideas at a primal level accessible to us without the need of argumentation or technical language, we can begin to understand that both images speak rather clearly to the same reality, but in differing culturo-historical contexts. The image of the Lady of Guadalupe is adapted to the Mesoamerican context of the period of Spanish conquest.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the image's kerygmatic power lies in the fact of its being a kind of "Rosetta stone," capable of translating

*theosis* over-against the religion of a New Babylon and its myth of the great dragon god (Quezalcoatl) that won the Aztec people to Jesus Christ. It was not, indeed, until her appearance that Christianity was able to offer any serious alternative to the prevailing cult, but with her appearance, interest in Christianity developed abruptly, overwhelming the existing cult with startling rapidity.

<sup>4</sup> In making this assertion, of course, we in no way intend to call into question the divine source of the image, nor to doubt away traditional claims of its miraculous production on the tilma of Juan Diego. Indeed, for our own part, we regard these claims as genuine.

the Christian dogma into the conceptual framework of the Aztec culture in such a way as to speak directly to the Aztec people's own concerns. It is, in effect, what a perfect icon ought to be: a gospel in pictographic form. We should consider, therefore, a few of the more salient details of the image.

The Lady of Guadalupe wears a black belt around her waist, indicating, according to common custom, that she carries a child in her womb. The flower above her womb, however, bears four petals, indicating the power of the divine realm over the cosmos.<sup>5</sup> The association between these two symbols constitutes a dramatic statement, indeed: the woman is pregnant with a divine presence.

Now, the color of her mantle is associated with the realm of the divine, as well as with royalty, though the precise interpretation of its meaning is a matter of some speculation to the contemporary scholar, because scholars differ in their opinions about the details of the Aztec cults themselves. Some hold that the color of the mantle is referenced to a divine duality—an

<sup>5</sup>This symbol is known in Spanish as the *flor de Azteca*. Manuela Testoni explains that it is "a design in the form of a cross representing the four cardinal points of the compass with the sun at the center; a symbol of Quetzalcóatl." (Manuela Testoni, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: History and Meaning of the Apparitions*, trans. Jordan Aumann, O.P. [New York: Alba House, 2001], 135.) Interestingly, the Lady also wears a hasp or brooch around her neck, featuring a cross. While this figure has an obvious meaning from within the Christian context, its meaning in the Aztec context is the same as that of the four-petaled flower. The four cardinal points represented a central motif of Mesoamerican cosmology and religious thought. Flowers, however, are also symbol-laden in their own right, having been employed ritually by the Aztecs in association with various feast days on their liturgical calendar. Thus, the four-petaled flower, the floral patterns on the tunic, and the physical roses found by Juan Diego can all be seen as symbols of the sacred, and, in particular, of sacrifice. According to Miller and Taube, one legend depicts Quetzalcoatl leading his people to sacrifice flowers in place of human life. From this starting point, one can also see in the figure on the tilma yet another prophecy that the age of human sacrifice and the dominion of death has come to an end, and a New Covenant based on love and peace has arrived. The association of flowers with ritual warfare or *xochiyaoyotl*, by which the Aztecs would capture worthy sacrificial victims from neighboring peoples, would make this vision of cultic transition especially poignant. For their entry on "flowers," see Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), 88-89. For their entry on "directions," see 77-78.

inner relationality within a supreme creator God, who exists as one in both a male and female persona, and who so radically transcends the world of human beings as to be unapproachable even by any religious cult.<sup>6</sup> This claim is difficult to support because this deity's radical transcendence could leave no unambiguous witnesses to its presence in the Aztec pantheon.<sup>7</sup> While some might take this fact of silence for evidence favoring their thesis, those trained in Aristotelian logic are more likely to reach the opposite conclusion.

Another interpretation of Aztec mythology, however, would associate this color with the cult of Mictlantecuhtli (Miktlan-tek-woot-lee) and his wife Mictecacihuatl (Misk-tesk-eisiev-alth), god and goddess of the underworld.<sup>8</sup> Together, they represent the demonic sphere of influence, like the power of Satan in the Judeo-Christian tradition. For the Aztecs, it must be noted, this sphere of influence is not a side-issue, easily neglected, as in contemporary Christianity and Judaism, where the unjustifiable, but no less powerful temptation is to reduce it entirely to the status of analogy or fantasy. Rather, for the Aztecs, this dimension of the religious landscape was the dominant feature in their cosmic consciousness. The fact that the Lady of Guadalupe is cloaked in a garment of this color, therefore, would seem to require explanation. But that explanation will have to wait until our analysis has proceeded further, since, we suggest, its real significance lies in its relationship with other elements of the image.

<sup>6</sup>The god in question here is known as Ometeotl, whose name means "two god," and who is understood to exist as both male and female within itself. According to Miller and Taube, while this god is not the subject of iconographic representation and had no temple consecrated to his worship, this god was addressed in "a multitude of formal prayers" (*Gods and Symbols*, 127-128).

<sup>7</sup> Miller and Taube, *Gods and Symbols*, 128.

<sup>8</sup>This association appears to follow upon the relationship between death and darkness, and the suggestion that the night sky is the color of the gods of the underworld. This may be so, but there are several additional possible meanings to the color, which we will also consider in this paper. We would suggest that, as is the case with the Bible, several layers of meaning may coexist in a single symbol, and in a single instance of its use. Other color associations with the gods of the underworld are black and yellow, but there would seem little sense in the suggestion that the black color of the Lady's belt should be associated with the underworld.

That said, the final features capturing our attention for the purpose of the present study, are those of the great celestial bodies of the sun and the moon, for these symbols, too, bear divine significations. Huitzilopochtli (Huit-zil-o-pach-tli) was the Aztec lord of the sun, while Quetzalcoatl, the plumed dragon, was lord of the moon.<sup>9</sup> Together, these principal deities framed the whole arena of the cosmic order, emanating, drawing back, and recycling the life-forces that preserved cosmic patterns in perpetuity.<sup>10</sup> For the Aztecs, therefore, the Woman's presence before the light of the sun indicates that she is more glorious than Huitzilopochtli, and the fact that the moon lies beneath her feet means that she has utterly vanquished Quetzalcoatl, "crushing the head of the serpent."<sup>11</sup> Thinking about this relationship another way, we can say that the Woman appears to eclipse the sun god Huitzilopochtli, and, thus, to take the place of the moon—representative of Quetzalcoatl—as the body that blocks the light of the sun. The significance of this element of the image rests in part upon the fact that the Aztecs ascribed great meaning to eclipses, greeting them with dread as cosmic cataclysms to be prevented if at all possible; for them, the eclipse of the sun by the moon was seen as more serious than the eclipse of the moon by the sun.<sup>12</sup> So at this point, an alternative meaning of the coloration of the Woman's garments suddenly becomes apparent. The apocalyptic significance of the image on the tilma is immediately apparent. The Lady's blue-green mantle and the rose tunic are the colors of the quetzal: a lavishly plumed bird after which the plumed serpent Quetzalcoatl is partly named. Together, these two colors are the colors one would associate with the dragon-god of the moon, who now lies naked and cold beneath her feet.

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that representations of this plumed dragon god often bore a stone-like appearance reminiscent of the face-like formation discernible in the full moon.

<sup>10</sup> See, Miller and Taube on "human sacrifice," in *Gods and Symbols*, 96-98, and "sacrifice," 144-146. See also, Testoni, *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Gen. 3:15.

<sup>12</sup> For their entry on "eclipse," see Miller and Taube, *Gods and Symbols*, 84.

The Lady of Guadalupe appears to the Aztec people, therefore, as a medium of revelation concerning things divine; and hers is a truth that displaces the cults of their forbears. The truth by which these cults are displaced is the divine authority she bears within her womb and to whom she herself appears engrossed in prayer. Just as the Woman in the Book of Revelation, therefore, the woman of Guadalupe is, as we have said, an apocalyptic figure—one who represents, quite literally, the “inversion” of the cosmic structure.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Original Babylonian Context of the Genesis Myths**

Returning to the perennial undercurrents of the problem of the faith as a fundamental option, we recall that this option comes as a response to the question of human existence. The ancient Hebrew people rightly saw two possible ways to an answer. The first way is the way of life in the Torah, while the other is the way of death—a path into darkness and alienation apart from God. The principal representatives of this second way, for the ancient Israelites, were the Babylonians, who appear as implicit interlocutors in the two creation narratives in the Book of Genesis and are recast in a new culturo-historical context in the Book of Revelation. We will now consider those two representations.

It is widely recognized, today, that the first creation narrative in the Book of Genesis is influenced in some way by the Babylonian myth of origins, the *Enûma Elish*, or that, at the very least, the two texts share a common narrative tradition.<sup>14</sup> But, the contrasts between the Babylonian myth and the Genesis

<sup>13</sup> The Greek word *apokalypsis* means “an uncovering, a turning inside-out, or a revealing of what is hidden as behind a veil.” It has also the implication of “an inversion, a re-ordering,” or “a turning upside-down.” The Johannine theme of *apokalypsis*, then, is reflected in Christ’s aphorism (John 16:33): “Be emboldened, for I have taken over the cosmic order” (*tharseite; ego nenikeika kosmon*). The word *nikao* carries the implication of overthrowing an existing power and instituting a new order or a new rule in that area over which one has earned conquest.

<sup>14</sup> By all accounts, the *Enûma Elish* is the older narrative, while the Genesis account is, by comparison, rather later, dating, in its canonical form, to the immediate post-exilic period, when temple worship was reestablished in Jerusalem after forty-eight years of captivity in Babylon and a lengthy reconstruction project undertaken upon their return.

account, rather than their similarities, seem the issue of central importance to us, as the purpose of the Genesis account is not merely to develop an extant tradition along distinct cultural lines, but, in fact, to mark out the essential point of departure between the faith of the Hebrew people and that of their gentile neighbors. The Genesis account is read, on the basis of these premises, as a direct confrontation with the fundamental inadequacy of the Babylonian religious perspective and, by extension, any religious perspective blind to the real truth about God.

Any really thorough analysis of the Enûma Elish here would be totally out of the question, of course, but a few points about it should be noted as a way of providing context for our central observation concerning the Yahwistic Covenant as a fundamental option. Both the first creation narrative in the Book of Genesis and the Enûma Elish take place over a period of seven distinct movements—whether “days,” as in Genesis, or “eons” as in the Enûma Elish. And both myths recount the emergence of the sky and the earth, the seas and the land, the heavenly bodies, the seasons of the year, and various life forms. Most importantly, however, both myths end with the formation of human beings, who are understood as fundamentally oriented to the divine; and, in both, the seventh episode involves divine repose. But, let it suffice to say that, for our purposes in the present study, this is the point in the two narratives at which the similarities end and the contrasts begin.

While the creation narrative in Genesis is artfully concise and ordered, the Enûma Elish is a lengthy narrative, featuring redundancies and overlapping typologies. It is, in other words, characteristically more “primitive.” The Enûma Elish is also highly anthropomorphic, describing a realm of the gods capable of merging with earth because, like earth, the divine realm is essentially corporeal, at least in some sense. The world is formed out of originally “divine material” in the Enûma Elish. The Hebrew narrative, by contrast, employs typologies indicative of nothingness, building up by layers of imagery a depiction of creation *ex nihilo*. We are well aware of the limitations involved in such a seemingly anachronistic assertion, of course, but the point is rather clear when the narrative is read in its

original Hebrew, and the reader is able to discern that the “darkness” is not a positive mode of existence, as in the *Enûma Elish*, but “a twisting-away” from the “warmth” that is the light cast by the divine command, “Let there be.” Perhaps the most significant contrast between the *Enûma Elish* and the first creation narrative in Genesis, however, is the fact that the central plot device at work in the *Enûma Elish* is a cosmic conflagration, while the central plot device of the first creation narrative in Genesis is a deliberate act, purposed single-mindedly upon the emergence of humanity from the heart of God as a gift, bearing within itself an invitation to love.

The *Enûma Elish* envisions a world, in essence, precipitating out of evil, formed of the dismembered body of the evil dragon goddess Tiamat, who, as Mother of all gods, is the primordial substrate of all reality. The world, in spite of all that is good in it, remains evil at its core in this model, and, as evil, must be constrained and controlled. Humanity, likewise, is formed out of the lifeblood of Qingu, who plotted to disturb the order of the gods, leading to the cosmic conflagration that then necessitated the invention of humanity as a mitigating measure against perpetual anarchy.

At base, the differences between the *Enûma Elish* and the first creation narrative in Genesis can be reduced to a difference in their understanding of reality, of its meaning, and of its value in light of the experience of the mystery of human existence. Our foundational experience with evil as evil, we should recall, is death—the fact of death as it presents itself as an inescapable problem in all our lives, finalizing our sufferings, placing limits on our future hopes and aspirations, and imposing a claim to authority in moral matters, as failure to compromise our moral principles means facing the threat of death or of a life diminished in its prospects for happiness until, inevitably, death overtakes us and too soon for us to change our plight for the better. This fact about our lives demands an explanation, or else what remains of life in the shadow of death becomes unbearable to us.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> It should be expected, then, that where universal human quandaries can be articulated, we would come to see common structures to the postures formulated in response to them. One common structure is dualism—and this is what lies at the heart

Now, in the Babylonian myth, Tiamat, the dragon of chaos, is a feminine figure; so the feminine among humans would represent a fuller manifestation of primordial evil than would the masculine. Primordial evil is more powerful, in the end, than goodness, according to the Babylonian mythos, because the good god, Marduk—who is male—is himself the offspring of Tiamat. In contrast to this view, the biblical account features a single deity willing the cosmos into being through a positive command, all for the sake of human beings. Human beings do not have to be enslaved to the service of the gods, as in the *Enûma Elish*, because they do not emerge as an outgrowth of primordial chaos but are made in the image and likeness of God. We are not employed by divine interests as a way to make the evil of the cosmic chaos work against itself, keeping itself in check that the divine realm might live in peace. Rather, God makes the cosmos that we might have a home in which to greet him. He blesses us with fertility that our numbers might increase as boundlessly as his love extends, and calls us back to himself in Sabbath rest. The seventh day—the day of fulfillment—involves, for the ancient Hebrew people, a worship rooted in love, in which God draws near to human beings and opens himself up to us, that we might share his life with him.

So the pagan options seem rather clear. If we get any attention at all from the realm of the divine, it is woefully conditional at best and openly hostile at worst. Otherwise, as in the best case scenario characteristic of the Greek philosophers of later centuries, we are mere accidents of the divine goodness, since God simply exists so fully as, in a kind of cosmic wake, to stir up the waters of the primordial formlessness, giving it shape

of the Babylonian response. A dualistic response to the problem of evil begins by noting that our experience of evil and suffering is predicated upon the fact of change. We can die because we can move from being alive at one moment to being dead at another. Thus, whatever in our lives has the character of changeability is regarded as, somehow, ignoble, defective, or evil. In this way, dichotomies are drawn up within our thinking, our attitudes, and our cultural values, between that which we associate with goodness (i.e., permanence and stability) and that which we associate with evil (i.e., temporality and mutability). We note, for example, that our experience of the material world is an experience of change—that whatever happens to remain the same in our world does so within the context of constant flux.

and structure without the slightest thought of concern about it. In either case, the concept of creation in the biblical sense—of God’s deliberate willing that there be something other than himself to love—was a thought possible only for the Children of Abraham. Only the God who is mysteriously plural in his oneness—Elohim—can exist entirely of himself without existing entirely for himself, turning out from himself in love to give rise to a cosmic order that he sees and embraces in its entirety as “very good.”<sup>16</sup> For the ancient Hebrew people, the divine title Elohim means that the foundation of all reality is not some cold or distant principle, much less chaos or anger, but love; the foundational reality is love.

This is why, in the second creation account in the Book of Genesis, the serpent or dragon appears as the spokesperson of a pagan alternative to the Yahwistic Covenant—a representation of the iconic figure of Tiamat. The choice between these two worldviews is illustrated by the Tree of Life, on the one hand, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, on the other. The first tree is named for a basically monistic view of the universe, founded upon life-giving love in Covenant with Yahweh, while the second tree bears a name indicative of a dualistic view of the universe, characteristic of the pagan cults that account for the problem of evil by appealing to distinct

Now, anyone familiar with the history of ancient philosophy from the time of the pre-Socratics through the time of the Stoa will immediately recognize in this analysis the basic structure of thought reflected in the early history of Greek philosophy. Matter changes, and, with that, we contrast an unchanging dimension of spirit. Emotions change from one moment to another, and against this fleeting affection stands enduring reason. Against body stands mind. And, often, against feminine stands masculine; for the feminine form is perceived as more bodily than the masculine, more emotional, and even more primordial—characterized by a striking beauty that blossoms like a flower and then gradually fades away in the midst of a life of constant flux. Of course, our purpose here is not to endorse but to describe a primitive point-of-view. From within that point-of-view, femininity appears as less than fully mature, deficient, or, in the extreme, evil. Embedded in the dualism so widely represented among pagan cultures, like the Babylonians, are the seeds of an anti-material, anti-human, anti-feminine prejudice that casts a shadow of darkness, over-against which the people Israel eventually came to see themselves as radiating a brilliant, liberating light of truth and love.

<sup>16</sup> Gen. 1:31.

origins for different elements of our experience. It is a world of self-referenced power struggles, division and alienation, isolation, and death. The choice between the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, in other words, is the choice to maintain faith in the God who is Love or to abandon that faith in favor of paganism. When the man and the woman eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, God seeks them out and finally asks the woman, "What is this terrible thing that you have done?" Her answer is simple and direct, and can be translated into our modern vernacular with the words, "I bought what the dragon was selling me."<sup>17</sup>

### **The Book of Revelation, the Lady, the Dragon, and the New Babylon**

The figure of the great dragon appears, once again, in the Book of Revelation, which depicts the struggle of the Church to maintain her faith in the God who is love, even though, in the aftermath of the historical Christ-event, the world appears to have continued on very much as it had been before.<sup>18</sup> The Johannine literature as a whole rests upon the idea of a renewal of God's original creative act and a reminder that what God had willed in the beginning does triumph in the end, in

<sup>17</sup> The Hebrew word for "dragon" or "serpent" in this passage is *naḥash*, which can also mean "shiny-thing" or "bronze-thing." Thus, in the context of the Garden narrative, where it appears in connection with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, it suggests a graven image for a pagan god. The later concept of a "debt" of sin, according to which the debt was understood as one owed, somehow, to the devil, comes from a more literal reading of the Woman's response: *hanaḥash hishbiant wa'okel* = "the serpent [or "bronze-thing"] mortgaged to me what I ate."

<sup>18</sup> As an expression of apocalyptic literature, the Book of Revelation should not be understood as a prediction of future events. Like other apocalyptic literature—for example, Ezekiel or Daniel—it relies heavily upon allegory, borrowing images from common typologies and recasting familiar themes in a new interpretive context. It is not concerned with detailed accounts of what will happen in a thousand years, but with the broad contours of what is happening in the kairological now. In fact, the idea that the Book of Revelation is intended to predict a series of future events in chronological time simply cannot be squared with the author's use of the word *kairos* rather than *chronos*, at both the beginning and the end of the book ("for the *time* is at hand"—Rev. 1:3 and 22:10) to describe the nearness of the events. The language in both places suggests a reading like, "the divine-moment" or "the eternal-now is right here!"

spite of everything we can presently see. This confidence lies behind the macharism Christ utters in the upper room on the eighth day—the day of the eternal present—when he says to Thomas, “You believe because you have seen, but blessed are they who believe and yet have not seen.”<sup>19</sup>

That said, when in his Gospel John deliberately quotes from the first chapter of Genesis to retell the story of creation as an act of self-revelation on God’s part, the tragedy of evil and death is explained in terms of our lostness in a world imprisoned by its separation from the inner life of God. The remedy to that separation, of course, is God’s undeterred entrance into our world, his becoming one with us, finding us even in the darkness of death, and sharing his life with us. He draws us into his own inner life through baptism and Eucharistic communion, that we might live his life with him, entering into the dynamism of love that is God himself. In the Book of Revelation, John continues this theme of renewal with the image of a “new heaven and a new earth,”<sup>20</sup> and the proclamation from Christ, “Behold, I make all things new.”<sup>21</sup> The Book of Revelation takes us to a New Eden—the heavenly Jerusalem—in which the Tree of Life is once again accessible to humanity, while a river of life flows from its roots.<sup>22</sup> The cosmos returns to its primordial purity, where it is illuminated, not by some foreign body, but from within. The Lamb, who is, in fact, one with us, and the one in whom and by whom we live, is, himself, the light of our world.<sup>23</sup>

But, over against this triumph stands the constant threat of our destruction: the great dragon, poised before the Woman, ready to consume the New Man to whom she gives birth. She must be protected from this threat by being set apart from the world in the desert of the Great Pasch. We should recall, at this point, that the dragon of the second creation narrative “crawls

<sup>19</sup> John 20:29. We use here the *Jerusalem Bible: Readers Edition* (New York: Doubleday, 1966, 2000). In the present article, use of this translation will be indicated by the use of the abbreviation JB.

<sup>20</sup> Rev. 21:1. Cf., also, Isa. 65:17 and 66:22.

<sup>21</sup> Rev. 21:5.

<sup>22</sup> Rev. 22:2.

<sup>23</sup> Rev. 21:23.

on his belly and eats dust"<sup>24</sup>—that is to say, that he seeks to destroy us from our very inception. His presence in the Book of Revelation is a reminder that this struggle of evil against life is as present to us today as it was in the beginning, for it is a struggle, not against what God can do, and does achieve, but against what we, for our own part, are ready to receive through a faith that responds to Love with a hope that shares in it. In the classical tradition, the Book of Revelation presents anew the fundamental option between the two ways—one of life and the other of death.

Now, we saw in the garden narrative that, at the center of this option stood the figure of a Woman, whose choice set in motion the whole cosmic structure in its distorted, fallen condition. Again, in the Book of Revelation, there stands a woman in her encounter with a dragon, and what becomes of her determines the fate of her offspring.<sup>25</sup> We should examine this image, because its details speak again to the basic problem of human existence, and the one option that paves the way to life.

"A great sign appeared in the sky," John writes, "a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth."<sup>26</sup> We recall, again, that the images in this narrative are similar to those manifest in the figure of the Lady of Guadalupe, who will appear roughly fifteen-hundred years later in an entirely different context. The Woman appears wrapped in the very source of light itself, but, in the context of the Book of Revelation, this means that she is enveloped in the goodness and warmth of divine providence. As such, she is a window into the divine wisdom which, as we read in the Old Testament book by that name, "is an aura of the might of God and a pure effusion of the glory of the

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Gen. 3:14.

<sup>25</sup> The presentations of the Woman of Revelation as an image of the Mother of God, on the one hand, and the Church, on the other, are well-attested. We need not belabor those images here, as if to argue for or against one or the other interpretation. A genuinely Catholic reading would, in any event, eschew false dichotomies and opt for both. What is relevant for our purposes here is the actual *figure* as it appears in the narrative.

<sup>26</sup> Rev. 12:1-2 (JB).

Almighty. . . the refulgence of eternal light, the spotless mirror of the power of God, the image of his goodness."<sup>27</sup> Being "clothed" or "wrapped" in the sun, as if wearing a garment, suggests an intimacy with divine wisdom and, thus, the tender protection of the love of God. Again, in Wisdom, we read of Lady Wisdom that:

. . . she, who is one, can do all things, and renews everything while herself perduring; And passing into holy souls from age to age, she produces friends of God and prophets. For there is naught God loves, be it not one who dwells with Wisdom. For she is fairer than the sun and surpasses every constellation of the stars. Compared to light, she takes precedence; for that, indeed, night supplants, but wickedness prevails not over Wisdom.<sup>28</sup>

As John takes up these images, noting their original context in the Book of Genesis, he means to suggest that the Woman stands at the very center of God's creative goodness and love. John recalls that the heavenly lights are put in place by God as a means by which human beings will be able to work out their covenantal response to God's love. And, with these heavenly bodies, even the "night," or "twisting-away" from the "day" of God's warmth toward humanity,<sup>29</sup> is penetrated by the light of the moon and the stars, such that "the light shines in the darkness, but the darkness cannot overwhelm it."<sup>30</sup> What is more,

<sup>27</sup> Wis. 7:25-26 (JB). The images in the Book of Wisdom are, of course, their own matter, and we cannot pretend to take them up here, exegetically. Our purpose is not to suggest that the image of Lady Wisdom in the Old Testament is equivalent to, or identifiable with, that of the Virgin Mary in any unqualified way. Given the ambiguity of the image in the Book of Wisdom, which may be interpreted as a feminine representation of God (though we do not wish to enter upon this debate here), such a suggestion could end by playing directly into the hands of those who would oppose the veneration of the Virgin Mary as a form of idolatry. Nonetheless, the parallels between the image of Lady Wisdom and the Woman of Revelation are striking, and clearly suggest an intentional reference on the part of the New Testament author.

<sup>28</sup> Wis. 7:27-30 (JB).

<sup>29</sup> The word in Genesis that we translate as "day" is *yom*, which also means "warmth" or "comfort." The word in Genesis that we translate as "night" is *layilb*, which can also mean "a twisting-away."

<sup>30</sup> John 1:3.

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the number twelve is the number of universality—the number of the twelve tribes of Israel, the descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob who form the people of the promise, and the number of the apostles who take up this inheritance for the New Israel in the new universality of the Catholic Church, whose mission is to bring the Covenant to the farthest reaches of the world.

John's image, though, extends further, to include the perpetual enmity between the dragon and his descendants, and the woman and her descendants, through all generations, until humanity is led to victory over the reign of death.<sup>31</sup> He writes, recalling again, the image of the dragon who "eats dust,"<sup>32</sup> that "the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth."<sup>33</sup> Noting, further, that the dragon's tail, "swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth,"<sup>34</sup> John shows that, in spite of the turn to sin with its consequence in terms of the fall of the cosmos into alienation and death, the power of God's providence remains undefeated. Indeed, while the contemporary reader might be tempted to focus upon the horrific damage visited upon God's world by the Accuser, the real emphasis in the image is upon the utter futility of his attempt at destruction, for, as we recall from the garden narrative, the woman's offspring will crush the dragon's head, while the dragon merely strikes a heel.<sup>35</sup>

A thorough exegesis of the whole passage in the Book of Revelation is, of course, beyond the reach of the present study,

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Paul's similar view articulated in 1 Cor. 15:20-28.

<sup>32</sup> Gen. 3:15. The full significance of this oracle can only be understood when one remembers that the *Adam*—the Man or humanity—is formed out of the dust of the ground (Gen. 2:7), and that, after the fall, the soil is cursed (3:17), that the one who is dust, shall again be reduced to the stuff out of which he had at first been made (3:19).

<sup>33</sup> Rev. 12:4 (JB).

<sup>34</sup> Rev. 12:4 (JB).

<sup>35</sup> Gen. 3:15. The word used to indicate making a "strike" or "blow" is the same in both cases in the Hebrew (*shuf*), but as Hebrew is a context-driven and highly typological language, the fact that one contestant attacks the heel while the other attacks the head should be understood to represent the victory of the contestant who attacks the head, landing a lethal blow.

but, let it suffice to say simply that the image of the dragon or serpent in the Book of Revelation recalls the image of the dragon or serpent in the Book of Genesis, and it returns us, again, to the perennial struggle between faith and its alternative—between acceptance of a world founded on Love and any alternative to it. In the Book of Revelation, in fact, the New Babylon is not a religious culture at all, but a secular one—it is Rome, wherein all power rests in a world of purely fleeting interests, bound to the limitations of the realm of pure *Bios*,<sup>36</sup> and, therefore, unable to escape the threat of death's seeming authority over life to find the freedom to live and to love as we ought. But what can we say, then, of the Aztec context, separated by oceans and centuries, but within which other permutations of these images nonetheless reassert themselves with overwhelming power?

### **The Aztec Context**

We have already offered a few preliminary remarks about the feathered dragon god of the Aztec or Nahuatl culture, best known to us today as Quetzalcoatl.<sup>37</sup> In the figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Quetzalcoatl is iconographically vanquished, but it is only fair to say, if we wish to present an honest assessment of the circumstances under which the Lady of Guadalupe triumphed and the Aztec religion came to be supplanted by Christianity, that the figure of Quetzalcoatl, as it appeared in the Mesoamerican context was, in many respects, a positive

<sup>36</sup> In the New Testament, the Greek word *Bios* indicates purely material life, of a sort that comes to be and passes away. It is the sort of life we share in common with the beasts, but it is not the life to which we are called by God. So one of the overarching themes in the New Testament is Christ's gift of a new form of transcendent Life in the Spirit—the life of *zoë*. Returning to the Old Testament and the story of the Fall, we see that death appeared as a consequence of sin, by which the *Adam*—once again, the Man or humanity—exhaled the *neshamah* or “life-giving spirit” received from the mouth of God in the beginning, and which had raised him from a purely material mode of existence to make him a “person” or a “really-living thing” (*Yenepesh bayab*).

<sup>37</sup> This god appears in a variety of forms and under different names in the vast array of Mesoamerican cultures out of which the Aztecs emerged as the dominant politico-cultural force. There were many dialects of ancient Nahuatl, and the different names derive from the words in those languages for the same specific characteristics associated with Quetzalcoatl—namely, “plumed serpent” or “plumed dragon.”

one. He was a god of fertility, who reached into the abode of the dead to give rise to a new era of life on earth, forming human beings, and bestowing life upon them with his own blood. The myth of Quetzalcoatl persuaded John Taylor, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (1880-1887), that Quetzalcoatl was an apparition of Jesus Christ himself before the Mesoamerican peoples.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, interpreting Mesoamerican iconography from a decidedly Christo-graphic hermeneutic, early Mormon scholars saw, in the iconography of Middle America, a Quetzalcoatl crucified, nailed through hands and feet, harrowing hell, and atoning for the sins of the human race with his own blood. They saw his virgin birth in the celestial sphere as a depiction of the virgin birth of Jesus of Nazareth in the earthly sphere, and found support in these myths and icons for their prior faith assertion that Christ had, indeed, appeared to the Mesoamerican peoples following his post-resurrectional sojourns among his own disciples, gathering together a flock of sheep, "not of this fold."<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> John Taylor, *An Examination into and an Elucidation of the Great Principle of the Meditation and Atonement of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News Publ. Co., 1892), 201-203.

<sup>39</sup> John 10:16. Taylor's thesis is not without some limited merit, if what he means to assert is merely that God, in his infinite wisdom, so fashioned human existence that no religious mythos could ever wholly close itself off from some point of readiness for his true self-revelation, and thus, that all religion is, in some meaningful sense, proto-Christian, no matter how diabolical it may be in its overarching presuppositions. It must be said, however, that the Mormon thesis about God and the Incarnation is not properly Christian in the fully orthodox sense, but a hybrid of Adoptionist and Subordinationist/Arian views, such that the Catholic Church is not able to recognize the validity of Mormon baptism as a properly Christian sacrament. This fact should alert us to the limitations within which a Mormon recognition of the semblance of Quetzalcoatl to Christ could be accepted as adequate from within the pale of orthodox Christianity. The similarities and differences between Mormonism and orthodoxy are their own issue, and this is not the place to take them up, but in the interest of avoiding polemics, it must be said that Mormonism, however divergent it is from authentic Christianity, is, nonetheless, more Christian in its overall sensibilities than it is Mesoamerican. For that reason, however, it is important to note that importing those sensibilities uncritically into the totally foreign cultural milieu of the Nahua people is likely to lead to distorted readings of their iconographic record.

The central fact to bring to light at this point, however, is the extraordinary violence associated with Mesoamerican cultures in the period before their eventual Christianization. As politically incorrect as it may be to say, Christianity displaced a set of religious beliefs and practices that, for whatever astounding developments of architecture and mathematics, law and politics, literature and art attended them, held the human person in a bondage that would not break and for all the reasons with which the Church is perennially familiar.

Returning to the Book of Revelation, then, we should note that the symbolic “number of the beast,” being 666,<sup>40</sup> can be taken, by an application of the familiar principles of gematria, to signify that which is supremely ripe—supremely near to utter perfection.<sup>41</sup> In its positive dimension, therefore, it

<sup>40</sup> Rev. 13:18.

<sup>41</sup> Gematria is more an art than a science. Hebrew numerologists would recognize a wide array of interrelationships within numbers, interpreting them by breaking them into smaller numbers that could be multiplied or added together to form the number in question, or by starting with a still larger number and subtracting from it to arrive at the number. Each number involved in the analysis would have its own meaning. But there are certain numbers that hold specific and primal meanings and stand as the foundation of the whole art. Here, the number six means *ripeness, readiness, or near completion*, and can thus also mean *frustration* if that readiness never reaches the stage of *fulfillment* indicated by the number seven. In the narrative of the Wedding at Cana in John’s Gospel (2:1-11), e.g., Jesus begins with *six* jars (2:6), after having announced to his mother that his hour had not yet come (2:4). The time for fulfillment was near, but not yet. So he turns water, signifying baptism and renewal, into wine, signifying covenant, but does not yet turn the wine into the very *essence* of covenant, which exists in the life and the blood. So the miracle performed at Cana anticipates the Bread of Life discourse (6:26-65) and the event of the Cross. The number three is the divine number, representative of the divine power, according to Philo of Alexandria, and, thus, representative of the *superlative*. The use of the number six according to this factoring as  $6+(6 \times 10)+(6 \times 10^2)=666$ , means superlative frustration because it means being unbearably near to fulfillment without ever reaching it. Other analyses could also be done to this number to draw that image out even more fully, e.g., that the number ten indicates covenant, and the multiplication of ten times itself indicates a complete life. From this perspective, 600 and 60 each have their own meanings relative to the orientation and fulfillment of one’s life in relation to God and righteousness. Noah, e.g., “was six hundred years old when the flood waters came upon the earth” (Gen. 7:6). Another valid and likely also accurate reading of the number 666 in Rev. 13:18 is the numeralization of the name of the Emperor Nero (reigned 54-68 a.d.), who presided over the political persecution of Christians beginning around the

indicates that which, if we are not paying close-enough attention, can be taken for God himself.<sup>42</sup> But, in its negative dimension, the “number of the beast” indicates final and irremediable frustration to become what one ought: the number, that is to say, of damnation. Understood in this light, it is easy to see why many of the Christians who first encountered the myth of Quetzalcoatl hypothesized that Leviathan, the ancient serpent and deceiver, the Na’hash, had spread, among the Mesoamerican tribes, a pseudo-gospel designed to inoculate them against evangelization. This interpretation has the distinct advantage of accounting for the extraordinary difficulty the Spanish evangelists encountered in their attempt to introduce Christianity to the native cultures in spite of the superficial similarities between the natives’ own legends and the Christian narrative.

The fact that we cannot deny—and the fact that led the Spaniards to interpret the Mesoamerican religions as fundamentally demonic cults—was the prevalence of human sacrifice in the concrete practice of their observances. Indeed, human sacrifice, which had always been seen as an abomination in the Judeo-Christian tradition,<sup>43</sup> was a common feature

year 64 a.d. According to the tradition of gematria, it is possible to numeralize the letters of a name based upon their order of appearance in the alphabet, and then to assign a numerical value to the whole name. In this way, it is possible to infer a name based upon a number, or a number based upon a name, depending upon one’s starting point. Barnabas employs this technique in his Letter, when he attempts to locate Christ’s significance as a fulfillment of salvific history and the promise made to Abraham (Letter of Barnabas 10:7-9).

<sup>42</sup> It is on the basis of this error that the early Mormon scholars labored in the formation of their thesis equating Quetzalcoatl to Christ, when Quetzalcoatl is really more akin to the beast and the dragon in the Book of Revelation, not merely in terms of his iconographic representations, but in terms of his role in the great cosmic drama.

<sup>43</sup> Human sacrifice was known to the ancient Hebrew people from the surrounding pagan cults, most notably, the cult of Moloch, to whom children were sacrificed by the Canaanites in the valley of Gahanna, hurled into a ritual bonfire. This practice, which stands as the reference for Christ’s warnings in the New Testament, was so prevalent that, in the early years of the Hebrew differentiation from the surrounding pagan cults, many people still offered sacrifice to Moloch, and the practice was explicitly condemned, and at length, in the Book of Leviticus (18:21; 20:2-5). Once we understand this reference, we can immediately see that the Narrative of the Isaac offering (Gen. 22:1-19) is meant to show us that Abraham’s God does not delight in human sacrifice, but in the sacrifice of faith, hope, and love.

of Mesoamerican religion, but its pervasiveness within the Aztec culture, in particular, strains to the breaking point even the most resolute commitment to value-neutral scholarship. The Aztecs believed that their gods demanded the life-blood of human beings, themselves, living from humanity like celestial vampires. In this connection, the Aztecs engaged in perpetual warfare as a religious exercise. They sought noble combatants to capture and offer as sacrifices to their gods, who delighted, especially, in the victims' still-beating hearts. The God's needed human life to be and to do what divinity required. As the authorities over life and cosmic order, the gods absorbed into themselves the lives of mortals, and reprocessed their energies back into the cosmic store. It was the responsibility of the Aztec cult to feed human life into the system, lest the whole world come to an end.

From this point of view, it is easy to characterize the Aztec culture as a genuine, fully-formed culture of death. For the Aztecs, the power of life was truly limited—truly zero-sum. Theirs was not a world of creation, in which an inexhaustible font of Life loved the world into being to share himself with us, but a classically pagan world of mere finitude, in which life was radically limited from within, and, as a result, time was understood cyclically rather than teleo-eschatologically. Death framed all of life, and life's parameters were negotiated only within death's suffocating horizon of influence. With only so much of life to go around, it had to be managed, rationed, and redistributed. The Aztec perspective was a radicalized form of this typically pagan perspective, in which the gods stood as personified authorities administering death's perceived power over life.

Returning to the earliest days of the Hebrew people's self-awareness as participants in a cult of an entirely different variety—indeed, wholly unlike, in this essential, any alternative known to them—we can see, again, that the perspective of the Aztecs simply could not be reconciled with the Judeo-Christian Covenant. Once encountered, it had to be confronted and exposed before the Aztec people, to whom the Christian God of Love and unbounded Life could then be presented as the definitive alternative, whose universal Covenant could stand as

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a truly live and liberating fundamental option. With this observation, the words of God in Deuteronomy seem to resound in our ears:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love Yahweh your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that Yahweh your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. . . . I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving Yahweh your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days. . . .<sup>44</sup>

Now, we left off from our earlier summary of the image of the Woman of Guadalupe, we noted that she had appeared as if arrayed in the light of sun while standing on the moon, indicating that she had vanquished the sun god, Huitzilopachtli, and the moon god, Quetzalcoatl, the winged serpent. These principal deities lived, as we have already said, on blood-lust, in a religious milieu that involved human sacrifices sometimes numbering in the thousands, and tens of thousands of lives. Vanquishing them meant giving rise to a new culture, not of death, but of life.

Yet, we must return to the matter of the paradoxical color of Our Lady's mantle. We had suggested that the color connects the mantle with the figures of Mictlantecuhtli (Mikt-lan-tek-woot-lee) and his wife Mictecacihuatl (Misk-tesk-ei-siev-alth), god and goddess of the underworld—figures understandable

<sup>44</sup> Deut. 30:15-20 (JB), *emphasis* is added. The First Commandment of the Decalogue consists, in fact, precisely in the call to the option at the heart of this passage. By prefacing the commandments with a reminder of his self-revelation through the exodus experience (Ex. 20:2), God makes it clear that the Covenant he forms with the Hebrew people is the only option for genuine liberation and life. Yahweh is totally unlike any other deity, and only he can make humanity free from the bondage of death. Belief in Yahweh means belief in *creation* in the proper sense, and thus, in the limitless power and final victory of unbounded Love.

to Christians as Satan or the Devil. Thus, the images in the figure of the Lady of Guadalupe overlap with one another in the Aztec context, but to the Aztec people they told, in this way, a dramatic tale of salvation from a world of horrifying subjugation to a divine regime of death and decay. When they looked upon the image of the Woman on the tilma of Juan Diego, they saw the overturning of everything they thought they knew about the universe and about the relationship between life and death. The apocalyptic Woman in the image is draped in the color of the god of darkness, yet, through the night sky shines the light of the stars. These faint lights dispel the darkness of death and represent, as in the original narrative in the Book of Genesis,<sup>45</sup> the absolute power of light over darkness, of goodness over evil, and of life over death.<sup>46</sup> These luminations pierce through the darkness of her womb with the inextinguishable light of God's love—a love that simply will not be undone, even by the fearsome bonds of the kingdom of Mictlantecuhtli (Mikt-lan-tek-woot-lee). They speak a promise of resurrection as they show, even now, that “the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the cosmos, and was in the cosmos,”<sup>47</sup> to give life to us in all its fullness, as Christ proclaims in our presence, once again: “Live beyond fear; for I have changed [for you] the very structure of the world.”<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Gen. 1:14-19.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. also John 1:4-9. For a detailed discussion of the fourth day of the first creation narrative, see, Bulzacchelli, “*Elohim Created*,” 70-76.

<sup>47</sup> John 1:9-10.

<sup>48</sup> John 16:33. We offer here a slightly different rendering of this passage from our first use of it earlier, in 13, in the present article.