

1-24-1961

# Patristic Interpretation of the Protoevangelium

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### Recommended Citation

Unger, Dominic J. (1961) "Patristic Interpretation of the Protoevangelium," *Marian Studies*: Vol. 12, Article 10, Pages 111-164.  
Available at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian\\_studies/vol12/iss1/10](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian_studies/vol12/iss1/10)

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## PATRISTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE PROTOEVANGELIUM

The investigation to be undertaken in this paper is purposely restricted to those ancient Christian writers who, at least implicitly, interpreted the First-gospel (*Gen 3, 15*) of Our Blessed Lady.

Was there a tradition among these early writers to the effect that, in the mind of the Divine Author, "the Woman" mentioned in that prophecy is to be identified with Mary? If so, how common was that tradition?

We shall arrange the authors chronologically as far as possible. There seems to be no reason for treating the Eastern and Western Fathers in separate groups. The Marian interpretation is found in all sections of the Church and that rather early. Besides, there seems to have been an interdependence between East and West on this matter.

Before beginning the analysis of the single writers, a few observations seem in place. First, when exegetizing the ancient Christian writers, one must be aware of the different manners in which they can express or hold a doctrine or present an interpretation. They may do so expressly, or equivalently. They may do so implicitly, or even only virtually. They hold a doctrine implicitly if they are somehow aware that their words or ideas include the further doctrine. If their words objectively could express a more developed doctrine, but they seem wholly unaware (subjectively) of that, then they cannot be invoked as witnesses of this doctrine. In this these writers differ from the inspired writers of Scripture, where the Holy Spirit is the principal Author and could have intended something contained objectively in the words, of which the Sacred Writers were not conscious. Further, the

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authors may be simply silent about a doctrine without denying it. Then their silence may not be used as an argument in favor of the negative side, especially if outstanding ancient Churchmen defended the positive side. Lastly, these writers may deny a doctrine virtually, or implicitly, or equivalently, or expressly. In each case one should determine which. These distinctions will help to avoid the extremes of reading too much into the Fathers and of being so cautious as to miss something they did hold implicitly.<sup>1</sup>

That leads to a second observation. Often scholars are accused of taking an *a priori* approach to finding a doctrine in the Fathers. They are supposed to be so enthusiastic about finding it there that they actually do. At times the accusation may be just. But let us not forget that whether or not a doctrine is taught by a Father depends, not on the subjective enthusiasm with which one approaches the problem, but on the objective validity of the arguments presented. Moreover, unless one knows beforehand about a doctrine which is not expressly and *ex professo* in the Fathers one will hardly discover it there. It was only after scholars were convinced of the Immaculate Conception that they were able to discern it in the earlier Christian writers.

A third observation. When does a writer allude to a passage in Sacred Scripture? Evidently when he uses words or phrases that occur only in one place in Scripture with a well determined meaning. But I believe that besides such a word-allusion there can be an idea-allusion, that is, the idea of a passage is alluded to, not by the exact words of the passage itself, but by synonyms. Such an allusion is, of course, harder to prove. But it obtains, I think, if the idea is nowhere else

<sup>1</sup> Cf. O. Faller, S.J., *De priorum saeculorum silentio circa Assumptionem B. Mariae Virginis*, in *AG* 36 (1946) 77f., who correctly notes the importance of distinguishing between the objective and subjective content of a writer.

in Scripture, especially if in the same context there is a word-allusion to another part of the same Scriptural passage. Examples of this will occur in the paper. Let us now examine the individual writers <sup>2</sup>

### St. Justin Martyr

(d. ca. 163/7)

St. Justin is our first witness. He represents the Church of Palestine, Asia Minor and Rome. Three of his passages come into question, though only one of them introduces Mary. In the first, he is writing about the serpent that was raised on a tree in the desert by which the Israelites were saved.<sup>3</sup> He explains, though, that we do not have to stake our belief on a serpent, because, as a matter of fact, God cursed the serpent in the beginning. Without telling us where that beginning is, he notes that Isaias too foretold that Christ, as the great sword, would do away with the serpent, His enemy (*Is. 27, 1*). But the beginning where God cursed the serpent can be no other place hut *Gen. 3, 14-15*, to which he also alludes in his explanation of *Is. 27, 1*, because the term "enemy" does not occur there, though it is in *Gen. 3, 15*. Obviously, he is interpreting *Gen. 3, 15* in a Messianic sense by the aid of *Is. 27, 1*. Why did he not quote *Gen. 3, 15*? Perhaps he took it for granted that all knew this prophecy well. Perhaps, since he used the Septuagint, which did not express the destruction of the serpent forcefully enough, he used *Is.*

<sup>2</sup> For bibliography on the Marian interpretation of *Gen. 3, 15* in the patristic age see the writer's *The First-gospel, Genesis 3, 15*, in *Franciscan Institute Publications, Theology Series*, n 3 (St Bonaventure, N Y, 1954) especially the more recent works in nn 142 (Drewniak), 187, 205 (Lennerz), 191, 210 (Roschini), 221 (Fonseca, 266, 269 (Gallus), 281 (Stys) Besides, the writer's own study in the work just quoted, pp 90-235, Stan Styś, SJ, *De antithesi "Eva-Maria" eiusque relatione ad Protoevangelium apud Patres*, in *CTh* 23 (1952) 318-365, R Laurentin, *L'interprétation de la Genèse 3, 15 dans la tradition jusqu'au début du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, in *BSFEM* 12 (1954) 77-156

<sup>3</sup> St Justin, *Dialogus cum Tryphone*, n 19; PG 6, 692BC, 693AB

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27, 1 to interpret it. In any case, the prophecy for him seems certainly Messianic.

In his second passage, the Apologete explains how Christ is the Firstborn of God and of all creatures (cf. *Col.* 1, 15), and still He is the Son of Man, too, because He was born of Mary the Virgin. That leads him to describe how the birth of Christ from the Virgin Mary as the destroyer of the serpent is a reversal of what happened in Genesis:

And when in the commentaries of His apostles we find written that He is God's Son, and when we say that He is the Son, we understand Him to be that . . . , and that He was made man from the Virgin, in order that by the very way in which disobedience, which came from the serpent, got into power, by that same way its deposition might take place To explain, when Eve was a virgin and incorrupt, and when she had conceived the word from the serpent, she gave birth to disobedience and death Mary, the Virgin, contrariwise, when she had received faith and joy, gave this answer to the Angel Gabriel (who brought the glad news, namely, that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her, and therefore the Holy One who would be born of her would be the Son of God)· "Be it done to me according to your word" (Luke 1, 38). Of her He was born . . . through whom [Christ] God deposed the serpent and the angels and men who have become like him.<sup>4</sup>

Here Christ, who was born of the Virgin, is presented as the destruction and deposition of the serpent. Is this an allusion to *Gen.* 3, 15? I think it is an idea-allusion for these reasons. For the antithesis of Eve and Mary he is certainly using *Lk.* 1, 28-38, but not only that, because there is nothing about the deposition of the serpent in that passage That idea is found in *Gen.* 3, 15. Moreover, according to Justin, it was God Himself who deposed the serpent, though through Christ. That agrees with *Gen.* 3, 15, where God placed the enmity that

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, n 100, PG 6, 709CD, 712A

would result eventually in the ruin of the serpent. Again, Justin stresses the virgin birth of Christ in the work of destroying the serpent. That combination, a virginal Child destroying the serpent, is not in Luke; it is in *Gen* 3, 15, inasmuch as the Seed is presented as of the Woman only, an indication of a virginal conception. St. Irenaeus, who used Justin or the same source as Justin did, makes this point clear. Finally, there may be an allusion to the seed of the serpent when Justin tells us that Christ will destroy all the angels and men who become like the serpent. This cumulative evidence begets at least a great probability that Justin is alluding to *Gen*. 3, 15. Then he is taking that prophecy in a Messianic sense. And "the Woman" is the Virgin Mary; she is not Eve who is the total opposite of a virgin or a co-operator with Christ in the destruction of Satan. And then, of course, the Eve-Mary antithesis is, according to Justin, based on *Gen*. 3, 15 as one source.

That Christ is the destroyer of Satan's power in *Gen*. 3, 15 is deducible from St. Justin's third reference to the First-gospel. He is explaining *Ps*. 21 as Messianic. He calls attention to Christ's flight into Egypt, because of Herod, and he answers the objection: Why could God not have killed Herod in the beginning?, by appealing to God's allowing the serpent to live in the beginning:

Could not God have gotten rid also of the serpent in the beginning, so that it would not exist, rather than say: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed" (*Gen*. 3, 15ab)? Could He not at once have created a multitude of men? And yet, since He knew that it would be good, He created both angels and men free to do what is right, and He appointed periods of time during which He knew it would be good for them to have the exercise of free will<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, n 102; *PG* 6, 712D, 714AB Cf T. Gallus, S J, *Quaestiones de Protoevangelio in Bulla "Munificentissimus Deus,"* in *Mm* 17 (1955) 305-331,

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The objector certainly implied, and Justin admits it, that God did put the serpent out of the way in Messianic times. He did not do so immediately, namely, in *Gen. 3*, because He created men with a free will and willed that they merit their reward by the struggle against the serpent. This enmity was foretold in *Gen. 3*, 15ab, as Justin notes. He does not quote *Gen. 3*, 15c, to the effect that the serpent was put away by Christ, but in the context of the objection that seems certainly Justin's view. This interpretation of Justin is strengthened by the fact that he answers the objector not by any passage of Scripture where God allowed sinners to live, but by *Gen. 3*, 15, because precisely in this text the serpent is the enemy, the archenemy, of Christ, just as Herod is the enemy of Christ in the case that occasioned the objection. In both cases the enemy was allowed to live for the greater triumph of Christ. In any case, Justin had not forgotten that only two paragraphs before he had used *Gen. 3*, 15 in a Messianic sense; and so in the present case he is not interpreting the Woman's Seed in a collective sense, to the exclusion of Christ.

To sum up. Justin sees the First-gospel as a prophecy about the enmity between Christ and Satan, and about Christ's deposing Satan, precisely inasmuch as He was born of the Virgin Mother. Since his allusive interpretation occurs while he is speaking of the antithesis between Eve and Mary, he considers *Gen. 3*, 15 as one source of this antithesis. We have considered St. Justin first, not because he is so explicit on this matter, but because he was either the source of St. Irenaeus, or both got the matter from a common source. St. Irenaeus, however, holds clearly what Justin does by allusion.

contains a refutation of Styś (Note 2), with whom Laurentin (Note 2) sides Styś attempted a rebuttal in *Sitne Iustinus revera auctor interpretationis christologico-mariologicae Gen. 3, 15 Responsum R. P. Tiburtio Gallus datum*, in *RTk* 3 (1956) 70-128.

**St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons**  
(d. ca. 200)

The Bishop of Lyons represents not only Gaul, but also Asia Minor whence he came originally, and Rome, where he traveled and had considerable contacts. He has three passages in which he cites or uses *Gen. 3, 15*. I have treated this matter in greater detail in *Maria et Ecclesia*,<sup>6</sup> so I will not repeat here all the details. We shall start with the passage in which he quotes *Gen. 3, 15* verbatim and completely:

He has, therefore, thoroughly recapitulated all things He has engaged our enemy in battle, both dashing him to pieces—him who had led us captive in Adam in the beginning—and trampling on his head. This you have given in Genesis where God said to the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed; he shall observe your head, and you shall observe his heel” (*Gen. 3, 15*).

To explain, ever since that time He who was to be born of the Virgin Woman, according to the likeness of Adam, was heralded as observing the head of the serpent. That, namely, is the Offspring of whom the Apostle wrote in his letter to the Galatians: “The Law of works was enacted until the offspring should come to whom the promise was made” (*Gal. 3, 19*; cf. *Gen 12, 3; 18, 18; 22, 18*).

He makes this still clearer in the same letter when he says: “But when the fullness of time came, God sent His Son made of a woman” (*Gal. 4, 4*).

Certainly, the enemy would not have been justly conquered unless a man born of a woman had conquered him. For it was through a woman that he got dominion over man in the beginning, setting himself up in opposition to man. For that reason too the Lord confessed Himself to be the “Son of Man,” inasmuch as He recapitulated in Himself the primordial man

<sup>6</sup>D Unger, O.F.M. Cap., *Sancti Irenaei, Lugdunensis Episcopi, doctrina de Maria Virgine Matre, Socia Iesu Christi Filii sui ad opus recapitulationis*, in *MEcl 4* (Romae, 1959) 67-140.

[Adam], out of whom was made the handiwork that is according to woman . . .

But since He who in the beginning fashioned us and in the end sent His Son, is one and the same, the Lord perfected His commandment when He was born of a woman, and destroyed our Adversary . . .<sup>7</sup>

This passage is not extant in the Greek original. But we can be certain that Irenaeus used the Greek Septuagint for *Gen. 3, 15*, with 'He' as the subject of the third clause, the 'observe' as the verb in the third and fourth clauses. He uses the same verb in his commentary that follows the quotation, when he writes of the Virgin's Offspring as having been "heralded as observing the head of the serpent." So, when before the quotation of *Gen. 3, 15* he writes about Christ as "trampling on his head," he is not quoting *Gen. 3, 15*, but interpreting it. That interpretation is correct, because to "observe" the head of a serpent means to defeat it, to make it powerless, and that is done by trampling on its head, or smashing it. Irenaeus could have arrived at this interpretation by the aid of *Lk. 10, 19*, where Christ says He gives power to His disciples to trample on serpents; and he may have considered this Lucan passage as a virtual interpretation of *Gen. 3, 15*, inasmuch as Christ who gives that power to the disciples has it Himself by greater reason and independently. So, as early as the second half of the second century we find "observe your head" of the Septuagint interpreted by "trample on your head." This will eventually become the Latin translation and the Syriac. St. Jerome will extend the meaning further to express the crushing of the head, which he claims gives the Hebrew sense better than does the Septuagint.

The general context of this passage is this: Irenaeus is explaining how Christ, by being born of a Virgin Woman,

<sup>7</sup> St Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 5, 21, 1-2, PG 7, 1179, ed Harvey, 2, 380f

recapitulated all things and defeated Satan in a triumphant victory. We must note that the Virgin Mother plays an important role.

Who are the actors involved in this drama of recapitulation? The serpent is, of course, the Devil. And there can be no doubt that the one who dashes him to pieces and tramples on his head is Christ, as all scholars admit. But is this Offspring of the Virgin Mother Christ alone? Yes, throughout this passage Christ alone is presented as the one who conquers Satan. But even if Irenaeus were interpreting the woman's "seed" in a collective sense, Christ would still be the principal part of it, and all others would be included in Him. It would be against the entire theology of recapitulation to think that the seed is the whole race, including Christ in a special manner.

And who is the Woman? The Bishop of Lyons does not expressly identify the Woman, but he does so equivalently. He begins his commentary on *Gen. 3, 15* by stating that the one who would observe the serpent's head, Christ, is the one who was to be born of the "Virgin Woman." He calls her "Virgin Woman" because he is speaking of the Woman of *Gen. 3, 15* just quoted, and because he considered her a virgin mother. But that can be only Mary. He makes this clearer by using *Gal. 4, 4* to explain who the Seed of the Woman is. But the Woman of *Gal. 4, 4*, whom Irenaeus takes to be a virgin mother, is none other than Mary. Mary, then, is also the "Virgin Woman," the Woman of *Gen. 3, 15*.

From another viewpoint, too, the Woman can be identified as Mary. The central doctrine of Irenaeus in this section is that of the recapitulation of all things through Christ. But that was possible only because Christ took our nature, the nature that had fallen in Adam, and He did so only through the Virgin Woman. But this recapitulation is, according to the

Bishop, expressed in the First-gospel. The Woman of the First-gospel is, therefore, Mary.

We must note that in this section Irenaeus makes no mention whatever of Eve as the Woman. Moreover, elsewhere he repeatedly portrays Eve as the total antithesis of Mary.<sup>8</sup> But then Eve cannot be this victorious Woman of *Gen. 3, 15*. And, equivalently, Irenaeus tells us that he bases his Eve-Mary antithesis on *Gen. 3, 15* as the source of Mary's victory. No objection can, therefore, be raised against this, because he does not quote or allude to *Gen. 3, 15* when establishing the Eve-Mary antithesis. To do so in those places would have been against his policy of referring to the Old Testament for Eve and to the New Testament for Mary.

From this passage of Irenaeus we can conclude that he expressly identifies the Offspring of the Woman as Christ, and equivalently he identifies the woman as the Virgin Mother of Christ, who with Him is victorious over Satan. Virtually, then, he tells us that this victorious Woman is not Eve, who was defeated by Satan. And so *Gen 3, 15* was for him the positive side, the Marian side, of the Eve-Mary antithesis, just as it was for Christ in the Satan-Christ antithesis.

The second Irenaeian passage is from the fourth book of his *Adversus haereses* where he explains that the Father who prepared the kingdom for the just, also prepared the furnace of fire for punishment of the wicked. That gave Irenaeus an occasion to explain how the devil fits into this picture. By means of the parable of the Wheat and the Cockle he states that Satan sowed enmity between God and man (cf. *Gen. 3, 1-6*); but God turned that enmity right back on Satan, placing enmity between him and men through the mediation of Christ who was to be born of a woman. This reversal of enmity Irenaeus saw predicted in the First-gospel:

<sup>8</sup> See my *First-gospel* (Note 2), pp 100-103

Really, this Angel and Enemy has been an apostate since the day on which he envied God's handiwork and attempted to make him God's enemy (cf. Gen. 3, 1ff.) Wherefore, God in turn separated from fellowship with Himself him who of his own accord secretly sowed cockle, that is, who introduced the transgression. He had pity, however, on man who negligently and wickedly took upon himself the disobedience, and He turned back upon the author of the enmity that enmity by which he wished to make man God's enemy. He did so by removing His own enmity against man, but turning it back on and setting it up again against the serpent.

That is according to what the Scripture tells us God said to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the Woman, between your seed and her Seed. He shall observe your head, and you shall observe his heel" (Gen. 3, 15).

This enmity the Lord recapitulated in Himself by being made man from a woman (cf. Gal. 4, 4), and by trampling on his head (Gen. 3, 15c), as we have shown in the preceding book.<sup>9</sup>

This text is extant in Greek in a *Catena*. It agrees with the Latin version, except for a small point that is immaterial in our question. But the quotation of Gen. 3, 15 in Latin has *calcabit*. That does not mean that Irenaeus had the corresponding word in Greek. He quoted here as elsewhere from the Septuagint and wrote 'observe.' But here as elsewhere Irenaeus interprets 'observe' by "trample on," and so it was easy for the Latin translator to insert "trample on" in the quotation of Gen. 3, 15, according to what some of the Old Latin translations had.

Again, who are the actors in Gen. 3, 15 according to this passage? There is no doubt that Christ is the Woman's Seed. He is the Recapitulator of the enmity of the devil. This recapitulation took place by Christ's being born of a woman,

<sup>9</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, 4, 40, 3, PG 7, 1114, Harvey 2, 303f.

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according to the language of *Gal* 4, 4. That way he trampled on the serpent's head, according to the First-gospel, to which the Bishop certainly alludes here, and which he interprets as a trampling on the serpent. Christ alone is the Seed of the Woman, but all men share in His victory over Satan, because He recapitulated them by His birth from the Virgin

Irenaeus sees, however, in the First-gospel, not merely Christ's victory over Satan, in clause c, but His birth from the Virgin Woman, in clause b, and her enmity against Satan, in clause a. The cryptic sentence: "This enmity the Lord recapitulated in Himself by being made man from a woman, and by trampling on the serpent's head," is a concise but complete interpretation of the First-gospel in a Christological and Mariological sense. His allusion to *Gal* 4, 4, as well as the whole context makes it certain that Mary is the Woman, and not Eve; and she is a Virgin Mother. Eve is not a virgin mother, and she contributed nothing to the work of recapitulation, to which this Woman contributed by her physical and moral virginal motherhood in relation to Christ. Mary, and she alone, is the necessary instrument of the recapitulation through Christ.

The third passage of the Bishop of Lyons to be considered is in the Third Book. There he wishes to show that God was merciful toward Adam. As a proof of this he refers to the First-gospel, which he does not quote verbatim, but condenses in his own words and then interprets it.

With this in mind, He put enmity between the serpent and the woman together with her Offspring, who would observe each other (cf. Gen 3, 15).

The one is he whose sole would be bitten (cf. Gen. 3, 15d), and who would have power to trample on the head of His enemy (Gen. 3, 15c), the other is he who would bite and kill and hinder the steps of man until the Offspring predestined to

trample on his head would come, who was Mary's Child (cf. Gen. 3, 15c).

Of Him the prophet said: "You shall tread upon the asp and basilisk, and shall trample upon the lion and the dragon" (Ps 90, 13). By this he pointed out that sin, together with death that held sway, because it set itself up and spread abroad against man, and made him cold, would be deprived of its dominion, and that the lion, that is, the Antichrist, who would rush upon the human race, would be trampled on by Him in the last times, and He would bind the dragon, that ancient serpent (cf. Apoc. 20, 2), and make it subject to the dominion of man, who had been conquered, so man could trample on all his [devil's] power (cf. Luke 10, 19).<sup>10</sup>

For this the Greek original is again missing. But there are no difficulties that would make us doubt the Latin as a very literal translation. Who are the persons involved in the First-gospel? Irenaeus condenses the last part of the prophecy thus: "who would observe each other." Some authors have concluded, incorrectly, that he means that the woman would observe the serpent, and the seed of the woman would observe the seed of the serpent, and vice versa, as is expressed in the First-gospel. But Irenaeus condensed the text to suit his purpose. He said God placed enmity between the serpent on the one side and the Woman and her Offspring on the other. These observe each other: the offspring of the serpent is not included, except inasmuch as it is part of the serpent himself.

The Seed of the Woman is described as "the one whose sole would be bitten" (Gen. 3, 15d), and "who would have power to trample on the head of His enemy" (Gen. 3, 15c), and as "the seed what would come" (Gal. 3, 19), which was "predestined to trample on his head" (Gen. 3, 15c). Then he identifies this Seed expressly by saying it is "Mary's Child"

The function of this Child is to "observe the head of the

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 23, 7, PG 7, 694, Harvey 2, 129

serpent," which Irenaeus interprets here too as a trampling on the serpent's head. The victory described in the rest of the paragraph makes it clear that it is Christ who "observed" the serpent's head and "trampled on" it.<sup>11</sup>

The Bishop does not speak of two Offsprings of the Woman. Some claim that the phrase "the one, whose sole would be bitten" and the phrase about man's steps being hindered, refer to man in general, to all the offspring of Eve, which would be "observed" by the serpent. The other is Christ, the Seed predestined to trample on the serpent's head.<sup>12</sup> That is not correct. For Irenaeus the one whose sole would be bitten is the same as the one who would trample on the serpent's head, Mary's Child. We showed above that Irenaeus does not admit Eve in the First-gospel. She brought ruin and death to all her children. The Woman of the First-gospel is the necessary instrument of salvation, and that by a virginal motherhood relative to the Recapitulator. If the Woman's Seed included all believers in Christ, or even the rest of mankind, they would have to be Mary's children, not Eve's.

Besides, St. Irenaeus expressly identifies the Seed of the Woman as Mary's Child. That is an equally express identification of Mary as the Virgin Mother, as the Woman. Moreover, in the context the Virgin Mother was necessary for the "just" destruction of the serpent, because through her the predestined Seed had human nature. Here too St. Irenaeus' explanation of *Gen. 3, 15* supposes the doctrine of recapitulation. So, if Christ justly recapitulated us, he had to be born of a virgin mother. That is why Irenaeus introduces her in this explanation, though very cryptically, in the expression

<sup>11</sup> Cf Unger, *art cit.*, p 133f, against Laurentin's idea that Irenaeus sees only the enmity and not the victory expressed in the First-gospel

<sup>12</sup> See the further refutation of this, against Styś, Michl, and Laurentin, in Unger, *art. cit.*, p 134f.

“who was Mary’s Child.” That, too, is why in the beginning when he condenses the First-gospel in his own words, he tells us that God “put enmity between the serpent and the woman, together with her Offspring.” The Woman is in an important role against Satan. And she is included also in the phrase “who would observe each other.” The Woman and her Child would observe the serpent, and vice versa. Hers is a dynamic enmity that, together with and through her Child, resulted in the serpent’s head being trampled on, in complete victory over him.

To sum up. It is clear that Irenaeus expressly identifies the Seed of the Woman as Christ, and Christ only, though other men share in His victory, since He recapitulated them. He interprets the Woman of the First-gospel as a virgin mother, which he corroborates with *Gal.* 4, 4. Thus he, at least equivalently, identifies Mary as the Woman. But he also expressly says the Seed is Mary’s Child, and so Mary is the Woman. The First-gospel is an expression of Christ’s work of recapitulation, in which His Virgin Mother played an important, a necessary part, and in which Eve played no part whatever. In this work she was the total opposite of Mary, the Woman in the First-gospel. Irenaeus also used *Gen* 3, 15 as the source for the Marian part in the Eve-Mary antithesis.

Having analyzed the texts of St. Justin and St. Irenaeus, it seems proper to note that this analysis substantiates the statement of Pope Pius XII in his Apostolic Constitution on the Assumption that ever since the second century the Fathers are witnesses to the doctrine that the New Eve was associated intimately with the New Adam in the struggle against the infernal foe and in the victory over him, as was foretold in the First-gospel.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *AAS* 42 (1950) 768. For a discussion of St. Irenaeus, as well as St. Justin, in this connection, cf. Gallus, *art. cit.*

### **St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage**

(d. 258)

St. Cyprian represents the Church of the West in Africa in the first half of the third century. He quotes *Is. 7, 10-15*, including the famous prophecy about the virgin birth of Emmanuel, and then continues:

God had foretold that this Seed would come forth from a woman, the Seed, namely, that would trample on the head of the Devil. It was in Genesis: "Then God said to the serpent: . . . I will put enmities between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed, he shall observe your head, and you shall observe his heel" (*Gen. 3, 14-15*).<sup>14</sup>

The Bishop here expressly identifies the virgin Child of *Is. 7, 14* with the Seed of the Woman in *Gen. 3, 15*. He therefore considers *Gen. 3, 15* Messianic, and obviously, takes the Woman as the Mother of Christ, Mary. Moreover, by comparing *Is. 7, 14* with *Gen. 3, 15* he admits that "her Seed" is indicative of a virgin motherhood. The Woman, therefore, can not be Eve. In Africa, then, in the middle of the third century we have the same clear Marian as well as Christological explanation of the First-gospel as at the end of the second century in Gaul.

### **Serapion, Bishop of Thmuis**

(d. after 362)

Serapion was Bishop in Lower Egypt and a friend of St. Anthony the Hermit and of St. Athanasius, from whom he received several important letters. A fragment, seemingly from a work on the Hexaëmeron, was known till recently only

<sup>14</sup> St. Cyprian, *Ad Quirinum. Testimonium adversus Iudaeos*, lib. 2, 9, *PL* 4, 704, *Hartel, CSEL* 3, 1 (1868) 73-74

in a Latin translation in a *Catena*. Laurentin found the Greek original in the Vatican library. Here are the Bishop's words:

The woman does not have seed, only man does. How then was that (Gen 3, 15ab) said of the Woman? Is it not evident that there is here question of Christ, whom the holy Virgin brought forth without seed? As a matter of fact, the singular is used, "of the seed," and not the plural, "of the seeds."<sup>15</sup>

The Bishop holds very clearly that the Woman is Mary, and he identifies her by the fact that she must be a virgin mother. This early Christian writer, too, in Egypt, sees the virgin motherhood foretold in the First-gospel.

### St. Ephraem, Deacon of Syria (d. 376)

St. Ephraem, that shining light of the early Church in Syria, unmistakably favors the Marian as well as the Christological interpretation. Much work needs to be done yet on the authenticity of some of his writings. But in the works that are surely genuine, his mind on the question is clear.

In one of his poems he sang:

Truly you [Lord] and your Mother are the only ones who are absolutely and completely beautiful, for there is no guilt in you, Lord, nor any stain in your Mother. . . . Adam did not engender you, who dared to transgress the law, nor did his son who unjustly and without cause killed his brother. You are the children of the Holy Spirit . . .

The Devil came, raging very much—he who was cursed seven times; and his spirit was still elated, though Mary's Son trampled on him sorely, for he is a serpent who, though crushed, still attacks. But it is wiser for me [death] to lie low on the ground and adore this Jesus who conquered me by His cross<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Cf Laurentin, *art cit*, n 167a. The Latin is in A Lippomanus, *Catena in Genesim ex varis authoribus ecclesiasticis* (Paris, 1564) fol 93r.

<sup>16</sup> St Ephraem, *Carmina Nisibena*, nn 26 and 38; ed G Bickel (Leipzig, 1866) 122f, 152

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In place of the Septuagint 'observe' we have here 'trample on', which is not an interpretation as it was in the Greek Fathers, because Ephraem read 'trample on' in his Syriac version of the Bible. But like the Greek, the Syriac has "he" as subject of the trampling. In his interpretation St Ephraem introduces the idea of crushing. Since it is "Mary's Son" who trampled on the serpent, Mary is surely the Woman of the First-gospel, as the Seed is the Son of Mary. St. Ephraem seems here to depend on St. Ireneaus.

In a sermon on the Nativity of Jesus, the Deacon has this word of encouragement:

Eve looks up cheerfully already now, because she will see the day when her Offspring, the Author of Life, descends to raise up the dead mother [Eve] of His own Mother [Mary]. The adorable Child smashed the serpent's head, by whose poison the Woman of old was infected and perished<sup>17</sup>

The allusion to *Gen* 3, 15 is beyond doubt. A serpent's head is smashed by the divine Child of a mother who can be only Mary. "Smashed" is but a poetic synonym for 'trampled on.'

In another sermon on the Lord, the Singer of Our Lady has this explanation:

Our Lord, however, was trampled on by death, but He in turn crushed it as a path [cf. *Gen* 3, 15cd]. . . . So, since death could not devour Him without a body, and the lower regions [grave] could not swallow Him up without flesh, He came to the Virgin, that, having taken a chariot from her, He might ride to the lower regions. . . . So [death] came to Eve, the mother of all the living. She is the vineyard, of which death opened the fence with the very hands of Eve, that she might taste its fruit, hence, Eve, the mother of all the living, became the

<sup>17</sup> *Idem, De Nativitate, sermo 9, ed Assemani, Syr. lat., t 2, 424DF.*

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source of death for all the living. But Mary flowered as the new vine instead of the old vine Eve, and the new Life, Christ, dwelt in her<sup>18</sup>

That Christ crushed death, but that death trampled on Christ, is a certain use of, a word-allusion to, *Gen.* 3, 15cd. Death is but a synonym for the serpent. Mary is the Mother of Christ, who crushed the serpent, so she is the Woman. Eve is not that Woman. Eve is presented as the total opposite of Mary, of the Woman of *Gen.* 3, 15. It is clear from this that St. Ephraem, too, based the Eve-Mary antithesis on the First-gospel as one source for Mary's role.

In a second hymn on the Nativity, the Syrian Singer has this new note:

The Lord said that he [Satan] had fallen from heaven (Luke 10, 18). That accursed one had exalted himself but he was cast down from his high place (Apoc. 12, 7-9) The foot of Mary trampled on him who had struck at Eve with the heel. Blessed is He who laid him low by His birth.<sup>19</sup>

Again we have a certain allusion to the First-gospel in "trampling on" the devil. True, the first line is a reference to Christ's statement in *Lk.* 10, 18; and since in *Lk.* 10, 19 Christ speaks of giving power to the Apostles to "trample on" serpents, there may be an allusion to this verse here. But since this passage is itself an equivalent expression of Christ's power to trample on the serpent and an allusion to *Gen.* 3, 15, Ephraem's allusion would go back to *Gen.* 3, 15 in any case. That is strengthened by the fact that Christ is said to do the trampling on Satan by His birth, evidently, by His virginal birth from Mary. This is an idea-allusion to the

<sup>18</sup> *Idem, Sermo de Domino nostro*; ed Th. J. Lamy, *Hymni et sermones*, 1 (Malnes, 1882-1902) 154-156

<sup>19</sup> *Idem, De Nativitate Iesu Christi in carne, Hymnus* 2, 31; Lamy, 2, 455-457 There is some doubt about the authenticity of this hymn

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"Seed of the Woman." Moreover, Mary's presence here— it is Mary's foot that tramples on the serpent—makes the reference to *Gen.* 3, 15 certain, because she is nowhere in sight in *Lk.* 10, 19 But "Mary's foot," I would guess, is Christ, who took his human nature from her, and through whom she was able to trample on Satan Hence, this passage is not an argument in favor of the feminine pronoun in his Bible. It seems quite probable that Ephraem is alluding to *Apoc.* 12, 7-9 when he speaks of the Devil's having been cast down These cumulative notes leave little doubt that we have here a certain use of *Gen.* 3, 15 in the Mariological and Christological sense; and that the Eve-Mary antithesis is rooted in *Gen.* 3, 15.

In a hymn on the Blessed Mother we find the same interpretation:

Let the great Adam who had been struck by the serpent rejoice with Mary. She gave to Adam a vine [Christ], by which when He was nourished He crushed the cursed asp and recovered from its deadly bite . . .

Eve and the Serpent dug a ditch and threw Adam headlong into it But Mary and her kingly Child opposed themselves [to them] and, having descended, drew him out of the abyss by this occult mystery, which, when it was made known to Adam, gave him life.

The virginal vine [Mary] gave the grape [Christ], whose sweet wine brought solace to those who were weeping Eve and Adam, afflicted by sorrow, tasted the medicine of life and found solace in it for their tears.<sup>20</sup>

The knowledge of the Incarnation brought solace to Adam and Eve; that must have been during their lifetime. But the only place where anything was revealed to them that might have

<sup>20</sup> *De B. M. Virgine, Hymnus* 1, vs. 6 13-14, Lamy, 2, 524 This hymn is possibly not authentic

some connection with the Incarnation, with a virginal mother and her victorious Child, is *Gen. 3, 15*. There is here an allusion to that First-gospel. The fact that in the first verse here quoted Adam crushes the serpent's head, simply means that he could do so after having been nourished on Christ, who is therefore the principal crusher of Satan. Adam shares in Christ's victory; but Christ is the Seed of the Woman, Mary. We must note again that Mary is the opposite of Eve, and this antithesis is revealed in *Gen. 3, 15*, with Mary as the virginal, victorious Woman.

A final passage from a second hymn on the Virgin:

In Mary the bowed head of E $\ddot{v}$ e was raised; because Mary received the Infant who apprehended the asp, the leaves of ignominy have been swallowed up in glory.<sup>21</sup>

He continues for a number of verses contrasting Eve and Mary, with Mary effecting the opposite of Eve, with Mary undoing Eve's sin and its effects, as is expressed already in the verse quoted. This verse is an idea-allusion to *Gen. 3, 15*. The apprehension of the asp is a poetic expression of the serpent's being trampled on or crushed. Mary's Infant does that, and He is the Seed of the Woman. The Eve-Mary antithesis is again rooted in the First-gospel. Mary is even Eve's Mediatress.

The mind of St. Ephraem is, therefore, very clear and certain. The Woman of *Gen. 3, 15* is a virginal mother, and she is that in regard to Christ, who is her Seed. Together they are not only at enmity with Satan, but they triumph over him completely and save Adam and Eve and the whole race. The First-gospel is without doubt a springboard for the Eve-Mary antithesis. And this interpretation of St. Ephraem is

<sup>21</sup> *De B. M. Virgine, Hymnus 2, vs 7; Lamy, 2, 526*

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not contradicted or even weakened if in other works of his he accommodates the prophecy to a moral explanation.<sup>22</sup>

We may add here that members of the school of St Ephraem wrote a number of hymns in imitation of those of the Saint, expressing the same interpretation of *Gen. 3, 15* as he did.<sup>23</sup>

**St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan**

(d 397)

St. Ambrose of Milan is an excellent witness of the Western Church in matters Mariological. What is his opinion about the First-gospel? Some nine passages have been discovered in his works where he uses or quotes that prophecy. At times he merely accommodates the last clause allegorically, once to Adam even before the Fall! Several times he takes that clause in a collective moral sense, of all men tempted by the devil, against whom they should guard themselves. But here Christ is the source of victory, and so He is virtually included in the Woman's Seed. In these places "the Woman" is not expressly identified as Eve, although Ambrose seems to suppose she is Eve. Ambrose has three places where by an idea-allusion he identifies the Woman's Seed as Christ.<sup>24</sup> Lastly, there are two passages in which Mary enters into the explanation. These we shall analyze. The first is in his commentary on *Ps. 37*. He is commenting on *Matt 10, 18* about being wise as serpents, and he makes the application that, just as a serpent guards its head to protect itself, so we should guard our Head who is Christ. That suggests to him the mystery of the serpent:

<sup>22</sup> Cf Unger *The First-gospel*, 150f

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 146-149

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 167-168, and Ambrose, *In Ps 118*, n 4, *PL 15*, 1201AC, Petschenig, *CSEL 62* (1913) 7f.

Do you not recognize a mystery of faith about the nature of the serpent? That famous [ille] serpent of paradise first provoked the woman to the sin of adultery. But when its poison had been poured out on this world, the Child of that renowned [illius] Woman avenged the parent's circumvention and the serpent's deception; He despoiled him, namely, of his weapons and amputated his head (cf. Gen. 3, 15c).<sup>25</sup>

After this the Bishop returns to give advice that we should somehow turn the poison that the serpent had injected in our race against it and cause it to die. Several times he speaks of crushing the poison of the serpent, an idea he takes from *Rom* 16, 20, where Paul prays that God will crush Satan under the feet of believers. So Ambrose's mention of crushing the poison of the serpent is not a use of, at least direct, of *Gen*. 3, 15c, but of *Rom*. 16, 20. The Child who amputated the serpent's head is certainly Christ, and this is an idea-allusion to *Gen*. 3, 15c. A serpent is made powerless, is killed, by trampling on its head, or crushing it, or amputating it. But whose Child is Christ in this passage of Ambrose? In Latin the passage reads:

Serpens ille paradisi prior feminam [Evam] ad culpae adulterium provocavit. Sed ubi venenum eius effusum est in hunc mundum, suboles [Christus] *illius* feminae [Mariae] circumventionem parentis [Evae], et fraudem ulta serpentis armis eum suis exiit et caput illius amputavit.

In my book, *The First-gospel*, I argued at length that the antecedent of *illius* is Mary, *illius* having here its classical meaning, "that well-known, or renowned." I see no reason for retreating from that interpretation. The *fraudem serpentis* is certainly the serpent's deceiving Eve, and the *cir-*

<sup>25</sup> St. Ambrose, *In Ps* 37, nn 8-9; *PL* 14, 1012D-1013C, Petschenig, *CSEL* 64 (1918) 142

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*cumventionem parentis* is certainly Eve's deceiving Adam. *Parentis* just as *serpentis* is a subjective genitive; it is not an objective genitive referring to Adam. But if Eve is meant by *parentis*, and if she were also referred to by *illius feminae*, we would have an extremely awkward construction: The Child of that woman Eve avenged that parent-Eve's circumventing of Adam. In that case he should have used merely a pronoun (*eius*) in place of *parentis*, and perhaps put *parentis* in place of *feminae*: "Suboles illius parentis [Evae] circumventionem eius ulta . ." As it stands, I believe, it expresses the famous Eve-Mary antithesis, about which St. Ambrose wrote elsewhere quite forcefully.<sup>26</sup> Here he bases Mary's opposition to Eve on the First-gospel, inasmuch as through her Child she was victorious over Satan, and avenged both Eve's sin and the devil's.

The second passage where the Doctor of Milan alludes to *Gen. 3, 15* with a Marian inclusion is this:

Mary conquered you [devil], inasmuch as she gave birth to the Conqueror, inasmuch as she, without loss of virginity, brought forth Him who when crucified conquered you, and when dead made you subject to Himself. Today too you will be conquered, so that the Woman will detect your ambushes . . . Mary has been visited in order that she might liberate Eve.<sup>27</sup>

Just before this he wrote of removing the ruin of the devil so that Life might appear, and of bringing out the sword by which the head of the real Goliath might be cut off. This is a reference to *1 Kings 17, 51*. But the real Goliath is the devil, whose head is cut off by Christ. There may be here an idea-allusion to *Gen 3, 15c*, since in what follows, quoted above, there is a word-allusion to *Gen 3, 15d* (the detection of the devil's ambushes), and an idea-allusion to *Gen. 3, 15c* (the

<sup>26</sup> Cf Unger, *op cit*, 165-168.

<sup>27</sup> St Ambrose, *De obitu Theodori*, 44, 47, *PL* 16, 1400-1401

conquering of the devil), and *Gen* 3, 15b (the virginal motherhood). The virginal motherhood has here its traditional force: Christ, the Seed of the Woman, conquered Satan by being born of a virgin mother. Moreover, the Woman detects the ambushes of the devil, so she must have been the subject of *Gen* 3, 15c: it is *her* heel that is attacked. Finally, Mary is the liberator of even Eve, so she shares in her Son's conquering of the devil. And the Eve-Mary antithesis has *Gen* 3, 15 as its foundation.

To conclude, among his various explanations of the First-gospel, St. Ambrose seems to have been aware of the Mariological as well as Christological interpretation and made use of it by allusion.

### Pseudo-Jerome

This letter (*Ad amicum aegrotum, de viro perfecto*), written between 390 and 400, perhaps by a man infected with Pelagianism, advises on how to live amid suffering. The immediate context of the section in which *Gen*. 3, 15 occurs is this: The author describes the creation of man and his deception by the devil; then he dwells on the devil's and man's punishment according to *Gen*. 3, 14-19. Having stressed that God, in His mercy, promised Christ immediately after the Fall of man, he explains at length:

For, when He fulminated the curse against the serpent according to his deserts, He ordered him to take dirt for food and to crawl on his belly [*Gen* 3, 14], and since he had introduced death, God added; 'I will put enmities between you and the woman, between your seed and the woman's [sic] seed, she shall trample on your head, and you shall observe her heel' (*Gen*. 3, 15).

Do you not realize, do you not see, that a threat was then made against him *in Christ*? Certainly, I will accept no other seed of woman except that of which the Apostle says: 'Made of

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a woman' (Gal. 4, 4), made from flesh. . . (John 1, 14). For if we look at this public and natural notion of generating, women do not have seed. Finally, no woman conceives without a man. And for this reason, since already then the seed of human generation had been vitiated in Adam by the transgression, the heavenly seed is promised, as the Apostle believed, not from the corruption of man, but from God (John 1, 13) . . .

And so, the Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ was already then promised in that renowned woman; for it is she who was made the opponent of the serpent's enmities. God says, 'I will put enmities between you and the woman.' He does not say, 'I put,' lest it might seem to refer to Eve. The word is one of promise relative to the future. 'I will put,' He says. . . . The renowned woman spoken of is assuredly she who was to give birth to the Savior, and not she who would bear a fratricide. 'I will raise up a woman who, setting aside credulity, will not only not listen to you though you should point to the sweetness of apples for opening her eyes, or promise her that she should be like God, but one who when even Gabriel will deliver his message will demand a reason for the strangeness of his promise.

. (Luke 1, 34). [Here follows a long explanation of the virginal conception and birth of Christ.]

Finally, what follows is a promise of an achievement of the Virgin that is greater than man [human nature], namely, 'She shall trample on your head' (Gen 3, 15c). Who doubts that besides Our Lord no one trampled on the serpent's head? Certainly, He alone walked on dragons and scorpions (Cf. Ps. 90, 13 Luke 10, 19), He led captivity captive (cf. Eph. 4, 8) For what follows: 'And you shall observe her heel' (Gen. 3, 15d), to whom else does that refer, do we believe? The heel is the extremity of the foot. And Our Lord . . . when He was being tempted by the same serpent and was already victor of the third deception (Matt. 4, 10), exclaimed: 'Get behind me, Satan' (Mark 8, 33) What else does that mean than that being placed or left behind Him, he is ordered to observe His heel?<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Epistola sexta. Ad amicum aegrotum, de viro perfecto*, n 6, PL 30, 82C-84A.

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All scholars recognize this passage as one of the most explicit and complete identifications of the Woman and her Seed as Mary and Christ in ancient Christian literature. We need not delay, then, to explain this. We should note, however, that the author inserted *mulieris* in place of *illius* in the very quotation from Genesis, so there would be no mistake about the identity of the Woman. Further, he not merely identifies the Woman as Mary; he expressly excludes Eve.

The meaning of the first sentence in the last paragraph is disputed. There are two problems. We need the Latin text for the discussion:

Denique quod sequitur maiorem ab homine virginis promittit effectum, dicendo: 'Ipsa tuum calcabit caput' . . . Ipse enim solus super draconem . . . ambulavit

Now, did the author quote the Bible here with *ipsa*, or *ipse*? Second, does the genitive *virginis* belong with *ab homine* or with *effectum*? The practical upshot of both questions is: Did the author have the Woman, Mary, share in the defeat of Satan, according to the last half of the First-gospel? In his explanation he certainly ascribes the trampling on the devil to Christ, and to Him alone. But does he thereby exclude even the Virgin?

As for the pronoun, the editors of the various editions of this letter have always written *ipsa*, both the first and the second time. *Gen. 3, 15* is here quoted. But B. Fischer in his critical study of the Old Latin text of Genesis claims the author had written *ipse*.<sup>29</sup> He gives no reasons for his change, but it seems the sole reason is the fact that the author immediately explains that only Christ ever trampled on the serpent, thus excluding even Mary and supposing a masculine

<sup>29</sup> B. Fischer, OSB, *Vetus latina: Die Reste der Altlateinischen Bibel nach Petrus Sabatier neu gesammelt und herausgegeben von der Erzabtei Beuron* (Freiburg, 1951) 68

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pronoun. But I think *ipsa* is genuine. In fact, the author purposely inserted *mulieris* in place of *illius* just before *ipsa*, when he first quoted it, so there would be no doubt about the correctness of *ipsa* and the antecedent. If he had written *ipse*, the insertion of *mulieris* would have been quite strange. That Mary shared in Christ's work of destroying the devil was by this time quite traditional. Already St. Optatus had *ipsa* in his Bible reading but explained the text of Christ.<sup>30</sup> And so, even if the Virgin would not be included in the author's explanation here, *ipsa* could still be correct.

But what about the second question: Does *Virginis* modify *effectum* as a subjective genitive? If so, the sense would be: *Gen. 3, 15c* promises an achievement of the Virgin which is greater than what could be accomplished by a mere man, namely, the trampling on the devil. Or does it modify *ab homine* as possessive genitive? If so, the meaning would be: *Gen. 3, 15c* promises an achievement, namely, the trampling on the devil's head, which is greater than the human nature of the Virgin can accomplish.

First of all, one may not seek a solution by changing *promittit* to *producit*, as if *Gen. 3, 15c* would produce this achievement. That would solve nothing, and the idea of *Gen. 3, 15* being a promise occurs six times in this context. Secondly, *ab homine* is certainly not an ablative of agent, whether with *promittit* (because God makes the promise, and there is no need of an ablative of agent), or with *effectum*. In the latter case *Virginis* would have to modify *homine*, which we shall show is improbable. Also, *maiolem* needs a noun, which must be *effectum*, and cannot then function as a participle. So the author did not say: *Gen. 3, 15c* promises some effect achieved (*effectum*, as a participle) by the human nature of the Virgin (*ab homine Virginis*), which is still greater, namely,

<sup>30</sup> St. Optatus, *In Natale Infantium qui pro Domino occisi sunt*; ed. A. Wilmart, *RvSR* 2 (1922) 271-302, the pertinent passage is on p. 283

the virginal conception of the Conqueror. The author would hardly have admitted this last idea anyhow. So *ab homine* is an ablative of comparison, demanded by *maiozem*.

It seems improbable that *homine* governs *Virginis*. These reasons favor taking *Virginis* with *effectum*. First, *ipsa* is genuine as the pronoun in the Bible quotation of *Gen. 3, 15c*. Hence, Mary is given a share in Christ's victory in that very Bible text. Secondly, the achievement that is greater, and which is promised in *Gen. 3, 15c*, is not merely the trampling on, the defeat of, the devil, to the exclusion of the virginal conception of the Conqueror; it is that victory, but precisely by one who was conceived of a virgin mother, and who, because of that, was sinless and never under Satan's power, as the author explains. Mary's virginal conception of the conquering Christ makes her, therefore, a sharer in His trampling on the serpent. Besides, in the entire greater context of this paragraph she is not only not excluded from sharing in Christ's victory, but is included. That is why the author stressed the virginal conception so much. Her enmity against Satan was not considered static, but dynamic. If she, as well as her Child, is a total enemy of Satan, then she, as well as her Child, completely triumphed over Satan. The victory as well as the enmity is common to both Virgin Mother and Child. So, when the author states that no one but Christ ever trampled on the serpent, he is not excluding Mary; she shared in that work, according to tradition, with which this author was certainly acquainted, and which he did not wish to reject. Christ is the only independent and self-sufficient Conqueror of Satan, but Mary shares in that work of His most intimately as Virgin Mother.

Third, no objection can be found in the fact that thus the genitive *Virginis* is separated from its noun by the verb. Our author delighted in such separations. He has three others similar in this letter: "De promissionis exigat novi-

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tate . . . ; semen promissum est mulieris . . .”, and especially, “indefloratae Virginis inveniretur in utero.”

Fourth, to take *ab homine Virginis* to mean “than the human nature of the Virgin,” is not very likely at all. The author does take *homo* to stand for human nature, or mere man, in two other places. A human father he calls *patrem hominem*, and “according to human nature” he expresses by *secundum hominem*. So he should have said: *a Virgine*, or *ab homine Virgine*; not *ab homine Virginis*.

There is, therefore, no solid reason for saying that *Gen.* 3, 15c, according to this author, is only Christological, not Mariological. All the reasons point to the fact that he took *Virginis* as the subjective genitive, namely, the agent, of the achievement that is promised in *Gen.* 3, 15c, which is then a joint effect of the Virgin Mother and her Child.

A last note. Also according to this witness of the ancient Church the Eve-Mary antithesis was revealed in the First-gospel. Eve, the total opposite of Mary in the salvation of mankind, is expressly excluded from the promise of that salvation; but Mary is included as playing a decisive role.

**St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis**

(d. 403)

St. Epiphanius, again a representative of the East, and of a rather broad area, because of his travels and ministry, makes explicit use of *Gen.* 3, 15 and quotes the first half of it in his *Panarion*. The remote context is his aim to defend the perpetual virginity of Mary, which he does in the entire number 78. The proximate context is this. Having adduced a number of arguments in favor of Mary’s perpetual virginity, and refuted objections, he asserts the great honor in which God held Mary, as is evidenced by the Angel’s greeting:

'Hail, full of grace.'<sup>31</sup> This becomes a springboard for him to develop Mary's greatness because of her likeness and unlikeness to Eve. Within this exposition he uses *Gen. 3, 15* and explains it. To understand him correctly it is necessary to give the whole passage, long as it is:

I She [Mary] is the one who was signified by Eve, inasmuch as she [Mary] was typically given the title 'mother of the living' (cf. *Gen. 3, 20*).

1. For she [Eve] was called 'mother of the living' even after the transgression, when she had heard: 'Dust you are and unto dust you shall return' (*Gen. 3, 19*). It was indeed a surprising thing that after the transgression she should be given such a great title. And according to external appearances every birth of men on earth springs from that Eve. Still, in all truth, Life itself has been born to the world from Mary, in order that Mary might give birth to the Living [Christ, in the singular] and that she might become the 'mother of the living [Christians, in the plural]. Mary therefore was called 'mother of the living' typically

2. For concerning both women it was said: 'Who gave to woman wisdom of the woven robe, or multicolored understanding?' (*Job 38, 36*, in LXX). To explain, Eve, the first [to be called] wisdom, wove visible garments for Adam's sake, whom she had despoiled; for to her was given this task. Nakedness appeared through her, so to her was given the duty of clothing the visible body, because of the visible nakedness

To Mary, however, God gave the task of bearing for us the Lamb and the Sheep, that from the glory of the Lamb and the Sheep there might be made for us, as from fleece, in wisdom through His virtue, a garment of immortality.

II, 1. Yet another wonderful thing is to be considered concerning these, namely, concerning Eve and Mary. Eve became a cause of death for men, for through her 'death came into the world' (*Rom 5, 12*).

<sup>31</sup> St Epiphanius, *Ραναππον*, n. 78, # 17; PG 42, 728; Holl, GCS 3 (1933) 468

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But Mary was the cause of life, because through her Life was born for us. Indeed it was for this reason that the Son of God came into the world; and 'where sin abounded, grace did more abound' (Rom 5, 20), and whence [from woman] death had come, there [from woman] life got its start, in order that life might exist in place of death, inasmuch as life shut out death that sprang from woman, when Life was again born for us through a woman.

2. And since Eve, when still a virgin, fell into the transgression of disobedience, the obedience of grace again came through the Virgin, when the good news of the enfleshed coming from heaven and of eternal life was announced. For it was then that he said to the serpent: 'I will put enmity between you and her [sic], and between your seed and her seed' (Gen. 3, 15ab). Now, a 'seed of a woman' is not to be found anywhere. But typically, as far as Eve is concerned, the enmity is taken to be against her progeny, [namely, the enmity of her progeny] against the progeny of the serpent and of the devil [dwelling] in the serpent, and of envy.

3. But then, everything could not have been fulfilled in her [Eve] in the fullest sense. It will, however, be fulfilled really in the holy Seed, the chosen and singular Seed, who was found [conceived] only of Mary, without marital relation with a man. For this one came to destroy the power 'of the dragon and of the crooked and fleeing serpent' (cf. Is. 27, 1), which boasted of having taken the whole world captive (cf. Matt. 4, 9). For this reason the Only-begotten was born of a woman for the destruction of the serpent, that is, of wicked doctrine, of corruption and deceit, of error and lawlessness. This one truly 'opened the mother's womb' (Ex. 13, 2). For if we wish to speak honestly, all the firstborn who had been born were not able to achieve this; the Only-begotten alone opened a virgin's womb. Really, in him alone, and in no other, was this accomplished.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, # 18-19, PG 42, 728C-729, GCS, 468-470

We are interested in two questions: First, does Epiphanius take *Gen. 3, 15* in a Christological and Mariological sense? Second, does he see the Eve-Mary antithesis contained in that First-gospel? To be able to answer these questions accurately it will be well to analyze the progress of thought in the passage quoted. The Bishop is trying to show Mary's greatness, and consequently the propriety of perpetual virginity for her, by comparing her with Eve. He compares her with Eve in two ways. First, he shows how the two are alike, then how they are unlike; and in each of these ways he has two stages.<sup>33</sup>

First, Mary is like Eve as mother. Eve was called 'mother of the living' in *Gen. 3, 20*. In the natural order she is the mother of all the living. But in the supernatural order she is not, especially not after the transgression, and so if she is still called 'mother of the living,' it is in a typical sense. Mary is really the Mother of the living, first of Christ, our Life, and then of all the living in the supernatural order. He adds an illustration, in the second stage (I, 2), from *Job 38, 36 [LXX]*, stating that both Eve and Mary were wise seamstresses: Eve sewed garments for Adam whom she had despoiled, namely, of immortality and immunity from passion; so she sewed for him clothes of the natural order. Mary, however, made a garment for Christ by giving Him the body that would be immortal and the cause of our immortality.

So this first parallelism is founded on the typical use of *Gen. 3, 20*. Both Eve and Mary are mothers, giving life and "clothing." But Eve operates in the natural order; Mary in the supernatural. Eve contributed nothing in the supernatural order to Christ or us. In fact, she even despoiled Adam, and in doing so, despoiled us too. There is, therefore, a note of

<sup>33</sup> To facilitate reference to these sections I have inserted numbers (I, 1-2, II, 1-2) in the translation. Authors usually speak of four points of comparison that are coordinate. That is not borne out by the text, as I hope my explanation will show.

unlikeness in this first parallel already. This is developed more in the next phase. So, in this first phase there is no use whatever of *Gen. 3, 15*, only of *Gen. 3, 20*.

In the second phase of the parallel between Eve and Mary Epiphanius stresses the opposition between the two in their actions and the results, though basically they are alike in that both are taken as women in the first stage, and as virgins in the second. In the first stage both are women, but the one was the cause of death for us, while the other caused life. The Scriptural basis is *Rom 5, 12* (death) and *5, 20* (life through grace). Paul, of course, had only Christ in mind, but Epiphanius does not hesitate to apply this to Mary because of her close association with Christ, no doubt, after the pattern of the close association of Eve with Adam in the Fall. In the second stage (II, 2) he restates this antithesis, with both as virgins. But Eve was disobedient and (by obvious implication) brought death to us; Mary, however, the Virgin, was obedient and brought life, by being instrumental in bringing the Incarnation and life everlasting. Now the Scriptural basis for this antithetic parallel is *Gen. 3, 15*, which Epiphanius quotes partially. And the key to the comparison is Mary's virginal conception of Christ by an act of obedience. This section is, then, not a total digression, as some seem to think, but a proof for Mary's greatness as the direct opposite of Eve by her obedience and virginal conception of Jesus. The virginal conception is contained in the expression "her Seed" of the First-gospel, and the obedience is implied in the fact that it was a moral motherhood according to God's plan, which Epiphanius knew from the Lucan story (*Lk. 1, 38*). Mary is worthy of perpetual virginity, our Saint would argue, on God's part and on St. Joseph's, because of her virginal motherhood, which makes her of greatest dignity.

From this outline it is clear and certain that our Bishop considers *Gen. 3, 15* as Mariological and Christological. But

let us analyze the thought more in detail. He tells us that the "obedience of grace again came through the Virgin when the good news of the enfleshed coming from heaven and of eternal life was announced" (II, 2). Then he introduces the First-gospel thus: "For it was then that he said to the serpent" It seems possible to understand the relation between these two sentences in two ways. Either that the announcement of the good news, expressed in the First-gospel, took place at the Annunciation, inasmuch as it was then fulfilled, and is here represented as repeated at that time. If this is what Epiphanius meant, then Mary is surely the Woman, identified by the virginal conception spoken of in *Lk.* 1, 35, and implied in *Gen.* 3, 15b. It seems, however, that the more usual interpretation is correct; namely, the announcing of the good news of which he speaks took place when the First-gospel was first proclaimed. That is the obvious meaning of "it was then," followed immediately by the quotation of the First-gospel.<sup>34</sup> That the virginal conception is the key to the understanding of *Gen.* 3, 15 according to Epiphanius is clear from what he says immediately after quoting it: "Now, a 'seed of a woman' is not to be found anywhere." It is clear too from the following paragraph where he again stresses that Christ is the completest fulfillment of this Seed of a woman. Having established that the Woman is Mary because of her virginal conception of Christ, our Bishop applies the First-gospel also to Eve, saying:

But typically, as far as Eve is concerned, the enmity is taken to be against her progeny, [namely, the enmity of her progeny] against the progeny of the serpent and of the devil. . . (II, 2).

My brackets indicate that Epiphanius is writing somewhat elliptically. His meaning is not absolutely clear. In fact,

<sup>34</sup> Cf. T. Gallus, S. J., *Ad interpretationem Epiphani marilogicam Gen. 3, 15*, in *VD* 35 (1956) 275f.

Holl, in his critical edition, suggested that we read *autou* in place of *autes* before "progeny" the first time, so as to read: "the enmity is taken against *its* progeny, that is, [the offspring] of the serpent. . . ."<sup>35</sup> This seems a possible interpretation. I cannot decide which Epiphanius intended. Is "enmity" the governing word of the genitives "serpent's and devils," as in the first interpretation, with Eve's progeny at war with the serpent and devil; or is it "offspring" as in the second interpretation, with Eve's offspring at war with the serpent's and the devil's offspring? In any case, Eve is at enmity with the serpent and the devil, at least through her offspring. So the text is true of her in a typical sense in regard to the enmity. But only that far. It is not fulfilled in her in any other way. That is why the Bishop corrects immediately:

But then, everything could not have been fulfilled in her [Eve] in the fullest sense. It will, however, be fulfilled really in the holy Seed, . . . who was found [conceived] only of Mary, without marital relation with a man.

It is precisely because of the virginal conception of Christ that this cannot be true of Eve in the fullest sense "Everything" of the First-gospel cannot be true of Eve; in fact, according to Epiphanius only the idea of enmity against the serpent and the devil is true of her in a limited sense, and of her offspring.

Father Gallus gave this last section a unique turn by claiming that the antecedent of "in her" is Mary not Eve; and that even Mary is excluded from this fullest sense of *Gen.* 3, 15c, namely, the complete destruction of Satan's power.<sup>36</sup> But this view must be ruled out for these reasons. First, the antecedent, Mary, would be too far distant, while

<sup>35</sup> *GCS* 3, 469, fn

<sup>36</sup> Gallus, *Interpretatio mariologica Protoevangelii (Gen 3, 15) tempore postpatristico usque ad Concilium Tridentinum* (Romae, 1949) 20.

Eve was mentioned immediately before. Second, "everything" is not merely the complete destruction of Satan's power, but that destruction precisely by Christ who was born of the Virgin in a virginal manner. Third, if the antecedent were Mary, Epiphanius would have had to use the same tense for her as for Christ, not the past for Mary "could not have been fulfilled" and the future for Christ ("It will . . . be fulfilled")

Having explained that the Holy Seed of Mary would fulfill *Gen. 3, 15* in the fullest sense, he tells how Christ came to destroy the power of the dragon. This is a partial quotation of *Is. 27, 1*, which St. Justin had already used for explaining *Gen. 3, 15c*. St. Epiphanius is doing the same here. He did not quote the last half of *Gen. 3, 15*, about the Seed's observing the head of the serpent; but immediately after he stated that the Holy Seed would fulfill *Gen. 3, 15* completely, he adds this explanation about Christ's destroying the power of Satan. Obviously, this is an explanation, in the Messianic sense, of *Gen. 3, 15c*. "For" must here retain its strict causal meaning. The Bishop did not leave off his Messianic interpretation of *Gen. 3, 15* just before, and loosely add, with "for," some ideas about Christ's destroying Satan's power. No; he is explaining it, without quoting *Gen. 3, 15c*, but with an obvious allusion to it. That is confirmed too by his again stressing that it was precisely he who was conceived in a virginal manner who was able to destroy Satan. In other words, even Mary plays a part in this destruction of Satan, through her virginal conception of Christ.

And the second question Did St. Epiphanius link *Gen. 3, 15* with the antithetic parallel of Eve and Mary? Many scholars have held that he does. L. Drewniak denied this.<sup>37</sup> Father Gallus refuted his position.<sup>38</sup> But Father Stanislaus

<sup>37</sup> L. Drewniak, OSB, *Die mariologische Deutung von Gen. 3, 15 in der Vaterzeit* (Breslau, 1934) 38

<sup>38</sup> Gallus, *loc. cit*

Styś claims that Father Gallus' refutation confirms Drewniak's opinion.<sup>39</sup> What is correct? In spite of protestations from both sides, it seems the authors line up here as they do in general on the relation between *Gen* 3, 15 and the Eve-Mary antithesis. From the outline and analysis we have given it should be clear enough that the Bishop does hold the Mariological interpretation of *Gen*. 3, 15 and that Mary's role is foretold in this prophecy. Just as he used an Old Testament passage, *Gen*. 3, 20, to back up the parallel in the first phase, so he backs up the parallel in the second phase by an Old Testament passage, *Gen*. 3, 15.

But Drewniak and Styś maintain that the Bishop does not quote *Gen*. 3, 15 to confirm the antithetic parallel. He does link the two with "for," but this for does not have here a strict causal meaning, but a broader confirmatory meaning, for instance, "certainly," as if he had stopped speaking about the antithesis between the women, and were now just adding some new ideas. Styś maintains that if "for" were strictly causal it would have to prove either of two things, or both, spoken of in the preceding antithesis, either Mary's obedience, or her virginal conception. But, so he claims, there is nothing about obedience in the First-gospel; and for the virginal conception it is inept too, because his source here is *Lk*. 1, 28ff.<sup>40</sup> We answer that, regardless of how inept Styś considers the First-gospel for expressing the virginal conception, it is a fact that Epiphanius saw it revealed there, as did many of his predecessors, especially St. Irenaeus, his source here. Christ, he maintains, is the holy Seed precisely because He was conceived in a virginal manner. And *Gen*. 3, 15 speaks of "her seed," of the Woman's seed because there is question here of Mary's virginal conception of Christ. Nor is obedience missing from the First-gospel. Epiphanius stressed Mary's

<sup>39</sup> Styś, *art cit*, 351

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 352-355

obedience in the antithetic parallel. He used *Rom.* 5, 12ff. as a source for that, by which he put Mary equivalently on a par with Christ. And by that he admits that the two stages of his second phase in the parallelism are closely linked together and complement each other; just as the two stages of the first phase were closely linked together under the concept of a mother giving life. Besides, as we noted earlier, the virginal motherhood of the Woman in *Gen.* 3, 15 was, for Epiphanius, a rational act, in obedience to the God who placed the enmity between her and the serpent, who, in other words, decreed her existence as a virgin mother of the Conqueror.<sup>41</sup>

But we must answer a basic error in Styś' reasoning. He assumes that if *Gen.* 3, 15 has a causal or necessary connection with the Eve-Mary antithesis, one must prove that this antithesis could not be thought of or exist without *Gen.* 3, 15.<sup>42</sup> Even if *Gen.* 3, 15 had never been written, authors could have arrived at the Eve-Mary antithesis by the aid of *Rom.* 5 and *Lk.* 1. But that does not exclude the possibility of using other Scriptural texts as sources for this antithesis. The fact is that Epiphanius never refers expressly to Luke as a source for this antithesis, but he does refer to *Rom.* 5, and to *Gen.* 3, 15, which he even quotes, and which he links with the antithesis by means of the connective "for," which ordinarily has a strict causal meaning. Only by side-stepping this normal meaning can one disconnect the antithesis from the First-gospel. "For" was not meant as a break between the antithesis and the First-gospel; it was meant to cement the two together.

Finally, the description of the antithesis that we have been considering is not an interruption of the discussion of Mary's perpetual virginity as Drewniak and Styś assert.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Gallus, *art. cit.* in *VD* 35 (1956) 277, argued correctly on this point.

<sup>42</sup> Styś, *loc. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> Drewniak, *loc. cit.* Styś, *ibid.*, 354.

It is not a digression but a progression of thought. It fits in quite properly and corroborates his thesis about the perpetual virginity. He shows how great Mary is because of her virginal conception of Christ, who conquered Satan and all corruption; and through that virginal conception, to which she consented obediently, she herself became a co-operator with her Son in the destruction of Satan, or as Epiphanius states most concisely in the first stage of the antithetic parallel. "Mary became the cause of life for us," of life everlasting and immortality of body, as he says in the second stage. *Gen. 3, 15*, as interpreted by Epiphanius, better and more concisely than any other Scripture text expresses what he wanted here: Mary is the direct opposite of Eve by an obedient and virginal motherhood relative to Christ, the Conqueror of Satan, the Author of life, which made her a sharer in that victory and life. If she enjoyed such greatness, over against Eve, it was most fitting, to say the least, that she should never have been violated by Joseph, that she should have remained a virgin forever incorrupt. That this is his conclusion is plain from the fact that he returns to the point about Mary's perpetual virginity at the end of the discussion.

### St. Prudentius

(d. after 405)

Our next witness is from Spain. In a section of his poem *Cathemerinon*, St. Prudentius tells the story of *Gen. 3*. In regard to verses 14-15, having spoken of the Incarnation of the Word from the Virgin, he writes:

This was that ancient hatred, this was the fierce enmity between the asp and man, which, now that the serpent is prostrate, is crushed under the woman's feet. For having merited to bring forth God, the Virgin makes all poisons powerless.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>44</sup> St. Prudentius, *Cathemerinon* 3, vs. 146-150 PL 59, 805f; Bergmann, *CSEL* 61 (1926), 17.

In this obvious use of *Gen. 3, 15*, as all admit, the Virgin Mary is "the Woman," who gave hirth to Christ, the Seed; and she it is who crushes the serpent under her feet. She does this precisely by her virginal conception of the Seed. All these ideas are quite traditional. We must note, too, that Prudentius had *ipsa* in his Bible.

### Isidore of Pelusium

(d. ca. 435)

Isidore was a priest of Pelusium in Egypt, famous for his piety and for his competence in the Scriptures. Many of his letters are known for their treatment of exegetical questions, in which he follows the School of Antioch, rather than the allegorism of Alexandria. In regard to our question he writes:

The Seed of the Woman, the one whom God commands to be hostile to the serpent (*Gen. 3, 15b*) is Our Lord Jesus Christ. For He is the Seed of the Woman who alone was born from her in such a manner that no life-germ of man intervned, and chastity was not lessened.<sup>45</sup>

Isidore expressly identifies the Woman's Seed as Christ, and he does so precisely because He is the only one who was conceived of a Virgin. But thereby he at least equivalently identified the Woman as Mary, the Virgin Mother of Christ. Lest we overlook it, for him, too, "her Seed" points to a virginal conception of the Seed.

### Hesychius, Priest-monk of Jerusalem

(d. after 450)

Though little is known of the life of this Hesychius, we are informed that he was held in high repute as a priest and preacher in Jerusalem. The Greek Church venerates him as

<sup>45</sup> Isidore of Pelusium, *Epistolarum liber*, 1, n. 426 PG 78, 417D

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a highly competent interpreter of Sacred Scripture as well as a saint. He is thought to have written a commentary on the whole Bible. In two of his published sermons on the Blessed Mother he treats of Mary as the Second Eve, who through her virginal Son conquered the Dragon. In the first of these he dwells at length on the greatness of Mary as Mother of the Only-begotten Son of God, who is described as the opposite of Eve, removing as she did the curse that had been placed on Eve and all women. Here he contrasts, as was customary, *Lk.* 1, 28ff and *Gen.* 3, 16, not 3, 15 But in the next sermon he writes:

Do you not see how great and of what kind is the dignity of God's Virgin Mother? For the Only-begotten Son of God, Maker of the world, is carried by her as an Infant, and He refashioned Adam and sanctified Eve, He deposed the dragon and opened paradise, the while protecting the seal of the womb.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, the virginal conception itself and birth of God's Son were a means for destroying the devil and restoring grace to Adam and Eve. Mary, therefore, was instrumental in this work of redemption. But does the author here allude to *Gen.* 3, 15? Yes, there is an idea-allusion to Christ's victory over the serpent inasmuch as He is the virginal Child of Mary. True, the words are not from Genesis. That the devil is called the dragon is from *Apoc.* 12, 7-9; that he is said to have been "destroyed by Christ" is got from Paul's idea that the diabolical powers were "destroyed" by Christ (*1 Cor.* 15, 24) or that death was "destroyed" (*2 Tim.* 1, 10), or that the Antichrist will be "destroyed" by Christ (*2 Th.* 2, 8). But the idea of a virginal mother making it possible for Christ to destroy Satan comes from *Gen.* 3, 15, unless perhaps from *Apoc.* 12, 7-9, with an allusion from there to *Gen.* 3, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Hesychius, *Oratio 4, De Sancta Maria Deipara*; PG 93, 1462C.

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This interpretation is confirmed by another passage in this same sermon, in which he comments on *Is. 7, 14*:

Behold the Virgin! Which one? The distinguished of all women, the elect of all virgins, the excellent ornament of our nature, the glory of our race, the one who freed Eve from shame and Adam from the threat, and decapitated the boldness of the dragon.<sup>47</sup>

The allusion of freeing Eve from shame is to *Gen. 3, 16*; that of removing the threat from Adam is to *Gen. 3, 17-19*. So, when he speaks about Mary's decapitating the boldness of the dragon, there seems to be a certain idea-allusion to *Gen. 3, 15*. The term dragon is, of course, again from *Apoc. 12, 9*, and perhaps the allusion is here directly to *Apoc. 12*, and from there to *Gen. 3, 15*. But in any case there seems to be an allusion to the First-gospel, with a Messianic and Marian interpretation. It is interesting to note that Mary herself is said to decapitate the dragon, obviously by her virginal conception and birth of the Conquerer, as stated previously. It is of interest, too, that in the commentary on *Is. 7, 14* he should be alluding to *Gen. 3, 15*, implying, what is very traditional by now, the virginal motherhood in "her Seed." If these allusions to *Gen. 3, 15* are correct, and I think they are, then Hesychius is another ancient writer who sees the Eve-Mary antithesis founded on *Gen. 3, 15*, since in the context of the previous sermon Mary was presented as the total opposite of Eve, but she, and not Eve, is the victorious Woman of the First-gospel.

**Pope St. Leo the Great**  
(d. 461)

Pope St. Leo the Great is witness for the Church in Rome, but in a sense for the whole Church. In his introduction to

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid., Oratio 5, PG 93, 1465A.*

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the second Christmas sermon he looks on the Incarnation as the day of our redemption. It is the day on which God gave a retort to the devil and showed His mercy toward us:

For the mystery of our salvation is recalled by the annual cycle—the mystery that was promised from the beginning, that was given in the end, and that remains without end, . . . For God who is all-powerful and merciful, whose very nature is goodness, and whose will is power and whose work is mercy, designated, in the very beginning of the world, as soon as the diabolic malice killed us by the poison of his envy, the remedies of His mercy, prepared for us mortal men who had to be redeemed. He announced to the serpent that a Seed of a woman would come who would crush by His power the haughtiness of the guilty head. By that He signified that Christ, who would come in the flesh, to be God and Man, who, born of the Virgin, would by His incorrupt birth condemn the violator of the human race.<sup>48</sup>

St. Leo certainly takes the First-gospel in a Messianic sense, as a promise of the Christ's coming in the flesh. He identifies the Woman's Seed expressly as Christ. He has Him crush the head, the haughtiness of the serpent, namely, according to *Gen.* 3, 15c. He equivalently identifies the Woman as Mary, since he stresses that the Seed was born of a virgin mother. In fact, it is the virginal conception and birth of this Seed which was the undoing of Satan. St. Leo, too, agrees with all the other interpreters of *Gen.* 3, 15, that "her Seed" is indicative of the virginal conception of the Christ. The Woman, Mary, moreover, has an active role in the destruction of Satan, though he does not expressly apply the crushing to Mary. Finally, *Gen.* 3, 15 is for him the basis of the anti-thetic parallel between Christ and the devil. He did not draw out the parallel in regard to Eve and Mary, but it is scarcely doubtful what his view would be.

<sup>48</sup> *Sermo* 22, *De nativitate Domini*, 2, 1: *PL* 54, 194A.

### **Chrysippus, Priest of Jerusalem** (d. 479)

Chrysippus was originally from Cappadocia, but he went to Palestine when he was about 15 or 20 years old. There he lived, became a monk and was ordained a priest. He is recognized as a singular writer and preacher. In his eulogy on the Blessed Virgin he has a long description of Mary's excellence, as virgin and Mother of Christ, the Conqueror of Satan, over against Eve who was conquered by Satan. These are the pertinent words:

What then, what is the enemy of the human race likely to say to himself when now he sees us called back to the pristine adoption of sons through a woman? Does he not ask repeatedly and lament. "How does it happen that the instrument which was my colleague in the beginning, is now my enemy? A woman co-operated with me to obtain tyrannical power over the race, and a woman has evicted me from that tyrannical power. The ancient Eve exalted me, but the new Eve deposed me. Really, Eve is even now the same according to nature, though she is not Eve according to the generation. For what woman was able to give birth to such a wonderful Child, or to conceive without being subject to any corruption of intercourse? She became a mother without loss of virginity; . . . Rightly then have I been taken captive by her whom I conquered. On the contrary, I have in vain tried maliciously to lay ambush for her. . . . Really, how much time I would need to narrate by what measure He who was born of her triumphed over me. . . . Finally, though by my advice He was hoisted even on the cross, He filled me, and death together with me, with still greater shame while from the cross He made everything that was on the earth quake, and from the tomb He exposed all that was under the earth. He despoiled both me from the cross and death from the tomb, as the dead rose together with Him.

Now who was the cause of all these things? Who else was it but she who gave birth to the worker of miracles of this

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kind? It would indeed have been better for me not to lead the ancient Eve into deceiving [Adam]; it would have been better for me not to deceive her by the serpent ”<sup>49</sup>

The trend of thought in Chrysippus is rather clear. His whole sermon is in praise of Mary. That explains his Mary-centered attitude when explaining the First-gospel. He definitely ascribes the victory over Satan to Mary, by the very fact that she conceived and gave birth to Christ, the Victor. And he sees all this as an antithesis of what Eve did. Just as he sees Christ's work as the antithesis of the devil's. So we ask two questions: Does he allude to and use *Gen. 3, 15* for the role of Christ and Mary as he describes it? Does he base the antithesis of Eve and Mary on *Gen. 3, 15*?

In regard to the first question, he certainly gathered his material about Eve's Fall and the curse from *Gen. 3*. So he is in the environment of *Gen. 3, 15*. He wrote in Greek and consequently used the Septuagint. But one need not look for allusions to the word "observe," because not only the Latin writers, but also the Greek writers, beginning with St. Irenaeus, interpreted "observe" as a defeat of the devil, by trampling on, or crushing his head. His statement, put in the mouth of the devil, that the devil tried in vain "to lay ambushes" for Mary is an idea-allusion to *Gen. 3, 15* according to the Latin Vulgate and some Greek commentators of the Septuagint. But just before that he has the devil speak of Mary's having taken him captive and conquered him. That is an idea-allusion to *Gen. 3, 15c*. The notion of defeating the devil is expressed several times in this short exposition: Mary "evicted" the devil from his tyrannical power; as the New Eve she "deposed" him. Her Child triumphed over Satan and "despoiled" him. But Mary, too, was the cause

<sup>49</sup> Chrysippus, *Oratio in S. Mariam Deiparam*, # 3; ed. M. Jugie, A.A., *Homélies mariales byzantines*, in *PO* 19 (1926) 340f.

of that triumph and destruction by her virginal conception of Christ. That leads to the next allusion. Prior to his allusion to *Gen. 3, 15c*, as just explained, he stressed the virginal conception of Christ. Again, since in *Gen. 3, 15*, the expression "her Seed" precedes the idea of this Seed's triumphing over Satan, it seems most natural to think that Chrysippus is here alluding to and explaining "her Seed" as virginal. His many predecessors, of whom he certainly knew, who saw the Woman as Mary, also laid stress on the fact that "her Seed" indicates a virginal motherhood. Later on he has the devil state very concisely, "He who was born of her triumphed over me." That is again an allusion to and an interpretation of *Gen. 3, 15bc*, about the Seed, born of the Woman alone, who defeated Satan. To be noted is that here he ascribes the victory to the Seed, though above he ascribed it to the Woman, and the devil lays ambushes for *her*, which seems to suppose a feminine pronoun "She shall observe." But since he had the Septuagint, and since the Greeks never read the feminine pronoun here, it is more likely that he just interpreted this part of the prophecy also of Mary because of her sharing in the struggle and triumph of the Son. He also alludes to *Gen. 3, 15* by repeating the idea that the devil is the enemy of the race, and the special enemy of the Woman. That is followed by an explanation of how Mary became his enemy, namely, by evicting and deposing him. This is a word- and idea-allusion to *Gen. 3, 15a*, about the enmity that God put between the serpent and the Woman.

Because the allusion seemed clearest in the last part of *Gen. 3, 15*, about the ambushes, I started with that and worked up to the first part. But now if we start from the allusion to the enmity and work back, we can see that Chrysippus explains, by allusion, the various parts of the First-gospel, and that in the order in which they occur in it. What more do we need for an allusion, when there are even a few

word-allusions here? The conclusion seems inescapable: Chrysippus did use *Gen. 3, 15* and, in an oratorical but masterful way, alluded to the sense it had received through tradition.

True, texts of the New Testament might have given him some of the ideas about Mary; for instance, *Gal. 4, 4*, or *Apoc. 12*; or *Lk. 1, 26ff.* One might see in these passages an allusion to the virginal motherhood as the cause of our salvation. But in none of them is that virginal motherhood linked expressly with defeating Satan, as it is in *Gen. 3, 15*. This too must, therefore, have been the source for his ideas. Not even *Apoc. 12* has all the ideas about enmity, virginal motherhood, triumph over Satan, who lay in wait for her continuously, so well combined as does *Gen. 3, 15*, and as they are explained by our author. I conclude, then, the answer to the first question by saying that—in spite of the flat denial of Styś<sup>60</sup> that Chrysippus does not allude to *Gen. 3, 15*, and that the text cannot be used as a proof for the Christological or Mariological meaning of *Gen. 3, 15*, and in spite of the wholehearted approval of this by Laurentin<sup>61</sup>—I think it indubitable that Chrysippus did make use of and allude to the First-gospel as Marian and Messianic, as Father Gallus ably defended.<sup>62</sup>

Now for the second question: Does Chrysippus base the Eve-Mary antithesis, which runs throughout his passage, on *Gen. 3, 15*? In view of what we explained, the answer must be an emphatic yes: Mary is the Woman, virginal in her motherhood of Christ, the Seed, and she is victorious over Satan, her special enemy. In that she is presented as the exact opposite of Eve. Eve was the devil's colleague, while Mary is his enemy, as expressed in *Gen. 3, 15a*, to which he alludes.

<sup>60</sup> Styś, *art. cit.*, 357-363

<sup>61</sup> Laurentin, *art. cit.*, 143, n. 204

<sup>62</sup> Gallus, *Antithesis Eva-Maria cum Gen. 3, 15 coniuncta apud Chrysippum*, in *DTPI* 59 (1956) 71-74

Eve, though she has the same physical nature as Mary, did not beget children in a virginal manner. Only Mary, of all women, did that. Again, this privilege of Mary's is alluded to in *Gen. 3, 15b*, "her Seed." Eve had been taken captive and was conquered by the devil; but Mary took the devil captive and conquered him; she evicted him from the tyrannical power and deposed him. So we conclude, if Chrysippus alludes to *Gen. 3, 15* and explains it, as we think we have proved, then there can be no doubt that the Eve-Mary antithesis which is interwoven in his explanation, has as one source *Gen. 3, 15*, with Mary as that virginal and victorious Woman, and with Eve as the total opposite, having no part in *Gen. 3, 15*.

It is beside the point to say that Chrysippus used *Gal. 4, 4* as the New Testament counterpart for Mary in this antithesis, and that was sufficient to establish the antithesis.<sup>53</sup> To be sure it was; but it is not a question of what was sufficient, but of what Chrysippus gave as all the sources of the antithesis. For him not merely *Lk.* or *Gal.*, but also *Gen. 3, 15* was the source, just as it was also the source for the antithesis between Satan and Christ, though other passages of the New Testament could have sufficed for establishing that antithesis.

### St. Isidore, Bishop of Seville

(d. 636)

St. Isidore of Seville, often called the last of the Fathers in the West, is witness for Spain. He was a collector of opinions of the Fathers, but quite competent to summarize them. In regard to *Gen. 3, 15* he follows his usual method of giving various opinions:

'I will put enmities between you and the woman, between your seed and her seed.' The devil's seed is the perverse sug-

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Styš, *loc. cit.*

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gestion. The woman's seed is the fruit of good work, by which the perverse suggestion is resisted 'She shall crush his head' if the mind will exclude it in the very beginning of the evil suggestion. 'He will lie in wait for her heel,' because he tries to deceive at the end the mind which he did not deceive at the first suggestion.

Certain ones, however, have understood the phrase, 'I will put enmities between you and the woman,' of the Virgin of whom the Lord was born, because then it was that the promise was made that the Lord would be born of her for the sake of conquering the enemy, and destroying death, which was authored by him. For even what follows, 'She shall crush your head, and you shall lie in wait for her heel,' they understand of the fruit of Mary's womb, namely, of Christ, in this sense. "You [devil] will trip him up so that he will die, he however, having conquered you, will rise again, and 'will crush your head' namely death." That is in keeping with what David too, in the person of the Father, said to the Son: 'You shall tread on the asp and the basilisk, and you shall trample under foot the lion and the dragon' (Ps 90, 13). By serpents [asps] he means death; by basilisk, sin, by lions, Antichrist; by dragons, the devil.<sup>54</sup>

Here as in other instances, St Isidore seems to have condensed the opinions of various Fathers on whom he relied. There is no contradiction between the moral-allegorical interpretation and the Marian-Christological. Since we are interested in knowing who held the Marian interpretation, we will discuss only that. The opinion he quotes certainly identifies the Woman as Mary and the Seed as Christ. St. Isidore noted in the authors whom he consulted, what we have called attention to so often, that they saw the virginal motherhood foretold in the First-gospel in the expression "her Seed," and they insist that through this virginal motherhood He defeated

<sup>54</sup> St Isidore, *Questiones in Vetus Testamentum In Gen, cap. 5, nn 5-7, PL 83, 221AB*

Satan, and that she shared in that victory. And so, even though he read *ipsa* in his Bible, he did not hesitate to ascribe the defeating of the devil to the Seed directly. We saw how Chrysippus did the same thing. And so, here too, Fischer has no warrant to change *ipsa* to *ipse*, as if the Bishop had really written *ipse*. Besides, he introduces his explanation of this part by saying, "For even what follows: 'She shall crush . . .,' they understand of the fruit of Mary's womb," as if to say. Even though the text has 'she', they refer the crushing of the serpent's head to the Woman's Seed.

But did St. Isidore espouse this view, or did he merely record it without approving it, as Drewniak thought?<sup>55</sup> If he had not approved it, he would hardly have presented it so favorably, and explained it so carefully. Besides, he would scarcely have disapproved an opinion that has such eminent authorities in its favor. The "certain ones" to whom he ascribes this view were surely his countryman, Prudentius, the letter *Ad amicum aegrotum*, St. Irenaeus, St. Cyprian, St. Leo I. That is confirmed by the fact that elsewhere he presents this interpretation as an example of a Scriptural text that is to be taken partially historically and partially spiritually (*mystice figurata*).<sup>56</sup> He does not explain there what is to be taken in the literal historical and what in the mystically figurative sense. But it seems that the Woman is a figure of Mary, as the serpent is the figure of Satan. In this passage he also has *ipsa*, which confirms the fact that he read *ipsa* in his Bible and wrote it in the preceding quotation. The Bishop of Seville must then be listed as holding the Marian and Messianic sense of the First-gospel.

<sup>55</sup> Drewniak, *op cit*, 82.

<sup>56</sup> Isidore, *Liber de varis quaestionibus adversus Iudaeos ex utroque Testamento*, c 8, 1, ed A C Vega—A. E. Anspach, *Scriptores ecclesiastici hispano-latinus veteris et medi aevi*, fasc 6-9 (Escorial, typ Monasterii, 1940) p. 22.

### *Conclusion*

I hope this study disclosed the fact that there were clear witnesses for the Marian interpretation of the First-gospel in every section of the Church, in practically every age from the beginning.<sup>1</sup> The first explicit interpretation of *Gen. 3, 15*, that of Irenaeus, was Marian as well as Messianic; it stressed the virginal conception of the Woman whose Offspring was called "her Seed"; for that very reason he thought the Virgin Woman had a very intimate share in the work of salutary recapitulation; and in so doing, he opposed the Virgin Woman to Eve. Before the Council of Nicea there is another clear and strong voice in favor of the Marian sense in Africa: St. Cyprian. St. Justin is at least a probable witness to it in Palestine and Rome. Between the Councils of Nicea and Ephesus there is the certain Marian explanation of Serapion in Egypt, Ephraem in Syria, Pseudo-Jerome in the West, Epiphanius in Palestine and Cyprus, Prudentius in Spain; and the probable witness of Ambrose in Milan. After Ephesus there are the certain voices of Isidore of Pelusium in Egypt, Leo the Great in Rome, Chrysippus in Jerusalem, Isidore of Seville in Spain; and the probable voice of Hesychius in Jerusalem. There was not enough space in this study to consider a number of other probable witnesses to the Marian interpretation.

This interpretation which was so unhesitatingly proposed from the beginning and was so well known in all parts of the Church, was never openly opposed by any writer of the patristic age. True, many of the greatest Fathers interpreted our text in an allegorical-moral sense. But that is not equivalent to a denial of the Messianic or Marian sense, in fact, their explanation often presupposes at least the Messianic interpretation.

Throughout our analysis of the ancient writers we called

attention to the fact that they say the virginal motherhood was disclosed in the expression of "her Seed"; and that, in fact, they frequently identified Christ and Mary as the Woman and her Seed precisely by this note. And those who expressed themselves on this point held it with the same certainty as they held the Marian interpretation itself. For them the two aspects go hand in hand

Furthermore, with almost equal frequency they noted that Mary shared in the work of redemption precisely because she was virginal mother of the Seed, and in that way she contributed to His initial victory over Satan. Because of that a number of them pointed out that Mary is the opposite of Eve. They, in other words, used *Gen. 3, 15* as one source of the Marian role in the Eve-Mary antithesis. It was because of this that the theologians of the Commission of Pius IX for the Bull *Ineffabilis Deus* regarded the entire patristic tradition on the Eve-Mary antithesis as an "allusive" argument in favor of the Marian interpretation of *Gen. 3, 15*.<sup>57</sup> That is correct, I believe, unless one can prove the contrary for individual writers. True, they very often used *Gen. 3, 16* for Eve in opposition to Mary, for whom they quoted *Lk 1, 42*; but they implicitly admitted the opposition between *Gen. 3, 16* and *3, 15*, between the humiliated Eve and the victorious virgin mother. They used Luke instead of *Gen. 3, 15* because it was a more perfect antithesis to *Gen. 3, 16* even in words. Consequently, it is by no means proved conclusively, as Laurentin and Styś seem to think,<sup>58</sup> that *Gen 3, 15* was not a source for the Eve-Mary antithesis. Father Gallus, in his articles quoted in this study, correctly defends the relation between the two.

And so, we conclude, an interpretation of a Scriptural

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Unger, *op cit.*, 53

<sup>58</sup> Styś especially in the article cited in Note 2; Laurentin, *art cit.*, 90, fn 50a

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passage that was so openly and unhesitatingly proposed already from the second century, and which was never contradicted by any ancient Christian writer, even though it was not proposed *expressly* by a majority of the writers, is the correct tradition. That is what Pope Pius IX thought when he appealed to these Fathers as holding the Messianic and Marian interpretation; that is what Pope Pius XII thought when, in favor of the Immaculate Conception, he appealed to "not a few of the Fathers" for this interpretation; and when, in favor of the Assumption, he appealed to a constant tradition, from the second century on, which saw the victorious Woman as Mary, opposed to Eve, in the First-gospel.

The Marian interpretation of the First-gospel, in the sense that "the Woman" as virgin mother of the Messiah, is Mary, in closest association with Him precisely because of the virginal motherhood, rests on a most solid foundation in the ancient Christian writers.

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