

AN ALLUSION TO MARY IN THE APOCALYPSE

One of the most interesting expositions of the Bible to come from Cardinal Newman's pen is his interpretation of the twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse. He reveals his understanding of the passage almost incidentally, treating of Catholic doctrine concerning the Blessed Virgin.¹ The occasion for such a topic was afforded by the *Eirenicon* of "my dear Pusey," which the Cardinal characterized in an immortal phrase: "excuse me—you discharge your olive-branch as if from a catapult."² At the outset Newman makes a distinction, sharply conceived and executed, between Catholic doctrine concerning the Blessed Virgin, which has been one and the same in substance from the beginning, and Catholic devotion to our Lady, which has increased with the centuries. His immediate interest is to make clear the belief of Catholics in our Lady; so he develops what he calls the "rudimental view" of Mary in the early Fathers: she is the second Eve. Incidentally, Newman's use of the Fathers in instances such as these is a lesson in patristic methodology; he makes the argument from the Fathers count heavily. He proceeds to draw two inferences from the evidence adduced: the sanctity and the dignity of the Blessed Virgin. It is Newman's treatment of Mary's dignity that interests us here.

The Cardinal begins with a contrary to fact hypothesis, the blessed memory which our first parents would have enjoyed had they not succumbed.³ We, their descendants, would never cease praising them. That is the way human beings are; they look back and celebrate heroes of the past. In the sphere of religion, *opera eorum sequuntur illos*; the deeds of the Saints never die. With regard to the Blessed Virgin, therefore, there is no valid reason for astonishment at Catholic belief in her dignity.⁴ In fact, this astonishment seems to stem from the absence of a calm consideration of "her historical position in the gospels." Newman proposes to find the doctrine of our Lady's exaltation in the vision of the Woman and Child in the twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse. It is no objection to say that such an interpretation is poorly supported in the Fathers. Christians, and so the Fathers, never

¹ *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching* (London: Longmans, 1891), II, pp. 50-61. The Cardinal's few pages on the Apocalypse exerted no little influence, even on such technical theologians as Scheeben; cf. M. J. Scheeben, *Mariology* (St. Louis: Herder, 1946), I, p. 15. The work of Jacques Seynaeve on Newman and Scripture is not available to the writer.

² *Difficulties*, p. 7.

³ Compare the similar hypothesis of St. Thomas, *Sum. Theol.* I, q. 100, a. 1.

⁴ These preliminary observations remind one of Newman's ideas on antecedent probability.

had recourse to Scripture for proof of their doctrines except in the pressure of controversy; since the dignity of the Blessed Virgin was unchallenged, the absence of any support for this interpretation among the Fathers is not significant.⁵ Nor is it an anachronism to ascribe such a picture of the Madonna (Woman and Child) to the Apostolic Age. Newman points to the numerous representations of Virgin and Child in the Catacombs to prove that this is not a modern idea.

The Cardinal quotes Apoc. 12:1-6 almost in its entirety and immediately adds: "Now I do not deny of course, that under the image of the Woman, the Church is signified; but what I would maintain is this, that the Holy Apostle would not have spoken of the Church under this particular image, *unless* there had existed a blessed Virgin Mary, who was exalted on high, and the object of veneration to all the faithful."⁶ This is the corner-stone of Newman's argument. The reason that St. John chose this particular imagery is to be found in the influence exerted by Mary's position in the early Church. The choice of the Woman-symbol is rendered completely intelligible by the exaltation of the Lady who was the Mother of all Christians, with whom the infant Church "continued steadfastly in prayer" (Acts 1:14). When we recall that the author of the Apocalypse is St. John, we appreciate the weight of the argument. What more natural than that the disciple whom Jesus loved, to whom the dying Jesus consigned the care of His mother as a sacred trust, would have in some way reflected her in his writings? If he set his hand to describe the Church in its battle with Satan, the figure of Mary, the Woman, would easily come to mind in describing the scene. Her attributes and prerogatives could alternate in his mind with the Church itself, the spouse of Christ, a "bride adorned for her husband" (Apoc. 21:2), which he was actually describing. As we shall see later in this note, that is the way St. John's mind functioned in elaborating the symbols in the Apocalypse.

Cardinal Newman then takes up the "sense" conveyed by these symbols:

No one doubts that the "man-child" spoken of is an allusion to our Lord; why then is not "the Woman" an allusion to His Mother? This surely is the obvious sense of the words; of course they have a further sense also, which is the scope of the image; doubtless the Child represents the children of the Church, and doubtless the Woman represents the Church; this, I grant, is the real or direct sense, but what is the sense of the symbol under which that real sense is conveyed? *Who* are

⁵ *Difficulties*, pp. 54 ff. It would be unwise to think that Newman "nodded" at this point. As a generalisation, his statement remains true; it is Mary's dignity that is under consideration.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

the Woman and the Child? I answer, they are not personifications but Persons. This is true of the Child, therefore it is true of the Woman.⁷

This passage deserves careful reading. Newman distinguishes between two senses. It is clear that for him the real sense of the passage lies in interpreting the symbol of the Woman as the Church. But it is important to notice that to this symbol itself is attached a sense, a meaning; the symbol itself is a person, the Blessed Virgin who is exalted above the Dragon. One can surmise that Newman saw the exaltation implicit in the failure of the Dragon to seize the Woman's offspring and in the vivid *mise-en-scène* of 12:1, "a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon was under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars." What is the significance of this special meaning which Newman ascribes to the symbol?

I believe that it can be reduced to the first point: the particular symbol of a Woman was chosen because of Mary, her exalted position and her relations with St. John. It is not that this is a special "sense" of Sacred Scripture; it is really an *allusion* to Mary, as Newman himself terms it. Newman insists that the symbol is not a personification but a person. In reality it is both. Since the real sense, intended by St. John and conveyed by the symbol in its context, has to do with the Church, we are dealing with a personification. On the other hand, since there is present a deliberate allusion to Mary as the mother of the Messiah, conveyed by the particular symbol chosen by St. John, we are dealing with a person. In the symbol there is an allusion to Mary. We are not interested in following up the assertion that "the Child represents the children of the Church." The unmistakable messianic reference in v. 5 precludes this; Christ alone is meant. There is no intention to defend Cardinal Newman here or to cling to every statement which he made, but simply to develop his approach to the problem and apply his principles to the text.

Earlier in his answer to Pusey, Newman speaks at length of Mary as the second Eve. Now that idea emerges again in his consideration of what might be called the divine or eternal triangle:

Such a meeting of man, woman, and serpent has not been found in Scripture, since the beginning of Scripture, and now it is found in its end. . . . If the dragon of St. John is the same as the serpent of Moses (Gen. 3) and the man-child is "the seed of the woman," why is not the woman herself she, whose seed the man-child

⁷ *Ibid.* These brief quotations are demanded by the sequence of thought; unfortunately, they do not fully convey the beautiful prose and rhythmic periods in which the Cardinal has written of our Lady.

is? And, if the first woman is not an allegory, why is the second? If the first woman is Eve, why is not the second Mary?⁸

This correlation of the Apocalypse with Genesis, *omega* with *alpha*, is a very beautiful thought; but one feels that the Cardinal may have been carried away with the sweep of the idea. On this view, there is more than an allusion to the Blessed Virgin in the Woman-symbol and there is no room for a thorough and logical interpretation of the Church-Woman throughout chapter 12. It is difficult to admit that this final touch adds any conviction to the Marian interpretation. One might maintain that St. John wrote with Gen. 3 in mind; but Newman's statement would demand more than that.

Such is Cardinal Newman's interpretation of Apocalypse 12. It is evidently not a complete exegesis of this chapter. Newman seemed to imply that the chapter dealt with the Church as the central figure. But the symbol of the Church has overtones to it: a definite allusion to the Blessed Virgin, which St. John brought out cleverly by his choice of symbol.

The weak point in this interpretation is to be found in what was called the "corner-stone" of Newman's argument—that the choice of the Woman-symbol is necessarily due to Mary. This is only an application of what Newman really considered to be a principle of interpretation:

Again, there is another principle of Scripture interpretation which we should hold as well as you, viz., when we speak of a doctrine being contained in Scripture, we do not necessarily mean that it is contained there in direct categorical terms, but that there is no satisfactory way of accounting for the language and expressions of the sacred writers, concerning the subject matter in question, except to suppose that they held concerning it the opinion which we hold; that they would not have spoken as they have spoken, *unless* they held it. For myself I have ever felt the truth of this principle, as regards the Scripture proof of the Holy Trinity; I should not have found out that doctrine in the sacred text without previous traditional teaching; but, when once it is suggested from without, it commends itself as the one true interpretation, from its appositeness, because no other view of doctrine, which can be ascribed to the inspired writers, so happily solves the obscurities and seeming inconsistencies of their teaching.⁹

The application of this principle to the doctrine of the Trinity is a singularly happy one. Thus one can hardly doubt that the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity is meant in Lk. 1:35 (Annunciation), Lk. 4:1 (forty days in desert), Mt. 12:28-32 (sin against Holy Spirit). As Newman says, "they would not have spoken as they have spoken, *unless* they held it." We must keep distinct, therefore, the probative value and the meaning of a text.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

But is it possible that the Apocalypse, unlike the Trinitarian texts indicated above, could be understood without any necessary reference to the Blessed Virgin? That St. John could have written as he did without her in mind? Perhaps because he felt that this possibility had not been sufficiently excluded, Newman added a few remarks on imagery in Sacred Scripture.¹⁰ On the whole, this part of his argument does not share in the general excellence of his interpretation. Newman did not reckon sufficiently with the marriage-symbol in the Old and New Testament. One of the most celebrated symbols in the Old Testament is that of Israel as Yahweh's spouse. The dramatic course of their love and Israel's infidelity is epitomized in the marital experiences of the prophet Osee. Jeremias accused Israel of playing the harlot with many lovers (3:1-13). Likewise, the twenty-third chapter of Ezekiel is a bitter denunciation of the two sisters, Northern and Southern Kingdom. The ideal spouse, Israel as it should be, was offered to view in the beautiful poetry of the Canticle of Canticles. This bold imagery, therefore, was in the warp and woof of Jewish tradition—God's chosen people is His Spouse.¹¹ In the New Testament the Church becomes the Jerusalem which is above, our mother (Gal. 4:26). Thus one could appeal to this tradition as sufficient reason for St. John's choice of the Woman-symbol.

This line of reasoning is more imposing, at first sight, than it merits. In the text of the Apocalypse, the woman is the mother of a male child who is certainly the Messiah; the reference to Ps. 2, the ruling of the nations with a rod of iron, makes this clear. One must consider the Woman, therefore, as Israel, the faithful Jewish community from which the Messiah issued. But from another point of view, this Woman is also the Church of the New Testament; the rest of chapter 12 demands that. Thus we must admit, leaving aside the question of Newman's allusion, that the Woman-symbol is complex. At least two notions are in there, as all must admit. *Allo* combines both in one allegorical mother.¹² The plasticity of this Woman-symbol should not surprise us; this manner of thinking runs throughout the Bible. Thus the "Servant of Yahweh" passages in Isaias seem to depict now an individual, now a collectivity. In Daniel the figure of the Son of Man represents the Messianic King and the saints of the Most High. Such com-

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-61.

¹¹ For further instances in the Old Testament, cf. D. Buzy, "L'allégorie matrimoniale de Jahvé et d'Israël et le Cantique des Cantiques," *Vivre et Penser*, III^e Série (1943/4), I, pp. 77-90.

¹² E. B. Allo, O. P., *Saint Jean L'Apocalypse* (Paris: Gabalda, 1933), pp. 193-94: "La femme est la communauté des justes; c'est à la fois l'Israël fidèle d'où Jésus est sorti suivant la chair, et l'Israël spirituel qui est l'Eglise du Christ, les deux considérés comme ne faisant qu'un. Ainsi cette femme est une mère allégorique."

plexity makes for uncertainty in interpretation, but the fact itself cannot be gainsaid.

Once we allow for the virtuality inherent in biblical symbols, we can see the reasonableness of Newman's interpretation of the Woman. The hard and fast point at which it can be anchored is the explicit reference to the birth of the Messiah. It is difficult to conceive that St. John could have written so vividly about the birth of Jesus without an allusion to Mary, without having her in mind. The "travail" and "anguish of delivery" do not preclude this. They are in line with the plasticity of the symbol and can be understood of Israel; it was not without the opposition of Satan that she gave the Messiah to the world. As Allo suggests, one might even see a secondary reference to Mary's *compassio* in giving birth to the Church.¹³

A brief examination of St. John's treatment of the symbols in the eleventh chapter of the Apocalypse will provide an argument in favor of Newman's claim of an allusion to Mary in the twelfth chapter. The episode of the two witnesses suggests the pattern according to which St. John's mind functioned. The witnesses represent the missionary arm, the preaching activity of the Church.¹⁴ Into these two symbols St. John has fused a flood of Old Testament imagery and even some from the New. Like the ancient prophets, they wear sackcloth (Is. 20:2). From Zach. 4:2 ff. St. John borrows the ideas of olive trees and lampstands. He adapts the passage. Whereas one lampstand in Zacharias represents Israel, in the Apocalypse two represent the witnesses. The two olive trees, which stand for the priesthood (Josue) and the kingship (Zorobabel), are similarly applied. These two witnesses are further described in terms of Elias and Moses (the witnesses of the Transfiguration in Mt. 17:3). Their enemies will be devoured by fire (Elias in IV Kings 1:10 ff.). They have power to prevent the rains (Elias in III Kings 17:1) and to turn waters to blood (Moses in Ex. 7:20). Where their Lord was crucified the two Witnesses shall be killed. But like their Lord they shall rise from the dead and ascend into heaven (as Elias and Henoah were said to be taken up, Eccles. 44:16, 48:9, and after the example of Christ, Acts 1:9). In this example it will be seen that the individual details which go into the formation of the symbol are not to be overemphasized by the exegete. Thus the allusion to Elias' activity in the matter of the drought is an allusion to a perfectly evident fact in Jewish history. But it is not the intention of St.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹⁴ As Swete puts it: "Rather the witnesses represent the Church in her function of witness-bearing . . . and her testimony is symbolized by *two* witnesses . . ." Cf. H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: Macmillan, 1906), p. 132; J. S. Considine, O. P., "The Two Witnesses: Apoc. 11:3-13," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, VIII (1946), pp. 377-92.

John to reiterate this. The fact has lost its old meaning; it corresponds to a new power, left unspecified, in the Church. Such details as this one are only the means to build up the elaborate picture of the effectiveness of the Church's mission through the centuries; Moses and Elias exist only as symbols, in the author's mind, of the power of the Church.

An analogous process is found in the setting of Apocalypse 12. St. John would have found it only too easy to draw on details concerning the Mother of God and to work them into his picture of the Church versus Satan. Once he had designed the general symbolism of Woman versus Dragon, he resorted to the same type of literary device that he used with the two witnesses. The Messiah came from the Jewish race, Yahweh's spouse; more specifically, He was the son of Mary. Thus St. John was operating on three levels: traits of the Blessed Virgin, of the Chosen People and of the early Christian Church could be utilized in his description. The idea offers far more for the devout mind than the prospect of the two witnesses, particularly from the point of view of Mary. Because for St. John she became *the* Woman par excellence. It was under such a title that she had been given into his loving care. Perhaps St. John himself in some way bridged the gap between his own era and the protoevangelium of Gen. 3:15. Consequently, it is inevitable that St. John would have had Mary in mind in writing Apocalypse 12:1, "a woman clothed with the sun. . . ." Even though he is only introducing his characters and at this point his main protagonist, the Church, the figure of Mary hovers in the background.

The final conclusion, then, is that Mary is found in Apocalypse 12 by way of allusion. The allusion is inherent in the particular symbol which is used to personify the Church. In view of St. John's background and association with the Mother of God, and in view of his concrete statement about the birth of the Messiah, one cannot be satisfied with a mere personification here. This goes beyond texts like Isa. 66:7 ff., Ezek. 16:8 ff., or any other biblical passage which personifies God's people. On the other hand, St. John does not teach anything definite concerning the Blessed Virgin. There is no true biblical "sense" here. However, from the way St. John alludes to Mary, we may argue to the exalted position she enjoyed, to her *dignity*, as Newman intended.

Cardinal Newman's final word on the passage is to reply to the question why the sacred writers do not mention our Lady's greatness: "I answer, she was, or may have been alive, when the apostles and evangelists wrote; there was just one book of Scripture certainly written after her death and that book does (so to say) canonize and crown her."¹⁵ This stirring statement

¹⁵ *Difficulties*, p. 61.

can hardly be true; there is no assurance how much of the New Testament was written when Mary's earthly career came to an end. But it is worthy of the great Cardinal's heart and devotion to our Lady.

Newman's approach to this problem is significant for two reasons. First, it enlarges our understanding of this famous passage in the Apocalypse. Secondly, it has a bearing on the Scriptural basis for the doctrine of our Lady's Assumption into heaven.

With regard to the understanding of the Marian character of this twelfth chapter, modern Catholic exegetes have been divided.¹⁶ One of the most recent commentaries on the Apocalypse, produced by A. Gelin for *La Sainte Bible* series,¹⁷ takes a forthright stand: the Woman is a complex symbol, including the Jewish-Christian community and the Church; these verses can be applied to Mary in an *accommodated* sense. Other authors are unfortunately much less distinct, as Lusseau-Collomb,¹⁸ and Ignaz Rohr.¹⁹ On the other hand, Allo claims that the liturgical application to the Blessed Virgin is not a mere accommodation. But this sense, he says, is secondary or spiritual and the whole passage can be understood without it. Allo does not explain how this secondary sense is worked out. One might surmise that his explanation would be similar to remarks which he makes concerning the "divine" appearance of the Woman.²⁰ St. John would have described the Church in terms applicable primarily to Christ's mother, to the virgin of Isa. 7:14, in a blend of type and antitype. Allo makes another thoughtful suggestion when he allows that the symbol of the glorious mother could have borrowed something from the divine images of the pagan Orient. This opinion is far from the extreme views of Gunkel, Bousset and others who

¹⁶ It would go beyond the scope of this note to give an historical summary of interpretations. This has been done for the Fathers, devotional writers, theologians and exegetes by Dominic J. Unger, O.F.M.Cap., in "Did Saint John See the Virgin Mary in Glory?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, XI (1949), 249-62. Here one can be content with a representative selection. It might be noted that J. B. Bonnefoy and A. Rivera agree that the Marian interpretation has become "presque commune" in recent times. Cf. Bonnefoy, "Les Interprétations ecclésiologiques du chapitre XII de l'Apocalypse," *Marianum*, IX (1947), pp. 208-222, esp. 208, n. 2.

¹⁷ (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1946), Vol. XII, p. 629.

¹⁸ *Manuel d'études bibliques*, (Paris: Téqui, 1941), V, 2, p. 516: "Marie n'est donc désignée que *confusément* . . ."

¹⁹ *Die Heilige Schrift des Neuen Testaments* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1924), VIII, p. 247: "Das Zeichen . . . kann schon deshalb nicht unmittelbar auf Maria gedeutet werden . . ."

²⁰ Allo, *op. cit.*, p. 194: "Cette emphase symbolique surprendra moins, si l'on admet que la mère allégorique du Messie, la communauté, est ici représentée sous des traits qui conviennent premièrement à sa mère réelle, à la 'almah d'Isaïe, à la 'Femme qui enfante' de Michée; ce ne serait pas le première fois qu'on trouverait, dans notre livre, deux réalités analogiques mêlées, le type et l'antitype plus ou moins confondus."

derived the chapter from Babylonian, Iranian, Egyptian and other sources. The existence of mother-goddesses could have prompted St. John to set against them a symbol which represented the beauty and goodness that the pagan mind so vainly sought.

Recent theological discussion about the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin has worked over the twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse. One of the most extreme, if ingenious, interpretations has been constructed by Jugie.²¹ His systematic interpretation of the entire chapter has not rallied many followers and has met with opposition.²² Apart from Jugie's interpretation, what is to be said for other views which see some reference to the Blessed Virgin in the Woman? Fonseca has indicated the limitations of these with regard to the Assumption.²³ There is not sufficient indication of the Assumption itself. Is Mary pictured in a glorified Body? Does the phrase ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ mean the heaven of the beatified? These weaknesses leave Fonseca sceptical of the validity of this Scriptural argument.

These same questions can be directed at the conclusion made in this note. Does the allusion to the Blessed Virgin refer to her prerogative in heaven, at least implicitly? Newman began his study by attempting to show the dignity of the Blessed Virgin. One might argue that her dignity would include her prerogative of the Assumption. But it is practically impossible to prove that St. John was necessarily referring to this prerogative; his picture is too general. If we were to attempt to indicate what aspect of Mary is celebrated in the tableau, it would be this: her glorious privilege of Mother of God.

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²¹ M. Jugie, A. A., *La Mort et l'assomption de la sainte Vierge, étude historico-doctrinale*, Studi e testi, 114 (Vatican: 1944).

²² An effective refutation of Jugie's interpretation has been worked out by L. Poirier, O.F.M., "Le Chapitre XII de l'Apocalypse fait-il allusion à l'assomption?" in *Vers le dogme de l'assomption* (Montreal: Editions Fides, 1948), pp. 93-102.

²³ L. G. da Fonseca, S. J., "L'Assunzione di Maria nella Sacra Scrittura," *Biblica*, XXVIII (1947), 321-62.