

THE MOTHER OF GOD IN SCRIPTURE

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TO treat of the motherhood of the Blessed Virgin according to the Scriptures is as overwhelming a task as it would be to treat of Christ according to the Scriptures. For one whole half of the mystery of redemption, as set forth there, is summed up in the person of the Blessed Virgin. Under Christ, and in Christ, the Blessed Virgin plays in the work of the redemption a companion, complementary part to his; being the Eve to his Adam, the Woman answering to the (Son of) Man that he is. It is accepted that it is necessary, in order to appreciate the Scriptural witness to Christ, to study the Bible as a whole and in its full inspired weight of meaning. The same is true of the Blessed Virgin. It is not sufficient, in the Old Testament, to dwell on a number of the more explicitly prophetic texts, nor in the New Testament on the great scenes, say, of the Annunciation, Bethlehem, Cana, Calvary. These texts cannot yield their full significance unless they are seen as organically related to the whole world of meaning which the Scriptures in their entirety embody. Or this might perhaps be expressed by saying that, like Christ himself, the Blessed Virgin is not merely a person but is also a person of Mystery, expressing with all her being something of the supreme Mystery that is the total content of the Scriptures. She cannot, therefore, be understood through anything less than the whole play of that Mystery as set forth in the Bible.

To interpret the Bible in its wholeness of meaning is a task to which only the Church itself is equal. That she is equal to it is the measure of her divinely inspired mind. The interpretations of any inspired critic are always liable to seem to the uninspired of us to be arbitrary, or even fantastic! So it is, for example, with the Church's doctrines concerning the Immaculacy of the Blessed Virgin or her Assumption. By those who do not trust the Church they are liable to be dismissed as un-Scriptural. They are not un-Scriptural, but it is true that to any one who cannot discern the Spirit of the Scriptures they will so appear. For that matter, whatever inspired utterance or work of art—human as well as divine—comes to be interpreted, the uninspired critic will always fail

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through being unable to penetrate to the inner meaning, to the spirit of it. In the very last analysis it is through the spirit that the letter is flooded with its authentic meaning, and so expresses infinitely more than a purely literal understanding of it can perceive.

The Church's Scriptural interpretation, it need hardly be said, is not to be gathered only from her dogmatic conclusions; it is to be found expressed, for example, in the Liturgy and in the whole body of Catholic Tradition. Any one in touch with those sources who has assimilated anything of their spirit should have begun, even without knowing it, to acquire something of Scriptural understanding; should have begun to be able to read the Bible for himself! For if the Church must unseal the Scriptures for us, this should not mean simply that she dictates their sense to us, but that she gives us all the essential keys to enable us to explore them for ourselves. The Bible is not to be like a divine story that Mother Church reads to her children, seated on her knee, at bedtime; at least, it will be like that to begin with, but sooner or later we should grow up and begin to be capable of exercising our own free understanding and insight. This is not to invoke the principle of private inspiration, in the Protestant sense, but of the need for a Catholic formation and maturity of mind.

The essential keys or principles with which the Church equips us are not provided principally through the authoritative interpretation of any particular texts. What we need far more is to be attuned to the spirit of the Bible, to be introduced to its inner meaning, to the great organic shape of it, to its master themes and images. Although it is certainly true, and indeed impressed upon us by the Church herself, that scientific biblical study is generally speaking an indispensable Catholic instrument, yet it can safely be said that to be versed, for example, in the Liturgy and in all that it sets forth concerning the Blessed Virgin would lead one to an incomparably truer, deeper understanding of the biblical revelation of her than could be gained from the study of any number of scientific commentaries. Sometimes in the Church's handling of the Scriptures what would appear, on a narrow view, to be just a scholarly mistake in biblical interpretation (like the rendering of the Protoevangelium that ascribes to the Woman the crushing of the serpent's head), or to be far-fetched or purely distortions will be discovered on further reflection to be instances of a perfect

understanding of Scripture which even when swerving from immediate literal accuracy yet remains faithful to the deep underlying significance of a text. The Church enjoys that freedom in the handling of the Scriptures which perfect understanding justifies. None of us individually can ever enjoy such freedom as that! Yet we ought to be able to enter into a little more of it than we usually do; and not be content either to be spoon-fed or else to be just assiduous students of the biblical sciences. To attain to a biblical understanding and insight of our own is part of our Catholic inheritance.

This will seem a ponderous way of introducing the few poor remarks that are now to be offered concerning the biblical revelation of the motherhood of the Blessed Virgin. The purpose is to plead that they are not a purely fanciful exercise, but an attempt to read the Scriptures in the light of the Church's reading of them. And the hope will be that nothing will be said that could not be substantiated by the Liturgy or the other sources of Catholic biblical understanding; though it is clearly impossible in this short space to adduce anything of this evidence. It is also impossible to do more than introduce one or two themes belonging to the subject; whereas it would be necessary before one could say that one had generously pondered the revelational data to have studied a score of themes, with all their ramifications and interrelations. One would have needed, for example, to have explored the themes of the Garden, of the Holy Land, of the Temple, of Mother Israel, of the King and his marriage with his people, of Wisdom and the Wisdom marriage, and so on. One is only drawing attention here, then, to a few threads of meaning within a vast composition; with the danger, in making such a selection, of doing violence to the subject as a whole.

The great mystery of motherhood begins to be expressed in the very opening verses of the Bible. The creation of the world in the strict sense, that is to say, its coming into being out of sheer nothingness, is clearly enough asserted there; but what is also treated of is a sort of moral or virtual nothingness which is preserved at the heart of the world, out of which, by the power of the Holy Spirit, its own finished, perfect state of being has to be born. What the Bible, in fact, normally describes as Creation is not sheer being coming out of sheer nothingness, but a perfection of being engendered by God's power out of a mothering poten-

tiality in nature. In that sense the world has not been truly Created until the Cosmos has been born out of the Chaos.

To begin with, then, the world is presented in a state of Chaos. It is full of darkness waiting for the light; it is beneath the waters waiting until they should be divided and the dry land lifted up out of the deep; it is 'waste and void', that is to say, it is empty and formless waiting until its true order and formation shall be shaped out of it. This already expresses, as if in a parable, the idea of Motherhood joined to that of Virginité. The Virginité consists in this, that the world is ready (as it were) to wait upon God, upon the action of the Holy Spirit, to bring about its fulfilment; content, in the meantime, to rest in a sort of nothingness. So at the heart of the world, at the heart of life, there must be a principle as of a holy Virginité if it is to be divinely Created. Supposing it could not endure to wait upon God for its fulfilment but turned to some other imagined principle of life to give it light (or glory), to establish it on firm ground, to confer significance upon its life, —then it would have lost its Virginité unto God. Then the Holy Spirit would not come down upon it, nor the power of the Most High overshadow it. It would not be divinely fruitful. In this deep sense, therefore, Virginité and Motherhood are inseparable parts of one whole mystery.

It is said that the Blessed Virgin crushes the Serpent's head; or it is also said that she is the '*Turris draconi impervá*', that Tower of strength against which the Dragon can never prevail. What do they stand for, then—these biblical figures of the Serpent and the Dragon? For it would seem very confusing if, as is generally simply said, they stand for the very principle of Chaos. They do indeed stand for chaos, but for an ultimate unholy, sterile chaos, and not for this holy, mothering Chaos that is part of the mystery of Creation. In fact they precisely stand for and embody the denial, or the rejection, of this holy Chaos. They embody that spirit of pride which, if it can infect nature, shuts up the womb of its Nothingness towards God. No more is there any falling back to that point of a sheer creatureliness, to that condition as of un-Createdness which is necessary if there is to be a divine Creation, a divine fruitfulness. The waiting upon God in that state until by his power the desire of life should be fulfilled seems intolerable, and nature gives herself to whatever principle it may be that promises immediate life and the saving of her from the need of

ever knowing this terrible Chaos. A createdness is sought—and promised by the evil spirit—that need not be based on creatureliness, need not spring out of a holy nothingness. But the order of life so fashioned, is not really fashioned at all, since only God can make life. It pretends to be a sort of Cosmos, but it is no Cosmos. It is Chaos pretending to be Cosmos, that has therefore lost its fruitfulness. It is an unholy, *sterile* Chaos.

The roots of sin are here laid bare. Pride, with all its possible concomitant elements of fear, disbelief, etc., partakes of this anti-creational spirit which will not accept the way of birth out of a nothingness-of-self. It demands to *be*; it cannot bear to lose its life in order to find it, to die in order that a new life may be born. Its desire of life must not be crossed, even for a moment, even by God; its own notions of what is its own true life must not be interfered with. And so it is never fertilised, since no outside principle (no principle of 'otherness') is allowed to penetrate and inform it. It is inspired by the devil, but this is no quickening influence. It is simply involved by the devil in an endless welter of sameness; of sameness struggling to enlarge or secure whatever it may already possess or have imagined for itself of life. The evil spirit cannot husband it, in order that it may bear new life, but only lashes it up in a futile, endless longing. When that evil spirit should be exorcised and the world lie open again to be pierced by the sword of the creative will of God, then the ultimate mothering principle of life would have been restored.

For the meaning of the Fall, the meaning of sin was that that mothering principle was lost—the mystery of holy Chaos lost. The moment had come when it was required of man to collaborate with the Holy Spirit so that holy life might be born in him anew. He was to have life more abundantly; but the Temptation was that he should think to attain it cheaply—as it were; as life that he might snatch at, like plucking, snatching fruit from a tree, and not as life that should be born, blessed fruit of the womb, begotten by the will of God. Even to Adam and Eve that word applied: 'Unless a man be born again . . . he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God'. No one can enter into a new reach of true life except by a dying to the former self and a giving birth to a new self. Only the new-born self of us can advance into the Promised Land of the greater life that is continually prepared for us. But Eve was tempted into denying this mystery of motherhood; and

'the Mother of all the living', as she should have been, thus became the harlot, the paramour of the Beast.

It is as though the whole creational economy was now undone, the whole creational order and process arrested. The sun would still rise, but there would be nothing truly 'new, under the sun'. The sources of the world's true life were blocked: for it no longer rested over the Deep—the mystery of the Deep having been denied. It was now built up high and dry, with no fountain of new life continually springing up, pressing up from where its deep Nothingness should be presented to the Holy Spirit to act upon. 'The Holy Ghost shall *not* come down upon me, the power of the most high shall *not* overshadow me', is what Eve had in effect said. Holy life, therefore, is no more born in the world. The world has become sterile; and so it must remain until the hard heart is pierced, and the Holy Spirit again penetrates into its depth. The Wisdom that they resorted to at the instigation of the devil was a false wisdom in contradiction to the Wisdom that has its Beginning in the 'Fear' of the Lord, and to that Wisdom of the Cross which says to God: 'Be it done unto me according to thy Word'. This false wisdom effects no renewal of life: it is not like a tree-of-wisdom that cross-fertilises the tree-of-life. For it knows nothing of sacrifice; it only knows how to flatter life, pretending to it that it can be fulfilled without being continually re-created. It is the situation, says this false wisdom, which must be changed, but not you and your desires. You must be accommodated, and you can be. But the Commandment of God, the Word of God given to Adam and Eve did not accommodate them: it only seemed to them to thwart them. So it did not seem to them to represent Wisdom, to have anything of creative promise in it. They must preserve their lives against this threat, harden their heart lest it should be so pierced, or, in other terms, cause the deep womb of nature to be closed against the fathering power of God. But there would be a new Adam whose heart would be pierced by a spear; and a new Eve whose soul a sword would pierce.

The first Adam failed to play the part of a true husband to his wife. He did not 'keep' the garden of her soul, in which should have been sown the seed of the word of God, although at the cost of sacrifice, although with a sort of shedding of blood—as Christ in his agony (in that Temptation of his in the Garden) shed his blood into the soil of Gethsemane. When Eve reached out to take

what she thought would fulfil their happiness, in defiance of God, Adam should have controlled that impulse of her nature, should have mastered her in the strength of the will of God. Then a holy life would have been conceived in her, and between them there would have been the realisation of the mystery of marriage. He should have said to her something like: *Quid mihi et tibi, mulier?* The fruit on the tree was a sort of sign and sacrament of a fruitfulness that must be realised in them, in their human nature. But Eve snatched at it and took it in the hope that it would provide a sort of magic escape from the need, the painful need, to bear fruit of grace within her own nature. (Like the woman at the well misinterpreting the water of life that Christ said should spring up within her, as a sort of magic water she might acquire and so be freed from the labour of drawing from the well; or like the crowd that cried out to be given 'always' 'that bread', only understanding it as a magical provision that would save them from all the toil of life. Or like some of us Catholics, perhaps, in the way we can reach out to the Holy Eucharist, forgetting that its power and its purpose is to enable us to become fruitful in our own natures, in our own selves.)

But to the second Eve we can precisely say: 'Blessed is the fruit of thy womb'. She did not snatch at any fruitfulness, in defiance of God, but consented to become fruitful in herself, according to his will and in the strength of his Holy Spirit. And that she was immune from sin, free from all taint of sin, and perfectly surrendered to God was due to the virtue of Christ's Passion working within her, that is to say, to the working within her of the power of Christ's own acceptance of the will of God. It was through his virtue, then, that she was divinely fruitful. He was her lord and her saviour, though he was her son. Whereas she gave him birth physically, according to the Spirit she was his bride, and came forth from his side.

She was safeguarded, then, the Blessed Virgin, against Temptation by the working in her of Christ's own power over the Tempter. For although not in point of time, yet according to the inner reality, they were tempted together: they were partners in temptation and in the overcoming of temptation. The scene of the Annunciation seems idyllically peaceful and gentle; yet at the heart of it there was a tremendous ordeal like that of Christ in his agony or in his encounter with the devil in the wilderness. The

lovely calm of the scene at Nazareth came as the stilling of a mighty storm—no less a storm, in fact, than that of the original Chaos! For in this Woman, at this moment, God is recreating the world. ‘The Lord possessed me in the Beginning of his ways . . .’; ‘I have penetrated into the bottom of the deep, and have walked in the waves of the sea.’ There is no Catholic who should not know how truly the mystery of the transcendent creational Wisdom is verified in the Blessed Virgin. By her act of abandonment to God, of perfect faith, all that had been built up of pseudo-creation, stifling the play of the world’s Nothingness towards God, is swept away, and the Depths again let free. Mary accepts the darkness, lets the waters go over her head, is ready to lie low, waiting upon God. So the Holy Spirit moves over her, and the power of the most high overshadows her. The great mothering Deep is restored.

Here is a new beginning; not a patching up of sin. There is an innocence here not as of a forgiven sinner, but that reaches back beyond the Fall of man, behind the Fall of Eve, restoring an utterly original goodness and holiness, restoring ‘Creation’. This maid of Nazareth, this gentle sweet creature, is indeed as young and fresh as the world when it came from the hands of God; yet also you can say that she is as ancient as time as it reaches back into the eternity of God: infinitely older than poor sinful woman, to whom a certain kind of romantic snobbery loves to attribute a magical-wise seniority. The poor sinner is a newcomer; and yet already stale. Mary is ancient, yet ever young.

The *Fiat mihi* (‘Be it done unto me’) which she spoke to the angel can be made to sound so purely gentle; but it is a tremendous word, reaching out to the creative word of God, to the divine *Fiat lux*, etc. (‘Let there be light . . . let there be a firmament’.) That which says *Fiat* to the creative Word of God is nothing less—or, one might say, nothing more—than the world’s Nothingness, the world’s Chaos. That here at Nazareth the great Chaos should have been let loose again—that is, indeed, at first a startling conception. But so it is. It was required of the Blessed Virgin to abandon herself to God in a spirit of pure faith. What was announced to her was according to all human reckoning as unacceptable as the Word spoken to the first Eve—‘Thou shalt not eat of this tree’. Mary must believe that she will be fruitful although naturally speaking the conditions of human fruitfulness are with-

held. As the scene unfolds to us, it all seems so easy, so natural! Such a gracious messenger—who would not simply trust him? It would have been easy, though, for us not to trust him, but to regard him as an angel of darkness, as the first Eve regarded the devil as an angel of light!

The whole context (Isaias, chap. VII ff.) in which the prophetic sign of the Virgin and Child is set helps us to read into the deep issues of this mystery of Nazareth. The sign was given to the king who, when the situation, humanly speaking, was desperate would not believe that God could save him. Unless he could establish himself on some naturally promising foundation he could conceive no hope; whereas the truth was: 'You will not be established unless you can have *faith*'. And the *true* sign of salvation, for which he had no use, was then in fact declared to him: 'Behold a Virgin shall conceive . . .'

And now at Nazareth that Virgin conceives. In the strength of her utter faith in God she conceives; in the strength of her passionate complete abandonment to the creative power of the Holy Spirit; in her ultimate virginal readiness to find only in God—in nothing at all apart from God, short of God—the power that would save her, render her fruitful. Her act of surrender to God is passionate: it is not, as it were, to be seen as a pious damping down of the forces of nature, but as their mighty release. Life is here being freed from all the constriction and frustration and sterility brought about by sinful egotism—by all the uncreative ways in which, in the attempt to fulfil it without the need of sacrifice, it had become stifled. But now there is a bursting of these bonds and nature is thrown up against God, thrown back unto God, as in the original holy Chaos when the great deep was lashed up in a storm, and the spray leaped up to the sky. '*Turbata est, et cogitabat qualis est ista salutatio.*' And 'I know not man', she says. Between her and God there is nothing. For the moment the whole world for her has lost light—she is in a holy darkness; the waters have gone over her head and she has no foothold, but only her trust in God. There is only a passionate beating back to God, out of and beyond the order of this world, a torrential beating back to God mightier than all the frustrated desires of the world let loose again.

It is a movement, then, of a tremendous, passionate self-surrender to God; and of a divine conception. So long as life seeks to

save itself, or to find salvation anywhere apart from God, it is sterile; but if it can be abandoned to God, immediately it conceives by his power, although it may not know this, although the new holy life may be long in coming to birth. Out of the Chaos surrendered to God a new world, a holy world will certainly be raised, although not perhaps in one moment. The Mystery is now restored for all the world—the mystery of holy conception and birth, of true creation. ‘*Puer natus est nobis, filius datus est nobis.*’ If the Holy Child were given to us merely to worship there on the lap of the Blessed Virgin, that would hardly save us—that is not what the salvation of the world means. Our salvation lies in this, that now within our own nature—by a participation in the Mystery of Mary’s motherhood—divine birth can take place. Everywhere that mystery is available, everywhere the world can be filled with God.



TE DEUM LAUDAMUS

THEE God we praise. But to speak of this Godhead I dare not presume, for since I cannot prove, nor conceive thine hid works, that thou hast made in a creature, what should I say to the maker that is a creator? For all philosophers that have laboured in divers sentences, as in grammar, logic, rhetoric, music, astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, all, they proved by reason in their faculties, till they came to one point, that was called, *prima causa*. And here they stood still and could proceed no further. And that first causer, they said, might well be called a God. And so we, to the same first causer of all things, we say: *Te Deum Laudamus*. ‘Thee God we praise’, that art so curious a maker of diversities of things. And *Te dominum confitemur*, ‘we knowledge thee’, a lord that of everything art so wise a disposer and so noble a keeper. And not only we with our wits praise God thus, but also *Te eternum patrem omnis terra veneratur!* ‘All the regions of the earth worship thee everlasting Father.’ In this name ‘earth’ we may understand three places, the first, the earth of living folk, that is the bliss of Heaven as David saith: *Credo videre bona Domini in terram viventium*: ‘I hope to see the goodness of our Lord in the