

## **Unlocking the Book of Revelation: Part III** **“A Woman Clothed with the Sun” (Rev 11:19-12:2)**

**Jim Seghers**

The “woman” of chapter 12 captures dual senses representing Mary, the mother of Jesus, and “Daughter Zion” as depicted by the prophet Isaiah. This short essay will examine these depictions.

### **Mary**

Chapter 11 ends with another of John’s remarkable heavenly visions:<sup>1</sup>

“Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple.” This was followed by a theophany: “and there were flashes of lightening, loud noises, peals of thunder, and earth quake, and heavy hail” (Rev 11:19).

The ark of the covenant was the most sacred object in Israel. It was holy because it contained: the ten commandments, some of the miraculous manna that fed God’s people in the desert, and the rod of Aaron that had blossomed to witness his priesthood. The ark also signified God’s intimate presence among his people, especially when the glory cloud (*shekinah*) descended on the ark and filled the tabernacle (Ex 40:34-38).

The ark led Israel to the Promised Land (Num 10:33-35), across the Jordan River (Josh 2:2-3, 11-17), and in the conquest of Jericho (Josh 6:4-17). King David placed the ark prominently in the Tabernacle after he established Jerusalem as his capital. His son Solomon enshrined the ark in the Temple, where it remained for about 400 years until Jerusalem and the Temple were captured and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

However, the ark was not listed among the spoils captured by the Babylonians (2 Kgs 25:13-17), because it was hidden by the prophet Jeremiah on Mount Nebo (2 Macc 2:5). It would remain hidden “until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy” (2 Macc 2:7). Therefore, John’s vision of the ark was remarkable because the ark had not been seen for almost five centuries, but now it was in heaven. What did it look like?

John gives a surprising depiction in the next verse:

“A great sign appeared in heaven, a *woman* clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (Rev 12:1).

This prophetic imagery presents the ark of the covenant of the Old Testament as a type that foreshadowed the true ark, namely, Mary whose virginal temple (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19) housed: the new law - God’s Word made flesh, the true manna – the Eucharist (Jn 6:32, 35), and the “merciful and faithful high priest” Jesus Christ (Heb 2:17).

---

<sup>1</sup> It’s important to recognize that the chapter and verse divisions in the Bible are not part of the inspired text. The chapters were devised by Stephen Langton in 1206 A.D. The verses were added by Robert Etienne in 1551 A.D. Therefore these arbitrary partitions are irrelevant in interpreting passages.

A type (*typos* in Greek) refers to a person, place, event or institution in the Bible that foreshadows a greater reality that God will make known in history. For example, Joshua is portrayed in the book of Joshua as a new Moses who led the Hebrew people into the Promised Land. In the New Testament the Temple (Mt 12:6), Jonah (Mt 12:41, and Solomon (Mt 12:42) are depicted as types of Christ. During the forty days spend in the desert, Jesus reenacts Israel's forty years of testing in the wilderness. Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey amid shouts that proclaimed him "King" (Lk 19:28) and "Son of David" (Mt 21:6) captures the typological symbolism of Solomon's coronation ride into Jerusalem (1 Kgs 1:38-40). St. Paul presents Jesus as the new Adam (1 Cor 15:22; Rom 5:12-21). Peter sees the flood in the time of Noah as a prefiguring of the waters of baptism (1 Pet 3:20-21). The above examples are a small sampling of the Christological, ecclesiological, sacramental, and Mariological typology found in the New Testament.

That Mary is the "woman" of Revelation 12:1 is supported in the description of her son, "a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron" (Rev 12:5). The allusion to the "rod of iron" is drawn from Psalm 2:9, which celebrates the enthronement of the Davidic kings. Additional confirmation is found in Luke's Gospel, which also depicts Mary as the ark of the covenant.

When the angel Gabriel described Jesus' miraculous conception, he declared: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will *overshadow* you" (Lk 1:35). The Greek word that is translated as "overshadow" is the same word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the cloud overshadowing the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a type of the Mother of God<sup>2</sup> and the cloud represented the Holy Spirit.

The depiction of Mary as the true ark of the covenant becomes even clearer when St. Luke describes Mary's journey to visit her cousin Elizabeth. He intentionally draws a parallel between the ark of the covenant going to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel 6 and Mary visiting Elizabeth.

- Mary goes to town in the hill country (Lk 1:39); the Ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:12,15-16)
- Mary stays in house of Zechariah (Lk 1:40); the ark stays in the house of Obededom (2 Sam 6:10)
- Both John and David leapt, danced, with joy (Lk 1:41; 2 Sam 6:14)
- Elizabeth said: "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" (Lk 1:43); David said: "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" (2 Sam 6:9).
- Mary rejoices (Lk 1:47); People rejoice (2 Sam 6:12)
- Loud cry (Lk 1:42); Shouting (2 Sam 6:15)

---

<sup>2</sup> Mary is properly called the Mother of God because, as all mothers understand, she gave birth to a Person, in this case the divine Word made flesh. However, this title does not in any sense imply that Mary is above God or anything other than a creature.

- Mary remains with Elizabeth for three months (Lk 1:56); the Ark remains in the house of Obbedom for three months (2 Sam 6:11).

One may wonder why John chose to identify Mary with the title “woman” and not her given name. The Apostle is following the practice of Jesus who twice addressed his mother with the prophetic title “woman” at two important times in his ministry. The first was at the wedding in Cana, when Jesus began his public assault on the kingdom of Satan (Jn 3:4), and the second occurred when he completed it on Calvary (Jn 19:26). Jesus was clearly connecting his mother with the prophecy of Genesis 3:15: “I will put enmity between you and the *woman*, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” The woman’s seed is Christ. Mary is the “woman” who will cooperate in her son’s victory over the devil. This connection is seen in two Old Testament types of Mary.

The first is Jeal who drove a tent peg into Sisera’s head (Judg 4:21). Subsequently, she was praised, “Most blessed of women be Jael” (Judg 5:24). The second type was Judith. She took Holofernes’ sword and “severed his head from his body” (Judith 13:8). She received similar praise from Uzziah who said to her, “O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all women on earth” (Judith 13:18). The typology is fulfilled in St. Luke’s Gospel when “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” (Lk 1:41) and was prompted to exclaim to Mary, “Blessed are you among women” (Lk 1:42).

### **Daughter Zion**

In Chapter 12 of Revelation, John also draws on passages from the prophet Isaiah. The restoration of God’s people is described as a *woman* in labor: “Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time” (Is 26:17). The sacred author uses similar imagery at the end of the book: “Before she was in labor she gave birth; before her pain came upon her she was delivered of a son” (Is 66:7). In Revelation we read: “She was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery” (Rev 12:2).

John is showing us that in her total submission to God and in her cooperation with her son, Mary is Daughter Zion, the icon of the Church, and the mother of all believers: “Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the *rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus*” (Rev 12:17). Daughter Zion is not only destined to be the mother of those redeemed from the Gentiles, she is also both virgin bride and fruitful mother: “For as a young man marries a virgin, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Is 62:5). Jesus is the son, the God-man, who became the new Adam to redeem us, and in the process making Mary the new Eve.

A future essay will explore a major event in Mary’s maternal care for her earthly children, which happened in Portugal during the dark days of World War I.