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Author(s): Francis X. Peirce

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MARY ALONE IS "THE WOMAN" OF GENESIS 3:15

Inimicitias ponam inter te et mulierem, et semen tuum et semen illius.

To the present writer the problem of finding a common ground for comparison between Eve and Mary has long seemed impossible of solution. The one possible meeting point in the text is in the word *inimicitias*; but that word (as most modern Catholic commentators agree) indicates an absolute enmity of which the fallen Eve is incapable.

The most recent effort to solve the problem comes from the pen of D. Nicolaus Palmerini;¹ but the effect produced is one of bewilderment rather than of satisfaction. After emphasizing the fact that the enmity predicted in the text is absolute in its extent (pp. 139-140), he proceeds to indicate Eve as "the woman" in the stricter literal sense, and Mary in the extended literal sense. As proof he offers the comparison that, just as between the material serpent and Eve there will be repugnance, so between the devil and Mary there will be enmity. But such a proof raises too many problems to be taken seriously. First, there is no question of the material serpent in the verse. Secondly, even if there were, it is scientifically untrue to say that there is any peculiar opposition between mankind and snakes, since it is rather a fear of the unknown (true also with respect to other possibly deadly animals) that produces such repugnance as exists. Thirdly, the enmity in the text is a mutual opposition, whereas the serpent has no recognizable repugnance to man. Fourthly, the word אִיְבָרָה (enmity) is applied in scripture only to rational beings, to whom the material serpent would not belong. Fifthly, there still exists no common ground of comparison between Eve and Mary in the feature alleged, but rather a relationship of each woman toward different entities.

Actually, the sole obstacle that lies in the way of a simple, acceptable interpretation of the text is the presumed necessity of including Eve in at least the narrower literal sense. It is her presence which postulates a double meaning for the word "enmity" against the obvious meaning of the text, causes trouble with

¹ *Verbum Domini*, May, 1940; XX, 5.

semen illius, and distorts *ipsum*.² This presumed necessity is not due to any desire to give her prominence. It results rather from the fact that the text seems to deal with a known woman (the term having the definite article in the original Hebrew), while in the whole context the only known woman is certainly Eve. Nevertheless, it can be shown exegetically that no such necessity exists.

EVE NOT NECESSARILY THE WOMAN.

First of all, the Hebrew definite article may have either a limiting, or a limiting and demonstrating force. Its commonest use, perhaps, is to define an object known to the reader or the listener; and if that be its use in our text, Eve is certainly designated by "the woman," since only she is known in the context. There is, however, another use, not so frequent as that just indicated, yet not uncommon: namely, to define an object known indeed to the speaker or writer, but unknown to the listener or reader; and if that be the sense in our text, then Eve need not be the woman in question, since the meaning then would be "a certain woman." Gesenius-Kautzsch³ lists upwards of fifty examples of such use, as, for instance, "a certain dove" (Gen. 8:7), "a certain young man" (Gen. 18:7), "a certain virgin" (Isa. 7:14), etc. Hence, in so far as the article is concerned, it is possible *a priori* (without considering the context) to translate either "the woman" or "a certain woman," in which latter case Eve would not necessarily be intended.

A second animadversion obviates the necessity of taking the context into consideration. The text is messianic in its literal sense. No Catholic exegete today will deny that the victor over the devil is Christ (exclusively or pre-eminently) in the literal sense. But a literally messianic text, with respect to its context, differs from other texts in a peculiar way. Because of its essentially forward temporal outlook, it may be and often is divorced from its context in so far as its fundamental thought-content is concerned. While rising out of its context, and receiving its peculiar trend or coloring from the context, its mes-

² Jerome's reading *ipsa* is a precious witness to the tradition of Mary as the woman in the text, but is exegetically untenable; it is certain that the pronoun refers to *semen illius*, and should therefore be neuter in Latin.

³ *Hebrew Grammar*, Second English Edition (Cowley), 1910, pp. 407-408.

sage is its own and may be independent of the surrounding passage in which it is found. To cite but one example of what is sufficiently obvious: in the context immediately preceding the prophecy of the Virgin Birth (Isa. 7: 14-16), there is question of a sign, and the prophecy is given as a sign; but the message is a unit to itself, with no essential link binding it to the context. This is so far true that though the definite article is employed with the word "virgin," and though the subsequent context mentions a woman (Isaias' wife), no Catholic exegete attempts to identify the virgin with this woman, as do many non-Catholic writers. It is possible, then, because of the nature of this particular text, that the woman mentioned in Gen. 3:15 may be another than the only woman known in the context.

EVE UNSUITED TO THE RÔLE.

Once we are relieved of the necessity of including Eve in the literal interpretation of the text, her unsuitability as the subject of the prophecy can be viewed in a clearer, more objective light. Careful consideration of the situation portrayed by the context, as well as a more sensitive appreciation of the exigencies of the text, makes it impossible to accept her in the rôle so long assigned to her.

From the antecedent context we gather that a world order, of which Adam had been constituted the head and Eve his helpmate, has been ruined through the wiles of the devil and the co-operation of the first man and woman. God Himself enters upon the scene in judgment; and from *Quia fecisti hoc* (3:14) it is evident that His attention is definitely fixed on that first sin upon earth, and particularly on the devil's part in it. In which direction will His judgment turn with respect to the ruined order? Will He abandon the supernatural order, constituted and now ruined? Will He re-establish our first parents in their state of original justice? Will He establish a wholly new order? As to the first, we know that such a judgment was not passed; nor would such a judgment seem consonant with His dignity and majesty. If there were question of a re-establishment of the broken order through Adam and Eve, it would be difficult enough to interpret *ponam* (נָשָׂא) as *reponam*, even without the far more significant fact that Eve and not Adam comes into the text. Consistent Hebrew usage throughout the Old Testament prefers

the male to the female parent in delineating descent. In the special case, moreover, of our first parents, Adam is the divinely constituted head of the race, whom all later Scripture continues to recall while ignoring Eve. Further, we know for a fact that original justice was not re-established in the persons of Adam and Eve, since all humanity continues to inherit the original stain.

But even supposing that a wholly new order must ultimately be expected, is it not possible that Eve has some special connection with it? Such possibility is precluded by the text itself. For whatever the "enmity" may be, it is at least a divine benefaction to be transmitted to the woman's seed, since what is established between the devil and the woman is likewise to exist between his seed and hers. If Eve be "the woman," we cannot legitimately restrict her progeny to Christ alone. Hence, the text would seem to indicate the transmission of a special benefit to succeeding generations, whereas in the existing fact our sole moral inheritance from our first parents is sin. On this point, then, the text would become unintelligible.

When we examine a little more closely the nature of the enmity involved between the devil and the woman, it becomes definitely impossible to consider Eve as the subject of the prophecy. Even could we imagine, against the exigencies of the text, that a mitigated opposition proportioned to Eve's capabilities under the existing circumstances is intended, we come face to face with vague uncertainties which are at variance with the clear-cut precision of the text. We are confronted with one of the most solemn moments in human history, when God expresses Himself briefly and succinctly without human mediation. We must therefore recognize something special in the opposition pronounced by Him. Anything less than the woman's sinlessness for the remainder of her life—especially in view of some of her illustrious descendants—would fail to satisfy the special opposition demanded. But of her sinlessness we have no record, and no knowledge. To suppose it, therefore, is to suppose that which cannot be proved, and which can scarcely be true in the absence of any indication in subsequent history. Moreover, an unlimited opposition is out of the question. There is no reason why Eve alone should receive such an honor; and its absence in Adam's case is proved by our own state on entering into this life.

MARY ALONE THE WOMAN.

Independently of considerations drawn from text and context, a solid suspicion that Mary is the woman intended by God arises from the fact that wherever else in the Old Testament a woman appears in a messianic text, that woman is Mary. Mention of a woman in such texts occurs four times: Gen. 3:15; Isa. 7:14; Jer. 31:22; Mich. 5:3. What extraordinary factor of Eve's career is sufficient to explain her prominence in the first prophecy, yet not sufficient to prevent a total eclipse of her personality from the remainder of the sacred record? At the very moment of this presumed elevation to prominence, she is awaiting the severe penance of centuries of sorrow and pain, which will in fact be meted out without any show of favor or predilection.

But let us leave suspicions for certainty. The enmity to be set up between the devil and the woman must be absolute, to suit the situation, and to justify the manner of its employment in the text. The situation is clear. The devil has just ruined the constituted order of supernatural justice, vitiated humanity at its source and for all succeeding generations to the end of time, and he is now present for judgment precisely because of this crime (v. 14). If the enmity decreed does not ward off from the woman all contact with sin, even original sin, then the devil, in the very moment of his condemnation, emerges with some of his spoils. It is true that the decree respects the future, but when enforced, it should be complete; otherwise a weakness incompatible with the majesty of God is displayed on His part. The devil knows the finality of that decree because of which, through the perversity of Adam's will, Eve's progeny for all time will enter the world in a state of sin. He knows also that he has been successful against Eve's will in the hour of its pristine strength. Hence, to be told that she would be strengthened against his subsequent attacks, and that her progeny would eventually overthrow him, would but slightly wound his self-confidence and would leave him still conscious of triumph. But to be told that there would arise a new woman and a new man in whom he could have no part, a new order beyond his power to destroy and destined to destroy him, would be to declare his present achievement futile. God would be acting with that fullness and absolute finality which had in an instant driven Satan in terror from heaven to hell.

Looking now at the text itself, we notice that while enmity is established both between the devil and the woman and between his seed and hers, the word "enmity" is expressed but once, and implied (or to be supplied) once. Now it is a fundamental rule of grammar in such a case that the implied use be identical with the expressed use. Hence, where the "enmity" is to be supplied as affecting "thy seed and her seed," its meaning is absolute and unlimited, barring also original sin from the woman's seed, because that seed (as we shall presently see) is literally and exclusively Christ. Therefore, the expressed use of the term must be equally absolute in extent. The woman, then, is to be protected from original sin.

Evaluating the phrase *semen tuum*, we again discover how prominent a place original sin holds in the prophecy. The devil's seed has been variously interpreted as being the fallen angels, human sinners, fallen angels and sinners, and sin itself. But the fallen angels are certainly not the seed of the devil, even metaphorically; for, aside from the fact that the Book of Genesis thus far knows nothing of fallen angels, these spirits were Satan's companions in sin rather than his progeny. Nor does any passage of subsequent revelation teach us to regard them as his "seed." Nor may human sinners be so considered. Not only are they actually the seed of Eve, but it is hardly conceivable that God Himself, who uses the expression, would thus assign His rebellious human creatures to the devil, notwithstanding Christ's admonition to the Jews.⁴ In the sense of "sin," however, the term is wholly apposite to the situation. The scene is earthly, and on earth the devil has spawned but one thing, sin, for which he is now receiving sentence. What more obvious interpretation of the text is possible than to understand that God is to raise a barrier against the devil and the sin which he has introduced into the world? Both are to be frustrated and destroyed by a woman and a man, even as Satan himself through his seed has destroyed the first man and woman.

Taken in this sense, *semen tuum* cannot be paralleled with *semen illius* (i. e. of the woman) as understood collectively. It might, on the other hand, confirm the interpretation of *semen illius* as designating an individual person. It might also lend a

⁴ Jn. 8:38-44.

richer appreciation to St. Paul's treatment of ἡ ἀμαρτία, which rises at times to the level of personification.

The phrase *semen illius* requires somewhat closer consideration. The Hebrew word for "seed" (צֶרֶף), when used in a physical rather than a metaphorical sense, may signify either a collective progeny or an immediate offspring. Analysing the concept of "seed," it is evident that the primary notion is that of immediate origin from a generative principle. This is the exclusive idea where there is question of an individual seed, and is the primary reason for the validity of the term "progeny" when the extension of the word is expanded to embrace successive subordinate generations; for unless the first member of a line of descendants is literally an immediate offspring of a parent, the progeny as a whole cannot be ascribed to that parent. This analysis is substantiated by the fact that wherever, apart from this text, צֶרֶף is used, either in the singular or the plural, of human beings, if the sense is not collective, immediate offspring is always denoted. For instance, in Gen. 4:25 the terms "son" and "seed" are used synonymously of the child given to Eve in substitution for the slain Abel. Again, in 15:3 the same two terms are used synonymously, where subsequently we see (15:13) this fundamental meaning broaden out into that of a progeny. In Lev. 18:21; 20:2, 3, 4; 22:13 we find a plural use which still remains within the fundamental root idea of immediate offspring. If, then, we can conclude that the phrase *semen illius* is used in an individual sense, we are justified in translating it literally as "her son." And if that son is Christ, it is certain that "the woman" is Mary, of whom alone Christ may legitimately be called Son in the natural order.

Hence, for the final link in the chain of evidence to support our contention that Mary alone is the woman intended in the text, we turn to the pronoun *ipsum*. Catholic exegetes agree that *ipsum* refers literally to Christ, either exclusively, or pre-eminently as head of the mystical body. The text and context demand Christ in the exclusive literal sense. The opponent of *ipsum* is certainly an individual; hence, the obvious interpretation of *ipsum* to sustain the parallel (as well as to complete comparison with the first parallel of devil and woman) is as a definite individual. Secondly, only Christ, and He without the help of other creatures, is equal to the complete victory foretold. Third-

ly, the text is messianic, and in no other messianic text is there implication of the mystical body. This idea, as we receive it from St. Paul, seems foreign to the thought of the Old Testament. There the Messiah is a being apart, under whom and around whom the people will gather to be His spoils, captives, adorers, kingdom, etc.—to *have* part with Him, but never to *be* a part of Him. Now and again it is explicitly stated that in His redemptive work He is alone.⁵ Hence, while it is true that in and through Him the mystical body does attain to victory over the devil, it is exegetically illegitimate to force such an idea into the present text. With respect to the context, as we have elsewhere pointed out, there is evident intention to offset the fall of the first man and woman before the devil by the triumph of the new woman and Man.

A further consideration—which is granted to be rather an intangible impression than a definite argument—arises from the prophecies of Isaias, whose loftier levels seem almost a commentary on our text. Beginning in 7:14 with emphasis on the woman (Mary, beyond all doubt), the Prophet directs the emphasis to her Seed in cc. 9 and 11, to portray therein His spirit, power, and universal domination, and to imply (since the prophecies are wholly spiritual) the overthrow of Satan. Finally, his paean of victory in cc. 52 and 53 announces, with a clarity only eclipsed by the actual fulfillment centuries later, the extent of the prediction *tu insidiaberis calcaneo ejus*. And His is pictured as alone.

Clearly, then, *ipsum* must be understood of an individual. This being so, *semen illius* must be taken in the same sense, since, by the laws of grammar, the pronoun *ipsum* exhausts the full extent of its antecedent. It thus means "son" in the strict sense of the word, and the woman is inescapably Mary, and Mary alone.

The text, if paraphrased, reads simply enough, once cleared of the unnecessary accretions which have been read into it. "I will raise an impenetrable barrier of grace between you and in a New Woman, between your sin and Her Offspring, the New Man. He will defeat you completely, while you inflict upon Him a minor, physical⁶ hurt."

FRANCIS X. PEIRCE, S.J.

⁵ E.g. Ps. 21 (22):11; 68 (69):21; Isa. 63:3.

⁶ Because even textually (apart from the metaphysical impossibility arising from His nature) the absolute enmity, which is of the order of grace, precludes any moral harm.