New Series
Volume 5
No. 1
May 2025
Pages 1-17

Author: **Steven Shakespeare**

Title: **The Apocalyptic Mary: The Labour of Creation and the End of the World**

Abstract

This article argues for the philosophical and theological importance of the image of Mary as the 'woman clothed with the sun' in Revelation 12. It proposes to approach Mary as an apocalyptic figure: specifically, as an embodied *sign*, in whom the boundary between earth and heaven is crossed. As such, she troubles the very binary distinctions she is often used to reinforce: between male and female, earth and heaven, active God and passive creation, past and future. In dialogue with important reflections on the apocalyptic in continental philosophy of religion (including Derrida and Taubes), the article argues that Mary as the apocalyptic sign can challenge the pretensions of either secular philosophy or self-certifying theology to comprehend the relationship between God, humanity and creation. In reading Mary as both a liminal and a cosmic figure, her symbolic potential to disrupt dualisms is rooted in her own semiological ambivalence. The article concludes that this reading opens up new possibilities for an 'intense Mariology' in ways that challenge our notions of creation, labour and the limits of the world.

Author

The Reverend Steven Shakespeare is Professor of Continental Philosophy of Religion at Liverpool Hope University. He is member of the Sodality of Mary, a dispersed community of priests in the Anglo-Catholic tradition.

Introduction

This article argues for the philosophical and theological importance of the image of Mary as the 'woman clothed with the sun' in Revelation 12. My interest is in Mary as an apocalyptic figure: specifically, as an embodied *sign*, in whom the boundary between earth and heaven is crossed. As such, she troubles the very binary distinctions she is often used to reinforce: between male and female, earth and heaven, active God and passive creation, past and future. I argue that Mary as the apocalyptic sign can challenge the pretensions of either secular philosophy or self-certifying theology to comprehend the relationship between God, humanity and creation. In reading Mary as both a liminal and a cosmic figure, her symbolic potential to disrupt dualisms is rooted in her own semiological ambivalence. My wager is that doing so opens up new possibilities for reading and encountering Mary, in ways that challenge our notions of creation, labour and the limits of the world. In the process, I seek to engage constructively with developments in continental philosophy of religion in particular, where neat divisions between theology and philosophy, religion and the secular, have been subjected to nuanced critique.

Seeing Mary in the sign of the woman in Revelation 12, connects with an ancient, but always contested hermeneutic of scripture – one that fell increasingly into disrepute after the late medieval period. It is a hermeneutic in which allegorical and typological motifs proliferate. The exuberance of this tradition is also grounds for concern among those who suspect it of wilful invention, irrationality, lack of groundedness in the clear word of Scripture and so on. And yet it is that very risk-taking in the Marian sign I take to be fruitful.

The Woman Clothed with the Sun: Contested Interpretations

'A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.'[1]

These words are from the beginning chapter 12 of Revelation. Like much of this part of scripture, their interpretation is contested. Some readers see in this chapter a clear reference to Mary, one that has worked its way into artistic presentations of her through the centuries. In the sanctuary of the church where I worship and serve, Our Lady and St Nicholas in Liverpool, there is a stained-glass window in which Mary is depicted according to this image from Revelation: holding Jesus, she is set against the encompassing disc of the sun. On her head is a crown set with nine stars. She stands on a thin crescent moon above a many headed beast which falls away from her. Mary, the Mother of God, shares in Christ's triumph over evil.

However, the association of the woman in Revelation 12 with Mary is far from straightforward. Although she is pregnant and gives birth to a messianic male child who will

[1] Rev 12:1 (NRSV)

rule the nations, the account is hard to square with any historical telling of Mary or Jesus' life. It is not clear when the action is taking place, and the detail – with the child snatched up to heaven and a war in heaven breaking out – hardly fits with the birth of Jesus. Some interpreters are also 'queasy' about the fact that the woman experiences pain in labour, though that reflects later doctrinal developments that Mary's birth-giving was both virginal and painless.

It is therefore not surprising that other interpretations of the woman have been put forward. These probably have the upper hand in more contemporary scholarship, though they are hardly new: Andrew of Caesarea's seventh-century commentary, which itself draws on the earlier work of Romanos the Melodist, holds that Revelation does not refer to past events. This means the woman cannot be Mary, but is instead the Church, the people of God. The pregnancy of the woman signifies Mother Church's capacity to bring new Christians into being. As Andrew puts it, 'Continuously the Church gives birth to Christ through those who are baptized, as if he is being fashioned in them'.[2] Fourteen centuries later, G. B. Caird's commentary puts the matter pithily, writing that 'The woman is the mother of the Messiah, not Mary, but the messianic community', and arguing that the birth in Revelation 12 is better equated with the cross than the nativity. [3]

Such interpretations cohere with the shift in Roman Catholic Mariology since Vatican II. As is well known, the Council witnessed the painful tension between so-called Christotypical and ecclesiotypical approaches to Mary. Should she be understood primarily in her unique role as Mother of God? Or as the first believer and type of the church? Of course, such binaries are overly simplistic – it is hardly the case that the ecclesiocentric approach to Mary lacks a Christological dimension, for example – but they do offer a heuristic tool to discern important differences of emphasis and value. The model of Mary as first believer, and its development in seminal works such as Elizabeth Johnson's *Truly Our Sister* was clearly both a reaction to the perceived excesses of high Mariology and a constructive work in its own right.[4] As to the former, the concern was that focusing on Mary's uniqueness and pushing for additional honours and privileges to be accorded her – Mediatrix, Co-redemptrix – obscured the definitive mediating role of Christ and set up barriers to ecumenical convergence. As to the latter, recovering the human Mary was thought to make her more relevant to the Church's daily life and to liberating struggles against poverty and marginalisation. Here was a Mary who did not come wrapped in sun and moon and stars, but who walked firmly on the ground.

This constellation of issues forms the background to what I want to explore here. However, I do so not as a biblical scholar or historian of ideas, but as a philosopher or

[2] Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2011, 140.
[3] G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St John the Divine*, London: Adam and Charles Black, 1969, 149.
[4] Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister. A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, London: Continuum, 2003. Johnson's critique of dualistic, patriarchal readings of Mary is especially powerful.

philosophical theologian. I draw on a tradition of continental, post-Kantian philosophy, which has often engaged with theological themes even as it subjects them to critique. One of the obsessions of thinkers in this field – Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Luce Irigaray *et al* – has been how to deal with the legacy of Christianity, even as its dogmatic claims and institutional forms are deconstructed. Continental thought has become post-secular, because it recognises that religion never went away. Christian language and forms inhabit the legal and political structures even of the secularised cities of Western Europe, even without considering the persistence and resurgence of religious life across the world. And because continental thought critiques the claims of reason too, religious tropes – of incarnation, messianism, grace, mysticism, to name a few – remain live occasions for thought.

This is of course, controversial. A number of thinkers in the continental philosophical tradition have pushed back. They maintain that a methodological or ontological atheism must be maintained to do justice to traditions of phenomenology and materialism.[5] There has also been specific criticism of the way thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and, to a lesser extent, Julia Kristeva have introduced a focus on Mary into their work.

The worry is that the continental tradition is losing its critical edge; that its rootedness in embodied, relational, historical forms of thought has been hi-jacked by neo-traditionalists. In the guise of a non-dogmatic encounter with otherness, Catholic doctrines and institutions are being smuggled back in. That's precisely the concern about Jean-Luc-Marion, for example, who moves with deceptive ease from the phenomenological tradition – in which epistemological frameworks and commitments are bracketed – to an affirmation that the bishop presiding at the Eucharist is the only true theologian.[6]

This is compounded in the case of Mary, a figure long suspected for combining and reinforcing binary dualisms: between active male and passive female, sex and purity, transcendent God and submissive creation. Philosophy that starts out by deconstructing Christianity ends up by replicating its structure and logic. [7]

The debates I have discussed can be distilled down into three trends which form the context for my essay. First, a turn from an overblown high Mariology which undermines the centrality of Christ to one which emphasizes Mary as first believer and type of the church; second, a resistance towards creeping theological colonialism in philosophy; and third, resistance to the specifically Marian form of this colonisation, in which a spiritualised gender essentialism is reintroduced into our anthropology and theology.

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[5] The debate is covered in Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": the French Debate*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2000.

[6] See Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, 2nd edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2012, 153.

[7] A worry expressed by Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler in their editors' introduction to *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of* Religion, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011 – a work which was something of a clarion call to resist the colonisation of philosophy by theologies of transcendence.

It would be tempting to say that I am simply going to cheer for the opposite side in all of these issues and offer a philosophical reception of an unapologetically high Mariology. But while there is some truth in that, it would be a blunt and partial telling of the story. In order to clarify my aims, the following section sets out some guiding principles for what I want to articulate.

Guiding Principles

The first is the *necessity of hermeneutics*. This is hardly a controversial one, but it is worth noting. To stress the importance of the historical Mary as the ground of devotion – her socio-cultural context, experience of marginalisation, her particular path of discipleship – is itself a speculative act of reconstruction. It is likely that many of the episodes recounted of Mary in the gospels are retrospective artifice. At the very least, they are part of gospels which are theological, post-resurrection witnesses to Jesus. That is not to deny the possibility of any historical truth to a particular story, but to acknowledge that historicity cannot be determined with any assurance. Judgements about the truth of gospel narratives about Mary remain subject to complex questions of hermeneutics. This is even more true of the inferences and deductions involved in further doctrinal developments about Mary, which relate to canonical and extra-canonical sources and judgements about the logical consistency and implications of dogmatic material, especially concerning the Incarnation and soteriology. Any interpretation of the significance of Mary cannot avoid the hermeneutical challenges such realities present.

The second principle follows from the above: it is a commitment to *thinking the limits of theology and philosophy critically*. Neither discipline should dominate. It is valid to note the centrality of religious motifs within the Western philosophical and political traditions, even in supposedly secular contexts. It is evident that such motifs have become the focus of explicit work across a number of genres of philosophy, from dialectical materialism to political theology to deconstruction. Whilst a kind of philosophical indifference to or mastery of religious materials should be resisted, however, this should not be the occasion for an assertion of theological imperialism. What I propose is a philosophy that thinks *with* religious materials, in order that each might affect and mutate the other. The critical element of philosophy refuses the closure of the world within predefined systems of what thought and bodies can do; the matter of theological signs resists translation into concepts, which is not the same as saying that they are thoughtless or spiritless. Taken together, theology and philosophy test and disrupt one another's limits.

Finally, to Mary herself, or rather to Mary as the embodied sign of the Incarnation. My third principle is to *give full weight to the critique of how Mary the sign has been deployed in contradictory and oppressive ways*. Theological reflection on Mary is quite capable of allocating her place in accordance with an overarching gender binary. As passive and humble she figures the appropriate state of the believer, one which is essentially feminine in relation

to the masculine activity of the Father.[8] As perpetual virgin, she is purified of the contamination of both sexual activity and ordinary childbirth. As perfect mother of the Holy Family, she reaffirms a heterosexual ideal, and the place of woman within it.[9]

Of course, Mary has never sat easily within such a framework. It is absurd, for instance, to think of God's role in the incarnation as the equivalent of a man's. That would reduce God to an idol and undermine the humanity of Jesus by making God supply half of his DNA by divine impregnation. In addition, this hardly fits with the traditional affirmation of Mary's active role of co-operation in the Incarnation. She questions the angel, gives her *fiat*, conceives without need of a male, and seemingly goes off on her own to visit Elizabeth before singing the Magnificat. As such, the attempts to co-opt her into a conventional, if idealised heterosexual family – which arguably start as early as Matthew's gospel – are contrived. Mary's developing role in devotion and doctrine is full of ambiguity and tension. The virgin mother is also the woman higher than the angels, queen of heaven, a powerful intercessor. As such, she is not simply a meek avatar of submission.

Those who resist a high Mariology, from Vatican II onwards, are motivated by many concerns: biblical, historical, ecumenical, Christological. Among them, as Elizabeth Johnson's work bears witness, is an association of that high Mariology with a conservative theology that reacts against modern movements for gender equality. Immune from biblical criticism, the Mary of some celebrated modern apparitions deflects attention from issues of this-worldly justice, to announce an often apocalyptically tinged call for the world's conversion. Mary, idealised, is both the hammer of heretics and the guarantor of gender roles. Balthasar's theology of the Marian and Petrine church – for all the richness of his thinking – only confirms a gendered hierarchy of power.[10]

Three guiding principles, then: the necessity of hermeneutics, or taking responsibility for our interpretations; theological humility in the dialogue between ways of interpreting Mary; accepting the validity of feminist critiques of gender hierarchies, especially as related to the figure of Mary.

[8] Confirmation of this is provided by the way in which prominent Catholic theologians across the theological spectrum – from Schillebeeckx and Laurentin to Balthasar – manage to reproduce this logic. See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Mary, Mother of the Redemption*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1964, 160; René Laurentin, *Mary's Place in the Church*, London: Burns and Oates, 1965, 87-88; for Balthasar, see n.10 below.

[9] The classic feminist critique is Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex. The Myth and Cult of the Virgin* Mary, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1976.

[10] See the essays collected in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Priestly Spirituality*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013; see also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986; and the critiques in Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 57-60 and Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation*, London: Continuum, 2002, 72-81 and 135-136. For a careful survey, see Lucy Gardner, 'Balthasar and the Figure of Mary', in Edward T. Oakes and David Moss, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 64-78.

Towards an Intense Mariology

Against this backdrop of principles, contested narratives and interpretations, it might make sense to follow the route taken by Johnson and others: to abandon aspects of the high Mariological approach, and to focus on Mary as our sister and companion. She would remain significant, but the emphasis would be on her discipleship rather than her motherhood, her faithfulness in poverty and pain rather than her glorification, her example rather than her intercession.

I am going to propose another way: a high Mariology, but one mediated by the apocalyptic. In this, I take significant inspiration from recent authors such as Tina Beattie and Sarah Jane Boss, who find in the divine motherhood of Mary the core of her importance.[11] They do so in full acknowledgement of feminist critiques but are able to articulate a constructive Mariology around her vocation to bear the divine, to bring to birth the Word. As Boss has argued, this links with a key element of Christian soteriology, one often neglected: *theosis* or deification. *Theosis* entails that we are called to bring to birth the Word within us, so that it is not we but Christ who lives in us; that we are called to live in union with the Father as the Son does; that we, by grace, are made sharers of the divine nature; that we share the divine energies, if not the divine essence.[12]

My contribution will be to link these insights to the disruptive capacity of the apocalyptic. I am therefore not going to approach *theosis* directly, but to begin with Mary as an apocalyptic sign. This is for a couple of reasons. First, it highlights the issue of hermeneutics: in Revelation 12, we are confronted with a contested sign, which demands active interpretation. At the same time, this sign does not necessarily resolve itself into one referent or level of explanation. Secondly, the sign of the woman clothed with the stars has the potential to link both the human and cosmic dimensions of Mary. This connects with issues of deification, not just in anthropocentric terms, but in ways that extend across our ecological communities. Finally, this is an apocalyptic sign: mysterious and yet revelatory, it opens up a heavenly perspective on the earth. As such, it relativises the way we have constructed the world: it announces the end of the world, the insufficiency of the world as we have constructed it. And this opens up soteriological avenues for thinking with Mary that do not fall back into settled hierarchies, gendered or otherwise.

In this context, the language of a 'high' Mariology can be unhelpful. It can evoke unexamined assumptions about ecclesial and theological hierarchies. Perhaps it would be better to talk about an *intense Mariology*: one in which the intensification of Mary's symbolic

[11] See Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary*, London: Continuum, 2003 and 'Deification: The Mariology of the Ordinary Faithful' in *New Blackfriars* 98.1074, 2017, 188-202; and Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*. Boss has done a huge amount to open up the potential of high Mariological doctrines in a liberating way, not least in relation to our care for creation. For her part, Beattie's serious engagement with the work of continental thinkers on Mary, especially that of Luce Irigaray, has established the creative potential of the kind of approach taken in the present article.

[12] See Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 186ff. for a further affirmation of the Marian dimension of *theosis*.

and metaphysical role actually disrupts dualistic models of transcendence, and the worldly apparatus of control and subjugation, especially of women, the colonised and the poor.

The remainder of this article explores this approach further. It is divided into three sections: Mary as sign; Mary as apocalyptic sign; and a brief forward-pointing section on Mary as the apocalyptic sign of labour of creation and the end of the world.

Mary as sign

The woman of revelation 12 is introduced as a sign in the heavens. The Greek word *semeion* has obviously passed into our lexicon via words such as semiotics. In a biblical context, it is the word used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew phrase rendered in English as 'signs and wonders'. It concerns demonstrations of divine power, which dramatize, establish or uphold God's covenant relationship with God's people. However, a sign need not be a miraculous act of God, at least not directly. Key aspects of the covenant – such as circumcision and the sabbath – are referred to as signs. Objects with special significance may be signs, as in the book of Numbers, where the censers of the priests who offered unholy fire, and the flowering staff of Aaron and Moses' bronze serpent all attract the word *semeion*. Events can be signs of God's displeasure, such as the deaths of Hophni and Phinehas in 1 Samuel. There is also significant use of the term in prophetic books: Ezekiel and Isaiah's symbolic actions, for instance, and, famously, Isaiah 7 when 'this shall be a sign for you' introduces the woman who will conceive and bear Immanuel.

The Greek *semeion* therefore is used to refer to a range of things: powerful miracles and portents, as well as events, objects and actions which might not necessarily be miraculous, but which do carry a deeper meaning for those who witness them and are able to read them. The word can also be used of false or lying signs (we see an echo of this in the beast of Revelation 13 who is able to work great signs).

Semeion is also an important term in the New Testament beyond the Book of Revelation, most obviously in the gospel of John. Here, Jesus' miraculous actions are manifestations of his divine glory. They are not a random collection of miracles, but symbolic actions that embody Jesus' transformative presence as the incarnate Word.[13] Some commentators suggest that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are the culminating signs of the gospel.[14] In any case, there is surely a connection: the crucifixion is the decisive moment in which the glory of Jesus is paradoxically shown and the ruler of the world is exposed as powerless. It is interesting to connect the distinctively Johannine use of signs with the episode in the synoptics in which Jesus is asked for a sign. Here, he refuses the implied demand for a

[13] See, for example Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John. Volume One. Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 1-4*, London: Burns and Oates, 1968, 515-17; John F. McHugh*, The International Critical Commentary. John 1-4*, London: T & T Clark, 2009, 210-12.; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Gospel According to St John. A Theological Commentary*, trans. John Vriend, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997, 130-1.

[14] See Deolito V. Vistar, *The Cross-and-Resurrection. The Supreme Sign in John's Gospel*, Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2019.

miracle, offering instead only the sign of Jonah, who spends three days in the whale's belly. This cryptic image – both mysterious and the image of a crypt – points to the necessity of Jesus' death and his burial in the earth.[15]

Semeion is itself therefore a multivalent sign in the way it appears in the Scriptures. This may be linked with Giovanni Manetti's work.[16] Manetti's broad thesis is that there are two shared convictions across the variety of ancient semiotics, which are at odds with the contemporary version. The first is that a sign is not necessarily or primarily verbal. Indeed, Aristotle tends to use *symbolon* of linguistic signs and reserve *semeion* for non-linguistic ones. Later, though the two forms of sign are discussed under the same term, the linguistic sign does not take precedence; rather, it is a localised version of a more general sign-structure. The second difference from contemporary semiotics is that the relation between signifier and signified is not one of equivalence but of implication or inference. If correct, Manetti's position allows us to embed an understanding of signs as *essentially* rather than accidentally figural and expressive. Signs demand – metaphorically or literally – an art of navigation, in which inferential logic and divination are two sides of the same semiotic coin.[17]

I do not want to make speculative claims about the relationship between ancient Greek semiotics and scriptures written in (or translated into) Greek, but simply to bear in mind this cultural and linguistic milieu. Broad understandings of the sign are present in sacred and secular contexts, without implying specific paths of derivation or influence.

With this in mind, what can we say about Revelation 12? First, the presentation of the woman as a sign does not reduce her to a mere abstract cipher which simply 'stands for' something else. The woman's own appearance and narrative, the embodied nexus of visual cues that surround her, invite us to dwell on her. She is clothed with signs of sacred status and power; she is a cosmic figure. At the same time, there is a sense of her mortal vulnerability to harm, and her human experience of giving birth. As sign, she poses a question: how do we interpret this coincidence of contraries?

One option is to relate the imagery to other mythical narratives, most notably those of Leto and Apollo (to which we might compare that of Isis and Horus). Leto, pregnant with Apollo and Artemis by Zeus, is pursued by a great snake sent by the jealous Hera. Leto flees, but Hera commands all lands to forbid her entry. Eventually she finds the island of Delos, which is not attached even to the ocean floor, and so is separate from the land, and there she gives birth to the twins. Caird argues that this is a variant of the solar myth, that the sun god is pursued by the serpent of darkness. He comments that the myth offers an interpretation of the world that grounds its perpetuation: 'a myth is an interpretation of life…. It must be

[15] Mt 12:38-42. Cf. Mt 16:1-4.
[16] Giovanni Manetti, *Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
[17] Cf McHugh, *John 1-4*, 211-12, where this inferential aspect of the use of *semeion* is also explored.

capable of being re-enacted by those who have found in it a stimulus to the imagination and a spur to action.'[18]

The commonalities are illuminating: there is in the sign of the woman an expression of cosmic powers and tensions, which also involve all-too-human passions and suffering. This is still the currency of myth. However, for Revelation, these are also signs of a very present earthly reality. History, specifically the history of the Roman empire and the persecution of the church, is taken up into myth and refigured.

At the least then, the woman expresses this dual perspective so evident in apocalyptic texts, whether they address the crisis at the end of the ages or are more speculative in nature. She invites us to consider a web of inference: a female figure associated with cosmic signs of divinity who gives birth to a divine child; but also one whose own suffering and redemption is bound up with a historical period of persecution. The woman is the Church, then, but the Church is nothing if not itself an expression of what makes it possible. Mary and the Church are thus implicated together. She is the specific woman whose bearing of the divine makes possible the history of the church as one of bringing Christ to birth in a world of empire.

Remember a fundamental difference from the Greek myth: there is no battle between the gods in Revelation. The cosmic action always bears upon and recasts the created, historical and finite drama. In that sense, the sign of the woman leads us back from the equivalent myths to the historical situation of humanity and earth despoiled, and a singular act of birth. And that brings us again, by implication, to Mary.

Mary herself is *sign*: not, again, in the sense of being reduced to a cipher, but an embodied and lived expression. What does she express? That a human being can bear the divine, whose glory is revealed in the form of suffering humanity. Mary's capacity to gestate and give birth to God is a statement both about her graced and glorified existence and about the deification offered to all human beings (and possibly to all creation). She is also thereby a sign that history is not simply linear, or an unfolding of a predetermined content, contrary to more fatalistic readings of the apocalyptic genre. The sign of the woman in Revelation 12 subverts dominant historical narratives. It opens a fissure in the fabric of the world, a futurity that makes another world possible. We will return to the complexity of this temporal displacement when considering the apocalyptic sign more directly later. For now, suffice to say that what Mary expresses is not reducible to one level of interpretation, since it is about how what is by nature not divine can become a share in the divine nature through the personal operation of the Word. I'm not pretending that either a fully worked out idea of incarnation or of deification is simply to be read off the pages of Revelation, but it can be inferred within the unfolding 'logic' of this coincidence of opposites at the heart of Christian faith and worship.

[18] Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation*, 148.

This leads me to my next section, where we consider Mary as an apocalyptic sign: as someone whose significance can be understood apocalyptically and who, conversely, can help us reimagine the nature of the apocalyptic.

Mary as an apocalyptic sign

'Apocalyptic' is clearly a contested term. Does it correspond to a distinct literary genre, or a defined set of theological concepts or motifs? What of its use beyond canonical and deuterocanonical texts? Does apocalyptic have an ongoing afterlife in the way we tell the impossible story of the end of the world?

Of course, that reference to the end of the world may already jump the gun. To focus on apocalyptic texts for now: the influential scholar John Collins argues that an overemphasis on the 'end of the world' neglects the more mystical and speculative aspects of some apocalypses.[19] Collins takes as his starting point the 1979 definition published in the Journal called, interestingly, *Semeia*, in which the SBL Genres project defined apocalypse as 'a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world'.[20] However, Collins goes on to explore the renewed interest in otherworldly journeys and cosmic speculation that are a feature of works such as the Enoch literature. He also points out that an eschatology of the end of the current age is not distinctive to apocalypses.

What *is* essential, for Collins, is the 'revelation of a supernatural world and the activity of supernatural beings'.[21] The truth is unintelligible without supernatural mediation. There is also a final judgement of the wicked, extending beyond death. Within this framework, the emphasis can vary, including myth, the allegorical retelling of past, present and future events, and revelation of both what is happening in the heavenly court and the nature and design of earthly creation. In the end it is not simply one feature that defines an apocalypse, but the combination of features within a distinctive framework.

I take Collins' point that overly strict definitions cut out much that share apocalyptic features; while looser ones risk telling us nothing about the specifics of this tradition. What is interesting, however, is the combination of two elements across a variety of apocalyptic texts: first the prioritisation of supernatural agency and a consequent sense of passivity on the reader's part in the face of divine control of the world; second, the need for the reader to actively read and interpret the signs of the times. The revelation unveils a hidden dimension, beyond the surface level impression of great empires and devastating events of destruction,

[19] John Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, Grand Rapids, Mi: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016.
[20] Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 5.
[21] Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*. 6.

persecution or apostasy. And yet the interpretation of that dimension, and the resultant actions and virtues that are to respond to it, are left to the reader.

Some interpreters of apocalyptic books want to nail down every symbolic reference as much as possible, making its meaning unambiguous. However, Collins invites us to resist such a one-dimensional approach. Citing Paul Ricoeur, he writes: 'Ricoeur suggests that we should sometimes "allow several concurrent identifications *play*" and that the text may on occasion achieve its effect precisely through the element of uncertainty.'[22]

A further dimension of this interpretative play is put forward by Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland in their commentary on Revelation. They focus on the reception history of the work, arguing that its multi-layered meanings lend themselves to ever new readings and situations. Rather than what they call a 'decoding' approach which tells us what each image means, once and for all, they argue for the possibility of 'repeated actualization'. The text 'offers that alternative horizon, functioning as a lens through which one can see one's own situation afresh'.[23] In their commentary on Revelation 12 specifically, Kovacs and Rowland note the mythological, ecclesial and Marian connotations of the text as it has been reinterpreted through the history of the church.

This holds open the possibility of a Marian interpretation, but I want to go a step further and ask: what difference does it make to our understanding of Mary and of apocalypse to see her in the sign of the woman?

The first thing to note is how the woman's story both confirms and disrupts the passivity of human beings in the face of supernatural agency. As *semeion*, she invites a kind of divinatory and inferential interpretation. She appears in the heavens as if she is a supernatural being. And yet her pregnancy and labour appear wholly human. She herself is vulnerable to attack from the dragon, who is the second sign. Her flight into the desert becomes a literal one as she is given eagle's wings, but it is ultimately the earth rather than the heavens which comes to her aid.

The woman seems to signify in multiple ways: her symbolic accompaniments imply a heavenly origin; her labour and flight a mortal one. Against this it can fairly be pointed out that Leto too experiences flight, fear and pain, and she is certainly an otherworldly figure. The difference here seems to be the tie to the historical events of Incarnation and cross, and to the actual experience of persecution faced by the early church.

The Marian interpretation of the woman clearly does run into problems if we are looking for a literal reflection of those historical events. While most commentators now stress the ecclesial interpretation of the woman, this ignores several features of the narrative: first, that the woman stands at the origin of the fight on earth between demonic ruler and God's agents; second, that when the woman escapes him, the dragon goes off to make war on the 'rest of her offspring'. The original male child, the one caught up into heaven, therefore has a

[22] Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 16.
[23] Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2004, 8-10.

distinctive *individual* role. He is the firstborn, the one who is pursued, eludes demonic control and ascends. The child cannot simply therefore be equated with the Christian community of believers.

We are operating on multiple levels here: the sign of the woman and child makes possible a way of reading earthly events in the light of cosmic realities and heavenly intervention. But it roots that reading in the motherhood, birth and continuing resistance to evil of the woman who descends from heaven to earth.

I suggest therefore that it is Mary's capacity to bear the divine Word which is implicit in the sign of the woman. The supernatural intervention here is one that – among all the startling heavenly portents of Revelation – stands out as point of *crossing*. The embodied motherhood and flight of the woman, its earthliness, point to the overcoming of that boundary between earth and heaven that is vital to the action of Revelation. Mary is the one in whom this crossing takes place in its most decisive form. She is herself apocalyptic in this sense: revelatory of the passage between heaven and earth within which human life, suffering and death are reimagined. As Karl Rahner puts it, 'We too are to become what she is'.[24]

'Apocalypse' is necessarily unveiling and re-veiling *at the same time.* It reveals, and what it reveals demands intuition, inference and actualisation. Even then, what it reveals remains more than human and beyond literal comprehension. What it gives is not transparency, not a purely intelligible disembodied truth nor a passive earth and mute bodies which simply receive their meaning from above. The woman embodies this aspect of the apocalyptic. She is a disrupting and disruptive sign, in which the particular shape of a life and its response to God are formative for what follows.

Mary can thus be seen as an apocalyptic sign: she bears the gift of the Incarnation as that paradoxical identification of the Word of God with humanity and flesh. The unveiling of the Word, however, also remains veiled: a sign of contradiction. What is made in the secrecy of her is also the Word; what she delivers to the world is also the Mystery against which our attempts to control and define what the world means come to grief.

Mary shares in the bending of temporality that is essential to the apocalpyses. She lives a particular historical life. And yet, if the Incarnation of the Word is willed from eternity, so is her motherhood. Her bearing of the divine is one of those things hidden since before the world began (Mt 13:35; cf Eph 3:9 and Col 1:26). The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception connects with this: Mary recapitulates the story of creation, takes us back to the garden. At the same time, Mary signifies the fulfilment of our calling: she reveals that humanity can bear the divine. The doctrine of the Assumption crowns this conviction, that she fulfils the human vocation to become divine, to share in the divine nature. Although we should not assume a blunt futuristic reading of all apocalyptic literature, it does seem as if the apocalyptic sign opens up a dimension of futurity: a capacity, made possible by a grace we do not command, for us and our world to be transformed. That futurity is also rooted in the past – the familiar

[24] Karl Rahner, *Mary, Mother of the Lord*, Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1963, 40.

'already-not yet' of the kingdom of God, and of our adoption in Christ. Mary is something of a hinge for this temporal dimension. She is both the redeemed past of humanity and its as-yet-unrealised deification.

This is a high Mariology mediated by the apocalyptic, now seen as an essential feature of Christian doctrine, rather than a specific set of texts. At the same time, the apocalyptic is inflected by her story. It is in her wholly human, creaturely and embodied life that the Word comes to be in time. Revelation 12 reminds us that this is both heavenly gift and a human story of trauma. And Mariology becomes a dynamic existential openness to reconceiving our stories about what it is to be human, rather than a static set of descriptors applied to Mary. In this way, something of the false division between high and low Mariology is overcome.

It is helpful to link my argument with that of Karen O Donnell here.[25] She argues for the centrality of the Annunciation-Incarnation event to our understanding of eucharist, church and priesthood. But crucially, she interprets that event as a somatic *trauma*, in which the normal course of the world is disrupted. There is a very ordinary, but no less important aspect to this: the experience of pregnancy in which another life comes to share a woman's body, with all the strains and risks that entails. In the Annunciation, this is heightened: Mary's encounter with the supernatural angel, her conception outside marriage and the subsequent shadow of the sword hanging over her and her child all conspire to make her childbearing one that breaks with nature and norms. For O'Donnell, trauma introduces ruptures of bodily integrity, temporal continuity and the capacity of language to express the real. The irruption of the real – that which resists symbolic or imaginative capture – reshapes our narratives and identities.

I have some reservations about the focus on trauma to the exclusion of other aspects of the Annunciation and Incarnation, but O'Donnell captures a vital element of Tina Beattie's exploration of the disruptive power of Mary's story.[26] Revelation 12 speaks into this situation: as bodies, identities, time and language are strained, the great semeion is offered, the embodied sign of the woman clothed with the sun giving birth and fleeing to the earth's protection. The identity of the woman is multiple. This does not mean that she simply stands for the Church, since Mary herself is a sign of difference, disruption and complexity. The struggles of the Church and the struggles of women who face pursuit and violence through history, are entangled with the sign of Mary; each reflects and reinterprets the other.

Disruption, then, and the announcement of the 'end' of the world are not simply reserved for a future time. For Revelation, they are already present and working within the world, because the ultimate disruptive force, the one that precipitates the war in heaven, is Mary's refusal to submit to the dragon, and her capacity to bear the divine Word into a violent world. In a very different vein, this is what the great signs of John's gospel suggest: that the ruler of this world is already overcome in the revelation of the Word made flesh.

[25] Karen O'Donnell, *Broken Bodies. The Eucharist, Mary and the Body in Trauma Theology*, London: SCM, 2018.
[26] Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate,* passim.

Mary as the apocalyptic sign of labour of creation and the end of the world.

Clearly, we have now moved beyond the specific genre of texts known as apocalypses to something a little more nebulous: the apocalyptic as a style of thinking, as theological and cultural tone, perhaps. In this section, I will relate this expanded sense of apocalyptic to possibilities offered in relatively contemporary thought. I will discuss two overlapping facets to this: from political theology and from deconstruction.

The first comes from the tradition of political theology, rooted most obviously in Carl Schmitt's claim that political concepts are theological concepts in disguise.[27] Schmitt's reactionary and ultimately Nazi deployment of this insight notwithstanding, he drew attention to the nonrational dimensions of power and sovereignty even in a seemingly liberal and secular political regime.

In the subsequent history of political theology, Jacob Taubes is a key figure. In opposition to Schmitt's assertion of state sovereignty, Taubes looks to the revolutionary potential of the apocalyptic. Taubes' argument is complex and requires more careful exploration than can be given here. Briefly, he traces a line of apocalyptic and gnostic thinking through a speculative tradition that reaches from Joachim of Fiore through Hegel to his own day.[28] In many ways, Taubes' thought bears the imprint of a materialist and Marxist tradition that translates theological concepts into immanent ones. However, as Thomas Lynch and others argue, this is not a simple secularisation of the religious.[29] Apocalypticism reveals the unthought of history, unthought by either theology or secularism: the unveiling of the violent core of our world is accompanied by a negation, a tension that exposes the breakdown and ultimate annihilation of that world. Unveiling and veiling are held together. Although Taubes does not see this in terms of a supernatural intervention, he does not affirm the continuity and intelligibility of a secular world. No, the world is thought from the point of view of the unthought, the negation that exposes its contingency and announces its end. As Agata Bielik-Robson writes,

> What creates history in Taubes's account is neither an annihilating shock awaited by the apocalypticists, nor the inherent norm inscribed into some impersonal "laws of history", but the antinomian tension, which always presses against the grain, against "nature", against any progressive normativity. History, therefore, is never a progress, it is rather a disruptive staccato of breaks, awakenings and traumas that never simply evaporate without trace but always leave a disquieting mark that, despite all the "natural" obstacles, initiates messianic transformation of the world.[30]

There is no inevitable progress, no simple unfolding of a better world from a hidden seed in this one. At the same time, this is not an appeal to sudden or vertical divine intervention, a

[27] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. Schmitt's book was originally published in German in 1922.
[28] Jacob Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, trans. David Ratmoko, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009; cf. Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
[29] See Thomas Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology: Hegel, Taubes and Malabou*, London: Bloomsbury, 2019.
[30] Agata Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity*, London: Routledge, 2014, 170.

mode of thinking that easily mimics and recreates the forms of power that it seeks to undermine.

Apocalypse thus figures the unthought, not just the *conceptual* unthought but the end of the ordering of the world – social, political, economic – that provides the norms for our mutual intelligibility while keeping us locked into mutual violence. Apocalypse is not an appeal to 'nature' in any given normative sense, but to what remains unanticipated, still to come, beyond the human as currently represented and reproduced.

This political theological use of apocalypse overlaps with its appearance in a more deconstructive vein of philosophy. The seminal texts here are by Derrida. In his meditation on Kant's 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone in recent Philosophy', Derrida explores Kant's imperative to rid ourselves of appeals to authority, to ungrounded intuitions and revelations. This critical impulse of Kantian thought is necessary, but insufficient, Derrida argues, because the apocalyptic tone is not just a fog that can be dispelled by the light of autonomous reason and moral action. Derrida notes how Enlightenment and apocalyptic both refer to an unveiling, that both are 'promised in the name of light'. [31]

For Derrida, there is something originary about the apocalyptic: it pushes beyond any settled norm of authorisation towards a 'self-critical vigilance'. It invokes an openness to the other that no conceptual or political system does. The apocalyptic is the subterranean vein, the transcendental condition of that openness – Derrida can even refer to an 'apocalyptic structure of language', for our signs are always solicited by an invitation from the other, an invitation that defies presentation.[32] Such signs have no assured destination. They cannot be appropriated within a systematic discourse, be it theology or metaphysics, which refuses to acknowledge the internal disruption of signs and symbolic worlds. For Derrida, all signs can only function as such if beyond their place in determinate structures, they are also open to the advent of the other, the uncontainable difference. This is the force of the Spirit's invitation at the end of revelation: 'Come'. As Derrida glosses this, 'the event of this "Come" precedes and calls the event'.[33] It is a futurity inherent in life, one which no predetermined eschatology can define.

A sign of contradiction

What happens when we think the apocalyptic sign of Mary alongside these discourses? When we do so, not to correct them in the name of theology, nor to reduce Mary to the parameters of a preconceived philosophical schema, but to allow the sign to break through the limits of our discourses?

[31] J. Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy', in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, 25–71: 50

[32] Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone', 57.

[33] Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone', 64.

In Revelation 12, we see the woman face the labour of childbirth and the labour of surviving in a hostile world that wants to kill her and her child. She does survive, with the help of creation, of the earth (perhaps we hear Paul's lines from Romans 8, about the labour pains of creation itself, interweaving themselves in this narrative). Within the sign of the woman, an otherness resonates. The body's trauma is still there. It is positioned by the world, as what it is to be a woman has been positioned by dominant binaries. This is not accidental. As Lynch puts it, the world 'is violent and inescapable, for those relations are not conflicts within the world, but antagonisms that are the world'.[34] And yet the sign still materialises, still speaks, challenging the fundamental structure of the world. The sign is not delivered to the consuming dragon. The woman takes help where she can – the pagan earth, the Christian God, rivers, angels. She refuses the world that is. She is a survivor.

The woman as sign is apocalyptic: revealing the limits of the world even as she overcomes those limits in her own bodily transformation and deification. As sign, she is not just intelligible within the given syntax of the world but deforms that order. As Taubes writes, 'With each new apocalyptic wave, a new syntax is created, and the breakdown of meaning in language makes people from the old age appear deranged to those of the new, and vice versa'.[35] This breakdown is the effect of an otherness, something undeconstructible from within the discourses of the world. In Taubes's terms. 'All apocalypse tells of the triumph of eternity. This telling is receiving the signs of eternity.'[36]

As the woman bears the child, the earth bears the woman, but this is not a return to an idyllic or feminised nature. There is trauma. The sea is weaponised, as Rome used it to assert its domination. Creation is pitted against itself. In Revelation, there has to be a radical break if the woman and her offspring and creation itself are to live and be renewed. The contours of the world need to be dismantled, and Revelation imagines an intensely urban new world, a perfect city and the sea erased. But at the centre of it stands a tree, a sign of paradise, a flowering of creation. And we are reminded that, at the centre of the heavenly court are beings more like animals than humans. There is something distinctly unnatural in this revelation, something that already mutates what we take nature to be.[37]

Perhaps, as Micah Kiel argues, we find in revelation an 'apocalyptic ecology' in which both annihilation of the earth and its renewal are paradoxically held together.[38] The ways we construct our world need to end, decisively. That ending is not for the sake of destroying what lives, however. The world as constituted by violent antagonism cannot be a world where God dwells; conversely, the new creation of Revelation 21 is where God dwells with us without

[34] Lynch, *Apocalyptic Political Theology*, 35.
[35] Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 85.
[36] Taubes, *Occidental Eschatology*, 4.
[37] For more on way in which Mary queers patriarchal accounts of reproduction and kinship, see C. Breu, 'Female Seed as a Metaphor: Queer Kinship in Revelation 12, Ancient Medical and Literary Texts and the Septuagint', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 45.1, 2022, 81–108.
[38] Micah D Kiel, *Apocalyptic Eschatology. The Book of Revelation, the Earth and the Future*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017.

reservation. In the middle of this narrative of separation, the woman is the sign that tells us that, impossibly, *God already dwells in a Godforsaken world* – that this traumatised human being can bear the divine *even now*. Without that sign, we really are reduced to the status of passive observers of salvation handed down to us from the heavens. And Mary has never really stood for that: even in the most conservative Mariology, her 'yes' has been necessary, her co-operation essential to what salvation is. If angelic mediation is needed in apocalypses, Mary is higher than the angels – a sign of humanity deified. Henri de Lubac touches on this when he quotes an early Armenian liturgy for Assumption: 'Today the flamelike choirs of the angelic spirits see our human nature, which was drawn out of the dust of the earth; and they tremble.'[39]

Mary is the embodied, apocalyptic sign of this transformation. I wonder if we have need to begin again with Mary, with the reading of this sign, which never stops bearing fruit. I wonder if Mary, as sign and Godbearer, is the *unthought of both philosophy and theology*.

[39] Henri de Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1956, 262-3.