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“She Labored to Give Birth:”
A Study of the Birth-Pangs Motif in Rev 12:2

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The birth-pang imagery of Rev 12:2 is an important part of the description of the Great Sign in Revelation 12 and draws on the varied uses of birth-pang imagery in the Bible. Revelation 12 is unique in its combination of the motifs of heavenly splendor and birth pangs. The unique significance of the birth-pang imagery for the meaning of the Great Sign can be missed if Revelation 12 is interpreted primarily in light of ancient pagan myth or even in light of the OT without the context of the NT and related literature.

Birth-pang imagery in the OT is used to describe humankind’s alienation from God that results from sin. The imagery is based on Gen 3:15 and developed in the prophets’ writings against the infidelity of Israel. The NT use of birth-pang imagery does not emphasize negative divine judgment but the new life that follows birth pangs. Birth-pang imagery is connected to the cross and represents vicarious suffering on behalf of another’s alienation from God. In the apocryphal 4 Maccabees, the suffering of the mother at the death of her sons is described as birth pangs. She is called the mother of a nation because of her strength in suffering.

In Rev 12:2 the birth pangs represent the pangs of the cross and, in particular, Mary's participation in them as mother of the Messiah. Her suffering, described in terms of birth pangs, is evocative of the original birth pangs of Eve and of the trials of Israel in the exile. Furthermore, the emphasis in Revelation 12 on her maternity and her persecution by the dragon, that ancient serpent, alludes to Eve, the mother of all. Mary's heavenly splendor indicates the faithfulness that neither Eve nor Israel had. Mary is a new Eve who foreshadows the new creation of Revelation 21.

The birth pangs represent Mary's suffering, which is joined to the suffering of the cross and is on behalf of her "other offspring," the faithful on earth. She is the Great Sign of the participation in the suffering and triumph of the cross to which all the faithful are invited and by which they defeat the dragon.

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This work is dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows.

And also to my husband, Christopher J. Malloy, whom I love dearly.

And to our children who are our delight and joy.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	iv
List of Abbreviations	viii
Acknowledgments	x
Chapter One. Birth Pangs in Revelation 12: An Overview of Contemporary Research	
1. Introduction	1
2. Revelation as Myth—the Comparative Approach	4
2.1 Adela Yarboro Collins, <i>The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation</i>	4
2.1.1. Birth Pangs	5
2.1.2. Combat Myth	5
2.1.3 Critique of the Combat Myth	9
2.2. David E. Aune, <i>Revelation 6-16</i>	11
2.2.1. Birth Pangs	11
2.2.2. Classical Digression with Jewish Features	11
2.3. G. B. Caird, <i>The Revelation of St. John the Divine</i>	14
2.4. Ian Boxall, <i>The Revelation of Saint John</i>	16
3. Revelation as Prophecy—Correctives to the Comparative Approach	17
3.1. Hildegard Gollinger, <i>Das grosse Zeichen von Apokalypse 12</i>	17
3.2. Eugenio Corsini, <i>The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ</i>	19
3.2.1. The Great Sign and Birth Pangs	20
3.2.2 Symbolism in Revelation 12	20
3.3. Pierre Prigent, <i>Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John</i>	22
3.4. Felise Tavo, <i>Woman, Mother and Bride</i>	25
3.4.1. Birth Pangs and the Great Sign	25
3.4.2. A Literary Reading	26
4. Revelation 12—Polyvalent Significance of the Great Sign	28
4.1. John Philip M. Sweet, <i>Revelation</i>	28
4.2. André Feuillet, <i>Jesus and His Mother</i>	29
4.2.1. Telescoping Effect	29
4.2.2. Birth Pangs	30
4.3. Ignace de la Potterie, <i>Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant</i>	32
4.3.1. Birth Pangs—A Way Out of Difficulty	33
4.3.2. The Glory of the Woman	34
4.4. François M. Braun, <i>Mother of God's People</i>	35
4.4.1. Polyvalence of Johannine Imagery	35
4.4.2. Birth Pangs	36
4.4.3. Glory of the Woman	37
4.5. Bernard J. Le Frois, <i>The Woman Clothed with the Sun: Individual or Collective?</i>	38
4.5.1. Totality Conception	38
4.5.2. Birth Pangs	40
4.5.3. Marian Interpretation of the Great Sign	41
5. Conclusion	42

Chapter Two. Birth-Pang Imagery in Old Testament and Related Literature	
1. Introduction	46
2. Birth Pangs as a Metaphor for the Birthing Process	47
2.1. Birth as a Metaphor for Creation	47
1. Deut 32:18	49
2. Ps 90:2 (LXX Ps 89:2)	49
3. Prov 8:24-25	51
2.2. Birth Pangs as a Sign of Birth, a Miracle of Creation (Job 39:1-2)	53
2.3. Birth Pangs Represent the Blessing of Birth	53
1. Isa 23:4	54
2. Isa 54:1	55
3. Cant 8:5	56
3. Birth Pangs and Birth as a Metaphor for Evil (Ps 7:15)	57
4. Birth Pangs Represent Alienation in the Midst of Blessing	58
1. Gen 3:16	58
2. Gen 35:16-18 (also Jub 32:33)	60
3. 1 Chr 4:9	61
5. Birth Pangs Represent Negative Divine Judgment	62
5.1. Birth Pangs Describe the Reaction to Military Defeat	63
1. Ps 48:7	64
2. Isa 13:8	65
3. Isa 21:3	66
4. Jer 4:31	66
5. Jer 6:24	67
6. Jer 13:21	68
7. Jer 22:23	69
8. Jer 48:41	69
9. Jer 49:22	70
10. Jer 49:24	70
11. Jer 50:43	70
12. Hab 3:10	70
13. Sir 48:19	71
14. Dan 10:16	72
5.2. Birth Pangs/ Death Pangs Describe Personal Distress	73
1. Ps 18:5-6 (LXX/ Vulgate Ps 17:5-6)/ 2 Sam 22:6	74
2. Ps 116:3 (LXX Ps 114:3)	74
6. Birth-Pang Imagery that Excludes Birth	75
1. Hos 13:13	75
2. 2 Kgs 19:3/ Isa 37:3	76
3. Isa 26:17-18	78
7. Birth Pangs Represent Judgment and Birth Represents Redemption (Mic 4:9-10; 5:2)	79
8. Birth Without Birth Pangs (Isa 66:7-8)	81
9. Birth-Pang Imagery in the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha	83
1. 4 Ezra 10:12-13	84

2. 4 Ezra 16:38-39	85
3. 2 <i>Apoc. Bar.</i> 73:7	86
4. 4 Macc 15:16-17	88
5. <i>Apoc. Mos.</i> 25:1-4	90
6. <i>Adam and Eve</i> 19:1-3	92
7. 1 Enoch 62:4-6	93
10. Birth-Pang Imagery in Qumran	94
1. 1QH ^a xi.7-12	94
2. 4QH xiii.30-32	95
11. Conclusion	96
Chapter Three. Birth-Pang Imagery in the New Testament	
1. Introduction	102
2. Birth Pangs Represent the Blessing of Birth (Gal 4:27)	104
3. Birth Pangs Suffered on Behalf of Another's Alienation from God	111
1. Gal 4:19	111
2. Rom 8:22-23, 26	117
4. Birth-Pang Imagery Represents Negative Divine Judgment	124
1. 1 Thess 5:3	126
2. Matt 24:7-8/ Mark 13:8	128
5. Birth-Pang Imagery Represents Death (Acts 2:24)	131
6. Birth Pangs Lead to Birth, a Sign of Redemption (John 16:21-22)	133
7. Conclusion	141
Chapter 4. The Great Sign: Birth Pangs and Battles	
1. Introduction	143
2. Structure	145
2.1. Overview	145
2.2. "Back-and-Forth" Description of God's Providence and the Dragon's Response	147
Chart 1	149
2.3. Four Representations of Participation in the Triumph of the Lamb	150
Chart 2	151
2.4. From Victorious Reality of Heaven to the Embattled Reality of Earth	152
Chart 3	154
2.5. Recapitulations and Resumptions of Previous Texts	155
2.6. Returning to the Garden: Old Testament Allusions	158
3. Text-Critical Issues	162
4. Exegesis of Revelation 12	166
4.1. Overview (and Rev 11:19)	166
4.2. The Great Sign	169
1. Rev 12:1a	169
2. Rev 12:1b	171
3. Rev 12:1c-d	173
4. Rev 12:2a	176

5. Rev 12:2b	177
6. Rev 12:5a	184
7. Rev 12:5b	191
8. Rev 12:6	192
9. Rev 12:13	195
10. Rev 12:14	196
11. Rev 12:15	198
12. Rev 12:16	200
4.3. The Other Sign	201
1. Rev 12:3	201
2. Rev 12:4a	203
3. Rev 12:4b-c	204
4. Rev 12:7	204
5. Rev 12:8	205
6. Rev 12:9a-b	206
4.4. From Victory in Heaven to Battle on Earth	208
1. Rev 12:10a-d	208
2. Rev 12:10e-f	209
3. Rev 12:11a-c	210
4. Rev 12:12a-c	211
5. Rev 12:17	212
6. Rev 12:18	215
5. Conclusion	216
Conclusion	
1. A Summary of This Work	220
2. Significance of Birth-Pang Imagery for Understanding the Great Sign's Motherhood	228
3. Avenues for Future Research	233
Bibliography	235

List of Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
<i>ABD</i>	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentary
<i>APOT</i>	R. H. Charles, ed., <i>Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament</i>
<i>AUSS</i>	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BDB	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum theologicarum Lovaniensium
BGBE	Beiträge zur historischen Theologie
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BibOr	Biblica et orientalia
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BP	birth pangs
BPI	birth pang imagery
<i>BR</i>	<i>Biblical Research</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur <i>ZAW</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Monograph Series
CNT	Commentaire du Nouveau Testament
EBib	Études bibliques
<i>ETL</i>	<i>Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses</i>
GKC	Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar, ed. E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley
GNS	Good News Studies
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HDR	Harvard Dissertations in Religion
HTKNT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
HNTC	Harper's New Testament Commentaries
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LSJ	Liddell-Scott-Jones, <i>Greek-English Lexicon</i>
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
<i>NAB</i>	<i>New American Bible</i>
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NCB	New Century Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>

NPNF	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers
NT	New Testament
NTL	New Testament Library
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTT	New Testament Theology
OAN	Oracles against the nations
OT	Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
<i>OTP</i>	J. H. Charlesworth, ed. <i>The OT Pseudepigrapha</i>
<i>RSV</i>	<i>Revised Standard Version</i>
SacPag	Sacra Pagina
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature, Dissertation Series
SBLEJL	Society of Biblical Literature, Early Judaism and Its Literature
SBM	Stuttgarter biblische Monographien
Str-B	H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, <i>Kommentar zum Neuen Testament</i>
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
<i>TDNT</i>	G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, eds. <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
Vg	Vulgate
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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Chapter One

Birth Pangs in Revelation 12:

An Overview of Contemporary Research

1. Introduction

The description of the “Great Sign” of Revelation 12 lends itself to a broad spectrum of interpretation and has a special place in the conversation about the Book of Revelation. The poignancy of the woman arrayed in celestial glory and yet in the midst of the pains of labor while the dragon lies in wait to devour the fruit of her womb awakens the interest of even the most casual reader.

Pierre Prigent summarizes the common ground regarding the BP (birth pangs) of Rev 12:2 in his explanation, “The pains of childbirth are a traditional metaphor in Judaism to designate the sufferings of the difficult times that are a prelude to the Messianic era.”¹ Differences in interpretation come to the fore when scholars go into more detail about the nature of the messianic woes, as they are often called. Differences of interpretation of the BP often reflect differences of interpretive approach to the whole of Revelation 12.

The interpretation of the BP is key to a proper interpretation of the Great Sign. It is the purpose of this work to delve into the image of labor pains as it occurs throughout the biblical canon as well as in related works, for example, the Qumran hymns and extra-canonical

¹ Pierre Prigent, *L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean* (CNT 14; Geneve: Labor et Fides, 2000). Citations from Pierre Prigent, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (trans. Wendy Pradels; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 379.

apocalyptic works. Insight into the many-layered meaning of the BPI (birth-pang imagery) will enrich the interpretation of the Great Sign.

To this end, the first chapter presents an overview of the three major approaches in contemporary scholarship regarding the BPI in Revelation 12. The overview begins with representative scholars who take a comparative approach to Revelation, which is arguably the dominant approach.² Hermann Gunkel introduced this approach at the end of the 19th century.³ Scholars adopting this approach often do so in conjunction with source theory; they hypothesize that the basic narrative outline of Revelation 12 is taken from the Greek Apollo/Leto/Python myth. They highlight the conflict between the woman and dragon and interpret the woman to be Israel portrayed as a goddess. The woman's BP are usually interpreted as a narrative detail in the birth of the child. Adela Yarbro Collins adopts a comparative approach to discuss the BP of the woman but incorporates the general OT use of the image in her comments regarding the final redactional version.⁴ She interprets the BP both as the trials of Israel before giving birth to the Messiah as well as the trials experienced by the Jewish people under Roman subjugation. Others interpret the BP as the trials experienced by the Christians under the Romans.

² My survey of literature represents the major interpretations of the BP in Revelation 12. Bernard Le Frois gives an extensive overview of the patristic history of interpretation of the woman, the BP, and the male child of chapter 12 in *The Woman Clothed with the Sun: Individual or Collective* (Rome: Herder, 1954). Pierre Prigent, in his authoritative work, *Apocalypse 12: Histoire de l'exegese* (BGBE 2; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1959) presents an overview of the secondary literature on chap. 12 through 1952. Pavol Farkas provides an overview through 1990 in *La 'Donna' Di Apocalisse 12: Storia, vilancio, nuove prospettive* (Tesi Gregoriana; Serie Teologia 25; Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1997).

³ Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen. 1 und Ap. Jon 12* (Göttingen: Vandenoek & Ruprecht, 1895).

⁴ Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (HDR 9; Missoula, MO: Scholars Press, 1976) 135.

Next, the overview moves to scholars who find the comparative approach to Revelation deficient in some way. They attempt to respond to the comparative approach as well as to recover interpretations of Revelation 12 as a type of prophecy or at least a fundamentally Christian work. Their responses are varied in approach and conclusion as regards the symbolic significance of the BP. They attempt to account for the whole text of Revelation 12 in their interpretation. Some, like Prigent and Felise Tavo, interpret the Great Sign to represent the Church, albeit in different ways; others, like Eugenio Corsini, interpret the Great Sign to represent humankind.⁵ These scholars tend to take into account mostly OT use of BPI. Some, like Hildegard Gollinger, emphasize the eschatological nature of the BPI.

Finally, there are those scholars who focus on the polyvalent ecclesial and Marian interpretations of the woman, which have been common throughout the centuries.⁶ They attempt to account for the symbolic polyvalence of the apocalyptic woman and her BP. They are particularly intrigued by the juxtaposition of the woman's glory and simultaneous subjugation to BP in the Great Sign. These scholars examine the NT use of the BPI, particularly, the resonance between Revelation 12 and John 16 as well as the first chapters of Luke and other NT texts in which Mary is described. They come to the conclusion that the BP of the woman are not those of

⁵ Eugenio Corsini, *Apocalisse prima e dopo* (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1980). Citations are taken from *The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ* (trans. and ed. Francis J. Moloney; GNS 5; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983) 222-23. Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 378. Felise Tavo, *Woman, Mother, and Bride: An Exegetical Investigation into the "Ecclesial" Notions of the Apocalypse* (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2007) 288.

⁶ Le Frois, *Clothed With the Sun*, 13-58. Even if one is not convinced that Marian interpretations of the Great Sign of Revelation 12 were commonplace among the Patristics, at the very least, he demonstrates that often ecclesial interpretations of the Great Sign were linked to a Marian interpretation as well, and not just in an accommodated sense.

a child's birth but of the birth "of Christ glorified"⁷ through the passion in which the disciples (and Mary) share at the foot of the cross. These scholars represent a minority position in current scholarship on Revelation 12 and tend to focus on the first texts of chap. 12. They discuss the BP, however, in the greatest detail. To this end, they have influenced scholars of the second group. For example, Prigent credits André Feuillet for his interpretation of the BP.⁸

The second chapter will present an overview of the occurrences and uses of BPI in the OT and related literature. The third chapter will present an overview of the occurrences and uses of BPI in the NT. The fourth chapter will present an exegesis of Revelation 12 with special focus on the interpretation of the Great Sign and the significance of the BPI.

2. Revelation 12 as Myth—the Comparative Approach

2.1. Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*

Adela Yarbro Collins represents a comparative approach to the interpretation of Revelation, particularly the twelfth chapter. This approach has been extremely influential, even among those scholars who also put a priority on engaging the biblical themes and allusions in Revelation 12, whether the scholar considers Revelation 12 to be a simple adaptation of an ancient myth or a subversion of it to Christian purposes.⁹

⁷ Ignace de la Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant* (trans. Bertrand Buby; Bombay: Alba House, 1998) 284.

⁸ Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 380.

⁹ See, for example, Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 164-65 and G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 148.

2.1.1. Birth Pangs

Collins interprets the BP as representing “the eschatological woes which precede the appearance of the messiah.”¹⁰ In the redacted text of Revelation 12, the woman is the heavenly Israel, and the birth is the heavenly prototype of Jesus’s birth. Collins interprets v. 17 as a reference to another heavenly birth, that of the Christian community, which “shows that the redactor understood the establishment of the Christian community as an eschatological event parallel to the coming of the messiah.”¹¹ Collins is most interested in the external difficulties of the birth—that is, in the attack of the dragon on the woman and child and its mythical origins. The BP are, to a certain extent, essentially a mythical narrative detail that has taken on additional significance in the final, Christian redaction of the text.¹²

2.1.2 Combat Myth

Like other scholars of this approach, Collins considers the attack of the dragon on the woman—and the child—and his subsequent pursuit of the woman to be the most striking characteristic of Revelation 12.¹³ According to Collins, this image cannot be understood against a Semitic background. Collins theorizes that the dragon’s pursuit of the woman reflects a phase of the universal combat myth “in which the rebel has power and is trying to prevent the one

¹⁰ Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (HDR 9; Montana: Scholars Press, 1976) 135.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² This is the general view of the comparative approach. Indeed, from a mythological perspective, there is nothing striking about a celestially garbed queen in the throws of labor. Anton Vögtle (“Mythos und Botschaft in Apokalypse 12,” in *Tradition und Glaube: Das frühe Christentum in seiner Umwelt. Festgabe für Karl Georg Kuhn* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971]) 395-415) notes that the contrast is striking but comes to the conclusion that the BP are included in order to move the narrative of the birth along.

¹³ Collins, *Combat Myth*, 70.

destined to be king from eventually wresting that power from him.”¹⁴ Collins considers a comparative approach to the interpretation of Revelation 12 to be essential because of Revelation’s roots in the Hebrew Bible, much of which she considers to be an adaptation of extra-biblical myth.¹⁵

Collins, following Joseph E. Fontenrose, outlines the pattern of the basic combat myth in Revelation 12 as follows:

- A. The Dragon (12:3)
- B. Chaos and Disorder (12:4a)
- C. The Attack (12:4b)
- D. The Champion (12:5a)
- E. The Champion’s Death (12:5b)
- G. Recovery of the Champion (12:7a)
- H. Battle Renewed and Victory (12:7b-9)
- I. Restoration and Confirmation of Order (12:10-12a)
- F. The Dragon’s Reign (12:12b-17)¹⁶

Collins considers the description of the woman as the Queen of Heaven to be “the second most striking feature” of the chapter; she does not comment on the omission of this feature from the combat myth structure. Collins interprets the woman to be the heavenly Israel, portrayed with the symbolism of the goddess Isis. Isis is associated with the moon, sun, and zodiac: “the moon is a mere footstool for her; the circle of heaven, the zodiac, her crown; and the mighty sun, her

¹⁴ Ibid., 58-59.

¹⁵ Ibid., 208.

¹⁶ Ibid., 61. Collins follows Joseph E. Fontenrose’s outline of basic themes common to most combat myths in *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959) 262-64. Collins indicates that Revelation 12 does not follow the exact order of elements in the pattern outlined by Fontenrose.

garment.”¹⁷ Collins comments that in Rev 12:1-5 a Marian interpretation seems most natural and in Rev 12:6, 13-17 an ecclesiological view seems most natural. However, since an “interpretation which could suggest a consistent referent of the woman would be preferable,”¹⁸ she offers the “Jewish point of view . . . [in which the woman] represents the persecuted people of God from whom comes the Messiah.”¹⁹ Collins does not discuss how the “people of God” are represented in the OT.

Collins notes, “The narrative does not seem to be a unified one.”²⁰ Her observation is based on two questions: (1) Why is Michael the Archangel the one charged with defeating the dragon in Revelation 12, whereas in each of the myths mentioned above the son vanquishes the enemy? Collins concludes that this “shift in function” raises the question of literary unity.²¹ (2) Do the narrative of the woman and dragon and the narrative of the battle even “cohere”²² with each other? Since the battle between Michael and the dragon does not fit the model of the combat myth as outlined, Collins concludes that the battle must be taken from a different source and is not a continuation of the story of the woman and the dragon.

Collins interprets Revelation 12 as a Christian adaptation and combination of two Jewish sources, the first of which is a combat myth combining the myths of Leto and Isis to describe the

¹⁷ Collins, *Combat Myth*, 71, 73. Collins cites Lucius’s prayer to Isis in Apuleius’s *Metamorphosis*, as “Regina caeli.” *The Metamorphosis* dates to about A.D. 170.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

²² *Ibid.*, 84.

dragon's pursuit of the woman.²³ Leto gives birth to Apollo while pursued by Python. Apollo fights and kills Python four days after his birth. Isis secretly gives birth to Horus, the son of her deceased brother, Osiris. Horus then vanquishes Osiris's enemy Seth and restores peace to the cosmos. The woman of Revelation 12 gives birth to a son who is preserved from the dragon; the dragon subsequently pursues the woman who is protected by God. The original Jewish source was a "figurative expression of political and religious conflict," particularly referring to the conflict between the Jewish people and Rome in the first centuries before and after the birth of Christ.²⁴ Collins writes, "The depiction of the rescue of the woman and the birth of the messiah would, in such a context, awaken the hope of deliverance from subjugation to the Romans."²⁵

The second source "depicts a battle in heaven"²⁶ and is most similar to "the Jewish myth of the rebellion of Satan [which is] closely related to the Canaanite myth of the fallen stellar god, Ashtar."²⁷ A Christian redactor combined the two sources, added details and the Christian victory hymn, which he has composed.²⁸

²³ Ibid., 66-67. Collins refers to Hyginus's version of the Leto myth and the description of Isis on the Metternich and Amenmose stelae. She writes, "While the order [of events] varies, we see that a number of the same themes occur in all three narratives: the attack by the dragon on the mother of the hero with the intent to kill the child (3); the birth of the hero (5); the mother of the hero is given divine aid (4)."

²⁴ Ibid., 119.

²⁵ Ibid., 126.

²⁶ Ibid., 102.

²⁷ Ibid., 129.

²⁸ Ibid., 115-16. Collins's "two-source" theory for Revelation 12 is a move toward a theory of compositional unity when considered in the context of her discussion with R. H. Charles. I present three examples: (1) Collins considers and dismisses R. H. Charles's case for distinct sources based on style and grammar; (2) Collins argues it is impossible to tell the difference between Greek translated from Hebrew and Greek composed in imitation of Septuagint Greek; (3) finally, she argues that the victory hymn is an original composition rather than an

In their redacted forms, the content of the two sources is transformed and spiritualized into an eschatological framework. In the reinterpretation of source I, “the issue is no longer simply a nationalistic one with cosmic overtones, but one which has to do with the fundamentally dualistic nature of reality.”²⁹ The woman represents the heavenly Israel, and the BP, the “eschatological woes which precede the appearance of the messiah.”³⁰ In the reinterpretation of source II, “the fall of Satan, once linked to a primordial rebellion, is now linked with the exaltation of the savior of the end-time.”³¹

Collins presents the similarities between characteristics of Revelation 12 and Hygenius’s version of the Leto myth—namely, the dragon’s attack on the child and the flight of the woman—and argues that Revelation 12 has its closest parallel in the Leto myth.³² Collins concludes that since the Leto myth is older, and since the author of Revelation was surely familiar with the myth, the Leto myth must be a source for Revelation 12.³³

2.1.3 Critique of the Combat Myth

Other scholars, such as Prigent, however, have shown that the vision in Revelation 12 is described in the language of the poetry and psalms of the OT and refers symbolically to OT themes. Additionally, the basic pattern of Fontenrose’s theory of the combat myth does not

adaptation of a third source, particularly a liturgical source, since there are such hymns throughout the book of Revelation. See pp. 108-12.

²⁹ Ibid., 131.

³⁰ Ibid., 135.

³¹ Ibid., 135-36.

³² Ibid., 70.

³³ Ibid., 67.

cohere convincingly with the events in Revelation since (1) the male son never “battles” the dragon, and (2) the chapter ends with the dragon’s “Reign” instead of the “Restoration and Confirmation of Order.” Collins herself notes this, but instead of questioning the relevance of Fontenrose’s theory to the narrative she questions the unity of the narrative. These apparent incongruities and others have led scholars such as Andras Pataki to conclude that at most the author of Revelation rewrote the entire combat myth into a “non-combat myth,” purposely turning the entire pattern of the myth upon its head.³⁴ Pataki contends that the author of Revelation wanted to portray Jesus Christ as LORD of all and to *refute* cosmic dualism.³⁵ Stephen Schreiber counters the portrayal of Revelation 12 as a letter of comfort and writes, “Revelation . . . is a cultural war cry sounded by those who want to make it known that their faith in the God of Israel and his Christ is the very reason for living; it is so important that it deserves to be asserted even against the socially dominant culture.”³⁶

As regards BP specifically, Collins does not explain the connection between the messianic woes of Israel preceding the birth of the Messiah and subjugation to the Romans, particularly following the birth of the Messiah. Collins’s hermeneutical emphasis on the combat between the woman/child and the dragon distracts from the crisis of the BP, which is an important part of the Great Sign. The introduction of the dragon immediately follows the description of the BP, suggesting a relationship between the two. Additionally, the total

³⁴ Andras Pataki, “A Non-combat Myth in Revelation 12,” *NTS* 57 (2011) 258-80, here 260.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

³⁶ Stephen Schreiber, “Die Sternfrau und ihre Kinder (Offb 12): Zur Wiederentdeckung eines Mythos,” *NTS* 53 (2007) 436-57, here 457. Translation is mine.

preservation of the child and woman from any direct contact with the dragon seems to suggest that a unique conflict is taking place into which the significance of the BP may offer insight.

2.2. David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*

David E. Aune takes a comparative approach but attempts to account for the OT imagery and significance of the visions in Revelation 12 by discussing OT and related sources as well.³⁷

2.2.1. Birth Pangs

Aune mentions the association in the OT with Israel's distress and the image of a woman suffering BP.³⁸ He writes, "The Hebrew term '*hebel*,' 'birth pang,' is associated with the conception of the '*heblô sel masîah*' (BP of the Messiah) a well-known eschatological motif for the trials and tribulations that are expected to precede the time of the end."³⁹ Aune does not offer his own conclusions regarding the symbolism of the BP in Revelation 12. Since he interprets—at least implicitly—the birth of the child as the birth of Jesus, it would be interesting to know how he sorts out the details of the BPI.

2.2.2 Classical Digression with Jewish Features

Aune interprets Revelation 12 as a classical digression of the type seen in the works of classical authors and orators and concludes that it was composed independently from the rest of Revelation.⁴⁰ Classical digressions usually contained explicitly mythological material.

³⁷ David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (WBC 52B; Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 691. Aune follows the same theory of composition as described by Collins.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 682.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 688.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 665. See, for example, Plutarch (*De Herodoti malignitate* 855D); Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria* 4.3.12).

Revelation 12 is a compilation of various myths from Hellenistic and Jewish traditions.⁴¹ The chapter “constitutes a kind of narrative apologetic in which traditional Greek stories are shown to validate important aspects of the Christian gospel.”⁴²

Aune also notes distinctive Jewish features of the chapter, for example, the flight of the woman into the wilderness: “For the Qumran community, the desert retreat was a prelude to the final eschatological battle.”⁴³ Additionally, motifs in common between Revelation 12 and Gen 3:15—such as the woman, her offspring, the serpent, and the importance of obeying the commandments—lead Aune to conclude “that this aspect of the myth in Revelation 12 appears to be a dramatization of the so-called protoevangelium of Gen 3:15.”⁴⁴ Aune’s comments contrast with those of Collins’s who sees this very conflict as requiring an extra-biblical explanation (see above).

Aune interprets the two signs to be possibly “astrological constellations” that depict a story.⁴⁵ The two “myth-images . . . serve as a catalyst for his juxtaposition of two mythic

⁴¹ Ibid., 712.

⁴² Ibid., 713.

⁴³ Ibid., 706. See also Peter von der Osten-Saken, *Gott und Belial: Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Dualismus in den Texten aus Qumran* (SUNT 6; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969) 30-41, here 34: “Before the battle began, the ‘banished one of the Sons of Light’ would return from the ‘wilderness of the people’ to the holy land (I, 3).” Translation is mine.

⁴⁴ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 708. Gen 3:15 was “understood in some circles of early Judaism and by early Christians to refer to the birth of the Messiah (Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 143-44); in early Christianity the Hebrew term ‘seed’ was understood (incorrectly) as having a singular rather than a collective sense. . . . This messianic reading, however, was probably not the intention of the LXX translator. According to the tradition preserved in the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Gen 3:15 and in the fragmentary targums P and V on Gen 3:15, when the offspring of the woman keep the Torah, they smite the offspring of the serpent on the head, whereas in Rev 12:17, the offspring of the woman keep the commandments of God but are nevertheless attacked by the dragon.”

⁴⁵ Ibid., 663. See also 683.

traditions.”⁴⁶ Using Vladimir J. Propp’s formalist analysis of Russian Märchen, Aune identifies the formal function of the characters in the story, the “dramatis personae,” the woman and the dragon, as the protagonist and antagonist, respectively.⁴⁷

Aune interprets the woman as Mary and the child as Jesus in the present version of Rev 12:1-6.⁴⁸ Aune notes, “The woman is presented in astral imagery as the queen of the cosmos.”⁴⁹ He does not address the juxtaposition of her regal position and BP in labor. Aune critiques the common contemporary interpretation of the woman as Israel: “If the woman of Rev 12:1 represents Israel, the problem is that there is no OT passage that personifies Israel as a mother and also speaks of her bearing a child Messiah. . . .”⁵⁰

In the second portion of the mythical narrative (Rev 12:13-17), “where ‘the rest of her offspring’ (Rev 12:17) are mentioned, it seems more appropriate to understand the woman as the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 713.

⁴⁷ Vladimir J. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (2nd ed.; Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968). See especially chap. 3, “The Function of the Dramatis Personae.” Propp was a part of the movement of Russian Formalism in the first half of the 20th century that was attempting to keep literature from becoming mere propaganda for the governments of Lenin and then Stalin.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 689, 712. Aune wonders if the child symbolized Jerusalem originally and Jesus only secondarily, particularly if the allusion to Ps 2:9 is a later addition. He explains, “Since Isa 66:6-14 (alluded to twice in Rev 12:1-5) uses mother, birth, and child imagery to describe the emergence of a new city, with Zion as the ‘mother’ and Jerusalem as the ‘child,’ it is possible that the woman in Rev 12:1-6 originally referred to Zion and the child to Jerusalem; the latter may have been only secondarily identified with the Messiah.” See also p.712, “While in the present version the child is clearly the Messiah (=Jesus), described as ‘one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron’ (v. 5, alluding to Ps 2:9, a psalm interpreted messianically), this detail is probably a Jewish embellishment of the Hellenistic myth. That the child was ‘caught up’ to God and to his throne (v. 5) probably signifies the exaltation of the risen Jesus to the right hand of God, though its occurrence immediately following the child’s birth and its depiction as a divine rescue indicate its earlier, pre-Christian character.”

⁴⁹ Ibid., 713.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 688.

Church and her persecuted offspring as Christians. From a Jewish perspective, in an earlier version of this myth, the woman could be construed as Israel, the persecuted people of God.”⁵¹

Aune presents a great deal of information on different approaches to interpreting Revelation 12 and certainly gives a closer reading to the OT usage of BPI. As a result, he understands the problem with a collective interpretation of the woman coupled with an individual interpretation of the child. He does not, unfortunately, give an explanation for the BPI in Revelation 12, an explanation which would be interesting, especially since he sees a Marian interpretation of the Great Sign in vv. 1-6 as most natural.

2.3. G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*

G. B. Caird also takes a comparative approach; he theorizes that John rewrote the Greek and Egyptian myths in order to counter their current political application to the Roman emperor, hailed as the son of Apollo.⁵² Like Aune, he attempts to account for the OT symbolism throughout Revelation 12, as well as that of the NT.

Caird interprets the birth of the child as the death of Christ in a manner similar to the reading of Prigent, who also interprets the woman as the early Church. Caird explains that the BP of the “Queen of Heaven” represent “the suffering endured by the loyal people of God as they waited for their anointed king.”⁵³ Citing Ps 2:7-9 and Rom 1:4, Caird interprets Rev 12:5 as Jesus’s crucifixion and his enthronement: “. . . for John as for the fourth evangelist, the Cross is

⁵¹ Ibid., 712.

⁵² Caird, *Revelation*, 147-48.

⁵³ Ibid., 148-49.

the point at which Jesus entered upon his kingly glory.”⁵⁴ Satan, in the form of the dragon, is ready to devour the child upon “birth” because he thought Jesus’s death would be a victory for himself. The child is caught up because Jesus’s death and resurrection is a victory over Satan. In death, Jesus is permanently removed from the temptation of Satan. Jesus will return from the throne to slay the dragon.⁵⁵

Like Aune, Caird sees the description of the woman’s flight into the desert as reference to the Exodus story.⁵⁶ Caird sees references throughout the book of Revelation to the Exodus story and the creation myth (Rev 4:9; 9:1; 11:7; 12:3; 13:1; 16:2; 21:1). Unlike Aune and Collins, Caird reads Revelation 12 as a literary unity; he explains that the apparently unrelated story of Michael’s victory over the dragon and his cohorts is the heavenly and symbolic counterpart of the earthly reality of the cross.⁵⁷ Caird explains that since Christ is part of the earthly reality at the crucifixion, he cannot be part of the “heavenly symbolism” of the battle between Michael and the dragon.⁵⁸

Because Caird reads Revelation 12 and the whole book of Revelation as a unity, he is able to provide more insight into the use of OT and NT symbolism throughout the book, even

⁵⁴ Ibid., 150.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 150-51. “The dragon’s seven heads identify him also with that other mythical creature, Leviathan or Lotan, the ocean dragon of the Canaanite creation story, whose aliases are Tiamat and Rahab. . . . We have found ample evidence from the OT to prove that the creation myth was still part of the living language of theology down to the time of Daniel. . . . The characteristics of Satan, we are to understand, are those of his earthly representatives.”

⁵⁶ Ibid., 151-52.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 154.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 153.

though he has a comparative approach. His reading of the Great Sign and Rev 12:5 is shared by many scholars who take a canonical approach in their interpretation.

2.4. Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*

In his 2006 commentary Ian Boxall presents Revelation 12 as a subversion of the pagan form of the combat myth as described by Collins and others. The combat myth is subverted so that Christ is the victor, “not Apollo or any imperial incarnation of that deity.”⁵⁹ The emperor is identified with the “destroying dragon.” Boxall emphasizes the earlier biblical appropriation of the combat myth in the OT, to which Revelation 12 also alludes. Furthermore, although he interprets the chapter as having two clear underlying sources, Boxall explains that the present form of Revelation 12 is important, not its literary pre-history.⁶⁰ He brings together multiple OT allusions with those of pagan mythology to interpret the meaning behind the chapter’s description of the vision.

He interprets the woman as representing the “heavenly counterpart of the community of the faithful . . . from Eden to New Exodus in Christ.”⁶¹ The BP represent the “long and often turbulent history [which] prepared the way for the Messiah’s coming” and the increased tribulation that comes with the messianic age.⁶² Not only does he refer to the use of BPI in Mark 13:8, Boxall compares the BP of Revelation 12 to those in John 16:20-22 of the community of disciples during the passion and resurrection of Jesus. The birth of the child and his ascent to

⁵⁹ Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John* (BNTC 18; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006) 181.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 178-79.

⁶² *Ibid.*

heaven is a mythological representation of the death and resurrection of Christ by which the dragon is defeated.⁶³

Boxall connects an historical reading with an eschatological reading when he suggests that Revelation 12 portrays the cosmic significance of the individual struggle to bear witness to Christ. For example, he writes of v. 10, “This heavenly canticle takes up the mundane struggles of possibly tiny congregations of Asian Christians into a struggle of cosmic and cosmos-changing proportions. There is no localized battle, but part of that great battle in which order is re-established over chaos.”⁶⁴

3. Revelation as Prophecy—Correctives to the Comparative Approach

3.1. Hildegard Gollinger, *Das grosse Zeichen von Apokalypse 12*

Gollinger discusses the image of BP in the context of Henry Barclay Swete’s interpretation (not to be confused with that of John Philip M. Sweet discussed below) of the image as concrete physical pain accompanying the birth of Jesus.⁶⁵ In contrast to Swete’s literalist interpretation, Gollinger goes to the other extreme and interprets the BP as generally as possible according to OT imagery; she does the same in regard to the birth of the child and even the filial relation between the apocalyptic woman and her son.

⁶³ Ibid., 180.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 184.

⁶⁵ Henry B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: MacMillan, 1906) 148.

Gollinger notes the anomalous use of the verb to describe the pain of labor, as well as the literal and metaphorical use of the verb *τεκεῖν* to describe birth and a more general “bringing forth” in the NT.⁶⁶ She interprets the BP, particularly the “torment” to give birth, as “the pain that the woman suffered for the sake of the birth, to facilitate the ‘breaking through’ of the time of judgment, and with it, the punishment for all the enemies of God and the Christian community.”⁶⁷

Gollinger interprets the birth as the “dawn of the end times and the crowning completion of the messianic woes.”⁶⁸ She explains further, “With the birth of the child, the messianic woes have attained their goal and the pain of the apocalyptic woman no longer stands in contrast with her exaltation Thus begins the time of messianic judgment and salvation.”⁶⁹

Gollinger’s interpretation leads her to distance the interpretations of both the child in Rev 12:5 and the other offspring in Rev 12:17 from involving a relationship to the apocalyptic woman.⁷⁰ She is “mother Jerusalem.” Gollinger writes that since “there is no physical mother for all Christians,”⁷¹ the motherhood of the apocalyptic woman is a general metaphorical reference.

⁶⁶ Hildegard Gollinger, *Das grosse Zeichen von Apokalypse 12* (SBM 11; Würzburg: Echter KBW Verlag, 1971) 90-91. Translations are mine.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

This plays on “the Jewish concept of a heavenly antitype,” of which the earthly “heilsgemeinde” is a type.⁷²

Gollinger introduces a helpful insight to the discussion, particularly relating to the nuanced portrayal of the BP as part of the Great Sign. She reads Revelation 12 as a unity and attends to the OT significance of BP as an eschatological sign. Gollinger does not, however, attend to the significance of BP in the NT and, despite the fact that the actual birth of the Messiah in the person of Jesus Christ is a necessary condition for her reading of Revelation 12, Gollinger limits her interpretation of the Great Sign to the most general of levels. As a result, her reading of the BP—as well as the other images—is, in the end, not particularly distinct from other, more comparatively oriented scholars.

3.2. Eugenio Corsini, *The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ*

In his commentary Corsini takes an even more general and metaphorical approach to Revelation 12 and interprets the chapter as a meditation on the significance of human history from creation to redemption.⁷³ Revelation is written “in the spirit of prophecy,” which in Revelation 19 is identified with “bearing testimony to Jesus.”⁷⁴ The function of a prophet was not primarily to tell the future but rather to interpret events of history as signs of God’s will. John interprets the events of the OT in light of Jesus Christ.⁷⁵

⁷² Ibid., 175.

⁷³ Corsini, *Apocalypse*, 223.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 32.

3.2.1. The Great Sign and Birth Pangs

The three signs are instances of God's merciful intervention in history. The Great Sign represents the creation of man and the call to spiritual perfection; the "Other Sign" represents the fall of man through diabolic temptation, yet the promise of redemption; the third sign (Rev 15:1) represents putting the redemption into action through the work of Jesus Christ.⁷⁶

Corsini shies away from identifying the symbols of woman and child into particular human figures in history, although their symbolism is not unrelated to historical events.⁷⁷ In this vein, Corsini interprets the woman as a symbol of mankind, "created in a perfect condition, at the center of all creation and having dominion over it."⁷⁸ The child in the woman's womb represents the greater spiritual perfection that is promised and must be won by "working through trials and sacrifices;" the BP in Revelation 12 are the painful cost of spiritual rebirth; in the fall, the child is snatched away, representing "the loss of the prerogative of divine promises."⁷⁹ In this interpretation of the BP, Corsini is inspired by Gal 4:19, a NT use of BPI, in which Paul describes his own trials on behalf of his Galatian converts as a spiritual maternity.

3.2.2. Symbolism in Revelation 12

The continuity of symbolic meaning that carries over from the original OT meaning through the NT and into Revelation from chapter to chapter is important to Corsini's

⁷⁶ Ibid., 207-8.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 214.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 223.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 220.

interpretation.⁸⁰ He argues that the woman of chapter 12 must be interpreted in continuity with the great prostitute of Revelation 17 and the spouse of the Lamb in Revelation 21: “Even though it may appear to be a paradox, it is clear that the basic meaning of the symbol never changes. The only thing that changes is its contact with other symbols and different contexts.”⁸¹ As a result of this principle, Corsini interprets the woman broadly as “a symbol of humanity after the fall.”⁸²

Specifically in the desert, “the woman represents humanity in the period before the great event of the death and resurrection of Jesus.”⁸³ Corsini divides the woman’s flight into the desert into two flights, that is, her flight before and her flight after the dragon pursues her. The first flight is God’s first of many interventions in “favor of mankind after its sin.”⁸⁴ The woman’s second flight into the desert is a retelling of Israel’s religious history in which John shows that Israel’s religious history has universal significance. He shows this by combining Eden and Exodus imagery.⁸⁵ The image of the desert is an ambivalent one, representing both refuge as well as trial, temptation, and sin.⁸⁶ The woman’s further offspring gives hope that it is possible to

⁸⁰ Ibid., 40-41. “Given the idea of continuity which is so important to the mind of John, each symbol preserves in itself its own original meaning. In fact, it is precisely upon the permanency of the original meaning that John plays when introducing the variations which serve to modify it. This means that when John recalls any section of scripture through a particular form of allusion, he presupposes that the original passage and its meaning are already present in the minds of his readers. The permanence of the original meaning, the biblical significance of the symbols used by John, is another basic point for a correct reading of the Apocalypse. . .”.

⁸¹ Ibid., 42.

⁸² Ibid., 222-23.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 221.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 224-25.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 216.

return to “the original condition of innocence, of justice and of trust in the promises of God symbolized by that ‘Son’ carried in the womb of the woman.”⁸⁷

Corsini attempts to bring attention to the Paschal-oriented movement of Revelation. He provides fresh insight into the contemporary discussion, which characterizes Revelation as totally eschatological. Like Gollinger, and unlike many contemporary scholars, he resists identifying figures in Revelation with historical figures because Revelation’s Paschal message is universally relevant. Corsini, a Patristics scholar, is influenced by Origen’s commentary on John, in which Origen refers continuously to Revelation in order to explain the Gospel of John. However, Corsini’s interpretation of the Great Sign and all of Revelation 12 as the part of salvation history preceding Christ does not account for the connection between the angelic battle and victory hymn that clearly refers to the victory of Christ and all Christians.

3.3. Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*

In his thorough revision of his 1981 commentary, published in translation in 2002, Prigent seeks to recover a canonical reading of Revelation and give an explanation of Revelation 12 that takes into account biblical allusions and significance of the text. Such an explanation “is much more economical and, above all, much less strange,” than that offered by the comparative approach which looks to goddesses giving birth in the heavens to give meaning to Revelation 12.⁸⁸ The hymn (Rev 12:10-12) is the key to interpretation of Revelation 12 in light of Gen

⁸⁷ Ibid., 221.

⁸⁸ Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 369.

3:15.⁸⁹ The earlier verses of the chapter are a reference to “the Paschal martyrdom of Christ and its consequences.”⁹⁰

According to Prigent, BP should not be a surprising inclusion in the depiction of Jesus’s birth since they are a stock metaphor for the “sufferings and difficult times that are a prelude to the Messianic era.”⁹¹ The woman of Revelation 12 is the early church rooted in Israel.⁹² The male child born is the Messiah-king. Prigent cites the passage’s allusion to Isa 66:7-9 as well as the Targum of Isaiah, which reads the passage as describing the birth of the Messiah-King. Additionally, he points out the allusion to Ps 2:9.⁹³ He acknowledges, though, that the interpretative difficulty lies in the question of how the “people of God” can give birth to Jesus, even “if we take this people in its largest sense.”⁹⁴

Prigent interprets the BP as the trials endured by the early church in the passion of Christ. The birth of the Messiah-king in Rev 12:5 is not depicting a birth in the normal course of events, but rather is actually depicting the death and resurrection of Jesus.⁹⁵ Through the travail of the cross, the early Church gives birth, through faith, to the resurrected Christ in their hearts.⁹⁶ In the

⁸⁹ Ibid., 389.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 369.

⁹¹ Ibid., 379.

⁹² Ibid., 378. “People of God” is the generic interpretation of the apocalyptic woman. Prigent wishes to go further than the general consensus that the woman represents the People of God.

⁹³ Ibid., 372 (cf. R. D. Aus, “The Relevance of Isaiah 66:7 to Revelation 12 and 2 Thessalonians 1,” *ZNW* 67 [1976] 252-68).

⁹⁴ Ibid., 379.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 384-85.

Church's proclamation of the resurrected Christ to be LORD, Christ comes to dwell in the faithful.⁹⁷ When giving his interpretation of the Great Sign, Prigent cites Feuillet (discussed below) and even presents himself as following Feuillet.⁹⁸ He does not take up, however, the Marian aspect that is fundamental to making sense of Feuillet's interpretation of the Great Sign, and particularly the BP.

Prigent interprets Revelation 11 and 12 as a continuous narrative of visions with no break intended by the author.⁹⁹ The hymn, which proclaims Christ's victory over Satan (the dragon) and his banishment from heaven, explains the significance of the several discreet visions in the chapter. Despite the ravaging effects of Satan's confinement to earth, the victory hailed in the hymn now belongs to the Christians: "At the very moment when the world considers the Christians to be defeated, crushed, and destroyed, by faith they can be discerned as conquerors, kings, those who live."¹⁰⁰

The corrective attempts discussed in this portion of the introduction move toward accounting for the narrative movement and general metaphorical significance of the BP and the Great Sign as a whole within salvation history. They do not note, however, the full significance of the Great Sign as a polyvalent figure.

⁹⁷ Ibid. See also n. 66, in which Prigent shares his view of the resurrection: "A resurrection is a surprising phenomenon in the human world, but it is not, in and of itself, anything more than a trivial event, without consequence for humanity. The primitive Christian community confessed that the resurrected Jesus is its Lord and that this lordship is already exercised at present. By doing so it makes room in the existence of each Christian for the new man: Christ who dwells within the faithful. One can then very well say that it gives birth to him."

⁹⁸ Ibid., 380.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 366.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 392.

3.4. Felice Tavo, *Woman, Mother and Bride: An Exegetical Investigation in the “Ecclesial”*

Notions of the Apocalypse

3.4.1. Birth Pangs and the Great Sign

Tavo interprets the BP of the Great Sign in light of Isa 26:17-18 and concludes that the vulnerability of the woman in giving birth should be linked with Israel whose pains are no less than BP on account of the child to be born.”¹⁰¹ Tavo notes the unusual syntax used in describing the BP, βασανίζω and κράζω. The woman is not an historical person per se but a metaphor, a figure connoting something else.¹⁰² She is most likely a collective metaphor because of the OT precedence of representing Israel as a woman, and the Book of Revelation uses the figure of a woman as a collective metaphor in the case of Babylon and the New Jerusalem. It is important to note, however, that the New Jerusalem is described from the first as a city; its only description that alludes to the figure of a woman is in 21:2, “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” Tavo looks to Isaiah 66:7 as the basis for interpreting the Great Sign as a collective giving birth to an individual son, in this case, the Messiah. However, the text is unclear as to whether it is referring to Zion, and Zion is specifically described in v. 8 as giving birth to multiple children. Tavo is inclined to follow those scholars who interpret the birth of the child as both the nativity and the crucifixion of Jesus; Tavo interprets vv. 4c-5c as a summation of the entire Paschal mystery of Jesus.¹⁰³ He interprets the woman as a collective metaphor for Israel and the Christian

¹⁰¹Tavo, *Woman*, 266.

¹⁰² Ibid., 257.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 273. See also Robert H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (2 vols; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920) 1:320.

church, “which the author and indeed the whole NT seem to have taken for granted.”¹⁰⁴ Tavo further qualifies that Israel, while not identified with the Church, continues *only* in the church while being transformed.¹⁰⁵

3.4.2. A Literary Reading

Felice Tavo seeks to recover a literary reading of the Book of Revelation. His investigation into the “church material” of the book represents a definitive shift away from source-theory toward literary analysis to explain the structure and meaning of the book.¹⁰⁶ Tavo begins from the premise that the Book of Revelation is a coherent unity and has a simple structure so as not to confuse the listeners for whom it was composed.¹⁰⁷ He describes seven key units in the Book of Revelation linked by transitional units that include liturgical action.¹⁰⁸

Tavo’s attention to literary analysis leads him to interpret Revelation 12 as a series of recapitulations. He writes that the three scenes of Revelation 12 (vv. 1-6, 7-12, 13-18) demonstrate narrative development in “waves” of the “key theme of the chapter, the struggle for

¹⁰⁴ Tavo, *Woman*, 288.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 292.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 3 footnote 10. Tavo defines “church material” as “the more significant texts of the Apocalypse which clearly have ecclesiological content: Rev 2-3; 7; 11:1-13; 12; 14:1-4; 21:1-22:5.” And in footnote 11, Tavo gives an overview of scholars’ varying approaches to “church material” in Revelation and the depth at which they discuss it.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* Tavo writes, “If there is a certain correlation between the literary structure of a written document and its intelligibility among hearers, and we think there is, the structure of the Apocalypse cannot be overly complicated so as to merely confuse its intended hearers.”

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 39. According to Tavo (*Woman*, 39), chapter 12 is the first part of the fourth unit, “Series of Visions I,” that extends through chapter 14. The fourth unit is preceded by the transitional material, Rev 11:15-19.

ultimate control between God and Satan.”¹⁰⁹ The second and third waves “provide further development and clarification of what has been initiated in the first wave (scene one).”¹¹⁰ The first scene presents the “dramatis personae” (vv. 1-4b) and establishes the central conflict (vv. 4c-5) between the child and dragon. The second scene, vv. 7-12 develops this conflict. The third scene vv. 13-18 elaborates on the earthly consequences of the dragon’s defeat, already alluded to in v. 6. The development of themes through a series of repetitions, each more detailed than the previous one, is a common feature of Hebrew poetics.¹¹¹ This feature of Hebrew poetics at work in Revelation 12 allows a reading of the chapter that can account for its seemingly “choppy” structure and account as well for the structure’s contribution to the meaning of the chapter.

Tavo’s literary-rhetorical reading highlights the use of OT imagery and motifs in Revelation 12. For example, his careful analysis of the literary presentation of the conflict between the son and the dragon demonstrates an allusion to the ancient enmity of Genesis 3. The limited power of the serpent/dragon simply to bruise the heel of the child, rather than devour him, provides hope for the listeners of Revelation 12. Tavo distances himself from Collins’s comparative methodology when he argues that the meaning of Revelation 12 is not dependent upon the particular underlying ancient myth or even the theoretical Jewish adaptor of the myth,

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 243-45. Tavo here follows Le Frois, *Clothed with the Sun*, 189-206. He also mentions Ernest Bernard Allo (*Saint Jean, L’Apocalypse* [4th ed.; EBib; Paris: Librairie Victor Lecoffre, 1933] lxxxvi) who speaks of the “loi des ondulations.”

¹¹⁰ Tavo, *Woman*, 245.

¹¹¹ See Michael O’Conner, *Hebrew Verse Structure* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997) 109-29 on word-level tropes of repetition, coloration, matching, and gapping.

but the final Christian redactor.¹¹² But he does follow Collins in highlighting the conflict between child and dragon as the meaning of the chapter.

4. Revelation 12—Polyvalent Significance of the Great Sign

4.1. John Philip M. Sweet, *Revelation*

John Philip M. Sweet writes that the BP are most reminiscent of the BP of Eve. “In other words John is evoking the idea of Zion as mother of many sons, like Eve, in the new age (cf. Ps 87), but this by virtue of bearing the Son, through bitter danger and travail (the ‘birth-pangs of the Messiah’), the Man who is to smite the dragon (Gen 3:15, Is 27:1) and shepherd the nations (v. 5 = Ps 2:9 LXX).”¹¹³ Sweet notes the multilayered symbolism of the woman, writing that she “seems to represent a gallery of figures: Eve, the mother of all living; Israel, the mother of the Messiah (= Christ); Mary, the mother of Jesus; the church, mother of Christians—with overtones of pagan myths as well.”¹¹⁴ In her glory, the woman represents the ideal, glorified Israel, who like Eve, will bear many sons in the new age.¹¹⁵ Sweet does not go into any detail as to what he means by “ideal, glorified Israel” and how the levels of symbolism would come together.

¹¹² Tavo (*Woman*, 248-55) discusses different theories about the myths from which the imagery of Revelation 12 may have originated. He concludes, “We think that while the influence of other ancient mythologies is not to be completely disregarded as some would suggest, what is far more important for ascertaining the Christian author’s intention is an analysis of the OT imagery and motifs which he has used to compose his story.”

¹¹³ John Philip M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 196.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

4.2. André Feuillet, *Jesus and His Mother*

Feuillet offers the key insight that “the extraordinary concomitance of heavenly glory and intense pangs of childbirth such as is described in Rev 12:1-2 is found nowhere else, either in the OT or in the Jewish writings. This represents an enigma of the Apocalypse which commentators too easily pass over.”¹¹⁶

4.2.1. Telescoping Effect

Feuillet explains that Revelation 12 is intelligible only if one understands that the author has “built into a single vision, realities which while intimately related, remain nevertheless perfectly distinct.”¹¹⁷ In the case of the Great Sign, the telescoping effect works at least two ways: as regards the multilayered significance of the woman and as regards the birth of the child: “The supremely sorrowful Messianic childbirth of the Woman of the Apocalypse fuses into a single vision the two births of Bethlehem and Calvary presenting them under the aspect of the maternal collaboration of the Virgin Mary in the creation of the new people of God.”¹¹⁸

There are additional layers of significance of the Great Sign; Feuillet notes the “unexpected presence” of the dragon crouching before the woman and the clear reference to the person of Eve in the Great Sign, such that, “the collective Sion of the prophets” is opposed to the person of Eve, in “the [same] way Pauline Christology opposes the person of Christ to that of Adam. . . . The Woman of the Apocalypse is presented as the reply and antithesis to Eve: she is

¹¹⁶ André Feuillet, *Jésus et sa Mère* (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie. Editeurs, 1974). Citations are from André Feuillet, *Jesus and His Mother* (trans. Leonard Maluf; Still River: St. Bede’s Publications, 1984) 20.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

threatened by the ‘ancient serpent’ who had seduced Eve in the terrestrial paradise.”¹¹⁹ The dragon’s presence is additionally unexpected at the birth of Christ, particularly in the Johannine context, because “John speaks of the action of Satan only in reference to the Passion.”¹²⁰

Feuillet also notes that the sorrowful birth of the Messiah in Revelation 12 and Jesus’s discourse in John 16:21-22 on the hour of his Passion allude to the same two oracles (Isa 26:17; 66:7), which refer to Zion as giving birth to the messianic people.¹²¹

4.2.2. Birth Pangs

Feuillet addresses the dimension of similarity and dissimilarity of the BPI in the Great Sign to OT uses of BPI, particularly Isa 60:1, 19-22; 66:7; Gen 37:9; and Cant 6:10.¹²² The similarities of BPI support an allusion to Zion in the person of the woman. Two significant departures in Revelation 12 from the imagery of BP in the OT, however, prevent an interpretation of the woman as *only* Zion. First, neither in Isa 60, nor in Isa 26:17 and 66:7—all alluded to in Rev 12:2—is there any question of a painful childbearing by Zion of the new people of God. Isa 26:17 speaks of pains of childbirth, which are followed by no birth at all, and Isa 66:7 speaks of birth before any labor pains have been experienced.¹²³ This is related to the difficulty that “no Jewish text presents the people of God personified as the mother of the

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 21. See also Lucien Cerfaux, “La vision de la Femme et du Dragon en relation avec le Protevangile,” *ETL* 31 (1955) 31.

¹²⁰ Feuillet, *Mother*, 54.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 19.

¹²³ Ibid., 20. See also concurrence of Jan Fekkes III, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation* (JSNT 93; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 182.

individual Messiah.”¹²⁴ Of the scholars addressed above, Aune is the only one to note this difficulty, addressed thoroughly by Bernard J. Le Frois (whose work is treated below).

The descriptive detail of the painful childbirth is an exegesis of, and commentary on, the prophetic maternity of Zion and her messianic woes. The labor pains seem to be surprising for a Marian interpretation of the woman of Revelation 12, since Jesus’s birth is portrayed in Luke as a joyful occasion. According to Catholic tradition, Mary was spared the BP of Eve. In contrast, Feuillet points out, the woman experiences torturous (βασανίζω) labor pangs, an unusual description for the otherwise familiar metaphor of BP.¹²⁵

Feuillet concludes that the BP are those of Mary’s maternal participation in the cross at Calvary. Feuillet looks not only to the Gospel of John for insight into Rev 12:2, but to the first chapters of Luke as well: “. . . the Woman here is participating in the Passion of Christ and in the painful childbirth of the new people of God in the same way that Mary is associated [with] these two events both in the prophecy of Simeon and in the complementary scene of the farewell of Christ to his mother as we read in John 19:25-27.”¹²⁶ Simeon’s prophecy to Mary is noteworthy

¹²⁴ Feuillet, *Mother*, 82.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 53-54. Note further that elsewhere in Revelation (9:5; 11:10; 14:10; 20:10) the verb is used to describe demonic torture. Michael Koch (*Drachenkampf und Sonnenfrau; zur Funktion des mythischen in der Johannesapokalypse am Beispiel in Apk 12* [WUNT 2 Reihe 184; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004] 191) comments that the strange formulation of the BP cause one to wonder if it is even a human birth that is described, despite the genealogical connection, or if the overstated portrayal points to a broader meaning.

¹²⁶ Feuillet, *Mother*, 54. Feuillet is convinced that the author of Revelation was familiar with at least the first few chapters of Luke. He argues for this familiarity in passing, though; he is more interested in making an argument for a Marian interpretation. See pp. 22-23: “Is it conceivable that a Christian author of the late first century could speak about the Mother of Christ while prescinding entirely from the Virgin Mary? This phenomenon would appear particularly strange if we are dealing with an author who knew the Third Gospel, for the latter attributes to Mary, by reason of her Messianic and divine motherhood, an exceptional role in the history of salvation. *Now, the author of the Apocalypse does know the Third Gospel.* We will cite here only two points of contact that are very striking. In Apoc 6:16 we find the same exploitation of the text of Hosea 10:8 that we find in Lk 23:30, each time

in that he foretells Jesus's crucifixion in terms of Mary's sufferings.¹²⁷ In John 19, Jesus's last words to Mary and John are a repetition of the *fiat* of the Incarnation: "Once again Mary gives her free consent to a divine intention that concerns not only the Messiah but the messianic people."¹²⁸ When he names Mary as the mother of John, who personifies the messianic people, Christ shows that "she represents Sion and that he intends to attribute to her the supernatural and metaphorical maternity that the prophets had predicted of Sion."¹²⁹ In as much as she represents Zion, Mary can be called Mother of the Church.¹³⁰

4.3. Ignace de la Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant*

Ignace de la Potterie interprets the BP similarly to Feuillet, emphasizing the symbolic polyvalence of the Great Sign. He, however, does not consider Lukan material and focuses on the ecclesial and Johannine aspects. He writes, "Interpreting the woman as Mary allows various levels of symbolism to come together; Mary is at the same time the image and mother of the Church. At the foot of the cross, the birth of a new people, the Church, takes place."¹³¹

with the same modification of the prophetic text ("fall upon us and cover us" in place of "cover us and fall upon us"); in Apoc 11:2 as in Lk 21:24 there is a reference to Jerusalem trampled under foot by the Gentiles." (emphasis added)

¹²⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 127.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 126.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 126-27.

¹³¹ de la Potterie, *Mary*, 291.

1. Birth Pangs—A Way Out of Difficulty

The BP are those of the cross, experienced by the early Church. Like Prigent, de la Potterie interprets the BPI in the context of John 16 and writes, “The pains of the woman in giving birth, with which the sadness of the disciples is compared, are a sign of the new world, which ought to be realized for them in the Paschal event.”¹³² De la Potterie points out that Mary, especially in the Johannine tradition, is the “concrete and personal realization of the Church.”¹³³ The insight that the woman of Revelation 12 is Mary as both image and mother of the Church enables de la Potterie to account for the ecclesial significance of the woman of Revelation 12 without finding himself in Prigent’s awkward position of denying the historical reality of the resurrection.

De la Potterie points out the difficulties in combining a collective interpretation of the woman (as Israel or Zion) and an individual interpretation of the child (as Jesus). Whereas Feuillet solves this difficulty by interpreting the woman as primarily a singular figure, namely Mary, de la Potterie interprets the son primarily collectively as the body of Christ in the church. He explains that part of the solution to this difficulty lies in interpreting the child as Christ *and* his members, born of the Church.¹³⁴ This follows biblical metaphor since in Isaiah and Qumran,

¹³² Ibid., 283.

¹³³ Ibid., 288.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 285. See also Allo, *L’Apocalypse*, 193 and Primasius III PL 68. 873 D874A.

the son born to the Woman Zion represents a collective entity, that is, “all the children of the people of Israel, the new messianic people.”¹³⁵

4.3.2. The Glory of the Woman

Like Feuillet, de la Potterie notes the contrast between the woman in splendor and the woman in the midst of painful labor.¹³⁶ De la Potterie explains the contrast in terms of Mary, who concretely personifies the Church both in glory as well as in the midst of the pain of the cross, which continues in the trials and tribulations the Church experiences through the centuries. Chapter 12 is a fitting introduction to the second part of Revelation (12-22:5), which is dedicated to the destiny of the Church, represented by “Woman Zion,”¹³⁷ from its birth until its final victory in the heavenly Jerusalem, wherein “there is no longer sun or moon. The stars are no longer necessary, ‘because the glory of God illumines her and his light is the Lamb’ (Rev 21:23).”¹³⁸ De la Potterie looks at Mic 4:10 and Isa 66:6-10 to examine how “‘Daughter of Zion’ is explicitly described at the moment when she is becoming a mother.”¹³⁹ He concludes that “in Mary are accomplished all of the important aspects of the promises of the OT to the Daughter of

¹³⁵ de la Potterie, *Mary*, 283.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 278. See also John McHugh, *The Mother of Jesus in the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1975) 429: “The woman clothed with the sun is . . . the archetypal symbol of the indestructible Church, of the eternal Church.”

¹³⁸ de la Potterie, *Mary*, 279.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 282.

Zion, and in her real person there is an anticipation which will be realized for the new people of God, the Church.”¹⁴⁰

De la Potterie explains that the woman’s other offspring mentioned in 12:17 are “the believers who through their trials and persecutions, observe the commandments of God and continue to bear witness to Jesus. . . .” They are the spiritual offspring of the woman in her symbolism both of Mary and the Church.¹⁴¹

4.4. François M. Braun, *Mother of God’s People*

4.4.1. Polyvalence of Johannine Imagery

The literal sense of Scripture includes both proper and figurative senses. François M. Braun explains that, regarding the meaning known to the author (or hagiographer, as he puts it), the evident meaning may be distinguished from underlying meanings, both of which are important. John, in particular, has many such underlying meanings in passages that reflect his sense of the whole picture he is trying to communicate to his reader.¹⁴² One can attain, therefore, a fuller understanding of a particular passage by comparing it with others from John.

Braun observes that the principle of polyvalence is at work throughout John and Revelation.¹⁴³ Several symbols in Revelation have an individual and collective significance, such

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 292.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 291.

¹⁴² François Marie Braun, *Mother of God’s People* (trans. John Clarke; Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1967) 15.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 136-37. See also 127-28, where Braun reminds the reader that Revelation and the Gospel of John “reflect a theology, psychology, and spirituality that are analogous.”

as the male child, Nero, Rome, and even the two witnesses.¹⁴⁴ In the woman of Revelation 12, the Great Sign, we find the image of Eve, Zion, the Church, and Mary. Although he recognizes the OT imagery of Zion is undisputed, Braun focuses on the OT imagery of Eve and writes, “The prophecy relative to Eve (Gen 3:15) is found accomplished in Mary and the Church.”¹⁴⁵

Braun explains that it is not necessary to choose between the woman of Revelation 12 representing the Church or representing Mary and explains that “when two realities are brought under the same common designation,” it is only proper to look for the connection between those two realities, even if every aspect of the common designation does not apply equally to both realities.¹⁴⁶ Hence, Braun argues, other traits of the woman—such as the BP—could possibly be applied to Mary and the Church in a related way.

4.4.2. Birth Pangs

The BP experienced by the woman of Revelation 12 link her to the “prophecy of the Protoevangelium,” particularly Gen 3:16. Braun points out that the BP have deep significance relating to the Church and to Mary as well. The BP of the Church are Mary’s continual partaking in the “trials of her children.” Sharing “in the Passion of her Son and becoming mother of the disciples, Mary received in the pain of her maternal heart a mission which would never cease being accomplished through the time assigned to the Church on earth.”¹⁴⁷ As such, the BP are

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 153.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 154.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 155.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 156.

not unrelated to the woman's other offspring in Rev 12:17, which continues the portrayal of the woman as the New Eve.¹⁴⁸

4.4.3. Glory of the Woman

Braun criticizes the contemporary tendency to interpret the woman of Revelation 12 as the idealized Zion only—not only because often such an interpretation is presented as the only significance of the woman but also because the very prophetic traditions that the interpretation relies upon do not depict a collective Zion giving birth to a personal Messiah. Braun also criticizes the portrayal of the woman as only the Church, precisely because she is presented as victorious. He argues that in Revelation 12—and indeed in history—“the Church does not excel her pilgrim condition;” in Revelation, things are presented as victorious (the slain lamb, the triumphant elect, heavenly Jerusalem) only after they have already gained their victory—not in anticipation.¹⁴⁹

Braun concludes that the woman of Revelation 12 represents the Church in so far as Mary prefigures it: “What belongs to the Church was eminently realized in Mary, as far as the author of the Apocalypse is concerned. She, the daughter of Sion, in whom was accomplished the vocation of Israel, had been mother of the male Child and adversary of the Serpent. Under these titles, as a consequence of this primacy, Mary prefigured the Church.”¹⁵⁰ Additionally, as de la Potterie hints in the citation above, Braun explains the glory of the woman is appropriate

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 143.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 167.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 154.

for Mary, since she is “more glorious than the Church *in the course of history*, as she is already introduced into the place prepared for the Day of the Parousia. And she is more deeply engaged in the struggles of time, as she is the disciple’s mother (John 19:26) in whom we have recognized the community of believers (Rev 12:17).”¹⁵¹

4.5. Bernard J. Le Frois, *The Woman Clothed with the Sun: Individual or Collective?*

Writing around the same time as Braun, Le Frois focuses on the symbolism of the woman of Revelation 12 and offers an interpretation of the woman based on the principle “totality conception,” in which a prophetic symbol has multiple significances, particularly an individual and related collective significance.¹⁵² This interpretation of the woman on individual and collective levels is reflected in the work of many scholars, such as Braun above, but without uniform terminology or expression.¹⁵³

4.5.1. Totality Conception

Le Frois explains, “The Hebrew thinks in totalities. In the individual he sees the whole species manifesting itself. Hence, he can think of the individual and of the species at one and the same time, and the same word can be used to express both.”¹⁵⁴ In his exegesis of Revelation, which he presents as an abbreviated version of Tyconinus’s work, Bede enumerates the rules of

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 163. (emphasis added)

¹⁵² Le Frois, *Clothed With the Sun*, 236-62.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 259.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 247. See also 258, where he explains that this principle was first formulated (in essence) in Tyconius’ fourth rule of exegesis, that “the Holy Spirit, while speaking of the species, passes over to the genus, in such a way that the transition is not immediately apparent, and in the same way he leaves the genus and returns to the species. By ‘species’ and ‘genus,’ Tyconius had in mind our present-day terminology for individual and collective; hence he came close to the Semitic presentation of the matter.”

exegesis formulated by Tyconius.¹⁵⁵ The fourth of these rules regards the use of metaphor involving the species (part/individual) and genus (whole/collective), whereby the referent from a single figure may transition fluidly between the two.¹⁵⁶ Bede observes this principle is at play throughout the whole of the Bible.¹⁵⁷ Le Frois notes that this principle explains several passages in the OT where the significance of one term switches back and forth between collective and individual meaning and sometimes means both at the same time, particularly regarding kings representing their kingdoms.¹⁵⁸

This principle is at work in other parts of Revelation, as seen in the letters to the seven churches. There were more churches at the time but John is writing to the whole Church by writing to seven individual Churches. “The letters are intended for the individual Churches as well as for the entire Church.”¹⁵⁹

This principle is demonstrated in chap. 12 also and proves particularly relevant for deciphering the passage at hand: the male child is Christ, who in himself embodies the entire mystical Christ; the dragon is Satan, who in himself embodies all “the rebellious hordes of hell

¹⁵⁵ Bede, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation/ Victorinus of Petovium/ Apringius of Beja/ Caesarius of Arles/ Bede the Venerable*, trans. and ed. William C. Weinrich (Ancient Christian Texts; Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2011) 112.

¹⁵⁶ This use of metaphor is known as synecdoche, a subset of metonymy, in which a part is used to represent the whole. This type of metaphor is not so much a characteristic of Hebrew thought in particular, but human speech in general. Synecdoche can also be used as a type of personification by attaching a human aspect to a non-human thing.

¹⁵⁷ Bede, *Latin Commentaries*, 112.

¹⁵⁸ Le Frois, *Clothed With the Sun*, 249-52.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 253.

bent on domination or destruction.”¹⁶⁰ Likewise, the woman is Mary, as she is the “foremost representative” of the people of God. “Under one and the same identical image of the Woman, Mary and the Church are depicted as a totality, and the mind of the Semite passes with ease from the individual to the collective because they both form one.”¹⁶¹

Le Frois’s application of the “totality principle” to the Great Sign goes a long way to making sense of the “break” between Rev 12:1-5 and Rev 12:6, 14-17 that has puzzled scholars for some time. The “totality principle” gives the tools to explain the changing and constant significance of the woman. In Rev 12:1-5 Mary is in the foreground of the image, but the Church is implied. In Rev 12:6, 14-16, Mary is by no means excluded, yet the Church on earth stands out more prominently—the Church as it is identified with Mary. Likewise, when the woman is distinguished from her offspring (Rev 12:5, 17), “the individual comes into prominence: Mary as distinguished from her offspring.”¹⁶² But in the wilderness scene, the collective aspect is emphasized, “Mary living on in the Church.”¹⁶³

4.5.2. Birth Pangs

As with the other authors discussed in this chapter, the interpretation of the BP is closely linked with a Marian interpretation of the woman, partially because in the last centuries the BP have been presented as a difficulty and partially because of the interpretation of the BP as sign of

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 254. See also 160. Bede (*Latin Commentaries*, 150) in fact takes this interpretation of the male son born in v. 5.

¹⁶¹ Le Frois (*Clothed With the Sun*, 256) explains that this is not a double literal sense of Scripture.

¹⁶² Ibid., 257.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 258.

Mary's spiritual motherhood—in which the maternity of Zion is brought to fruition and in which the tribulations of the Church are represented. Le Frois explains, “The literal metaphorical sense discloses the meaning of the sacred author.”¹⁶⁴ The difficulties with a Marian interpretation such as the BP and other children cease to become difficulties when interpreted metaphorically, “as all the other images are.”¹⁶⁵ Additionally, regarding Mary's motherhood, Le Frois explains, “It is Mary alone who conceived the entire Christ, both Head and members; and although she remained inviolate in bringing forth the Head, to be ‘Mother of all the living’ demanded of her much suffering.”¹⁶⁶ Her suffering is portrayed in Revelation 12 as the torturous BP.

4.5.3. Marian Interpretation of the Great Sign

At the very least, an interpretation of the symbol of the woman may not exclude a Marian significance.¹⁶⁷ Le Frois writes:

... by no means did the sacred author neglect the standard imagery of the woman throughout Scripture as Mother Zion of the OT or the Church of the New. On the contrary, he perceived the unique relation of the exalted Mother of the Savior to the People of God of both Old and NTs, and portrayed Mary in person as Ideal Mother Zion and the Church in perfect form. *Neither Israel solely with all her messianic BP nor the Christian Church solely with all her glorious endowments satisfies the image of the glorious Woman in the throes of motherhood, accomplishing the great task given her by God, that is, bringing forth Christ, Head and members, to conquer and dethrone Satan, but the sublime Mother of Christ, Mary Most Holy, in whom is embodied all that is truly Israelitic, and in whom the Church finds its perfect realization.*¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 211.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 214.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 219.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 212.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 255. (emphasis added)

Le Frois discusses the difficulties with interpreting the woman as (1) only Israel or (2) the People of God throughout OT and NT. As regards Israel, he explains that it is problematic to think of OT Israel as giving birth to Christ and to the “sons of God who are Christ’s members. Not by any connection with Judaism or the Synagogue did one become a member of Christ, but by Baptism, an entirely new institution of Christ.”¹⁶⁹

If, however, one interprets the woman as the People of God throughout the OT and the NT, then there is the difficulty that “the People of God is portrayed in features far more sublime in the OT (Rev 12:1-5) than in the NT (Rev 12:6, 13-16). Moreover, it is not a question of the People of God bringing forth collectively the children of God, but of a Woman who brings forth the Messiah-Christ in whom the children of God are one. . .”¹⁷⁰

5. Conclusion

The book of Revelation is difficult to interpret without reference to related texts that provide some sort of hermeneutic key. The Great Sign of Revelation 12 is no exception. Commentators usually follow one of two approaches—the comparative approach and the canonical approach. The more popular interpretative approach today is the former, but there are scholars who emphasize the latter.

Commentators of both approaches recognize the image of the BP in Rev 12:2 to be a well-attested OT image of the hardships to be endured by Israel at the advent of the Messianic

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 217.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 218. See also 172.

age or end times. Although most commentators recognize the child as Jesus, almost no one considers the BP to be those accompanying Jesus's actual birth.¹⁷¹ The commentators' approach correlates with how extensively they discuss the significance of the BPI.

Those who take the comparative approach tend to miss the nuances of the BPI and spend little time discussing the use of the image in the NT context. They do not discuss the contrast between the celestial glory of the woman and her torturous BP—a unique image in the entire OT and NT. Since the scholars who use the source-critical method in this context postulate several non-Christian, even non-Jewish, mythological sources that provide the basic structure and context of Revelation 12, it is easy for them to conclude that the Christian exegesis of an OT image is of secondary importance and historically bound to the situation of the early Christians. Collins interprets the BP to be the persecutions experienced by the early Christians who read the book of Revelation; Schreiber and Pataki have different interpretations of Revelation 12, yet they nevertheless remain within the parameters of the comparative approach.

Those scholars who attempt a corrective to the comparative approach represent various interpretations in attempting to make biblical sense of the mysterious image of the Great Sign. All four scholars discussed (Gollinger, Corsini, Prigent, and Tavo) attempt to recover an interpretation of Revelation 12 that takes into account the Paschal mystery. Their interpretations reflect an emphasis on the OT use of BPI within salvation history but generalize the significance of the Great Sign to the exclusion of any relation with actual historical persons or events.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Swete, *Apocalypse*, 148.

The last group of scholars attend most carefully to OT and NT imagery in the Great Sign, including the BPI. With such attention, the symbolic layering within the image of the Great Sign becomes evident. Interestingly, acknowledging a Marian aspect to the Great Sign broadens its significance rather than constricts it since the Marian symbolism provides an ordering for the various layers of images present. These scholars emphasize the symbolism of the Paschal mystery in the Great Sign and attend to the mechanism of polyvalence, or totality conception, as an exegetical principle (in particular, Braun and Le Frois).

This last group of scholars provides helpful insight into the metaphorical sense of the scriptural text. Their attention both to the final text of Revelation and to the allusions to prominent Biblical metaphor/motifs is helpful for today's discussion of Revelation and the BPI. In her book *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, Claudia Bergmann laments the tendency of biblical scholarship to ignore the use of metaphor (otherwise known as the improper literal sense) in the biblical text and mentions Adele Berlin's concern as well, that only from the mid-twentieth century has attention slowly been turning to metaphor in biblical poetry and prose.¹⁷²

The connection between metaphor and BPI in Revelation 12 is a complex question, since the BP in Rev 12:2 are not a metaphor in a traditional literary sense, but rather are described as part of a vision. On the other hand, the BP described are a symbolic representation of another reality. Uncovering that reality requires attention to the multiple significances of the metaphor of BP throughout the OT and NT as well as related literature. A focus on this imagery within the OT and NT canon as well as related pseudepigraphal and Qumran literature will give much

¹⁷² Claudia Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis: Evidence from the Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and IQH XI, 1-18* (BZAW 382; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008) 4.

needed aid for interpreting one of the most puzzling passages of the NT, the Great Sign, built on two contrasting images: the crowning of celestial glory and the throes of labor pangs.

Chapter Two

Birth-Pang Imagery in Old Testament and Related Literature

1. Introduction

In the first chapter I presented a broad survey of the interpretation of the significance of BPI in Revelation 12. As discussed, commentators vary in how much attention they pay to BPI in the OT and NT and its significance for Revelation 12. I concluded that in order to arrive at a satisfactory interpretation of BPI in Revelation 12, it is necessary to take into account the broad spectrum of OT and NT use of this significant imagery.

In this chapter I will survey occurrences of BPI in the OT and related literature. BPI tends to be a recurrent theme throughout the OT. Birth and BPI texts may refer to other texts and can sometimes have several layers of meaning. Different instances of OT BPI can be categorized according to the way they are used. BPI is used in different ways throughout the OT, not just to represent fear of military invasion, as suggested by Amy Kalmanofsky.¹

In some metaphorical uses BP represent birth, a blessing from God and an opportunity for humanity to participate in creation. The image of God giving birth is sometimes used as a metaphor for creation. Birth itself is closely linked to creation. For example, after God creates humankind in Gen 1:27, He blesses them and commands them to “Be fertile and multiply.”

¹ Amy Kalmanofsky, “Israel’s Baby: The Horror of Childbirth in the Biblical Prophets,” *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2008) 60-82.

Usually, however, OT BPI signifies human alienation from God due to sin—all the more poignantly since the alienation is signified in the intimate partnership of God and humanity. The alienation represented by BPI is rooted in the Genesis 3 description of Eve's BP as one of several signs that humanity has been alienated from God. This alienation results from Adam and Eve's disobedience in the garden and results in their expulsion from the garden.

The occurrences of OT BPI as alienation of humanity from God can be categorized according to the following types of usage: BPI as it represents alienation within the blessing of birth; BPI as a sign of negative divine judgment (usually in the context of battle); BPI that fails to yield a birth as a sign of futility of human action without the divine; BPI that yields birth as a sign of future redemption; and finally, the remarkable absence of BP in birth as a sign of divine intervention. The first two categories—particularly the first one—represent the dominant OT birth pang metaphors upon which the other three categories are based.

The occurrences of BPI in related literature (OT Pseudepigrapha and Qumran) fall roughly into these same categories, with some innovation. For sake of clarity I discuss extracanonical material separately from the OT material. I will, however, indicate what OT category to which each extracanonical usage corresponds.

2. Birth Pangs as a Metaphor for the Birthing Process

2.1. Birth as a Metaphor for Creation

In the following texts birth is used as a metaphor for creation. God is portrayed as giving birth. It is a question of debate, however, whether or not the texts discussed here portray birth in terms of birth pains. All the texts use the same word to describe the process of giving birth, הָלַל,

the very meaning of which is debated. Before discussing individual texts, I will address the difficulty of ascertaining the meaning of חלל in the general context of these texts.

In the context of birth, the verb חלל means, “to writhe,” in labor pains, or at the very least, “to labor.” As seen below, these texts are translated by “giving birth” or “bringing forth” in the Latin and Greek traditions as well as in modern English translations. Marianne Grohmann argues that such translations are a reflection of the discomfort of exegetes with the idea of God experiencing labor pains.² Without speculating on personal motives of scholarly endeavors and remembering the birth image is *metaphorical*, one can agree with Grohmann that retaining the labor aspect of birth imagery in translation emphasizes the personal relationship between God and creation.³

Contrary to Grohmann, however, the English translations of “giving birth” or “bringing forth” capture the meaning of the texts. There is no established Hebrew verb for a male subject giving birth, much less for a male subject experiencing labor pangs. Used of a male subject, יָלַד, the typical Hebrew word for “to give birth,” means, “to beget.” In the unique texts discussed below, it is possible that חלל is being used to accommodate an unusual meaning of a male subject giving birth, however metaphorically.⁴ The LXX and Vg translations seem to bear

² Marianne Grohmann, “Metaphors of God, Nature and Birth in Psalm 90:2 and Psalm 110:3,” in *Metaphors in the Psalms* (ed. Pierre van Hecke and Antje Labahn; BETL 231; Walpole, MA: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2010) 23-34, here 26.

³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18A; New York: Doubleday, 2000, 2009) 282-83.

witness to the same tradition of interpretation as reflected in the English. See the discussion below for further treatment of this topic.

1. “*You were unmindful of the Rock that begot you (אֱלֹהֵינוּ), You forgot the God who gave you birth (אֱלֹהֵינוּ).*” (Deut 32:18)

Instead of “the God who gave you birth,” another possible translation would be “the God who labored to give you birth.”

Deuteronomy 32, known as the “Song of Moses,” describes the woeful inadequacy of Israel’s response to God’s saving action. Israel’s response to God’s intimate care for her has been forgetfulness and infidelity. The metaphorical imagery used to make this point is of relevance to the topic at hand. Both the LXX and Vg retain imagery of God’s intimate care without, however, the specific birth imagery.

The LXX reading, “You were unmindful of the God who begot you and you forgot the God who nursed you” (θεὸν τὸν γεννήσαντά σε ἐγκατέλιπες καὶ ἐπελάθου θεοῦ τοῦ τρέφοντός σε) retains the personal aspect of God’s creation of Israel with a completely different image: that of nourishment. τρέφω is often used of mothers nursing their infants or rearing their children.

The Latin reading, “You turned away from the God who begot you and forgot the God who created you” (*Deum qui te genuit dereliquisti et oblitus es Domini creatoris tui*) conveys the metaphorical meaning of the Hebrew text, that is, creation.

2. “*Before the mountains were born, the earth and the world brought forth (לְעוֹלָם), from eternity to eternity you are God.*” (Ps 90:2; LXX Ps 89:2)

An alternative translation with the correct subject would be: “Before the mountains were born, you labored to bear forth the earth and firmament—from eternity to eternity, you are God.”⁵

Psalm 90 describes God’s eternity in contrast to the brevity of creation, which is described in terms evocative of Genesis 1. He preexists even the mountains, and the life span of a human person passes quickly.

Psalm 90 not only contrasts God’s eternity with human mortality, but it also situates mortal existence within God’s personal creation of the universe, represented as God giving birth.⁶ The parallel structure of this verse allows the reader to understand that God not only preexists the mountains, he has brought them forth into being. Likewise, he has brought forth the earth into being.

The difficulty in translating this text is related to the ambiguous Po’el verb form of הָיָה, נִתְהַוָּה.⁷ The form can be taken as either second masculine singular active or third feminine singular active. In this instance, the verb should be taken as a second masculine singular active. The *NAB*, however, and other translations translate the verb as third feminine singular active. There are many difficulties that arise from interpreting the verb form in this text as third

⁵ Grohmann, “Metaphors,” 24. She suggests the translation, “Before mountains were born and you were in labor with earth and mainland, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.”

⁶ Frank Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005) 421. Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (trans., Herbert Hartwell; OTL; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1962) 597 does not have any grounding for his position that the text is evocative of mother earth giving birth to creation.

⁷ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (3 vols.; AB 16, 17A-B; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968-70) 2.323. Dahood reads the stem as a polal instead of polel.

feminine singular: (1) the form is singular and not plural, despite a plural subject; (2) the verb is transitive and the necessary object is not supplied; (3) lack of direct object could require a passive translation to make sense of the text.⁸ Difficulties (1) and (2) are evident in the *NAB* translation above. The RSV translates the verb as second masculine singular even though it does not transmit the birth imagery: “. . . or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world.”

Difficulty three is evident in both the LXX and Vg. The LXX and Vg have different nuances of meaning. The LXX translates the Hebrew, “Before the mountains were conceived and the earth and world fashioned, from eternity to eternity, you are” (πρὸ τοῦ ὄρη γενηθῆναι καὶ πλασθῆναι τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν οἰκουμένην καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος ἕως τοῦ αἰῶνος σὺ εἶ) preserves the personal aspect of God’s creative activity, but without the imagery of labor.

The Vg, “Before the mountains were born and the earth and world were labored forth, from eternity to eternity you are” (*antequam montes nascerentur et parturetur terra et orbis a saeculo et usque in saeculum tu es*) is faithful to the birth imagery.

3. “When there were no depths (תְּהוֹמוֹת) I was brought forth (יָצֵאתִי), when there were no fountains or springs of water; Before the mountains were settled into place, before the hills, I was brought forth (יָצֵאתִי).” (Prov 8:24-25)

A possible alternative translation that emphasizes birth imagery would be, “. . . I was labored forth. . . .”

In Proverbs 8 Divine Wisdom is personified and speaks of her origins before creation. She is the firstborn of creation and describes her role in creation as the LORD’s “craftsman.”

⁸ See GKC, 151-52, on “Less Common Conjugations” for a discussion of the use of Po’el.

Wisdom is created even before the depth of Gen 1:2 (מְהַרְהֵרָה) is created.⁹ Blessings are bestowed upon those who follow her ways.

The birth imagery is not reflected in the *NAB* translation or in the LXX. The Vg partially transmits the birth imagery. The LXX reading of v. 24 does not follow the MT. The LXX reading of v. 25, “. . . before the mountains were established and the hills, he begot me” (πρὸ τοῦ ὄρη ἐδρασθῆναι πρὸ δὲ πάντων βουνῶν γεννῶ με) is faithful to the idea that Wisdom is created by God, but it does not maintain the birth imagery in the Hebrew. The subject of γεννῶ is the LORD, in contrast with the MT and Vg, in which the subject is Wisdom. The verb form is the present tense of γεννάω, the causal of γίγνομαι, “to be,” used mostly of the father, who begets the child.¹⁰

The Vg reading of v. 24, “Not yet were the depths—and I was conceived” (*necdum erant abyssi et ego iam concepta eram . . .*) maintains the basic meaning that God created Wisdom, but without the birth imagery. The Vg reading of v. 25 follows the Hebrew with “I was brought forth/labored forth” (*ego parturiebar*).

In conclusion, in the examples discussed above the image of birth as a metaphor for creation does not include the image of BP. הָלַל has been translated in the tradition as “to bring forth” or “birth” when the subject is God. Labor, in the sense of the effort of birth, is probably included in the sense of the word, since the various works of God are described in the same context. Pain, however, is not included in the meaning of the word.

⁹ Fox, *Proverbs 1-9*, 282.

¹⁰ LSJ, 344.

2.2. Birth Pangs as a Sign of Birth, a Miracle of Creation

“Do you know about the birth of the mountain goats, watch for the birth pangs (לָלֶדֶת) of the hinds, number the months that they must fulfill, and fix the time of their bringing forth?” (Job 39:1-2)

In this text God responds to Job’s prayers and petitions for a reversal of his fate. “After pointing to the marvels of his creation in the earth, the sea, and the heavens, the Lord takes up the wonders of his provenance for birds and beasts.”¹¹ The image of BP is part and parcel of the birth imagery God uses to illustrate the mysterious order of his creation.¹² These texts speak about creation from the perspective of creation, that is, concrete natural experience in which labor pangs are encountered. This is a different way of speaking about creation than in the previous three texts discussed. In the three previous texts creation is viewed from the human perspective of the Creator’s actions. Here God speaks to Job of the mystery of his divine ways and wisdom in ordering nature—wisdom that humankind does not necessarily understand. In this verse the hinds are the subject of BP, not God. The LXX and Vg translations of לָלֶדֶת (ὠδίννας/*parturientes*, respectively) follow the MT.

2.3. Birth Pangs Represent the Blessing of Birth

Isaiah 23:4 and 54:1 are instances in which BP stand for birth, displaying the literary device in which a part is used to refer to the whole. In both texts from Isaiah BP represent all that

¹¹ Patrick W. Skeehan, “The Book of Job,” in *Studies in Israelite Poetry and Wisdom* (CBQMS 1; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1971) 80.

¹² Marvin H. Pope (*Job: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* [AB 15; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965] 259) writes, “Because this word in Hebrew usually designates the pains of childbirth, this line has been misunderstood as depicting painful delivery rather than the easy and rapid parturition normal for wild animals.”

a birth entails, from BP to rearing the child who has come into the world. In Isaiah and the whole OT cities are personified as women. Given the “well-established thematic link between covenant and marriage,” the feminine personification of Israel and/or Jerusalem holds special significance.¹³

The texts from Isaiah discussed in this section, as well as those discussed in other sections, reflect Isaiah’s own admonitions to other prophets “to speak tender words to the woman Jerusalem, unlike their predecessors, who often subjected her to verbal abuse, sometimes in the coarsest terms.”¹⁴

1. “*Shame, O Sidon, fortress on the sea, for the sea has spoken: ‘I have not been in labor (לֹא-לֵדָה), nor given birth, nor raised young men, nor reared virgins.’*” (Isa 23:4)

Isaiah 23 is an oracle against Tyre in which the sea personified bemoans the fate of Tyre. The fates of Tyre and Sidon are intertwined. In the sacking of the harbor, the sea cries that she will not experience labor pangs (לֹא-לֵדָה) or give birth to children. Here, BP are a blessing because they are part of the whole process of child birthing and child rearing, which is a blessing. The LXX and Vg translations of לֵדָה (οὐκ ὄδινον/ *non parturivi*, respectively) follow the MT.

¹³ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 19A; New York: Doubleday, 2002) 364.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 359. See Isa 40:2.

2. “Raise a glad cry, you barren one who did not bear (לֹא יָלְדָהּ), break forth in jubilant song, you who were not in labor (לֹא-לָדָהּ), for more numerous are the children of the deserted wife than the children of her who has a husband, says the LORD.” (Isa 54:1)

This text from Isaiah 54 follows the chapter of the “Fourth Suffering Servant Song.” In this text Isaiah applies the OT theme of the barren woman to Israel, whom Isaiah is comforting.¹⁵ Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah are all prominent women of the OT who suffer because they are barren and have no children until the Lord blesses them. For these women, BP signify the blessing of birth. In Isaiah 54, the woman who has not had labor pangs is a woman who has not given birth. Isaiah compares Israel’s hardship and desolation not to BP, as in texts discussed later in this chapter, but to sterility that will be transformed by the LORD.

Isaiah’s exhortation for Israel to rejoice is based on a promise of the reversal of Israel’s situation. The image of a woman deprived of the blessing of children is not a cause for rejoicing. Isaiah assures Israel that, although she is forsaken, the LORD’s withdrawal is temporary.¹⁶ The LORD will again take Jerusalem as his own, rebuild the city, and protect her. Isaiah 55 goes on to describe the new era in which the LORD will glorify Israel. She is promised more children than the woman in wedlock. The very mountains and hills will rejoice.

¹⁵ Mary Callaway, *Sing O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash* (SBLDS 91; Atlanta: Scholars, 1986) 59-64.

¹⁶ Joseph Blenkinsopp (*Isaiah 55-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 19B; New York: Doubleday, 2003] 363) notes that the hidden face of God, an operative image in this text, is a standard figure for abandonment and distance. Here, the hidden face of God is the cause of Israel’s barrenness.

3. “Who is this coming up from the desert, leaning upon her lover? Under the apple tree I awakened you; it was there that your mother conceived you (הַבְּלֵהָ), it was there that your parent conceived (יִלְדָהּ יִלְדָהּ).” (Cant 8:5)

A translation that reflects the Hebrew is, “. . . it was there that your mother was in travail with you; there she who travailed gave birth to you.”¹⁷

Canticles 8 is an intimate love song in which two voices speak in turn. In this text, the man speaks to the woman and describes the place of their intimacy—under the apple tree—as the same place where the woman’s own mother experienced BP and gave birth to her.¹⁸ Mentioning BP in such an intimate context, as a special part of the woman’s history, portrays the BP in a positive light because BP are part of the birth, which is a blessing.

The LXX tradition follows the MT but the Vg seems to follow a different theological interpretation in a perplexing reading of v. 5b, “. . . there your mother was corrupted; there your parent was violated (*ibi corrupta est mater tua ibi violata est genetrix tua*).¹⁹

¹⁷ See Marianne Grohmann’s helpful discussion of the use of the piel form of הבל in Cant 8:5 in conjunction with its appearance in Ps 7:15 (“Ambivalent Images of Birth in Psalm VII 15,” *VT* 54 [2005] 339-49, here 442).

¹⁸ Marvin H. Pope’s translation of הבל as “conceive” (*Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 7C; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977] 664) is unfounded. I do appreciate, however, his call to restore the punctuation proper to the feminine suffixes in the consonantal text (*ibid.*, 663).

¹⁹ Pope (*ibid.*, 663) notes that the Vg reading corresponds to Aquila’s reading, διέφθαρε, which is a mistranslation of הַבְּלֵהָ as הַבְּלֵהָ. As a note, the New Vulgate follows the MT.

3. Birth Pangs and Birth as a Metaphor for Evil

“Sinners conceive (יִהְיֶה לָם) iniquity; pregnant (וְהָרָה) with mischief, they give birth (וְיִלְדוּ) to failure.” (Ps 7:15)

An alternative translation is, “The wicked man is in travail with iniquity; pregnant with sorrow, he gives birth to deceit.”

The *NAB*’s translation of יִהְיֶה לָם is somewhat confusing since “to conceive” is certainly outside the lexical range of meaning of the verb. Grohmann urges a more faithful translation and sees the inversion of stages as metaphorically significant.²⁰ There is not actually an inversion of stages, but rather v. 15b explains the meaning of v. 15a in more detail.

In this text the BP represent the process of giving birth and all that it entails. Since birth is used as a metaphor for planning and executing evil deeds, the image is a negative one. The metaphor simply plays on the similarity between the long, labored processes of planning—for good or evil—and of giving birth. In both situations, the results are apparent for all to see. The result of birth is positive: a child. The result of wicked planning is negative: sorrow and deceit. Birth itself is not portrayed in negative terms.²¹

²⁰ Grohmann, “Ambivalent Images,” 441. See also 439, where she suggests the translation, “See! He is in labor with disaster; and he is pregnant with harm; and he gives birth to (a) lie.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, 448.

4. Birth Pangs Represent Alienation in the Midst of Blessing

1. *“To the woman he said: “I will intensify the pangs (עֲצִיבוֹתַיִךְ) of your childbearing (וְיָהֳרָה לְךָ); in pain (בְּעֲצָבָה) shall you bring forth children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall be your master.” (Gen 3:16)*

The most striking and biblically influential OT references to BP comes in Gen 3:16 as part of the curse given to the first woman when she and Adam are cast out of the garden. Adam has not yet named the woman. The immediate context of this text is the disobedience of the first man and woman. The broader context is the resulting disruption of the original divine vision of man’s life in the garden (2:15), the unity of man and woman and the blessing of children (2:23-24).

This text has various interpretive difficulties, particularly the first half of v. 16a. The general meaning of increased difficulty of pregnancy and birth is witnessed to in early interpretative traditions (LXX, Vg, *Apoc. Mos.*) and enjoys fairly widespread support among contemporary scholars. Additionally, most contemporary scholars read this part of the verse as a classic example of a hendiadys.²² Michael (Tzvi) Novick presents a helpful discussion of various contemporary interpretations of the text, and an interesting interpretation of his own.²³

The term by which BP are described in this verse has been the subject of much discussion. The root, עֲצָב, has two major lexical definitions. In Gen 3:16a it is normally

²² Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 24.

²³ Michael (Tzvi) Novick, “Pain and Production in Eden: Some Philological Reflections on Genesis iii:16,” *VT* 58 (2008) 235-44.

translated according to its first meaning, “pain,” “toil,” “anxiety.” Novick, however, suggests translating it according to its second meaning, “wrapping,” “shaping,” “fashioning.”²⁴ He translates v. 16a “the shaping of your conception,” meaning an increase in length of pregnancy. While this is intriguing and does make sense of the meaning of פָּרַח (pregnancy or conception), such a translation is untenable in light of the other occurrences of the same form of the root (Gen 3:17; 5:29; 1 Chr 4:9) and even the different form in the same verse (Gen 3:16) in which the root is clearly being used according to the meaning of toil and distress.

Novick rightly highlights the importance of a correct translation of פָּרַח by showing that there are several OT references to the difficulties of pregnancy (Gen 25:22; Tob 4:4; Jer 31:7). In this regard, Novick stands in contrast to Carol L. Meyers who dismisses the translation, “pain (or toil or anxiety) in pregnancy.” Meyers interprets v. 16 as “I will greatly increase your work and your pregnancies; (along) with toil you shall give birth to children.”²⁵ The Genesis account of Rachel’s death in childbirth with Benjamin witnesses to unexpected difficulties in childbirth. Even the possible translation, “pain (or toil or anxiety) in conception,” would be contextually reasonable when the reader considers the sorrow of barren women throughout the OT (Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah, for example).

The LXX and Vg are important for the history of interpretation. The LXX reading of the first part of v. 16a, “your pain and your groaning” (τὰς λύπας σου καὶ τὸν στεναγμὸν

²⁴ Ibid., 240.

²⁵ Carol L. Meyers, “Gender Roles and Genesis 3:16 Revisited,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor David Noel Freedman in Celebration of his Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. Carol L. Meyers and Michael P. O’Connor; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 337-53, here 344.

σου), may be based on a misreading of הָרִיבָהּ (your pregnancy or conception) as הָרִיבָהּ (moaning). The Vg reading of the first part of v. 16a, “your labor/affliction and your conception” (*aerumnas tuas et conceptus tuos*), follows the Hebrew diction more closely than the LXX.²⁶ Through the whole of v. 16a the LXX translates both instances of עָצַב as λύπη, whereas the Vg translates עָצַב first as *aerumna* and second as *dolor*. The LXX’s consistent translation of עָצַב emphasizes the continuity of meaning throughout Gen 3:16a-17. The (increased) difficulty the woman will experience in bearing children is paralleled by the (increased) difficulty Adam will experience in working the ground.²⁷

Genesis 3:16 gives deeper insight into the meaning of BP in the OT world. BP, a sign that new life is on the way, are described in 3:16 as a sign of human frailty in accomplishing the most basic command (and blessing), “multiply and be fruitful,” (1:28) given to humanity.

2. “Then they departed from Bethel; but while they still had some distance to go on the way to Ephrath, Rachel began to be in labor (וַתֵּלֶד) and to suffer great distress (בְּלִדְתָהּ בְּהַקְשָׁתָהּ). When her pangs (בְּהַקְשָׁתָהּ בְּלִדְתָהּ) were most severe, her midwife said to her, ‘Have no fear! This time, too, you have a son.’ With her last breath—for she was at the point of death—she called him Ben-oni (בֶּן־אוֹנִי); his father, however, named him Benjamin.” (Gen 35:16-18; also Jub 32:33)

²⁶ Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000) 82.

²⁷ Ibid.

This text tells the poignant story of Rachel's death in childbirth with her second son on the way to Ephrath, or Bethlehem. Rachel's name for her son reflects her difficulty in childbirth, difficulty that is severe enough to cause her death. Even though Jacob exercises the final naming rights of his offspring and names him Benjamin, Rachel first names her second son, "son of my trouble" or "son of my sorrow."²⁸ Her choice of name reflects the sorrow of her pain in labor and delivery and her awareness of her impending death that casts an alienating shadow over the joyous occasion of childbirth, particularly that of a son. The contrast between the midwife's encouragement and Rachel's knowledge of her own fate emphasizes the alienation from the fullness of God's blessing of birth.

The phrase used to describe BP in these verses, *וַתִּקַּח בְּלִדְתָהּ* (she was hard-pressed in her labor), is not used in other occasions of OT BPI, descriptive or metaphoric. Most OT BPI tends to be more formulaic. The discreet depiction of Rachel's birth is typical of OT accounts of births, even difficult ones. The metaphorical references to childbirth and the accompanying pangs tend to be more graphic.²⁹

Similar details in the Jubilees' account of Rachel's death in childbirth include Rachel's naming her son, Ben-oni (*Jub* 32:33).

3. *"Jabez was the most distinguished of the brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, 'I bore him with pain (בְּעֵצָה).'* (I Chr 4:9)

²⁸ Speiser (*Genesis*, 273-74) observes that this is the interpretation of the folk etymology preferred by tradition, as in Hos 9:4.

²⁹ Bergmann, *Childbirth*, 66-67.

This is the second text in which עֲצַב refers to BP. Jabez's mother names him "Jabez" as a play on the root עֲצַב, since she "bore him with pain." He is described as the most upstanding of his brothers. Bergmann points out that successful birthing despite a difficult labor or unusual circumstances was considered a sign of special divine protection.³⁰ In 1 Chr 4:10 Jabez's prayer to God, "Help me and make me free of misfortune, without pain!" (וְעֲשֵׂיתָ מְרֻעָה לְבִלְתִּי עֲצָבִי), is another play on the root, עֲצַב. Jabez asks for the same divine intervention throughout his life that he experienced in his birth.³¹

1 Chr 4:9 and Gen 3:16 are the only two instances in the OT in which the Hebrew root עֲצַב is used to refer to BP. The LXX and Vg follow the MT. The LXX transliterates the name Jabez, witnessing to the play on words in Hebrew. The Vg "because I bore him in pain" (*quia peperit eum in dolore*) echoes the "*in dolore*" of Gen 3:16. The Vg tends to use *dolor* of childbirth only in cases of difficulty.

5. Birth Pangs Represent Negative Divine Judgment

The use of BPI to convey a physical likeness between a woman in labor and a man experiencing great fear or distress is the most common OT use of BPI. When Bergmann

³⁰ Ibid., 65.

³¹ See Gary N. Knoppers (*1 Chronicles 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 12; New York: Doubleday, 2003] 346) for a different interpretation: "Jabez asks the God of Israel to free him from an association between his name and fate."

describes childbirth as a metaphor for crisis, she considers primarily the use of BPI in the texts discussed below.³²

5.1. Birth Pangs Describe the Reaction to Military Defeat

The crisis of military defeat holds unique significance in the OT. The reaction to military defeat is described with BPI. Use of BPI does not simply illustrate a “reaction to bad news.”³³ Nor does BPI applied to the defeated soldiers impart “a curse of antiquity” upon the defeated soldiers. Rather, military defeat was interpreted as a sign of negative divine judgment and, within the unique OT context of BPI, a description of the defeated soldiers in terms of BP holds unique significance.³⁴

Negative divine judgment can be against Israel as well as other countries. The exile of the Israelites under the Babylonians is interpreted in the OT as a sign of radical divine judgment against Israel. When Israel is portrayed as the (future) victor over her oppressors, the victory is at the hand of the LORD who comes as a mighty warrior to defend/avenge Israel. The nation condemned by impending military takeover/defeat is helpless before the judgment. The

³² Bergmann (*Childbirth*, 82-163) discusses the use of metaphor for childbirth in descriptions of local, universal, and personal crises.

³³ Delbert R. Hillers, “A Convention in Hebrew Literature: The Reaction to Bad News,” *ZAW* 77 (1965) 86-89. Hillers describes various reactions of OT persona to bad news in the context of ANE literature. His treatment of such reactions in the OT is limited. He does not distinguish between the various instances when an individual is described as growing weak and when an individual is described as growing weak like a woman in labor. This distinction does not exist in ANE literature but is key in the interpretation of OT texts because of the unique context and significance of BP. Hillers interpretation is influential with commentators on Jeremiah.

³⁴ Jack R. Lundbom’s consistent interpretation of all BPI in Jeremiah to be an example of a “curse of antiquity” to become “like (weak) women” (*Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 21A; New York: Doubleday, 1999] 369) does not take into account the span of the OT use of BPI. Lundbom cites Delbert R. Hillers’s work, *Treaty-Curses and the OT Prophets* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964) in support of his reading. Hillers does not include the theme of BP in his treatment of OT curses.

helplessness gives the distress of the situation a particular characteristic akin to the distress of a woman in labor, particularly with her first child, as Jer 4:31 specifies for even further emphasis.

The texts discussed in this section usually include the simile “like a woman in labor.” BPI in these texts tends to be the most formulaic of the OT categories. The same vocabulary and constructions are used consistently. BPI in Jeremiah, especially, tends to be so formulaic that William L. Holladay considers several instances of its usage to be a gloss calling for deletion.³⁵

In her discussion of birth as crisis in the OT, Bergmann categorizes the texts according to whether the crisis described is personal, local, or universal. The key to the use of BPI, however, is the personalizing aspect of BPI. That is, for the BPI or metaphor to make sense, whether the subject is a group of people or a city or a portion of natural creation, that subject is portrayed as one woman, on the model of real reactions of women in birth.³⁶ For the purposes of the particular image or metaphor/simile, the subject is “like a woman in labor.”

1. “*Trembling seized them there, anguish, like a woman’s labor* (הַיָּל פִּיזוֹלָהָ).” (Ps 48:7)

In Psalm 48 the beauty and permanence of Zion, blessed by God, is described. The foreign kings assemble around Zion’s hill, preparing to invade, and are stricken with alarm and panic when they see the strength of Zion. The foreign kings act like women in labor when they see the strength of Zion. The BPI in this verse emphasizes the helplessness and weakness of the foreign kings when confronted with the power of God, seen in the strength of Zion.

³⁵ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26-52* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989) 344. Holladay (344, 379, 395) considers Jer 48:41b and 49:24 glosses to be omitted. Additionally, he considers Jer 50:43 to be material taken from Jer 6:22-24.

³⁶ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah Chaps. 1-25* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1986) 225.

The verses following meditate on God's steadfast love. The focus on divine judgment in this psalm is positive; that is to say, the focus is on the permanent glory of Zion, blessed by God.

2. “. . . Pangs (צִיָּרִים) and sorrows (וְהִבְלִים) take hold of them, like a woman in labor they writhe (וְהִבְלִים יִצְחָזֹזֶן פִּיזְלָהָהּ); they look aghast at each other, their faces aflame.” (Isa 13:8)

Isaiah 13 is “an oracle concerning Babylon; a vision of Isaiah, son of Amoz” (13:1) in which Isaiah describes the destruction the LORD of hosts and his assembled army will bring upon Babylon in his day of wrath. The day of wrath has cosmic dimensions, for the LORD will make “the heavens tremble and the earth shall be shaken from its place” (13:13). This oracle is a classic example of an oracle in the Oracles against the Nations (OAN) in which there are several elements of city-lament.³⁷ In this oracle, the focus is on the utter destruction of Babylon and the punishment of the “world for its evil.” The warriors are helpless before the judgment and wrath of the LORD, which is instigated by evil and iniquity (13:11). The warriors' helpless reaction in the face of divine judgment is described in terms of BP. Later, in chapter 14, Isaiah mentions the LORD once again showing mercy upon Israel and resettling them.

The Hebrew root רָצַץ is translated as “anguish” or “pangs” or “distress.” This root appears throughout Isaiah and Jeremiah and refers particularly to the distress of BP.

³⁷ Frederick W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (BibOr 44; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993) 123. In his treatment of Isaiah 13, Dobbs-Allsopp does not discuss BPI in particular but rather the theme of divine destruction, which in the OT results from negative divine judgment.

3. “Therefore my loins are filled with anguish, pangs (צִיָּרִים) have seized me like those of a woman in labor (כְּצִיָּרֵי יוֹלְדָה); I am too bewildered to hear, too dismayed to look.” (Isa 21:3)

The OAN continues through Isaiah 23. In Isaiah 21, the fall of Babylon is met with Isaiah’s anguished reaction.³⁸ The BPI is used to describe anguish at the vision of Babylon’s fall. The anguish is in sympathy with the helpless plight of the Babylonians in their military overthrow.³⁹

The chapters immediately preceding Isaiah 21 share the vision, “Although the LORD shall smite Egypt severely, he shall heal them” (19:22), and there will come a day when the LORD blesses Egypt and Assyria, and together with Israel, the three will be a blessing in the world (19:24-25). Then the LORD commands Isaiah to go about barefoot and naked to represent the Egyptian and Cush captives of the King of Assyria (Isaiah 20).

4. “Yes, I hear the moaning as of a woman in travail (כְּחֹזֶקֶת), like the anguish (צִיָּרָה) of a mother with her first child—the cry of daughter Zion gasping, as she stretches forth her hands: ‘Ah, woe is me! I sink exhausted before the slayers!’” (Jer 4:31)

This dramatic personification of daughter Zion at the peak of BP is a feature of city-laments.⁴⁰ The personification of Zion closes a chapter describing Jeremiah’s visions of

³⁸ Hillers (“Convention,” 88) and Dobbs-Allsopp (*Weep*, p. 103) see Isaiah’s reaction as conventional.

³⁹ Brevard S. Childs (*Isaiah* [OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2001] 152) comments that the perplexing mystery of Isaiah’s deep sympathy for the plight of the Babylonians is solved with an earlier dating in an 8th-century setting. At that time, Babylon was under Merodach-balada, and an ally of Judah against Assyria.

⁴⁰ Dobbs-Allsopp (*Weep*, p. 138) notes that although most commentators fail to do so, it is important to distinguish between the personified city and the community.

destruction that undo the very acts of creation: “I looked at the earth, and it was waste and void; at the heavens, and their light had gone out!” (Jer 2:23). Jeremiah promises that wrath of the Lord (4:8) will come in cosmic proportions if Jerusalem does not repent her wicked ways. Jerusalem does not, however, repent; instead of clothing herself in sackcloth, she dresses herself in purple and puts on cosmetics. Instead of trying to please the LORD, she tries to please her false lovers, the nations.

This last verse of the chapter portrays daughter Zion at the mercy of “the slayers,” the very lovers who have spurned her, yet for whom she persists in beautifying herself (Jer 4:30). The lovers represent the pagan nations who have betrayed (or will betray) Jerusalem by conquering her. They are the instruments of God’s judgment. The contrast between the false confidence of daughter Zion at the peak of her beauty and the helplessness of a woman forsaken in BP makes the poignant argument that the destruction of Israel is not a result of the LORD’s deception of Israel (Jer 4:10) but Israel’s own self-deception.

Jeremiah features the few OT metaphorical images of sexual violation (of Israel) in relation to divine judgment. Metaphorical images of sexual violation are a feature of the city-lament, but rarely used in conjunction with BPI. In Jer 4:30-31, “the first [image] calls attention to Zion’s culpability and the second, her tragic plight.”⁴¹ Jeremiah 13:21-22 (discussed below) is the only other text which exhibits this metaphor combination.

5. “We hear the report of them; helpless fall our hands, Anguish (עָרִירָה) takes hold of us, throes (תִּזְרֹתַי) like a mother’s in childbirth (בְּיִלְדוּתָהּ).” (Jer 6:24)

⁴¹ Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep*, 148.

In Jeremiah 6 the LORD casts judgment against Zion and calls upon her enemies to overcome her. In the beginning of the chapter Jeremiah renews his call for “delicate daughter Zion” (6:2) to repent, to “gird on sackcloth, roll in the ashes” (6:20). He then narrates that Zion does not turn to the LORD, nor mend her ways (6:15), and even scorns the LORD’s words (6:10). As a result, the LORD is not pleased with her sacrifices (6:20) and sends a “great nation, roused from the ends of the earth” (6:22), by whom Israel will fall: Babylon. BPI describes the Israelites’ reaction to the news of the invaders and Israel’s resultant helplessness and distress.⁴²

6. “*Will not pangs (תַּבְּלִיִּים) seize you like those of a woman giving birth (אִשָּׁה לֹדֶה)?*”

(Jer 13:21)

Jeremiah continues the theme discussed above: that of Israel’s betrayal by foreign powers. Jeremiah uses BPI to describe the anguish Judah will feel when those foreign powers she has made alliances with conquer her. Jeremiah uses harsh language and strong images to describe the judgment of the LORD upon Israel and upon Judah, whom he made to “cling to him,” but who would not listen to his commandments. There seems to be some hope earlier in the chapter that if Israel repents, she can avert disaster (Jer 13:15-17), in the form of exile. By the end of the chapter, it is clear that there is little hope for Jerusalem’s repentance in the near future, but Jeremiah does allude to the promise of a distant future: “Jerusalem, how long will it yet be before you become clean!” (13:27).

⁴² Holladay (*Jeremiah 1*, 225) recognizes even in this text the possibility of supplication in the double meaning of צָרָה as both “distress” (of BP) and “imploring.”

7. “*You who dwell on Lebanon, who nest in the cedars, how you shall groan when pains (תַּבְּלִים תִּיָּל) come upon you, like the pains of a woman in travail (תִּיָּל בְּיָלָהּ)! (Jer 22:23)*

In this text, Jeremiah is not speaking to the inhabitants of Lebanon. He pronounces the LORD’s judgment against Israel—particularly against Jehoiakim and his son Coniah, king of Judah, because they are more concerned with living in a fine palace than dispensing justice to the weak and poor (Jer 22:16-17). “You who dwell in Lebanon” refers to those who live in the royal palace in Jerusalem, which was supported by massive cedar pillars.⁴³ BPI describes the deliverance of Israel into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and the distress of exile to another land.

Jeremiah 22 ends with the declaration that the family of Josiah will never again sit on the throne of David (v. 30). The LXX departs from the MT completely, as in subsequent texts discussed below.

8. “*On that day, the hearts of Moab’s heroes are like the heart of a woman in travail (כָּלֵב אִשָּׁה מְצַרָּה).*” (Jer 48:41)

Jeremiah 48 is an oracle against Moab in the OAN in which the divine abandonment theme (48:7) plays a key role. The distress of the Moab warriors on the day that Moab falls is described with BPI. The LXX text varies greatly from the MT in the last verses of chap. 48.

Moab’s fall is described as a punishment for boasting against the LORD (Jer 48:42). At the end of the chapter, however, the LORD promises a reversal of fortune for Moab.

⁴³ John Bright, *Jeremiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 21; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965) 141.

9. *“On that day, the hearts of Edom’s heroes shall be like the heart of a woman in travail (כְּלֵב אִשָּׁה מִצָּרָה).”* (Jer 49:22)

Jeremiah 49 continues the OAN, turning to Ammon and Edom, Damascus, Kedar, and Elam. Jeremiah 49:7-22 is the prophecy against Edom. After describing with various metaphors the desolation that will take hold of Edom, the prophecy ends with the BPI describing the distress of Edom in the face of defeat and desolation. The Vg reading, “like a woman giving birth” (*mulieris parturientis*), diminishes the BPI.

10. *“Distress and pangs (צָרָה וְחִבְּלָיִם) take hold of her, like those of a woman in travail (כִּי יוֹלְדָה).”* (Jer 49:24)

After the longer prophecy against Edom, there is a shorter prophecy against Damascus (Jer 49:23-27), wherein this text falls. BPI describes Damascus as she attempts to flee the judgment and destruction of the LORD.

11. *“The king of Babylon hears news of them, and helpless fall his hands; anguish (צָרָה) seizes him, throes like a mother’s in childbirth (כִּי יוֹלְדָה).”* (Jer 50:43)

This verse describes the reaction of the king of Babylon when he hears news of an invader from the north. The invaders from the north are the instruments of the LORD’s judgment against Babylon. The fate of the Babylonians is described in terms of a flock of sheep scattered and ravaged by a wild lion that no shepherd can withstand. The defeat of Babylon is the beginning of the LORD’s rehabilitation of Israel.

12. *“At the sight of you the mountains tremble (יִהְיִילוּ) . . .”* (Hab 3:10)

Habbakuk 3 is a song of praise to the LORD, singing of his victories over the enemies of Israel. The mountains tremble (לָרָדוּ) in an allusion to BPI and the deep (תְּהוֹמוֹת) gives forth its cry, because they experience the LORD's anger as he tramples the nations. The allusion to BPI is continued in v. 16 as well. The LORD's wrath makes the very innards or womb (רֵחַם) of the prophet himself quake (3:16). The rain, ocean, sun, and moon are all affected by the LORD's coming as a mighty warrior to save his "anointed one." The prophet recalls Israel's past, beginning with creation, and praises the LORD and proclaims trust in him despite the current attacks on Israel.⁴⁴ The prophet looks forward to the day of distress for the enemies of Israel (Hab 3:16).

The Hebrew root is not used exclusively for the trembling of labor, but the LXX reading, "the nations will be in travail" (ὁδυνήσουσιν), witnesses to an allusion to BPI. The subject of the LXX reading is admittedly mistaken: "the nations" (λαοί) instead of "the mountains" (ὄρη). Bergmann discusses the many allusions to birth imagery and BP throughout chap. 3, particularly the various types of trembling described. She considers BPI to be most prominent in v. 16.⁴⁵

13. *"The people's hearts melted within them, and they were in anguish like that of childbirth."* (Sir 48:19)

Sirach 48 is part of a song of the heroes of Israel's past, Sirach 44–50. Sir 48:17-25 celebrates the heroism of Hezekiah and Isaiah. The BPI describes the Israelites' reaction to the invasion of Sennacherib. They do not give up hope, however, and pray for deliverance (48:20).

⁴⁴ Francis I. Andersen, *Habakkuk: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 25; New York: Doubleday, 2001) 339.

⁴⁵ Bergmann, *Childbirth*, 160-61.

The LORD sends Isaiah to save them with his visions of truth and he strikes the Assyrians with a plague. The LXX reading, “Then, their hearts and hands melted and they were in travail, like women giving birth” (καὶ ὠδίνησαν ὡς αἱ τίκτουσαι), retains the BPI.

14. “*Then something like a man’s hand touched my lips; I opened my mouth and said to the one facing me, ‘My Lord, I was seized with pangs (נְהַפְּסָוּ צִרְיִי עָלַי) at the vision and I was powerless.’*” (Dan. 10:16)

This text differs from those discussed above since the BPI does not include the formulaic simile “like a woman in labor” and because it does not represent negative divine judgment in a military context. BPI is present since the allusion to other account(s) of birth/BP is clear.⁴⁶ The element of crisis as judgment still remains, however, since Daniel knows that “for a sinful man to see God is to die.”⁴⁷ Daniel is not facing judgment for any particular wrong-doing but for his sinful nature as a man. BPI in particular indicates Daniel’s powerlessness as a human person in relation to God. The “one like a man” strengthens Daniel and tells him he must fight the prince of Persia again (Sir 10:20).

Delbert R. Hillers includes this text in his list of examples of the OT convention of physical weakness in response to bad news.⁴⁸ However, Daniel does not experience his pangs in reaction to bad news but in awareness of his own unworthiness before such a divine messenger.

⁴⁶ Louis F. Hartman and Alexander Di Lella, (*The Book of Daniel: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary on Chapters 1-9 by Louis F. Hartman. Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 10-12 by Alexander A. Di Lella*, AB 23 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978] 265) consider that the author of Daniel borrowed the phrasing of the BPI from 1 Sam 4:19.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 281. See also Exod 3:6; 19:22; 33:18-20; Isa 24:24.

⁴⁸ Hillers, “Convention,” 88.

The LXX and Vg do not reflect the BPI. The LXX does not mention any kind of pain but does mention loss of strength. It is possible that the LXX mistakenly includes “side” (τὸ πλευρόν) instead of “pangs” (ὁ πόνος). The Vg, “My LORD, with this vision, my joints are dissolved and nothing within me remains strong” (*domine me in visione dissolutae sunt conpages meae et nihil in me remansit virium*), also describes lack of strength but without BPI.

5.2 Birth Pangs /Death Pangs Describe Personal Distress

The two texts in this section possibly contain BPI. Most readings do not read birth imagery in these two texts. The images of distress, however, are related to BPI.

The imagery in both texts could be that of BP or death pangs, depending on the interpretation of the root **הבל**. Bergmann sees both of these verses as instances of birth imagery, in these cases to describe such distress as to approach a feeling of death. According to BDB, however, two separate entries are given for the two roots **הבל** and **הבל**. The first root, which is the larger entry of the two, is “cord,” “territory,” “band.” The second entry is “pain,” “pang” of birth. We have seen the occurrence of **הבל** in several texts discussed above (Isa 13:8; 26:17: 66:7; Jer 13:21; 22:23; 49:84; Cant 8:5).⁴⁹ The two texts below are included in the first lexical entry of BDB. Nevertheless, these two texts are discussed because of the history of interpretation witnessed in the LXX reading “pangs of death” (ὠδίνες ἄδου).

⁴⁹ It is possible the second root is a derivative of the first, since BP are contractions of the abdominal muscles, and often feel like a cord tightened. The lexical range of **הבל** could include the cord-related experience of encircling and constriction that corresponds both with constriction of the abdomen in a birth contraction as well as with the constriction of the air passageway and blood vessels experienced by a person breathing his last.

1. “*The breakers of death (הַבְּלֵי־מָוֶת) surged round about me; the menacing floods terrified me. The cords of Sheol (שָׁאֵי־לֵךְ/ ὠδίνες ἄδου) tightened; the snares of death (מְזֻקְשֵׁי מָוֶת) lay in wait for me.*” (Ps 18:5-6 [Ps 17:5-6 LXX/Vulgate]; also 2 Sam 22:6)

This psalm is the prayer of a man (David) in distress who is delivered from his enemies by the LORD, who comes out to battle as a mighty warrior as in Habbakuk 3, Isaiah 42, and Jeremiah 4. This psalm celebrates the LORD as a mighty warrior.

The LXX reading “the birth pangs of death” (ὠδίνες ἄδου) preserve the possible allusion to BP. The Vg includes two versions of Psalm 17 in its text. Each version is characterized by a different reading of הַבְּלֵי.⁵⁰ The first version reads “pains of death/ pains of Hell” (*dolores mortis/inferni*) (pains of death/hell) and the second version, “cords of death/hell” (*funes mortis/inferni*).

2. “*I was caught by the cords of death (הַבְּלֵי־מָוֶת/ ὠδίνες θανάτου); the snares of Sheol had seized me; I felt agony and dread.*” (Ps 116:3 [Ps 114:3 LXX])

In this Psalm the source of the psalmist’s affliction is not specified. The message of the psalm is God’s saving action. God’s power to save the psalmist stands in contrast with the psalmist’s helplessness, represented by BP. In addition the psalmist highlights his own faith in time of trouble and his thanks in time of salvation.

Once again, the LXX reading, “the birth pangs of death” (ὠδίνες θανάτου) preserve the possible allusion to BP. Once again, the Vg includes two versions of Psalm 116 in its text.

⁵⁰ The current edition of the New Vulgate adopts the reading, *funes mortis/funes inferni*.

Each version is characterized by a different reading of תַּבְּלִי. The first version reads “pains of death/ pains of Hell” (*dolores mortis/inferni*) (pains of death/hell) and the second version “cords of death/hell” (*funes mortis/inferni*).

6. Birth-Pang Imagery That Excludes Birth

This section discusses the third use of OT BPI. The texts discussed in this section elaborate on the theme of childbirth as a crisis in which judgment is implicit. These texts complete the birth pang metaphor to include birth imagery as well. However, the birth imagery is characterized by failure rather than success. The image of BP that fail to yield a birth is the most negative use of BPI in the OT. In this image the blessing of giving birth is totally absent; only the alienation of humanity from God is retained. BPI represents alienation to a greater or lesser degree depending on the particular text. In the three texts discussed below we see BPI at its most vivid in all of the OT. In all of these texts the BP described are “final contractions when the mother actively pushes.”⁵¹ Any prolongation of this stage could present grave danger for the mother.

1. “*The birth pangs (תַּבְּלִי) shall come for him, but he shall be an unwise child; For when it is time he shall not present himself where children break forth (לֹא-יֵעָמֵד בְּמוֹשְׁבֵי).*” (Hos 13:13)

⁵¹ Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 24; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) 638.

The entire book of Hosea is an application of the prophet's own life to the situation of Israel. Here in v. 13 BP primarily signify that the time for birth has come. Israel is compared to a son who does not come forth from the womb when it is time for him to be born. This, of course, is a grave situation for child and mother alike and is a poignant image for the senseless morbidity of Ephraim's sin (תִּטְּאֶתָּהּ). Israel's rebelliousness against God is as senseless and fatal as a child's "refusal" to be born.

In the OT a successful birth is considered the work of God. In this verse there are some things that even God cannot accomplish if there is no cooperation on the part of the individuals involved—in this case, the child to be born. Such an implicit limitation on the power of God is an interesting theological commentary in Hosea.

In Hos 13:14 it is unclear whether the LORD offers redemption from the netherworld, as Francis I. Andersen reads it, or whether the LORD withholds redemption, as the *NAB* translation suggests.⁵² In v. 15 the LORD certainly withholds redemption. The LORD, however, does offer redemption for Israel in chap. 14.

The Vg reading, "the pains of childbirth" (*dolores parturientes*) emphasizes the BPI more than the typical Vg reading, "*parturientis*."

2. "Thus says Hezekiah: 'This is a day of distress (יְוִם-צָרָה), of rebuke, and of disgrace.

Children are at the point of birth (עַד-מִשְׁבֵּר), but there is no strength to bring them forth.' " (2 Kgs 19:3; also Isa 37:3)

⁵² Ibid., 625.

This text is excerpted from the message that Hezekiah sends to Isaiah telling him of Babylon's recently announced intention of takeover. Hezekiah asks Isaiah to "send up a prayer for the remnant that is here" (2 Kgs 19:4; Isa 37:4) since the king of Assyria has sent word that he will not accept tribute in place of surrender. The king's messenger continues, after delivering his message, to insult Hezekiah and God himself. Hezekiah wraps himself in sackcloth and mourns.

Hezekiah uses BPI to represent a crisis. The phrase "day of distress" (יום־צָרָה) is used many times throughout the Prophets, Psalms, and even in Proverbs, to describe either impending military disaster (Obad 12; 14; Nah 1:7; Hab 3:16)—sometimes of eschatological proportions (Jer 16:19; Zeph 1:15)—or personal disaster (Gen 35:3; Ps 50:15; 86:7; Prov 24:10; 25:19).

In this text the crisis lies in the lack of strength to bring the children forth, that is, the lack of strength to meet the enemy and defeat him. Blenkinsopp considers Isa 37:3b to be a proverbial saying since a similar saying is attested in Hos 13:13 discussed above.⁵³ BPI is a theme that runs throughout the OT and often occurs in formulaic phrases.

The LXX reading, ". . . a day of distress . . . the sons have come to the point of BP but there is no strength for the birth" (ἡμέρα θλίψεως . . . αὕτη ὅτι ἦλθον υἱοὶ ἕως ὠδίνων καὶ ἰσχὺς οὐκ ἔστιν τῇ τικτούσῃ), does not transmit the BPI latent in the phrase "day of distress." The LXX reading, however, portrays the time of birth in terms of BP. The Vg does not retain BPI.

⁵³ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-39: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 19; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 468.

3. “As a woman about to give birth (הָרָה תִּקְרֹב לְלֵדָה) writhes (תִּתְהַיֵּל) and cries out in her pains (בְּחִבְלֶיהָ), so were we in your presence, O LORD. We conceived (הִרְיִינוּ) and writhed in pain (חִלְנוּ), giving birth to wind; Salvation we have not achieved for the earth, the inhabitants of the world cannot bring it forth.” (Isa 26:17-18)

Joseph Blenkinsopp offers the alternative translation of v. 18b, “no one is born to people the world,” based on a rare meaning of נִבְלָה, as “to birth.”⁵⁴

In this text several examples of BPI are featured. Isaiah elaborates on the theme of human impotence: a woman may conceive and experience BP, but God alone brings the child to birth. In other OT texts the themes of divine intervention regarding conception and relief from BP are treated. Isaiah uses BPI to symbolize the hardships and trials that Israel experiences in the exile. Isaiah makes the point that Israel conceives with God’s aid and endures the BP but does not give birth to a child because Israel does not rely on God’s help to do so. Human action independent from God is the equivalent of giving birth to wind. Just as only God brings about a birth, so he is the only one who can bring salvation.

The closing image of this text, particularly if we adopt Blenkinsopp’s translation, is of a world desolate of people. BP fail to bring a birth, and no birth means no people.

The closing of Isaiah 26 describes the redemption of the LORD, which extends not just to Israel, not just to the nations, but would appear to extend to the dead, as well as the very ground

⁵⁴ Ibid., 366-67.

that has covered their bodies (26:19-21). Whereas Judah cannot even give birth to what they have conceived, the LORD can raise even the dead from the ground.

7. Birth Pangs Represent Judgment and Birth Represents Redemption

“Now why do you cry out so? Are you without a king? Or has your counselor perished, that you are seized with pains (הַיֵּל פִּיזוֹלָרָה) like a woman in travail? Writhe in pain (הַיִּלְיָ), grow faint, O daughter Zion, like a woman in travail (פִּיזוֹלָרָה); for now shall you go forth from the city and dwell in the fields; to Babylon shall you go, there shall you be rescued. There shall the Lord redeem you from the hand of your enemies.” (Mic 4:9-10)

“Therefore the LORD will give them up, until the time when she who is to give birth has borne (יִזְלָרָה יִלְרָה), And the rest of his brethren shall return to the children of Israel.”
(Mic 5:2 [Mic 5:3 RSV])

The fourth category of OT use of BPI is represented solely by this text from Micah, in which the trials of Zion are depicted in terms of BP and her redemption in terms of a birth.

Although the text is difficult to interpret, the birth described seems to be that of a future ruler, who will come forth from Bethlehem-Ephrathah.⁵⁵ Hence, we have BPI applied metaphorically to Zion and interpreted as a precursor to an actual birth.

Mic 4:9 poses a series of questions to Zion that seem to mock her distress and suggest her situation is not as bad as it appears to be. In v. 10a, however, Zion’s cause for distress is affirmed

⁵⁵ Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Micah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 24E; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 469. Regarding an interpretation of Mic 5:2, they write, “The mother here is the mother of the personage of v. 1. The most natural reading would be the human mother, whose identity has no special significance. If the language is metaphorical, the same imagery is used in Mi 4:10.”

and she is commanded to experience “the pangs of childbirth” in the “face of an overwhelming military threat” and the agony of exile.⁵⁶ In v. 10b, redemption is promised for Zion—in Babylon, of all places. Redemption is not usually mentioned explicitly in conjunction with OT BPI but is arguably often alluded to in the very nature of the metaphor—BP lead to birth, which by its very nature calls for hope.

In this text Micah promises redemption explicitly. Redemption is the metaphorical birth that follows the BP of the exile. The text leaves open the possibility, however, of interpreting the birth described as more than metaphorical. In their commentary on Micah, Andersen and David Noel Freedman write that this text, taken with Isa 7:14 and “similar birth oracles in Isaiah, could reflect the hope that there would be another David who would bring back ‘his brothers,’ the exiled or alienated northerners.”⁵⁷

Micah’s explicit promise of redemption in the event of a birth uses BPI differently than other OT texts about military defeat.⁵⁸ Micah distances God’s final judgment upon Israel from the present military defeat of Israel. Micah assures Zion that the thoughts of the LORD go beyond the present moment of crisis and misfortune (vv. 11-14). The LORD’s plans for Zion differ from the plans of Zion’s captors. He looks to future promises of restoration for the afflicted of

⁵⁶ James Luther Mays, *Micah: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 104. See Andersen and Freedman (*Micah*, 442) for interpretation that the text focuses less on the “justice of the punishment” and more on “the hope of redemption.” Andersen and Freedman (*Micah*, 446) see it as totally “appropriate to encourage the woman in labor to increase her painful struggle.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 468-69.

⁵⁸ Bergmann (*Childbirth*, 111) writes, “Now, childbirth is applied as a sign that pain and suffering can lead to new life, an image that especially appeals to modern readers who often underestimate the ancient metaphorical connection between childbirth and crisis.”

Jerusalem as well as the afflicted of all the nations. In that time many nations will look to the LORD for guidance and peace will rule, so that “they shall beat their swords into plowshares. . .” and “every man shall sit under his own vine or under his own fig tree, undisturbed. . .” (Mic 4:3).

The *RSV* translation (Mic 5:2 [5:3 *RSV*]) depicts the birth in terms of BP: “Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in travail has brought forth. . . .” This translation emphasizes the continuity between the image of Zion currently in travail, i.e., in exile, and Zion giving birth in the future, i.e., redeemed from exile. Giving birth represents the fulfillment of the LORD’s plan. James Luther Mays writes:

This expansion of the original oracle of disaster carries the scenario of God’s way with Israel two steps further, from loss of the city to exile and deliverance there. It sees the pangs of childbirth in the original saying as more than a simile for distress; they are the birth pains of a new phase of YHWH’s dealing with Israel. The connection between the end of labor and the return of the lost brethren is clear in 5:3, an addition to the promise of the new ruler who will come from Bethlehem.⁵⁹

8. Birth Without Birth Pangs

“Before she comes to labor (תִּהְיֶה לִילָדָה), she gives birth; Before the pains (תִּבְרָלָה) come upon her, she safely delivers a male child (וְהָיָה בְרִישָׁתָהּ זָכָר). Who ever heard of such a thing, or saw the like? Can a country (אֶרֶץ) be brought forth (תִּיּוּחַל) in one day, or a nation be born in a single moment? Yet Zion is scarcely in labor when she gives birth (גַּם-יִלְדָהּ) to her children.” (Isa 66:7-8)

⁵⁹ Mays, *Micah*, 106. See also Conrad Gempf, “The Imagery of Birth Pangs in the New Testament,” *TynBul* 45 (1994) 119-35, here 131. It is not necessary to draw from Mays’s comments (as does Gempf) that simply because the period of labor pains is so important, “the birth is not what is being emphasized.”

The fifth category of OT use of BPI is represented solely by this text from Isaiah, which describes a birth without the oft-mentioned BP. In this text the birth without BP is predicated of a single woman (figure) and a single son (figure) in v. 7. In v. 8, the birth without BP refers to Zion, who gives birth to many children. The reference in v. 8 could be interpreted in two ways. Either v. 8 could be a parallel description of the single figure of mother and son in v. 7. or v. 8 could be using the situation of the distinct figures of v. 7 to describe what will happen to Zion and her children.

In this text the founding of a nation is described as a birth. Zion giving birth to her children represents the founding of a new, spiritual Zion described in Isaiah: “As the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall endure before me, says the LORD, so shall your race and your name endure. From one new moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, All mankind shall come to worship before me, says the LORD” (Isa 66:22-23).

The nature of the new Zion to be founded is revealed first of all in the absence of BP at its “birth” or founding. Those guilty before the Lord—from within and without Israel—will still suffer judgment but all of Israel is no longer presumed guilty (Isa 66:24). This text contrasts with others in the OT that proclaim the judgment of *all Israel* in terms of a woman in labor, helpless before BP.

The LORD assures Israel that he will not allow the types of situations described in the texts above (Hos 13:13; 2 Kgs 19:3) in which birth is frustrated, “Shall I bring a mother to the point of birth, and yet not let her child be born? says the LORD; Or shall I who allow her to conceive, yet close her womb? says your God” (Isa 66:9). This promise of the LORD has identical wording to Sarah’s complaint in Gen 16:2 that the LORD has closed her womb. The reference to

Sarah once again shows the tendency in the OT to use BPI and birth imagery that is based on individual women's situations to describe the fate of all of Israel.

Isaiah progresses from BPI, to birth imagery, and then to motherhood imagery. Jerusalem is portrayed as the mother of her peoples. She nurses them and comforts them (Isa 66:11-13). Jerusalem is portrayed as a mother throughout the OT. In this text the full breadth of maternal imagery is included: from conception through nursing. Only the BP are missing.

The LXX follows the MT with one discrepancy of translation: "Before she was in labor, she gave birth; before the pangs of labor came, she escaped and gave birth to a son." (πρὶν ἢ τὴν ὠδίνουσαν τεκεῖν, πρὶν ἐλθεῖν τὸν πόνον τῶν ὠδίνων, ἐξέφυγεν καὶ ἔτεκεν ἄρσεν). The LXX reflects a different meaning of the Hebrew word פָּרַחַתָּהּ, as "cause to escape."⁶⁰

9. Birth-Pang Imagery in the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha

The passages discussed in this section are excerpts of literature found in James H. Charlesworth's two-volume work *The OT Pseudepigrapha*. They serve as further commentary on the various uses of OT BPI although their dating is varied and generally much later than that of the OT. The BPI found in these passages is arguably within the range of theological and literary trajectories inspired by, or related to, those found in the OT.

⁶⁰ Blenkinsopp (*Isaiah 55-66*, 303) hypothesizes that the LXX wording of v. 7 is "taken up into the apocalyptic scenario of Rev 12:5-6 καὶ ἔτεκεν υἱὸν ἄρσεν. . . καὶ ἔφαγεν. Tg gives the end of the verse a messianic sense: 'Her king shall be revealed.'"

Whereas the pseudepigraphal texts discussed in this section are related in some way to the OT texts, they tend not to use BPI in the same way as the OT. The apocryphal use of BPI reflects a combination and revision of OT usages. The various categories of OT usage in each apocryphal text are discussed individually. The diction in the texts below is similar to that of the OT verses discussed above. Since the books discussed in this section do not enjoy the canonical status of the OT books discussed above, additional attention is given to provenance and date of their composition to give some context to their possible relevance to the topic at hand.

1. “. . . *for I have lost the fruit of my womb, which I brought forth in pain and bore in sorrow (quem cum maeroribus peperit et cum doloribus genui); but it is with the earth according to the way of the earth—the multitude that is now in it goes as it came. . . .*”⁶¹
(4 Ezra 10:12-13)

This text belongs to the first category of OT use of BPI, in which BP are seen as a sign of alienation from God, even while giving birth is a sign of blessing from God.

The text of 4 Ezra is preserved mainly in Latin and Syriac, and partially in other languages. The original text of 4 Ezra was written in Greek with Semitic influence, suggesting a Palestinian provenance.⁶² Bruce M. Metzger and Robert H. Charles conclude the final redaction of 4 Ezra is dated sometime in the first or early part of the second century A.D., although Charles places the composition date of the oldest portions of the book as early as 30 B.C.⁶³

⁶¹ Bruce M. Metzger, “The Fourth Book of Ezra with Four Additional Chapters: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *OTP* 1: 517-24, here 546.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 520.

⁶³ *Ibid.* See also George H. Box, “IV Ezra: General Introduction,” in *APOT* 2:542-60, here 552.

4 Ezra is included in the Vg, although not as a canonical book. This text is from Ezra's fourth vision (4 Ezra 9:38-10:28) in a series of seven visions. The vision is interpreted later in 4 Ezra 10:41-49 as the following: The woman represents Zion, who was barren. After 30 years, she bears a son, who represents the construction of the city of Jerusalem. The travail she experiences in rearing her son represents the divine presence in Jerusalem despite all the failings of its inhabitants. The death of her son in his wedding chamber represents the fall of Jerusalem.

This text is from the speech that Ezra, the visionary, makes to the woman, chastising her for her plan to remain outside the city, fasting, until she dies. He tells the woman that the pain and sorrow she has experienced in losing her son may mirror her pain and sorrow in birthing him, "as is the way of the earth," but nevertheless the very earth has brought forth its fruit for humanity from the beginning of creation and it is her responsibility to bear her troubles soberly (4 Ezra 10:15).

2. *"Just as a woman with child, in the ninth month, when the time of her delivery draws near, has great pains about her womb for two or three hours beforehand, and when the child comes forth from the womb, there will not be a moment's delay, so the calamities will not delay in coming forth upon the earth, and the world will groan, and pains will seize it on every side."* (4 Ezra 16:38-39)

This text is part of the description of the calamities and the impending disasters that conclude 4 Ezra. This text is based in the tradition of the second use of OT BPI since it is related to the denunciation of the nations: Babylon, Asia, Egypt, and Syria (4 Ezra 16:1) and the woes that will befall them. This text is different, however, from the second use of OT BPI since in the

OT use, soldiers and/or kings react, or will react, to military defeat by their own experience similar to BP, whereas in this text the woes themselves are compared to BP.

The most obvious point of comparison in this text's simile is the sudden, unheralded nature of the onset of BP and the sudden, unheralded nature of the trials and tribulations. Another point of comparison, however, that is even more important is the nature of BP and the nature of the woes: neither will last forever and both will end in new, unforeseeable life. The use of BPI instead of any number of other images is significant; it is rooted in the long-developed meaning of OT BPI and its implicit call to hope. Indeed, the very last words of 4 Ezra are the LORD's short promise of deliverance for those "who keep my commandments and precepts" (16:76).

3. *"And women will no longer have pain when they bear, nor will they be tormented when they yield the fruits of their womb."*⁶⁴ (2 Apoc. Bar. 73:7)

This text falls into the fifth category of OT use of BPI, in which birth without BP describes a new era of divine providence. This text is different from Isaiah 66, the sole OT example of this use, in that this text describes BP as absent for all women giving birth, concretely, whereas the OT text describes a metaphorical birth without BP and/or a single birth without BP that is connected to the rebirth of Zion.

Charles dates this book within the first half of the first century A.D. and concludes it is of Jewish authorship. He writes, "In this Apocalypse we have almost the last noble utterance of Judaism before it plunged into the dark and oppressive years that followed the destruction of

⁶⁴ Albertus F. J. Klijn, "2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch: A New Translation and Introduction," *OTP* 1:615-52, here 646.

Jerusalem.”⁶⁵ Albertus F. J. Klijn, however, dates the book later, in the late first century or early second century A.D., although he recognizes an earlier composition date of the portion of *Syriac Apocalypse Baruch* dealing with the visions.⁶⁶ The Syriac is translated from the Greek and the Greek in turn was translated from Hebrew.

This text is part of the interpretation of Baruch’s vision given by the angel Ramiel. Baruch has a vision of a cloud with black and white waters (*2 Apoc. Bar.* 53) and is deeply troubled because he does not understand it. He prays for an interpretation (54) and the angel Ramiel, “who presides over true visions” (55:3), comes to explain the vision as an account of human history from Adam to the advent of the Messiah (56).

Ramiel explains that the end of history will come after the last judgment, in which the very ground will consume mankind (70:10)—with the exception of the Holy Land, which will protect its people (71:1). After the last judgment, the Messiah will come and a new era will begin. In this era all the evils which have come about from the transgression of Adam (56:6) will be reversed; all these things “that have filled this world with evils” and on account of which, “the life of man has been greatly troubled,” will fade away (73:5). In addition to the pain of childbirth, evils that will fade away include disease, untimely death, and all vice. Also, wild animals will serve men and show gentleness to children. Additionally, it seems as if Baruch is suggesting a new type of life or bodily existence since Ramiel explains that what is corruptible will give way to what is incorruptible (74:2).

⁶⁵ Robert H. Charles, “II Baruch: The Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch,” in *APOT.* 2:470-526, here 470.

⁶⁶ Klijn, “2 Baruch,” 617.

In this text the pain of childbirth is closely connected to an interpretation of Gen 3:16; pain in childbirth is a direct result of Adam's (and Eve's) disobedience. The theology of the *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch* goes even further in its interpretation, though, explaining that "each of us has been the Adam of his own soul" (2 *Apoc. Bar.* 54:19), pointing to an understanding of personal transgression (against God's will) and its connection with that of Adam's. This theological development is also present in 4 Ezra 7:119.

4. "O mother, tried now by more bitter pains (ὠ πικροτέρων νῦν πόνων) than even the birth pangs you suffered for them (ἥπερ τῶν ἐπ' αὐτοῖς ὠδίνων)! O woman, who alone gave birth (ἀποκυήσασα) to such complete devotion!"⁶⁷ (4 Macc 15:16-17)

This text fits somewhat into the first category of OT use of BPI, since the BP the woman suffered for her sons are depicted as a sorrow (of pain and alienation from God). The BP, however, are also portrayed as a cause for her deep motherly love. The significance of BPI in this text, however, goes far beyond the first category and introduces the concept of efficacious suffering on behalf of someone else. This text also fits into the sub-category of "BP as Death Pangs," since here BP are compared to the pangs of death that the mother experiences on behalf of her sons.

4 Maccabees is a reworking of 2 Maccabees's account of the martyrdom of the seven brothers. Hugh Anderson assigns the book's provenance to coastal lands of Asia Minor, perhaps Antioch.⁶⁸ The author is Jewish and his native tongue is Greek.⁶⁹ Anderson dates 4 Maccabees to

⁶⁷ See also the translation from Hugh Anderson ("4 Maccabees: A New Translation and Introduction," in *OTP* 2:532-64, here 559-60): "O mother, sorely tried now by pains sharper than the pains of birth."

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 537.

about the first half of the first century A.D (A.D. 18-55).⁷⁰ If this dating is correct, the use of BPI in 4 Maccabees might provide a contemporaneous witness to the use of such imagery in Revelation 12.⁷¹

4 Maccabees is included in the LXX, and in the canon of the Eastern Churches. This text concludes a discussion of 4 Maccabees 14-15 on the nature of a parent's love for her child, in particular that of a mother (15:4-8), in which the mother of seven sons is praised for not only enduring Antiochus's torture and execution of her sons, but for encouraging them to hold fast:

In what manner might I express the emotions of parents who love their children? We impress upon the character of a small child a wondrous likeness both of mind and of form. Especially is this true of mothers, who because of their birth pangs have a deeper sympathy toward their offspring than do the fathers. Considering that mothers are the weaker sex and give birth to many, they are more devoted to their children. The mother of the seven boys, more than any other mother, loved her children. In seven pregnancies she had implanted in herself tender love toward them, and because of the many pains she suffered with each of them she had sympathy for them; yet because of the fear of God, she disdained the temporary safety of her children. (4 Macc 15:4-8)

4 Maccabees 15:16-17 is particularly interesting because it compares the "bitter pains" the mother experiences at her sons' deaths and her sons' births. The author explains that BP are the very reason for the strong tie of affection between mother and child, the tie of affection, which on its own would have compelled the mother to fight for the safety of her children. The author explains that the mother's faith allows her to "give birth" to the faith of her sons, both in

⁶⁹ Ibid., 532.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 534.

⁷¹ Ibid., 540. Anderson concludes, "Paul and our author, both Hellenistic Jews of the Diaspora, were exposed to the same atmosphere of religious belief."

the pains of physical birth and rearing as well as in the pains of spiritual birth, that is, death, that she experiences in sympathy with her sons.

Anderson writes, “Doctrinally, the most significant contribution of 4 Maccabees is the development of the notion that the suffering and death of the martyred righteous had redemptive efficacy for all Israel and secured God’s grace and pardon for his people.”⁷² Anderson does not attribute this to Christian interpolation but rather an authentic development of doctrine in the Jewish Diaspora. He argues that to the contrary, 4 Maccabees’s extensive depiction on the martyrdoms has “exerted the most profound and widespread influence, most of all among early Church Fathers both of the East and West.”⁷³

Anderson does not specifically comment on the role of the mother as a suffering bystander to her sons’ martyrdoms. The text clearly portrays her, however, as sharing the redemptive suffering of her sons.

5. *“Turning to me, the Lord said to me, ‘Since you have listened to the serpent and ignored my commandment, you shall suffer birth pangs and unspeakable pains; with much trembling you shall bear children and on that occasion you shall come near to lose your life from your great anguish and pains (ἔση ἐν ματαίοις⁷⁴ καὶ ἐν πόνοις ἀφορήτοις· τέξῃ τέκνα ἐν πολλοῖς τρόμοις, καὶ ἐν μιᾷ ὥρᾳ ἔλθῃς καὶ ἀπολέσεις τὴν ζωὴν σου ἐκ τῆς ἀνάγκης σου τῆς μεγάλης καὶ τῶν*

⁷² Ibid., 539.

⁷³ Ibid., 541.

⁷⁴ This is a mistranslation resulting from reading the Hebrew original בְּלִבְיָהוּבִים as בְּלִבְיָהוּבִים , BP and vanities, respectively. See Marshall D. Johnson, “Life of Adam and Eve: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *OTP* 2:249-95, here 283 n. 25c.

ὀδυνῶν⁷⁵), and you shall confess and say, 'Lord, Lord, save me and I will never again turn to the sins of the flesh.' And by this, according to your word I will judge you, because of the enmity which the enemy has placed in you. And yet you shall turn again to your husband, and he shall rule over you."⁷⁶ (*Apoc. Mos.* 25:1-4)

This text falls into the first category of OT use of BPI in which BP are a sign of alienation from God, even during birth, which is a blessing from God.

Of a Palestinian provenance and originally written in Hebrew between 100 B.C. and A.D. 200, "more probably toward the end of the first Christian century," the *Life of Adam and Eve* is preserved in a Greek translation produced sometime before A.D. 400.⁷⁷ This Greek translation is known as the *Apocalypse of Moses*. The Latin translation of the *Life of Adam and Eve* is known as *Adam and Eve* or *Vita*. The textual relationship between the preserved Greek and Latin texts of the *Life of Adam and Eve* remains to be clarified.⁷⁸ The books in their currently preserved forms are only partially parallel to each another. Both books enjoyed wide circulation among Christians.⁷⁹

These verses retell the story of the fall in Genesis 3 with embellishment of the labor pangs. Gen 3:16 is the seminal text for the OT vision of BP as a sign of alienation from God. The

⁷⁵ David Miller and Ian W. Scott, ed., "Life of Adam and Eve." in *The Online Critical Pseudepigrapha*. (database online; text at <http://ocp.tyndale.ca/life-of-adam-and-eve#25-25>; ed. Ian W. Scott, Ken M. Penner, and David M. Miller [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006] accessed June 22, 2012).

⁷⁶ Johnson, "Adam and Eve," 283.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁷⁸ For full treatment of the textual relationship, see Michael E. Stone, *A History of the Literature of Adam and Eve* (SBLJL; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1992).

⁷⁹ Johnson, "Adam and Eve," 252.

account reflects familiarity with the tradition of the Hebrew text of Genesis 3 rather than the LXX, since even with the embellishment no mention is made of groaning.

6. “*And when the time of her giving birth drew near, she began to be distressed with pains (coepit conturbari doloribus) and cried out to the Lord, saying, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, help me.’ But neither was she heard, nor was the mercy of God around her. And she said to herself, ‘Who will give the news to my Lord Adam? I beg you, O lights of heaven, when you return to the East, tell my Lord Adam.’*”⁸⁰ (*Adam and Eve* 19:1-3)

This text also falls into the first category of OT use of BPI in which BP are a sign of alienation from God, even during birth, which is a blessing from God.

Like the Greek text, the Latin text is of a Palestinian provenance and originally written in Hebrew between 100 B.C. and A.D. 200, “more probably toward the end of the first Christian century.” The text is preserved in a Latin translation produced sometime before A.D. 400. The Latin is either a translation of the Hebrew or an intermediate Greek translation.⁸¹

In this text, Eve gives birth to her first child, Cain. In her birth, she experiences the BP foretold in the account of the fall in the *Apocalypse of Moses*. However, when she asks for mercy, none is given. The account goes on to relate that the LORD does not hear Eve’s prayer until Adam intercedes on her behalf; at which point the LORD sends twelve angels, including Michael, to minister to her and give her solace in the birth of Cain. This text alludes to Gen 3:16

⁸⁰ Ibid., 264. The Latin text is from “Life of Adam and Eve” (database online; text at: <http://ocp.tyndale.ca/life-of-adam-and-eve#19-19>; accessed June 22, 2012).

⁸¹ Johnson, “Adam and Eve,” 252.

and the BP that would come to Eve and all women. In this interpretation, Adam is acts as intercessor between Eve and God.

7. “Then pain shall come upon them as on a woman in travail with birth pangs—when she is giving birth [the child] enters the mouth of the womb and she suffers from childbearing.”⁸² (*1 Enoch* 62:4-6)

This text belongs to the second category of OT use of BPI, in which BP are used to describe military defeat in terms of negative divine judgment.

Lost for centuries, and preserved only in the Christian tradition in Ethiopia, “The Book of Enoch is for the history of theological development the most important pseudepigraph of the first two centuries BC.”⁸³ *1 Enoch* was originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic or both.⁸⁴ The provenance of *1 Enoch* is unknown; the book, however, was familiar to early Christians and has numerous points of influence throughout the NT, including the Book of Revelation.⁸⁵

In chap. 62 the coming of the Son of Man is prophesied and with him judgment against the rulers of the age, the governors, high officials, and landlords (*1 Enoch* 62:1). They are the ones who suffer as if from labor pains. This use of the image of birth pains is in line with many uses of BPI in the prophets discussed above.

⁸² E. Isaac, “1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch: A New Translation and Introduction,” in *OTP* 1:5-90, here 43.

⁸³ Robert H. Charles, “Book of Enoch: Introduction,” in *APOT* 2:163-81, here 163.

⁸⁴ Isaac, “1 Enoch,” 6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

10. Birth-Pang Imagery in Qumran

The two texts from Qumran discussed in this section are taken from the Thanksgiving Scroll (1QH^a) found in the first cave of Qumran. The scroll is written in a style similar to the OT psalms. These two texts from the Thanksgiving Scroll do not fit into any one particular category of OT use of BPI but seem to have commonalities with several categories of use. For example, these two texts are similar to texts discussed in the second category of OT BPI inasmuch as they use BPI to describe personal crisis in the face of enemies. The two texts are different because the external oppression the author experiences is not interpreted as a sign of negative divine judgment.

These two texts are similar to Psalms 18 and 116 discussed under the subcategory of BP as death pangs because the two images, BP and death pangs, are dominant. Both texts also praise and look forward to the saving power of God. These two texts are dissimilar, though, because although they do look forward to divine intervention providing an external resolution to their crisis in the person of a “splendid counselor,” or “remnant” of the LORD’s inheritance, they characterize the saving power of God as something not necessarily evident to others. These texts do not include visions of the LORD as a victorious warrior vanquishing the foes of Israel.

1. “⁷ . . . *I was in distress like a woman giving birth the first time when her birth-pangs come on her* (נהפכו ציריה) ⁸ *and a pain* (והבל) *racks the mouth of her womb to begin the birth in the [crucible] of the pregnant woman. For children come through the breakers of death* ⁹ *and the woman expectant with a boy is racked by her pains* (הצרה בהבליה), *for through the breakers of death she gives birth to a male, and through the pangs of Sheol* (ובהבלי שאול) ¹⁰ *there emerges, from the [crucible] of the pregnant woman a splendid*

counselor with his strength, and the boy is freed from the breakers. In the woman expectant with him rush all ¹¹the contractions and the wracking pain (והבל [י] [נ] מורץ) (בישברים) at their birth; terror (seizes) those expectant with them, and at his birth all the labor-pains come suddenly (יהפכו לזכ צירים), ¹²in the [crucible] of the pregnant woman. And she who is pregnant with a serpent is with a racking pain (להבל); and the breakers of the pit result in all the deeds of terror.”⁸⁶ (1QH^a xi.7-12)

This text is similar to Psalms 18 and 116 discussed above in which BPI is possibly associated with the pangs/cords of death in descriptions of personal distress. In this text, however, the connection between BPI and death-pang imagery is explicit and detailed. The author also uses the image of a turbulent sea to describe his distress—a metaphor also used in OT texts.⁸⁷

In this text the author portrays his agonizing distress as BP and emphasizes the goodness of the LORD in saving the author from distress. The context of the speaker’s distress is hard to determine. The author praises the LORD for saving the author’s life “from the pit” (1 QH^a xi.19).

The most unique feature of this text is the digression on the trials of the woman “pregnant with the serpent.” The text seems to imply that her “racking pain” is a result of the monster she to which she is giving birth.

2. *“They announce ³⁰the charge against me with the harp, their grumblings with texts in harmony, with demolition and destruction. Resentment has taken hold of me and pangs*

⁸⁶ Florentino Garcia Martinez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, ed. and trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (2 vols.; New York: Brill, 1997) 1:165.

⁸⁷ Bergmann (*Childbirth*, 127-33) discusses “engulfment imagery” as a metaphor for crisis.

*like the labors of*³¹*a woman giving birth* (והבלים כצירי יולדה). *My heart is in turmoil within me. I have dressed in black and my tongue sticks to (my) palate, because they surround me with the calamity of their heart; and their intention*³² *appeared to me in bitterness. . . .*⁸⁸ (4QH xiii.30-32)

In this text BPI describe the author's distress, the context of which is difficult to ascertain. The author sees a clear difference between the oppression he experiences externally and the affirmative divine judgment which he experiences internally. He proclaims, "And you, my God, have opened a broad space in my heart but they have increased the narrowness and have wrapped me in darkness" (xiii.33). The author has charges announced against him (v. 30) and is imprisoned (vv. 34-39). Although the author has little hope he will be released from his prison, he thanks God for not deserting him (v. 20) and for giving him interior peace (v. 18). He looks to the time when God will raise "a survivor among your people; a remnant in your inheritance" (v. 8).

11. Conclusion

From the survey of relevant texts I conclude that BPI in the OT and related literature is understood most fully in the context of the OT vision of giving birth as a work of a human person in partnership with God's creative activity (Gen 4:1).

Birth is an important part of creation. God is metaphorically described as "giving birth" (or "bringing forth") as in Deut 32:18; Ps 90:2; and Prov 8:24. The language used in these texts

⁸⁸ Martinez and Tigchelaar, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 1:173.

alludes to the birthing process, inclusive of BP. In Job 39:1-2 the birth of mountain goats and the accompanying BP are part of the mystery and blessing of God's ordering of creation.

Most of the BPI is metaphorical, although there are instances related to actual births, such as the naming of Lamech (1 Chr 4:9) and Benjamin (Gen 35:16-18) by their respective mothers. In these texts the mothers are grateful for the blessing of the births of their son but acknowledge the painful reality of BP that accompany the births.

Although giving birth is a sign of blessing from God, the accompanying BP are a sign of alienation from God. There are roughly five categories of OT BPI signifying alienation from God. The first two categories form a basis for the other three: (1) BP represent human alienation within the divine blessing of birth; and (2) BP represent human alienation in the face of negative divine judgment, as seen particularly in military defeat.

The first significance of BP established early in the Hebrew canon adds a dimension to OT BPI that is unique among ANE cultures. In the Genesis story of the expulsion of the first man and woman from the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:16), BP are mentioned in a unique context. The LORD tells the woman that because she disobeyed the LORD and ate from the forbidden fruit, she would experience increased difficulty in giving birth and give birth in pain.

The second significance of BPI is found in descriptions of the fearful reaction of soldiers in battle who are facing military defeat. This use of BPI tends to be somewhat codified with repeated use of a limited vocabulary and formulaic similes. Formulaic similes such as "BP like those of a woman in labor/giving birth seized them . . ." are used throughout Isaiah and Jeremiah in conjunction with the literary form of the OAN and the City-Lament. These straightforward comparisons are used of both Israel and other nations. They focus on the physical likeness of the

helplessness and fear of a woman giving birth and the helplessness and fear of a soldier facing death and ultimately negative divine judgment. On the surface such a comparison could be seen as mere deprecation of the soldiers described. Because of the unique significance of BP in the OT, however, the comparison is much more profound: the helplessness of the human person in the face of alienation from God as a result of sin. But just as BP are temporary, hopefully the helplessness is as well.

In some texts the military defeat described reaches cosmic proportions. In these texts the role of the LORD's judgment against the offending nation is even more starkly presented. Sometimes the BP are experienced by nature itself, instead of human soldiers. The occasion of cosmic judgment of the LORD is described frequently throughout the Prophets with military images of the LORD as a conquering warrior. This occasion is often described as the "Day of the LORD," for example in Joel, and may or may not make use of BPI.

There are at least three other identifiable uses of BPI that build upon the two basic uses of BPI in the OT. First, there are several instances of BPI in which the BP explicitly fail to yield a birth (2 Kgs 19:3/Isa 26:17-18; Hos 13:13). Second, Micah extends the birth pang metaphor to include the birth representing Israel's eventual redemption from exile (Mic 4:9-10; 5:3). Third, Isaiah describes a remarkable birth without BP, signifying divine intervention, to which the birth of the new Zion is compared (Isa 66:7-8). These last two categories feature texts that have been the object of much discussion regarding possible messianic interpretation. Certainly, in the NT they are interpreted as passages fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Throughout these categories BPI is used to describe situations with individual, national, or cosmic implications. BPI in Genesis and 1 Chronicles discussed above is used in conjunction

with birth narratives. There is also a possible allusion to the likeness of BP and death on an individual level in Psalms 18 and 116. Additionally, BPI may be applied to an individual on behalf of a collective entity (group/nation). For example, in Isaiah BP are experienced on behalf of the Babylonians in Isa 21:3, and the king of Babylon on behalf of the Babylonians in Jer 50:43. Thirdly, BPI and birth imagery referring to an individual may be applied to a nation as in Isa 54:1. Here Isaiah takes up the cry of Sarah and Hannah who were barren and did not experience BP until they were each given a child through divine intervention. Isaiah applies the situations of Sarah, Rachel, Rebecca, and Hannah to Israel in exile.

Throughout these categories BPI remains essentially personal, based on the real reaction of real people (women). Whatever entity to which BPI is applied is personified, regardless of whether this entity is a city, a nation, or a portion of natural creation. This essentially personal aspect is key to the use of BPI in the OT and related literature. The responsibility for sin, the resultant negative divine judgment, and experience of alienation from God are all on the level of the individual person, however collectively they may be shared or felt.

In the related literature of OT Pseudepigrapha we see even more explicit references to BP as a sign of alienation from God in birth (Genesis 3) than we do in OT usage. *The Apocalypse of Moses* and *The Life of Adam and Eve* give an account of Genesis 3 and an account of Eve's BP in giving birth to Cain, respectively. In the latter text Eve receives divine consolation during birth, but only after Adam intercedes for her. In 4 Ezra the allegorical woman alludes to BP both as alienation in birth as well as connected to the sorrow of death. In *Apocalypse of Baruch*, Baruch's vision of the messianic era describes birth without BP, that is, a healing of humankind's alienation from the divine.

In 4 Maccabees the mother who watches her sons' martyrdoms experiences worse pangs than she did in birthing her sons. Her agony is depicted as the pangs of her birthing her sons spiritually. In this last text we see a remarkable similarity to Paul, who depicts his own spiritual paternity (and maternity) of the early Christian Galatian community in terms of BP and intercessory sufferings (Gal 4:19). *First Enoch* 62 and 4 Ezra 16 exemplify Pseudepigraphal use of BPI in the OT prophetic tradition of the "Day of the Lord."

The two Qumran hymns seem most similar to the psalmic depiction of grave distress to the point of death in terms of BP. The first Qumran excerpt of the Thanksgiving Hymn not only uses BP metaphorically to describe distress but also describes a man who is born from such BP. Here we possibly see a unique combination of metaphor and description of a particular birth.

It is no accident that many of the texts discussed in this chapter contain elements of the City-Lament. This genre is present in ANE and OT literature. However, Harvey Guthrie points out that because of the unique faith of Israel, "The lament in Israel came to be employed to bewail sin rather than the perplexities and sufferings occasioned by finitude."⁸⁹ Such a dynamic leads to self-examination and self-accusation,⁹⁰ which is closely linked to the fivefold usage of BPI in the OT and its related uses in apocryphal and Qumran literature.

BPI in the OT and related literature must be understood against the backdrop of the blessing of giving birth. At times this backdrop seems all but eclipsed by the strong sense of the evil of sin and of suffering in the OT. In the NT, BPI builds upon and recovers the original OT

⁸⁹ Harvey H. Guthrie, *Israel's Sacred Songs: A Study* (New York: Seabury; 1966) 158.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 158-59.

context of the blessing of giving birth. In the NT, BPI still represents the evil of suffering as a result of sin, but the suffering takes on a redemptive significance through the cross of Christ. This new redemptive significance makes the hope already imbedded in the OT BPI much more immediately relevant and prominent. NT birth and birth-pang imagery takes on a primarily spiritual and apostolic significance that is distinct from, but deeply rooted in the OT and related literature.

The OT roots of NT BPI are especially important in deciphering the full significance of Rev 12:2. Of all NT instances of BPI, arguably, the most mysterious remains that of Revelation 12. The BPI of Revelation 12:2 contains all the various facets of BPI throughout the Old and New Testaments. At the same time, the BPI of Rev 12:2 is also unique in all of biblical literature. Systematically addressing each instance of BPI in the OT and related literature is an essential first step in the project of distinguishing what the BPI in Revelation 12 means and what it does not mean.

Chapter Three

Birth-Pang Imagery in the New Testament

1. Introduction

In the survey of OT BPI in chapter two, I examined the imagery of BP in the context of man's alienation from God. BP represent alienation from God within the blessing of birth.¹ In chapter three, I examine the imagery of BP in the context of the redemptive work of Christ. In the NT, BP still represent alienation from God (and suffering due to sin), but BP also represent man's participation in Christ's redemptive work on the cross. The NT use of BPI builds upon and transforms the OT categories discussed. Using the OT categories from chap. 2, I will highlight the differences and developments of the imagery of BP from the OT to the NT.

Four of the six OT categories of BPI are found in the NT. The first OT category discussed is (1) "BP represent the blessing of birth." This category is present throughout the NT use of BPI, but it is most clearly evident in Gal 4:27. Of the five OT categories related to BPI representing alienation, only three are present in the NT: (2) "BP represent alienation from God," particularly in allusion to Gen 3:16 (Gal 4:19 and Rom 8:22); (3) "BP represent negative divine judgment" (1 Thess 5:3; Matt 24:7-8; Mark 13:8), of which BP as the pangs of death is a subsection (Acts 2:24); and (4) "BP that yield birth as a sign of redemption" (John 16:21). This last category includes the most developed use of OT BPI in the NT, with the clearest parallel

¹ This symbolic value is rooted in the imagery of Gen 3:16. As discussed, some BP simply represent the blessing of birth, for example, Isa 54:1.

between BPI and Christ's Passion. In all the texts discussed, man's alienation from God is portrayed from the perspective of hope for future union with God.

Each of the four categories of OT BPI that appear in the NT is transformed. (1) In Gal 4:27 BPI alludes to the OT significance of the blessing of birth. However, Paul transforms the BPI to indicate that the absence of BP signifies a "birth through a promise." (2) In Gal 4:19 and Rom 8:22 BP have the OT significance of alienation from God due to sin within the blessing of birth. In the NT, however, those who suffer BP do so not because of their own alienation, but rather on behalf of another's alienation from God. In Galatians, Paul is not suffering the BP of his own alienation from God, but of the Galatians' alienation from God. In Romans, all of creation—and even the Spirit—share in the BP on behalf of the Roman believers as they long for adoption, which is the redemption of their bodies. (3) In 1 Thess 5:3, Matt 24:7-8, and Mark 13:8, BP have the OT significance of negative divine judgment. In the NT, however, divine judgment is no longer evidenced on the physical battlefield in the defeat of, or victory over, a particular nation, as it is in the Prophets and Psalms. In the NT divine judgment will be accompanied by cosmic disaster, but the real battlefield is on the level of the individual person (Rom 7:22-23) and his/her conformity to Christ (Gal 4:19, ". . . until Christ is formed in you."). BPI is not used to incite fear but to give disciples insight into the nature of their trials. (4) In John 16:16, BP signify present trials that lead to future redemption, symbolized by birth. This category is only imperfectly represented in the OT in Mic 4:9-10 and 5:2. John 16:16 is unique in the bible because it contains the whole analogy, from BP to birth, that is implied in other instances of biblical BPI but never made explicit. BP and birth in John 16:16 represent the suffering of present and future trials that will be forgotten in the joy of union with Christ.

2. Birth Pangs Represent the Blessing of Birth

“For it is written, ‘Rejoice, you barren one who bore no children; break forth and shout, you who were not in labor (ὠδίνουσα); for more numerous are the children of the deserted one than of her who has a husband.’” (Gal 4:27)

The BPI in this text is based on the OT use of BPI to represent the blessing of birth. In this text Paul quotes Isa 54:1, “a prominent oracle in Jewish eschatological expectation that had to do with the future glory of Zion.”² In this text the *absence* of BP is a sign of the coming of the messianic age; it signifies a “birth through a promise.” In the discussion of this text, I first treat Paul’s use of BPI and, second, I treat his discussion of the maternal line through which he traces the inheritance of all believers.

Isaiah uses BPI to represent the blessing of birth. Isaiah alludes to Sarah’s birth of Isaac, with the idea that what God “did for Sarah in the past is what He will do for Jerusalem in the future.”³ Isaiah exhorts Israel/Jerusalem, through his allusion to Sarah, to rejoice because her fortune will be reversed.⁴ Earlier, in chap. 51, he exhorts Israel with birth imagery representing creation and creation of Israel: “Listen to me, you who pursue justice, who seek the LORD; Look to the rock from which you were hewn, to the pit from which you were quarried; Look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth (תְּהוֹלֵלְתֶּם); When he was but one I called him, I blessed him and made him many” (vv.1-2).

² Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Dallas: Word Books, 1990) 215. See the discussion of Isa 54:1 above, p. 47.

³ Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One*, 113.

⁴ Joel Willits, “Isa 54:1 in Gal 4:24b-27: Reading Genesis in Light of Isaiah,” *ZNW* 96 (2005) 197.

Paul uses the BPI of this text from Isaiah to represent the blessing of birth. He gives a new meaning to Isaiah's text, however, inasmuch as he interprets the real cause for Sarah's rejoicing not to be the reversal of fortune she experiences in Isaac's birth, but rather God's blessing in an even more abundant providence of descendents through faith. According to the "allegory," Sarah represents the heavenly Jerusalem, which is the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. God has provided Israel cause for rejoicing not through the re-flowering of the remnant after the exile, but rather, through the incorporation of the Gentiles through Christ.⁵ Paul does not interpret Israel's reversal of fortune on the physical level of birth, i.e., the one who was barren is no longer barren; the one who had no BP now has BP; the nation that has dwindled is now peopled and prosperous. Paul takes the reversal of fortune to a different level, that of faith, of the "spirit" (Gal 4:29). Israel's true fulfillment is no longer through tribal and familial relations, but through faith.⁶

Paul's basic meaning for the Galatians is that they should rejoice because, as believers in Christ, they are the true fulfillment of the Lord's promise to give Abraham descendents more numerous than the stars.⁷ Paul is possibly alluding to the time of the Messiah when women will

⁵ Isaiah's prophecy of Israel's reversal of fortune places her within the OT theme, found particularly in the Prophets, of God blessing the lowly. This theme is continued in the NT in the miracle stories and beatitudes. In the OT, God blesses the lowly through the reversal of fortune; in the NT, God blesses them sometimes through reversal of fortune (e.g., NT miracles and healings) but also through taking the suffering of the lowly and unfortunate up into the redemptive work of the cross (e.g., beatitudes).

⁶ James D. G. Dunn (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* [BNTC; London: Black, 1993] 246-47) writes, "Underlying the surface account, therefore, is the deeper message, that as Abraham was wrong to turn to Hagar, relying on the flesh for the fulfillment of the divine promise, so those who likewise rely on the flesh (ethnic descent from Abraham, signified by circumcision) were in the wrong."

⁷Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011) 304.

no longer experience BP (2 *Apoc. Bar.* 73:7). If this is the case, then he is suggesting that the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy through the baptized faithful is a sign of the Messianic age.⁸

The Galatian Christians should not be concerned with fulfilling the Jewish Law, as some "agitators" propose.⁹ The present Jerusalem, which has rejected God's providence, does not fulfill this promise physically because she shows no signs of bearing descendents more numerous than the stars. Nor does the present Jerusalem fulfill this promise from the perspective of faith because she bears children for slavery to the law, not heirs to the promise. The Jerusalem above, however, is fruitful by God's providence. The many children ("of the Spirit" [Gal 4:29]) promised to Abraham and Sarah are gained through the incorporation of the Gentiles through faith in Christ into the line of Abraham.¹⁰

Paul's use of the term "son" in Gal 4:23 ("the son of the freeborn woman was born through a promise") includes three different but related referents: Isaac, Christ, and the followers of Christ. Each "son" is born through a promise according to the Spirit. The remarkable birth of Isaac, since Sarah was barren and past the age of child-bearing, provides the scriptural framework for Paul to describe the remarkable "birth" of the "children of the promise" (Gal

⁸ Longenecker, *Galatians*, 214. See de Boer's excursus on Galatians and Apocalyptic Eschatology (*Galatians*, 31-36, esp. 33).

⁹ Frank J. Matera, *Galatians* (SacPag 9; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992) 177-78. It is unclear whether the agitators were part of the Galatian community or visiting from elsewhere. Paul has taken up this issue of Judaizing for the whole of Galatians 4, and his argument against circumcision as a condition for fulfilling the law culminates in chap. 5.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Bligh (*Galatians: A Discussion of St. Paul's Epistle* [London: St. Paul, 1969] 401-4) who interprets the Christian Church as being free from the law because she has no husband, i.e., is "desolate." Bligh does not consider the various NT texts describing Christ as the bridegroom (Mark 2:19, 20; Luke 5:34, 35; 1 Cor 6:15-17; Eph 5:23-33). Along the same lines, Brant James Pitre ("Blessing the Barren and Warning the Fecund: Jesus' Message for Women Concerning Pregnancy and Childbirth," *JSNT* 81 [2001] 59-80) misses OT and NT vision of birth as a blessing.

4:28) to whom he is writing.¹¹ Believers are “born” through their incorporation into Christ in baptism. Paul writes that those who have faith are children of Abraham (Gal 3:7), and that Christ is the singular descendent of Abraham (3:16).¹² Christ is the fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham (Gal 3:18), and through Christ the blessing of Abraham is extended to the Gentiles (Gal 3:14, 29) so that Abraham’s descendents become as numerous as the stars. Sarah suffers BP for Isaac but not for Christ and his faithful. Christ’s faithful are “born” to Sarah through the cross (3:13-14). The faithful are “born” to Sarah through the pangs of the cross rather than the pangs of labor.

Although Paul earlier describes those who believe in Christ as children of Abraham, his extensive discussion of Abraham’s two wives encourages the Galatians to attend closely to the maternal line. Isaiah’s command to Israel/Jerusalem to rejoice becomes Paul’s command to the Galatians to rejoice (Gal 4:27), all in allusion to Sarah and her cause for rejoicing. The reversal of fortune on the level of faith is great cause for rejoicing, both for Sarah and for the children of the promise (Gal 4:27). Indeed, in this chapter, Paul gives particular attention to the maternal line in various phrases and references. For example, in Gal 4:4 he mentions that Christ is born of a woman (γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός), born under the law (γενόμενον ὑπὸ νόμον). Paul uses the same verb in two other texts in which he mentions Christ’s human origins (γενομένου ἐκ σπέρματος Δαυὶδ κατὰ σάρκα [Rom 1:3]; ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος [Phil

¹¹ One can only wonder if Paul was also considering the tradition(s) represented in the first chapters of Matthew and Luke regarding Jesus’s own remarkable conception and birth.

¹² Matera (*Galatians*, 169) writes, “Although Paul does not identify the second covenant, he probably has in mind the promise made to Abraham which he discussed in 3:15-17 and finds its fulfillment in Abraham’s seed, Christ.”

2:7]). Paul’s phrasing is somewhat unusual in this text from Galatians since γίνομαι is not normally used to describe the birth of a child in relation to his mother but rather to his father in the sense of establishing familial lineage or existence. In the LXX γίνομαι is used in the brief genealogy of Genesis 4 in regard to paternal lineage. See, for example, Gen 4:26, τῷ Σηθ ἐγένετο υἱός. The only LXX use of γίνομαι to describe lineage through the maternal line is in Ezra 10:3, in which Ezra encourages all the Israelite men to dismiss their foreign wives and “the children born of them.” Here the maternal line is distinguished because it is the key to deciding the fate of the children.¹³

In the context of the “allegory,” Paul prefers the verb, γεννάω, which he uses to describe the birth of Hagar’s son. Paul uses the verb three times in rapid succession, almost as if for emphasis (Gal 4:23, 24, 29).¹⁴ The use of this verb is not particularly unusual and has the normal meaning of “to bear” or “to beget,” depending on whether the subject is female or male, respectively.¹⁵

Paul’s comparison of the two wives begins as a simple parallelism. By the end of the passage, however, the parallel structure shifts to emphasize the freeborn woman and Paul addresses her directly in the words of Isaiah. Paul introduces Abraham’s two wives as “the slave woman” and the “freeborn woman” (Gal 4:22); as the one who bears naturally and the one who

¹³ See also Raymond E. Brown’s comments on this topic in *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke* (2 Vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1977, 1993) 519.

¹⁴ de Boer, *Galatians*, 293.

¹⁵ Cf. Sam K. Williams (*Galatians* [ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1997] 130-31) who makes the case that γεννάω describes begetting primarily and therefore, in this text, refers to Paul’s own mission of begetting in faith. Also, Dunn, *Galatians*, 250.

bears by a promise (4:23); as the one who represents the covenant of Mt. Sinai and the city of Jerusalem and the one who represents the heavenly Jerusalem (4:25-26). Paul identifies Hagar as the slave woman but never identifies Sarah, whom he continues to refer to as the “freeborn woman” (4:22, 23, 26, 29, 31). Likewise, when Paul explains that Hagar represents the covenant of Mt. Sinai, which corresponds to the present-day Jerusalem (4:25), he does not explain which covenant “the freeborn” represents. Instead, he writes, “But the Jerusalem above is freeborn, and she is our mother” (Gal 4:26).

The idea of an ideal or faithful Jerusalem is mentioned elsewhere in the NT with different wording: Heb 12:22, “. . . you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the *heavenly Jerusalem*,” Rev 3:12, “. . . the city of God, the *new Jerusalem*,” and Rev 21:2, 10, “. . . *Jerusalem coming out of heaven* from God.” A New Jerusalem is promised and hoped for in the OT and OT Pseudepigrapha.¹⁶ In Galatians, according to Paul, the heavenly Jerusalem—anticipated for so long by the patriarchs—is the mother of all the faithful.¹⁷

In Isaiah 54, Isaiah speaks to Israel in the second person throughout the chapter. When Paul quotes Isa 54:1, however, he shifts from the third person to the second person, thus emphasizing the importance of the “freeborn” mother and her blessing of progeny. Richard N. Longenecker writes, “The conjunction γάρ is used in a confirmatory manner in support of the

¹⁶ In OT: Ps 87:3; Ezek 40-48; Sir 36:13; Tob 13. In related literature: *1 Enoch* 53:6; 90:28-29; *2 Enoch* 55:2; *Pss. Sol.* 17:33; 4 Ezra 7:26; 8:52; 10:27, 44-46; 13:35-36; *2 Apoc. Bar* 4:2-6.

¹⁷ Longenecker, *Galatians*, 214.

identification of Sarah with ‘the Jerusalem that is above’ and the claim that all Christians (including Gentile believers) have as their mother both Sarah and the heavenly Jerusalem.”¹⁸

The portrayal of “Jerusalem ‘our mother’ in mourning, devastated or awaiting the birth of her sons . . .” is based on Jer 31:15 in which Rachel weeps for her children. This is the image of Jerusalem found in sectarian and rabbinic literature. The image of Jerusalem giving birth to sons is based on the story of “Sarah, who gave birth when it seemed to be impossible.”¹⁹ This image of a fruitful mother Jerusalem is seldom seen in the OT, and even in Isaiah 54 the command for Israel to rejoice is in light of a future reversal of fortune. Hence, Paul’s depiction of the “Jerusalem above” as a joyful “mother” at the present time is striking. She is not the mournful or bereft Jerusalem of the OT because her children have been delivered in the “birth of the Christian community.”²⁰ Paul is depicting the “Jerusalem above” as the fulfillment of the promised reversal of fortune and echoes Isaiah’s command to rejoice. Paul’s depiction of the Galatians as the children of the “freeborn woman” (4:31) is based on faith and baptism in Christ, not on natural birth. In this way, Isaiah’s words (“break forth and shout, you who were not in labor!”) are validated. The Galatians, like Sarah/Jerusalem above, are to rejoice because the fruitfulness of God’s providence extends far beyond that of nature. Through Christ, Sarah has more children than she ever could have had through natural birth, or even through her descendants. Although the theme of mother in the faith is not common in the NT, this text from Galatians 4:31 and 1 Pet

¹⁸ Ibid., 215.

¹⁹ Calloway, *Sing, O Barren One*, 112. Calloway discusses this topic especially on pp. 73-90. Also see Christle Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008) 202 for her discussion of the “complex” portrayal of Zion as mother and daughter.

²⁰ Calloway, *Sing, O Barren One*, 112.

3:6 (“ . . . You are her [Sarah’s] children when you do what is good and fear no intimidation”) both portray believers as children of Sarah through their witness to their faith. Abraham is their father in the faith through the line of Sarah.

3. Birth Pangs Suffered on Behalf of Another’s Alienation from God

1. “*My little children, with whom I am again in travail (ὠδίνω) until Christ be formed (μορφωθῆ) in you!*” (Gal 4:19)

Paul’s use of BPI in this second text from Galatians is based on the OT use of BPI to represent alienation from God within the blessing of birth, particularly in reference to Gen 3:16. In the OT texts, BP often represent national disaster or military defeat and are experienced by the one who is alienated by sin as punishment or a sign of alienation. In this NT text, however, BP represent the personal anxiety and hardship of the apostolate and are experienced by another party on behalf of the one alienated by sin. Paul is not in “travail” because he is alienated from God but because the *Galatians* have alienated themselves from God—even after their baptism (Gal 4:9). The Galatians have also alienated themselves from Paul, as God’s messenger (4:16). Although earlier in Galatians (4:13) and in other letters (Rom 7:23; 2 Cor 12:17-18), Paul writes about his own physical sufferings that remind him of his imperfect union with God, in this text, he suffers on behalf of the Galatians. The BPI in this text represents the care and suffering that Paul undergoes on behalf of the Galatians as they grow and mature in their faith.

The growth and conversion of the Galatians is represented as an on-going gestational period: “. . . until Christ be formed (μορφωθῆ) in you (ὁμῖν)” (Gal 4:19). The verb does not of itself connote conception or gestation as Martinus C. de Boer suggests and it is not usually used

in the context of pregnancy or birth.²¹ However, when it is used with Paul's BPI, the reader naturally thinks of a child forming in the womb. Frank J. Matera points out that "Christ, like an embryo, takes shape among the Galatians, but Paul suffers the pains of childbirth."²² Μορφώω is only used once in the NT. In the NT the related noun, μορφή is used only three times, and always of Christ. In Philippians, Christ has the form (μορφῆ) of God (2:6) but takes on the form (μορφῆν) of a slave (2:7). In Mark, Jesus appears in a different form (μορφῆ [16:12]). "Until you (each) become like Christ" is the general meaning of the phrase in Galatians 4 but it is significant that Paul phrases his meaning with Christ as the subject. The three NT uses of the related word form, σύμμορφον, are always predicated of the believer in relation to Christ. For example, Paul desires to be conformed (συμμορφιζόμενος) to Christ's death (Phil 3:10). The earthly body will conform (συμμόρφους) to the glorified body of Christ (Phil 3:12). Those God foreknew were predestined to be conformed (σύμμορφον) to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29). Regarding this text in Galatians, Augustine explains, "Christ is formed in the inner self of the believer through faith."²³

Paul is concerned both with the salvation of individual Galatians and with the health and life of the Galatian community itself.²⁴ He is personally grieved that the community has turned

²¹ de Boer, *Galatians*, 284. LSJ defines "μορφώω" as "to give shape or form to something." One example given from Euripides's *Troades* is "changing men into swine."

²² Matera, *Galatians*, 166; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 197.

²³ Augustine, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. Eric Plumer (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 191.

²⁴ For a discussion of the Pauline notion of individual and community, see Ben C. Dunson, *Individual and Community in Paul's Letter to the Romans* (WUNT 332; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012). He takes issue with what he describes as the "broad-brush antithesis between the individual and the community in Paul," particularly the 20th-

on him and writes, “So now have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?” (4:16). The main source of his grief, however, is not that the Galatians are rejecting him but that they are rejecting their faith in God by turning toward “destitute elemental powers” (4:9). Although Paul describes himself as experiencing BP “again,” he does not describe the need for Christ to be formed among the Galatians “again.”²⁵ As Augustine writes, Paul “is not referring to the beginnings of faith . . . but rather to its strengthening and perfection.”²⁶ Perhaps for this reason Paul does not explicitly mention a metaphorical birth, either of the Galatians or of Christ. Those who have submitted to circumcision “are separated from Christ” (5:4), but Paul hopes they will respond to correction and draw closer to Christ (6:1).

The basis for Paul’s anguish on behalf of the Galatians is his love for them, which he expresses here in maternal imagery. Augustine describes Paul as speaking in the person of “Mother Church.”²⁷ By rooting the birth-pang metaphor in the image of maternal love, Paul recalls the original context of BP—birth of new life in partnership with God. In the first half of

century trend of reading Paul as interested in the community alone. He explains that for Paul, the individual and community are intrinsically bound (Dunson, *Individual*, 3). He roots this scholarly discussion in the original disagreement between Bultmann and Käsemann. Bultmann defended an existentialist individualism in his *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. Kendrick Grobel; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007) 190-269, albeit within the context of community. Ernst Käsemann (“Was ich als deutscher Theologe in fünfzig Jahren verlernte,” in *Kirchliche Konflikte* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982] 233-44, here 241) argued that the individual was little more than an abstraction and not important in Paul at all (Dunson, *Individual*, 39). It is helpful to consider that a community in which Christ is formed begins with baptized individuals in whom Christ is formed and who are joined together by love of Christ. For example, see Gal 3:28.

²⁵ Dunn, *Galatians*, 240. cf. de Boer (*Galatians*, 284) who interprets $\pi\alpha\lambda\acute{\iota}\nu$ as referring to both the main clause in v. 19a as well as the subordinate clause in v. 19b. Also, Hans Dieter Betz, *A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 234.

²⁶ Augustine, *Galatians*, 193. Frederick F. Bruce (*The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982] 213) suggests the same basic meaning as “the daily renewal of the inner man” (2 Cor 4:16).

²⁷ Augustine, *Galatians*, 191.

chapter 4, Paul develops the metaphor of childhood and maturation in detail. He implies that he has previously experienced labor pains on behalf of the Galatians, referring to his role in preparing them for baptism, baptizing them (3:26-27), and founding their community.²⁸ Paul calls the Galatians his children (τέκνα) and begs them not to regress to the status of slaves but to keep their status as sons (υἱοί) so that they may inherit that which is promised to them as children of Abraham. Elsewhere in his epistles, Paul uses maternal imagery (1 Cor 3:2; 1 Thess 2:7) and paternal imagery (Phlm 10) to show his love for the churches. Paul speaks of the Corinthians as infants who needed him to feed them milk (1 Cor 3:2) and to whom he has become a father in Christ Jesus through the gospel (1 Cor 4:14-15). He speaks also to the Thessalonians, with whom he was as gentle “as a nursing mother [who] cares for her children” (1 Thess 2:7). Paul describes Onesimus as his own child, whom he begat (in faith) (ἐγέννησα), during his imprisonment (Phlm 10).²⁹

Paul’s use of BPI in this text is unique. But the use of BPI in the OT and related literature that comes closest to this text is the description in 4 Maccabees of the mother’s anguish in witnessing the deaths of her seven sons. The point of similarity is key: BPI is used in both texts

²⁸ Matera, *Galatians*, 166.

²⁹ Ben Witherington III (*The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007] 67-68) interprets Paul’s begetting Onesimus to refer to the spiritual father-son relationship in which Paul claims Onesimus belongs to him in the Lord. Here he follows Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke (*The Letter to Philemon* [Eerdman’s Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000] 335) who argue against the possibility of an allusion to baptism and seem to do so out of confessional persuasion in the primacy of personal conversion (known colloquially as “being born again”) over baptism. It seems that Paul is hardly excluding an allusion to baptism in Philemon, at least as part of Onesimus’s conversion, especially since he explicitly links such father/mother imagery to baptism in Galatians and in 1 Corinthians (1:16; 3:2; 4:14-15). Even if Paul did not baptize Onesimus himself, surely his apostolate with him caused him to be baptized by another.

as a metaphor for suffering on behalf of another's increase in faith. Paul and the Maccabean mother bolster the faith of another in their suffering. Just as Paul suffers BP for the Galatians' continued conversion, which Paul describes as Christ being formed in them, the Maccabean mother suffers for her sons' martyrdom, which is described as their birth into perfect piety: "O mother, sorely tried now by pains sharper than the pains of birth! O woman who alone among women brought perfect piety to birth!" (4 Macc 15:16-17).

There are certainly differences between the two texts. The text from 4 Maccabees is more gruesome and impassioned in its presentation of the martyrdom of the seven brothers than is Paul's description of his concern for preserving the "spirit of his Son" that God sent into the hearts of the Galatians (Gal 4:6). The seven brothers are tortured and die in excruciating pain. The Maccabean mother is not alienated from her sons; nor are her sons alienated from God, whereas the Galatians are alienated from Paul and his teaching on Christ.

These differences do not negate the fundamental similarity between the texts of suffering represented by BP that benefits another. The first similarity is the element of freedom and transcendence. The Maccabean mother experiences pangs of sorrow as a mother but "in the midst of her passionate feelings pious reason nerved her whole being with a manly courage and enabled her to transcend the immediate affections of a mother's love" (4 Macc 15:23). Paul's agony that he experiences on behalf of the Galatians follows from his mission that he has freely accepted. Indeed, he discourses extensively in chapters 3 and 4 on the theme of freedom that Christ brings to the children of the promise in contrast to their former slavery. The second similarity is that the suffering is on behalf of another's faith in God. Both the Maccabean

mother's suffering and Paul's suffering are of exhortative and exemplary value. Both texts suggest that there is intercessory value to their vicarious suffering.

Paul appeals to the Galatians to imitate him, writing, "Be as I am, because I have also become as you are" (Gal 4:12). He exhorts the Galatians to imitate him in relying on faith and not on the law. Paul emphasizes that he has become like the Galatians in the most basic way of adopting Gentile customs.³⁰ His conduct with the Galatians reflects his deeper desire stated in 1 Cor 9:22 to be all things to all people, "to save at least some." Paul is laying the foundation for them to share in his apostolic zeal for others. He knows that as the Galatians are conformed to Christ on the cross, they will come to suffer on behalf of others so that Christ may be formed in others. Not only Paul, but the Galatians themselves are called to suffer BP for others.

Paul's use of BPI includes apocalyptic allusions within the overarching metaphor of the maturation of a child.³¹ In Gal 4:4-5 he writes of the "fullness of time" (τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου) in which "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption."³² By using BPI in Gal 4:19, Paul communicates that his own deeply personal sacrifice and concern for the Galatians (and all believers) are connected with the destiny of the whole created order. For Paul, as discussed below under the text from Romans, individual human persons (Adam, Christ, etc.) are actors in

³⁰ Matera, *Galatians*, 164.

³¹ Dunn, *Galatians*, 213.

³² τὸ πλήρωμα ("Fullness") is used elsewhere in the Pauline letters (Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians) to mean fulfillment or perfection of a particular reality in Christ. Fullness is used in conjunction with several different concepts/realities. For example, see Romans: the "fullness" of the Jews" (11:12), the "fullness of the nations" (11:25), the "fullness of the law" (13:10), the "fullness of Christ's blessing" (15:29). See also 1 Cor 10:26, the "fullness" of the earth. Also, Eph 1:10, 1:23, 3:19, 4:13 and Col 1:19, 2:9.

the drama of sin and redemption, but their actions have cosmic implications. Through his BPI in Gal 4:19, “Paul associates his own apostolic vocation with the anguish anticipated in an apocalyptic era and recalls for the Galatians their crucifixion with Christ.”³³

2. “*We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains (συστενάζει καὶ συνωδίνει) even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we also groan (στενάζομεν) within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption (τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν) of our bodies. . . . In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings (στεναγμοῖς).*” (Rom 8:22-23, 26)

Paul’s use of BPI in this text from Romans is based on the OT use of BPI to represent alienation from God within the blessing of birth, particularly in reference to Gen 3:16. Paul’s image of creation groaning in BP recalls the LXX text of Gen 3:16 (πληθυνῶ τὰς λύπας σου καὶ τὸν στεναγμόν σου) which describes the increase of pain and groaning in giving birth.³⁴

There is a three-fold use of BPI in the text of Romans: creation groaning in labor pangs; the groaning of those who have the firstfruits; and the groaning of the Spirit itself. In his

³³ Beverly R. Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007) 8.

³⁴ David T. Tsumura, “An OT Background for Rom 8:22,” *NTS* 40 (1994) 620-21; also, J. Mark Lawson, “Romans 8:18-25—The Hope of Creation,” *RevExp* 91 (1994) 562; Andrzej Gieniusz, *Romans 8:18-30 “Suffering Does Not Thwart the Future Glory”* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999) 146-48. For a different perspective, see Laurie Braaten, “The Groaning Creation: The Biblical Background for Romans 8:22,” *BR* 50 (2005) 22-24. Braaten does not think that Paul is referring to Genesis 3 but rather to the OT theme of creation mourning human sin. Braaten creates a false dichotomy between ongoing human sin/divine judgment and Adam’s original sin in the garden. Then, she picks the former as the reason for creation’s groaning. She dismisses the significance of the BPI in the passage and interprets the verse according to the OT tradition of the “mourning of creation due either to human sin, God’s judgment, or a combination of the two” (23). Mourning, however, is associated with death. BP are associated with new life, and this text from Romans certainly points to new life.

description of creation groaning in BP, Paul uses the Greek compounds, συστενάζει (groaning together with) and συνωδίνει (having BP together with) rather than στενάζω (groaning) and ὠδίνω (having BP) to emphasize that creation is suffering *together with* humankind.³⁵ Creation suffers BP because of Adam's sin. When Paul explains that “we ourselves groan,” he does not explicitly mention BP, but the structure of the sentence (οὐ μόνον δέ, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοὶ . . . ἡμεῖς) makes it understood that he is alluding to the image of groaning in BP.³⁶ He uses the more common στενάζω rather than συστενάζω because humankind is the primary subject of suffering in hope of final redemption of the body.³⁷ When Paul describes the intercessory “groanings” of the Spirit in v. 26, he continues to allude to the BPI of v. 22, although in a different way. Byrne writes, “Whereas both ‘creation’ and ‘we ourselves’ groan out of a longing to be set free from present restriction, the activity of the Spirit amounts to a ‘coming to the aid of our weakness.’”³⁸

³⁵ Frank J. Matera, *Romans* (Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010) 201. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 509. Cf. Harry Alan Hahne (*The Corruption and Redemption of Creation: Nature in Romans 8:19-22 and Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* [LNTS 336; London: T&T Clark, 2006] 205) writes, “Most scholars believe that the συν- compounds indicate that creation in its entirety suffers ‘together’ or ‘in one accord.’” In a completely different direction, Laurie Braaten (“All Creation Groans: Romans 8:22 in Light of the Biblical Sources,” *HBT* 28 [2006] 132) concludes, “The groaning of the children of God is likened to the groaning of creation, and not the other way around, as the reader might expect.”

³⁶ Cf. Gieniusz (*Romans*, 148-49, especially footnote 494) concludes that all creation (including human persons) is groaning in travail with Eve. Those who have the firstfruits are groaning in expectation of release, not related to BP.

³⁷ See Fitzmyer (*Romans*, 505) who points out that in these texts, “redemption” is “recast in cosmic terms” and concludes that redemption “is no longer considered from an anthropological point of view. . . . and human bodies that are said to await such redemption are merely part of the entire material creation.”

³⁸ Brendan J. Byrne, *Romans* (SacPag 6; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996) 266. See also, Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 517.

The OT theme of humankind’s alienation from God within the blessing of birth is transformed in Rom 8:22 in three important ways. First, the groaning of BP is no longer an unending crisis of suffering and futility resulting from sin. Second, Paul’s emphasis is not on the BP, but the birth. Third, not only does creation join humankind’s suffering, but the Spirit does as well in its intercession. Creation is compelled from the beginning of humankind to experience the futility of decay as a result of Adam and Eve’s sin. Not only are Adam and Eve affected by their disobedience, the very ground—representing all of creation—is affected.³⁹ In Rom 5:12-19, Paul explains that Adam brought sin and death into the world.⁴⁰ Since the ground was under Adam’s jurisdiction, it was affected by Adam’s disobedience.⁴¹ The curse upon the ground is intensified with Cain’s murder of Abel. The Lord tells Cain, “If you till the soil, it shall no longer give you its produce. You shall become a restless wanderer on the earth” (Gen 4:12). This is so great a punishment that Cain despairs that he will be murdered until the Lord gives him a protective mark (4:15).

Paul describes the BP of creation as “slavery to corruption” (Rom 8:26) and “futility” (8:20), the Greek equivalent of “vanity of vanities” (הַבְּלָה הַבְּלָה) in Eccl 12:8. Paul explains, “creation was made subject to futility, *not of its own accord* but because of the one who

³⁹ Gienisiuz, *Romans*, 174.

⁴⁰ The connection that Paul makes between Adam’s sin and on-going (or personal) sin in the world is present in the Judaic tradition. For example, *2 Apoc. Bar.* 54:19 explains that “each of us has been the Adam of his own soul” (Klijn, “2 Baruch,” 640). Klijn (619) notes clear parallels between the advanced theology of the *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch* and Romans and 1 Corinthians.

⁴¹ Gieniusz (*Romans*, 149) sees creation’s experience of Eve’s BP in v. 22 as “the clearest possible example of unmerited suffering.” Romans 8 emphasizes Paul’s understanding that Adam and Eve’s original disobedience has created a bondage to sin that continues among humankind as well as all creation.

subjected it . . .” (Rom 8:20). When Paul describes the subjection of the ground in terms of labor pangs he conflates Gen 3:16 with 3:17-18, when God says, “Cursed be the ground because of you! In toil shall you eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you, as you eat of the plants of the field.”⁴² By associating the BP of creation with the sin of Adam, Paul draws a connection between Genesis 3 and the traditions behind the texts of Mark 13:8, Matt 24:7-8, and 4 Ezra 16:38-39, in which the calamities to come upon the earth before/in the last age are described as BP.

Although Paul initially addresses the slavery of sin from the “perspective” of creation, the center of the drama plays out in the “inner self” (Rom 7:22) of each believer: creation experiences BP by subjugation and the Spirit, by intercession. Paul makes it clear that even those who have received the “firstfruits of the Spirit,” i.e., those who have been baptized, still suffer from the effects of Adam’s sin.⁴³ This is because even those who have the firstfruits have not yet received (full) adoption, the redemption of the body (Rom 8:23). So, the faithful groan (with BP) themselves, as a part of physical creation awaiting redemption. For the faithful, however, BP are characterized in terms of weakness due to sin, rather than alienation and futility. Their weakness is in body and heart (8:27) since they do not know how to pray. This weakness becomes a

⁴² Tsumura, “OT Background,” 620-21.

⁴³ A survey of the Pauline use of “firstfruits” shows that he uses the word to refer to the first people in a community to be baptized, those founding members of a particular church (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:15; 2 Thes 2:13). Christ is also the firstfruits (1 Cor 15:20, 23). In a particularly interesting passage in James (1:18) we read, “He (Christ) willed to give us birth (ἀπεκύησεν) by the word of truth that we may be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.”

Ceslaus Spicq (*Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* [3 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994] 1:148-50. s. v. “ἀπαρχή”) mentions a meaning of ἀπαρχή found in the papyri of “birth certificates,” which in this text would refer to baptism. See also Gieniusz’s comments (*Romans*, 198-99).

strength, however, because it requires the faithful to rely upon (and benefit from) a much more powerful intercessor than themselves. The faithful’s groaning “within” is made efficacious by the Spirit, whom Paul explains “comes to the aid of our weakness (συναντιλαμβάνεται τῇ ἄσθενίᾳ); for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings . . . according to God’s will” (8:26, 27).

Second, Paul’s emphasis is not on the BP, but rather, on the glory to come, in which all of creation will share. The “birth to come” is in sight.⁴⁴ The BP represent “the sufferings of this present time [which] are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18).⁴⁵ Paul’s use of BPI to signify cause for hope is apt since hope is the belief in things unseen (8:24). Likewise, the meaning of BP is dictated not by the experience or nature of BP, but rather by what causes them—the birth of a new life, which is of a totally different nature from the pangs themselves.⁴⁶ This true meaning remains despite the all-encompassing experience of BP in the time of labor. Experience, in this text, is mediated by judgment of the intellect and even more so by the act of the will through the virtue of hope. Harry Alan Hahne writes, “Although the sensitive person could perceive the suffering of nature, only the eyes of faith in light of divine revelation can see that the suffering of creation is the travail of birth, not the agony of death.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Hahne, *Romans*, 203-4.

⁴⁵ Gieniusz, *Romans*, 137-38.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 140-43. Gieniusz emphasizes the ambivalent use of BP in the OT and NT, particularly in terms of results, including the death of the mother, the birth of wind, and no birth at all—generally speaking, anything but an actual birth. As Bergmann (*Childbirth*, 63-64) points out in her survey of birth imagery in OT and ANE literature, BP and labor can be a crisis situation; they do not always end well.

⁴⁷ Hahne, *Romans*, 200.

Visions of the redemption of the created order are present in the OT and related literature. In the *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch*, the age of the Messiah is described as “the end of that which is corruptible and the beginning of that which is incorruptible” (2 *Apoc. Bar.* 74:2). This work outlines some of the concrete implications of this freedom from corruptibility: wild beasts will serve men (73:6); women will not be tormented with BP during birth (73:7); farmers will not tire “because the products of themselves will shoot out speedily” (74:1). These descriptions of future freedom develop themes from Gen 3:16-17. The *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch’s* vision is reminiscent of OT prophets who look forward to a future time of redemption marked by agricultural fecundity and general prosperity for Israel. Amos describes this time in 9:13 when he writes, “Yes, the days are coming, says the Lord, when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the vintager, him who sows the seed.”

Similar to the *Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch*, Paul explains in Rom 8:22-23 that creation will share in the freedom of the children of God, and the same release from slavery. Here, Paul promises the ultimate transformation of creation’s “primordial state (bondage to decay) into an existence at a higher level (freedom from this bondage).”⁴⁸ Paul, however, brings a radical new dimension to the vision of redemption when he explains that the beginning of “that which is incorruptible” does not mean the abolishment of suffering, but that by sharing Christ’s cross, the faithful will also share his glory (8:17). The suffering of creation is no longer simply a consequence for human sin but a means of sharing in the cross and joining in the redemptive suffering of the faithful. This is what Paul means when he speaks of the law of the Spirit ruling

⁴⁸ Ibid., 166.

the law of the body. Such is the hope Paul offers all creation for the present age and such is the hope that prepares creation for the future age of glory (8:17).

This text of Romans is not the only place that Paul addresses the implications of Christ's new creation for the physical body.⁴⁹ In Galatians Paul explains the uselessness of circumcision and mentions that he has the marks of *Jesus* on his body (6:17). In 1 Cor 15:42-43, he talks about the perishable body we have presently and contrasts it with the glory of the future resurrected body. Paul exhorts his readers to follow the law of the Spirit and not the urging of the flesh. Walking according to the Spirit leads to the redemption of the flesh, but not without redemptive suffering, represented by BP.

Third, and finally, Paul writes of the Spirit that he “takes on the burden of our weakness . . . (and) intercedes with inexpressible groanings” (Rom 8:26).⁵⁰ That Paul would extend the three-fold BPI to the Spirit is striking and surprising because of the connection that Paul has just confirmed between sin and BP. Nevertheless, Andrzej Gieniusz concludes, “Given Paul’s careful way of introducing . . . the Spirit’s intercession, his στεναγμοί in v. 26 cannot but be seen as a resumption, continuation and consummation of the crescendo of the groanings of creation (v. 22) and of the believers’ (v. 23).”⁵¹ Paul’s language is evocative of the OT texts in which birth is a

⁴⁹ See Hahne (*Romans*, 180) for a discussion on the meaning of κτισις. Hahne (197) also writes, “Creation will become all that God intended it to be, but was prevented from becoming due to the impact of human sin.” See also, Joseph Lee Nelson, Jr., *The Groaning of Creation: An Exegetical Study of Romans 8:18-27* (Unpublished ThD Dissertation; Union Theological Seminary of Virginia, 1969)

⁵⁰ The translation of Rom 8:26 is mine. See Matera, *Romans*, 203. Fitzmyer (*Romans*, 517) writes, “Paul mentioned earlier that Christians ‘groan’ together with the groaning of material creation (8:23); now he affirms that the Spirit too groans with Christians who have hope and long for the glory of the risen life. It is not that the Spirit hopes for such glory, but that it enables Christians by its assistance to formulate the proper prayer of hope.”

⁵¹ Gieniusz, *Romans*, 224.

metaphor for creation (Deut 32:18; Ps 90:2; Prov 8:24-25). In these texts, God is portrayed as giving birth, but not necessarily with BP.⁵² The sin of humankind is the cause of all creation's BP and it is on behalf of the weakness caused by the sin that the Spirit groans in intercession. When Paul describes the groaning of the Spirit, he recasts the BPI in light of the freedom of the Spirit in taking on our human weakness to bring about a new creation. All of creation is subjected (ὑπετάγη), not of its own accord, but the Spirit takes on our weakness to help us (συναντιλαμβάνεται).⁵³

Paul's use of BPI to represent redemptive suffering and new creation reorients the whole tone of suffering as a consequence for sin. Paul exhorts his readers to hope, a hope in which all of creation shares. The basis of this hope is Paul's belief that "the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us" (Rom 8:18). In the present time, the sufferings of alienation remain, even for the baptized faithful. In fact, the sufferings for the faithful are greater, precisely because they share the suffering of Christ, just as they hope to share his glory. But Paul assures the faithful that "all things work for good for those who love God" (8:28).

4. Birth-Pang Imagery Represents Negative Divine Judgment

In this section, I discuss those NT texts that use BP as a metaphor for the end-time tribulations leading up to the Lord's return and judgment. The OT use of BPI to represent

⁵² This is discussed above, pp. 40-45.

⁵³ In the few instances of use in the NT (Luke 10:40) and LXX (Exod 18:22; Num 11:17; Ps 88:22), συναντιλαμβάνω is used in the sense of lightening a burden that is too much to bear.

negative divine judgment is associated primarily with military defeat, particularly on the national level in the OAN (Isaiah 13–23; Jer 4:31; 6:24; 13:21; etc.), but also on the cosmic level as in Hab 3:10, when “the mountains tremble” at the sight of the LORD’s trampling the nations. A related use of BPI which explicitly excludes birth from the metaphor emphasizes the impotence and hopelessness of the situation of defeat. 2 Kgs 19:3 is one such example when King Hezekiah says, “This is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace. Children are at the point of birth, but there is no strength to bring them forth.” Hezekiah interprets defeat as divine judgment against him and his people.

BPI becomes directly related to the end times, the so-called Messianic woes, in the OT pseudepigrapha. In the end times, a final judgment is represented by cosmic BP. OT prophets speak about the tribulations and judgment that will precede the coming of the Messiah, albeit without BPI. Joel, for example, speaks of the “day of the Lord” (Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11; 3:4; 4:14) throughout the book, both of the cosmic effects of the Lord’s judgment as well as the bounty and gladness of the new era to follow. In the pseudepigrapha, the use of BPI to represent divine judgment does not occur in the context of battle, but in the cosmic context of the Lord’s judgment and the calamities that will accompany it (4 Ezra 16:38-39; 1 Enoch 62:4-6). BP become almost a “technical term for the fearful tribulation out of which the new age would at last be born.”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Hugh Anderson, *Gospel of Mark* (NCBCommentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 293.

1. “When people are saying, ‘Peace and security,’ then sudden disaster comes upon them, like labor pangs upon a pregnant woman (ὡσπερ ἡ ὥδιν τῆ ἐν γαστρὶ ἐχούσῃ), and they will not escape.” (1 Thess 5:3)

In this text, Paul uses BPI to describe the coming of the “Day of the Lord.” Paul has just described the Day of the Lord as a thief in the night in 1 Thess 5:2. The timing will be unforeseen, sudden, and inescapable; the metaphors of a thief and the onset of BP share these characteristics. The style and diction of this text are unusual for Paul, so some commentators hypothesize that Paul is drawing on traditional material.⁵⁵ The BPI of 1 Thessalonians certainly has a different context than do the instances of BPI in Galatians and Romans, discussed above. In this text, the primary significance of BP is their unavoidable and sudden onset, bringing ruin to “those who prophesy falsely.”⁵⁶ Paul bypasses all descriptions of the trials, writing that the Thessalonians already know about the “times and seasons” (1 Thess 5:1), as if he is referring to instruction given previously when he was teaching them. Here, the final disaster that begins as suddenly as BP is not connected to the physical defeat of nations because of lack of military prowess, but to Christ’s judgment of individuals because of the way they have lived their lives and falsely placated themselves. The disaster is final because they have no more opportunity to amend their lives.

⁵⁵ Charles A. Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 180; Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 32B; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 290.

⁵⁶ Malherbe, *Thessalonians*, 293.

For those who follow Christ, the disaster that begins as suddenly as BP is no longer the final word of defeat but only the beginning of the final era of redemption. It is not Paul's intention, however, to elaborate on the final era; Paul's restraint in comparison with the gospels is noteworthy.⁵⁷ He is more interested in exhorting the Thessalonians to moral rectitude (5:6-8) and unity in virtuous living (5:11-22) than he is in detailing the events of the end times. Paul spends many more verses assuring his readers that, although inescapable, the trials will not overtake the Thessalonians unawares—if they remain “alert” (5:4-11). Paul is especially warning against a “false security and self deception,” when he exhorts them to remain alert.⁵⁸ The faithful must belong to the day and encourage one another (in the moral life), so that they are not taken by surprise when the Lord comes.

In OT BPI, fear tends to predominate, particularly in the context of negative divine judgment. Paul rejects the need for followers of Christ to be afraid, explaining, “For God did not destine us for wrath, but to gain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 5:9). Whatever trials and calamities the faithful will experience, their purpose is the salvation of the faithful. This is the basis of the hope that Paul offers his readers. As discussed above in regards to Gal 4:19, Paul subtly shifts the significance of BPI and brings it back to the original loving and joyful context of birth, albeit sadly fraught with pain because of the effects of alienation from God due to sin. BP are still painful and to be endured, and they still represent the effects of sin, but their ultimate meaning is found in birth, i.e., the final adoption, the resurrection of the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 292.

⁵⁸ Earl Richard, *First and Second Thessalonians* (SacPag 11; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995) 251.

body (Rom 8:23) when Christ comes again. While it is not their primary significance in this text, BP are also a sign of hope for the faithful.

Paul uses OT battle imagery at times to describe the struggle between good and evil in which the faithful are engaged.⁵⁹ He instructs the faithful to put on “the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet that is hope for salvation” (1 Thess 5:8). He alludes to the battle imagery that is so prevalent throughout the OT, particularly in the prophets’ OAN, with which OT BPI is often connected.⁶⁰ Paul transforms the battle imagery to describe the battles that the faithful wage both internally against the flesh, as well as externally against the spiritual principalities of evil.

2. *“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be famines and earthquakes from place to place. All these are the beginning of the labor pains (ταῦτα ἀρχὴ ὠδίνων).”* (Matt 24:7-8)

“Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes from place to place and there will be famines. These are the beginnings of the labor pains (ἀρχὴ ὠδίνων ταῦτα).” (Mark 13:8)

These verses in Matthew and Mark are close parallels and occur in parallel material.

Luke 21 is a more distant parallel that does not include BPI. This common material occurs in the “Temple Discourse,” also called “The Apocalyptic Discourse” (Mark 13; Matthew 24-25).

⁵⁹ See, for example, Eph 6:11-12, 17: “Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in heaven. . . . And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” See also, 1 Cor 15:24; Col 1:13-14; 2:15.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Isa 13:8, 21:3 and Jer 48:41, 49:22, 24, 50:43. I discuss this above, pp. 56-57, 60-61.

Although there are differences between Matthew's and Mark's use of this common material,⁶¹ they do not affect the use of BPI.

In 1 Thessalonians, the unexpected onset of the BP and the trials is the main point of comparison in the metaphor. In these texts, however, there are several points of implied comparison between the various trials and BP: (1) the timing of their beginning, end, and duration is unexpected and unknown; (2) the type of pain they bring is repetitive, “coming in waves over and over again,”⁶² and requires endurance; (3) their significance is not simply pain but future hope and new life. BP themselves can be a sign of the beginning of labor or the end; they can endure for a long time (days) or a short time (hours); finally, their painful character is wholly unlike the joyful end result of the birthing process—a totally unforeseeable new life.⁶³

In these texts, BPI is a metaphor for the trials that will come upon the world at “the end of the age” (Matt 24:3) before the return of Jesus, the Son of Man. The calamities are part of the BP that necessarily precede the divine judgment that brings justice to all. Unlike the OT texts, in these NT texts, wars, earthquakes, and famines are characterized as only the *beginning* of the BP.⁶⁴ In specifying that these tribulations which others might consider the *end*, are actually just the *beginning*, Matthew and Mark emphasize the unknown and unexpected beginning, duration, and end of the trials. Timothy J. Geddert writes:

⁶¹ See Schuyler Brown, “The Matthean Apocalypse,” *JSNT* (1979) 2-27.

⁶² Gempf, “Birth Pangs,” 133.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Timothy J. Geddert, *Watchwords: Mark 13 in Markan Eschatology* (JSNTSup 26; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989) 236. Francis J. Moloney (*Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012] 255) writes, “history will not come to an end with the destruction of Jerusalem. It is still working its painful way to a final end.”

But if the wars and trials are apocalyptic events, that does not mean they signal an imminent parousia. They are but the beginning. Therefore the discernment call goes forth: “be discerning lest someone deceive you.” The kingdom does not advance through suffering per se; it advances when God’s messengers, the kingdom’s citizens, take up their cross and follow. The disciples are not to imagine that the troubles they share with the world at large will fulfill the prophecies of Jesus that they too must suffer. There is reserved for them trials which are a test not only of their ability to endure suffering but of their allegiance to Jesus. These preliminary crises are to cause no distress. Others who do not know the kingdom’s secret will imagine that these events signal the End. The disciple who is discerning will not be deceived.⁶⁵

The endurance and perseverance required is evidenced by the long list of tribulations described in Matt 24:9-24; Mark 13:9-23. The trials include persecution of Christians and intra-familial bloodshed, culminating in the erection of the desolating sacrilege and the advent of false messiahs. Then, accompanied by cosmic signs and at a time unknown by anyone, the Son of Man will come for all to see.

The onset of these trials should be a sign of hope for the faithful, instead of a sign of fear, because they signify the (eventual) coming of the Lord. Matthew and Mark also use another example from nature that functions as a sign of a coming season: when the fig tree’s “branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near” (Matt 24:32). The suffering of the trials, like BP, leads to new life—the new life that the Son of Man will bring. These texts, particularly that of Mark 13, are not about establishing an apocalyptic timeline.⁶⁶ “The agenda of Mark 13 is to call believers to discern the significance of what Jesus has predicted will come to

⁶⁵Geddert, *Watchwords*, 216.

⁶⁶ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (SacPag 2; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002) 369.

pass.”⁶⁷ Hence, the faithful are enjoined to see the events surrounding them with the eyes of faith and to remain steadfast. It is for their sake that the days of trial will be shortened (Matt 24:22; Mark 13:20).

These texts in Matthew and Mark are similar to the rabbinic tradition of “the BP of the Messiah,”⁶⁸ the trials that precede the coming of the Messiah and the Messianic age. Here, BP are experienced cosmically and nationally, until the Son of Man comes on the clouds (Mark 13:26).

5. Birth-Pang Imagery Represents Death

“But God raised him up, releasing him from the throes of death (τὰς ὀδῖνας τοῦ θανάτου), because it was impossible for him to be held by it.” (Acts 2:24)

In this text, Peter alludes to the LXX translation of Psalm 18, discussed in the previous chapter, in which BPI represents the personal distress of the psalmist, even to the point of death.⁶⁹ When the psalmist cries for help, the Lord rescues him from death because he is innocent. In Peter’s description of Christ’s resurrection from the dead, he explains “it was not possible for him to be held by [death]” (Acts 2:24). Whereas in other BPI, particularly in the OT,

⁶⁷ Geddert, *Watchwords*, 206.

⁶⁸ Str-B, 1:950. The cited rabbinic commentaries were mostly written in the 3rd century and later. Strack-Billerbeck credits R. Eliezer with the earliest description of the BP of the Messiah around the year 90 A.D., but the dating of Eliezer’s work, *Pirke R. El.*, is uncertain.

⁶⁹ Hans Conzelmann (*A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987] 20) notes the LXX mistranslation of the Hebrew root and does not think there is any actual connection with BPI. Luke Timothy Johnson (*The Acts of the Apostles* [SacPag 5; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992] 51) notes that Acts 2:24 is “a wonderful example of the LXX shaping Luke’s language.”

the suffering of BP is described in terms of death, in this text from Acts, death is described in terms of BP, which bring the new life of resurrection.

The dramatic depiction in Psalm 18 of the Lord's arrival, mounted on a cherub to lay bare the "world's foundations" and draw the psalmist out of "the deep waters," contrasts with Peter's simple words that death could not hold Christ. Peter uses the dramatic depiction of Psalm 18 to describe Jesus's resurrection and to make a distinction between the rescue of the psalmist and Peter's greater claim for Jesus. Those who crucified Christ are like the psalmist's enemies. Jesus is raised from the dead by God because death "could not hold him." Likewise, the Psalmist is rescued on account of his innocence.⁷⁰ Whereas Peter emphasizes that Jesus was delivered to death because of "the set plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23), Peter makes it clear that Jesus was delivered *from* death because of who he is, i.e., the Lord's "holy one."⁷¹ Bertram writes, "The abyss can no more hold the Redeemer than a pregnant woman can hold the child in her body."⁷² Peter interprets Psalm 16, ". . . nor will you suffer your holy one to see corruption. . ." (Acts 2:27), as a prophecy fulfilled by the resurrection of Jesus who is the Messiah (2:31).⁷³

⁷⁰ Beverly R. Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003) 78.

⁷¹ See Joseph A. Fitzmyer (*The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 31; New York: Doubleday, 1998] 256), according to whom, Peter is making a statement about God's plan, not necessarily about who Jesus is: "God released Jesus from death's hold because that was part of the divine 'plan,' for this reason death could not hold him in its clutches."

⁷² G. Bertram, "ὁδὶν," in *TDNT* 9:673.

⁷³ Daniel Marguerat ("Paul after Paul: a [Hi]story of Reception," in *Paul and the Heritage of Israel: Paul's Claim upon Israel's Legacy in Luke and Acts in the Light of the Pauline Letters* [New York: T&T Clark, 2012] 88) writes that Luke's "comprehension of the cross is dominated by the formula of contrast, which opposes the murderous action of humans with the resurrecting activity of God: 'The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.'"

Through Christ's death on the cross and resurrection, death is conquered and leads to new life with God. Here we see a parallel between death and resurrection and BP and birth, respectively.

The larger context of Acts' use of BPI is Peter's defense of Christians against the charge of drunkenness and his explanation of what has just occurred in the pouring forth of the Spirit at Pentecost. He describes these events in reference to Joel's words about the Day of the Lord in which Joel writes, "I will pour out my spirit upon all mankind. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. . . ." (Joel 3:1). After describing the wonders the Lord will work among his people, Joel goes on to describe the wonders God will work in the heavens and on earth (3:3-4). Peter quotes all of Joel 3, including the later portion about the wonders the Lord will work in heaven and on earth. Certainly, the coming of the Spirit is accompanied by a "strong driving wind and . . . tongues of fire . . ." (Acts 2:2-3). Peter interprets the whole of Joel 3 to be fulfilled at Pentecost. Jesus's resurrection is certainly the most wonderful sign. The pangs of death tamed into BP is a fulfillment of Joel's prophesy about the Day of the Lord.

6. Birth Pangs Lead to Birth, a Sign of Redemption

"When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish (ὄταν τίκτη λύπην ἔχει), because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain (τῆς θλίψεως) because of her joy that a child has been born into the world. So you also are now in anguish (λύπην ἔχετε). But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you." (John 16:21-22)

John's use of BPI is similar to the OT category in which BP yield birth as a sign of future redemption. This Johannine text features the only use of the full, extended metaphor in the entire OT and NT: from BP to birth and from sorrow to joy.⁷⁴ Jesus uses the imagery of Gen 3:16 to invite his disciples to appreciate the meaning of the full metaphor from the perspective of the birth, not the BP.⁷⁵ The phrase, ὅταν τίκῃ λύπην ἔχει (has pain when she gives birth) draws attention to birth and possibly reflects the LXX translation of Gen 3:16, ἐν λύπαις τέξῃ τέκνα rather than the typical syntax of ὠδίν in BPI in the prophets' judgment against Israel. This text's shift in perspective to emphasize the birth rather than the BP eliminates ambiguity present in BPI elsewhere. All of the crisis and potential harm underlying the BP/birth metaphor melts away in Jesus's consoling words to his disciples.

The only OT text that is in the OT category of "BP Leading to Redemption" is Mic 4:9-10; 5:2, in which Micah tells of a birth that will bring about the redemption of Israel, whom he describes as in the throes of BP. This text from Micah is unusual because although OT BPI is most fully understood in the context of birth, the metaphor is not completed. Even in Micah, in which birth follows from BP, the relation is indirect because the continuity of the subject of the BP and of the birth is unclear. As discussed in chapter two, some interpret the text as a metaphor

⁷⁴ Gieniusz (*Romans*, 140-43) discusses the ambiguity of the birth pang image in OT and NT in that birth is never mentioned. He emphasizes that the outcome of BP is not always positive, that is, not necessarily a successful birth. Unfortunately, he does not consider John 16:21 to be an instance of BPI because there is no mention of BP (141). This is an error on his part since in the metaphor, ἡ λύπη and ἡ θλίψις refer to the pain and anguish of BP.

⁷⁵ André Feuillet, "L'heure de la femme (Jn 16,21) et l'heure de la Mere de Jesus (Jn 19,25-27)," *Bib* 47 (1966) 178. Feuillet sees a strong connection between the two title passages in John and Revelation 12.

for Israel; others interpret the text as referring to a woman in Israelite history who comes to represent Israel, like Sarah or Rachel.

Jesus's metaphorical use of BPI and birth imagery stands in contrast with the OT texts in which the labor is depicted but no child is born.⁷⁶ This Johannine text stands in contrast to Isa 26:16-19 in which the labor pangs of Israel in the presence of the Lord yield only wind because the "inhabitants of the world" cannot bring forth salvation. Only through Christ is salvation wrought and beatitude enjoyed.

Both BPI and birth imagery play their full symbolic role for one woman/subject in this metaphor in John. In the NT, two instances of BPI come close to using birth imagery as a sign of redemption (Gal 4:19 and Rom 8:22). In Galatians, Paul writes of being in labor and uses the gestational imagery of Christ being formed in the Galatians. In Romans, Paul writes of all of creation groaning with labor pains until the redemption of the body. The birth imagery is, however, explicit in John, where the dominant image is the mother's joy at the birth of her child.

In this text, BPI still represents suffering due to alienation from God, but in a new way since the blessing of birth is the dominant image. The BP/suffering from alienation are no longer just a consequence of sin, but through the cross become integral to the work of redemption. Jesus speaks of his disciples being in anguish (16:22), but the anguish the disciples experience is a sharing of Jesus's own anguish on the cross. Likewise, the joy they will experience is a sharing of Jesus's joy in seeing them. Jesus suffers the BP of alienation although he himself is not alienated from God. The theme of suffering BP on behalf of *another's* alienation has already

⁷⁶ Rudolph Schnackenburg, *Gospel According to John* (3 vols.; HTKNT; New York: Crossroad, 1982) 3:158.

been discussed above regarding the texts of Gal 4:19 and Rom 8:22. In this Johannine text we see most fully that in the NT birth/redemption is not merely a release from BP/suffering. Rather, the BP/suffering bring about the birth. The anguish of the disciples that Jesus describes is on their own behalf, but also on behalf of the whole Church.

Jesus explains that even though a mother giving birth is in anguish, once her child is born, she forgets her anguish, which *in hindsight* seems to have lasted just “a little while” because of her joy at the birth of her new child.⁷⁷ It is from the perspective of this joy that Jesus notes his disciples are currently in anguish as he speaks (John 16:22) and will continue to be in anguish. Jesus invites them to understand their current situation in the light of a future joy of union with the Father, through himself. In other words, he invites them to understand their current situation from the perspective of the Father. In the joyful hindsight of the new life of the resurrection, the anguish of the passion/earthly trials will seem but a little time. The joy of a new mother is the joy the disciples will have when Jesus sees them (16:22), that is, when they share in his union with the Father (16:24). The joy will be a generous joy for which they have suffered. Jesus speaks plainly of the Father’s love for his disciples as rooted in the Father’s love for him, “For the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have come to believe that I came from God” (16:27).

⁷⁷ Charles K. Barrett (*The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978] 493) describes the BP as “short,” but they are not defined as such in the text. They are “short” only in relation to the lasting joy that will follow and from the perspective of that lasting joy.

The question of when the disciples will experience this joy is illuminated by the image of BP and their unspecified duration.⁷⁸ In the context of the immediate passage (16:16-24), Jesus uses the metaphor of BP and birth to explain to his disciples what he means by “a little while” (μικρόν) when he says, “A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me” (16:16).⁷⁹ The time frame is vague and the emphasis is on proper interpretation of the trials. Here, Jesus explains clearly to his disciples that he is only telling them about these trials to come so that they “may not fall away” (16:1). What Jesus means when he says, “a little while and you will see me,” is subject to two basic interpretations among contemporary scholars.

On one hand, Jesus could be primarily referring to his resurrection and appearances post-resurrection. Certainly, the most immediate significance of the disciples’ anguish and joy is the experience of the passion and resurrection. For example, the wording in John 16:20, κλάυσετε καὶ θρηνήσετε ὑμεῖς, clearly implies death.⁸⁰ Beasley-Murray interprets this text as referring to Jesus’s resurrection and appearances post-resurrection. He interprets the joy promised to the disciples to be a joy of understanding and a joy of efficacious prayer which is described in vv.

⁷⁸ As in Rom 8:18 and 2 Cor 4:17, Revelation portrays a (relatively) brief period of distress of 1260 days/ 42 months/ a time and time and half a time which is followed by a 1000 year reign of Christ. See J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 844.

⁷⁹ Jesus explains several times before John 16 that he will be with them only a “little while” longer (John 7:33; 12:35; 13:33; 14:19).

⁸⁰ Κλαίω is usually associated in the NT with weeping at someone’s death, and in John is exclusively associated with mourning over the death of Lazarus (11:31, 33) and the death of Jesus (20:11, 13, 15). θρηνέω is much less frequently used in the NT, but is also associated with mourning, particularly the death of Jesus. In Luke 23:27, “A large crowd of people followed Jesus, including many women who mourned and lamented (θρηνήσουσιν) him.”

23-24.⁸¹ After Easter, which he describes as the “beginning of a new creation,” the disciples “will no longer have to question Jesus in the kind of bewilderment which they have just known.”⁸²

On the other hand, Jesus could be primarily referring to the disciples seeing him in heaven and/or seeing him in his second coming. This is the reading of Francis J. Moloney, who writes, “The readers of this Gospel are living in the in-between time, which is marked by hatred, rejection, and murder (cf. 15:18-16:13). This cannot be the time described by Jesus as full of a joy that no one can take from them (16:22).”⁸³ Moloney interprets vv. 23-24 as instructions on how to live in the “in-between times,” not when Jesus sees them again.⁸⁴ Certainly, taken in the context of the whole chapter of John 16, Jesus could not be referring only to the passion and resurrection. The description of the coming of the Advocate in John 16:7-11 seems at least partially to fulfill the prophetic expectations of the “Day of the Lord” in that “he will convict the world in regard to sin and righteousness and condemnation” (16:8-11). But, the trials and the coming of the Advocate that Jesus describes pertain to the time following his ascension. The trials Jesus describes seem to fit more into NT descriptions of the time preceding the “end of the

⁸¹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (2nd ed.; WBC 36; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999) 285. Beasley-Murray is not simply arguing for “fresh spiritual insight” on the part of the disciples. He notes that Jesus’s words, “I will see you” (16:22), rather than “you will see me” (16:16) emphasize an objective reality to the coming events.

⁸² Ibid. Frederick F. Bruce (*The Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983] 322) interprets the text as only referring to the resurrection and sees no reference to messianic BP.

⁸³ Francis J. Moloney, *Gospel of John* (SacPag 4; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998) 449. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (2 vols. AB 29-29A; New York: Doubleday, 1966, 1970) 2:729. Later in his commentary, Brown (*John*, 2:733) seems to favor the first interpretation due to his emphasis on realized eschatology.

⁸⁴ Moloney, *John*, 451.

age.” For example, the faithful will be expelled from Synagogues, the only faith community they know, and they will be persecuted even to the point of death (16:1-2).

The reference to the trials (ἡ θλίψις rather than the more typical ἡ λύπη) that the woman will forget in her joy over her new child are an allusion to OT and NT references to the “Day of the Lord” and NT references to the pains of the end time.⁸⁵ In John 16:33, Jesus refers to the trouble (ἡ θλίψις) his disciples will have in the world. As in the texts from Matthew, Mark, and 1 Thessalonians, in this text in John, BPI could depict the unspecified period of time before Jesus returns. The sorrow of the disciples has an unspecified duration just as do BP.

Additionally, phrases like, “in a little while” (Isa 29:17; Jer 51:33; Heb 10:37; Rev 6:11; Rev 20:3) and “on that day” (Mark 13:32; 14:25; Matt 24:36, 42, 50; 25:13; 26:29; Lk 6:23; Phil 1:6,10; 2:16; 2 Tim 1:12, 18; 4:8; Heb 10:25) are associated with the end times.

Both interpretations of “a little while” may be correct because Jesus is using the metaphor of BP and birth on two levels of meaning.⁸⁶ Jesus uses this metaphor to refer to his own passion and death (BP) and his own resurrection (birth). But Jesus also uses the birth-pang metaphor to refer to the disciples’ own anguish during his passion and death as well as the sufferings of the persecuted faithful, until the end of time and Jesus’s return. On this level, the birth symbolizes the consolation of the faithful both in heaven and when Jesus returns.⁸⁷ The parousia or the

⁸⁵ OT and NT references to tribulation (ἡ θλίψις) accompanying the end times include: Dan 12:1; Zeph 1:14-15; Hab 3:16; Mark 13:19, 24; Matt 24:21, 29; Acts 14:22; 1Cor 7:26; 10:11; 2 Cor 4:17; Rev 2:10; 7:14.

⁸⁶ Barrett (*John*, 493) notes the “studied ambiguity” of the text. Schnackenberg (*John*, 158) recognizes the “intentional overtones” in using the BPI. Michaels (*John*, 845) follows Barrett in allowing that either interpretation of the text is possible.

⁸⁷ Augustine in his *Homilies on the Gospel of John. Homilies on the First Epistle of John. Soliloquies* 101.5 (NPNF 7:388) interprets the metaphor as referring to the church laboring continuously until the coming of Christ.

disciples' own resurrection into new life in heaven and union with Christ is symbolized by the birth.

The two levels of meaning are intimately connected. Barrett writes that Jesus's "death and resurrection were themselves eschatological events which both prefigured and anticipated the final events."⁸⁸ This connection, however, does not mean that the resurrection is the same as the final coming, or parousia as Bultmann suggests.⁸⁹ Jesus's resurrection is a sign to the disciples of their own share in the promised union with the Father.⁹⁰ For this reason, we see language elsewhere used to describe messianic woes, now applied to the passion of Christ.⁹¹

Dale C. Allison writes,

The coming of the Messiah was bound up with the last things, and to claim that the Messiah had come was to claim that the prophetic promises of the Tanach had begun to meet their fulfillment. It entailed that the messianic age or the age to come was near and thus that the terrors or wonders of eschatological expectation must be present or very near to hand.⁹²

The tone of the whole of chapter 16 is one of encouragement, from the perspective of the joy of a new mother. Rudolph Schnackenburg notes that this discourse is more of a consoling

⁸⁸ Barrett, *John*, 491. Barrett (493) further explains that John does not wish to identify Easter and the parousia, as Bultmann interprets, but "sees their coherence and uses it to explain the period between them."

⁸⁹ See Rudolf Bultman, *Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 581 on the identification of the Resurrection and the Parousia. He explains that both are translated into the "experience of the believer."

⁹⁰ In his *Homilies on the Gospels* 2.13 (Cistercian Studies 111; Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1991), Bede interprets the metaphor as referring to the death of the disciples, when Jesus will see them in heaven.

⁹¹ Dale C. Allison Jr., *The End of the Ages has Come: An Early Interpretation of the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 57-58.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 90.

discourse than a farewell one.⁹³ As in the other NT uses of BPI, hope sets the tone and fear is set to rest. In John 16:33, Jesus exhorts his disciples saying, “Have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world.” The promise that the disciples’ grief will turn to joy, despite the fact that they weep now while the world rejoices, reminds the reader of the beatitudes of Luke and Matthew: “Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh” (Luke 6:21b) and “Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matt 5:4). In both Matthew and Luke, Jesus tells the crowds to “rejoice . . . your reward will be great in heaven” (Matt 5:12; Luke 6:23). In John 16:22, Jesus tells his disciples that no one will take their joy away.

7. Conclusion

In the NT, BPI builds on the OT use of the image and transforms it. In the OT, the focus is primarily the pangs themselves, the suffering they bring and the alienation they represent. Although the context of birth is almost always present in some way in OT BPI, it is not emphasized and in some cases, birth is explicitly omitted from the metaphor. In the NT, however, the focus is not on the BP but on the future birth they signify and the joy that the birth will bring. In the OT, BP are a judicial necessity for sin(s); in the NT, BP are freely taken on by human persons on behalf of one another. In fact, in the NT, the deepest suffering is on the part of those who suffer for another’s redemption from alienation from God. This is evident in Galatians when Paul refers to his own labor pangs so that the Galatians might allow Christ to take form in

⁹³ Schnackenburg, *John*, 125.

their lives (4:19). And this is evident in Romans when all of creation is suffering the BP of Eve, on behalf of humankind, longing for the redemption that is to come. We see this most of all in John, since it is Jesus who bears the brunt of the agony (of the Passion) about which he so gently reassures his disciples. In the NT use of BPI, personal sacrifice and cosmic tribulations become signs of hope for Redemption.

In Gal 4:22-23 Sarah represents the freeborn woman, the Jerusalem above, the mother in the faith. She is *free* from BP (4:27) because she is “our mother” through our faith and baptism in Christ, not natural birth. Sarah does not suffer BP for her Gentile descendents in faith. The BP that *are* suffered for the faithful are the pangs of the cross, suffered on behalf of Israel and Gentiles alike. The BP Paul experiences on behalf of the Galatians are one way in which he shares in Jesus’s suffering on the cross. The same is true for anyone who suffers on behalf of another in the faith; they partake in the BP of new life in faith.

Hahne’s words about the text of Romans discussed above apply to all the NT uses of BPI: the suffering represented “is the travail of birth, not the agony of death.”⁹⁴ This is the proper interpretation of trials described in 2 Thessalonians, Matthew, and Mark. In John, the trials the faithful will experience are BP that the faithful will forget in the joy of beatitude, union with the Father.

⁹⁴ Hahne, *Romans*, 200. Also, see Gieniusz, *Romans*, 209.

Chapter Four

The Great Sign: Birth Pangs and Battles

1. Introduction

The survey of BPI in the Bible and related literature is an important foundation for appreciating the depth of the BPI in Revelation 12 and its role in the portrayal of the Great Sign.

In the first chapter I summarized general trends of 20th- and 21st-century scholarly interpretations of the BPI of Revelation 12. Contemporary scholarship tends to interpret the BP in one of three ways: a narrative detail (comparative approach), the suffering of Israel/people of God while waiting for the Messiah (corrective/canonical approach), or the sufferings of the cross (polyvalent approach). Scholars in the first group look to extra biblical mythology to interpret Revelation 12; those in the second look to a small group of OT references, mostly in Isaiah, and sometimes refer to the NT, particularly to John; those in the third group look to some the NT references, particularly those that connect the portrayal of the cross to BPI. The third group, which represents the minority of contemporary scholars, pays the most attention to the significance of BPI. But the significance of the BPI for Revelation 12 has yet to be investigated in light of the imagery's varied use throughout the whole of the Bible and related literature, particularly 4 Maccabees. This, the fourth chapter aims to accomplish such a task.

In the second chapter I discussed the range of BPI in the OT and related literature. I demonstrated that the OT BPI is vivid and varied. It is fundamentally rooted in the blessing of birth. One prominent use of BPI in the OT, however, focuses on the suffering and terror of BP

and uses the image to describe the terror of defeat in battle. This use obfuscates the fundamental blessing of birth. But this OT use among others is interpreted and transformed in Revelation 12, particularly through the strong allusions to the BPI of Gen 3:16, which juxtaposes the blessing of birth with the suffering of mankind due to alienation from God.

In the third chapter I discussed the range of BPI in the NT. I demonstrated that in the NT, BPI basically represents suffering on behalf of another's alienation from God. This vicarious suffering is rooted in Christ's vicarious suffering on the cross and, ultimately, NT BPI represents a participation in the suffering of the cross. There are different directions that this imagery takes. For example, in Acts 2:24 BP become the dominant image in referring to death since, through Christ's cross, death is no longer final, but a birth into new life. And in Mark 13:8 BP are the sign of the beginning of the end times. In Revelation 12 these different birth-pang symbolisms are all integrated, adding shades of meaning to the basic NT significance of BPI as vicarious suffering.

In this chapter I will build upon the foundation of the survey of the biblical use of BPI and demonstrate how the BPI of Revelation 12 is a key to understanding the Great Sign and the chapter as a whole. The BPI of Rev 12:2 summarizes the span of OT imagery, from Gen 3:15 to Job 39:1-2, with the logic of the cross that is witnessed to in other NT texts that employ BPI. The transformation of BPI and its use in the NT in light of the cross is fundamental to a proper interpretation of Rev 12:2. Indeed, in Revelation 12 the BP are the dominant image of the participation in the cross by which the faithful may triumph over the dragon.

I accomplish this analysis first by attending to the chapter's structure and its broader literary context within the Book of Revelation. I also provide a translation and accompanying

text critical notes. The chapter's structure and structural elements contextualize and highlight the role of the BPI in Rev 12:2 and the key to its interpretation found in v. 11. Then, I present a careful line-by-line exegesis of the chapter for the purpose of demonstrating how thoroughly the vision of the Great Sign, the Other Sign, and the ensuing action resonates with imagery that spans the whole of the canon as well as key related texts. The vision is best understood as a coherent unity by reading it within a primarily biblical context. As discussed above, scholars do not agree on this point and therefore I attempt to demonstrate it in my exegesis.

Reading Revelation 12 within the spectrum of NT imagery and diction highlights the chapter's many allusions to Genesis 2–4, particularly the allusion of Rev 12:2 to BP through which the demise of the dragon is portrayed as a sign of the coming of the kingdom of God. This marks the beginning of the end to the ancient enmity of Gen 3:15 between the woman and the serpent. In Revelation 12 the significance of the BP of Eve (Gen 3:16) is transformed from a sign of alienation from God to a sign of sacrificial “witness to Jesus.” The BP of v. 2 are the first in the chapter's four-fold depiction of those who participate in the triumph over the dragon. Finally, I offer a conclusion, including remarks on the identity of the woman in the Great Sign in light of the BPI.

2. Structure

2.1. Overview

Revelation 12 has five basic units: the description of the Great Sign and Other Sign (vv. 1-6), which summarize the events of chap. 12; the description of the heavenly battle (vv. 7-9), which elaborates on the allusion in v. 4a; the acclamation of the great voice in heaven (vv. 10-

12), which interprets the events of chap. 12; the dragon's persecution of the woman (vv. 13-16), which resumes the woman's flight in v. 6; and the conclusion of the chapter (vv.17-18), in which v. 17 resumes the role of the faithful in defeating the dragon in v. 11 and in which v. 18 resumes the woe of v. 12.

John employs several different structural elements in Revelation 12:

- 1) Revelation 12 features a "back-and-forth" description of God's providence and the dragon's negative response. Additionally, in vv. 9, 10e-f, 12b-c, there is a recurring refrain of the dragon's banishment that stands out from the "back-and-forth" description, also indicated in the chart. This "back-and-forth" description involves symmetry evident in the structure of the verses themselves, indicated most clearly in the translation.
- 2) There are four key portrayals of participation in the same event of triumph of the Lamb over the dragon, that is, Christ's triumph over Satan on the cross: the symbolic BP of the Great Sign in v. 2; the heavenly victory of Michael in vv. 7-9; the conquest of the martyrs by the blood of the Lamb in v. 11; and the "war" fought by the rest of the woman's offspring, the outcome of which is outstanding in v. 12.
- 3) There is a shift in v. 12 from the victorious reality of the "heavens and those who dwell within" them to the yet embattled reality of the "earth and sea." The shift from heavenly reality to earthly reality is indicated gradually through the entire chapter by means of a shift from repetition of key phrases related to heaven, heavenly bodies, or upward movement to repetition of key phrases related to earth, time, or downward movement. The heavenly reality is outside of time and space and its inhabitants include the One on

the Throne, the Lamb, the heavenly multitude, and the angelic host. The “earth and sea” includes living people and the created material world, all of which exist in history.

- 4) Recapitulations of previous texts are indicated by repetition of key phrases and elaborated content of earlier texts (vv. 7-9 recap v. 4a; vv. 13-16 recap v. 6; v. 17 recaps v. 11).
- 5) Revelation 12 features a series of allusions to Genesis 2–4 in addition to other OT texts such as the Prophets. Although the final chapters of the Book of Revelation are explicit in the portrayal of the New Jerusalem as a New Eden, the vision of Revelation 12 seems to have its own series of allusions to Eden as well, in particular regarding the woman, the dragon/serpent, and the ancient enmity of Gen 3:15. Of particular importance are two allusions: the first regarding Eve, mother of all the living (3:20) at the end (v. 17) of Revelation 12; and the second regarding the ancient enmity of Gen 3:15 throughout Revelation 12.

2.2. “Back-and-Forth” Description of God’s Providence and the Dragon’s Response (Chart 1)

The “back-and-forth” structure of Revelation 12 forms three units: vv. 1-8; vv. 9-12; and vv. 13-18. In the first unit, the descriptions of the Great Sign and the Other Sign and their respective actions are structured in a “back-and-forth” pattern that emphasizes the enmity between woman and dragon as well as the prominence of the woman over the dragon. She is revealed and described in four phrases (v. 1a-d) and her action, in the next three phrases (v. 2a-c). The description of the Other Sign in four phrases (v. 3a-d) and its action in three phrases (v. 4a-c) mimics that of the Great Sign. The Great Sign is portrayed in painful but life-giving activity. The Other Sign is portrayed in effortless but destructive activity. Both activities are of cosmic significance.

After the birth of the son (v. 5a), this symmetry is broken until v. 7. The dragon is given no opportunity to respond to, or rebel against, the three-fold sequence of God's providential action: the birth of the son (v. 5a); the son is caught up to heaven (v. 5b); the woman flees to a place prepared (v. 6). When Michael takes up arms against the dragon (v. 7a-b), the dragon is allowed a response in the narrative (vv. 7c-8).

In vv. 9-12 the "back-and-forth" pattern does not contrast the description of the woman with that of the dragon. But rather, the pattern continues in a modified form contrasting the description of the dragon's banishment from heaven (vv. 9, 10e-f, 12b-c) with the description of the victory of God (v. 10a-d) and the faithful (vv. 11a-12a). I indicate the modified form of the "back-and-forth" pattern in the chart by indenting vv. 9, 10e-f, 12b-c only partially. This partial indentation emphasizes the continuity in the dragon's action between vv. 7c-8 and 13.

In vv. 13-17 the "back-and-forth" pattern between the woman and the dragon returns. In this unit the description of action begins and ends with that of the dragon. This unit, however, resumes the action of v. 6, such that v. 13 is actually describing the reaction of the dragon to the woman's flight in v. 6. His reaction is not only to the woman but also to his defeat in the heavenly battle in vv. 7-9. The chapter ends with v. 18, which elaborates upon the dragon's first step in waging war against the faithful on earth.

Chart 1

- 1a And a great sign was revealed in heaven,
 1b a woman clothed with the sun,
 1c with the moon under her feet,
 1d and on her head, a crown of twelve stars.
 2a She is with child
 2b and she cries out,
 2c laboring and tortured to give birth.
- 3a And another sign was revealed in heaven;
 3b behold, a great red dragon,
 3c with seven heads and ten horns,
 3d and upon his heads, seven diadems.
 4a His tail drags a third of the stars of heaven and casts them to earth.
 4b And the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth,
 4c so that when she give birth to her child, it might devour it.
- 5a And she bore a son—a male who will shepherd all the nations with a staff of iron.
 5b But her child was caught up to God and his throne.
 6 And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she may be nurtured for one thousand, two hundred, and sixty days.
 7a And war broke out in heaven
 7b Michael and his angels fought against the dragon
 7c And the dragon fought back, along with his angels
 8 But he did not prevail and no longer was their place found in heaven.
 9a And cast out was the great dragon, the ancient serpent,
 who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world.
 9b He was cast to earth and his angels were cast with him.
- 10a Then I heard a great voice in Heaven, saying,
 10b Now have come the salvation and power
 10c And the kingdom of our God
 10d And the authority of his Christ
 10e Because the accuser of our brothers is cast out,
 10f the one who accuses them before our God day and night.
- 11a They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
 11b and by the word of their testimony;
 11c For they did not love their lives even at the point of death.
 12a Therefore, rejoice, O Heavens, and you who dwell within them!
 12b But woe to you, earth and sea, for the Devil has descended upon you
 12c in great anger, for he sees he has but a short time.
 13a When the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth,
 13b he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male.
- 14 But two great eagle wings were given to the woman, so that she might fly to the wilderness, to her place where she is nurtured for a time and times and half a time—far from the serpent.
 15 The serpent spewed a river of water from his mouth after the woman so that she be swept away with the current.
- 16 But the earth came to the aid of the woman. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon spewed from his mouth.
 17 The dragon was enraged with the woman and went off to make war with the rest of her offspring, those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus.
 18 And he stood upon the sand of the seashore.

2.3. Four Representations of Participation in the Triumph of the Lamb (see Chart 2)

In the middle of the vision of chapter 12 the heavenly voice announces the arrival of the “kingdom of our God. . . and the authority of his Christ . . .” (12:10). This announcement is key to the interpretation of the chapter and its rich and varied biblical symbolism rooted in the narrative of Genesis 3, particularly the BPI. Christ’s victory on the cross is portrayed in chapter 12 featuring the participation of *others* in that same victory: the Great Sign in agony of labor; Michael and his angels in battle; the martyrs in laying down their lives.¹ These faithful who participate in the victory of Christ are described as the woman’s “other offspring,” reminiscent of Eve’s offspring who are described in Gen 3:15 as participating in the struggle against the serpent.

The Great Sign encompasses the other three descriptions of participation in the triumph of the Lamb. She signifies both the fullness of beatitude and providential care the martyrs have yet to enjoy in the New Jerusalem as well the agony of the cross in which they have participated and continue to participate. The BP symbolize the pangs of the cross and all the suffering of others that is joined to the cross. That is, the suffering of the martyrs past (“who did not love their lives”) and present (“the rest of her offspring, those who keep God’s commandments and bear witness to Jesus”).²

¹ See Richard J. Bauckham, “The Victory of the Lamb and His Followers,” in *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (NTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 66-108, here 69, 75-76.

² For a discussion of the complex development of the use of the term, μάρτυς, see Jan Willem van Henten’s article, “The Concept of Martyrdom in Revelation” in *Die Johannesapokalypse: Kontexte-Konzepte-Rezeption* (WUNT 287; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012) 587-618. He concludes that martyr is not a technical term in the Book of Revelation, but includes all those who witness to their faith, whether they have to die for it or not. Also, Peter Antony Abir’s *The Cosmic Conflict of the Church: An Exegetico-Theological Study of Revelation 12, 7-12* (European University Studies Series 23 Theology 547 (New York: Peter Lang, 1995) 213.

Chart 2

1. Victorious Participation of the Great Sign

1a And a great sign was revealed in heaven,

1b a woman clothed with the sun,

1c with the moon under her feet,

1d and on her head, a crown of twelve stars.

2a She is with child

2b and she cries out,

2c laboring and tortured to give birth.

5a And she bore a son—a male who will shepherd all the nations with a staff of iron.

5b But her child was caught up to God and his throne.

2. Victorious Participation of Michael, the Angel

7a And war broke out in heaven

7b Michael and his angels fought against the dragon

7c And the dragon fought back, along with his angels

8 But he did not prevail and no longer was their place found in Heaven.

9a And cast out was the great dragon, the ancient serpent,
who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world.

9b He was cast to earth and his angels were cast with him.

3. Victorious Participation of the Martyrs

10e Because the accuser of our brothers is cast out,

10f the one who accuses them before our God day and night.

11a They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb

11b and by the word of their testimony;

11c For they did not love their lives even at the point of death.

4. On-going (Victorious) Participation of Faithful on Earth

17 The dragon was enraged with the woman

and went off to make war with the rest of her offspring,

those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus.

2.4. From Victorious Reality of Heaven to the Embattled Reality of Earth (see Chart 3)

Throughout Revelation 12 the perspective from which the action is described shifts gradually from the victorious reality of heaven from which the dragon is banished to the yet embattled reality of earth wherein the persecution of the dragon is experienced as dominant and at times, overpowering. This shift is made by means of a shift of repetition of key phrases related to heaven and earth. The shift to the perspective of the embattled earth and sea (and those who dwell within) is made definitely in v. 12b, at which point, the actions of the dragon are described before the actions of the woman.

The location of the vision itself remains somewhat unclear. The split between heaven and earth, however, is highlighted by the movement of the male son to the heavenly throne (v. 5) in contrast to the movement of the dragon to earth (vv. 4a, 8, 9a, 9b, 10e, 12b, 13a). The defeat of the dragon and his banishment from heaven is the beginning of the downward movement of the dragon, a movement that is concluded in Revelation 20.³ The dragon is identified by many names in the context of his banishment from heaven to earth (v. 9a). Furthermore, the dragon's antagonism of the woman (and her offspring) is explained in the context of the dragon's banishment. This banishment to earth parallels the serpent's banishment to the dust in Genesis 3. In Rev 12:7-9 the dragon is thrown to earth for a "short time," a period that explains the seeming contradiction between the decisive defeat of the Devil and the experience of the faithful to the contrary.

³ William H. Shea, "The Parallel Literary Structure of Revelation 12 and 20," *AUSS* 23 (1985) 45.

The perspective of the embattled earth is introduced in v. 12b as a woe to earth and sea. Each of the faithful still on earth has yet to have his or her particular victory over the dragon (by the blood of the Lamb). Wilfrid J. Harrington writes, “to conquer in the case of Christ and Christians is to die . . .”⁴ And after the dragon’s banishment from heaven, his wrath against the faithful on earth is even greater. After the woe is announced, the dragon’s actions are described first: pursuing the woman (v. 13); sending the flood after the woman (v. 15); pursuing the other offspring (v. 17); and standing on the seashore (v. 18). God’s providence seems to be described second, and only as regards the woman, in vv. 14, 16. As noted above, the actions of the dragon, although emphasized, are actually reactions to the woman’s action in v. 6. The final banishment of the dragon from the earth occurs in Revelation 20.

⁴ Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation* (SacPag 16; Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993) 134.

Chart 3

- 1a And a great sign was revealed in heaven,
 1b a woman clothed with the sun,
 1c with the moon under her feet,
 1d and on her head, a crown of twelve stars.
 2a She is with child
 2b and she cries out,
 2c laboring and tortured to give birth.
 3a And another sign was revealed in heaven;
 3b behold, a great red dragon,
 3c with seven heads and ten horns,
 3d and upon his heads, seven diadems.
 4a His tail drags a third of the stars of heaven and casts them to earth.
 4b And the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth,
 4c so that when she give birth to her child, he might devour it.
 5a And she bore a son—a male who will shepherd all the nations with a staff of iron.
 5b But her child was caught up to God and his throne.
 6 And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she may be nurtured for one thousand, two hundred, and sixty days.
 7a And war broke out in heaven
 7b Michael and his angels fought against the dragon
 7c And the dragon fought back, along with his angels
 8 But he did not prevail and no longer was their place found in heaven.
 9a And cast out was the great dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world.
 9b He was cast to earth and his angels were cast with him.
 10a Then I heard a great voice in heaven, saying,
 10b Now have come the salvation and power
 10c And the kingdom of our God
 10d And the authority of his Christ
 10e Because the accuser of our brothers is cast out,
 10f the one who accuses them before our God day and night.
 11a They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
 11b and by the word of their testimony;
 11c For they did not love their lives even at the point of death.
 12a Therefore, rejoice, O Heavens, and you who dwell within them!
 12b But woe to you, earth and sea, for the Devil has descended upon you
 12c in great anger, for he sees he has but a short time.
 13a When the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth,
 13b he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male.
 14 But two great eagle wings were given to the woman, so that she might fly to the wilderness, to her place where she is nurtured for a time and times and half a time—far from the serpent.
 15 The serpent spewed a river of water from his mouth after the woman so that she be swept away with the current.
 16 But the earth came to the aid of the woman. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon spewed from his mouth.
 17 The dragon was enraged with the woman and went off to make war with the rest of her offspring, those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus.
 18 And he stood upon the sand of the seashore.

2.5. Recapitulations and Resumptions of Previous Texts

The basis for all action of Revelation 12 is contained in the symbolism of vv. 1-6 and is explained in vv. 10-12. Verses 7-9 tell the story behind the symbolism in v. 4a of the dragon dragging a third of the stars of heaven to earth.⁵ And vv. 13-16 portray the “back-and-forth” action between the woman and dragon that is begun in v. 6 in her flight to the wilderness.⁶ Verse 17 continues the conquest of the martyrs in v. 11. Verse 18 resumes the reference to earth and sea mentioned in v. 12b.

Chapter 12 is characterized by what seems to be a lack of narrative coherence regarding time and space. This lack of time and space coherence could be a result of the chapter’s focus on the one event of the triumph of the cross (v. 11). All other events are described in terms of participation in that one event, not in terms of their historical or chronological reality. This characteristic is also a function of the description of events from the heavenly perspective, the perspective from which various events seem to take place simultaneously. For example, the three events described in vv. 5b-7 seem to take place simultaneously. Other events are foreshadowed earlier in the text and elaborated upon later, for example, v. 4a is elaborated upon in vv. 7-9.

⁵ Oecumenius (*Greek Commentaries on Revelation/ Oecumenius, Andrew of Caesarea*, trans. William C. Weinrich, ed. Thomas Oden [Ancient Christian Texts; Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity, 2011] 53) writes that v. 4 describes the casting of “Satan down from heaven” prior to the birth of the Lord, which is depicted more fully in vv. 7-9. Andrew of Caesarea (*ibid.*, 156-157) writes that it is possible vv. 4, 7-9 refer to the first fall of the Devil from his angelic rank, and his angels with him or that the vv. 4, 7-9 refer to “the destruction of the Devil through the cross of the Lord.” Caesarius refers to this interpretation (*Latin Commentaries*, 85). More recently, Harrington (*Revelation*, 133) comments that vv. 7-15 dramatize the fall of the dragon, an elaboration of vv. 4-5.

⁶ Oecumenius (*Greek Commentaries*, 56) writes that vv. 13-17 repeat v. 6. More recently, Brian Blount (*Revelation* [NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009] 223) makes the same observation.

This characteristic of lack of time and space coherence has resulted in two main approaches to discussing the structure of the chapter as a unified narrative with recapitulative (describing the same event in different ways) features or as a linear narrative (poorly) edited from a compilation of sources. The recapitulative method of interpreting chapter 12 is represented today by several scholars, if not a majority, even among those who do not employ a recapitulative interpretation for the rest of the Book of Revelation.⁷ Recapitulation is detailed as a principle of exegesis according to the sixth rule of Tyconius, as cited by Bede and employed in the Greek commentaries on Revelation of Oecumenus and Andrew of Caesarea.⁸ The recapitulative interpretation, however, came under criticism from Charles and others at the beginning of the 20th century.

Charles proposed that the events described throughout the entire book be interpreted along a chronological timeline into which “proleptic visions” have been inserted. One such inserted vision is chapter 12, which deals with past events in order to introduce chapter 13.⁹ Charles theorized that even though chapter 12 depicts past events, the events are still depicted in chronological order. In Charles’s work, his linear interpretation of Revelation coincided with his source theory, namely that the three scenes had different sources with varying narrative

⁷ For example, Aune, Bauckhaum, Blount, Caird, Collins, Garrow, Sweet, Tavo etc.

⁸ Bede (Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries*, 113) writes of this sixth principle, “Some things are mentioned in the Scriptures as though they were following chronological order or were narrated as a sequence of events, when without noting it the narrative in fact returns to previous events that had been omitted.” For a helpful overview of the influence of Victorinus’s seven exegetical principles, see William C. Weinrich, “Introduction to the Revelation to John,” in *Revelation*, ed. William C. Weinrich (Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament 12; Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2005) xvii-xxxii

⁹ Charles, *Revelation of St. John*, 1:xxiii.

purposes.¹⁰ Charles theorized that vv.1-5 and vv. 13-17 were discreet units taken from a pagan source, an “international myth” by a Jewish or Christian editor.¹¹ Charles’ position was a compromise between several different theories about the specific origins of the material in Revelation 12.¹² Charles himself recognized that his interpretation did little to explain the apparent unintelligibility of various aspects of the chapter. He concludes this is the result of poor editing.¹³ For Charles, the BPI in particular is merely a narrative detail in the goddess’s birth of a son.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid., 299-305.

¹¹ Ibid., 310. Rev 12:7-10, 12 were borrowed from Jewish tradition. Later, the two sources were combined and adapted to the Christian context of the Book of Revelation by the Christian addition of vv. 6, 11 and changes and additions to vv. 3, 5, 9, 10, 17.

¹² Albrecht Dieterich (*Abraxas: Studien zur Religionsgeschichte des späteren Altertums* [Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1891]) hypothesized the mythical origins of Revelation 12 to be the Greek myth of the birth of Apollo. Gunkel as discussed above, hypothesized the mythical origins of Revelation 12 to be Babylonian. Daniel Völter (*Offenbarung Johannis: Neu Untersucht und Erläutert* [Strassburg: J. H. Ed. Heitz, 1904]) hypothesized the mythical origins of the Rev 12:1-5 to be Persian.

Other scholars around the turn of the century, recognizing the undeniable presence of OT and apocryphal imagery, theorized that Revelation 12 was originally a Jewish writing that was later Christianized. Eberhard Vischer (*Offenbarung Johannis: Eine Jüdische Apokalypse in Christlicher Bearbeitung* [ATLA Monograph Preservation Program; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1886], protégé of Adolph von Harnack, hypothesized Revelation was originally a Jewish composition, later Christianized by substantial additions. Friedrich Spitta (*Offenbarung des Johannis* [ATLA Monograph Preservation Program; Halle: Verlag der Buchhandler des Waisenhauses, 1889]) hypothesized a primitive Christian writing later combined with two separate Jewish documents by a Christian redactor. Julius Wellhausen (*Analyse der Offenbarung Johannis* [Berlin: Weidmann, 1907]) hypothesized Revelation 12 to be a unified composition of Jewish origin.

For a contemporary argument that the Book of Revelation is a fundamentally Jewish book (rather than Christian), see John Marshall, *Parables of War: Reading John’s Jewish Apocalypse* (Studies in Christianity and Judaism 10; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001). His argument has as much to do with the past 200 years of biblical criticism of Revelation as it has to do with Revelation itself. He points out that Charles, in referring to the author of Revelation as a Jewish Christian, designates those parts of Revelation he values as Christian and those he does not as Jewish, “or worse, they are ascribed to a Jewish source that had been clumsily integrated by John or by his ‘profoundly stupid’ (l.xvii) Jewish editor” (7).

¹³ Charles, *Revelation*, 1:300. “Their lack of connection with their present context and their unintelligibility are undoubtedly evidence that they are wrested from their original context and belong to earlier forms of the myth.”

¹⁴ Ibid., 299.

The recapitulative interpretation of the structure of Revelation 12 is dominant in the approach of Tavo, as discussed above. Aune, however, indicates interest as well and uses the term, “resumption technique.”¹⁵ Following Collins, Aune observes the use of the technique in vv. 13-17 resuming the action of v. 6 after the “digression” of vv. 7-12.¹⁶ Aune and others combine a recapitulative interpretation with the theory of multiple sources, particularly that of the combat myth.¹⁷ This combined approach allows Aune to discuss the distinctly OT significance of the BPI of v. 2. But his use of source-theory does not compel him to account for the structure of Revelation 12 as it has been transmitted, but rather as he theorizes the original structure to have been arranged.

2.6. Returning to the Garden: Old Testament Allusions

Another distinctive structural element of Revelation 12 is its narrative arrangement according to prominent OT allusions. The foremost of these allusions is to the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden. Although other allusions are also significant, such as those referring to the Exodus and the Exile, here I focus on the Genesis allusions and their role in moving the narrative of Revelation 12 forward. Gen 3:15 describes an enmity between the serpent and woman and between their offspring. Revelation 12 narrates just such an enmity in terms of the antagonism of the serpent towards the woman. Verses 4, 11, 13-17 describe the antagonism of the serpent towards the woman’s son to be born, the woman herself, and the woman’s other offspring.

¹⁵ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 666. He gives several examples of other scholars who follow this approach as well. More recently, Boxall, *Revelation*, 17.

¹⁶ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 666; Collins, *Combat Myth*, 102.

¹⁷ Aune (*Revelation 6-16*, 666) also discusses various scholars with this approach.

Revelation 12, however, differs from Genesis 3 in that the woman is protected from the attacks of the dragon/serpent in a unique way that reflects the victory over the dragon in heaven and that foreshadows the ultimate banishment of the dragon from earth at the end of the Book of Revelation.

Various scholars have commented on the significance of Genesis 3 as a backdrop for understanding Revelation 12.¹⁸ There are clear linguistic allusions to the LXX text of Genesis 3. For example, the dragon in Rev 12:9, 14 is identified as one and the same as the ancient serpent of Genesis 3. Also, the offspring of the woman in Gen 3:15 and the offspring of the woman of Rev 12:17 are both identified as τοῦ σπέρματος αὐτῆς. The LXX specifies a singular masculine offspring through the pronoun (αὐτός σου τηρήσει κεφαλὴν) but Rev 12:17 retains the collective sense of the Hebrew.¹⁹ Furthermore, it is unusual to use σπέρμα of women. Finally, the BP of the woman in Rev 12:2a are described in terms of the BP given to Eve in Gen 3:16.

¹⁸ Sweet (*Revelation*, 203) and Paul S. Minear (“Far as the Curse is Found: The Point of Revelation 12:15-16,” *NovT* 33 [1991] 71-77), suggest that the symbolism and meaning of Revelation 12 is rooted in Gen 3:15-20. Others at least note the imagery from Genesis 3. For example, Harrington (*Revelation*, 130) writes, “. . . for John this woman is the heavenly Israel, depicted in terms of the woman of Gen 3. She is faced by Satan, the ancient serpent (Gen 3:1); she brings forth in anguish (3:16); her child will suffer attack by Satan (3:15). She is, all the while, the people of God who gives birth to the Messiah and the messianic age;” Blount (*Revelation*, 234-35) writes “The battle between the church and the dragon is the eschatological result of the primordial conflict initiated by the serpent’s deception;” Tavo (*Woman*, 270-71) writes, “All agree, however, that the author most probably borrowed the setting for the ‘dragon-child’ confrontation from the promised enmity of Gen 3:15 wherein the woman’s seed will strike the serpent’s head and the serpent his heel. The link with Gen 3 reveals at least two things about the intention here of the author: (i) he would have made a connection between the promised enmity of Gen 3 and the actual historical situation of his fellow Christians in Asia Minor vis-à-vis the imperial cult and (ii) his intended audience need not fear for the safety of the son to be born, for despite the dragon’s awesomely menacing presence, it will only succeed in bruising his heel. Already, the outcome of the actual confrontation between the male-son and the dragon is being anticipated.”

¹⁹ The single male child the woman gives birth to in v. 5 could allude to the singular number of the offspring in the LXX.

In addition to clear linguistic allusions, there are several arguable “secondary” allusions to the motifs regarding the woman of Genesis 3. Some allusions play on the similarities between the two women; others, on the contrasts. The woman of Revelation 12 enjoys a victory over, and protection against, the dragon that the Eve does not. The Great Sign enjoys “a place prepared by God . . . far from the serpent” (vv. 6, 14) precisely because of the victory of the cross that limits the dragon/serpent’s power.²⁰ The divine nourishment enjoyed by the woman in the wilderness reflects the divine providence enjoyed in the garden by the first man and woman (Gen 2:7) and foreshadows the divine providence to be enjoyed by all the faithful in the New Jerusalem, in which the tree of life produces fruit every month and leaves that are a balm for the nations (Rev 22:2). In an important nuance, the first man and woman *were not* protected in the garden from the serpent (Gen 3:1); the woman of Revelation 12 *is* protected from the dragon/serpent but in the desert; and the faithful *will be protected* in the New Jerusalem from all that would harm them (22:15). The portrayal of the woman of Revelation 12 as the first of the faithful to enjoy special protection from the dragon suggests that she is the first of the renewed creation that is promised and fulfilled in the final chapters of the Book of Revelation. In this sense, she is portrayed as the Eve of the new creation, or a new Eve.

Other possible “secondary” allusions include the following: 1) the movement of the woman of Revelation 12 into the place prepared for her by God contrasted with the expulsion of

²⁰ Minear (“Curse,” 73) writes, “If we follow this option [of Caird’s interpretation of the birth of the child as the Cross], we must see the operation of the curse in the whole of the Passion story. In the idiom of the promised enmity, the serpent bruised the heel of this child. That victory, however, proved illusory, for God had caught up the male child to his throne (12:5).”

Genesis 3 from the garden planted for the man and woman by God;²¹ 2) both women are clothed by God, the Great Sign in celestial glory, and Eve, in leather garments; 3) the woman's flight from the dragon contrasts with Eve's conversation with the serpent, in which she entertains his suggestions; 4) the woman is implicitly identified as the mother of all the faithful (Rev 12:17); Eve is identified as the mother of all living (Gen 3:20). John is not the only one to make the connection between keeping the commandments and fighting the serpent of Genesis 3. Targum Neofiti Gen 3:15 explains that the sons of Eve smite the serpent on the head when they follow the commandments.²²

Paul S. Minear adds two possible OT allusions in Rev 12:16. The flood from the dragon's mouth could be an allusion to the dragon/serpent's role of deceiver and tempter in Gen 3:1-5. And the earth protecting the woman and swallowing the river of water could be an allusion to the earth swallowing the blood of Abel in Gen 4:1-16.²³ Minear interprets the earth's role as a characteristic of the "New Earth," a sign that the curse on the earth is being reversed.²⁴ The linguistic and secondary allusions are suggestive of a portrayal of the Great Sign in terms of Eve, as a new Eve in whom the curse is reversed.²⁵ Minear writes, "In short, when we include both Genesis 3 and 4 in John's well-stocked memory, we have an adequate basis for following John's

²¹ Also a possible allusion to the Exodus. See Boxall, *Revelation*, 184-85.

²² I examine this passage further below in my discussion of v. 17.

²³ Minear ("Curse," 74-75) points out that elsewhere in the NT, Jesus charges the "serpents" who crucified his messengers as being guilty of all the righteous blood that had been shed on earth since Abel (Matt 23:29-36; Luke 11:49-51). Additionally in Heb 12:22, redemption of the Cross is described in terms of the blood of Abel.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 71. Cf. Boxall (*Revelation*, 185) who sees the earth's role as a personification of Mother Earth.

²⁵ Minear, "Curse," 76.

thought in his picture of the victory that had been won over the serpent by the woman, by the male child, and by those siblings who, when threatened by death, had maintained their witness to the blood of the Lamb.”²⁶

The victory hymn in Rev 12:11 celebrates the conquest of the dragon by the martyrs *by the blood of the Lamb* and makes a connection between the cross of Christ and the ancient enmity of Gen 3:15. The victory hymn describes the path for the victory of the woman’s other offspring, the faithful under persecution, over the dragon. The text does not say that the women’s other offspring are protected from the persecution of the dragon. The woman’s special protection could be part of her description as a new Eve.

3. Text-Critical Issues

Few, if any, of the text-critical issues in Revelation 12 affect the meaning of the text. They are, for the most part, evidence of attempts to emend the grammatical awkwardness in the Greek text. Nevertheless, it is helpful to discuss the rationale for the text as it appears in 27th edition of Erwin Nestle and Kurt Aland’s *Novum Testamentum Graece* (NA²⁷), since there are certainly variations.

Rev 12:5 A and C read ἄρσεν, whereas ⲛ, Ɔ⁴⁷, and the Miniscules read ἄρσένα. The latter reading may be an attempt to make the phrase less awkward. ἄρσένα would modify υἱὸν, either as an accusative noun or an adjective. ἄρσεν, the nominative form, would begin an

²⁶ Ibid., 75-76.

appositive phrase as the subject. The former, which is followed by NA²⁷, is probably the original reading.

Rev 12:6 A and the majority of witnesses read τρέφωσιν, which is the present, subjunctive, active form of τρέφω. The variant reading of \aleph , C, and a few uncials is τρεφοῦσιν, the present, indicative, active form. The variant could be the original since grammatical mistakes are common in the Book of Revelation. But the majority reading, followed by NA²⁷, does have the strong textual support of the papyri and A. Zerwick notes the use of the impersonal plural, a feature of Biblical Hebrew, throughout the NT. He cites this verse and Rev 12:14 as examples.²⁷ The majority reading is probably the original, based on textual and internal support.

Rev 12:6 Almost all witnesses read ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ. This reading, followed by NA²⁷, is grammatically awkward but has stronger textual and internal support than the variant reading, ὑπό, which is the reading of only two uncials and the Koine tradition proper (\aleph^k). The variant is a grammatical correction of ἀπό. Zerwick notes the tendency in the NT to use ἀπό instead of ὑπό with the passive.²⁸ The meaning of the phrase is that the place is prepared *by God*, not *from God*. ἀπο is probably the original reading.

Rev 12:8 A, one uncial, and \aleph^k read ἰσχυσεν, the singular, indicative, aorist form. The variant reading, ἰσχυσαν, is witnessed to by \aleph^{47} , \aleph , C, a variety of uncials, and \aleph^A . The singular verb form takes ὁ δράκων as the subject, as in the previous verse (ὁ δράκων

²⁷ Maximillian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici 114; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1994) 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

ἐπολέμησεν). The variant reading is probably a correction of the seeming awkwardness of a singular verb form with a plural subject, the dragon and his angels, reflected later in the verse with αὐτῶν τόπος. NA²⁷ follows the former reading, which is probably the original reading.

Rev 12:9 A and the majority of manuscripts read: ὁ δράκων ὁ μέγας, ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὁ καλούμενος Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς. ℘⁴⁷ and ℵ contain several variant readings in this one verse: ℘⁴⁷ reads, ὁ ὄφις, ὁ μέγας, omits ὁ ἀρχαῖος, omits ὁ modifying Σατανᾶς, and omits αὐτοῦ modifying οἱ ἄγγελοι. ℵ reads ὁ μέγας ὄφις, omits ὁ modifying δράκον, and omits καὶ of καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς. The Byzantine tradition represented by Andreas of Ceasarea's commentary (ℵ^A) omits μετ' αὐτοῦ from καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτοῦ μετ' αὐτοῦ ἐβλήθησαν. The variant readings of ℘⁴⁷ and ℵ are probably attempted corrections of the awkward nature of the list of the dragon's various names or could simply be copying mistakes. The variant reading of ℵ^A is probably due to an accidental omission in transcription. NA²⁷ follows the reading of A which is probably the original reading.

Rev 12:10 A reads κατήγῳρ, followed by NA²⁷. κατήγορος is the reading of all witnesses except A. κατήγορος is the word used elsewhere in the NT (Acts 23:30, 35, 25:16, 18) and OT (2 Mac 4:5; Prov 18:17). κατήγῳρ is a NT *hapax legomena* and *LSJ* mentions only one occurrence in the Greek Papyri. κατήγῳρ tends to be the later usage. It is not a semiticism but rather a "back formation from the genitive plural κατηγόρων."²⁹ κατήγῳρ actually appears transliterated into Hebrew in Rabbinic sources as a standard epithet for Satan.

²⁹ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 700.

A's reading is probably original although it could well be the mistake or emendation of a later copyist, since it is such an unusual form. κατήγωρ is probably the original reading, however, considering the strength of the textual witness of A. In such case, this text would witness to one of the earliest extant witnesses to the form. It is also possible, however, that κατήγωρ represents a later correction of a scribe, in accordance with the idiom of his day.³⁰

Rev 12:14 A and the majority of witnesses read ὅπου τρέφεται, followed by NA²⁷. The reading has strong textual support, but the repetitive nature of ὅπου . . . ἐκεῖ is of semitic influence and awkward in Greek.³¹ The variant reading of the Koine tradition proper (N^K), ὅπως τρεφῆται, attempts to make sense of the phrase by reading it as a purpose clause with a subjunctive, “so that she may be nourished.” The reading followed by NA²⁷ is probably the original. The variant is an emendation of the text and is supported only by a few uncials and some texts of the second order.

Rev 12:16 A is the only witness to the reading, τὸ ὕδωρ ὄ. NA²⁷ follows the reading attested by all other witnesses, τὸν ποταμὸν ὄν. It is difficult to tell which is the correct reading, since A is the strongest textual witness to the Book of Revelation. However, the reading of the majority of witnesses and the one followed by NA²⁷ is probably the original, based on the strong textual support as well as the internal support of the previous verse's use of ποταμὸν instead of ὕδωρ.

³⁰ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Biblia-Druck, 1994) 673.

³¹ See Zerwick citation above regarding v. 6.

Rev 12:18 ἐστάρθην is the reading of both the Koine tradition and the manuscripts related to the commentary by Andreas of Caesarea (20), some Vulgate manuscripts, and the sixth century Syriac Bible commissioned by Philoxenus of Mabbug (sy^{ph}). However, ἐστάρθη is the reading of \mathfrak{P}^{47} , A, and C, which amounts to much stronger textual support. Although the first reading mentioned would correspond to the first person singular verb of the following verse, the second reading is probably the original and is followed by NA²⁷.

4. Exegesis of Revelation 12

4.1. Overview

Revelation 12 portrays the triumph of the Cross with biblically rich symbols and images. It is the center point of the Book of Revelation. It portrays the fulfillment of the plan of God that has been anticipated for so long. The fulfillment of the plan of God marks the beginning of the renewal of all creation that is completed in the final chapters of the Book of Revelation. Revelation 12 seems distinct from the rest of the Book of Revelation, but upon closer study, it is apparent that it uses many of the same images and biblical allusions that are found throughout the book. For example, the theme of the victorious faithful one begins in the letters to the seven churches and continues until the last chapters. Another example is the climaxing theophanic exclamations regarding the fulfillment of God's plan that will be discussed below.

Revelation 12 is a continuation of chapter 11, particularly the liturgical transitional material (11:15-19) beginning with the seventh trumpet, the declaration of the great voices, the prayer of the twenty-four elders before the throne, the opening of the Temple in Heaven, and the appearance of the Ark of the Covenant. The key to interpreting the connection between the

revelations of the Ark, the Great Sign, and the Other Sign is found in 12:11, the proclamation of victory over the dragon by the blood of the Lamb, a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus.

After briefly discussing 11:19 in which the opening of God's heavenly temple begins the vision of Revelation 12, I present an exegesis of the chapter in three sections: The Great Sign (vv. 1-2, 5-6, 13-16), The Other Sign (vv. 3-4, 7-9), and From Victory in Heaven to Battle on Earth (vv. 10-12, 17-18). Texts are assigned to each section based on whether the text focuses on the role/identity of the woman, the dragon, or the past and present faithful.

1. *And God's temple was opened in heaven and the Ark of his Covenant was revealed in his temple and there were flashes of lightning, voices, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and great hail.*³² (Rev 11:19)

All the action described in the Book of Revelation originates in the heavenly temple and has a liturgical context.³³ The vision of chapter 12 is no different and begins in 11:19 with the opening of God's temple in heaven.³⁴ The opening of God's temple in heaven is followed by three heavenly appearances: the appearance of the Ark of the Covenant in heaven (v. 19), the

³² I translate both occurrences of αὐτοῦ as a personal pronoun referring to ὁ Θεῶ. The first αὐτοῦ modifies τῆς διαθήκης. See Boxall, *Revelation*, 174, 177. Aune (*Revelation 6-16*, 677) takes it to modify ἡ κιβωτὸς to read "his Ark of the Covenant."

³³ For example, the letters to the churches are written from amidst the golden candlesticks (1:12); the horsemen of the first four seals are commissioned from the altar (6:1-8); the angels who blow the seven trumpets to announce the plagues stand before God (8:1) and the incense is thrown from the altar to earth (8:3-5). Additionally, after John sees the third sign (15:1), the heavenly tent of testimony opens and the seven angels with the seven bowls come out of the temple (15:5-6) and the smoke of God's glory fills the temple until the plagues are accomplished (15:8).

³⁴ Alan J. P. Garro (*Revelation* [New Testament Readings; New York: Routledge, 1997] 50-51) identifies 11:19 as one of several opening formulae which begin the different episodes of the Book of Revelation. These episodes are characterized by action that originates in heaven and closing hymns which include Eucharistic references.

appearance of the Great Sign in heaven (12:1), and the appearance of the Other Sign, also in heaven (v. 3).³⁵ The first of these, the appearance of the Ark, is accompanied by the traditional signs of a theophany.³⁶ Each of these appearances is symbolic and evocative of individual persons: divine, human, and demonic. The Ark is the particular dwelling place of the LORD God (1 Kings 8, especially vv. 12-13), from the time of the ratification of the Mosaic covenant during the Israelites' sojourn in the desert (Exod 25-30, especially 28:29-30). The imagery of the Ark is evoked in John 1:14; it is quite possible that the same allusion to the Incarnation is at work in this text of Revelation 12 as well.³⁷

It is precisely in the context of the Ark—and all that it symbolizes about God's dwelling among his people—that the Great Sign and Other sign are revealed (ὠφθη) in heaven.³⁸ From the antagonism of the Other Sign toward the Great Sign the drama of chap. 12 ensues, portraying

³⁵ Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 365. Prigent does not interpret the appearance of the Ark as a reference to the legend that the Ark and its contents will be recovered in the eschatological era. See 2 *Apoc. Bar.* 6:5-7; 80:2. Richard J. Bauckham (*The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993] 204) also suggests 11:19 is a summary of what is to follow, namely the seven last plagues.

³⁶ Bauckham (*Climax*, 202-04) notes this text is the third of four culminating references in Revelation to the Sinai theophany (Rev 4:5; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18-21). Prigent (*Apocalypse*, 365) comments that this is because the Ark is the "most intimate revelation possible of the divine will." And Sweet (*Revelation*, 193) comments that the opening of the heavenly temple is reminiscent of the "rending of the veil over the Holy of Holies in the earthly temple at Jesus's death, which was followed by an earthquake (Matt 27:51)."

³⁷ The NT mentions of the Ark of the Covenant include John 1:14 and Heb 9:3-4. In the latter, Exod 16:32-34 and related texts are referenced: "Behind the second veil was the tabernacle called the Holy of Holies, in which were the gold altar of incense and the ark of the covenant entirely covered with gold. In it were the gold jar containing the manna, the staff of Aaron that had sprouted, and the tablets of the covenant." Earlier, in Rev 2:17, the "hidden manna" is mentioned, probably a double reference to the manna in the heavenly Ark and the Eucharist.

³⁸ William Riley ("Who is the Woman of Revelation 12?" in *Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association* 18 [1995] 31) sees the revelation of the Ark as yet another reference to the Zion tradition. In this he follows J. Edgar Bruns, "The Contrasted Women of Apocalypse 12 and 17," *CBQ* 26 (1964) 461. Prigent (*Apocalypse*, 366) writes that the Ark of the Covenant expressed "better than any other object the purpose of the temple, which is to be an expression of the divine will to make a covenant with men, to meet them, to reside with them. . . . This vision, which is introduced by the seventh trumpet, encompasses by way of anticipation the entire message of the following chapters."

the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise represented by the Ark of the Covenant. The beginning of God's reign is made possible by the participation of the faithful in the victory of the cross, represented throughout the chapter, but first and foremost by the BP of the mother of the Messiah arrayed in celestial glory.

4.2 The Great Sign

1. *And a Great Sign was revealed in heaven (12:1a)*

The Great Sign is the woman whose participation in the triumph/agony of the cross is the first of chapter 12's four portrayals of participation in the victory of the Lamb. Unlike the harlot of Revelation 17 identified as Babylon and the bride in Revelation 21 identified as the New Jerusalem, the Great Sign is not explicitly identified at all. Her description must serve as her identification. Her description includes most prominently her giving birth to the son (vv. 2, 4, 5, 13), but also by her clothing (12:1), her labor pains (12:2), her place prepared for her by God (vv. 6, 13), her protection from the dragon (12:6; 14; 16), and her other children (12:17).

Here "sign" (σημεῖον) is not an astrological term or a reference to the zodiac, as some scholars have suggested.³⁹ "Sign" is used to mean something, the significance of which extends beyond its apparent meaning. It is used throughout the Bible to designate the accomplishment of God's will. The content of the sign itself can be important to understanding God's will. "Sign" occurs a third time in Rev 15:1, "another sign, great and awe-inspiring," when the last seven

³⁹ See, for example, Caird, *Revelation*, 149; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 681.

plagues are introduced.⁴⁰ The Great Sign portrays the accomplishment of God's will and the Other Sign, the dragon, contradicts the accomplishment of God's will.

In the Gospel of John "sign" refers to miracles that signify Jesus's identity and authority, like changing the water into wine at Cana, healing the royal official's son from afar (John 4:54), and the multiplication of the loaves (John 6:14). Elsewhere in the NT a "sign" can be anything that indicates confirmation of God's will. In the Gospels Jesus often presents himself as a "sign."⁴¹ When Jesus's disciples privately ask for a sign of the end of the age (Matt 24:3), Jesus's first concern is that they not be deceived by either their own misreading of signs or by false signs of false prophets. Jesus then describes the typical signs associated with the end of the age as only the beginning of the "labor pangs" (Matt 24:8).⁴² Of particular interest is Matthew's use of "sign" in vv. 29-31 in a context which may sound familiar to the reader of Revelation 12 and 20: "Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky . . . Then the sign (τὸ σημεῖον) of the Son of Man will appear (φανήσεται) in heaven, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn (κόψονται) . . . And he will send out his angels with a trumpet blast, and they will gather his elect from the

⁴⁰ Prigent (*Apocalypse*, 458) suggests the connection of the third sign with the first two lies in the culmination of the last seven plagues in the final judgment, including the permanent destruction of the dragon. The third sign, that of seven angels who hold the final seven plagues, comes forth from the heavenly temple that is opened (15:6).

⁴¹ For example, when the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees ask for a sign from Jesus, Jesus points to his own person and his resurrection as the only sign they may expect. He refers to his resurrection as the "sign of Jonah" (Matt 12:39; 16:4).

⁴² Matthew (24:3), Mark (13:4), and Luke (21:7, 11, 25) are parallel material and use the term "signs" in the same manner.

four winds . . .” A few times “sign” is used to refer to something that confirms faith (Rom 4:11; 1 Cor 14:22).

In the OT “sign” takes on the meaning of a particularly important confirmation of God’s will. For example, the LORD’s mark on Cain (Gen 4:15) protected him from harm; the rainbow is a sign of the LORD’s covenant with Noah (Gen 9:13); circumcision is a sign of the LORD’s covenant with Abraham (Gen 17:11). One particular passage from Isaiah often recalled in conjunction with Rev 12:1 is Isa 7:10-12, 14. In this passage from Isaiah, the LORD identifies a person, a woman as the sign: “Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, ‘Ask for a sign from the LORD, your God; let it be deep as the nether world, or high as the sky!’ But Ahaz answered, ‘I will not ask! I will not tempt the LORD! . . .’ Then Isaiah said, ‘Therefore the LORD himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.’”⁴³

Although the common translation of ὤφθη is “appeared,” I translate it as “revealed,” to emphasize the syntactic parallel with the Ark of the Covenant in Rev 11:19, which is revealed when the temple is opened. In the NT, ὤφθη is used for apparitions, or revelations, of a heavenly nature.⁴⁴

2. *A woman clothed with the sun* (12:1b)

The woman of Revelation 12 is clothed in new and glorious garments, more beautiful than those God made for humankind in Gen 3:21: “For the man and his wife the LORD God made

⁴³ Matthew 1:23 interprets this verse from Isaiah as fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.

⁴⁴ Moses and Elijah appear (Matt 17:3); angels appear (Luke 1:11; 22:43; Acts 7:30; 13:31); Jesus appears after his resurrection (Luke 24:34; 1 Cor 15:5, 6, 7, 8; 1 Tim 3:16); the glory of God appears (Acts 7:2); tongues of fire appear at Pentecost (Acts 2:3).

leather garments, with which he clothed them.” The need for leather garments in Genesis originates from the man and woman’s disobedience, which made them aware that they were naked. The leather garments were also an indication of God’s providence for the man and woman. In Rev 12:1, as in the entire Book of Revelation, clothing indicates the spiritual state of the person and nakedness represents spiritual poverty.⁴⁵

The Book of Revelation accounts for many of the NT references to clothing. Most of the occupants of the heavenly temple wear white garments (1:13; 3:5; 3:18; 4:4; 7:9; 15:6; 19:14). The two prophets wear sackcloth as they call for repentance (11:3). The great harlot of Babylon is portrayed as clothed in the best the world can offer, wearing purple and scarlet and adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls (17:4; 18:16). The Bride wears a bright, clean linen garment, which represents the righteous deeds of the holy ones (19:8), and the Word of God wears a cloak dipped in blood (19:13). In 3:4 John transcribes to the church in Sardis, “If you are not watchful, I will come like a thief . . . You have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; they will walk with me dressed in white, because they are worthy.” And in 16:15 “Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who watches and keeps his clothes ready, so that he may not go naked and people see him exposed.”

The woman is uniquely clothed with the sun. NT comparisons with the sun’s brightness are reserved for persons of heavenly origin or in heavenly glory.⁴⁶ The mighty angel, whose face is “like the sun,” announces that when the seventh trumpet sounds “the mysterious plan of God

⁴⁵ Eva Marie Räßle, *The Metaphor of the City in the Apocalypse of John* (Studies in Biblical Literature 67; New York: Lang, 2004) 93-94.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Matt 13:43, 17:2; Rev 1:16, 10:1; 1 Cor 14:51.

shall be fulfilled, as he promised to his servants the prophets” (10:7). The woman clothed with the sun appears after the seventh trumpet is blown and the temple opens.

In the OT the sun is part of the created order and holds primacy of place in the heavens (Gen 1:26). The woman’s clothing echoes Joseph’s dream in Gen 37:7 as well as the description of the beloved in Cant 6:10. At the end of the Book of Revelation, when creation is made new, there will be no more need for the light of the sun or the moon (Rev 21:23; 22:5). John describes the New Jerusalem as illuminated by the glory of God and “its lamp [was] the Lamb.” The New Jerusalem will be a light for the nations (21:24). The woman’s clothing could suggest an allusion to Jerusalem/Israel of the OT. Portrayed in terms of the renewal of creation, she is not only a new and faithful Eve, but incorporates elements of a new and faithful Israel.

3. *With the moon under her feet and on her head, a crown of twelve stars* (12:1c-d)

In the OT, the moon is part of the created order and holds second place in the heavens (Gen 1:26). It is also considered a “light” in the heavens, and in the OT it is usually mentioned in conjunction with the sun. In the context of the Book of Revelation the mighty angel stands with his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land (Rev 10:2). The woman, the Great Sign, however, stands over the moon. From OT symbolism, Le Frois considers that “the symbolism of footstool cannot be merely that of a foot-rest but must be one of conquest and victory.”⁴⁷ For example, David describes the Ark of the Covenant as “the footstool for the feet of our God” (1 Chr 28:2). The woman of Revelation 12, however, has the *moon* as her footstool. She is not portrayed as divine, but the drama of Revelation 12 incorporates both heaven and earth.

⁴⁷ Le Frois, *Clothed With the Sun*, 112. For example, see Josh 3:13; 2 Sam 22:10, 39; 1 Kings 5:17; Ps 8:7; Ps 110:1. In Isa 66:1, the Lord describes the heavens as his throne and the earth as his footstool.

The depiction of a crown of stars is a NT image for spiritual victory, not a reference to the goddess Isis.⁴⁸ The twenty-four elders have crowns of gold, but the woman of Revelation 12 has a crown of stars. The woman has been faithful, and her beatitude incorporates the entire cosmos.

In the OT a crown is usually a sign of royalty or honor. In the NT the Gospels' only mention of a crown as a sign of royalty is in the passion narratives when the soldiers mock Jesus's kingship by making him a crown of thorns (Matt 27:29; Mark 15:17; John 19:2). Elsewhere in the NT, a crown is exclusively a sign of spiritual victory.⁴⁹ In the Book of Revelation the image of a crown is associated with faithfulness to the word of God (Rev 2:10; 3:11; 4:10) and with God-given victory (6:2; 14:14).

Many scholars interpret the twelve stars as the Zodiac.⁵⁰ In the Book of Revelation, however, the stars refer to angelic persons (1:20; 12:4; 9:1; probably 8:10). The "one like a son of man" holds the seven stars in his right hand (1:16), the seven stars that represent the angels of the seven churches (1:20). The letters in the beginning chapters of the Book of Revelation are addressed to these seven angels.⁵¹ In the series of seven trumpets, after the third and fifth

⁴⁸ Collins (*Combat Myth*, 74) describes Isis's black palla which is decorated with stars and a moon.

⁴⁹ Paul uses the images of an "imperishable crown" (1 Cor 9:25) and a crown bestowed after death at the judgment (2 Tim 4:8). James writes of the "crown of life" (1:12) and Peter, of the "unfading crown of glory" (1 Pet 5:4). Paul describes the Philippians and Thessalonians as his "joy" and "crown" (Phil 4:14; 1 Thess 2:19).

⁵⁰ Collins (*Combat Myth*, 74) points out that Isis is also portrayed at times with the zodiac to signify her "power over human destiny." See also G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 149. He notes, however, that in Dan 8:10 the stars symbolize angelic representatives of the pagan nations.

⁵¹ See Rev 2:1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus;" 2:8 "To the angel of the church in Smyrna;" 2:18 "To the angel of the church in Thyatira;" 3:1 "To the angel of the church in Sardis;" 3:7 "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia;" 3:14 "To the angel of the church in Laodicea."

trumpets, a star falls to earth each time and delivers a plague. After the third trumpet the star named “Wormwood” poisons the water (8:10-11). After the fifth trumpet a star with the key to the abyss falls to earth and opens the abyss, releasing locusts (9:1-3). In 20:1 an angel is described who descends from heaven with the key to the abyss, binds the dragon, and locks him in the abyss for 1000 years. In 12:4a the stars dragged from heaven by the tail of the dragon symbolize the angels who are cast out of heaven in v. 9.

The number twelve symbolizes completeness and totality in the Bible. Most notably, twelve is the number of the tribes of Israel and the number of Jesus’s disciples.⁵² In the Book of Revelation twelve thousand are marked from each of the twelve tribes of Israel to make up the 144,000 who are sealed (7:5-8). Twelve is a prominent number in the description of the New Jerusalem as well.⁵³ There seems to be a connection between the woman of Revelation 12 with a crown of twelve stars and the New Jerusalem with twelve gates, each guarded by an angel. Le Frois suggests the interpretation of the crown of twelve stars as the “sum-total of angelic beings who line up in victory with the woman and her offspring . . .”⁵⁴

⁵² Jesus promises his disciples that they will “sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt 19:28). Elsewhere in Matthew, Jesus asks, “Do you think that I cannot call upon my Father and he will not provide me at this moment with more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matt 26:53). The apostles fill twelve wicker baskets with fragments after Jesus feeds the 5000 (Matt 14:20; Mark 6:43; 9:17; John 6:13). The woman suffers from hemorrhages for twelve years (Matt 9:20; Mark 5:25; Luke 9:43). The girl whom Jesus heals is twelve years old (Mark 5:42; Luke 8:42). Jesus is found in the temple when he is twelve (Luke 2:42).

⁵³ The city has twelve gates, each made from a single pearl, and twelve angels, one at each gate (Rev 21:12, 21). The city has twelve layers of stone in its foundation, each with the name of one of the twelve disciples (of the Lamb) written upon it (Rev 21:14). The city is 12,000 stades in length, width, and height (Rev 21:16).

⁵⁴ Le Frois, *Clothed With the Sun*, 120.

4. *She is with child* (Rev 12:2a)

The Great Sign is described in the present tense. The participial phrase is present tense, which is somewhat unusual and emphasizes the ongoing action of the vision.⁵⁵ This phrase (ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα) occurs elsewhere in Matt 1:18 of Mary, the mother of Jesus (ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου), in conjunction with Matthew's interpretation of Isa 7:14 as fulfilled in the birth of Jesus.⁵⁶ In Isa 7:14 the son to be born is identified as Immanuel but the woman's only identification is her motherhood as is the case in Rev 12:2.

Rev 12:2a describes the Great Sign in terms of her expectant motherhood, the first of several references to her giving birth. This description, when taken in conjunction with v. 17, seems to allude to the motherhood of Eve in 3:20, “. . . she became the mother of *all the living*.” The woman of Revelation 12 is the mother of the child and of *all the faithful*, “those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus.”

There are only three other women figures in the Book of Revelation. Two are explicitly identified as cities: the woman in chapter 17 is identified as “Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth” (17:5), and the woman in 19:7 and 21:9 is identified as the New Jerusalem arrayed as a bride. The third figure is an individual identified by name,

⁵⁵ William D. Mounce (*Basics of Biblical Greek* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009] 125) writes, “The present active indicative verb can be either a continuous ('I am studying') or undefined ('I study') action. We recommend using a continuous translation by default, and if it does not fit the context switch to the undefined.”

⁵⁶ Le Frois, *Clothed With the Sun*, 98, 145. The only other uses of this phrase in the NT are references to (1) the difficulty the women who are expecting will have in the time of trial that precedes the end time (Matt 24:19; Mark 13:17; Luke 21:23) or (2) the metaphorical use in 1 Thess 5:3 discussed in the previous chapter.

Jezebel (4:20). Although the woman of Revelation 12 is portrayed with allusions to Israel/Jerusalem, she is not explicitly identified as such.⁵⁷

5. *And she cries out, laboring and tortured to give birth (12:2b)*

Rev 12:2b is not a narrative detail of a mythical birth story but the summation of OT BPI interpreted in light of Christ. Verse 2b alludes to Gen 3:16 in which the LORD God says to the woman that he will intensify her BP. In v. 16 Eve is given physical BP to accompany the births of her children. In the NT, however, BP are used metaphorically to symbolize a witness to Christ. For Paul in Galatians 4 and Romans 8, this witness includes vicarious suffering for others as they mature in their faith. In 1 Thessalonians and Matthew/Mark this witness includes an upheaval of the created order in anticipation of the second coming. In John 16 this witness is connected explicitly with the cross. Some scholars read the BP of v. 2b as symbolic of the anguish of the cross.⁵⁸ In light of the events described in chap. 12 it is possible to read the BP of the woman as symbolic of *participation* in the anguish of the cross. The key to this interpretation is the proclamation of victory of the faithful by the blood of the Lamb in v. 11a, a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus. In light of the heavenly proclamation, what appears to be the most

⁵⁷ Ibid., 99.

⁵⁸ Caird, *Revelation*, 149; Harrington, *Revelation*, 130; Blount, *Revelation*, 231; Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 384; Feuillet, *Jesus*, 125; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1997) 791. Gregory K. Beale (*The Book of Revelation* [NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999] 629), Jürgen Roloff (*Revelation of John: A Continental Commentary* [trans. John Alsup; Continental Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993] 151), and Tavo (*Woman*, 262-66) specifically exclude the interpretation of Calvary. Also Josephine Massyngberde-Ford (*Revelation* [AB 38; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975] 189), who nevertheless notes “The Birth is something more than a physical childbirth.” Beale (*Revelation*, 639), Robert H. Mounce (*The Book of Revelation* [rev. ed; NICT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997] 234), and Witherington (*Revelation*, 169) interpret v. 5 as a summary of Christ’s birth, death, resurrection, and ascension. Feuillet, however, is the only scholar cited above who makes the connection between Mary, mother of Jesus, at the foot of the cross and the agony of the passion.

vulnerable state of a woman has been transformed into a sign of participation in the anguish and victory of the cross. In this text, as in all other NT uses of BPI, the allusion to Gen 3:16 is transformed by the message of Christ's redemptive suffering on the cross.

The sign of a woman arrayed in celestial splendor who cries out (κράζει) does not initially seem unusual for the visions of the Book of Revelation. The woman's cry serves both as an announcement that her hour (the hour of the coming of God's kingdom) has come as well as a call of supplication for her "other offspring," the faithful on earth. These are the normal biblical meanings of κράζω.⁵⁹ In Matthew Jesus cries out on the cross before he dies (Matt 27:50).⁶⁰

κράζω does not normally appear in the Bible in conjunction with BPI. The only possible implicit connection with BPI is in Romans 8, where the crying out of the faithful is associated with the groaning of creation in BP. In Romans 8 those who have received the spirit of adoption cry out, "Abba Father!" in v. 15 and groan (in labor pains) in v. 23 *waiting for adoption*, the redemption of the body. The groaning of the Spirit, which alludes to the BPI of the previous verse, has the meaning of supplication. Paul's use of labor pangs in Galatians 4 serves to portray his supplication for the Galatians' growth in the faith. It is possible that this nuanced association of supplication and BPI is at play in the text of Galatians as well.

Throughout the OT BP (ὠδίνουσα) consistently represent alienation from God as a consequence for sin, albeit within the blessing of birth. As discussed in chapter three, in the NT

⁵⁹ Elsewhere in the Book of Revelation, the slaughtered souls under the altar cry out in supplication for justice (6:10), the great multitude before the throne cries out in praise (7:10), those who mourn the destruction of Babylon cry out (18:17, 18), and several angels cry out with commands and announcements of future events (7:2; 10:3; 14:15; 18:2; 19:17). In the OT (LXX) and NT the image of "crying out" is one exclusively of supplication.

⁶⁰ Mark and Luke use other verbs, but also describe Jesus as crying out at his death. John does not.

BPI is used to mitigate apocalyptic expectations (1 Thess 5:3; Matt 24:7-8/Mark 13:8) or to describe suffering for the benefit of another's redemption (Gal 4:19; Rom 8:22; John 16:16), symbolized by birth.⁶¹ BP are still a result of sin and alienation from God, but they are incorporated into the work of redemption on behalf of others. In John 16, where the full image of BP and birth is used in a simile, the dominant image is that of joy brought by the new life of a child. The context of the blessing of birth is a sign of God's faithfulness, even in the sinful condition of humankind.

BP in the NT do not signify negative divine judgment against the person/entity suffering them. In the NT whoever suffers BP suffers them on behalf of someone else's alienation from God. Even in Romans 8, in which all of creation experiences BP as a sign of negative divine judgment, the judgment is not directed against creation but humankind, for whom the Spirit himself intercedes.

The BP of the Great Sign bring together and interpret the various significances of OT BPI through the redemption of the cross. The signification is four-fold: (1) the beginning of the apocalyptic era of the final judgment, "The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for the dead to be judged," (Rev 11:18); (2) the suffering that sin has caused for all human persons as well as for all of creation, represented in the OT as the BP of Israel; (3) the expiatory suffering on behalf of others' redemption, primarily Christ's suffering on the cross and

⁶¹ One exception to this categorization of use from the NT is Gal 4:27. In this text, Paul's use of BPI is following a different tradition of OT usage, in which BP represent the blessing of birth. Another is Acts 2:24, in which yet another tradition is followed, that of BP representing death pangs. This is turned on its head in the NT, where death pangs become BP. See chap. 3 for discussion of use of BPI in these two NT texts.

secondarily that of others who are conformed to him on the cross; (4) the taming of death pangs into BP that lead to new life.

Through their four-fold symbolic significance the BP of Revelation 12 indicate a transformation in the significance of the BP of Genesis 3. The BP of Genesis 3 apply to physical future births of Eve (and her daughters through the ages). However, the BP of Revelation 12 are not the pangs of the birth in v. 5 or of any physical birth. Like the BP of 2 Thessalonians, they are the pangs of a renewal of creation in the coming of Christ, not the pangs of death. Like the BP of Paul, they are the pangs of expiatory suffering on behalf of other's redemption, namely the faithful, the woman's "other offspring." Like the BP of John, they are the pangs of the cross, particularly as suffered by those closest to Jesus, his disciples. Like the BP of Acts, they have transformed the pangs of death into those of birth. In Clement of Alexandria, we have an early witness to BPI being applied to Christ himself on the cross.⁶² The BP the woman experiences are those of her participatory suffering in the Passion and Death of the same son who is born in v. 5a, the Messiah.

Rev 11:17 announces that the LORD God has assumed his power but the depiction in Revelation 12 of how this has come about is quite different from the OT portrayal of the LORD's victory. Conrad Gempf writes,

. . . in chapter 12, instead of the fierce host of the LORD thundering into battle against a foe who is so humiliated as to act like a pregnant woman in the throes of labor, it is rather

⁶² Le Frois (*Clothed with the Sun*, 49) provides a translation of a passage in which Clement of Alexandria (*Paedagogus* 1.6.41-42) uses BPI to describe the crucifixion: "So she (the Church) nourishes with the Logos the young band of disciples which the Lord Himself gave birth to amid bodily pangs, and which He Himself wrapped in the swaddling clothes of His precious Blood."

the Enemy who parades with all the ferocity, as a dragon, and it is Salvation that comes through the humiliation of birth-pangs and child-birth.⁶³

This contrast is all the more poignant since the BP of the woman are not those of the normal course of nature but represent a participation in suffering that is freely taken on and constitutes a supplication on behalf of others. By joining her sufferings to Christ's suffering on the cross, it can be said of the woman of Revelation 12, as of Paul, that she is in labor until Christ is formed in the faithful. In this way, at very least, she can be said to be the mother of all the faithful. And in this regard, she can be said to represent the Church on earth.⁶⁴ This representation is an important aspect of the portrayal of the Great Sign as a new Eve of creation. The Church is indeed the first fruits of the new creation.

The word combination of βασσαυζομένη τεκεῖν is unique in the Bible. This unusual wording is yet another indication that the BP of this text are not simply physical BP. Nowhere in the Bible is βασσαυζομένη used in conjunction with birth imagery. In the NT it is used to describe the torment of Hell (Matt 8:29; Mk 5:7; Luke 8:28; Rev 14:10; Rev 20:10) and occasionally, the suffering of great illness (Matt 8:6; Rev 9:5). In 2 Pet 2:8 Lot is described as “tormented (βασσαυζομένη) in his righteous soul at the lawless deeds that he saw and heard.”

4 Maccabees is the only other use of βασσαυζομένη in conjunction with birth-pang and birth imagery. It is possible that 4 Maccabees provides an instance of the development of BPI

⁶³ Gempf, “Birth-Pangs,” 135.

⁶⁴ Caesarius (Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries*, 85) and Bede (Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries*, 150). Le Frois (*Clothed with the Sun*, 5-6 footnote 3) lists scholars from the first half of the 20th century who interpret the woman as Mary, a figure of the Church, according to one of the three following categories: the Church is described but with the features of Mary, Mary is described but as an archetype of the Church; both Mary and the Church are simultaneously described in the one figure.

roughly contemporaneous with that of the Book of Revelation.⁶⁵ In 4 Macc 15:16-17, 22, 27-29 the mother of seven sons is said to experience torture sharper than the pangs of birth when she is forced to watch her seven sons die for their faith.⁶⁶ By her strength in supporting her sons' heroic refusal to capitulate to the demands of their executioners, the mother suffers vicariously with her sons and strengthens their faith. As a result of her suffering she is said to bring "perfect piety to birth," and is named a "true daughter of God-fearing Abraham" and "mother of the nation. . ."⁶⁷

O mother, sorely tried now by *pains sharper than the pains of birth!* O woman who alone among women *brought perfect piety to birth!* . . . With what a manifold host of torments then was the mother *tortured* while her sons were racked by the wheel and fire. . . but she did not decide on the safe course that would preserve her sons for a little while, but like a true daughter of God-fearing Abraham, called to mind Abraham's unflinching bravery. O mother of the nation, champion of the law, defender of true religion, and winner of the prize in the inward context of the heart! . . . Like the ark of Noah, carrying the universe in the worldwide cataclysm and stoutly enduring the waves, so did you, guardian of the Law, buffeted on every side in the flood of the passions and by the mighty gales of your sons' torments, so did you by your perseverance nobly weather the storms that assailed you for religion's sake. (4 Mac 15:16-17, 22, 27-31)⁶⁸ (emphasis mine).

The suffering of the mother of 4 Maccabees provides a model by which to appreciate the nature of the BP of the mother of Revelation 12. The mother of Revelation 12 is also "tortured"

⁶⁵ Anderson ("4 Maccabees," 540, footnote 25) notes, "The vocabulary overlap of 4 Maccabees with NT documents is certainly not enough to demonstrate literary dependence and the circumstantial evidence is too heavily dependent on guesswork. It is much safer to assume that the various authors were simply exposed to the same climate of religious thought and belief." On the other hand, Anderson does note (535) that the style of 4 Maccabees is typical of that of Asia Minor and that there is evidence of a later Christian cult of the martyrs in Asia Minor and Antioch in particular.

⁶⁶ Massyngberde-Ford (*Revelation*, 189) notes that the verb appears 19 times and the noun, 41 times, consistently associating the word with martyrdom.

⁶⁷ Anderson ("4 Maccabees," 539) writes that there is no need to regard passages in 4 Maccabees on vicarious atonement as Christian interpolations. The idea is already present in the OT, although brought out and developed much more in the NT.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 560.

with BP at the wrongful death of her son, symbolically represented by the BP of Rev 12:2. The mother of Revelation 12 also becomes the “mother of a nation,” a “nation” that extends beyond the borders of kinship or region. Here we see that the woman’s motherhood of the son is inextricably linked to her motherhood of the other offspring. The mother of Revelation 12 suffers the pains of her son’s cross vicariously and in so doing she participates in the “painful childbearing of the messianic people by Sion” who are identified as “her other offspring,” in v. 17.⁶⁹ The new Eve is the mother of the faithful by giving birth to the “firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29), both at the nativity and in this text, at the cross. It is to this reality that John 19:25-26 witnesses.⁷⁰

Feuillet discusses the significance of The Great Sign represented in celestial glory and yet experiencing the BP of earthly sorrow, which are described in the present tense. He interprets the present tense to indicate an on-going permanence in the state of the woman who is the Great Sign. Somehow, despite the other action described of her in the chapter, her portrayal in the agony of BP remains the dominant image of the chapter’s vision. Feuillet concludes that the permanent nature of Christ’s wounds extends to Mary’s sorrow at the cross.⁷¹ This is a sign of the intimacy of Mary’s participation in her son’s suffering.

⁶⁹ Feuillet, *Jesus*, 125.

⁷⁰ Ugo Vanni (*Lectura del Apocalypsis: Hermenéutica, exegesis, teología* [trans. Honorio Rey; Navarra: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2005] 371) writes that read in the light of John, the woman of Revelation 12 representing the Church as mother coincides with the truth of Mary as mother. Nevertheless, it is not important whether or not there is a textual connection between Revelation 12 and John 19. It is possible for them simply to be two separate and distinct accounts of one reality.

⁷¹ Feuillet, *Jesus*, 243.

Feuillet also notes the indirect description of the agony of the cross through the suffering of Jesus's mother.⁷² Indeed, all the descriptions in Revelation 12 of the Lamb's triumph over the Devil (v. 11) are indirect, focusing on those who participate in the triumph, not the victor himself. The BP of the Great Sign are the first of the four portrayals of participation in the Lamb's victory of the cross over the dragon. The other three are: Michael and his angels, the martyrs who witnessed to Christ unto their death, and the faithful still on earth. In a limited sense, creation also participates in Christ's victory, symbolized by the help the woman receives in vv. 13, 15 against the dragon's aggression.

6. *And she bore a son—a male who will shepherd all the nations with a staff of iron*
(12:5a)

The woman's motherhood is described a second time in this text. Here, her expectant motherhood comes to fruition in the birth of a son. In this text the allusion to Ps 2:9 identifies the son as the Messiah.⁷³ Most scholars agree that the male child represents Jesus in some way, at some point during his life or death.⁷⁴ Some interpret the male child as the mystical Christ who includes all Christians.⁷⁵ This second interpretation, however, seems a little strained in that the

⁷² Ibid., 125. "What is most surprising of the Apocalypse is that John, instead of directly describing the Passion of Christ, speaks only of the compassion of his mother in the pangs of childbirth. It is as if Jesus' Passion and Mary's compassion amount to but one reality."

⁷³ Brown, *John*, 2:731.

⁷⁴ Cf. Massyngberde-Ford (*Revelation*, 200), who does not think Christ is mentioned at all. She concludes (25) that the child is a prominent leader.

⁷⁵ de la Potterie (*Mary*, 283-84) follows this interpretation, noting that it makes most sense to have a collective (represented in the woman as Israel) bringing forth a collective (represented in the male son as the Messianic people), rather than a collective bringing forth a singular. This is also to some degree the position of Beale (*Revelation*, 630). See also Ugo Vanni (*Lectura*, 106), who sees the woman as primarily representing the

faithful are represented specifically as the woman's "other offspring," thus distinguishing them from the male son. This text is connected with the interpretation of the identity of the mother of Revelation 12, as I discuss below.

The Book of Revelation begins (2:27) and ends (19:15) with an allusion to Ps 2:9. In Rev 2:26-27 the victor is promised authority over the nations, to shepherd them with a staff of iron (ποιμανεῖ αὐτοὺς ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ). This emphasizes the theme of conformation to Christ.⁷⁶ In 19:11 the son born of the woman returns from the heavens. The heavens open and a rider upon a white horse comes forth. He is identified by several names: "Faithful and True," the "Word of God" (v. 13), "King of Kings and LORD of LORDS" (v. 16), and as the one who will shepherd the nations with a staff of iron (v. 15).

If the BP of v. 2 represent the agony of the Messiah on the cross, shared by the new Eve, what does the birth represent? It could represent Jesus's resurrection or his death.⁷⁷ The BPI of Acts 2:24 "the pangs of death could not hold him," and the description of Jesus Christ as "firstborn of the dead" in Rev 1:5 are both key to interpreting v. 5a. Prigent, among others, discusses the symbolic significance of the birth. His conclusion that the son's birth must represent his resurrection is somewhat nuanced since he is not referring the objective event of the

Church. Allo (*L'Apocalypse*, 193) qualifies that certain traits of the child are suitable to Christ, others to the mystical Christ, others to both.

⁷⁶ We see this in the example of the image of the morning star. Jesus himself is described as the morning star (Rev 22:16), but in Rev 2:26-28, John is told that the victor who endures to the end will receive the morning star.

⁷⁷ Those interpreting the birth as the resurrection of Jesus include: Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 385; T. Vetralli, "La donna dell'Apocalisse," in *La Madre del Signore* (Spirito e Vita 6; Bologna: Parola, 1982) 152-170, esp. 165; Beale, *Revelation*, 640. Those interpreting the birth as the death of Jesus include: Boxall, *Revelation*, 180; Caird, *Revelation*, 149; Brown, *Introduction*, 791.

resurrection of Jesus but to the “faith event” that takes place in the hearts of the disciples when they come to believe Jesus is LORD.⁷⁸

Interpreting the birth of the child as Jesus’s resurrection is not without difficulty. It is one thing to argue (from scriptural assonance) that the mother of the Messiah partakes in the sufferings of the Messiah on the cross. It is another to argue that she is the cause, or even the means, of his resurrection, which might be implied by such an interpretation. This is the same problem that can come with identifying the woman with the Church, whether by “Church” one means the sum total of the faithful or the sacramental and hierarchical Church “against which the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail” (Matt 16:18).⁷⁹ Christ comes first, not the Church; *Christ* could be said to “give birth” to the *Church*, not the other way around. This problem is neatly addressed by Quodvultdeus, Bishop of Carthage, in *De Symbolo III 3* in his argument that the woman signifies Mary as a figure of the Church.⁸⁰

If the birth represents the death of Christ, as some scholars posit, then it would signify the essential fecundity of the BP in the drama of redemption. I discussed above how in the Bible BPI is rarely followed by explicit birth imagery. Revelation 12, Micah 4–5, and John 16 are the only biblical instances of BPI followed by birth imagery. Micah and John clearly link the birth

⁷⁸ Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 384-85 footnote 66. The terms, “objective event” and “faith event” are my own attempts to summarize Prigent’s position.

⁷⁹ This is one difficulty in comparing the interpretations of various scholars. They mean different things by the term “Church.” So, they come up with different, undefined terms, such as “Messianic People,” and “People of God,” etc.

⁸⁰ Quodvultdeus’s work is ascribed to Augustine in *Patrologia Latina* 40:659. Le Frois (*Clothed with the Sun*, 52) translates: The woman “signifies the Virgin Mary, who . . . brought forth our Head inviolate; at the same time she represented in her person Holy Church in figure (archetype) . . . so also the Church brings forth His members at all times”

imagery with the redemption of Israel and the disciples, respectively. This is included in the sense of v. 5 but the birth imagery of the verse still seems allusive. The text of 4 Macc 15:16 provides another instance of BPI followed by birth imagery and possibly gives a clue as to how the birth imagery and BPI function together in Revelation 12. 4 Maccabees 15 describes giving birth to piety. If the death of Christ is represented, then the Book of 4 Maccabees suggests that there is special significance in the sufferings of a martyrdom shared by the mother of the martyr. This suggests the new Eve who suffers with her son may well be none other than Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The second possible interpretation is that the birth represents the physical birth of Christ, albeit disassociated from the BP.⁸¹ A certain disassociation of the BP from the birth is suggested in the text itself since the description of the Other Sign comes between that of the Great Sign's BP and her giving birth. This is also the position of Oecumenus and Quodvultus and would be most consistent with NT references to birth. Oecumenus interprets the birth physically but the BP metaphorically, interpreting them as the concern Mary experienced on account of Joseph's perception of the situation.⁸² Quodvultus simply says that it is fine to interpret the text as referring to the birth of Christ, excepting the BP.⁸³ Elsewhere in the NT, *τίκτω* usually refers to a physical birth (nine out of thirteen times). Of these nine instances, all except for a single

⁸¹ If the birth in Rev 12:5a represents the physical birth of Christ, it could still symbolize the essential fecundity of the woman's BP in the drama of redemption.

⁸² Oecumenus, *Greek Commentaries*, 52.

⁸³ Le Frois, *Clothed with the Sun*, 52.

reference to the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:57) refer to the birth of Jesus (Matt 1:21, 23, 25, 2:2; Luke 1:31, 2:6, 7, 11).⁸⁴

If the physical birth is represented in v. 5a, albeit symbolically, then it logically follows that if the son is Jesus Christ, then the woman is his mother, Mary. Most scholars agree that the child is Jesus. Extending the logic to conclude that Mary, mother of Jesus, is the male child's mother does not enjoy such widespread scholarly support.⁸⁵ Reginald H. Fuller summarizes a point of discussion on Revelation 12 in a Lutheran-Catholic dialogue: "The main argument for a reference to Mary is that the narrative refers to the woman as the mother of the Messiah, and one may ask whether any Christian of the late first century could refer to the mother of the Messiah without thinking of Jesus' mother Mary."⁸⁶ This observation is made even though the discussion hardly reaches conclusions in favor of interpreting the woman of Revelation 12 as Mary symbolically portrayed.

One possibility as to why John does not identify the mother of Revelation 12 by name is that her identity is obvious to the reader/hearer based on the description of her motherhood. Mary

⁸⁴ The other four uses include John 16:21, mentioned already, Gal 4:27, a NT use of BPI to represent birth, and the other two uses are unrelated to birth as such, Heb 6:7 and Jas 1:15.

⁸⁵ Many scholars note the identity of the son but explicitly exclude any possibility of identifying the mother as Mary, even in v. 5. Caird (*Revelation*, 149) writes, "The woman is the mother of the Messiah, not Mary, but the messianic community." So, also, Mounce, *Revelation*, 231; Tavo, *Woman*, 234, 288; Harrington, *Revelation*, 130. Sweet (*Revelation*, 194-95) is open to a Marian interpretation, but qualifies it. He identifies several significances of the woman and writes, "She is Mary, but only in so far as Mary embodies faithful Israel, and *mothers the Messiah* and his community." In this position, Sweet follows many patristic commentators. However, others take the position that the woman is Mary and, as such, represents the Church.

⁸⁶ Reginald H. Fuller, "The Woman in Revelation 12," in *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars* (ed. Raymond E. Brown, Karl Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and John Reumann; New York: Paulist, 1978) 235. Fuller wrote the first draft of the chapter and Fitzmyer led the task force discussion.

is *always* identified as the mother of Jesus.⁸⁷ With the exception of the first three chapters of Luke, Mary is named only four times in the NT, and all four times her name is accompanied by an explanatory phrase, “his mother” (Matt 1:18; 2:11; 13:55) or “mother of Jesus” (Acts 1:14). In the Gospels and Acts half of the fourteen women mentioned are identified as mothers of their sons or wives of their husbands.⁸⁸ In the Pauline epistles women are identified by name without reference to husband or children in ten out of twelve times. In the Epistles, however, Mary is referred to as the “woman” of whom Jesus was born (Gal 4:4). The rate at which Mary is identified as mother of Jesus is much higher than the rate at which other women are identified by their sons or husbands. This suggests that although in the NT it was common to identify a woman by her sons or husband, Mary’s motherhood of Jesus was considered in a special way to be her most identifiable feature.⁸⁹

Most scholars interpret the woman who gives birth to the son as either an image of Jerusalem/Israel giving birth to the Messiah or an image of the Church giving birth to Christ in the faithful. Scholars who interpret the woman of Revelation 12 as primarily symbolic of a collective entity tend to interpret the BP as the persecutions of the faith community before the

⁸⁷ Matt 2:13, 14, 20, 21; Matt 12:46/ Mark 3:31/ Luke 8:19; Luke 1:43; 2:33, 34; 2:48; 2:51; John 2:1, 3, 5, 12; John 6:42; John 19:26, 27

⁸⁸ For example, Mary, the mother of James and Joseph (Matt 27:56); Mary, the mother of the younger James and Joses (Mark 15:40); the mother of the sons of Zebedee (Matt 20:20, 27:56); and Mary, the mother of John called Mark (Acts 12:12). Also, mentioned in John 19:25 is Mary, wife of Clopas; in Luke 8:3, Joanna, wife of Chuza (later simply named in 24:10); and in Acts 18:2, Priscilla, wife of Aquila.

Of the seven women in the Gospels and Acts, who are simply identified by their name, three are known to have no husband or children: Mary Magdalene (mentioned twelve times in all four Gospels), and the sisters, Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42; John 11-12:2). Nothing is mentioned about the familial situation of Susanna (Luke 8:3), Salome (Mark 15:40, 16:1), Dorcas (Acts 9:36-41); and Lydia (Acts 16:14).

⁸⁹ Although the Gospel writers needed to distinguish between several women named Mary, this was not the case for the Epistles.

coming of the Messiah or the trials of the Church, respectively. Such interpretations are based a certain reading of OT passages from Isaiah (26:17-18; 66:6-9) and the other prophets (Mic 4:9) as well as the pseudepigrapha (4 Ezra 10:12) referring to the resurgence of the remnant after the exile.⁹⁰

The collective interpretation, however, does not take into account the development of mother-child imagery in the NT, which almost always includes the prominence of an individual mother who has either physical children or children through faith in Jesus. For example: Mary, is given to John as mother by Jesus on the cross (John 19:37); Rachel weeps for her children, the slaughtered innocents (Matt 2:18);⁹¹ Sarah is the mother of Christians when they “do what is good and fear no intimidation” (1 Pet 3:6). In the two examples from Galatians 4, cities are presented as mothers—but they are symbolized by individual women: Hagar who is in slavery with her children symbolizes the present Jerusalem (Gal 4:25) and Sarah/ the freeborn woman symbolizes Jerusalem above as mother of Christians (Gal 4:26). The two examples that directly refer to a city as mother are not positive images: Jerusalem is unwilling to allow her children to be comforted by Jesus (Matt 23:37/ Luke 13:34), and Babylon is identified by her name written on her head, “the mother of harlots” (Rev 17:5).⁹²

⁹⁰ See Witherington (*Revelation*, 167) for just such a typical interpretation.

⁹¹ In Jeremiah, from which the quoted text is taken, Rachel’s “children” refer to the Israelites taken into exile.

⁹² See Collins (*Combat Myth*, 132) for a summary of additional difficulties in interpreting the woman as representing a city, whether Jerusalem or even a heavenly Jerusalem.

7. *But her child was caught up to God and to his throne (12:5b)*

This text is the first sign of the dragon's defeat and the second of three descriptions of divine providence unmatched by the dragon. The dragon plans a reprisal to the birth of the child, which is the first divine action. But the dragon's plans to devour the child (v. 4) are foiled without the slightest confrontation when the child is "caught up" to God and his throne. The third description of divine providence follows immediately in the woman's flight described in v. 6. The dragon's response is only described after the fourth description of divine providence, Michael taking up arms against the dragon and his angels (v. 7-9).

The unequal footing of the dragon in Revelation 12 contrasts with the portrayal of the serpent in Genesis 3. In the first verses of Genesis 3, the serpent is on roughly equal footing with the woman and man, if not with even a little advantage. Even though the serpent is lowered in stature and banished to the ground in 3:14, the conflict between the serpent and the woman along with her offspring is described in 3:15 as a back-and-forth conflict: one striking at the head and the other striking at the heel. In Revelation 12, however, the son's entrance onto the stage marks a dramatic shift in the pattern of contrast between the woman and the dragon; at the "birth" of the son, the power of the dragon dissolves and his plan is foiled without the slightest conflict.

The symbolic significance of v. 5b is much discussed by scholars, particularly those who interpret v. 5 as representative of historical events of Jesus's life.⁹³ It is more in line with the

⁹³ For example, Mounce (*Revelation*, 233) sees an allusion to the protection of the infant Jesus from Herod, who was trying to destroy him. Sweet (*Revelation*, 197) interprets this as Jesus's death. Prigent (*Apocalypse*, 385) interprets this as the assumption of Jesus. Prigent, cites Aune's support (*Revelation*, 689-90) since Aune writes that the verb ἀρπάζω was easily linked at that time to the taking up to heaven of human beings or heroes. Prigent is too literal in his interpretation of this text's symbols. He is ready to dismiss the tradition of the forty days between the resurrection and ascension of Jesus described in Acts (which describes itself as an historical account) simply

symbolic interpretation of vv. 2, 5a to interpret v. 5b as symbolically representing Jesus's preservation from the snares of the dragon, that is preservation from all sin. Jesus's preservation from sin culminates in his resurrection from the dead (Acts 2:24) and ascension into heaven (Acts 2:33-36).

8. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she may be nurtured for one thousand, two hundred, and sixty days (12:6)

The flight of the woman away from the dragon contrasts with Gen 3:1-5 in which Eve enters into discussion with the serpent and is tempted. Her flight *towards* and entrance into the place prepared for her by God alludes to the creation imagery of Gen 2:15 in which God plants a garden in Eden for the man (and woman) to “cultivate and care for it.” This text is also evocative of the Exodus imagery of the Israelite people in the wilderness on their way to Canaan, which is portrayed in terms of creation imagery. The transitional state of the wilderness itself could also be an allusion to the Exodus. In Rev 12:6 the woman enters into a provisional refuge where she is safe from the dragon's onslaught.⁹⁴ Isaiah brings together Exodus and creation imagery in 51:3, “Yes, the LORD shall comfort Zion and have pity on all her ruins; her deserts he shall make like Eden, her wasteland like the garden of the LORD.” The woman is protected and nurtured by divine providence in a way that the first man and woman of Genesis were created to enjoy. She portrays a renewed intimacy of divine providence in humankind. She is in this way portrayed as

because Revelation 12 does not mention any time between the birth and taking up into heaven of a child, all of which is presented as symbolic.

⁹⁴ Massyngberde-Ford (*Revelation*, 192) hypothesizes that the reign of the beast is one and the same as the period of the woman's refuge in the wilderness.

a new Eve, and she foreshadows the experience of divine nurture and care that the faithful will experience in the New Jerusalem as described in Revelation 20–21.⁹⁵

This text introduces the flight and protection of the woman from the heavenly perspective, that is, from the perspective of the dragon’s fundamental powerlessness against the Great Sign. She has a place *prepared by God*. The flight is elaborated upon in vv. 13-16 from the perspective of the aggressive attempts of the dragon against the woman. She is protected by creation, which is represented by the eagle’s wings and the very ground itself.

The wilderness (τό ἔρημος) is an ambivalent image in the OT.⁹⁶ This ambivalence is possibly due to the transitional aspect of the wilderness.⁹⁷ Consider, for example, the positive use in the prophecy of Hos 3:14, 18, “I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. . . and I will make you lie down in safety,” or the negative image of the destruction of Edom in Isa 34:11, “But the desert owl and hoot owl shall possess her, the screech owl and raven shall dwell in her. The LORD will measure her with line and plummet to be an empty waste for satyrs to dwell in.” In the NT Jesus goes into the desert to be tempted by the devil (Matt 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1). Jesus also frequently goes to a “deserted place” (ἔρημον

⁹⁵ Beale (*Revelation*, 649) notes that John 14:2-3 also describes a place prepared for the faithful in heaven when Jesus says, “. . . And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be.”

⁹⁶ Caird, *Revelation*, 151.

⁹⁷ Shemaryahu Talmon (“The ‘Desert Motif,’” in *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations* [ed. Alexander Altmann; Philip W. Lown Institute of Advanced Judaic Studies’ Studies and Texts 3; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966] 31-63, here 37) writes, “The ‘desert motif’ that occurs in the OT expresses the idea of an unavoidable transition period in which Israel recurrently is prepared for the ultimate transfer from social and spiritual chaos to an integrated social and spiritual order. The ‘trek in the desert’ motif represents on the historical and eschatological level what ‘creatio ex nihilo,’ the transfer from chaos to cosmos, signifies on the cosmic level.”

τόπον) to pray (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). In Revelation 17, the seer is taken to the wilderness to see the woman who “lives near the many waters,” who represents Babylon.

In this text the wilderness is the location of the place “prepared by God” for the woman. No luxuries are mentioned, but the woman is the center of concern in the place that God has prepared for her; the woman is not in exile. The woman is given a “place” in the renewal of creation that begins in chap. 12, whereas other things are described as losing their “place” (Rev 2:5, 6:14, 12:7, 20:11). The woman not only has a place prepared for her; she is nurtured as well.

Τρεφω can mean “to rear” a child, “to nurse” an infant, or simply “to feed” or “to care for” someone. While the exact word τρεφω is not used in Genesis to describe the garden of Eden—the emphasis in Genesis 2 is that the man is *to tend* (ἐργάζεσθαι αὐτὸν καὶ φυλάσσειν) the garden—the garden is nevertheless described as the place where the first man and woman were cared for with an abundance of fruit trees and enjoyed friendship with the LORD God. The word is used elsewhere in Genesis to describe the animals cared for or nourished in the ark during the flood (6:19, 20), and in 48:15 and Deut 32:18 to describe the LORD God caring for his people.

The length of time that the woman is protected is mentioned five times in the Book of Revelation (11:2, 3, 12:6, 14, 13:5) and described in different ways: in this text as “one thousand, two hundred and sixty days” and in 12:14, as “a time, two times, and half a time.” Verses 6, 14 describe the same period of time, which also refers to the “short time” the dragon has left on the earth to persecute the faithful (v. 13). An OT instance of the same period of time of God’s

providence is found in I Kgs 17:2-4, where God provides for Elijah during the three and a half year drought.⁹⁸

9. *When the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child (12:13)*

The dragon's response to the woman's flight in v. 6 comes in v. 13 when the dragon realizes he has been banished to earth. Here, the enmity of Gen 3:15 is resumed and elaborated upon within the constraints of the dragon's banishment from heaven. This text marks a return to the symmetry of vv. 1-6 in which the dragon's response is described after each action of divine initiative. It is easy to misread vv. 13-17 as the dragon taking the initiative in his aggression rather than responding in aggression to divine providence. Recognizing the proper structural relationship between v. 6 and vv. 13-17 helps avoid such a misreading. The dragon's antagonism toward the woman is a response to his defeat/confinement to earth.

The woman is identified by her motherhood of the male child yet again: she is "the woman who had given birth to the male," as described earlier in v. 5. Although many scholars tend to assign one significance to the woman in one portion of the chapter and another significance in a second portion of the chapter, the identification of the woman by means of reference to v. 5 leaves no doubt as to the continuity of her identity and symbolism throughout the shifts of the vision in Revelation 12.⁹⁹ The identity of the woman seems to remain constant

⁹⁸ Sweet (*Revelation*, 185, 198) makes a connection between Elijah and the two witnesses, regarding their power to "close up the sky" (11:6).

⁹⁹ For example, Aune (*Revelation 6-16*, 712) follows Collins (*Combat Myth*, 105) when he writes that "In a Christian context, it has seemed most natural to construe the woman of vv. 1-6 as Mary and her child as Jesus. Yet in vv. 13-17, where 'the rest of her offspring' (v. 17) are mentioned, it seems more appropriate to understand the

throughout the vision, although various allusions and symbolic aspects may be emphasized at one point or another. Tavo writes, “The woman is one throughout the entire narrative of Revelation 12 . . . The heavenly and travailing woman of vv. 1-2 is the same woman being pursued by the dragon into the desert (vv. 6, 13-18).”¹⁰⁰ The woman is the object of the dragon’s enmity in a particular way by reason of her motherhood of the son, much as her “other offspring” are the object of the dragon’s enmity by virtue of their relation with the son.

The seamless continuity of action from v. 6 to v. 13 emphasizes the close relationship with the events in vv. 5, 7-12, at least from the heavenly perspective of the battle won. The visions of the heavenly battle and the BP and birth are closely related and interpreted in v. 11 as a victory for the martyrs.

10. But two great eagle’s wings were given to the woman, so that she might fly to the wilderness, to her place where she is nurtured for a time and times and a half-time—far from the serpent (12:14)

This text elaborates on v. 6 in which the new Eve enters her prepared place, the desert that shall be made like Eden (Isa 51:3). This text is an example of poetic repetition (or matching) to develop a theme. Enough of the same details are repeated so as to identify the texts as

woman as the Church and her persecuted offspring as Christians.” Brown (*Introduction*, 791) interprets the woman as Zion, and then the Church. He is also open to interpreting her as the bride of the Lamb or the New Jerusalem.

¹⁰⁰ Tavo, *Woman*, 150. This is in response to the many scholars who split the symbolism of the woman in two, for vv. 1-5 and vv. 13-17. See, for example, Blount (*Revelation*, 232), who writes, “Notice how the symbols are allowed to shift in reference and in the slippery, dreamlike world of myth. The woman who has up to this point represented the genesis of the people now takes on the identity of the people.” Le Frois, as discussed above (*Clothed with the Sun*, 32-35), tried to reconcile the different emphases of the symbolic significance of the woman with his application of the “totality principle.” Le Frois nevertheless maintains one identity of the woman through the whole chapter. Others try to reconcile this perceived difficulty by assigning two meanings to the woman, for example, Tavo interprets her as the church of the Old and New Testaments.

matching, such as the woman's flight to the wilderness, her place, her nourishment, and the length of time of her refuge. Earlier in v. 6 the description from the heavenly perspective includes the detail of God's preparation of the place for the woman. Here, in v. 14 the description from the earthly perspective omits that detail but includes two others: the image of eagle's wings and the note that the woman's place in the desert is "far" from the serpent.

The image of the woman flying on eagle's wings could allude to several OT passages, including Exod 19:4 and Deut 32:11, both of which describe the LORD as carrying his people on eagle's wings. William D. Mounce writes that Exodus typology is woven throughout this episode (vv. 13-16) and lists possible allusions in this text: Pharaoh's attempt to drown the male Israelite children (Exod 1:22), the flight of the children of Israel from Pharaoh (Exod 14:8), God's assistance to the Israelites in the form of eagles' wings (19:4), the destruction of the men of Korah in the wilderness (Num 16:31-33).¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the dragon is an image in the OT used to represent Egypt (Ps 74:14; Ez 29:3).

It seems, however, that the image in this verse might most directly allude to Isa 40:31: "They that hope in the LORD will renew (ἀλλάξουσιν) their strength, they will soar as with eagle's wings. They will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint." The NAB's translation reflects the Hebrew but ἀλλάσσω of the LXX text usually means alter or change. The message of Isa 40:31 in the LXX is striking: that the LORD will alter the strength of the faithful so that their endurance will exceed their natural capacity. The woman's strength in fleeing the dragon far outstrips that of Eve's resistance to the ancient serpent. This text's allusion

¹⁰¹ Mounce, *Revelation*, 240.

to Isa 40:31 colors John's portrayal of the woman of the Book of Revelation as a new Eve whose motherhood marks the beginning of a new creation and who has been transformed herself in every way by the LORD.

The explanation that the place prepared for the woman in the desert is "far" from the serpent indicates that her place of refuge, although not described in terms of its verdant fruit trees, is superior to the Eden of Genesis 2–3 wherein the serpent was allowed to enter. By the end of the Book of Revelation, the whole Earth will also be safe from the dragon who will be tortured in the pool of fire. In addition, the New Jerusalem will not have anything harmful within its walls. The woman of Revelation 12 is protected from the persecution of the dragon by who she is, "the woman who had given birth to the male child," and by divine protection.

Even though the dragon has been loosed upon the earth in great anger, the divine providence continues to have the initiative, never the dragon.¹⁰² The woman, the new Eve, enjoys a special protection from the advances of the dragon, a special protection that is not described of her other offspring in v. 17. She is not removed or snatched up to heaven, as is her son, but rather has a special place prepared for her.

11. *The serpent spewed a river of water from his mouth after the woman so that she be swept away with the current (12:15)*

This text describes the dragon's response to the woman's successful flight to refuge. Unable to touch her himself, the dragon turns to the use of natural forces that extend his power.

¹⁰² Tavo (*Woman*, 282) writes: "In getting her into the desert, the initiative was God's, not Satan's. Her 'special place' in the desert spells the failure of all that the dragon has in store against her, as will be seen in vv. 15-16."

That is, he can propel the water so “far” that it reaches the woman in her place in the dessert. The dragon’s grotesque “river” of water is the destructive opposite of the river of Eden (2:10) which appears in renewed form as the river of living water that flows from the throne in the New Jerusalem (22:1) and waters the tree of life (22:2).¹⁰³

Flooding is a common OT metaphor for overwhelming evil and danger (Ps 18:5; Isa 43:2; 2 Sam 22:5, 17) from which the LORD provides deliverance to the faithful. In the case of the flood in Genesis 7–8, God causes the great flood because the wickedness of man was so great and “no desire that his heart conceived was ever anything but evil” so that the LORD “*regretted that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was grieved*” (Gen 6:5-6). The flood was as the “un-doing” of creation.¹⁰⁴ In Revelation 12 the dragon’s attempt to sweep the woman away shows that his ultimate goal is her destruction and the destruction of all creation. As v. 10 explains, the power of the dragon lies in his accusations of sin against humankind. The dragon’s flood could be interpreted as his accusing the woman of sin.¹⁰⁵ That she is protected from his “accusatory” flood is a symbolic statement that the serpent’s accusations have no power over the woman. The limitation of his power against her makes a statement about her nature. The woman, like Noah, is good and blameless in her age. The dragon is powerless to harm the one whom God protects.

¹⁰³ Boxall, *Revelation*, 185.

¹⁰⁴ Barry Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004) 61.

¹⁰⁵ This interpretation follows Minear’s interpretation of the river as the Devil’s deceit (“Curse,” 75). Minear suggests that John is alluding to the serpent’s temptation of Eve in Gen 3:1-5 in the image of a river.

12. But the earth came to the aid the woman. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon spewed from his mouth. (12:16)

This text marks a provisional end to the curse in Gen 3:17b and 4:1-16—in regards to the woman only. Part of the woman’s portrayal as the new Eve seems to include the eradication of the alienation of humankind from the soil. The woman does not experience the alienation from the soil that results from the transgression of Genesis 3 and intensified in Gen 4:11 when God tells Cain, “Therefore you shall be banned from the soil that opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.” Minear’s interpretation of Rev 12:16 in light of Gen 4:12 leads him to conclude that this text is the celebration of “the end of the curse on the earth, and with it the end of the curse on the woman and on the woman’s seed.”¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately for the woman’s other offspring, the battle is not over, as v. 17 indicates. Hence, in Revelation 12 the curse on the earth is ended only with regards to the woman. The curse on the earth is ended definitively only in the last chapters of Revelation. In regard to the woman, the earth itself exhibits characteristics of a new Eden or even of a new earth in which the dragon has no power. By protecting the woman, the earth itself has the opportunity to participate, however indirect and limited the fashion, in the victory of the Lamb over the dragon. This provisional end to the curse in Gen 3:17b foreshadows the definitive end of the curse in Revelation 21–22 with the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven.

¹⁰⁶ Minear’s conclusion (“Curse,” 77) that the curse on the earth has ended does not seem to bear out in the rest of the Book of Revelation, which describes a variety of plagues in the form of natural disasters. The text suggests, however, that in relation to the woman alone, the earth “returns” to its original state of harmony with humankind experienced in Eden.

4.3. The Other Sign

1. *And another sign was revealed in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and upon his heads, seven diadems (12:3)*

Rev 12:3-4 is the first of several allusions in chap. 12 to Gen 3:15. But Rev 12:3 also could allude to the description of the serpent in Gen 3:1 as “the most cunning of all the animals that the LORD God had made.” The dragon is the fiercest and most magnificent of creatures and seems capable of dominating the woman. As we have seen, however, the Great Sign is protected from the dragon. The limited power of the dragon in regard to the woman makes it difficult to interpret the Other Sign as a figure of “cosmic dualism.”¹⁰⁷

The “back-and-forth” dynamic between vv. 1-2 and 3-4 sets the stage for the entire chapter. The Great Sign is in the painful process of giving birth; the Other Sign destroys a third of the stars in the sky and waits to consume the newborn. The woman personifies life-giving sacrifice as mother. The dragon personifies death and destruction as adversary.

In the LXX Leviathan, serpent, and snake (of the MT) are all translated as δράκων on a regular basis.¹⁰⁸ The dragon is an adversarial figure throughout the OT, often representing the enemies of Israel, such as the Pharaoh of Egypt (Ps 74:14; Ez 29:3) and Babylon (Jer 51:34).¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Collins, *Combat Myth*, 158.

¹⁰⁸ In the LXX “dragon” translates “Leviathan” (לִיָּוִיָּתָן): Job 40:25; Ps 73:14 (MT 74:14); 103:26 (MT 104:26); and “serpent/ sea monster” (יָרֵבֶּת): Ex 7:9, 10, 12; Deut 32:33; Ps 73:13, 91:13, 148:7; Job 7:12; Jer 51:34 (LXX 27:8); Lam 4:3; Ez 29:3, 32:2; and snake (אֲרִיָּבָה): Amos 9:3; Job 26:13.

¹⁰⁹ The dragon in particular represents the nation through the individual at the head of the nation, that is, the Pharaoh of Egypt or King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Pharaoh is compared to a dragon because of his foolish pride in thinking that he is responsible for the Nile, a great work of creation.

The adversarial stance of the dragon against the woman is a clear allusion to Gen 3:15.¹¹⁰ Prigent points out the allusion to Isa 27:1, in which the dragon is a figure for the devil.¹¹¹ In this text from Isaiah, the images of the serpent, dragon, and Leviathan are combined: “On that day, the LORD will punish with his sword that is cruel, great, and strong, Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the coiled serpent; and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.” The dragon is the ultimate adversary of the male child born of the woman and therefore of the woman herself. But he, through the ages, has been the ultimate adversary of Israel, and of all peoples.¹¹²

Contemporary scholars suggest the seven heads of the dragon are inspired by the seven heads of the Leviathan in Ugaritic texts since there is no OT reference to a beast with exactly seven heads.¹¹³ However, an argument can be made that the dragon is portrayed in biblical terms. Psalm 74 refers to the (multiple) heads of the Leviathan (vv. 13-14). And seven is a significant number throughout the Bible, particularly in the Book of Revelation.¹¹⁴ The dragon’s seven

¹¹⁰ Cf. Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 373. Prigent considers an allusion to Genesis 3 doubtful because the adversarial figure is first introduced as a dragon rather than a serpent. In vv. 13-14, however, the terms dragon and serpent are used interchangeably.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 381.

¹¹² Even his color is associated with anarchy in the Book of Revelation. The dragon’s unusual color appears only one other time in the Book of Revelation with the description of the second rider’s horse (6:4): “Another horse came out, a red one. Its rider was given power to take peace away from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another . . .”

¹¹³ John Day, “Leviathan,” *ABD* 4:296.

¹¹⁴ The number seven represents a complete whole in the Bible. The entire structure of the Book of Revelation is based on cycles of seven, beginning with the author’s description of the vision’s occurrence on the Lord’s Day (1:10), the first of seven days of creation. This pattern of seven continues with the letters to the angels of the seven churches, and extends through the several cycles of seven plagues. For a thorough analysis of the structure of Revelation, particularly the various theories of the use of seven, see Tavo, *Woman*, 25-45. Cf. Duane F. Watson (“Seven Churches,” *ABD* 5:1143-44) who addresses the various answers to the question of why other churches in Asia Minor were not included as recipients of letters, including seven being a number of completeness. He discusses William M. Ramsey’s conclusions (*Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia and Their Place in the Plan of the*

heads could be a mockery of the number seven's symbolism of completeness, or it may be related to the seven-fold plagues that result from the work of the dragon on earth among humankind.¹¹⁵ The dragon's ten horns and seven diadems upon his seven heads contrasts with the Great Sign's single crown of twelve stars.¹¹⁶ The dragon's multiple diadems (on multiple heads) is a mimicry of the Word of God's many diadems (19:12) which represent the consolidation of all true power and authority in his person.

2. His tail drags a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to earth (12:4a)

The dragon's rebellion against the heavenly order and his banishment from heaven is an essential part of his identity. It is described even before his antagonistic stance toward the child to be born. Verse 4a refers to the angelic battle portrayed in the next scene, the result of which is the expulsion of the dragon and his angels from heaven to earth. The imagery of striking a third of the stars from the sky matches the description of the fourth plague earlier in the Book of Revelation (8:12).¹¹⁷

Apocalypse [London: Hodder & Stoghton, 1904] that the seven churches were the most conveniently situated for a courier's route..

¹¹⁵ In Revelation 17 this beast ("who was and is not") carries the harlot, and the reader is told that the seven heads of the beast "represent seven hills upon which the woman (Babylon) sits" (v. 9). The beast had been thrown into the Abyss but comes up for its final destruction (v. 8), a reference to 19:20, in which the beast and false prophet are thrown alive into the fiery pool of sulfur. This is the same pool that the dragon is finally thrown into as well (20:10). Cf. Aune (*Revelation 6-16*, 683) does not think the beast of Revelation 17 is the same as the one described in 13.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 682. Aune considers the description of the dragon "with seven heads and ten horns and seven diadems upon his heads" to be so unimportant to the vision in its final form that he concludes it must be a "redactional interpolation" from 17:3, since there is no further reference to this description of the dragon.

¹¹⁷ "The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, *and a third of the stars*, so that a third of their light was darkened; a third of the day was kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night." After this plague the first woe comes upon the inhabitants of the earth (v. 13).

3. *And the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, so that when she gives birth to her child, he might devour it (12:4b-c)*

The woman experiences the vestiges of the ancient enmity, that is, BP, in her own person. The dragon does not need to do anything but stand and wait as she is tortured; he is a spectator of sorts. The dragon focuses on the destruction of the child about to be born. The dragon stands before the woman waiting to devour the child, much as Nebuchadnezzar devours the city on Zion in Jer 51:34 (LXX 28:34): “He has consumed me, routed me (that is, Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon). He has left me as an empty vessel; He has swallowed me like a dragon: filled his belly with my delights, and cast me out.”

4. *And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon (12:7)*

Verses 7-9 give the full story behind the dragon’s dragging down a third of the stars in v. 4a. This is the first example of the resumption technique John employs in his attempts to describe his vision.¹¹⁸ The change of scene seems at first so drastic that scholars have puzzled over the connection between the portrayals of the Great Sign and the Other Sign and the heavenly battle. However, the heavenly battle is already contained in the appearance of the Other Sign.

This text describes the second of the four victorious participations in the triumph of the cross and the last of the four events of God’s providence. Michael and his angels participate in

¹¹⁸ Scholars debate whether the angelic battle scene happens simultaneously to the woman’s torturous BP of the cross, or whether the battle scene commences simultaneously with the son’s removal to heaven and the woman’s flight to her refuge. Caird (*Revelation*, 154) hypothesizes that the tortures of the cross are simultaneous to the angelic battle. Tavo (*Woman*, 274-75) theorizes that the removal of the child to his rightful throne is the necessary condition for Michael to have authority to fight the dragon and expel him.

the Lamb's triumph of the cross in their victory over the dragon and his banishment from heaven.¹¹⁹ Christ's victory is one that may be shared by all the faithful, a fact which does not diminish the quality of the fight or the victory over the Devil.¹²⁰ It is significant, however, that the dragon is portrayed as an angelic rather than a divine being. Once again, it is clear that the dragon's position vis-à-vis God is not that of an equal. While this is clear from the perspective of those who dwell in heaven, it is not always so clear from the perspective of those on earth since the faithful experience the adversarial opposition of the dragon, at times, to an overpowering degree (12:12).

5. The dragon fought back, along with his angels, but he did not prevail and no longer was their place found in heaven (12:8)

This text is the first mention of the dragon's actions since he lay in wait to devour the child in v. 4. As such it marks a resumption of the "back-and-forth" pattern from the beginning of the chapter (vv. 1-4). Despite his attempts, the dragon is defeated. And just as the woman gains a place prepared for her by God, so the dragon loses his own place in heaven.

This scene is the second of four defeats suffered by the dragon: 1) the removal of the child whom the dragon intended to devour, 2) the banishment of the dragon from heaven, 3) the

¹¹⁹ Michael, traditionally the protector of Israel, is mentioned in the War Scroll (1QM 9:15-16; 17:6-8). Aune hypothesizes that the title "Prince of Light" (1QM 13:10) also refers to Michael. In the OT, it is not uncommon for angelic hosts to battle on behalf of Israel. In Joshua 5-6, the "captain of the host of the Lord" comes to Joshua to aid Joshua in the siege at Jericho (5:13-15). He is clearly a messenger/angel of God, since Joshua falls prostrate to the ground in worship and the captain of the host tells Joshua to remove his sandals since the place on which he is standing is holy. Also, in the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:20) she describes Israel's release from twenty years of Canaanite oppression, "From the heavens the stars, too, fought; from their courses they fought against Sisera."

¹²⁰ Cf. Blount (*Revelation*, 226), who writes that "God need not engage the battle directly because God's representatives are sufficient for the task; they handle the eschatological 'light work.'"

defeat of the accuser by the martyrs, 4) the dragon's failure to harm the woman in her place of refuge. The fifth and last defeat, which remains to be seen, is at the hands of the woman's other offspring whom the dragon pursues in v. 17. The conflict in the first defeat of the dragon is represented in the BP of the woman. In this text, it is represented by a heavenly battle. The victory of Michael and his hosts over the dragon, however, is not their own; it is attributed to the martyrs in v. 11.

6. And cast out was the great dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world. He was cast to earth, and his angels were cast with him (12:9a-b)

Verses 9-12a are characterized by a modified "back-and-forth" pattern in which the three descriptions of the dragon's banishment (v. 9, 10e-f, 12b-c) are alternated with two descriptions of the victory of God (v. 10a-d, 11a-12a). These texts could well allude to the theme of Gen 3:14 in which the LORD God banishes the Serpent to the dust away from other animals.

Verse 9 elaborates on the statement in Rev 12:8 that the dragon's place was no longer "found" in heaven. The perspective of this description is that of the heavenly victory already enjoyed over the dragon. This victory is first described in v. 9a in terms of the dragon being "cast out" (ἐβλήθη) of heaven. After the list of the dragon's various names, however, he is described in v. 9b as "cast to earth" (ἐβλήθη εἰς τὴν γῆν). The movement of the dragon to earth contrasts with the movement of the son to the heavenly throne. The dragon losing his place in heaven contrasts with the woman receiving her place in the wilderness. Ultimately, the dragon loses his place on earth as well when he is banished to the Abyss/ bottomless pit (20:2) and then permanently thrown into the pool of fire (20:10).

The dragon is identified by various names in the context of his expulsion from heaven. Here, different traditions from the OT and NT are brought together under the one figure of the dragon in summary fashion. The name, ὁ δράκων, the LXX translation of Leviathan (לִיָּאֲתָן) or serpent (שֶׁפֶן), is discussed above under v. 3. The designation, ὁ μέγας, specifies the particular importance of this dragon among others, such as the king of Egypt. The name, ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἄρχαῖος, is a clear reference to the figure of the snake in Genesis 3, also mentioned in Isa 27:1.¹²¹ All the other LXX references to snakes are simple references to the animal as such. Bauckham notes that the serpent was a symbol of pagan divinities in Asia Minor.¹²²

יָצֵן is used over thirty times in the OT, usually to refer to a human enemy or adversary. Διάβολος translates יָצֵן in the LXX about half of the time to indicate an adversary of particular status. In some instances, διαβόλος translates יָצֵן as a proper name.¹²³ In other instances, διαβόλος translates יָצֵן, with the meaning of “adversary.”¹²⁴ In the LXX, σατανᾶς is used once (Sir 21:27) and has the meaning of “adversary.” Mounce translates Satan as “slanderer,” noting, “there is a thin line that divides accusation and slander.”¹²⁵

¹²¹ Blount, *Revelation*, 234-35.

¹²² Bauckham, *Climax*, 196. In Pergamon, the serpent was associated with the cults of Asklepios, Dionysos, and Zeus.

¹²³ Job 1:6-7, 12, 2:1-4, 7; Zech 3:1-2; Wis 2:24

¹²⁴ 1 Chr 21:1; Num 22:22, 32; 1 Mac 1:36; Ps 109:6 (LXX 108:6)

¹²⁵ Mounce, *Revelation*, 237.

In the NT, Διάβολος (used 37 times) and Σατανᾶς (used 33 times) are used as proper names for the same entity, even interchangeably. For example, in Matthew's story of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness the devil is described as Διάβολος in the third person (4:1, 5, 8, 11), as well as "the tempter" (ὁ πειράζων) in 4:3. But when Jesus speaks to him, he calls him, Σατανᾶς (4:10).

The dragon is also described as the one who deceives (ὁ πλανῶν) the whole world. This term is also used in Rev 20:10, "the Devil who had led them astray. . ." and elsewhere in the NT in the parable of the lost sheep, ". . . will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the one led astray (τὸ πλανώμενον)?" (Matt 18:12).

4.4. From Victory in Heaven to Battle on Earth

1. *Then I heard a great voice in heaven, saying: Now have come the salvation and power, and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ (12:10a-d)*

Verses 10-12 are the key to interpreting the significance of Revelation 12 and its relation to Genesis 3.¹²⁶ They proclaim the victory that has been symbolically represented in the fecundity of the BP of the woman (vv. 2, 5) and the victory of the angelic battle (vv. 7-9). They describe the defeat of the dragon by the faithful and their witness unto death. The perspective of vv. 10-12a is that of the heavenly host, regardless of where the events described take place.

The beginning of this proclamation in v. 10b is the second of three climaxing repetitions of divine attributes in the Book of Revelation. The climaxing intensity of these proclamations

¹²⁶ Scholars who use source-theory differ on whether they consider vv. 10-12 original to the author or taken from a liturgical source. For example, Collins (*Combat Myth*, 112) notes that these texts are a hymnic composition and auditory whereas the rest of the chapter is vision. Based on this difference, she concludes that vv. 10-12, along with all the other hymnic passages in the Book of Revelation, are original to the author.

represents the progressive fulfillment of God’s plan regarding the renewal of creation. In 7:10 the multitude before the throne cries out, “Salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne, and from the Lamb.” The great voice of 12:10 adds the divine attribute of “power” (δύναμις) to the acclamation. In 19:1 the loud voice of a great multitude adds the divine attribute of “glory.” The voice cries, “Alleluia! Salvation, glory, and might (δύναμις) belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments.” Each repetition of the theme adds a divine attribute and the heavenly proclamation gets louder: “cry of the multitude” (7:10) to “great voice” (12:10) to “loud voice of a great multitude” (19:1).

A similar climax can be observed in the theme of v. 10c-d, “the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ (Χριστοῦ). . . .” In 11:15 loud voices proclaim, “The kingdom of the world *now* belongs to our LORD and to his anointed (Χριστου), and he *will reign* forever and ever.” In 12:10 the kingdom has *come*. In 19:6 is proclaimed “Alleluia! The LORD has *established* his reign, God, the almighty.” The voices also become louder: “loud voices” (11:15) to “a great voice” (12:10) to “a great multitude or rushing water or mighty peals of thunder” (19:6).

2. Because the accuser of our brothers is cast out, the one who accuses them before our God day and night (12:10e-f)

This portion of the proclamation connects the banishment of the dragon from heaven and the coming of God’s kingdom. The former allows for the latter. Here, the dragon is identified by yet another name, “the accuser of our brothers” (ὁ κατήγορ), and by a new activity, that of

accusing humankind before God in what appears to be a courtroom setting.¹²⁷ He no longer has any accusations to make and no longer any platform on which to make them. A similar sentiment is expressed in John 12:31 and Rom 8:1.

3. They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; for they did not love their lives even at the point of death (12:11a-c)

The blood of the Lamb is the only explicit mention of the death of Christ in Revelation 12. The blood of the Lamb is the key to the whole chapter's interpretation as a symbol of the victory of Christ's death over the serpent, over sin, and even over death. And yet, this victory is symbolized over and over through the participation of *others* in Christ's death: the mother, Michael and his angels, the martyrs, and the faithful on earth.¹²⁸

Interestingly, here, the victory over the dragon is not ascribed to Michael, whose victory has been described in the immediately preceding verses, but to the faithful, who have witnessed to Christ to the point of death and who are victorious by the "blood of the Lamb." They are the perished ones of the "other offspring" mentioned in v. 17. Harrington notes, "John has reversed the standard heaven-earth relationship. Normally, heaven is the 'real' world with earth a reflection of it. In our case, the victory is won, by Jesus in this world, a victory that brings about the defeat of evil forces in the heavenly world."¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 700.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 702. Aune points out that in the Book of Revelation, *νικῶν* is used in conjunction with the victory of the Cross, both when Christ is the subject and when the faithful are the subject. He sees this entire section as a later addition since it represents the only mention of Christian martyrdom. But I have argued that the victory of the Christian martyrs is part and parcel of the indirect way in which the victory of Christ is portrayed.

¹²⁹ Harrington, *Revelation*, 133.

This text resumes the theme of Gen 3:15, particularly the enmity between the offspring of the woman and the serpent, and proclaims the third participation in the victory of Christ's cross in this chapter, that of the martyred faithful. Sweet writes, "How can sinners be rendered innocent by another's death? Only if it is also somehow theirs . . ." ¹³⁰ The faithful's sharing in Christ's victory is a theme of the Book of Revelation as a whole. The description of victor (νικῶν) is used most often of the faithful one, not of Christ. ¹³¹ The victory of Christ and the victory of the faithful are interconnected as Christ explains in 3:21, "I will give the victor the right to sit with me on my throne, as I myself first won the victory and sit with my Father on his throne."

4. Therefore, rejoice, O Heavens, and you who dwell within them! But woe to you, earth and sea, for the Devil has descended upon you in great anger, for he sees he has but a short time! (12:12a-c)

This text alludes to the beginning of the creation story in Gen 2:4b, ". . . when the LORD God made the earth and the heavens." Here, the contrast of rejoicing and woe reflect a split in the original unity of creation. This split is caused by the destructiveness of sin. It is also reflected in the contrast of the Great Sign, who is crowned in glory and yet experiences BP on behalf of humankind alienated from God by sin. ¹³² The Great Sign is adorned with the resplendence of the heavens but cries out with the earth. She rejoices with the heavens because she has participated

¹³⁰ Sweet, *Revelation*, 199.

¹³¹ Νικῶν or νικῶ referring to the faithful: Rev 2:7; 2:11; 2:17; 2:26; 3:5; 3:12; 3:21; 15:2; 21:7. Referring to Christ: Rev 3:21; 5:5; 6:2; 17:14. Referring to the beast: Rev 11:7; 13:7.

¹³² In the OT, the command to the heavens to rejoice is usually followed by a command to the earth to rejoice as well (Ps 96:11; Isa 44:23, 49:13; also 4Q176; 4Q88).

in the victory of her son. She cries out with the earth because the faithful are her children for whom she has shared in the BP of the cross.

This text summarizes the change in focus from the victory over the dragon already enjoyed in heaven (“rejoice” of v. 12a) to the Devil’s descent to earth and anger against the faithful still living (“woe” of v. 12b). The perspective of the faithful on earth continues through the rest of the chapter, and several chapters following, detailing the unfolding of the third woe. The heavenly perspective resumes later in the Book of Revelation when John sees the third sign in heaven, “great and awe-inspiring” (15:1). The command for the heavens to rejoice is repeated in 18:20 at the final judgment and fall of Babylon.

Verse 12b announces the third woe. Announcements that the first two woes have passed are made in 9:12 and 11:14. No such announcement is made after the third woe is completed, most likely because it is not finally completed until chapter 20, when the dragon is imprisoned and cast (down) into the pool of fire. This is described as happening in the future. So, from the perspective of John, the third woe is currently under way. The events narrated from this text through the beginning of chapter 20 are characterized as happening in a length of time the dragon knows to be “but a short time.”

5. The dragon was enraged with the woman and went off to make war with the rest of her offspring (μετὰ τῶν λοιπῶν τοῦ σπέρματος αὐτῆς), those who keep God’s commandments and bear witness to Jesus (12:17)

In this text, which clearly alludes to Gen 3:15, the dragon, twice-foiled, vents his anger on the woman's "other offspring."¹³³ Tavo writes, "But having found that even the woman could not be harmed, the dragon then came up with a more vicious ploy: both the male-son and his mother could still be harmed by harming 'the rest of her seed,' who are obviously 'brethren' of the male-son."¹³⁴

Here, the description of the faithful as the woman's σπέρμα is a unique reference to Eve's σπέρμα of Gen 3:15.¹³⁵ Those "who keep God's commandments and their faith in Jesus" are mentioned again in Rev 14:12 at the end of the description of the persecution of the human race by the beasts. In 14:12 they are described as the "the holy ones" who endure (Ὡδε ἡ ὑπομονὴ τῶν ἁγίων ἐστίν).

The dragon goes off "to make war" against the faithful, much as Michael and his angels made war against him in heaven. Just as v. 11 proclaims the martyrs to be the true victors in the heavenly battle, v. 17 resumes the battle imagery of bearing witness to Jesus and following the commandments. *Targum Neofiti* also connects Gen 3:15 with being faithful to the commandments.

And it will come about that when her sons observe the law and do the commandments they will aim at you and smite you on your head and kill you. But when they forsake the commandments of the Law you will aim and bite him on his heel and make him ill. For her sons, however, there will be a remedy, but for you, O serpent, there will not be a

¹³³ See Paul S. Minear, "Ontology and Ecclesiology in the Apocalypse," *NTS* 12 [1966] 101-102, for his comments on the relation between the historical Church and the faithful who activate "the Devil's most deceptive wiles."

¹³⁴ Tavo, *Woman*, 284.

¹³⁵ Caird, *Revelation*, 160; Blount, *Revelation*, 235. In LXX, σπέρμα is used of women only 3x: of Eve in Gen 4:25; Rebekah in 24:60; and Hannah in 1 Sam 1:11.

remedy, since they are to make appeasement in the end in the day of King Messiah. (*Tg. Neof. Gen 3:15*).¹³⁶

The woman is once again implicitly identified as a mother, this time of “other offspring,” in addition to the son she bears in v. 5. Her “other offspring” are those who believe in Christ and witness to him. Mention of other children is a difficulty scholars cite when disputing a Marian interpretation of the woman of Revelation 12.¹³⁷ However, as discussed above, the entire chapter is full of symbolic imagery, so it hardly seems appropriate to suddenly interpret v. 17 as referring to only physical children. The kinship language of “offspring” in this text needs to be interpreted in the context of the development of NT mother-child imagery in reference to fellow members of the faith. In the NT, “motherhood” and “fatherhood” are usually ascribed to individual people in relation to groups of the faithful.

In the NT when the faithful are named “children of . . .” this phrase does not refer to blood relation. It refers to a relation through baptism in Jesus.¹³⁸ This relation is the case when the faithful are called “children of God,” but it is also the case when they are described as children of Sarah (1 Pet 3:16) and children of the “freeborn woman”/“Jerusalem above,” represented by the person of Sarah (Gal 4:31). When Paul represents the faithful as children of

¹³⁶ *Targum Neofiti I: Genesis* (trans., Martin McNamara; The Aramaic Bible 1A; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992) 61. Based on a preliminary study of use of Latin and Greek loan words, McNamara (45) allows the likelihood that the Neofiti type of the Palestinian Targum dates to the fourth century, if not much earlier.

¹³⁷ The basic argument is Mary did not have other children. This woman has other children. Therefore this woman cannot be Mary. Fuller et al., “Woman,” 238. Taking a slightly different tact, Blount (*Revelation*, 225) writes, “Mary, the mother of Jesus, did not give birth to the entire people of God as this woman will (Rev 12:17). Eve gives birth to all humans, not specifically the believing community.”

¹³⁸ The two poignant examples of this language in the NT referring to particular individuals include John 19:26—when Jesus describes the beloved disciple as Mary’s son and Mary as his mother—and Philemon—where Paul explains that he has become Onesimus’s father during their imprisonment (10), most probably meaning that he brought Onesimus to the faith through baptism.

the freeborn woman, he is once again qualifying what it means to be a child of Abraham. Not all the physical descendents of Abraham are heirs, only those who belong to the line of faith.

Furthermore, in Rom 8:29 the kinship language of “brothers” is used to refer to the faithful: “For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn *among many brothers*.”

This text conflates the kinship of faith with an allusion to Genesis to present the Great Sign as the mother of the new creation, the faithful, through her son.¹³⁹

6. *And he stood upon the sand of the seashore* (12:18)

This text marks the beginning of the dragon’s war on the woman’s “other offspring.” In 12:1 the dragon stood before the woman waiting to devour her child. In this text the dragon stands before the sea waiting for the beast to rise from the sea in 13:1. A second beast rises from the earth (13:11) completing the two-fold woe in v.12b, “Woe to you, earth and sea!” Whereas the woman does not appear in the rest of the Book of Revelation, the dragon continues his assault on the human race until his demise in chap. 20.¹⁴⁰ There is a possible allusion to Isa 10:22, “Though the number of the Israelites were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant will be saved,” since the Book of Revelation, particularly the latter half, emphasizes that only a portion of the faithful will be victorious and prevail.

¹³⁹ Sweet (*Revelation*, 199) observes, “In other words, John is evoking the idea of Zion as mother of many sons, like Eve, in the new age, but this by virtue of bearing the Son.”

¹⁴⁰ See Corsini for an alternate view. He interprets all three women in Revelation (the woman of chap. 12, the harlot of Babylon in chap. 17, and the New Jerusalem in chap. 21) as different aspects of the same entity.

5. Conclusion

The BPI of the Great Sign in Revelation 12 brings together nuances of the OT BPI in light of the NT message. Elsewhere in the NT, BPI has been similarly transformed and it is important to take into account other NT uses of BPI in order to properly interpret the BPI of Revelation 12. The BP of 12:2 portray the victory of the cross, its transformation of the meaning of suffering, and the participation of the faithful in its victory. In 12:2 the allusion to Gen 3:15 is most evident, but allusions to almost all BPI in the OT and pseudepigrapha are present: the blessing of birth, particularly as an image of creation; the alienation of human persons from God due to sin, experienced even in the midst of the blessing of birth; the agony of military defeat associated with negative divine judgment; the pangs of personal distress and death; the agony of divine judgment with the promise of redemption in a birth (Mic 4:9-10; 5:3). The only allusions that seem to be missing are to BP that do not result in birth, representing futility and weakness of humankind without God, and to the eschatological image of Zion giving birth to her children without BP.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, in the OT pseudepigrapha, uses of BPI other than those of the OT appear that are alluded to in Rev 12:2: the cosmic BP accompanying the end times (4 Ezra 16:38-39); the BP of negative divine judgment at the end of time with the coming of the Son of Man (*1 Enoch* 62:4-6); Eve crying out to the LORD for mercy at the birth of her first child (Adam and Eve 19:1-3).

¹⁴¹ This last image of lack of BP is taken up in the New Jerusalem in Rev 21:4, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain (οὔτε κραυγή οὔτε πόνοϛ), [for] the old order has passed away.”

NT BPI interprets and transforms the imagery of the OT and related literature in light of the sacrifice of the cross. Rev 12:2 is a NT text; as such, it interprets and transforms the OT BPI in light of the sacrifice of the cross, the “blood of the Lamb,” by which the martyrs triumph. Rev 12:2 holds much in common with other NT uses of BPI: the vicarious suffering for another in expiation for their alienation from God (Gal 4:17); the suffering that leads to new life (John 16:16); the cosmic BP of negative divine judgment that precede the coming of the Son of Man at the end of time (1 Thess 5:3; Mark 13:8/Matt 24:7-8). Rom 7:22-23 combines the themes of vicarious suffering and cosmic BP.

In Rev 12:2 the BP represent the victory of the cross through the vicarious suffering of the new Eve. This suffering comes from bearing witness to Jesus, a witness that includes sharing in his cross. Hence, in this text the BP are not those of a birth but the participation of the mother of the Messiah in the sufferings of her son, Jesus, on the cross. The BP are a significant symbolic component of the depiction of the woman of Revelation 12, bringing together allusions to Eve, expiation for sin, and the end times. These allusions are made within the context of NT BPI, which emphasizes vicarious suffering on behalf of another that leads to new life and redemption from sin.

The BP of the mother are not only a sympathetic suffering for her son’s pain. At the cross, the new Eve experiences Eve’s BP of suffering and alienation caused by sin on behalf of others. She is the first and foremost of the faithful to be conformed to the cross. And through her participation in the pangs of the cross, her motherhood extends to all the faithful (Rev 12:17) who are conformed to the cross. The woman of Genesis 3 was named Eve because she became “the mother of all the living” (Gen 3:20). The Great Sign is a new Eve because she becomes the

mother of all who live in Christ, who are part of the renewal of creation. This renewal of creation is the plan of God that comes to fulfillment in the final chapters of the Book of Revelation. It is made possible by the victory of Christ over the dragon/devil.

Like the mother in 4 Maccabees, the mother of Revelation 12 gives birth to piety and becomes the mother of a nation in her suffering at the death of her sons. Like Paul in Gal 4:17, the woman of Revelation 12 is in labor until Christ is formed in her other offspring. She is portrayed as sharing in her son's suffering caused by the weight of sin and the resulting alienation of humankind from God. And in this sense, she can be said to be the mother of all the faithful.

The Great Sign contains the full image from BP to birth. In the entire Bible, the only other use of BPI that includes birth imagery is found in the simile of John 16, discussed above. Here, in this text the birth of the son strengthens the identity of the woman as the son's mother and indicates the fruitfulness of the BP, distinguishing them from the futile BP of Israel in Isa 26:17-18 and other texts in the OT category of "BP without birth." The woman is identified throughout the chapter as the mother of the child (τὸ τέκνον), "who will shepherd all the nations with a staff of iron," and at the end of the chapter, her "other offspring" are also mentioned.

The woman is identified repeatedly as the one who gave birth to the child (vv. 2c, 4b, 4c, 5a, 13b, v. 17). This identification suggests that to the extent that the son is identified as Jesus, his mother should be identified as Mary. Collins notes that the "Marian view" is the most natural

interpretation of vv. 1-5 in a Christian context.¹⁴² She questions, however, the significance of the persecution of Mary represented by the narrative of vv. 13-17. If Mary is understood in terms of a new Eve who is protected from the advances of the dragon, the serpent of old, then a continuity of narrative is evident. Through her faithfulness in bearing the Messiah, and through her sharing of his agony on the cross, Mary witnesses to the beginning of the end of the dragon's reign and enjoys a special protection from the deceit of the dragon as long as his reign should last.

Interpreting the woman to be Mary, symbolically represented according to the various biblical images of creation (Eve, Exodus) and new creation (post-Exilic Israel, the Church as a new Israel), provides a possible continuity of symbolic significance and continuity within the rich variety of imagery at work in the vision of Revelation 12.

Ultimately, the symbolic portrayal of Mary, mother of Christ, in terms of a new Eve, and also as a figure of Israel or the Church, contributes to a deepened understanding of the import of the faithful's participation in the victory of the cross and the fulfillment of the plan of God.¹⁴³ In her person is depicted the first and foremost of four participations in Christ's triumph (over the dragon) on the cross. The continuation of the earthly battle of the woman's "other offspring" is left open-ended because the outcome for each of the faithful remains to be seen.

¹⁴² Collins, *Combat Myth*, 105.

¹⁴³ Vanni (*Lectura*, 370) writes that not only does Mary's maternity allude to Eve, the mother par excellence, but also "Mary, woman and mother, should be understood in relation to Zion, which, seen in an eschatological perspective, coincides practically with the Church." Translation mine.

Conclusion

1. A Summary of This Work

In the first chapter I presented a brief overview of some of the major positions held by contemporary scholars on the significance of the BPI in Rev 12:2 and the importance of its role in interpreting the chapter. There is a wide range of approaches to interpreting Revelation 12. For the sake of simplicity, they can be organized into three groups. The first group of scholars is the largest and those within it are under the influence of the *Religionsgeschichte Schule* and interpret Revelation 12 as a Christianized version of pagan myth. This has led to interpreting the BPI as a narrative detail in the story of a mythical birth, if not simply ignoring it. This treatment of the BPI in Rev 12:2 at times misses the wealth of biblical allusions behind such a seemingly unimportant detail.

Scholars in the second group attempt a corrective to the first group and interpret the BPI in the context of OT prophetic texts, particularly Isaiah, and sometimes John 16. Most conclude that the BP represent the suffering of the people of God as they wait for the Messiah to be born. Others conclude that the BP represent the sufferings of the Church. As we have seen, these are aspects of the imagery's significance but not the whole of it. In addition, these interpretations can lead to a bifurcation in the woman's symbolic significance and her identity throughout the chapter. For example, one such interpretation of the Great Sign is that before the son is born she represents the OT people of God, and after the son is born she represents the NT people of God. Even if the Great Sign is interpreted as the people of God before and after the birth of the Messiah, or as the church of the OT and NT, an implicit bifurcation remains operative. Although

the covenant remains unbroken, the people of God after the birth of the Messiah (or church of the NT) is a qualitatively different entity because of the blood of the Lamb: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, who has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, to him to be glory and power forever” (Rev 1:6). This bifurcation is problematic because the woman is clearly identified as the same woman throughout the chapter, so her primary symbolic significance needs to be consistent throughout the chapter. This would not preclude, however, other allusions being present.

The third group includes a small number of scholars who interpret the BPI in light of NT BPI, primarily that of John 16, and conclude that the BP of the woman primarily represent the agony of the passion and crucifixion. The difficulty with this interpretation lies in arriving at a coherent interpretation of the woman, an interpretation that answers the question of why the suffering of the Messiah is represented by a woman, and not just any woman but a woman repeatedly identified as the one who gives him birth, i.e., his mother. Such an interpretation requires attention to the various biblical allusions at play in the depiction of the woman throughout Revelation 12. Certainly, there is overlap between these approaches. For example, the influence of the first approach extends to scholars in the other two groups and the third group has influenced the second. But generally speaking, even with overlap there remains a dominant approach in each scholar’s work.

The trend in scholarship seems to be moving away from interpreting Revelation 12 solely by source-critical and comparative religion approaches, although their influence remains dominant. For example, Collins’s interpretation of Revelation 12 leaves more of the text intact than does Charlesworth’s interpretation. And although Tavo acknowledges the possibility of

different sources and redactions, he limits his interpretation to the final version of the text.¹

Although many scholars today do not dispute the influence of pagan myth on the chapter, they find more biblical references than not in their exegesis of the chapter. The difficulty is understandable considering that although the images in Revelation 12 are biblical, they are combined in ways unique to the Bible. Whereas the unique features of the chapter were assigned solely to pagan mythical influence, now some scholars consider the possibility of an actual vision at the root of John's unique descriptions. Additionally, as Bergmann's 2008 work indicates, more attention is given to the role of metaphor and simile in biblical language.

In the second chapter I presented an overview of the OT uses of BPI. Throughout the OT, BPI is rooted in the understanding that BP lead to birth. Hence, BP are a special type of suffering that lead to life not death. BPI is ordered to the blessing of birth. This suffering is explained in Genesis 3–4 as a result of humankind's alienation from God. Genesis 3 explains that this alienation is due to the transgression of the first man and woman at the encouragement of the serpent. BP represent a rupture in the friendship between God and humankind. There are several different emphases that emerge in an overview of the OT use of BPI as alienation from God: BP signify alienation within the blessing of birth; BPI is used to signify negative divine judgment; BP that do not yield birth are a sign of the futility of human action without the aid of the divine; BP that yield birth are a sign of future redemption; the absence of BP in giving birth is a sign of divine intervention.

¹ Tavo (*Woman*, 255) writes, "We would rather propose that neither the presence nor the absence of a Jewish adaptor would be decisive for an understanding of the dragon-woman struggle."

Bergmann emphasizes the sense of crisis accompanying BPI in OT and ANE literature since the outcome of birth was never certain.² Children, not to mention women, died in childbirth. This sense of crisis, she argues, is the basis for the use of BPI to depict personal, local, and universal crisis. In the OT BPI is often used to describe the fearful reaction to military defeat mentioned repeatedly in the prophets, particularly in the OAN (for example, Isaiah 13-23, Jeremiah 48-49). Military defeat was considered a sign of negative divine judgment against those defeated. BP, like all suffering in the OT, was considered a punishment for sin. This use of BPI is developed in 4 Ezra 16 to describe the sudden onslaught of calamities upon the earth preceding the coming of “him who searches out every sin on earth” (16:50). In this use of BPI, little attention is paid to the ordering of BP to the blessing of birth. However, this ordering remains fundamental to a proper interpretation of BPI in the OT and its development in the NT. We see the importance of this ordering precisely in the variations of BPI and birth imagery in the Prophets. For example, BP which do not lead to birth (Hos 13:13; Isa 26:17-18; 37:4) are clearly presented as an image for human folly separated from divine blessing. In Isa 66:9 the Lord offers assurance in precisely the terms of labor and birth, “Shall I bring a mother to the point of birth, and yet not let her child be born?”

In the third chapter I presented an overview of the NT uses of BPI. In the NT the significance of OT BPI is transformed. BP still represent the alienation of sin within the context of the blessing of birth. But in the NT the person/entity suffering the BP does not do so on behalf of his/her own alienation from God. For example in Gal 4:19 and Rom 8:22 BP are suffered

² Bergmann, *Childbirth*, 2.

vicariously in expiation for another's alienation from God. In Galatians 4 Paul suffers BP until Christ is formed in the Galatians, and in Romans 8 all of creation is groaning in labor pains until humankind's "adoption, the redemption of our bodies." In both texts, BP are a sign of hope, a sign of movement away from slavery and towards adoption (Rom 8:15, 23-24). This vicarious suffering is rooted in the sacrifice of the cross; ultimately, NT BPI represents a participation in the cross.

In the NT the blessing of birth, which remains only implicit in OT BPI, is explicitly connected with BPI not only in Revelation 12 but in John 16 as well. In John 16:21-22 birth imagery is included when Jesus compares the disciples' sadness to BP and promises them joy (like a new mother) when he sees them again. Although birth (including the usage of both Greek verbs, *τικτώ/ γεννάω*) in the NT is usually a physical event, in John 16 it is used metaphorically, as well as in John 3:4-8, when Jesus explains to Nicodemus what it means to be "born from above" and in 1 Pet 1:3 when Peter writes of God giving "us a new birth (*ἀναγεννάω*) to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." This metaphorical new birth of the faithful is rooted in conformity to the image of Christ: "the firstborn among many brothers" Rom 8:29; "firstborn of all creation" Col 1:15; "the beginning, the firstborn from the dead" Col 1:18; "firstborn of the dead" Rev 1:5; "firstborn into the world" Heb 1:6. In Hebrews, the analogy of firstborn is extended to those in heaven (12:23).

The OT association of BPI with physical, national, or military crisis is continued in the NT on the moral/global level, much in the same fashion as discussed above in the text from 4 Ezra. That is, disaster described as BP will occur on a global level as a result of sin, whether individual or corporate. Whereas descriptions of military crises make up at least half of the OT

use of BPI, in the NT the comparable descriptions of global crises represent a smaller portion of the use of BPI. This use of BPI is also curtailed and less graphic than in the OT prophets.

The allusion to negative divine judgment is present in the NT texts that describe the upheaval accompanying the end time in terms of BP. But the point of comparison is timing rather than fear and pain. In fact, as in Rom 8:15, fear is dismissed as a necessary motivation in 1 Thess 5:3. The latter text uses BPI to portray the sudden onset of the crisis that will face those who live in darkness. But it also comforts the faithful that they should not be afraid because they are “children of the light and children of the day” (v. 5), and it exhorts them to a moral life in the community based on the theological virtues of faith, love, and hope (v. 8). Matt 24:7-8 and Mark 13:8 use BPI to represent the international and cosmic upheaval that will accompany the end of the age. Once again, the focus is the proper interpretation of the timing of the end age. In Matthew 24 the faithful are admonished not to be deceived. In both uses of BPI (1 Thessalonians and Matthew/Mark), the emphasis is the opposite of the fear and terror expressed by BPI in the OT descriptions of military defeat. The emphasis is on watching and vigilance so that the faithful are prepared for the coming trials and are able to persevere to the end.

In the fourth chapter I discussed the meaning of the BPI in Revelation 12 and its significance for the interpretation of this chapter. To this end I presented an analysis of the structure and structural elements of Revelation 12 as well as a careful exegesis of the chapter. Revelation 12 combines several different structural elements including a “back-and-forth” description of God’s providence and the dragon’s response, a four-fold description of the faithful’s participation in the triumph of “the blood of the Lamb,” a shift from emphasis on the victory in heaven to the embattled situation on earth, recapitulations of previous texts in the

chapter by texts mentioned later in the chapter, and a series of allusions to Genesis 2–4.

Attention to these structural elements and to the NT use and transformation of OT BPI allows the reader to appreciate the significance of the BPI as symbolic of the Great Sign's participation in the victory of the Lamb over the dragon.

In my exegesis I demonstrated that Revelation 12 is best interpreted within the spectrum of biblical imagery and language. John's descriptions of the vision(s) of the Great Sign and the Other Sign in Revelation 12 bring together various traditions of biblical imagery. The Other Sign, the dragon, is clearly identified by several biblical names, representing different biblical traditions that describe national adversaries as well as the personal (angelic) adversary of Israel in the OT and the faithful in the NT.

The description of the Great Sign is much more subtle and complex than that of the Other Sign. The various aspects of the description of the Great Sign also seem to bring together different biblical traditions of hope for the future redemption of Israel in the OT and the faithful in the NT. The foremost aspect of the description of the Great Sign is her motherhood. Although the woman is not identified by name(s), as is the Other Sign, she is identified by her motherhood and the allusions by which her motherhood is described. Some of these allusions are taken from the same biblical traditions as the names for the dragon, such as from the first woman in the story of Genesis 3. Other allusions are more directly related to the identity of the son born of the Great Sign. They include the text of Isa 7:14 in which a young woman who will give birth to a son, Emmanuel, is given as a sign to Ahaz of protection from his adversaries (in particular, the alliance of Israel and Syria against Jerusalem of Judea) and the text of Mic 4:9-10, 5:2-3 in which the BP of daughter Zion's exile are redeemed by the birth of a ruler to come from

Bethlehem. Both texts are employed in Matthew as a prophecy of the birth of Christ: Isa 7:14 in Matt 1:23 and Mic 4:9-10, 5:2-3 in Matt 2:5-6.

The BPI of Rev 12:2a is a particularly complex representation of the woman's motherhood. It brings together the various biblical traditions of BPI including those of Eve and Israel/daughter Zion into a poignant representation of the woman's suffering while crowned in glory. The inclusion of birth imagery in v. 5 emphasizes not only the motherhood of the woman but the redemptive value and the temporary nature of the suffering represented by the BP. Read in the light of the other instances of NT BPI summarized in chapter three, the BPI of v. 2a is most compellingly interpreted as a symbolic participation in the victory of the cross. The BP represent the death pangs of the cross in their true light, agony that leads to new life, not death. And yet, the representation of the agony of the cross through metaphorical BP does not preclude a symbolic representation of the physical birth of the Messiah. Rather, the significance of the woman's physical motherhood would be deepened and qualified by her metaphorical motherhood at the cross.

As the loud voice in heaven explains in v. 11, the center of meaning for the entire vision of Revelation 12 is the "blood of the Lamb," in which the faithful share and by which the dragon is conquered. The cross provides the point of unity for the disparate and seemingly unrelated depictions of the woman's BP, the angelic battle, the martyred faithful and the perseverance of the faithful yet on earth. The Great Sign is great because she promises protection from the adversary and manifests what it means to share in the blood of the Lamb. She does this precisely through her motherhood, of which her BP are a part.

2. Significance of Birth-Pang Imagery for Understanding the Great Sign's Motherhood

In chapter four I concluded that the identity of the Great Sign cannot be separated from her motherhood, primarily of the son who is identified as Jesus by allusion to Ps 2:9, and secondarily of the other offspring against whom the dragon continues to wage war. Hence, one of the results of this work may be to give a new impetus to the Marian interpretation of Revelation 12—precisely through the imagery that one least expects to see associated with Mary: BP. If the BP represent the agony of the cross and its triumph over the dragon, what can they say about the woman's motherhood as well? To answer this question, it is necessary to review the woman's identification in Revelation 12 as mother. The woman is implicitly identified as a mother in vv. 2a, 4b, 5a, and 13b. Each time, her motherhood is described in terms of her giving birth to the son in v. 5a. Additional references to her child(ren) are made in vv. 5b and 17. The former to her child who is "caught up to God and his throne," and the latter to "her other offspring." Her other offspring are "those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus."

The woman's motherhood is both physical and metaphorical. In regards to the son the woman's motherhood seems to be physical since all four references to her motherhood are specifically in terms of her giving birth: v. 2a "she is with child;" v. 4b "the woman about to give birth;" v. 5a "she bore a son;" and v. 13b "the woman who had given birth to the male." Unlike *ᾠδίνω*, which is often used metaphorically in the OT and only used metaphorically in the NT, *τικτώ* is usually used in the context of physical birth, in the NT the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. The one instance of the metaphorical use of *τικτώ* is in John 16:21-22.

The focus in Revelation 12 on identifying the woman with the most basic physical act of motherhood, giving birth, suggests that the woman probably does not primarily represent Israel/Zion/Jerusalem giving birth to the Messiah. In the whole of the OT, BP are ascribed of Zion many times but she is represented metaphorically as giving birth only twice, in Isa 51:18 and 66:8. In both texts Israel gives birth to many children who represent her inhabitants. In Isa 51:18, Israel has been abandoned by the many children she has born, and in 66:8 Israel will give birth without BP to her children. Neither description of Israel as giving birth seem to fit the description of the Great Sign and her birth of the son in Revelation 12:5, particularly because the children born are plural. Isa 66:8 is often discussed as a possible interpretive key to Rev 12:5. However, the contrast between the Great Sign's torturous BP and Isaiah's specific exclusion of Israel's BP from the birth imagery suggests such an allusion would probably be more indirect, namely in terms of the theme of new creation. Children born without BP in the context of Isaiah 66 is a sign of a newly created Zion in the sense of "a nation born in a single moment" (66:8). Isaiah's description of a new Jerusalem where there is no more sorrow or weeping (65:19) is incorporated in 4 Ezra's description of the age of the Messiah and the description in Revelation 21 of the new Jerusalem descended from heaven.

The one OT instance (Mic 4:9; 5:2) in which BP and birth imagery are explicitly connected ascribe the BP to Zion and the (redemptive) birth to a particular woman. As mentioned earlier, this text is described in Matt 2:5-6 as a passage known by the high priests to regard the (physical) birth of the Messiah. The most natural interpretation of the repeated identification of the woman according to her giving birth is that she is the physical mother of the

son, however symbolically represented. This suggests that the woman is Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The woman's motherhood of the son is also partially metaphorical since the BP are symbolic of the pangs of the cross; they are not related to the birth of Jesus. Hence, a portion of the maternal imagery, the BP, is metaphorical. As discussed above, BPI is a common metaphor in the OT, and in the NT BP are never described in conjunction with physical birth. The depiction of the woman as both a physical and metaphorical mother (in faith) is not unprecedented; it is a theme in the NT, and it appears clearly in 4 Maccabees. The mother in 4 Maccabees is portrayed in a similar fashion. She is the physical mother of her seven sons. However, in participating vicariously in her sons' suffering and bolstering their faith, she becomes their mother on the level of faith as well. She is even described as the mother of a nation because of her faith.

Mary is not the physical mother of all the faithful. The woman's "other offspring" are clearly not intended to be understood as her physical offspring, since they are identified as "those who keep God's commandments and bear witness to Jesus," in other words, everyone who believes in Jesus. As noted above, kinship language, including "children" and "brothers," is used to describe the familial relationship in faith between those who believe in Jesus and are baptized.

Mary is the metaphorical mother of the faithful. Portraying Mary as the mother of believers is well within the biblical tradition of portraying the faithful (Israelites or believers in Jesus) as the children of an important mother (or father) in the history of Israel. Sarah (and Abraham) is the most prominent example in the NT, but Rachel is also mentioned, weeping for her children. Prominent women are used to represent Israel or the faithful. For example in Isa

51:2 and 54:1 Sarah represents Israel as a sign that just as her fortune was reversed and she bore a child, so will Israel's fortune be reversed and prosper again. Paul continues this tradition in Gal 4:26 when he writes that the "Jerusalem above" is the mother of all the faithful—represented by the motherhood of Sarah. The New Jerusalem descended from heaven appears later in Revelation 21 and is not identified with the Great Sign but is anticipated by the Great Sign. Just as the Great Sign represents a renewal of creation through her glorious appearance and in her protection from the dragon, the New Jerusalem promises a renewal of creation for all the faithful. In any case, in the NT kinship is extended to all the faithful through incorporation into Christ. Through Christ all are brothers and sisters; and in Revelation 12 (and John 19) we learn that through Christ the faithful share his mother.

The portrayal in Revelation 12 of Mary's motherhood of the faithful is not only rooted in the traditions of Sarah and Rachel, but that of the first mother, Eve. The portrayal of Mary's unique role of motherhood of the faithful through the symbolism of BP is rooted in the multiple allusions to Genesis 2–4 portraying her in terms of a new Eve. Eve receives her name because "she became the mother of all the living" (3:20). The Great Sign is portrayed in terms of a new Eve in that she is preserved from the aggression of the dragon, that "ancient serpent," in a way that Eve was not. The Great Sign is also portrayed in terms of a new Eve in that she is the mother of all the faithful, which, according to God's will, would include all the living (21:3), but, because of the power and work of the dragon, does not. Finally, the Great Sign is a new Eve in that she experiences the BP of the cross as a witness to this disjuncture between what humankind was created to be and what humankind is. This disjuncture is nowhere more evident than at the crucifixion of the Messiah, her son. This disjuncture becomes the means of salvation for

humankind. Her BP are not simply a witness, they are a participation in the work of “him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (1:5), namely, the victory of the cross over the dragon. She suffers the BP for the sake of those for whom the Lamb’s blood is shed. She experiences the BP, even in heavenly glory, until “Christ is formed” (Gal 4:19) in the faithful.

The One on the throne promises that he will make all things new (21:5) and Mary is portrayed in Revelation 12 as the first of creation to at least partially fulfill this promise. She is a renewed creation in the sense that she enjoys the intimate friendship with, and protection of, God. This divine friendship and protection is what human persons were originally created to enjoy, as described in the first chapters of Genesis. This intimacy of friendship is extended to all the faithful in the New Jerusalem in Rev 21:3-4: “Behold, God’s dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away.”

Mary’s BP in Rev 12:2 represent a re-creation even of BP (along with all suffering). What women from the dawn of human history experience in giving birth as a matter of course, Mary experiences at the foot of the cross. The BP that were a curse upon Eve (and all women) were remitted for the mother of the Messiah at his birth (according to one strain of Catholic tradition and a particular reading of Is 66:7-9). Instead, they have become a means of communicating the mystery of redemption of the cross (John 16:21). They are even incorporated into the drama of redemption and salvation (Gal 4:19; Rom 8:22) and the faithful’s participation therein. In Revelation 12, the connection is made between the faithful’s participation in this drama and Mary’s sorrow at the foot of the cross.

Mary's portrayal in terms of the renewal of creation is a foreshadowing of the promise to make all things new in Rev 21:5. The fulfillment of this promise comes in the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven and is explained in the proclamation from the throne in Rev 21:3-4, cited above. This proclamation is in line with the expectations of *2 Apoc. Bar. 73:7* that "women will no longer have pain when they bear . . ."

The portrayal of Mary as the Great Sign and a new Eve in Revelation 12 is a subtle one. It invites the hearer/reader to appreciate the way in which the faithful are allowed and invited to participate in the suffering and victory of the cross. Through OT and NT allusions Mary's portrayal in the Great Sign is an image of a new creation in which vicarious suffering which witnesses to Jesus converges with the cosmic significance of the end of the age. The redemption (renewal) of creation includes the transformation of suffering from a sign of humankind's defeat by sin to a sign of divine love and opportunity to participate in the work of redemption. Death which has previously represented the victory of sin now represents birth into new life. For the faithful, it is the end of the race at which the crown of victory is bestowed. The Great Sign signifies simultaneously the crown of victory and the suffering that begets it.

3. Avenues for Future Research

It would be interesting to revisit and examine the various theories of the influence of pagan myth on Revelation 12 in light of the biblical foundations of the chapter. Also, the connection between the cross and the cosmic BP described heralding the beginning of the end of time remains to be clearly drawn out. There are several other possible avenues for future research that have been only briefly discussed in this dissertation. For example, the NT transformation of

kinship formulae in descriptions of the faithful have yet to be mined, particularly in light of Matt 12:46-50, “For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother,” as well as the text of 1 Tim 2:15 that woman will be saved “through motherhood [διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας] provided women persevere in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.” The text of 4 Maccabees 15 and its portrayal of motherhood in the mother of the seven martyrs also deserves more attention as an early witness to interpretation of OT BPI and other themes, such as Noah’s ark. As mentioned above, it is roughly contemporaneous with portions of the NT, including the Book of Revelation. Also to be pursued further is an in-depth study of the history of reception of Rev 12:2a and its BPI as well as an investigation of the ecclesial/Marian readings of the Great Sign in terms of contemporary critical methods of exegesis. There are many additional possibilities for further research related to BPI in the Bible and its interpretation within the context of the blessing of birth.

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