

Is Mary the Woman in Revelation 12?

Even many Protestant scholars believe she is an image of the mother of Jesus

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When Protestants say “Catholics believe in doctrines that aren’t found in the Bible,” they often appeal to the dogma of Mary’s Assumption in order to justify the claim. In response, some Catholics say the Assumption is in the Bible because Mary is the woman John sees in heaven that is described in Revelation 12. Protestants often counter this claim by accusing Catholics of shoe-horning Mary into a text that is actually talking about the Church or the people of Israel.

So who is right?

In one sense, both. But before I explain how that could be, I need to remind Catholics that we are not Protestant.

Challenges that we must “prove” all Catholic doctrine from scripture shouldn’t worry us because we reject the unbiblical doctrine of sola scriptura. When Cardinal Newman preached on the Mary’s Assumption and Immaculate Conception he gave evidence for those doctrines but he also said “I am not proving these doctrines to you, my brethren; the evidence of them lies in the declaration of the Church. The Church is the oracle of religious truth, and dispenses what the apostles committed to her in every time and place.”

A plausible case can be made, however, that the Bible “reflects” the doctrine of the Assumption and that evidence for this dogma is implicitly found in John’s description of the woman in Revelation 12:1-6. This isn’t enough to prove Mary was assumed into heaven, but it does cohere with prior belief in Mary’s assumption and provides additional support for that claim. So let’s examine what John says about this woman and consider the possible Marian symbolism:

And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems upon his heads. His tail swept down a third of the stars of

heaven, and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth; she brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Protestant author Gregory Beale writes “Most of Revelation’s symbols have multiple associations or meanings and ... the interpreter can never be sure that all the multiple meanings of a symbol have been discovered.” This is common in Biblical imagery and is a point Protestant critics often miss when they critique Catholic arguments.

For example, some Protestants say Peter is not the rock in Matthew 16:18 by pointing to Church fathers who identify the rock with Peter’s confession of Faith. But the Catechism says the Rock symbolizes both Peter’s confession of Faith (424) and Peter himself (881). Likewise, when it comes to the woman in Revelation 12, there is no contradiction in saying the woman represents Mary and other individuals or groups of people.

Protestant scholar Ben Witherington agrees: “This figure is both the literal mother of the male child Jesus and also the female image of the people of God. Again, the text is multivalent!” Peter Leithart also agrees: “If not only Mary, the woman is also Mary [emphasis added], Mary as eschatos in a line of miracle mothers, as the embodiment of the virginity of Israel’s labor, all of it necessary to form Christ in this world.”

Most biblical scholars see the woman in Revelation 12 as having some connection with bringing about the birth of the Messiah. As a result, they see her as representing the people of God who preceded the Messiah, which includes Mary, Israel, and even Eve. Scholars also believe this woman represents the Church, who gives birth to the people of the New Covenant. The multiplicity of meanings in the passage answers several common objections to Mary being identified with this woman “clothed with the sun.”

For example, some critics say the woman’s experience of birth pangs conflicts with the long-standing belief that Mary (who was conceived without original sin) did not experience one of its punishments in the form of painful childbirth (Gen. 3:16). But these “birth pangs” could refer to the sorrow that pierced Mary’s heart before she gave birth to Jesus (Luke 2:35), the pain she felt at the Cross, during which she became a spiritual mother to John (and by extension all believers), and the pain experienced by the people of God both before the messiah’s birth and after his resurrection during Roman persecution.

However, N.T. Wright says of this woman “she is a ‘sign,’ not a literal mother.” In response, we can note that John also describes “the great red dragon” in this passage as being a “sign” (Greek: semeion) but nearly all commenters agree the dragon represents an individual: Satan. Indeed, as Tim Staples notes, “There are four main characters in the chapter: “the woman,” the devil, Jesus, and the Archangel Michael. No one denies that the other three mentioned are real persons. It fits the context exegetically to interpret ‘the woman’ as a person (Mary) as well.” Wright even says, “It is from this faithful Israel, admittedly ultimately through the ‘virgin daughter of Israel,’ Mary herself, that the messiah is born.”

We should also note that in John’s gospel Jesus’ mother is never called “Mary.” Jesus never even calls her “mother,” but refers instead to her as “woman” (John 2:4, 19:27). The Church fathers saw in this language a reference to Mary being the New Eve who is also called “woman” (Hebrew: Ishah) in Genesis until after the Fall when Adam names her “Eve” (Hebrew: Hawwāh).

Another objection to this conclusion is that the earliest Church father to identify the woman as Mary is St. Quodvultdeus in the year A.D. 430, even though earlier writers like St. Methodius and St. Hippolytus commented on this passage. But this isn’t surprising given that the early Church disagreed about whether Revelation was even a Christian text!

The Council of Laodicea and Cyril of Jerusalem did not include Revelation in their canonical lists. In A.D. 330 the Church historian Eusebius said of it “Among the rejected writings must be reckoned, as I said, the Apocalypse of John, if it seem proper, which some, as I said, reject, but which others class with the accepted books.” If the early Church viewed Revelation as a Jewish text, then it makes sense they would not see Mary in it as vividly as they might see other Old Testament motifs until the text was more widely accepted in the early Church.

This echoes the conclusion of the 1978 work *Mary in the New Testament*, which documents the results of a joint study on Mary carried out by a group of Protestant and Catholic scholars. It concluded that John’s “symbol of the woman who is the mother of the Messiah might well lend itself to Marian interpretation” and admitted that “Revelation was a relatively late comer into the canon of some sections of the Eastern churches, so that this ‘canonical Marian symbolism would not be equally ancient in all areas.” In *Mary for Evangelicals* Protestant author Tim Perry reaches a similar conclusion: “It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Marian interpretation of Revelation 12 begins in the fifth century, after the New Testament canon is fixed.”

Protestant scholars like William Barclay and Larry Heyler admit the suggestion the woman in Revelation 12 is Mary is an “obvious” one to make. They only hesitate

to do so because they believe this woman can't only refer to Mary. Catholics would agree this woman is symbolic of many separate things and people, but they would also be prepared to go one step further and say Mary herself, in virtue of being the mother of God, is that fitting symbol. For example, St. Methodius said the woman was

according to the accurate interpretation, our mother, O virgins, being a power by herself distinct from her children; whom the prophets, according to the aspect of their subjects, have called sometimes Jerusalem, sometimes a Bride, sometimes Mount Zion, and sometimes the Temple and Tabernacle of God.

It makes sense that later Christians saw how concepts like "Israel" or "the Church," (which Methodius identifies with terms like "mother", "virgin," "Temple," and "tabernacle of God") are perfectly symbolized in the person of Mary, or as Heyler puts it, "the Virgin Mary typifies or embodies the true people of God."

Mary is the ever-virgin, mother of God, mother of all believers and Ark of the New Covenant who stands in contrast with the Ark of the Old Covenant that is also depicted as being in heaven in the preceding verse (Rev. 11:19). Even Perry, an Evangelical Christian, admits "As part of the New Testament canon, Revelation's depiction of the heavenly woman completes the biblical Marian material."

If this woman symbolizes Mary or, as we've seen can be plausibly claimed, this woman is Mary, then the belief that Jesus took his mother into heaven to reign with him becomes even more reasonable and the testimony of Scripture would serve as an implicit corroboration of this sublime mystery of our Faith.