

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

First Reading **Apocalypse 11: 19, 12: 1–6, 10**

The Greek word *Apokalypsus* means ‘Revelations’, and this last book of the Bible is known by both titles. It is very different from the other New Testament books in that it tells of visions of events and words not normally seen or heard by human beings about heaven and earth, whether in the past, present or future.

Authorship is disputed. From very early on it has been associated with John, the writer of the fourth Gospel, but there is no certainty about this. Its likely date is c. 95 AD, although some scholars suggest it was written before the Temple destruction (70 AD). Its language and imagery are striking and often difficult to understand for contemporary minds, which do not always perceive the symbolism. The author effectively speaks to his audience in code.

The Ark of the covenant is a symbol of God’s presence. Whereas it was normally kept in the Holy of Holies and only accessed by the high priest, here it is open for all to see.

The woman’s identity in this passage is multifaceted. Greeks and Hebrews would have been familiar with such a woman. In Greek mythology, Leto, also wearing a veil of stars, gives birth to Apollo in heaven; this myth was taken up by the Roman emperor Nero who had statues portraying him as Apollo. There were similar Egyptian myths. Yet the author of Revelation makes these old myths his own and many references to the Old Testament can be found: in Genesis, the Lord tells the woman that she will suffer pains in childbirth; while the Prophet Micah describes Jerusalem as a woman giving birth (Micah 4: 9–10). The woman finds sanctuary in the desert, just as the Israelites did when they were fleeing from Egypt (Exodus 15–16).

It was not until the 4th century that exegetes started to see Mary in the woman in Revelation. Others saw in her a personification of the Early Church struggling to make the Messiah accepted as it was attacked by evil, represented here by the dragon. Protected by God, the woman crowned with the twelve stars, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, becomes a vision given as an encouragement to the suffering churches.



ST BEUNO'S OUTREACH
IN THE DIOCESE OF WREXHAM

Gospel **Luke 1: 39–56**

Following her encounter with the angel Gabriel announcing that she is to conceive and bear a son – as also that her kinswoman Elizabeth is expecting a child despite her great age – Mary sets off to meet Elizabeth. **Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could.**

Luke gives no reasons for Mary’s journey. Was it because she wanted to congratulate Elizabeth; because she was afraid of the local social stigma of being pregnant before marriage; or because she was frightened and seeking comfort from an old friend? We may each have our own answer. Luke, however, gives a sense of the immediacy of Mary’s decision.

A town in the hill country of Judah

Everything in Luke’s account contributes to making this important encounter low key. No powerful local dignitaries are mentioned, and the location is a nameless town in the countryside. In a reversal of the normal social order of the time, the two pregnant women occupy centre stage.

Elizabeth and Mary

The Old Testament has many instances of older or barren women who conceive against all expectations: Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel in Genesis, and Hannah in the first book of Samuel. Mary, however, is a young girl: scholars think she was a young teenager, probably less than 15 years old.

Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit

In Luke’s Gospel this expression carries the same meaning as in the Old Testament: the person is empowered by God to perform a special task.

A visit from the mother of my Lord

This is the first time Jesus is called Lord; thus far the term has been connected to God, but from now on ‘The Lord’ will refer to Jesus, as in the cry of Thomas the apostle: ‘*My Lord and My God*’. (John 20: 28)

Fulfilled promises

The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is the Old Order meeting the New. Elizabeth is to give birth to John, a prophet in the Old Testament tradition, while Mary is to give birth to Jesus, God made man. He is the fulfilment of all the promises made by God in the Old Testament.

Mary’s song: The Magnificat

The Old Testament has other similar songs: Moses and Miriam (Exodus 15), and Hannah (1 Samuel 2: 1–10). Luke also quotes the songs of Zechariah and Simeon, known respectively as the ‘Benedictus’ and the ‘Nunc Dimittis’ from their opening words in Latin.