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*Chapter 1*

# GOD'S ORIGINAL PLAN

The worst thing that happened in history, the Bible tells us, happened at the very beginning. No matter how you read the book of Genesis, it tells the story of humanity's primordial fall from favor.

It was the woman's fault, said the man. It was the serpent's fault, said the woman. It was everybody's fault, said God.

And so Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, and the gate was closed and guarded by a cherub with a flaming sword.

But God had not left his creation without hope. Even as he pronounced curses on the serpent, he gave Adam and Eve a glimpse of the future:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your seed and her seed;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel. (Gn 3:15)

Christian writers have always seen in these words more than just a prediction that people will hate snakes. Since

very early times, this passage has been known as the *protevangelium*, from Greek words meaning “first gospel.”

### *Seed of a Woman*

What does it mean to speak of the “seed” of a woman? In the Old Testament, the word “seed” is used only to speak of the offspring of a man—except here. Here alone we hear of the “seed” of a woman, as if a woman could give birth without a man.

The meaning was clear to the early Christians. The only human being who could ever have been described as the “seed” of a woman was Jesus Christ, born of a virgin. The serpent was Satan: that much was already the universal interpretation of the story. So Jesus, the seed of a woman, would strike Satan’s head. But Satan would bruise his heel. To the ancient Christian writers, that was an obvious reference to the crucifixion, where Jesus’ feet were pierced by nails.

What it meant, then, was that the story of humanity would be symmetrical, with great women at both ends of it. Eve sinned and brought sin on all her descendants; another woman, through her “seed,” would undo what Eve had done. Justin Martyr, a Christian apologist of the middle 100s, explains that Christ, who was present before the beginning, came to destroy the serpent who had tempted Eve, and the demons who are like that serpent:

And since we find it recorded in the memoirs of his apostles that he is the Son of God, and since we call him the Son, we have understood that he proceeded before all creatures from the Father by his power and will (for he is addressed in the writings of the prophets in one way or another as Wisdom, and the Day, and the East, and a Sword, and a Stone, and a Rod, and Jacob, and

Israel); and that he became man by the Virgin, in order that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might receive its destruction in the same manner in which it derived its origin. For Eve, who was a virgin and undefiled, having conceived the word from the serpent, brought forth disobedience and death. But the Virgin Mary received faith and joy, when the angel Gabriel announced the good tidings to her that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon her, and the power of the Highest would overshadow her. And for that reason the Holy Being begotten of her is the Son of God; and she replied, "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). And by her has He been born, to whom we have proved so many Scriptures refer, and by whom God destroys both the serpent and those angels and men who are like him; but works deliverance from death to those who repent of their wickedness and believe upon Him.<sup>1</sup>

And Mary, the only mother in history to have a son without a human father, is the one who undoes what was done by Eve.

This is the notable thing about the comparison of Eve and Mary by the Fathers of the Church. Some later writers emphasized Eve's guilt and denigrated women as more prone to sin than men. But the Church Fathers almost always point out Eve's part in the Fall in order to point out Mary's part in our redemption. If sin came through a woman, redemption comes through a woman. Mary is the Eve who got it right.

St. Irenaeus makes the comparison between Eve and Mary in a very thorough way, and adds a fascinating thought: by her obedience, which undoes the disobedience of Eve, Mary becomes the patroness of Eve. Since Eve is the mother of all living, Mary becomes *our* patroness, leading

us to her Son, who frees us from the curse imposed on all Adam and Eve's descendants.

The Lord then was clearly . . . making a recapitulation of that disobedience which had occurred in connection with a tree, through his obedience on a tree. That deception was being done away with by which that virgin Eve, who was already espoused to a man, was unhappily misled. All this was happily announced through the truth the angel spoke to the Virgin Mary, who was also espoused to a man. For just as Eve was led astray by the word of an angel, so that she fled from God when she had transgressed His word; so did Mary, by an angelic communication, receive the glad tidings that she should sustain God, being obedient to His word. And if Eve disobeyed God, yet Mary was persuaded to be obedient to God, in order that the Virgin Mary might become the patroness of the virgin Eve. And thus, as the human race fell into bondage to death by means of a virgin, so is it rescued by a virgin; virginal disobedience having been balanced in the opposite scale by virginal obedience. For in the same way the sin of the first created man receives amendment by the correction of the First-begotten, and the coming of the serpent is conquered by the harmlessness of the dove, those bonds being loosed by which we had been fast bound to death.<sup>2</sup>

Irenaeus almost seems to draw us a picture. It's a symmetrical composition. In the center is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, representing the choice we have to make between right and wrong. On one side is Eve, taking the fruit from the tree—making the wrong choice. On the other side is Mary, who by saying yes to God has undone the damage that Eve's wrong choice did to us all.

## *The Longed-For Birth*

There are stories that seem to repeat throughout the Old Testament, as if there were a pattern to human history and a great Author behind the stories. For example, there's the story of the younger son who overshadows his brothers. Jacob is the younger son, but he's the founder of Israel. David is the youngest and apparently least of all Jesse's sons, but he becomes Israel's greatest king.

One of the most common stories is the story of the longed-for birth, the birth that finally comes when it seems impossible. The outline of the story is usually the same: a woman longs for a child, prays for a child, and finally—when she has all but given up hope—conceives and bears a child with a great destiny. For a Christian, the story is (so to speak) pregnant with meaning.

For example, there's Sarah, Abraham's wife. She hasn't been able to bear a child for many years. But when she's long past the age for children—ninety years old!—an angel comes to visit and tells her and Abraham that they'll have a son. That son is Isaac, whose name means “laughter”—because the news was so unbelievable that Sarah laughed to hear it.

Rachel, Jacob's wife, is another who prayed for a child when she could not conceive. Jacob, who was called Israel and gave his name to the nation descended from him, had two wives. Leah bore him many children; Rachel had not been able to bear any. But at last “God remembered Rachel,” and she bore a son named Joseph. We remember Joseph as the one with the many-colored coat whose jealous brothers conspired to kill him but ended up selling him into slavery instead. And precisely because his brothers got rid of him in such an underhanded way, he ended

up saving his whole family from famine—all the ancestors of the tribes of Israel.

In the book of Judges we hear the story of Samson. Again, his mother had been unable to bear children. Again, an angel visited and told her that she would bear a child with a great destiny. He would be the savior of his people from slavery to the Philistines. And of course Samson, the most famous of the Judges, did save his people from the Philistines—though only at the cost of his own life.

The birth of Samuel, the last of the Judges, is yet another one of those stories of the longed-for birth (see 1 Samuel 1). Hannah is one of two wives of Elkanah the priest; he loves her dearly, but she has never been able to bear children, so the other wife (Peninnah, but nobody ever remembers her name) gets most of the priest's share of the sacrifices to distribute among her children—an obvious mark of favor. "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" Elkanah asks Hannah. But in a culture where a wife is valued only by her children, a loving husband is not the same thing.

But after Hannah visits the Tabernacle and prays, vowing that her son will be dedicated to the Lord, she does conceive. And after her son Samuel is born and presented to the priest Eli, she prays a famous song—one that will seem a little familiar:

My heart exults in the LORD;  
my strength is exalted in the LORD.  
My mouth derides my enemies,  
because I rejoice in thy salvation.  
There is none holy like the LORD,  
there is none besides you;  
there is no rock like our God.

Talk no more so very proudly,  
let not arrogance come from your mouth;  
for the LORD is a God of knowledge,  
and by him actions are weighed.  
The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble gird on strength.  
Those who were full have hired themselves out  
for bread,  
but those who were hungry have ceased to  
hunger.

The barren has borne seven,  
but she who has many children is forlorn.  
The LORD kills and brings to life;  
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.  
The LORD makes poor and makes rich;  
he brings low, he also exalts.  
He raises up the poor from the dust;  
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
to make them sit with princes  
and inherit a seat of honor.

For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,  
and on them he has set the world.

He will guard the feet of his faithful ones;  
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;  
for not by might shall a man prevail.  
The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to  
pieces;  
against them he will thunder in heaven.

The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;  
he will give strength to his king,  
and exalt the power of his anointed. (1 Sm  
2:1–10)

Hannah's song reminds us Christians of the Magnificat, and surely there are good reasons for that. The story of the

birth of Samuel is one of the most famous in the Old Testament. A mother who had just given birth to a longed-for child would doubtless think of it, and might be inspired to express herself in similar terms. And so if Mary's song sounds as if she had Hannah's song in mind, it's probably because she did.

But the connection also works in the opposite direction. We're Christians, after all: we know that all of history was leading up to the birth of Christ, the Savior of humanity. So if the song of Hannah or the birth of Samson reminds us of the New Testament, it's because there *is* a pattern to history, and there *is* a great Author behind the stories. The whole Old Testament is full of images that point forward to the coming of Christ. We call them *types*, from the Greek word *typos*, meaning "image," and the study of these *types* is called *typology*.

And so when we see the story of the longed-for birth coming up over and over again in the Old Testament, it reminds us that there was one birth the whole world was longing for. All those other stories are images of the great story, the story the whole Old Testament tells: the story of Israel's longing for the coming of the Messiah.

### *A Virgin Shall Conceive*

It was a bad time for Ahaz, the king of Judah. In the middle of the eighth century before Christ, the Syrians had allied themselves with the northern kingdom of Israel—two traditional enemies of Judah. What were they up to?

It was perfectly obvious what they had in mind. "Let us go up against Judah and terrify it, and let us conquer it for ourselves" (Is 7:6).



Ahaz was almost ready to despair. So God sent Isaiah the prophet to him with a message: believe, and the threat will not come to pass.

But God also knew that Ahaz was having some trouble believing. So God gave Isaiah another message.

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, "Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven." But Ahaz said, "I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test." And he said, "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. (Is 7:10–16)

A virgin shall conceive! That would be quite a sign.

Many biblical scholars today translate the Hebrew word in this text as "young woman" rather than "virgin." That may be what Ahaz heard, although it hardly sounds like a very convincing miracle. But let us suppose it to be what Isaiah said when he spoke to Ahaz. Nevertheless, when a panel of Jewish translators—supposedly seventy of them—rendered the scriptures into Greek, they translated the word as "virgin." In the second century BC, at the very latest, people who read the Hebrew scriptures were reading Isaiah's prophecy as referring to a virgin giving birth.

And that hadn't happened yet. So the whole Jewish world was expecting a miraculous birth of someone named Immanuel—"God with us"—from a virgin.

But when would it happen?

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. (Lk 1:26–27)