

Crushing Satan's Head: Jesus and the Blessed Mother

By Graham Osborne

As we enter into both the great Easter season and the month of May, dedicated to our Blessed Mother, it is fitting that we contemplate the glorious relationship between Jesus and his mother, particularly as it pertains to our salvation.

Many of our separated brothers and sisters in Christ are mystified [or worse!] by the great devotion that many Catholics show to Mary. I suspect many forget Mary's own words following the Annunciation: "all generations will call me blessed" [Luke 1:48]. Or the Ten Commandments, where all are commanded to "honor thy Father and Mother". Of course Jesus keeps this Commandment perfectly, and we are all called to "imitate Christ" [1 Corinthians 11:1].

And they may miss her spiritual motherhood to all Christians, spoken of in places like Rev 12:17, where the devil goes off to make war "on the rest of her [Mary's] offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus". That's us! Or similarly, where Jesus, moments from death on the cross, says to St John, who the Church sees as representing all believers: "behold your mother". And to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!"

So with these thoughts in mind, let's examine one of the most powerful verses in Scripture, to see how it illuminates this great cooperation between Jesus and Mary.

Many may recall that jarring scene from the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, where Jesus is praying fervently to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. We then see the devil, followed by a serpent slithering ominously towards Jesus. Suddenly, Jesus' foot thunders down on the head of the serpent, crushing it! I don't know about you, but I jumped when I saw it the first time! But many, familiar with the Gospels, might be tempted to say that was just Mel Gibson adding *stuff*. A little literary license for effect. Not exactly...

This scene is based on Genesis 3:15. Adam and Eve have just fallen to the temptation of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, "the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan [Rev 20:2]. They will soon die physically [they were meant to live with God for eternity], but they *HAVE* already died spiritually – Sanctifying Grace and God's presence in their souls are gone.

God is certainly not pleased by the choices of all involved. But here, in what appears to be the darkest moment in human history, God immediately offers mercy, light and hope in the very next verse. Most English translations read: "The Lord God said to the serpent... I will put enmity [total opposition] between you and the woman, and between your seed and *her* seed; he shall bruise [crush] your head, and you shall bruise his heel" [Genesis 3:15].

The Early Church Fathers refer to this as the protoevangelium – the first [proto] proclamation of the good news, or gospel [evangelium in Latin]. This is a profound moment in Scripture.

Here, for the first time, God reveals his plan, now that man has turned away from him. And at the heart of this plan are “the woman” and “her seed”. The “seed” of “the woman”, who will “bruise” or “crush” [both words are acceptable translations of the original Greek and Hebrew] the head of Satan is clearly Jesus. So the woman must be Mary. The Church clearly sees this in Gal 4:4, where it reads: “God sent forth his Son, born of woman”.

And we cannot miss the significance of the woman being in enmity – complete opposition – to the devil, or that she is *NOT* of the devil’s seed. That is why Genesis 3:15 is also key to understanding the dogma of the Immaculate Conception as well – that Mary was born free of the stain of original sin, and was not of the Devil’s seed.

But a closer look at this verse reveals some fascinating insights. In the Latin Vulgate [the official Bible translation of the Catholic Church], Genesis 3:15 reads: “I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: *she* shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for *her* heel.” In fact Scripture scholars are much divided on whether the one crushing Satan’s head is the woman or her seed. This is because the original Hebrew can be rendered both ways, and many of the great Fathers of the Church taught that it was the woman, Mary, who would crush the head of Satan. This is also why the blessed Mother is often depicted with her foot on the head of the serpent.

But this is exactly the point! Either way you look at it, it is *BOTH* the woman and her seed that are crushing Satan’s head. And fascinatingly, a very good rendering of Genesis 3:15 would read, “they shall crush his head”! Bishop Challoner, in the great, *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, summarizes this all succinctly for us: “The sense is the same: for it is by her seed, Jesus Christ, that the woman crushes the serpent’s head.”

And this also sets the stage for some rich symbolism that is sprinkled throughout the Old Testament, where time and again, women are depicted as crushing the head of the enemies of God’s people. Scripture scholars and the Fathers of the Church often speak of Biblical “types” – Old Testament prefigurements of New Testament realities. God foreshadowing what is to come, then revealing the fullness of his message in the New Testament.

For example, Moses, leading God’s people out of the bondage of Egyptian slavery to the Promised Land, is seen as a type of Christ, who will lead God’s people out of the bondage of sin to “promised land” of Heaven. Similarly, Jesus will be seen as a new Adam. Adam, who brought death to all through sin and disobedience, and Jesus, who brought life to all through his love and obedience.

Turning to Judith 13:8-18 we read: “she struck his [Holofernes’] neck twice with all her might, and severed his head from his body... The Lord has struck him down by the hand of a woman... “O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God... who has guided you to strike the head of the leader of our enemies.” Compare this to where St Elizabeth, “filled with the Holy Spirit”, exclaims to Mary, “with a loud cry, blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

Similarly, in *Judges 4:21*, we read where, “Jael... took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, till it went down into the ground.” But now, hear the response of the Israelites as they praise her for rescuing them, and again, compare it to Elizabeth’s “blessed are you among women”: “Most blessed of women be Jael... of tent-dwelling women most blessed... she struck Sisera a blow, she crushed his head... So perish all thine enemies, O LORD!” [Judges 5:24-31]

And then there is *Judges 9:53*: “And a certain woman threw an upper millstone upon Abimelech’s head, and crushed his skull”. While this may all sound quite graphic, we cannot miss the message that is being given about the role of the “woman” in the Old Testament – to crush the head of the enemy.

But now, the fulfillment of this role is made clear in the New: it will be the woman *and* her seed. Fast forward to Calvary: “So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of a *skull*, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha” [John 19:17]. “But standing by the cross of Jesus”? “His mother” [John 19:25].

Here it is: the pinnacle of the battle. It is the woman and her seed. Jesus even uses the same word of *Genesis 3:15* to address his mother: “woman, behold your son”. And together, they are standing on Golgotha, crushing the skull of Satan with the cross of Christ. Just as *Genesis 3:15* said it would be.

The victory is won. The Devil is thrown down, but he still lashes out in his death throes. And to bring things into final focus for us, St Paul addresses “all the churches of Christ” in *Romans 16:16-20*, and tells them – even us today – that this fight will now carry on to its fulfillment *through them*: “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under *your feet*” [Romans 16:19-20].

The “churches of Christ” St Paul addresses above collectively form the Body of Christ [cf. *Romans 12:5*, *1 Corinthians 12:12, 27*]. Suddenly, the importance of the woman’s offspring takes on a profound New Testament fulfillment. The “Body of Christ”, the Church, becomes the final fulfillment of *Genesis 3:15*. *Revelation 12:17* tells us that this body is made up of “the woman’s *offspring*”. Who are these spiritual offspring? “Those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus” [Rev 12:17]. In other words, every Christian is a brother/sister of Christ, and has “the woman”, Mary, as their spiritual mother. And as the offspring or seed of the woman, every Christian has a role in crushing the head of Satan!

Our salvation is won through the woman and her seed. This is why Catholics call Mary blessed...