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*Figures of Mary in the Old Testament*



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# Figures of Mary in the Old Testament

Most of the typology of the Old Testament concerns Christ, the Church, and the sacraments, but there are also rich and abundant figures of Mary, the Mother of the Redeemer. The first part of the book *Daughter Zion*, by Joseph Ratzinger, has a beautiful discourse on the typology of Mary in the Old Testament. Protestants often object that the Marian doctrine of the Church is not found in Scripture. Ratzinger shows that Mary is present throughout the Bible, if you have eyes to see. The New Testament's portrait of Mary is itself modeled on figures of Mary in the Old Testament, which she fulfills in a far higher way:

First, the portrait of Mary includes the likeness of the great mothers of the Old Testament: Sarah and especially Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Second, into that portrait is woven the whole theology of daughter Zion, in which, above all, the prophets announced the mystery of election and covenant, the mystery of God's love for Israel. A third strand can perhaps be identified in the Gospel of John: the figure of Eve, the "woman" par excellence, is borrowed to interpret Mary.<sup>1</sup>

As Ratzinger mentions, it is not infrequent that we hear the complaint that Judaism and Catholicism are patriarchal religions with no significant place for a feminine role. This, however, is quite false. It is true that God is portrayed in the Revelation to Israel in male terms as Father, King, and Lord, and there is no place for the female earth deities of the pagan religions. However, Israel, the people of God, is spoken of generally as female. Man's relation to God is analogous to that of bride to bridegroom. There are many great women presented throughout the Old Testament who had key roles in the life of ancient Israel, and who form a succession that leads to and culminates in the Mother of the Messiah.

## Hannah

An interesting theme in the Old Testament is pairs of women, one infertile and the other fertile: Sarah and Hagar, Rachel and Leah, Hannah and Peninnah. In each case favor is given to the infertile woman, who then is granted to bear a son of promise. In an earlier talk we looked at Sarah's miraculous maternity as a type of Mary. The theme of the infertile wife who receives a miraculous fecundity occurs again with Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel. Hannah was married to Elkanah, who had another wife named Peninnah. Peninnah was blessed with children, but Hannah was barren.

In 1 Samuel 1-2, Hannah weeps before the Lord for a son; shortly afterwards she conceives and gives birth to Samuel, who will become a great prophet, and consecrates him to God. Hannah thus is a figure of Mary, whose vow

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church's Marian Belief* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 12.

of virginity is the reality to which Hannah's infertility is but a figure, and who receives a supernatural fertility to bear the Son of God. Like Hannah, Mary magnifies God with a hymn, praising Him for casting down the mighty and raising up the lowly. Hannah's song of thanksgiving is the closest Old Testament prototype for Mary's Magnificat. Hannah sings:

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 thee; 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.

Here we have a foreshadowing of one of the great themes of Christ's preaching: the first shall be last, and the last first. Mary is the perfect model of one who put herself last, and was made first, because her lowliness called down the favor of God and made Him able to do great things in her. Ratzinger writes:

A theology of grace was developed from this reversal of values in the song of Hannah, which is echoed in Mary's Magnificat: the Lord raises the humble from the dust, he lifts the poor from the ashes (1 Sam 2:8). God bends down to the humble, the powerless, the rejected, and in this condescension the love of God, which truly saves, shines forth both for Hannah and for Mary, in the remarkable phenomenon of unblessed-blessed women. The mystery of the last place (Lk 14:10), the exchange between the first and the last place (Mk 10:31), the reversal of values in the Sermon on the Mount, the reversal of earthly values founded upon *hybris*, all of this is intimated. Here also the theology of virginity finds its first, still hidden formulation: earthly infertility becomes true fertility.<sup>2</sup>

## Judith

Another interesting figure of Mary is Judith, who beheaded Holofernes, a general of the Assyrian army. Judith is a widow, a state considered to be that of the poor and lowly. The story of Judith, which takes place after the return of Israel from the Babylonian Exile, synthesizes

<sup>2</sup> Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*, 19.

various moments in the history of Israel when it was threatened, humiliated, left prostrate in the dust, but is saved by the grace of God. Here Israel is on the verge of ruin, but arises through the aid of this “woman of valor.”

The immense army of Holofernes besieged the city of Bethulia, and cut it off from its water supply, for the spring that gave water to the town was outside its walls. Pressed by the thirst of the inhabitants, the elders decide to surrender on the fifth day if conditions do not improve, and they make an oath to that effect. In this dire necessity, Judith, a pious widow, comes forward. It is significant that her name signifies “Jewess.” Judith represents the faith of Israel; she is the exemplary daughter of Judah. Judith berated the elders for tempting God by giving Him five days to act. She points out that if Bethulia fell, the enemy army would make its way to Jerusalem and sack the Temple. She resolves on a plan to behead the enemy general.

She begins, characteristically, with prayer and fasting at the hour of the evening sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem. Putting on sackcloth, she prayed with the faith of Israel:

O Lord God of my father Simeon. . . . For you have done these things and those that went before and those that followed; you have designed the things that are now, and those that are to come. Yes, the things you intended came to pass, and the things you willed presented themselves and said, ‘Behold, we are here’; for all your ways are prepared in advance, and your judgment is with foreknowledge. . . . Behold now, the Assyrians are increased in their might; they are exalted, . . . they trust in shield and spear, in bow and sling, and know not that you are the Lord who crushes wars; the Lord is your name. Break their strength by your might, and bring down their power in your anger; for they intend to defile your sanctuary. . . .

For your power depends not upon numbers, nor your might upon men of strength; for you are God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forlorn, savior of those without hope. Hear, O hear me, God of my father, God of the inheritance of Israel, Lord of heaven and earth, Creator of the waters, King of all your creation, hear my prayer! . . . And cause your whole nation and every tribe to know and understand that you are God, the God of all power and might, and that there is no other who protects the people of Israel but you alone!

Judith then takes off her sackcloth and puts on beautiful clothing. With a handmaid, she goes out of the gates and is captured by the Assyrian guards and taken to the general, to whom she proposes a plan to take the city, as if she were a traitor. She is believed by the general and his men, and they give her a tent. On the fourth day—the day before the city was to surrender—Holofernes makes a banquet to which he invites Judith, and, completely taken with her beauty, brings her alone to his tent and gets so drunk that he ends up passing out. She seizes the opportunity, takes his sword and cuts off his head, which she puts in her bag,

and then goes out of the camp as if to pray, as had been her custom on the previous nights. Instead she returns to the city, shows them the head of Holofernes, and persuades them to attack the camp on the following morning, just at the time when the death of Holofernes would be discovered and they would fall into confusion and flee.

Judith is then honored with a beautiful text (15:9-11) that the liturgy of the Church applies to Mary: “‘You are the exaltation of Jerusalem, you are the great glory of Israel, you are the great pride of our nation!<sup>3</sup> You have done all this singlehanded; you have done great good to Israel, and God is well pleased with it. May the Almighty Lord bless you forever!’ And all the people said, ‘So be it!’”

Judith, by cutting off the head of Holofernes and liberating her people, is thus a figure of the new Eve announced in Genesis 3:15, who will be associated with her Son in crushing the head of the serpent. As Holofernes represents the serpent, so Judith represents Mary.

## Esther

The intercession of Queen Esther on behalf of the Jewish people, saving them from death and destruction, has always been seen in the Church as a type of Mary’s intercession on behalf of the Church and mankind. Esther is an orphan, which like the widow is a state considered in Israel as poor and lowly.

The story takes place in Susa, the capital of the Persian empire, during the reign of Artaxerxes<sup>4</sup> in the middle of the fifth century BC, around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, at which time many of the Jewish people still lived in exile in the Persian empire. The protagonists of the story are Queen Esther and Mordecai, her first cousin and adopted father. The villain of the story is Haman, prime minister to the king.

After Queen Vashti offended the King, he established a beauty contest to find a successor to Vashti. Esther was chosen and enters the King’s harem. Mordecai continues to watch over Esther, and he counsels her to keep her Jewish identity secret.

In the meantime, Mordecai uncovers a treasonable plot against the king, which he communicates to Esther. She informs the king, and the offenders are put to death. Later, Mordecai offends Haman by not bowing down to him as if he were a god. Haman resolves to punish Mordecai and the entire Jewish people by extermination. This marks one of earliest examples of anti-Semitism after the Exodus. He gets the king to agree to pass a decree allowing everyone to attack the Jews on a certain day of the year. The ostensible

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Responsorial Psalm (Jdt 13:18bcde, 19); see also the extraordinary form of the Mass for Our Lady of Lourdes (The Apparition of the Immaculate Virgin Mary), Tract (Jdt 15:10).

<sup>4</sup> The king receives the names Ahasuerus (1:1) and Artaxerxes (11:1).

crime of the Jewish people was the fact that they did not assimilate as other peoples did. The king writes:

Haman, who excels among us in sound judgment, and is distinguished for his unchanging good will and steadfast fidelity, and has attained the second place in the kingdom, pointed out to us that among all the nations in the world there is scattered a certain hostile people, who have laws contrary to those of every nation and continually disregard the ordinances of the kings, so that the unifying of the kingdom which we honorably intend cannot be brought about. We understand that this people, and it alone, stands constantly in opposition to all men, perversely following a strange manner of life and laws.<sup>5</sup>

In this extreme emergency, Mordecai tells Esther that God's providence has made her Queen so that she can save her people by appealing to the king to persuade him to annul the law against the Jews. He tells her: "Remembering the days of your lowliness, when you were cared for by me, . . . beseech the Lord and speak to the king concerning us and deliver us from death. . . . Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"<sup>6</sup>

However, despite her position as Queen, Esther did not have regular access to the King. In fact, she had not seen him for a month. No one could go before the King unbidden without risking death. It was up to the king to admit petitioners, touching them with his golden scepter, or they would be subject to the death penalty.

In preparation for her perilous embassy, Esther, like Judith, prays in sackcloth and fasting for three days, together with the Jewish people. Scripture records the beautiful prayers of Mordecai and Esther.<sup>7</sup> On the third day, like Judith, she arrays herself in great beauty and went before the king. Fainting from fear, she receives mercy from him, and so she invites him to dine with her on the following day, with Haman. Afterwards, Haman tells his wife that even after such an honor, his happiness is ruined by the presence of Mordecai at the gate. She advises him to construct a huge gallows for Mordecai to be hanged on.

In the meantime, Haman is forced to honor Mordecai because the king, unable to sleep, had the chronicles read to him, and they spoke of Mordecai's saving the king from treason. To honor Mordecai, Haman is ordered to put the king's clothing on him, and escort him on the King's horse, saying "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor" (Esther 6:9). When he relates this to his wife, she says: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him" (6:13).

On the third day, Esther finally makes her petition, accusing Haman of seeking to take her life and that of all

her people. Haman is hanged on the gallows he erected for Mordecai, and the Israelites are allowed to protect themselves.

Let us look now at the typology. Whereas Judith is a figure of Mary crushing the head of the serpent, Esther is a figure of Mary's mediation by way of *intercession*. Judith and Esther, therefore, are complementary figures, highlighting different aspects of Mary's role in salvation history. Esther is able to intercede because her beauty captivates the king who styles himself the king of kings. Mary is she whose interior beauty and total purity captivates the true King of Kings, attracting Him to enter her very womb in the Incarnation. Esther's beauty, like that of Judith, is thus a key part of the typology. Her physical beauty represents Mary's transcendent spiritual beauty.

Secondly, the theme of humility is also crucial. Esther is an orphan, and a member of a persecuted people facing extermination. She thus represents mankind after the Fall, orphaned and in misery. She also represents Israel in particular, who, after the Exile, continues to be ruled by a foreign nation (Persia), and thus has fallen from her privileges and lost her political sovereignty.

Like the Beatitudes and the Magnificat, Esther exemplifies the great evangelical theme that "the first shall be last, and the last first." The hanging of Haman on the gallows he erected and the vindication of Mordecai and Esther and their persecuted people is a marvelous example of the fact that God "has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy" (Lk 1:52–54).

Cardinal Ratzinger gives a beautiful explanation of the typology of both Judith and Esther:

The great salvific figures of Esther and Judith appear, taking up again the most ancient tradition as it was embodied, for example, in the figure of the judge Deborah. Both women have an essential characteristic in common with the great mothers: one is a widow, the other is a harem wife at the Persian court, and thus both find themselves—in different ways—in an oppressed state. Both embody the defeated Israel: Israel who has become a widow and wastes away in sorrow, Israel who has been abducted and dishonored among the nations, enslaved within their arbitrary desires. Yet both personify at the same time Israel's unconquered spiritual strength, which cannot boast as do the worldly powers and for that very reason knows how to scorn and overcome the mighty. The woman as savior, the embodiment of Israel's hope, thereby takes her place alongside the unblest-blessed mothers. It is significant that the woman always figures in Israel's thought and belief, not as a priestess, but as prophetess and judge-savior. . . . The infertile one, the powerless one becomes the savior because it is there that the locus for the revelation of God's power is found. After every fall into

<sup>5</sup> Esther 13:3–5.

<sup>6</sup> Esther 4:9 (Greek version); Esther 4:14.

<sup>7</sup> Esther 4:9–18 (Esther 4:17a–m) and Esther 14 (Esther 4:17q–kk). These sections are not in the Hebrew text, but only in the Greek version.

sin, the woman remains “mother of life.”<sup>8</sup>

## A Woman of Valor

Another beautiful text that is applied to Mary by the Fathers is Proverbs 31:10-14, which describes the ideal Israelite woman and wife, and is often read at weddings: “A *woman of valor* who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life. She seeks wool and flax, and works with willing hands. She is like the ships of the merchant, she brings her bread from afar.” Mary is seen by the Fathers to be the true “woman of valor,” the “merchant ship who brings the bread of heaven from afar.”<sup>9</sup>

## Daughter of Zion

The Old Testament frequently personifies Israel as the “daughter of Zion”<sup>10</sup> while proclaiming God’s promise to dwell in her. For example, we read in Zechariah 2:10-11: “Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for lo, I come and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord. And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in the midst of you, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you.” What a remarkable image of the Incarnation of Christ in the womb of Mary! God indeed dwelt in Israel in the pillar of cloud and of fire, and in the Temple, and through His constant communication with Israel; but now He promises to dwell in her as in a woman, as in the daughter of His

8 Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*, 20-21. See also Ronald Knox’s summary of the Mariological typology of the story of Esther, quoted in F. J. Sheed, ed., *The Mary Book* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950), 20-21: “We value, then, this story of Mardocheaus and Esther because we find in it a type of our Lady’s position in the economy of grace. How often a face or a scene arrests us, only because it bears some resemblance to a face or a scene we love! So it is with these Old Testament figures; they borrow their interest from the future. Like the people of the Jews, the Church of God has its enemies and its detractors: its peace is continually threatened by the world’s hatred for its strictness of principle. And when times of trouble come upon us, we, too, would win a royal audience; we would ask redress for our grievances from the King of Kings. As the Jews could plead on their own behalf the loyal act of Mardocheaus, so we would plead before God, our one hope of pardon, the all-sufficient sacrifice of his Son. But who will plead it for us? It is not that we distrust his goodness; but, conscious of our need and of our own unworthiness, we would find some advocate who has a better claim on his attention than ourselves. Who has a better right to stand in God’s royal Presence than our Blessed Lady? The law which included us all under the curse of original sin was a law made for all others, but not for her. Who else dare touch the sceptre that sways a universe? . . . We say to her, as Mardocheaus said to Esther, “Remember the days of thy low estate; and do thou speak to the king for us, and deliver us from death.”

9 See Hugo Rahner, *Our Lady and the Church* (Bethesda: Zacheus Press, 2004), 88-97.

10 See Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*. “Zion” is often used as another name for Jerusalem, and so Scripture also often speaks of Israel as the “daughter of Jerusalem.”

people! Of course, this indwelling of God is realized in a unique way in Mary, for it was in her own womb that Emmanuel is made flesh.

In a more general way, the Daughter of Zion called by God to receive His indwelling is an image of Israel who prepares to receive Christ. This can be seen in Zechariah 9:9-10, a prophecy of Christ’s entry on Palm Sunday:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the Gentiles; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Again, Israel’s king comes to dwell in the midst of all Israel and Jerusalem. However, Mary sums up this mission of Israel, which was to prepare the way for the Lord, and to receive Him when He comes. He came to all the daughters and sons of Zion only through *the* Daughter of Zion, the Blessed Virgin Mary. She it was who rejoiced in faith more than any other over the salvation that would be won by her Son on Calvary.

Zephaniah 3:14-18 refers to the Daughter of Zion in a very similar way:

Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has cast out your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear evil no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: “Do not fear, O Zion; let not your hands grow weak. The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.

The King of Israel came to dwell in the midst of Zion through Mary.

In Isaiah 62:11-12, we read: “Behold, the Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: *Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.’* And they shall be called The-holy-people, The-redeemed-of-the-Lord; and you shall be called Sought-out, A-city-not-forsaken.”

In all of these texts, the “daughter of Zion” refers to faithful Israel as a whole, awaiting her Lord and King. However, Mary is the daughter of Zion *par excellence* because she sums up the expectation of Israel for the Messiah. She is the perfect Virgin awaiting her Lord, to come within her. In the Christian tradition, therefore, Mary is invoked as the “beloved daughter of the Father” (*Lumen gentium* 53).

In Lamentations 2:13, the daughter Zion becomes the figure of Mary as the Mother of Sorrows: “What can I say

for you, to what compare you, O daughter of Jerusalem? What can I liken to you, that I may comfort you, O virgin daughter of Zion? For vast as the sea is your ruin; who can restore you?"

## The Bride of the Song of Songs

The Old Testament speaks of Israel not only as a daughter, but also as Bride. It is God Himself who espouses the daughter of Zion as His bride, taking her from her abandonment and humble origin, her fornication and prostitution, and purifying her to be His. For example, in Hosea 2:19-23, God says to Israel: "I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord. . . . And I will have pity on Not-pitied, and I will say to Not-my-people, 'You-are-my-people'; and he shall say 'Thou art my God.'"

Although all Israel is the betrothed bride, she is also an unfaithful bride who has not kept the covenant. Sins of idolatry are compared to acts of adultery or harlotry, as in Ezekiel 16. Mary alone is a pure bride, untainted by a sin of infidelity of any kind. Therefore, the texts on Israel as bride apply in a special way to Mary insofar as she perfectly lives the faith, hope, and charity of Israel, and thus belongs wholly to God. Mary thus is the fulfillment of this figure of Israel, the spouse of God. She alone responds with perfect fidelity and correspondence to His gift of righteousness, justice, love, mercy, and faithfulness. Therefore it is through her response of faith that Israel passes from being "not pitied" to become she who receives the supreme mercy of redemption.

Because Mary perfectly fulfills the bridal calling of Israel, she is referred to by some of the Fathers as Spouse of the Father,<sup>11</sup> Bride of Christ, and especially "Spouse of the Holy Spirit."<sup>12</sup> Paul VI, in his apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus* 26, explains the significance of this latter title of Mary. Speaking of the Fathers, he writes: "Examining more deeply still the mystery of the Incarnation, they saw in the mysterious relationship between the Spirit and Mary an aspect redolent of marriage, poetically portrayed by Prudentius: 'The unwed Virgin espoused the Spirit.'"<sup>13</sup>

The theme of the bride has a central place in the Song of Songs. In the rabbinical tradition, the bride is understood as referring to Israel. In the Church, the bride is seen as a

11 See St. John Damascene, *Encomium in Dormitionem Dei Genetricis Semperque Virginis Mariae*, Hom. II, n. 14 (quoted in Pius XII, bull *Munificentissimus Deus* 21): "It was fitting that she, who had carried the Creator as a child at her breast, should dwell in the divine tabernacles. It was fitting that the spouse, whom the Father had taken to himself, should live in the divine mansions."

12 For Mary as spouse of the three divine Persons, see Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Mariology*, trans. T. L. M. J. Geukers (St. Louis: Herder, 1946-47), 1:165-183.

13 Prudentius, *Liber Apotheosis*, vv. 571-572, in *Corpus Christianorum*, series Latina 126:97.

figure of Mary as well as of the Church which is prefigured in Israel and embodied in Mary: "Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold, you are beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. . . . You are all fair, my love; there is no flaw in you" (Song 4:1-7). The description of the bride as being without flaw is a typological reference to the Immaculate Conception. The purity of Mary then is the type for the holiness of the Church, the Body of Christ whose members have been washed with the waters of Baptism so that she might be "without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph 5:27).

## Mary as the Created Wisdom

The liturgy of the Church also applies to Mary Old Testament texts that speak of Wisdom.<sup>14</sup> In Hebrew the word for wisdom (*chochma*, כְּחָמָה) is feminine, and these texts have a double reference: to the uncreated Wisdom in God (the Logos), and to the perfect response of creation to that wisdom, personified in Mary.

A beautiful example of a wisdom text applied to Mary is Sirach 24. In this text wisdom speaks of herself as a person; she will reside in Zion, and will be known for her beauty and grace. She will also be a mother given to all God's children to bring forth virtue in them, and to lead them in the path of God to truth and life. This personification of wisdom says:

Then the creator of all things commanded, and said to me: and he that made me, rested in my tabernacle, and he said to me: Let thy dwelling be in Jacob, and thy inheritance in Israel, and take root in my elect. . . . And I took root in an honourable people, and in the portion of my God his inheritance, and my abode is in the full assembly of saints. I was exalted like a cedar in Libanus, and as a cypress tree on mount Zion. . . . I am the mother of fair love, and of fear, and of knowledge, and of holy hope. In me is all grace of the way and of the truth, in me is all hope of life and of virtue. . . . They that eat me, shall yet hunger, and they that drink me, shall yet thirst. . . . They that work by me shall not sin.<sup>15</sup>

Wisdom has taken root in Jacob above all in the Blessed Virgin, who is Israel's perfect response to the creative Wisdom of God. As the created wisdom, Mary is said to be "the *mother of fair love*, and of fear, and of knowledge, and of holy hope." Mary in her incomparable purity is the mother of fair love, because she never let any difficulty, no matter how terrible, get in the way of loving God above all things. She never let any obstacle, no matter how great, cause her to deviate from perfect conformity with the will of her Beloved Spouse: the Holy Spirit. She thus becomes the patroness of pure love in all those who invoke her.

14 See the Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Reading 1 from the Old Testament, Sir 24:1-2, 3-4, 8-12, 18-21.

15 Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 24:12-17, 24-25, 29-30 (Douay Rheims version). This corresponds to RSV Sir 24:8-21.

Cardinal Ratzinger defends the Marian interpretation of the Wisdom texts in *Daughter Zion*:

“Wisdom” appears as the mediatrix of creation and salvation history, as God’s first creature in whom both the pure, primordial form of his creative will and the pure answer, which he discovers, find their expression; indeed, one can say that precisely this concept of the answer is formative for the Old Testament idea of wisdom. Creation answers, and the answer is as close to God as a playmate, as a lover. . . .

In both Hebrew and Greek, “wisdom” is a feminine noun, and this is no empty grammatical phenomenon in antiquity’s vivid awareness of language. “Sophia”, a feminine noun, stands on that side of reality which is represented by the woman, by what is purely and simply feminine. It signifies the answer which emerges from the divine call of creation and election. It expresses precisely this: that there is a pure answer and that God’s love finds its irrevocable dwelling place within it. . . . From the viewpoint of the New Testament, wisdom refers, on one side, to the Son as the Word, in whom God creates, but on the other side to the creature, to the true Israel, who is personified in the humble maid whose whole existence is marked by the attitude of *Fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*. Sophia refers to the Logos, the Word who establishes wisdom, and also to the womanly answer which receives wisdom and brings it to fruition. The eradication of the Marian interpretation of sophiology ultimately leaves out an entire dimension of the biblical and Christian mystery.<sup>16</sup>

Mary’s total yes to God realizes the purpose for which God created the universe. The creature is to complete the circle and return back to God the love by which He has loved us first.

Joseph Ratzinger summarizes the Marian figures in the Old Testament as follows:

To leave woman out of the whole of theology would be to deny creation and election (salvation history) and thereby to nullify revelation. In the women of Israel, the mothers and the saviors, in their fruitful infertility is expressed most purely and most profoundly what creation is and what election is, what “Israel” is as God’s people. . . . Of course this line of development in the Old Testament remains just as incomplete and open as all the other lines of the Old Testament. It acquires its definitive meaning for the first time in the New Testament: in the woman who is herself described as the true holy remnant, as the authentic daughter Zion, and who is thereby the mother of the savior, yes, the mother of God. . . .

We can now say the figure of the woman is indispensable for the structure of biblical faith. She expresses the reality of creation as well as the fruitfulness of grace. The abstract outlines for the hope that God will turn toward his people receive, in the New Testament, a concrete, personal name in the figure of Jesus Christ. At the same moment, the figure of the woman, until then seen only typologically in Israel although provisionally personified by the great women of Israel, also emerges with a name: Mary. She emerges as the personal epitome of the feminine principle.<sup>17</sup>

As the epitome of the creation’s response to God, Mary plays a central role in the economy of salvation. She is infinitely subordinate to the role of her Son—God made man—but she is not thereby marginal! Rather, she is the portal of her Son, the perfect creaturely (and thus feminine) response to His Word, the perfect disciple, the Bride par excellence, creation’s embodiment of Wisdom, and the mother of all those called to be disciples with her. May the *Mother of fair love* intercede for us that we may respond to God with a share of her faith, hope, and charity.

## Other Old Testament Figures of Mary’s Virginit

The Fathers of the Church see other figures in the Old Testament as types of the virginal conception and birth. One such image, the “garden enclosed,” is in the *Song of Songs* 4:12: “A garden enclosed is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed.”<sup>18</sup> Mary’s virginal womb is a garden perpetually enclosed, a fountain locked and covered to hide it from common use. Mary’s womb was miraculous in that it was supremely fruitful, and yet remained absolutely enclosed and sealed. Its fruit was the Incarnate Son of God, given for the life of the world.

The “garden enclosed” mentioned in this verse may have originally referred to the gardens of Solomon. The pools of Solomon are located south of Bethlehem on the road to Hebron in the village of Arkas, whose name seems to derive from the Latin “hortus,” or from “hortus conclusus,” garden enclosed. There is also a convent there named Hortus conclusus.

Another beautiful prefigurement of Mary’s virginit is the Temple Sanctuary and its gate. The Prophet Ezekiel describes a vision he received of the new Temple of the Lord after twenty-five years in exile, fourteen years after the destruction of the Temple. An angel brings him in a vision back to Israel and shows him the new Temple, which he measures and describes. He receives instructions about the consecration of the Temple, and then the angel shows him the sanctuary:

Then he brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, which faces east; and it was shut. And he said to me, “This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it; for the Lord, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore it shall remain shut.”<sup>19</sup>

St. Ambrose interprets this as follows: “What is this gate but Mary? And shut because she is a virgin. Mary, then, is the gate through which Christ came into this world, when He was born by a virginal birth, without loosing the bars of her virginit.”<sup>20</sup>

18 See St. Jerome, *Adv. Jov.* 1, 31, Ep. 49,21.

19 Ezek. 44:1-2.

20 St. Ambrose, *De Institutione Virginis* 8, quoted in Alastruey, *The Blessed Virgin Mary* (St. Louis: Herder, 1963), 1:283.

16 Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion*, 25–27.

17 *Ibid.*, 23–28.

Mary's womb is the true sanctuary of the Holy of Holies—the sanctuary of the living Torah which is her Son. God enters the world by the gate of her womb, but no one else can enter by it and so it must remain forever shut. This text is exceptionally rich for it shows Mary's virginal divine maternity, and demonstrates also that Mary must remain virgin not only in the conception of Jesus, but also in His birth, and forever afterwards. For the locked gate to the sanctuary by which God enters must remain forever locked to everyone else.

Another figure of Mary's virginity is the description of the stone in Daniel 2 as not cut by human hand. Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, has a dream in which he sees a great statue made of four metals: gold, silver, bronze, and iron. And then a stone not cut by human hands hits the statue and becomes a great mountain. Daniel interprets the dream to the king:

As you looked, a stone was cut out by no human hand, and it smote the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke them in pieces; then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, all together were broken in pieces, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.<sup>21</sup>

The stone that struck the image is Jesus Christ, whose Mystical Body is the mountain that arises everywhere on earth. Why does the prophecy say that the stone is not cut by human hand? One sense of this passage refers to the virginal conception. Jesus Christ is not “cut by human hand” in the sense that He is not the product of human reproduction. His origin is above that of human agency, and so He is not formed by conjugal intercourse.

Another figure of Mary's virginity can be seen in the burning bush encountered by Moses on Mount Horeb. The bush burned and yet was not consumed, as Mary's womb was supremely fruitful, but did not cease to be virginal. St. Gregory of Nyssa writes:

From this we learn also the mystery of the Virgin: The light of divinity which through birth shone from her into human life did not consume the burning bush, even as the flower of her virginity was not withered by giving birth.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Dan 2:34–35.

<sup>22</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 59.