

The Awesome Meaning Behind 'Blessed Are You Among Women'

Every time a strong woman appeared in Jewish history, Satan had cause to worry



JOE HESCHMEYER • 3/30/2019

Blessed are you among women. It's a strange blessing: why "among women"? It might strike our modern ears as either an odd bit of feminist agitprop or, alternatively, as a suggestion that women are second-rate: something like, "You're pretty good . . . *for a girl.*" But, in fact, there seems to be a shocking meaning lying just beneath the surface.

Who are the only three women in Scripture who were greeted in this way, and what do they have in common? The three women are Jael, Judith, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. What they have in common is something that none of us had ever noticed, but which the devil couldn't have missed.

What the devil does and doesn't know

The first thing to know about the devil is that he never experienced the beatific vision. There are two ways that we can know this. First, because, as Aquinas notes, "to see God in his essence, wherein the ultimate beatitude of the rational creature consists, is beyond the nature of every created intellect" (*Summa Theologiae* I, 62, 2). The angels are created in the highest state of natural beatitude, contemplating God as fully as their created natures permit.

But to know and love God in his essence requires grace. And some of the angels—namely, Lucifer and the fallen angels—clearly don't cooperate with this grace.

This is tied to the second way we can know that Lucifer never experienced the beatific vision. Angels, like humans, are rational creatures with intellects and wills. This means that the words of Blaise Pascal apply to the wills of angels as much as to human beings:

All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.

We don't sin because we decide we don't want the good. We sin because we choose false goods over real ones, or lower goods over higher ones. So, what did that look like for the rebel angels? John Milton seems to have the right idea in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, when he imagines Satan saying, "Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice, to reign is worth ambition, though in hell: better to reign in hell than serve in heaven."

That lines up nicely with the picture we get from the prophet Isaiah: "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high. . . . I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High'" (Isa. 14:13-14).

But why does this mean Satan didn't have the beatific vision? Because, if he had, he wouldn't have been hungry for more. His intellect and will would be totally satisfied by the infinite truth and goodness of God. That's why it's impossible for the saints and angels in heaven to sin: not because God takes away their free will but because their wills finally have the infinite good for which they (and we) have always hungered.

Satan confused

There's an important consequence to the fact that Satan never saw God in his essence. It means he seems to have been unaware of God's Triune nature and unaware that the Messiah would be fully divine. In the New Testament, Satan seems as confused as the first-century Jews about the cryptic expression "Son of God."

At Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, God the Father proclaims, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Almost immediately, the devil sets to work poking and prodding, saying: "*If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread,*" and "*If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down*" (Matt. 4:3, 6, emphasis added). Had he any humility, he might have just come out and asked: "Just what did God mean in calling you his Son?"

So, the devil apparently didn't know the nature of the Messiah, but here's what he did know. After he tempted Adam and Eve into turning away from God, the Lord responded with an ominous punishment: "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" (Gen. 3:15).

That last line is ambiguous in Hebrew: it literally reads "it shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise its heel." So all the devil has to go on is that he's in trouble and that trouble involves "the woman," her child, and his head getting crushed.

At this point, he was likely on the lookout for a woman fitting this description. He might have assumed it meant Adam's wife, whose name at the time was Woman, after all (Gen. 2:23). But immediately after this, Adam changes his wife's name to Eve, a name meaning "Mother of the living" (Gen. 3:20). In any case, Eve comes and goes, and the devil had to be relieved at how her son Cain turned out. So the question remained open. If "the woman" isn't Eve, then who is she?

Jael

Just what does this have to do with Jael, Judith, and the Blessed Virgin Mary? These three women are each honored with the same title in Scripture: “blessed among women.” This might have been enough to capture his attention each time: might one of these be “the woman” God foretold? But each of these three have something else in common that should have sent shivers down the devil’s spine.

Let’s start with Jael. One of the great judges of Jewish history was the prophetess Deborah (Judg. 4:4). She prophesied the liberation of Israel from the oppression of the Canaanite king Jabin and his general Sisera, foretelling that “the Lord will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (Judg. 4:9). A listener might have reasonably assumed she meant herself, but she didn’t.

After the Israelites defeated the Canaanites in battle, Sisera hid in the tent of Heber and Jael, a couple belonging to the neutral Kenite tribe. Jael brought him milk and gave him a place to rest, but after he fell asleep, she “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, as he was lying fast asleep from weariness. So he died” (Judg. 4:21). Deborah praises her:

Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed. He asked water and she gave him milk, she brought him curds in a lordly bowl. She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen’s mallet; she struck Sisera a blow, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple (Judg. 5:24-26, emphasis added).

Satan, the true oppressor of Israel, could hardly have missed that the nation’s redemption was brought about through a woman crushing the head of Israel’s enemy.

Judith

Next, there's Judith. This time, the Israelites are under the thumb of the Assyrians, led by the general Holofernes. Judith poses as a fleeing civilian and is taken in by the Assyrians. Holofernes is smitten by her and lets his guard down. Eventually, he throws a banquet at which he gets drunk and passes out. Judith then takes a sword, grabs Holofernes by the hair, decapitates him, and then "went out, and gave Holofernes' head to her maid, who placed it in her food bag" (Jud. 13:9-10).

When she returns triumphantly to Israel, the magistrate Uzziah proclaims, "O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth, who has guided you to strike the head of the leader of our enemies" (Jth. 13:18).

At this point, one almost wonders if God was mocking Satan by raising righteous women up to crush the heads of Israel's enemies as a none-too-subtle reminder of what was coming for Satan himself.

Mary

This brings us squarely back to Ein Karem, to the spot where Elizabeth greeted her cousin Mary by pro-claiming, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Luke 1:42). For us, the phrase is familiar because of the Hail Mary, perhaps so familiar we never pay it any heed. But for the devil it would have been familiar for quite a different reason: it's the honorific given to both Jael and Judith immediately after crushing the heads of Israel's enemies. So, is Mary "the woman," and if so, whose head will she crush?

Recall how Mary ended up in Ein Karem in the first place. St. Luke tells us that, at the Visitation, "Mary arose and went" into "the hill country, to a city of Judah," where she stays for three months (Luke 1:39, 56). Elizabeth's cry of joy upon seeing her is "Why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" and John the Baptist leaps for joy in his mother's womb at the sound of her greeting (Luke 1:43-44).

It's an idyllic domestic scene. But to those familiar with the Old Testament, it also sounds a lot like when David "arose and went" from the hill country of Judah "to bring up from there the ark of God" (2 Sam. 6:2). He has trouble getting the ark through the hill country of Judah and is forced to remain there for three months (2 Sam. 6:11). Vexed at his inability to bring the ark to Jerusalem, he cries out, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?" (2 Sam. 6:9).

But when he finally succeeds, we find "King David leaping and dancing before the Lord" (2 Sam. 6:16). Once the parallel is recognized, the meaning is clear. Luke is showing us, through the Visitation, that Mary is the new Ark of the Covenant.

The terrifying Ark of the Covenant

Speaking about Mary as the New Ark might conjure up visions of her purity and holiness, like the ark of old. Rightly so. But make no mistake: the ark was terrifying. David and his men knew this firsthand, as they tried to move the ark. At one point in the journey, "Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there because he put forth his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God" (2 Sam. 6:6-7).

And why was the Ark in the hill country of Judah in the first place? Because it had been sent there by some terrified Philistines. After they captured the ark in battle, they had brought it into the temple of their god Dagon. But when they arose the next morning, "Behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the Lord. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place" (1 Sam. 5:3).

The next day, not only is the idol once again prostrate before the ark, "the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left to him" (1 Sam. 5:4). After seeing their idol decapitated, the Philistines wisely conclude that "the ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us; for his hand is heavy upon us and upon

Dagon our god,” deciding to “send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not slay us and our people” (1 Sam. 5:7, 11).

The Israelites rejoice to have the ark back, but for some, the curiosity is too much: seventy men “looked into the ark of the Lord,” and are struck dead by God (1 Sam. 6:15, 19). The ark isn’t just a pretty vessel of God. It’s mighty and terrifying, and it crushes the head of Dagon.

The woman, the child, and the serpent

And so we see that Mary is welcomed with the “blessed are you among women” greeting given in Scripture only to those women who will smash the heads of Israel’s greatest enemies. She’s given this greeting as she’s fulfilling what’s foreshadowed in David’s sojourn with the Ark of the Covenant. Satan has every reason to be afraid.

St. John sees the same thing in a vision he records in the Book of Revelation. First, he sees the heavenly temple open, “and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, loud noises, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail” (Rev. 11:19). In the next verse, he sees a “great portent” in heaven, “a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (Rev. 12:1).

This heavenly queen is pregnant, but before she can give birth, a “great red dragon” appears, standing before her, “that he might devour her child when she brought it forth” (Rev. 12:3-4). When she does deliver, she gives birth to “a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron” (Rev. 12:5).

The language here is mystical, but part of it is straightforward. John explains (in case it wasn’t obvious) that the dragon is “that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Rev. 12:9). As for the identity of the child, the hint is the “rod of iron.”

That's from a messianic prophecy, Psalm 2:7-9, explicitly about the Son of God and applied directly to Jesus by Hebrews 1:5. John also applies this description to Jesus later in Revelation (Rev. 19:15).

But there's no reason that John's apocalyptic image refers to only one child. In addition to Jesus, John also applies the "rod of iron" imagery to the triumphant saints (Rev. 2:27). So, the child seems to be both Jesus and the saints. Who, then, is "the woman"? In one sense, it's obvious: Jesus' mother, Mary. But we can also see in this depiction Holy Mother Church, who brings Christ forth into the world, and brings forth saints, through great "pangs of birth" (Rev. 12:2).

These are the three great combatants from the first book of the Bible, returned again in a cosmic battle. And just as Genesis 3:15 foretold strife between the serpent and the woman, "when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had borne the male child" (Rev. 12:13).

Wherein Mary's power lies

If you want to know why the Church cares so much about Marian dogma, the answer is right here: the devil hates Mary. When she's supernaturally protected from his wiles, John tells us that "the dragon was angry with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus" (Rev. 12:17).

Remember earlier the grammatical ambiguity of Genesis 3:15 and the question of who will crush the head of Satan. Here, we finally have an answer. John sees the archangel Michael casting Satan out of heaven, but Christ getting the glory (Rev. 12:7-10).

Why? Because Michael doesn't do it by his own strength, as if he were some sort of rival power to God. The whole point is that Christ worked through Michael. Likewise, the saints are praised for defeating Satan because "they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 12:11).

So too the devil is unable to defeat the woman, but it's not because of Mary's power apart from God. Just as Scripture can accurately speak of the Ark of the Covenant slaying the Philistines (1 Sam. 5: 11) or God slaying the Philistines (1 Sam. 5:9), we can likewise speak accurately of both Mary and Jesus crushing Satan's head.

She's the new ark, and that's something that should set Satan quaking in fear. For this reason, we can echo the biblical cry for victorious female fatales: Blessed are you among women!