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*Chapter Four*  
SECOND EVE

*I am Eve, the wife of noble Adam; it was I who  
violated Jesus in the past; it was I who robbed my  
children of heaven; it is I by right who should have  
been crucified.*

*I had heaven at my command; evil the bad choice  
that shamed me; evil the punishment for my crime  
that has aged me; alas, my hand is not pure.*

*It was I who plucked the apple; it went past the  
narrow of my gullet; as long as they live in daylight  
women will not cease from folly on account of that.*

*There would be no ice in any place; there would be  
no bright windy winter; there would be no hell,  
there would be no grief, there would be no terror  
but for me.<sup>1</sup>*

—ANONYMOUS, OLD IRISH

**T**HAT THE MOTHER OF GOD should be a virgin was a matter of such importance to the men of the early Church that it overrode all other considerations, including the evidence of revelation itself. Classical metaphysics contributed to the development of the belief, but the root of it was the Fathers' definition of evil. Sexuality represented to them the gravest danger and the fatal flaw; they viewed virginity as its opposite and its conqueror, sadly failing to appreciate that renunciation does not banish or overcome desire. It is almost impossible to overestimate the effect that the characteristic Christian association of sex and sin and death has had on the attitudes of our civilization. Since the learned Saints Jerome and Augustine (d. 430) tackled the problem of man's tendency

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to evil, the three separate concepts have been bound together tightly in a web that traps every Christian. For if desire, as natural as breath or as sleep itself, is sinful, then the Christian, like a man in the grip of a usurer, must always run back to the Church, the only source of that grace which can give him reprieve.

Examples of this nexus of ideas can be culled from almost any Christian work, but one of the most naïve and striking occurs in the early thirteenth-century collection of cautionary and other tales of Cardinal Jacques de Vitry (d. before 1240), a most successful preacher. A monk, he said, once loved a woman so much that even when she had died he could not drive the longing for her from his mind. And so he visited her grave and, opening it, gathered up her remains in his arms and buried his face in the breast that he had never embraced in life. "He filled his nostrils with that putrefying flesh," concluded the cardinal, "and the stench of it henceforth cured him of all concupiscence."<sup>2</sup>

Christian theologians have drawn subtle distinctions about sin and desire for centuries; and since the Reformation, the Catholics' position on the inevitability of sin has been less pessimistic than that of the Lutherans or the Calvinists or the Jansenists. Contemporary Catholic theology now fervently denies that concupiscence is sinful in itself, and is at pains to point out that concupiscence does not mean only sex, and that sex is certainly not sinful in itself. Concupiscence is "the tendency to sin," a weakening of the will that makes resistance difficult, that is the permanent legacy of the Fall, the part of original sin not remitted in baptism. The symptoms of original sin itself, the primal lack of grace, are defined as the state of alienation of man from God, that cosmic despair, or *angst*, which is experienced by all creatures when they contemplate the wreck they are making of their lives and that humanity in general is making of its world.<sup>3</sup>

But although the updated formulas are an improvement, they cannot camouflage the still unchallenged structure of original sin: the rebellion of Adam and Eve against God in the Garden of Eden lost mankind the paradise where pain and toil did not exist. When they sinned, death and sex as we know them entered the world. The association of sex, sin, and death is ancient and still endures in Christian symbolism: the soul dies in lust as the body rots in death. Spiritual corruption mirrors bodily dissolution. The monk breathes the corrupt flesh of his desire: the stench is his own sin.

In the fourth century, St. John Chrysostom, patriarch of Constantinople, railed: "Scarcely had they [Adam and Eve] turned from obedience to God than they became earth and ashes, and all at once, they lost

the happy life, beauty and honour of virginity . . . they were made serfs, stripped of the royal robe . . . made subject to death and every other form of curse and imperfection; then did marriage make its appearance . . . Do you see where marriage took its origin? . . . For where there is death, there too is sexual coupling; and where there is no death, there is no sexual coupling either."<sup>4</sup>

John, "the Golden Mouth," was a fiery extremist, and other theologians, including Augustine and Aquinas, have held that Adam and Eve did have intercourse in Eden, for otherwise why would God have bothered to create a woman and not a man to be Adam's companion? But the sex that Adam and Eve enjoyed was different in kind, untainted by concupiscence, not flawed by the sufferings of possible pregnancy.<sup>5</sup>

Through the virgin birth Mary conquered the post-Eden natural law that man and woman couple in lust to produce children. Chaste, she escaped the debt of Adam and Eve. Thus the seeds of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which was declared in 1854 and spares Mary all stain of original sin, were implanted during the ascetic movement of the fourth century. But from what was the Virgin exempt? What was the original sin?

Adam, the first man, is the first to heap reproach on woman; Yahweh himself comes a close second. When Adam and Eve have eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, their "eyes are opened" and they hide from Yahweh, who is strolling in the garden. But when he calls them, he realizes they have eaten the forbidden fruit because they are aware of their nakedness. He challenges them, and Adam blames the woman, "whom thou gavest to me to be with me, she gave me of the tree and I did eat" (Genesis 3:12). Yahweh turns to the woman, and she blames the serpent. Then Yahweh pronounces three solemn curses. He condemns the serpent to crawl on his belly, and promises him the eternal enmity of the woman's offspring; he later tells Adam he shall work "in the sweat of his face" and that he will decompose after death "for dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return"; to the woman he says: "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception . . . and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (Genesis 3:19, 16).

For mankind, these curses were the struggle against nature, of which hitherto Adam had been master; mortality of the flesh; and for woman in particular, the pains of childbearing—the whole gamut from menstruation to suckling—and subjection of heart and head to the authority of the male. After this, Adam then names his wife Eve, "the mother of all the living" (Genesis 3:20). God, having instituted the division of labour and

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The story of the Fall was except bigots, to be an ancient in the fifth or fourth century condition of humanity in the intimations of his immortal transience and futility of the New Covenant, who before of the Fall provided a rich between the benevolent and of pain visible everywhere in the gift of free will, who upon beginning and caused evil a

The disobedience of Adam lost—but through Christ's was regained. St. Paul exp place where original sin Adam all die, even so in C 15:22; see Romans 5:12-2 century, defined the doctrine member of the *massa pe* cleansed of his stain by b would still suffer the pena from it in heaven. That p only antidote was the grac

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the rudiments of social order, makes clothes for Adam and Eve to wear, and throws them out of paradise.

The story of the Fall was not understood, as it is today by everyone except bigots, to be an ancient myth reinterpreted by rabbinical scholars in the fifth or fourth century before Christ in order to account for the condition of humanity in the world—for the great gap between man's intimations of his immortality, his power and his knowledge, and the transience and futility of his brief span on earth. To the Christians of the New Covenant, who believed in a God who was all love, the story of the Fall provided a rich explanation for the painful discrepancy between the benevolent and omnipotent deity and the misery, disorder, and pain visible everywhere in his creation. It was man, through the precious gift of free will, who unceasingly turned against his maker from the beginning and caused evil and suffering.<sup>6</sup>

The disobedience of Adam and Eve was a catastrophe—paradise lost—but through Christ's coming, his death and Resurrection, paradise was regained. St. Paul expressed the antithesis in his letters—the only place where original sin is discussed in the New Testament: "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22; see Romans 5:12-21). Augustine, in the last years of the fourth century, defined the doctrine that each individual is born in original sin, a member of the *massa peccati* that is the human race, who has to be cleansed of his stain by baptism. But even after the sacrament, a man would still suffer the penalty of Adam's sin on earth, though redeemed from it in heaven. That penalty Augustine called concupiscence, and its only antidote was the grace of God.

Up to and during the fourth century, there was much debate, east and west, on the consequences of Adam's fall. But it was the opinions of Pelagius, St. Augustine's contemporary, that particularly spurred St. Augustine towards the definition of original sin accepted until modern times. Pelagius interpreted the Fall as the result of God's gift of free will to mankind. This was orthodox enough; but he added that Adam and Eve's sin was personal, and was not transmitted through them to the whole of mankind. He denied St. Paul's statement to the Romans: "as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Romans 5:12). "Original" sin did not exist. Man is, according to Pelagius' strikingly modern view, free to do either good or evil as he chooses, and the grace of God is a helpful but unnecessary crutch. Christ's crucifixion did not redeem mankind, because mankind did not need redemption. Adam's sin was his personal sin,

and no one else's. Jesus' life and teachings simply held up a supreme example of goodness for men to emulate.

Pelagius' reliance on human willpower and independence of God drove Augustine to tackle the fundamental Christian questions about the inheritance of Adam's sin, its very nature, and the operation of God's grace in the soul.

In the *City of God*, written 413–26, Augustine noted that Adam and Eve, after they had eaten the forbidden fruit, covered their genitals, not their hands or mouths, which had done the deed. From this he reasoned that the knowledge they had acquired was of an inner force, which he called *epithymia* (concupiscence). It affects all areas of life, he wrote, but particularly the sexual act, which cannot be performed without passion. In the involuntary impulse of desire, which cannot be quelled by the will, Augustine perceived the penalty of Adam's sin. The passion aroused by making love was sinful; not the act itself, for the perpetuation of God's creation must be good.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Augustine drew the graphic analogy of the man with a limp who is doing a good deed. The limp does not detract from the good of his deed; nor does the good of the deed improve his limp. "We ought not to condemn marriage because of the evil of lust, nor must we praise lust because of the good of marriage."<sup>8</sup>

Augustine suggested that either the hereditary taint was transmitted through the male genitals themselves during intercourse, and that the body itself, not the soul, was genetically flawed by the Fall, or that because a child cannot be conceived outside the sexual embrace, which necessarily involves the sin of passion, the child is stained from that moment. The premise for this literal connection of intercourse and original sin was the virgin birth of Christ. The son of God chose to be born from a virgin mother because this was the only way a child could enter the world without sin. "Let us love chastity above all things," Augustine wrote, "for it was to show that this was pleasing to Him that Christ chose the modesty of a virgin womb."<sup>9</sup> Augustine thus bound up three ideas in a causal chain: the sinfulness of sex, the virgin birth, and the good of virginity.

Augustine was not alone among men of his day to hold such ideas; but he developed the theory more fully. Ambrose had declared that Jesus would have been sullied by an ordinary birth, and Jerome after him also saw the virgin birth as the supreme seal of approval on the celibate life. "Now that a virgin has conceived in the womb and borne to us a child . . . now the chain of the curse is broken. Death came through Eve, but life has come through Mary. And thus the gift of virginity has been

bestowed most richly from a woman."<sup>10</sup> And the Christian Church. The Christian ethic cannot

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bestowed most richly upon women, seeing that it has had its beginning from a woman."<sup>10</sup> Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome: the colossi of the Christian Church. Their cumulative impact on the development of the Christian ethic cannot be overemphasized.

Yet why did the Fathers agree that the way of sexual abstinence was holier than another? The Bible does not proclaim the ascetic life; for although the Judaic concern with pollution, codified in the ritual laws of Leviticus, lent some authority to purificatory practices, the Book's heroes, sages, and prophets are married, sometimes polygamous, and unashamedly prolific, almost to a man. Yet Jerome saw Daniel as a virgin, although no evidence exists; St. John Damascene (d. c. 749) apostrophized the prophet's body: "So hardened by virginity that the teeth of the beasts were unable to tear it apart."<sup>11</sup> In an Old Testament figure like Susannah, demure before the aged voyeurs, the Fathers saw a forerunner of the Christian virgin. Joseph, refusing the embrace of Potiphar's wife, and Judith, luring Holofernes to his gory death yet preserving her virtue the while, both prefigured the conquest of lust by chastity. Because no mention is made of Miriam's husband, commentators seized on her as the prototype of her namesake, the Virgin Mary. In medieval times, a parallel between Judith and Mary was developed: the widely read *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, which unveiled the inner typological meaning in Old and New Testament scenes by setting them side by side, shows Judith's triumph over Holofernes beside an all-conquering Virgin Mary, who transfixes Satan with the vexillum thrust deep into his gullet.<sup>12</sup>

The Gospels were not much more forthcoming than the Old Testament on the perils of the flesh: Jesus applies to himself the very word Augustine uses for concupiscence in a positive context: "With desire [*epithymia*] I have desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). He does not single out carnal sins for particular opprobrium, but reminds the Pharisees who bring him the adulteress that they too are sinners. And then he sends her from him with gentle words.

But in the Epistles of St. Paul the stress falls differently. His severity is notorious. Caught up in his pressing vision of the world's end, Paul urged the Corinthians to remain wed or unwed, whatever their condition, and advocates celibacy in particular as "good for the present distress." A married man or woman has ties and responsibilities, worries and duties that prevent total dedication to God's work. So although Paul concedes that "concerning virgins, I have no commandment of the Lord . . .," he tells the community, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman" (1 Corinthians 7:1). He, Paul, can concentrate all upon the imminent salvation of Christ and the Second Coming: "For I would that all men were

even as myself . . . I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them to abide even as I. But if they cannot abstain, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn" (1 Corinthians 7:7-9).

Throughout these famous ringing passages, the conflict between the things of God and the things of man, between heaven and the world, is perceived in sexual terms, and a hellenistic fear of reason's overthrow by passion—the same fear so vivid in Augustine later—colours Paul's warnings. He tells the Thessalonians: "For this is the will of God . . . that ye should abstain from fornication . . ." (1 Thessalonians 4:3). To the Galatians he lists "the works of the flesh," of which "adultery, fornication, uncleanness and lasciviousness" lead the catalogue of sins (Galatians 5:19)—an accurate reflection of Greco-Jewish morality and taboo. The Apocalypse of John strengthened the eschatological urgency of the ascetic life, for the first fruits of the Redemption, the faithful standing nearest to the throne of the lamb with the twenty-four elders, are the hundred and forty-four thousand virgins: "They which were not defiled with women" (Revelation 14:4).

Like Paul and John, the brilliant men of the ascetic movement of the fourth century were writing within a specific intellectual tradition in which various dualistic ideas about the importance of spiritual detachment from the world played a significant part. Augustine's theology of original sin can be understood only in the context of the long intellectual journey he made before he became a Christian in 387. In pursuit of the central problem—the origin and nature of evil—Augustine had tasted and sometimes accepted many of the philosophical systems abroad in the turmoil of Rome's decline. For nine years he had embraced the Manichaean religion, which held that evil was a separate and independent force, eternally in conflict with goodness. But he had abandoned this dualism, passed through a brief Sceptic phase, and had then become deeply impressed by the writings of Plotinus (d. 270) and the neoplatonism of Alexandria, which considered that evil was the absence of good, rather than a power on its own.

Common to the teachings of Mani (d. 277) and Plotinus, however, and to many of the creeds current in the years of paganism's last stand was a distaste for the world, a profound sense of a breach between things of the flesh and things of the spirit, and a restless quest for spiritual fulfilment through detachment from earthly concerns and pleasures. Plotinus himself, for all his sense of the beauty of the universe, wrote: "The soul has become ugly, by being immersed in what is not itself, by its descent into the body."<sup>13</sup> The sense that flesh itself was vitiated affected deeply Augustine's later analysis of the Fall.<sup>14</sup>

Other currents from Egypt, and Asia Minor, novel and radical the many otherworldly que orthodoxy with its con cultivated the bliss of a an influence over Alexa tury and moulded the d

In the deserts of the and pagan ascetics ha among a motley crowd sect, who won the ungl lived in a completely s formed unceasing ritua nated flesh. Around 270 pursue lives of equal s Diocletian in 303 drove wrestling with demons himself, was among t around 357 by St. Atha became the most semir effects on western idea some twenty years of it centuries, inspiring Ma fifteenth, and Flaubert *Antoine*, in the nineteer

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Other currents from different sources also converged in the near east, Egypt, and Asia Minor, where Christianity was nurtured, and however novel and radical the new religion was, it represented a syncretism of many otherworldly quests of the time. Gnosticism had scarred Christian orthodoxy with its contempt for the material universe. The Stoics, who cultivated the bliss of apathy through control of the passions, exercised an influence over Alexandrian thought that persisted until the fifth century and moulded the development of Christianity.

In the deserts of the middle east, in Egypt and Palestine, both Jewish and pagan ascetics had traditionally led lives of harsh self-discipline among a motley crowd of outlaws and runaway prisoners. The Essene sect, who won the ungrudging admiration of the Christian Epiphanius, lived in a completely secluded community, practised chastity, and performed unceasing ritual ablutions to purify their despised and contaminated flesh. Around 270, the first Christians retired up the Nile Valley to pursue lives of equal solitude and rigour, and the great persecution of Diocletian in 303 drove many others to join them. St. Antony (d. 356), wrestling with demons as he inflicted yet more severe austerities upon himself, was among the first desert hermits. His biography, written around 357 by St. Athanasius, vividly described his ordeals, and instantly became the most seminal manual on the ascetic life, with far-reaching effects on western idealism.<sup>15</sup> It was already being read in Gaul within some twenty years of its composition, and its influence has endured for centuries, inspiring Martin Schongauer's extraordinary engraving in the fifteenth, and Flaubert's vituperative fantasy, *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, in the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

When Augustine, Ambrose, and Jerome endorsed virginity for its special holiness, they were the heirs and representatives of much current thought in the Roman empire of their day. And in this battle between the flesh and the spirit, the female sex was firmly placed on the side of the flesh. For as childbirth was woman's special function, and its pangs the special penalty decreed by God after the Fall, and as the child she bore in her womb was stained by sin from the moment of its conception, the evils of sex were particularly identified with the female. Woman was womb and womb was evil: this cluster of ideas endemic to Christianity is but the extension of Augustine's argument about original sin. St. Jean Eudes in the seventeenth century sympathized with women's plight: "It is a subject of humiliation of all the mothers of the children of Adam to know that while they are with child, they carry within them an infant . . . who is the enemy of God, the object of his hatred and malediction, and the shrine of the demon."<sup>17</sup>

For the Fathers of the Church after Augustine, woman is the cause of the Fall, the wicked temptress, the accomplice of Satan, and the destroyer of mankind. The fury unleashed against Eve and all her kind is almost flattering, so exaggerated is the picture of women's fatal and all-powerful charms and men's incapacity to resist. Tertullian gave his rancour the bite of the most accomplished and deadly Latin since Tacitus: "Do you not realize, Eve, that it is you? The curse God pronounced on your sex weighs still on the world. Guilty, you must bear its hardships. You are the devil's gateway, you desecrated the fatal tree, you first betrayed the law of God, you softened up with your cajoling words the man against whom the devil could not prevail by force. The image of God, Adam, you broke him as if he were a plaything. *You* deserved death, and it was the son of God who had to die!"<sup>18</sup>

Eve, cursed to bear children rather than blessed with motherhood, was identified with nature, a form of low matter that drags man's soul down the spiritual ladder. In the faeces and urine—Augustine's phrase—of childbirth, the closeness of woman to all that is vile, lowly, corruptible, and material was epitomized; in the "curse" of menstruation, she lay closer to the beasts; the lure of her beauty was nothing but an aspect of the death brought about by her seduction of Adam in the garden. St. John Chrysostom warned: "The whole of her bodily beauty is nothing less than phlegm, blood, bile, rheum, and the fluid of digested food. . . . If you consider what is stored up behind those lovely eyes, the angle of the nose, the mouth and cheeks you will agree that the well-proportioned body is merely a whitened sepulchre."<sup>19</sup> It would be mistaken to take such a speech as the ravings of an individual, for it finds many echoes in later writings about priestly celibacy. By the time of Aquinas, the undertow of misogyny in patristic thought was so strong that he had difficulty in reconciling the creation—"male and female"—in God's image with woman's inferiority, propounded by Aristotle and by St. Paul.<sup>20</sup> Paul said: "For the man indeed ought not to cover his head, for as much as he is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of man. . . . Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man" (I Corinthians 11:7, 9).

Because of the curse of Eve in Eden, the idea of woman's subjection was bound up in Christian thought with her role as mother and as temptress. In iconography, Satan is often female, and not only in minor Books of Hours, but also in masterworks with a permanent influence on the imagination: Michelangelo's Eve on the Sistine ceiling takes the fruit from a strenuous and muscular seductress (figure 8). Ignatius of Loyola

(d. 1556) even saw the serpent as a tyrant who conducts himself as a woman and a tyrant if he has

But it was the eloquence of the relationship between the accuser and the hegemony: "Tell me, Whom do judges and tyrants poison, or those who sell poisons?"<sup>22</sup> It was the fear that the world would not be contaminated by the fall of the human species but by the ascetic revolt of Christ. The mother of Christ from the East exerted an overwhelming influence on scriptural commentary.

The inauguration of the Incarnation as a satisfying image: a new beginning, the Incarnation and the new clay, so he had to descend to earth but was not to be should be pristine and not influenced the ideas of the equivocal stories of Jesus.

The fundamental image turned the Old Covenant into images in the concept of the second Eve, mother of Paul had triumphantly summed up all that had passed through whom all was reborn (15:22; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Justin Martyr, in different ways up and extended the image wrote that Christ was

in order that by the serpent took its beginning. For Eve, being a virgin, she was a serpent, and brought forth receiving faith and gr

(d. 1556) even saw typical female guile in the devil: "The enemy conducts himself as a woman. He is a weakling before a show of strength, and a tyrant if he has his will."<sup>21</sup>

But it was the eloquent John Chrysostom who resolved the contradiction between the accepted passivity of women and their marked evil hegemony: "Tell me, what kind of people inspire the most horror? Whom do judges and magistrates strike down? Those who drink the fatal poisons, or those who prepare the draught and concoct the envenomed potions?"<sup>22</sup> It was therefore essential that the son of the Highest should not be contaminated by any of this sinfulness, inherent in the whole human species but more pronounced in the female. Thus during the ascetic revolt of Christianity's first centuries, the need to exempt the mother of Christ from tainted sexuality and to proclaim her virgin purity exerted an overwhelming pressure on definitions of doctrine and on scriptural commentaries.

The inauguration of the new era of Christ found in virginity a most satisfying image: a new, incorrupt, untainted world had been created by the Incarnation and the Redemption; just as God moulded Adam from new clay, so he had fashioned his son anew. Because Jesus did not descend to earth but was born of a woman, it was crucial that her clay too should be pristine and unspotted. This symbolism of a new world also influenced the ideas of early Christian theologians far more than the equivocal stories of Jesus' birth in the Gospels.

The fundamental idea that the Incarnation of the godhead had overturned the Old Covenant of sin and death found one of its loveliest images in the concept of the Virgin who gives birth to the redeemer. She is the second Eve, mother of all the living in a new, spiritual sense. St. Paul had triumphantly declared that Christ was the second Adam, the sum of all that had passed since the Creation, the new creature of God in whom all was reborn pure and incorrupt—indeed virgin (1 Corinthians 15:22; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 5:14). Irenaeus (d. c. 202) and Justin Martyr, in different milieux and seemingly independently, picked up and extended the Pauline idea to include the Virgin Mary. Justin wrote that Christ was born of the Virgin

in order that by the same way in which the disobedience caused by the serpent took its beginning; by this way should it also take its destruction. For Eve, being a virgin and uncorrupt, conceived the word spoken of the serpent, and brought forth disobedience and death. But Mary the Virgin, receiving faith and grace . . . [gave birth to him] . . . by whom God

destroys both the serpent and those angels and men that became like it. . . .<sup>23</sup>

Irenaeus embroidered the same theme a few years later: "as the human race was sentenced to death by means of a virgin . . . the guile of the serpent was overcome by the simplicity of the dove and we are set free from those chains by which we had been bound to death."<sup>24</sup>

The economy and proportion of this Pauline idea gave it great power and appeal. To this day it is a specially graceful analogue, architectural in its harmoniousness, a great vault thrown over the history of western attitudes to women, the whole mighty span resting on Eve the temptress on one side, and Mary the paragon on the other. The imagery of paradise regained through Mary inspired the luxuriant praises of one of the Virgin's earliest and most eloquent poets, Ephrem of Syria, who catches the sudden splendour of his native country's spring when he sings of the Creation clothed once more "in a robe of flowers/ and a tunic of blossoms" at the moment of the Annunciation. Eve, he writes, had covered Adam in a shameful coat of skins, but Mary has woven a new garment of salvation. Mary is the bright eye that illuminates the world, Eve the other eye, "blind and dark." The wine Eve pressed for mankind poisoned them; the vine that grew in Mary nourishes and saves the world.<sup>25</sup>

The idea of the second Eve, through whom the sin of the first was ransomed, was imported to the west, where it inspired the ingenious imagination of the medieval Christian to pun and riddle with a characteristic sense of delight and love of symmetry. For the greeting of the angel—Ave—neatly reversed the curse of Eve: the exquisite antiphon, the *Ave maris stella*, written for the feast of the Annunciation in the seventh or eighth century, plays on the anagram very prettily:

*Sumens illud Ave  
Gabrielis ore,  
Funda nos in pace  
Mutans nomen Evae.*

(Receiving that Ave from the lips of Gabriel, establish us in peace, changing Eva's name.)<sup>26</sup>

The Fall even came to be seen as a source of joy, for it had made possible the Incarnation through Mary. "O *felix culpa*" (Oh happy fault), wrote St. Ambrose.<sup>27</sup> In the fifteenth century, an anonymous poet of genius thanked God for the Fall, because it had brought about the Virgin Mary:

Christian art seized upon the idea of the Fall in the midst of *tristitia*. For example, the like predella panel painting in Washington) shows the Virgin while Mary seated in the news of the Incarnation (plate III, figure 3). The events, one initiating the New, form a diptych. In Munich, time is even shown from which the crucifixion while on the other Mary sings.

The symbolism of the inauguration of a new order to make it plain that this greatest and most thoughtful of the Church in Alexandria in the third elucidated God's plan for the virgin mother. The allegorical meaning beneath the narrative. But its general historical and literal (300) scorned for its letter of the Scriptures and tables instead of the

It was the fruit of the Fall; and the rational "suitable for God" was fruitful. This was made clear in sermons of later medieval times still vividly apparent

Ne had the apple taken been,  
 The apple taken been,  
 Ne hadde never our Lady  
 A been heaven's queen.  
 Blessed be the time  
 That apple taken was!  
 Therefore we may singen  
 "Deo Gratias!"<sup>28</sup>

Christian art seized on this suggestive strain, the *gaudium* in the midst of *tristia*. For example, the Sienese master Giovanni di Paolo's gemlike predella panel painted around 1445 (now in the National Gallery, Washington) shows Adam and Eve hounded from paradise by an angel, while Mary seated in a pavilion in the same garden of paradise receives the news of the Incarnation from another angelic messenger (colour plate III, figure 3). Time is telescoped, the cycle brought full circle, and the events, one initiating the Old Covenant, the other bringing in the New, form a diptych. In a Salzburg miniature of around 1481, now in Munich, time is even more compressed, for on one side of the Tree of Life from which the crucified Christ hangs, Eve leads a troop of death and sin, while on the other Mary stands at the head of a group of pious communicants.

The symbolism of the new Eve marked that break with the past, that inauguration of a new era at the heart of the Christian message. But in order to make it plain that God in his wisdom had prepared the world for this greatest and most ineffable of mysteries since the beginning, thinkers of the Church like Origen and his inspired school of exegetes in Alexandria in the third century quarried the Scriptures for symbols that elucidated God's plan to make all things new in Christ virgin born of a virgin mother. The Alexandrian method was to unveil the hidden, typological meaning beneath the written word of the Bible and the superficial narrative. But its great rival, the school of Antioch, adopted a more historical and literal approach that the Greek Christian Methodius (d. c. 300) scorned for its limitations: "The Jews who hover about the bare letter of the Scriptures like so-called butterflies about the leaves or vegetables instead of the flowers and fruit as the bee does. . . ." <sup>29</sup>

It was the fruit and the flowers that Origen and his followers were after; and the rationale behind the bee's suck was simple: what was "suitable for God" would be extracted, and all else discarded as incongruous. This was metaphysical speculation at its most inspired, and in the sermons of later medieval mystics like Bernard, the Origenist influence is still vividly apparent. The argument from appropriateness had been the

axiom of the Alexandrian school of philosophy since the days of the Jewish mystic Philo, and its effects on theology and Mariology are still immense.<sup>30</sup> Origen was a dazzling polemicist who later in life landed himself in trouble for preaching that even the Devil could be saved.<sup>31</sup> In Origen's view, it was fitting that God's only son be born of the Virgin, and the Old Testament was one unbroken chain of prophecy that foretold it.

The burning bush that Moses saw was, like Mary, inflamed with the spirit of God and yet not consumed by the flames, as she was filled with the fires of the Holy Ghost and yet never felt the heat of lust.<sup>32</sup> When Isaiah prophesied, "For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground . . ." (Isaiah 53:20), he was pointing out that the Messiah would rise from a virgin womb, unfertilized, therefore "dry."<sup>33</sup>

In this manner the Fathers of the Church, after Origen, and the medieval lyricists inspired by them, expounded different images and passages of the Old Testament to surround Mary with the myriad trophies and attributes with which she is still invoked in such prayers as the litany of Loreto. She is the tower of ivory, the house of gold, the Ark of the Covenant made of incorruptible timber, the lily among thorns, the rose in Jericho, the rose of Sharon, the tower of David, the holy root, the rod of Jesse.<sup>34</sup>

The operation of God on the virginal womb of Mary was prefigured in Scripture in a score of different ways: she was fecundated, like the fleece of Gideon drenched with dew while all around it remained dry (Judges 6:36-40); the rod of Aaron, like the womb of the Virgin, flowered of its own accord (Numbers 17:8); the stone in the dream of Nebuchadnezzar "was cut out of the mountain with no hands" (Daniel 2:34); the staff of Moses turned spontaneously into a serpent (Exodus 7:9); the manna fell like rain, a free gift from heaven (Exodus 16:14); the unaccompanied finger of God wrote the tablets of the law (Deuteronomy 9:10).

Mary's virginal womb was prefigured in the sensual praises of the Song of Songs: "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed" (Song of Solomon 4:12). The same intact maidenhead is concealed behind the words of the Lord to Ezekiel: "This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it, therefore it shall be shut" (Ezekiel 44:2). The pot of gold that preserves manna from rotteness (Ezekiel 16:33) reflects her pure and uncorrupted womb.

On similar lines, the Virgin is the book Isaiah was shown by God,

which was "sealed and young men who stood figured her unimpaired lions' den. In all these nature, the Fathers saw and birth. The magnificent *Akathistos*, hymns the of burning desires. The Marian attributes, which "the ladder in the firm leading men from earth Testament, the "sea was gushed with water and pillar of fire leading to across the wilderness, honey."<sup>35</sup>

Sheer exultation in particular the hymns the Virgin inspired the late. But the patristic imagery, betrays lines of the first, the equation of that the divine can be birth, and Aaron's rod nature; second, the lit virginity, as the close sealed," an unbroken line

Both these assumptions with lasting consequences

The principal catastrophe character and to her view was heresy—the problem question of Christ's nature

The greatest threat to cism, a mystery-cult whose verse to be irredeemably made flesh. The Doctrine Jesus was a divine person spirit, wholly free of heresy, the earliest Christ of Christ, which was the

which was "sealed and could not be read" (Isaiah 29:12). The three young men who stood in the fiery furnace and were not burned prefigured her unimpaired virginity, as did Daniel's invulnerability in the lions' den. In all these events, which suspended the ordinary course of nature, the Fathers saw presages of the miracle of Christ's conception and birth. The magnificent, enraptured sixth-century Greek paean, the *Akathistos*, hymns the Virgin as the destroyer of demons and the slaker of burning desires. The writer of this long and impassioned lexicon of Marian attributes, who may have been Romanos Melodos, also calls her "the ladder in the firmament" by which God came down, the bridge leading men from earth to heaven, and, mining the typology of the Old Testament, the "sea which drowned the spiritual Pharaoh," the rock that gushed with water and quenched the spiritual thirst of the faithful, the pillar of fire leading those lost in the darkness, as the Israelites were led across the wilderness, and the promised land that flows with milk and honey.<sup>35</sup>

Sheer exultation in the prodigy by which God became man marks in particular the hymns and homilies of the Greeks whose devotion to the Virgin inspired the later exhilaration of the medieval Church in the west. But the patristic imagery of the virgin birth, underneath its joyous fertility, betrays lines of thought that should be considered more seriously: first, the equation of the supernatural and the unnatural, the reasoning that the divine can be glimpsed only in phenomena that, like the virgin birth, and Aaron's rod and Gideon's fleece, suspend the normal course of nature; second, the literal interpretation of purity as technical, physical virginity, as the closed womb, the "spring shut up," the "fountain sealed," an unbroken body, and not as a spiritual state of purity.

Both these assumptions are still dynamic in the cult of the Virgin, with lasting consequences, as we shall see.

The principal catalyst, however, to the definition of Mary's role and character and to her veneration as the mother of God in patristic times was heresy—the prolonged and acrimonious controversy surrounding the question of Christ's nature for the first five hundred years of Christianity.

The greatest threat to orthodoxy in the second century was Gnosticism, a mystery-cult version of Christianity that held the material universe to be irredeemably corrupt, and therefore denied that the Word was made flesh. The Docetists, one branch of the Gnostics, maintained that Jesus was a divine phantom (from the Greek *dokeo*, I appear), a pure spirit, wholly free of the bondage of matter. In order to combat this heresy, the earliest Christian theologians had to stress the full humanity of Christ, which was best maintained by the human manner of his birth

and death. Ignatius of Antioch (d. c. 110), addressing the fledgling communities of Asia Minor, emphasized forcibly that Mary truly gave birth to Jesus: "Jesus Christ our God was conceived by Mary of the seed of David and of the spirit of God . . ." (Ephesians 18). To the people of Tralles, he was more urgent: "Close your ears, then, if anyone preaches to you speaking of Jesus Christ. Christ was of David's line. He was the son of Mary; he was verily and indeed, born, and ate and drank . . ." (*Trallians* 9).<sup>36</sup> To Smyrna, he was as insistent: "You hold the firmest convictions about our Lord; believing him to be truly of David's line in his manhood, yet Son of God by the divine will and power; truly born of a Virgin; baptized by John . . . and in the days of Pontius Pilate and Herod the Tetrarch, truly pierced by nails in his human flesh . . ." (*Smyrnaeans* 1).<sup>37</sup> Ignatius' impassioned phrases still echo in the affirmations of the Christian creed.

Asserting Christ's full humanity could, however, tip the scales against his full divinity. Two hundred years later, the greatest menace to the Church was no longer Gnosticism, but Arianism, which did indeed proclaim that Jesus Christ was an ordinary human creature, whom God had only adopted at the baptism in the Jordan when he said: "Thou art my beloved son" (Luke 3:22). In order to confound this heresy, and yet avoid the equal fault of denying Christ's humanity, the birth of Christ from a woman by the operation of the Holy Ghost, and his consequent dual nature as man and God had to be satisfactorily defined.

The struggle was by no means over when the Emperor Constantine, presiding at the Council of Nicaea in 325, pronounced the teachings of Arius to be anathema. The agonized and complex theological debate on the nature of Christ continued for hundreds of years afterwards, arousing intense passions almost impossible for simple modern minds to credit. But as the arguments raged over the empire, the mother of Christ was forced into a more and more prominent position. Her unbroken virginity suspended the law of nature, and thus manifested the presence of the divine, but her full parturition of Christ served to prove his manhood. The virgin birth was the key to orthodox Christology.

In the fourth century, under the impact of Arianism, Mary's virginity was stressed. At the Second Council of Constantinople in 381, her perpetual virginity was proclaimed. In Milan, the Christian writer Jovinian, who had dared to deny Mary's virginity during and after the birth of Christ (he never said she was not a virgin when she conceived), was excommunicated at a synod under St. Ambrose and again in Rome, where Jerome fulminated against his heresy. In 390, Pope Siricius proclaimed

Mary an inviolate virgin. But the climax of the century, in a bitter polemic with the people and Antioch, was the Virgin Mary.

The patriarch of Antioch, the long-tongued preacher Proclus, in which Proclus embraced the Incarnation, and gave her the title of mother of God). It was Nestorius had been tried in Antioch, where the sect was firmly held, and he was excommunicated—term of praise. It was God, who had existed before Bethlehem that first Christ was born. He declared, and Nestorius called *protokos*—or at most, the first-born—not be the mother of God. It was of such an extravagant nature that it raised her to the rank of deity.

The issue raised by Nestorius engaged the ancient and modern world. In Alexandria, where the sect of Proclus. The resulting controversy among the people as well as the pope of the battle no one side had been established. But finally, Cyril of Alexandria was elected in June 431, and excommunicated Nestorius. "To do so was questionable (mother of God) and Nestorius demonstrated the error of the Virgin Mary had been proclaimed by Cyril!" they cheered.

The political and theological struggle, however, and in 451, at the Second Ecumenical Council of the Church, Nestorius was excommunicated, and it was officially given the title of the Virgin Mary.



Mary an inviolate virgin during the pregnancy and the birth of Christ. But the climax of the controversy came at the beginning of the fifth century, in a bitter power struggle between the rival sees of Constantinople and Antioch, which effectively inaugurated official veneration for the Virgin Mary.

The patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, heard the golden-tongued preacher Proclus give a sermon in praise of Mary in about 428, in which Proclus embroidered many a lavish simile of Mary's role in the Incarnation, and gave her the title *Theotokos* (the God-bearer, the mother of God). It was not the first time the title had been used. But Nestorius had been trained in the pragmatic and restrained tradition of Antioch, where the separation of Christ's two natures as God and man was firmly held, and he balked at this excessive—and in his eyes heterodox—term of praise. It implied, he preached in reply, that the Word of God, who had existed from all eternity, was born in the stable at Bethlehem that first Christmas night. God was not a baby two or three months old, he declared, and Mary was either the mother of the man—*Anthropotokos*—or at most, the mother of Christ—*Christotokos*—but she could not be the mother of God, because God had always been. Besides, the use of such an extravagant title dangerously exaggerated her standing and raised her to the rank of a goddess, as worshipped by the heathen.

The issue raised by Nestorius and Proclus' disagreement soon engaged the ancient and inflammatory rivalry between Constantinople and Alexandria, where the zealot Patriarch Cyril leaped to the defence of Proclus. The resulting feud entangled the imperial court in Constantinople as well as the pope in Rome. It is interesting that even at the height of the battle no one suggested Mary was not a virgin—that at least had been established. But they quarrelled about her divine motherhood. Finally, Cyril of Alexandria presided at a heated council held at Ephesus in June 431, and excommunicated his enemy Nestorius. His authority to do so was questionable. Nevertheless, Mary was proclaimed *Theotokos* (mother of God) and in torchlit processions through the city the Ephesians demonstrated their jubilation that the man who had slighted the Virgin Mary had been deposed. "Praise be to the Theotokos! Long live Cyril!" they cheered.

The political and religious wrangling was not ended by Ephesus, however, and in 451, at the Council of Chalcedon, the Fourth Ecumenical Council of the Church, the two natures of Christ were formally reasserted, in an attempt to heal divisions still rankling. The Virgin was officially given the title *Aeiparthenos* (ever-virgin) and her virginity at

the conception, *in partu*, and *post partum* thereby affirmed. Two hundred years later, in 649, at the Fourth Lateran Council, Pope Martin I (d. 655) declared Mary's perpetual virginity a dogma of the Church.

The crowd's testimony to the Virgin's popularity in 431 was indeed eloquent, and the decision of Ephesus stands as the first landmark in the cult of Mary as mother of God. Both after Ephesus and Chalcedon, the government asked the approval of Symeon the Stylite (d. 459), who lived on top of a column in a Syrian monastery. Symeon, simple, unlettered, and holy, had won enormous popularity and prestige, and the need for his acceptance suggests that although the conciliar decisions that proclaimed Mary *Theotokos* and *Aeiparthenos* sprang from quarrels in the upper echelons of Church and state and settled complex Christological questions, they did undoubtedly have a base in the faith of ordinary Christians. It must also be remembered, however, as always with regard to spontaneous popular movements, that Cyril of Alexandria's agents had been active at Ephesus before the Council opened and the people's will, so impressively displayed, may have been well oiled.<sup>38</sup>

After the turbulence of the fifth century, the cult of the Virgin grew more smoothly, focussing its attentions on her miraculous virginity and her divine motherhood. The earliest feasts of the Virgin were instituted in the fifth century in Byzantium: the Annunciation (first kept on Ember Wednesday during Advent and then at the vernal equinox, March 25); and a commemoration in honour of her virginity, which was held either before or after Christmas all over the empire (probably on the Sunday before in Byzantium, December 18 in Spain, January 18 in Gaul, January 1 in Rome. It has now been revived in the new liturgy as the Solemnity of the Mother of God on the Christmas octave). Both these early feasts celebrate Mary's vital role in the Incarnation. Around the year 600, the feast of the Dormition, or Falling Asleep of the Virgin, was introduced on August 15; and fifty years later her Nativity and Presentation in the temple, based on the *Book of James*, began to be commemorated on September 8 and November 21, respectively.

Another feast was instituted in Jerusalem as early as the middle of the fourth century: the feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the temple. It was first kept forty days after the Epiphany, on February 14. By the early sixth century in Byzantium, the feast, now called the *Hypapante* (the Meeting), focussed less on the exemplary obedience of Jesus and Mary to Mosaic law than on Simeon and Anna's inspired recognition of the saviour.

Monks fleeing the Moslem invasion of the Holy Land in the seventh century brought the Byzantine quartet of Marian feastdays westwards: the

Annunciation, the Nativity, the Dormition, and the Purification, when it reached Rome, where it coincided with the feast of the Purification. The new character the feast assumed in the West was the celebration of the mystery of the Virgin's cult, where it coincided with the feast of the Purification. The new character the feast assumed in the West was the celebration of the mystery of the Virgin's cult, where it coincided with the feast of the Purification. The new character the feast assumed in the West was the celebration of the mystery of the Virgin's cult, where it coincided with the feast of the Purification.

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The Gospel story had been defiled by childbirth, and the Virgin's feast assimilated to the young Catholic girls walking to pierce through night's incandescent purity, is the

Thus the invincible as the power of chastity over from its official beginning, sign of her supremacy, is patristic writings, apocryphal is fundamental to the very that the very first prayer to (d. 390), is the implorator in danger.<sup>41</sup> The cult of ideas about the dangers women.

Annunciation, the Nativity, the Dormition, and the Presentation; the last, when it reached Rome, became the celebration of Mary's purification. The new character the feast acquired is highly indicative of the development of the Virgin's cult in Europe. For in the west, the accent of the feast of the Purification fell strongly on Mary's holiness and came to celebrate the mystery of her purity. Also, it was moved to February 2, where it coincided with the ancient pagan feast of lights, when torches and candles were carried in nighttime processions to exorcize the spirits of plague and famine, of earthquake and all natural disasters emanating from the darkness of the underworld.<sup>39</sup> Under Pope Sergius I, in 701, the Virgin's feast assimilated the symbol; and to this day, on February 2, young Catholic girls walk in procession in white veils and lighted candles to pierce through night's shadows with new light. Mary's holiness, her incandescent purity, is the source of this power over darkness.

The Gospel story had seemed to imply that Mary, like all mothers, was defiled by childbirth and in need of purification, but the feast that commemorated it twisted the Judaic rite into a thoroughly Christian encomium to the power of purity over evil. A Byzantine historian of the second half of the ninth century had chronicled the introduction of the Purification in Byzantium: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Justinian in the month of October, there was a plague in Byzantium; and in the same year the Purification began to be celebrated on the second day of February."<sup>40</sup> Not surprisingly, later Christians like William of Malmesbury in the twelfth century understood there to be a causal connection: the Virgin lifted the plague because the feast was instituted in her honour. Mary's purificatory fire had supreme prophylactic powers: purity prevailed against impurity.

Thus the invincible association of holiness with physical virginity, of the power of chastity over evil, dyed the entire fabric of the Marian cult from its official beginnings in Byzantium. Her miraculous virginity, the sign of her supremacy, is the strongest theme in the whole symphony of patristic writings, apocryphal tales, and early ritual. Christian asceticism is fundamental to the veneration of the *Theotokos*; it is not surprising that the very first prayer to the Virgin, recorded by St. Gregory Nazianzen (d. 390), is the imploration of Justina to come to the help of a virgin in danger.<sup>41</sup> The cult of Mary is inextricably interwoven with Christian ideas about the dangers of the flesh and their special connection with women.