

THE BIBLE AND THE VIRGIN MARY

A JOURNEY IN SCRIPTURE

LESSON 6: BORN A VIRGIN

WHAT WE'LL COVER IN LESSON SIX

Marian Apparition: Our Lady of Lourdes

Themes Covered

- » The nature and role of dogmas
- » The dogma of Mary's Perpetual Virginity
- » Mary's true interior, spiritual identity
- » Old Testament foreshadows of Mary's perpetual virginity
- » Answers to the objection of Jesus' "brethren"
- » St. Jerome's answers to the claim Mary and Joseph had sexual relations after the birth of Jesus

PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT LESSON

- » Hail, Holy Queen, Chapter 5 (pp. 89–113)
- » Matthew 1:18–25
- » Matthew 12:46–50
- » Catechism of the Catholic Church 88–90, 496–501

REVIEW OF THE PREVIOUS LESSON

How Can This Be?

The Gospel of Luke often uses parallels in words and images regarding Mary. We see this at the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will bear a Son. When she hears the news, Mary is surprised and asks, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" (Lk 1:34). Gabriel's reply is "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Lk 1:35).

The key parallel here is the word translated as "overshadow." That word is very rare in the New Testament and it always indicates the transformative presence of God. Luke is referencing a passage in Exodus from the Greek translation of the

Old Testament in which Moses placed the Ark of the Covenant in the great tent that was to be God's dwelling-place among his people. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, the word translated in Exodus 40:34–35 as "abode upon" is the same as the word translated in Luke's Gospel as "overshadowed." By using that word there, Luke tells us that the power of God will overshadow Mary, just as the power of God overshadowed the Ark of the Covenant in the Israelites' tabernacle.

The First Ark

The Ark described in Exodus was the dwelling place of God, containing within it the tablets of the Law (the 10 Commandments), a sample of the manna that fed the Israelites in the desert, and the rod of Aaron, Israel's first high priest. It signified God's presence among them (Num10:33). When Israel was settled in the Promised Land and David became king, he moved the Ark to Jerusalem. Eventually, however, his Kingdom broke apart and was destroyed. The prophet Jeremiah had warned the people of their impending fate. But he also had promised them that God would gather them back together in a New Covenant and a new kingdom. With that day in mind, Jeremiah hid the Ark on Mount Nebo shortly after the kingdom fell in 586 BC. After that, he foretold that the Ark would not be seen until the time when God showed his mercy and gathered his people together again (2 Macc 2:4–8).

The Ark Of The New Covenant

In Luke's account of the Visitation, he repeatedly uses words and phrases about the Ark of the Covenant from the Old Testament to drive home the point that Mary is the Ark of the New Covenant, implying that the time of which Jeremiah foretold had come. Like Luke, the Apostle John recounts a vision he had in heaven that included a vision of the Ark in the book of Revelation. When the first Christians—most of whom were Jewish—heard John's vision, they would have paid attention. If the Ark had been seen, that meant the time they had been waiting for had come. They would have wanted more details about it. But, instead, John describes a woman.

Unlike modern Bibles, there were no chapter divisions in John's day. He went straight from the reference to the Ark in Revelation 11:19 to the description of the woman in Revelation 12:1 without a break. In John's vision, the Ark of the Covenant is the "woman clothed with the sun," a woman who "brought forth a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne" (Rev 12:2). In John's vision, the Ark of the Covenant is Mary, the Mother of Christ.

Within The Ark

Why do John and Luke ascribe such a role to a woman? To start with, the Ark of the Covenant was the sign of God's real presence among his people. In Jesus Christ, born of Mary, God was present among his people once more, but in a much more intimate and direct way. Also, the Ark of the Covenant contained within it the Word of God written on stone: the tablets of the Ten Commandments. When Mary carried the child Jesus in her womb, she too contained within her the Word of God, but in flesh rather than stone. Similarly, the Ark contained the bread from heaven, the manna that fed the Israelites in the Wilderness and which foreshadowed the Eucharist. And Mary held within her the true bread that came down from heaven (see Jn 6:48–50). Finally, the Ark carried the rod of Aaron, the symbol of the high priesthood. And Mary carried the true High Priest, Jesus (Heb 4:14).