

THE SECOND EVE: NEWMAN AND IRENÆUS

By JOHN MCHUGH

IT IS often asserted that, apart from New Testament phrases like 'the handmaid of the Lord', the most ancient title given to St Mary the Virgin is 'the second Eve' or 'the new Eve'. This view has been eloquently presented by John Henry Newman, who, in his *Letter to Dr Pusey*, at the point where he begins to expound the belief of Catholics, writes as follows:

What is the great rudimental teaching of antiquity from its earliest date concerning her? By 'rudimental teaching', I mean the *prima facie* view of her person and office, the broad outline of her, the aspect under which she comes to us, in the writings of the Fathers. She is the Second Eve. Now let us consider what this implies. Eve had a definite, essential position in the First Covenant. The fate of the human race lay with Adam; he it was, who represented us. . . . Yet though Eve was not the head of the race, still, even as regards the race, she had a place of her own. . . . She listened to the Evil Angel; she offered the fruit to her husband, and he ate of it. She cooperated, not as an irresponsible instrument, but intimately and personally in the sin; she brought it about. As the history stands, she was a *sine-qua-non*, positive, active, cause of it . . . in that awful transaction there were three parties concerned — the serpent, the woman, and the man; and at the time of their sentence, an event was announced for a distant future, in which the same three parties were to meet again, the serpent, the woman and the man; but it was to be a second Adam and a second Eve, and the new Eve was to be the mother of the new Adam. 'I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed.' The Seed of the woman is the Word Incarnate, and the Woman, whose Seed or Son he is, is his mother Mary. This interpretation, and the parallelism it involves, seem to me undeniable; but at all events (and this is my point) the parallelism is the doctrine of the Fathers, from the earliest times; and, this being established, we are able, by the position and office of Eve in our fall, to determine the position and office of Mary in our restoration.¹

read more at www.theway.org.uk

Newman has no difficulty in showing that this parallelism between Mary and Eve goes back to the second century. It is found in the work of St Justin the Martyr entitled *A Dialogue with Trypho* (written between A.D. 155 and 165),² and on several occasions in the great treatise of St Irenaeus of Lyons *Against the Heresies* (written probably in the last quarter of the century). Both these writers draw out the parallel between Eve's disobedience and Mary's obedience, but does that justify us in calling Mary (as Newman does) 'a second Eve' and 'a new Eve'? Obviously, there is no problem if these two terms are used simply in a poetical or purely metaphorical sense, as when Shylock speaks of 'a Daniel come to judgment', without intending to develop from this comparison a systematic treatment of Portia's theological significance. However, that is exactly what Newman did intend to do, when he wrote of Mary as a second Eve. A good analogy to what he had in mind would be the New Testament identification of John the Baptist as the new Elijah, for Newman wanted to build a real theology on his Mary-Eve parallel, just as Matthew (11,14; 17,10-13), Mark (9,11-13) and Luke (1,17; cf 7,27) did when writing of the Baptist as Elijah. 'We are able, by the position and office of Eve in our fall, to determine the position and office of Mary in our restoration'. That is a very bold claim, and I wish to suggest that Newman has over-simplified his case here to some extent, and that a re-examination of the second-century texts from St Irenaeus leads to a slightly different, though not less interesting conclusion.

The problem

Newman writes of 'a second Eve' and 'a new Eve', but it is important to note that neither of these two phrases is to be found in the eleven pages of citations from the Fathers which he gives to justify their use, until we come to the very last quotation, falsely ascribed to St Fulgentius of Ruspe (A.D. 468-533), where we find the words *nova Eva*.³ It is not pedantry to make this observation, for it means that in the early patristic age the phrases were not technical theological terms in current use. This is certainly the case up to the Council of Nicaea, and I do not think either is ever used of Mary before A.D. 500.⁴ In view of the many passages which contrast Mary's obedience with Eve's disobedience, this is somewhat surprising, and we have to ask why the Fathers did not seize on the terms 'a new Eve', 'a second Eve', to epitomize the contrast.

One reason, I would suggest, was the very versatility and inven-

tiveness of their minds in their quest of symbolism. Irenaeus, for example, put great emphasis on a different parallel which may be drawn between Adam and Christ.

Just as the first-made Adam received his bodily framework from earth that was as yet untilled and still virgin soil . . . so the Word [of God] rightly received from Mary while she was still a virgin an origin that was a fresh repetition of Adam's. For suppose that the first Adam had had a man as his father, and had been begotten of human seed; then our opponents would be right to say that the second Adam also was begotten, of Joseph. But if the first Adam was taken out of the earth and fashioned by the Word of God, then the same Word, when undertaking the task of giving a fresh start to Adam's race, had to have the same sort of origin as the first Adam. But, you will say, in that case why did God not take some more dust? Why did he instead bring it about that what he created should be formed from Mary? It was to avoid making a different creature, to ensure that the creature that was to be saved should not be different from, but should be the self-same as the first creation, now given a fresh start precisely because its identity had been preserved.⁵

This comparison, in which the body of Adam is fashioned by God out of virgin soil, and the body of Jesus out of the Virgin Mary, provides no possible parallel between Mary and Eve, for Mary is compared with the soil. Mary's role cannot be prefigured in one and the same story both by the soil from which Adam was made, and by the woman later fashioned from his side — at least not at the same time.

That last qualification, 'not at the same time', is very important. For it is of course possible to look at the story in Genesis 2 in another way and to say that just as the first woman was formed directly by God from the body of the first man, with no human father, so Jesus (whom we call the second Adam) was formed directly by God without a human father, from the body of another woman, who may therefore be termed, quite properly, a second Eve. This is exactly the same theology as that of Irenaeus in the last paragraph, namely, an illustration from Genesis 2 of the virginal conception.

In other words, we are here faced with what contemporary theologians call different 'models', each one of which serves to illustrate only a part of reality. The term 'model' may be new, but the idea is familiar enough to everyone. We speak of the Church as the Ark of

salvation (1 Pet 3,20), as a sheepfold and a flock (Jn 10,1-10), a holy temple built of living stones (1 Pet 2,5), without ever thinking that these symbols are exclusive of one another, or trying to combine them together. We speak of Jesus as the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and the Lamb (Apoc 5,5-6). So too we employ different symbols to express different truths about the Blessed Virgin.

What this means is that the more extensively we use symbols or models, the more careful we must be to see that they are used correctly, that is, with extreme precision. They are not empty metaphors ('he has a sunny temperament') or dead clichés ('the battle for the league championship continues'). Every model or symbol used in theological reasoning must remain alive, and speak to us today.

But let me now give an example of the danger of using such a model carelessly, without discrimination. We have seen two legitimate applications of the term 'the second Eve': first, Mary may quite appropriately be compared with the woman to whose seed victory over the serpent is promised in Genesis 3,15 (Newman's theme); secondly, the virginal conception of Jesus may be likened to the creation of Eve. In either of these cases, there is good ground for speaking of Mary as a second Eve.

Let us examine a third possibility. In Genesis (2,21-24), Eve is created out of Adam's side, from one of his ribs, by contrast with all other living creatures, which are formed out of the ground (v 19). The point of this story is to affirm that woman is equal to man, as Adam acknowledges when he wakes from his sleep and first sees her: 'At last! Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh!' (2,23). It is only after the fall (Gen 3,16), that women are made subject to their husbands ('he shall rule over you'), and in Genesis 2-3 the writer clearly intends to teach that the social inferiority of woman was not part of God's original design, but is an effect of human sin.

Can we apply *this* story to Mary as a second Eve? If we attempt to do so, we shall find that we have to say that Mary is in some way equal to Jesus Christ, the second Adam; that he, like the first Adam, needed a helpmate of the same nature as himself; and that his lordship over her (the second Adam over the second Eve) was a consequence of sin and therefore a thing distasteful to her, and destined to be abolished when the last consequence of sin is destroyed. For these reasons, it would clearly be quite wrong to use this story in order to speak of Mary as a second Eve.

Now this is not just idle talk. When Roman Catholics speak of

Mary as a second Eve, and especially when they do so in the context of their belief in her Immaculate Conception, affirming that she was never tainted by original sin, they often give to Protestants the impression that they believe she was equal to Jesus Christ in his human nature. And when they refer to her as co-redeemer also, the deepest fears of the Reformed Churches are aroused, and apparently confirmed. Everyone knows what is implied by speaking of Jesus Christ as a second Adam. That is why one needs to be extremely cautious, extraordinarily clear and very precise, when speaking of Mary as a second Eve, for the term can so easily be misused or misunderstood.

That, I believe, is the reason why the early Fathers avoided it, even though they did not hesitate to point out certain parallels between Mary and Eve. This does not mean, of course, that we too must eschew all usage of the term, only that we in our day must be exceptionally careful about the ways in which we use it; and to this I now turn.

An elucidation of the concept according to St Irenaeus

In reading any great author, and especially one from the distant past, there is always a danger of seeing only what we want to see, or expect to find. This danger is particularly acute if we go to an ancient author in order to find answers to questions which we ourselves are asking, in a different age and a different culture. For then we may not only misunderstand him by thinking that the words he uses are intended to answer our modern questions; we may in fact entirely miss the point of his argument by not inquiring what were the problems to which he was addressing himself centuries ago. Now Irenaeus may rightly be called the first theologian to develop the symbolism of Mary as the new Eve, even though he does not himself use this term; but we need to examine very carefully the places in which he uses this symbolism, in order to grasp the precise point of his message. Obviously to do that we must know why he wrote.

His great work, in five books, entitled *Against the Heresies*, is a defence of the christian faith against a group of heresies known as gnosticism.⁶ Gnosticism was a complex phenomenon, a philosophy of religion embracing a bewildering variety of sects, widespread in the eastern part of the Roman Empire during the second and third centuries. A hundred years ago, it was generally thought to have been a christian version of certain pagan philosophies, but nowadays, as a result of further research and the discovery of new

manuscripts, almost the reverse is true. It is now considered to have been a thoroughly pagan philosophy of religion, which at certain times and in certain places took on, very superficially, a slightly christian colouring, by introducing here and there a few elements and names from the gospel preaching.

The essence of gnosticism, and its basic tenet, is that God is utterly alien to this world; he is totally Other, unknown and unknowable, even by revelation. He does not govern the world; indeed, he did not even create it, for the act of creation would have soiled him by bringing him into contact with material things.

How then did our world come into being? From God there emanate lesser spiritual beings, who are often grouped in pairs, one male and one female; and from one of these beings, or one of these pairs, there came the material world. For matter is utterly evil, being at the furthest extreme from the totally spiritual and invisible Godhead. The bodily nature of man, therefore, is irredeemable, and 'salvation' consists in escaping from this vile and earthly body.

Man, however, is composed not of one, nor of two, but of three elements: a material body, a soul (*psyche*) and a spirit (*pneuma*).

According to whichever of these elements dominates him, he falls into a particular category of existence. The 'hylics', the material ones, are those dominated by the body, swallowed up in the cares of life on earth. The 'psychics', dominated by the soul, are but one short step removed from the 'hylics', for the soul like the body is created by the lower powers, is subject to their rule, and is basically evil. The pseudo-christian gnostics identified the 'psychics' with the majority of Christians who aspired by faith and obedience as well as by the sacramental life to join their God in eternal bliss. But those in whom the spirit or the divine spark had been rekindled, the 'pneumatics', the gnostics themselves, were destined to rejoin the divine world to which they really belonged, once they had been liberated from this world.⁷

This liberation took place by their receiving esoteric knowledge about the world above. Such knowledge could not be communicated, nor did they dare divulge it, to others, who could not assimilate it and who were, therefore, destined to eternal damnation.

Along with this conviction of their own superiority over other men went the grossest carnal immorality. St Irenaeus says of them in a memorable passage:

As gold sunk in filth does not lose its beauty but preserves its own nature, the filth being unable to harm the gold, so they say of themselves that even if they be immersed in material deeds, nothing will injure them nor will they lose their spiritual essence. Therefore 'the most perfect' among them do unafraid all the forbidden things of which scripture tells us that 'they who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God'.⁸

It is against this background that we have to evaluate Irenaeus's theology.

Now we can see the point of his emphasis on the material reality of the Incarnation. Some gnostics said that the body of Jesus was 'psychic', others that it was 'pneumatic' or spiritual. Irenaeus cannot insist too strongly that it was thoroughly and completely material: the body of Jesus was as earthly and earthy as the dust from which the first man was made.

By the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners and lost life; and that man, the first of all mankind, was fashioned from virgin soil. So it was fitting that many should be made righteous and receive salvation by the obedience of one man who was in the first place conceived of a Virgin. . . . What he appeared to be, he truly was, God giving a fresh start to that primeval creature that was man by becoming man, in order to kill sin, to strip death of its power and to give life to man.⁹

It is obvious that his whole argument here depends on the reality of the Incarnation, on the fact that the Word of God took real human flesh from the body of the Virgin, as the following pages make clear.

After many pages on this theme, Irenaeus returns to the parallel between Eve's disobedience and Mary's obedience, in words as clear and forceful as any text in later theology: 'Just as she by her disobedience became for herself and all the human race a cause of death . . . so Mary by her obedience became for herself and all the human race a cause of salvation'.¹⁰ 'A cause of salvation, for herself and all the human race.' Irenaeus is not unaware of the theological problem in assigning to Mary a role in the work of redemption, and in the next sentence, in a passage too tortuous to permit of a literal rendering, explains his meaning. To untie a knot, he says, you have to begin by undoing the last and final loop which secures it, and work your way backwards to the first loop. So Christ untied the final loop which was tied by Adam, and once that was undone, the earlier

loop was easily unfastened, 'and so the disobedience of Eve was undone through the obedience of Mary, for the knot the virgin Eve had tied, by her refusal to believe, was untied by the Virgin Mary through her faith'. That is what leads Irenaeus to refer to Mary by the lovely title *advocata Evae*.¹¹

There is still more to say about these two women. Irenaeus was battling against the gnostics, and from the brief outline of their thought one can deduce just how deeply they despised womanhood. In their eyes, the story of Eve in Genesis would only prove how contemptible woman was from the dawn of creation — the source of all our ills. Irenaeus's reply is to point to a second Eve, to another woman who not only reversed the pattern of Eve's disobedience, but became the dwelling-place at which the Word of God entered the human race, to become one of us. 'The Incarnation', says St Thomas Aquinas, 'is a kind of spiritual marriage between the Son of God and human nature',¹² and it was in the womb of the Blessed Virgin that the wedding took place.

Conclusion

After this re-survey of the question, I think we can add two conclusions, one not present in Newman's theology, the other bringing a slight correction to his manner of argument.

First, it was only *after* the primeval sin of our first parents, according to Genesis (3,16), that woman was placed in a position of inferiority to man. It was not so from the beginning: in Genesis 2 the man and the woman are equal in rank. Must we not, therefore, conclude that this subordination of woman to man is abolished, by divine decree, through the fact of our redemption? And that in so far as it still obtains today, it is an effect of that primordial sin, a by-product which the Church must strive to abolish. This was something hardly thought of in Newman's day, but is none the less true. It is hardly necessary to add, except for completeness, that the dignity and excellence of womankind has never been carried to greater heights than in the lowliness of the handmaid of the Lord whose *Fiat* was the occasion on which the Son of God became one of our race. The tragedy of man's fall is truly reversed at this word which makes Mary in every sense *advocata Evae*.

Secondly, we need to reconsider Newman's words that 'we are able, by the position and office of Eve in our fall, to determine the position and office of Mary in our restoration'. I do not think one can argue quite so straightforwardly or so confidently from the

biblical story of Eve to doctrinal assertions about Mary. The most one might say is that the role of Mary as known from other sources might be illustrated by drawing analogies with that of Eve.

But that is not to say that the parallel between Mary and Eve has nothing to teach us, for there is another way of approaching Newman's problem (the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception). Before the time of St Augustine, who made common coinage of the technical term 'original sin', the Church used a variety of words to speak of fallen man, including the phrase 'sons of Adam'. Could Irenaeus have written as he did about Mary, even to calling her *advocata Evae*, if he had thought of her as being in the theological sense, a 'daughter of Adam' like ourselves? True, he never calls her a 'second Eve', or even an 'Eve', for that name *in this context* would, if pressed, have entailed a positive denial that she was a 'daughter of Adam' (since the first Eve was the only person in the history of the world not descended from Adam by generation, and not born with the taint of original sin); and because of the story in Genesis 2, might have seemed to put her on a level with Jesus Christ, the second Adam. However, when we look at St Irenaeus's teaching as a whole, it is difficult to escape the feeling that were he alive today, he would be happy to agree that what he wrote about the Blessed Virgin Mary could all be summed up in the phrase 'a second, a new Eve'.

NOTES

- ¹ Cf *Difficulties of Anglicans*, Longmans standard edition, vol 2, pp 31-32. ² Cf *Ibid.*, p 33.
- ³ Newman himself was aware that this sermon might not be authentic (cf p 43). It is printed both among the works of Fulgentius, as Sermon 36, in Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 65, 898D-900, and among the works of Pseudo-Augustine, as Sermon 123, (in Migne 39), 1990-91, but belongs to neither. Its author is unknown. See Laurentin, R.: *Courte traité de théologie mariale* (Paris, 1952), p 136, and Morin, G., in *Revue bénédictine* 26 (1909), p 226, n 8.
- ⁴ The first time the phrase *Eva nova* appears seems to be in St Augustine (*De urbis excidio* 3; cf Migne 40,719), speaking of the wife of Job! See Barré, H.: *Le 'mystère' d'Eve à la fin de l'époque patristique en Occident*, in *Bulletin de la Société Française d'Etudes Mariiales* 13 (1955), pp 70-71.
- ⁵ *Against the Heresies* III, 21, 10, trs from the Latin as given in *Sources Chrétiennes* 211, pp 428-30
- ⁶ There is a very fine article on 'Gnosticism' by George W. MacRae in the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol 6 (New York, 1967), pp 523-28, to which I am deeply indebted.
- ⁷ MacRae, George W.: *op. cit.*, pp 525-56.
- ⁸ MacRae, *op. cit.*, p 526. Irenaeus's text is in I, 6, 2-3, *Sources Chrétiennes* 264, p 94.
- ⁹ III, 18, 7, *Sources Chrétiennes* 211, pp 368-70. ¹⁰ III, 22, 4 (p 440).
- ¹¹ As he is drawing his argument together, in his final book, at V, 19, I; *Sources Chrétiennes* 153, p 248. ¹² *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 30, a. I.