

THE WOMAN'S SEED (GEN 3:15)

JACK P. LEWIS*

In his statement to the serpent the Lord speaks of enmity between the serpent and the woman, using the words "between your seed (*zar^cākā*) and her seed (*zar^cāh*)." Though *zera^c* in Hebrew is a collective noun and may be either plural or singular,¹ the text then proceeds to say that "he (*hū[?]*) will bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel (*tēšūpennū^c āqēb*)." The two third-person masculine pronouns of the verse are singular.

The noun *zera^c* occurs in fifteen Genesis passages without a possessive suffix,² in nineteen with a second-person-singular masculine possessive,³ in six with the third-person singular masculine,⁴ and in one with a second-person plural masculine.⁵ To contrast with all of these, *zera^c* with a feminine possessive occurs only five times in the whole OT: once with Adonis gardens (Isa 17:11), once with personified Israel (54:3), and three times (all in Genesis) with Eve, Hagar and Rebekah as the antecedents. These last two cases use second-person feminine possessives while Gen 3:15 has a third-person. With Hagar *zera^c* is a collective noun taking a masculine singular verb *yissāpēr* ("numbered"). In Rebekah's case the singular verb following the collective noun is *yīraš* ("inherit").

In Gen 3:15 the serpent's descendant (*zar^cākā*, "your seed/descendant") is paralleled with "her descendant" (*zar^cāh*), and logic would suggest that if one is to be taken as collective the other should be also. From this verse, later theology spoke of the "woman's seed." But actually the phrase itself does not occur in Scripture. It is only a theological term coined to express an idea already accepted. Once used, however, the term confirms to the mind the validity of the idea.

While it is normal in Hebrew to describe descendants by the noun *zera^c*, it is unusual (though not unique) to use the term with a feminine possessive pronoun. Had it been observed across history that Hagar's descendants whose ancestral father is Abraham are also projected with a feminine

* Jack Lewis is professor of Bible at Harding Graduate School of Religion in Memphis, Tennessee.

¹ *Zera^c* refers to an individual child who is an immediate offspring in Gen 4:25; 21:13; 1 Sam 1:11. Eve says, "God gave me another child (*zera^c āhēr*)"; the Lord says to Abraham concerning Ishmael, "He is your offspring"; and in her vow Hannah speaks of the Lord's giving her a son (*zera^c*).

² Gen 1:11, 12, 29, 29; 4:25; 7:3; 8:22; 15:3; 19:32, 34; 21:12; 38:8, 9; 47:19, 23.

³ Gen 12:7; 13:15, 16, 16; 15:13, 18; 17:7, 7, 12; 21:13; 24:7; 26:3, 4, 4, 4; 28:4, 13, 14; 35:12.

⁴ Gen 1:11, 12; 17:19; 46:6, 7; 48:19.

⁵ Gen 9:9.

possessive suffix attached to *zera*^c (Gen 16:10), as also are Rebekah's descendants whose ancestral father is Isaac (24:60), the treatment of Gen 3:15 would likely have been different. No further attention is given to 3:15 either in Genesis or in any other OT book.

I. THE VERSIONS

The LXX translators, using *sperma* in the two parts of the Genesis statement (Gen 3:16 LXX), took *zera*^c to be a singular as is reflected in their use of the nominative masculine pronoun *autos* ("he") as well as the singular verb *tērēsei* ("watch/keep"). These readings are supported in the Berlin Genesis as well as in the uncial MSS. *Sperma* is a neuter noun in Greek and would have taken a neuter pronoun had the translators not thought of an individual.

A study of the LXX treatment of the pronoun *hū*² in Genesis⁶ reveals that of 103 occurrences the LXX in fifty-seven cases uses a masculine pronoun where both Hebrew and Greek require the masculine gender. Twenty-five times *eimi* is used in a free rendering, and six cases have no Greek equivalent of the pronoun. Twice a plural masculine pronoun is used and four times a masculine singular participle.⁷ Eight times the Greek changes the gender to correspond to Greek grammar. Five cases⁸ require a feminine, and three⁹ require a neuter. While the LXX retaining of the masculine in Gen 3:15 could be an oversight, it is possible that the translator reveals a messianic understanding—which, if true, would then be the earliest known.¹⁰

The LXX treatment of a parallel structure in 2 Sam 7:12–13 is enlightening. In this promise to David, *sperma* is followed by the masculine relative pronoun *hos* and by the third-person masculine *autos*. The Chronicler, citing the same promise, also has *hos* followed by *autos*. The MSS Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, however, have the neuter *ho* followed by *autos*. The promise to David, using *bēn* ("son") instead of *zera*^c and followed by *hū*², is translated *huios* ("son") followed by *autos* in 3 Kgs 5:19; 8:9; 1 Chr 22:9–10, but in 1 Chr 28:6 the promise is applied to "Solomon your son." The LXX translator may have thought of *zera*^c as *huios*, but whether as collective or as an individual remains uncertain.¹¹

Whether the Jewish-Greek translators Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion took *zera*^c and the relevant pronoun *hū*² differently from the LXX translators cannot be known. Their treatments of Gen 3:15 have not survived.

⁶ R. A. Martin, "The Earliest Messianic Interpretation of Genesis 3:15," *JBL* 84 (December 1965) 525–527.

⁷ *Ibid.* 525–526.

⁸ Gen 14:3; 18:10; 19:23; 30:16; 32:23(22).

⁹ Gen 2:19; 14:17; 42:14.

¹⁰ Martin, "Earliest" 527.

¹¹ J. Michl, "Der Weibessame (Gen 3:15) in spätjüdischer und frühchristlicher Auffassung," *Bib* 33 (1952) 374–375.

The targum to the Samaritan Pentateuch is in agreement with the Hebrew text.¹² Michl pointed out that the Peshitta version reveals no special theological interpretation of Gen 3:15.¹³

The OL, using *semen* for the noun, has the masculine *ipse* in some sources but the feminine *ipsa* in others. The OL uses the verbs *calcare* and *observare*. The Vg follows with the pronouns as feminine singulars (*ipsa* and *eius*) for whom the woman is the antecedent. The verbs, rather than being repetitions, become *conteret* and *insidiaberis*. The woman crushes the serpent's head, and he wounds her heel. The Vg rendering determined much of later Latin exegesis.

The *Tg. Onq.* uses defective plural forms of *bēn* for *zera*^c and singular masculine pronouns, though they are translated into English in the plural by Aberbach and Grossfeld on the basis that mankind is meant: "They will remember what you did to them in ancient times, and you will preserve (your hatred) for them to the end of time."¹⁴ Actually the targum has the forms *bnh*^v and *hw*^v. The *Tg. Ps.-J.* and the *Frg. Tg.* also use "sons" for *zera*^c and make the statement to deal with the seed of "your sons" and the seed of "her sons." These targums explain Gen 3:15 eschatologically, speaking of humanity's victory over the devil "in the days of the King Messiah," but they do not base the interpretation on the uniqueness of "her seed." The targums are commenting on "his heel."¹⁵ The *Tg. Neof.* has the statement addressed to the serpent and also interprets the passage collectively:

And enmities will I put between you and the woman and between your sons and her sons. And it shall be when her sons observe the Law and put into practice the commandments they will aim at you and smite you on the head and kill you; but when they forsake the commandments of the Law you will aim at and wound him on the heel and make him ill. For her son[s], however, there will be a remedy, but for you, serpent, there will be no remedy, for they will make peace in the future, in the days of King Messiah.¹⁶

II. OLD TESTAMENT PSEUDEPIGRAPHIA

In surveying the curses on the participants in Eden, the writer of *Jub.* merely comments: "The Lord cursed the serpent; and he was angry with it forever."¹⁷ Then follow statements made to the woman and to Adam. No notice of the woman's descendants is taken.

¹² Ibid. 378.

¹³ Ibid. 378-379.

¹⁴ M. Aberbach and B. Grossfeld, *Targum Onkelos to Genesis* (Denver: Center for Judaic Studies, University of Denver, 1982) 36.

¹⁵ M. McNamara, *Targum and Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 217-221.

¹⁶ A. D. Macho, *Neofiti I* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1968) 503-504.

¹⁷ *Jub.* 2:23; cf. *The Old Testament Apocrypha* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 2. 60.

Eve legendarily embellishes the story of the fall in the *Apoc. Mos.*, giving the Lord's statements to each of the three participants ending with a statement about "his seed" (not "her seed") and with "he" in a conflict to last until the day of judgment.¹⁸ These works show no consciousness of Gen 3:15 being the first gospel. Though narrating the story of the fall, neither *The Apocalypse of Adam* nor *The Life of Adam and Eve* covers Gen 3:15. *The Life* has Adam tell the story,¹⁹ and each work has the serpent biting Seth, reflecting a collective interpretation rather than a messianic one.

In contrast *The Testament of Adam*, which dates from the second to the fifth century A.D., has Adam revealing to Seth the coming virgin birth as well as giving information about the fall. Adam tells of the Lord's making known to him that "for your sake, I will be born of the Virgin Mary."²⁰

The Book of the Cave of Treasures of the sixth century has the Lord fettering the legs of the serpent and promising Adam the incarnation for his redemption: "He shall sojourn in a Virgin, and shall put on a body and through Him redemption and a return shall be effected for thee."²¹

Under the influence of *bar ʿēnāš* of Dan 7:13 the term "son of man" or its equivalent occurs often in *1 Enoch*. Some Ethiopic manuscripts have "son of the woman" in *1 Enoch* 62:5; 69:29, a translation R. H. Charles rejected in all cases in favor of "son of man."²² Other passages speak of the Messiah as "the son of the descendants of the mother of the living" (62:7) or "that son of the descendants of the mother of the living" (62:9, 14; 63:11) or have the same epithet but use other pronouns (69:26, 27; 70:1; 71:17). Eve must be meant by these terms, and "son of the descendants" may be a double translation of the *zera*^c of Gen 3:15. This doubling shows a collective interpretation rather than an individual one. Strack and Billerbeck contended that the *1 Enoch* phenomenon showed that a messianic interpretation of "her seed" existed in pre-Christian Judaism.²³ Michl, on the other hand, contends that the concept in *1 Enoch* may be an insertion of Christian theology into *1 Enoch*.²⁴ Mowinckel notes that "son of the offspring of the mother of the living" is the regular rendering of "son of man" in the Ethiopic NT.²⁵

¹⁸ *Apoc. Mos.* 26; cf. *Altjüdisches Schrifttum ausserhalb der Bibel* (ed. P. Riessler; Augsburg: Benno Filfer, 1928) 148.

¹⁹ *The Life of Adam and Eve* 32–34, 37–39; cf. *Old Testament Apocrypha* (ed. Charlesworth), 2. 272, 274.

²⁰ *Testament of Adam* 3:1, 3; cf. *Old Testament Apocrypha* (ed. Charlesworth), 1. 994.

²¹ E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Cave of Treasures* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1927) 67.

²² See notes in R. H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912) 86, and in E. Kautzsch, *Die Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen des alten Testaments* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1900), 2. 262 n. p.

²³ Str-B, 1. 958 n. 1.

²⁴ Michl, "Weibessame" 383–386. McNamara, *Targum* 220 n. 92, states that no argument can be made on the occurrences of the phrases in *1 Enoch*.

²⁵ S. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956) 362.

III. NEW TESTAMENT

Neither Jesus nor his disciples cite Gen 3:15. A trap into which later exegetes fell could have been avoided had they observed that "born of woman" in both the OT and NT is a description of all humanity and not a unique term for the Christ describing his virgin birth. The term occurs three times in Job with "woman" in a singular form (*yēlūd* ²*iššâ*; LXX *genētos gynaikos*; Job 14:1; 15:14; 25:4) but also two times in the NT with "women" (plural) for all mankind but of John the Baptist in particular (Matt 11:11; Luke 7:28). While *genomenon ek gynaikos* (Gal 4:4) could include a virgin birth it does not distinctively proclaim one, and Paul is merely saying that the Christ became human. 4 Ezra uses the terms "born" (*natorum*; 4:6) and "who are born" (*qui nati sunt*; 7:46, 65) for mankind. On occasions "earthborn" is used as in 2 *Enoch* 50:1. The phrase *yēlūd* ²*iššâ* continued in use in rabbinic sources as a designation of humanity.²⁶ The contrary explanation of "born of woman" may be as old as Irenaeus who brings together Gen 3:15, the offspring of Abraham mentioned in Gal 3:19, and "born of woman" (4:4).²⁷

Paul is able to use the promise of descendants (*sperma*) of Abraham (Gen 12:7) as either singular (Gal 3:16) or plural (3:29) as his argument requires. The Greek text in Genesis is a singular form (*to spermati*), as Paul notices. But Gen 3:15 gets little if any attention in the NT. It is never appealed to in virgin birth settings, but Paul in his one possible allusion to it states: "Then the God of peace will soon crush [*syntripsei*] Satan under your feet" (Rom 16:20). The wording is not like the LXX text of Gen 3:15, which uses *tērēsei*. The offspring implied here, if the statement reflects Gen 3:15, would not be an individual but would be the totality of Christians. Paul's statement, however, may also be influenced by Jesus' statement about victory over serpents (Luke 10:19) and by the Biblical image of putting enemies under the feet (Josh 10:24; Heb 2:8).²⁸ The NT never speaks of Christ as the one who tramples the serpent. Irenaeus in the late second century, however, connects the trampling with both Ps 90(91):13 and Luke 10:19.²⁹ In early Christian martyrology, Perpetua in a dream treads on the head of the Egyptian, who is a symbol of the devil.³⁰

Some expositors have conjectured that Gen 3:15 lies back of the imagery of the woman and her child in Revelation 12. There the dragon, having been frustrated in his effort to destroy the child the woman is bearing, made war "on the rest of her offspring" (*meta tōn loipōn tou spermatos autēs*, Rev 12:17), who are identified with those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus.

²⁶ Str-B, 3. 570.

²⁷ Irenaeus *Adv. haer.* 5.21.1-2 (ANF, 1. 548-549).

²⁸ *T. Levī* 18:12 states that the righteous will have power in messianic times to tread on evil spirits.

²⁹ *Adv. haer.* 3.23.7 (ANF, 1. 457).

³⁰ *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* 3.2 (ANF, 3. 702).

IV. EARLY JEWISH WRITERS

Philo speaks of the fall of man in *De Opificio Mundi*, giving an allegorical interpretation without mentioning Gen 3:15.³¹ In his *Questions on Genesis*³² Philo asks why the serpent is to eat dust and to have enmity toward woman, but he says nothing of the woman's descendants. Philo allegorizes the serpent as a symbol of desire: "And desire has a natural enmity toward sense, which Scripture symbolically calls woman." In the *Allegorical Interpretation*³³ Philo quotes Gen 3:15 and attempts a distinction between enmity "for thee and the woman" (*soi kai tē gynaiiki*) and "between (*ana meson*) thee and the woman" in order to make a warfare between pleasure and sense. He finds the statement "between your seed and her seed" full of philosophical truth because seed is the starting point of existence. He finds that pleasure and sense are mutually hostile as also are passion and the mind. His text has the masculine pronoun *autos* in three citations.

Philo notes that the Genesis address is to the serpent. The woman is not the "he" (*autos*) spoken of but would be "she" (*autē*).³⁴ He declares: "He [the Lord] has left off speaking about the woman and passed on to her seed and origin." Philo is commenting on the Greek text, which has *tērēsei* but which also has the masculine pronominal subject (*to de autos sou tērēsei kephalēn*). Philo's remarks, however, may have influenced the Latin version's choice of the feminine pronoun *ipsa*.³⁵

Philo, in noting the curse on the serpent, comments that Eve's serpent is represented as thirsting for man's blood.³⁶ He cites Gen 3:15 but then proceeds to make the serpent a symbol of pleasure, which attacks the reasoning faculty in each of us. A delightful experience abounding with pleasure is the ruin of understanding. Philo does not give special attention to the phrase "her seed."

Josephus comments on the statement to the serpent without commenting on the woman's descendants:

He moreover deprived the serpent of speech, indignant at his malignity to Adam; He also put poison beneath his tongue, destining him to be the enemy of men, and admonishing them to strike their blows upon his head, because it was therein that man's danger lay and there too that his adversaries could most easily inflict a mortal blow. He further bereft him of feet and made him crawl and wiggle along the ground.³⁷

Josephus reflects no consciousness of a theological interpretation of Gen 3:15.

³¹ *De Opificio Mundi* 155–156 (no. 55).

³² *Questions on Genesis* 1:48.

³³ *Allegorical Interpretation* 3:65 (21), 182–185 (64–65), 188 (67).

³⁴ *Ibid.* 3:188 (67).

³⁵ Michl, "Weibessame" 387.

³⁶ Philo *De Agricultura* 107–108.

³⁷ Josephus *Ant.* 1.1.4 §§50–51 (LCL translation).

After the first century, Gen 3:15 evoked very little rabbinic comment as judged by extant sources. The statement was, however, connected with various lessons. None have been found to have relevance to the thesis of this paper. Rabbis, making the point that what the adulterous woman wants (her lover in marriage) is not given her, then cite the case of the serpent whom they saw as wanting to kill Adam and marry Eve. Instead of walking upright and eating human food, the serpent would now go on its belly and eat dust. Instead of having Eve, there would be enmity between the serpent and the woman.³⁸

Furthermore, R. Johanan said in the name of Simeon b. Jehozadak that any scholar who does not avenge himself but retains anger like a serpent is no scholar. Maharsha of the sixteenth century interpreted this proverb as an appeal to the total statement of Gen 3:15.³⁹

Some rabbis by the sort of exegesis by which the meaning of a word in one context can be used for its meaning in an entirely different one found the verb *ʾāšītēk* ("I would put thee," Jer 3:19) to be a verb used of hatred, and they appealed to Gen 3:15, "I will put enmity."⁴⁰

In a further example of the same sort of exegesis, R. Levi in the name of the son of Nezima homilized from Ps 139:11—"Darkness shall bruise (NIV hide) me"—that at the approach of darkness at the end of the Sabbath Adam thought the one of whom it was written "He shall bruise thy head" was coming to bite him. The Lord gave him two flints to strike against each other and light came forth.⁴¹ The contrast of wounding on the head and the heel is used homiletically to teach that vindictiveness should be less than the injury received.⁴² Nahmanides (A.D. 1195–1270) interpreted literally: "Man will have an advantage over you in your feud, for he will bruise your head, but you will bruise him only at his heel, and he will crush your brain."⁴³

The medieval commentator Rashi assumed that Gen 3:15 speaks of lasting hostility between the serpent and mankind. He repeats the rabbinic legend that the serpent wanted to kill Adam and take Eve as a wife. On the basis of occurrences of the root *šûp* in Deut 9:21, the targum, and *Soṭa* 9 he interprets *šûp* as meaning the same as *kātat* ("break").

V. EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS

Justin is the first known writer to parallel Eve and Mary, noticing the disobedience of Eve and the obedience of Mary. Despite his calling Eve a virgin,⁴⁴ Justin did not deduce that man was born from Eve by a virgin

³⁸ *t. Soṭa* 4:17–18; *b. Soṭa* 9a–b.

³⁹ *b. Yoma* 23a (Soncino ed., n. 6).

⁴⁰ *Exod. Rab.* 32:2.

⁴¹ *y. ʾAbod. Zar.* 1:2 A; *Gen. Rab.* 11:2; 12:6; 82:14.

⁴² *b. Yoma* 23a.

⁴³ J. Newman, *The Commentary of Nachmanides on Genesis 1–6* (Leiden: Brill, 1960) 78.

⁴⁴ That Eve was a virgin at the time of her fall is a commonplace in Christian writers; cf. Justin *Dial.* 100; *Ep. Diognetus* 12.8; Irenaeus *Adv. haer.* 5.19.1; *Demonstration* 33; and a host of others.

birth. Since in his argument Mary's child was, his parallel is not complete. Justin remarks: "He became man by the Virgin in order that the disobedience which proceeded from the serpent might receive its destruction in the same manner in which it derived its origin."⁴⁵ Justin proceeds to contrast the virgin Eve's conceiving the word of the serpent and the Virgin Mary's conceiving the Son of God.

Justin asks if God in the beginning could not have cut off the serpent so that he did not exist, rather than making the statement in which "his seed and her seed" occurs.⁴⁶ Justin has changed the statement from a direct address to the serpent in second person to a third-person form.⁴⁷ For Justin the serpent is the devil,⁴⁸ but he has him put to death by a great sword that he identifies with the Christ. Justin is here making an appeal to Isa 27:1 rather than to Gen 3:15.⁴⁹ The serpent was cursed by God from the beginning. Justin does not take the step of saying that Christ is "her seed" of Gen 3:15.

Theophilus of Antioch (ca. A.D. 180) is the first Christian writer to quote completely Gen 3:15, but he gives no comment. The text is part of a longer citation of 2:8-3:19. Theophilus has the reading "between your seed and her seed; it (*auto*) shall watch [bruise] your head and you shall watch [bruise] his heel."⁵⁰ The use of the neuter pronoun, which Greek gender agreement naturally requires, contrasts with known LXX MSS (all of Christian origin), which have *autos*.

Irenaeus expounded a doctrine of recapitulation (*anakephalaiosis*; cf. Eph 1:10) in which Christ's obedience is a recapitulation of Adam's disobedience. He paralleled the temptation from a tree to salvation by crucifixion on a tree. Christ shared every part of human experience, restoring communion with God to all.⁵¹ The knot of Eve's disobedience is loosed by the obedience of Mary, whose obedience is analogous to the obedience of Christ.⁵² The Son of Man is the pure one opening purely that pure womb that regenerates men unto God.⁵³ Irenaeus is the first theologian of the Virgin Mary.

Irenaeus interprets the struggle between the serpent and the woman to be moral in nature. In the first instance he interprets "seed" collectively:

He, the sole of whose foot should be bitten, having power to tread upon the enemy's head; but the other biting, killing, and impeding the steps of man,

⁴⁵ Justin *Dial.* 100.5 (ANF, 1. 249).

⁴⁶ *Dial.* 102.3 (ANF, 1. 250); 94.6 (ANF, 1. 245); 100.4; 100.5; 112.2.

⁴⁷ This change of person is also found in Severianus *De mundi creatione, orat.* 6.8 (PG, 50. 495-496).

⁴⁸ Justin *Dial.* 103.5 (ANF, 1. 251).

⁴⁹ *Dial.* 91.4 (ANF, 1. 245).

⁵⁰ *Ad Auto.* 2.2 (ANF, 2. 103).

⁵¹ Irenaeus *Adv. haer.* 3.18.7 (ANF, 1. 448); 2.22.4 (ANF, 1. 391).

⁵² *Adv. haer.* 3.22.4 (ANF, 1. 455). The Eve-Mary parallel is also in *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching* 33.

⁵³ *Adv. haer.* 4.33.11 (ANF, 1. 509).

until the seed did come appointed to tread down his head,—which was born of Mary.⁵⁴

Irenaeus ends up with “her seed” being Christ and thereby combines the collective and individual meaning of “seed.” Christ as the head of men has the battle against Satan victoriously completed. Irenaeus, however, does not in this context explicitly cite Gen 3:15.

In his fourth book Irenaeus, in expounding the enemy who sowed tares in the field (cf. Matt 13:25), states that God turned enmity against the serpent. Here he cites Gen 3:15 and says, “And the Lord summed up in himself the enmity, when he was made man from a woman, and trod upon his (the serpent’s) head.”⁵⁵

Irenaeus returns to recapitulation in the fifth book of his work, declaring Christ to be the one who crushed Satan. His Latin text uses the verb *ob-servabit*. He continues: “For from that time He who would be born of a woman, [namely] from the Virgin, after the likeness of Adam, was preached as keeping watch for the head of the serpent.”⁵⁶

Irenaeus explicitly exegeted “her seed” as being messianic, connecting the “seed” of Gen 3:15 with the “seed” of Gal 3:19. He was further convinced by the phrase “born of woman” (4:4):

For indeed the enemy would not have been fairly vanquished, unless it had been a man [born] of woman who conquered him. For it was by means of a woman that he got the advantage over man at first, setting himself up as man’s opponent.⁵⁷

Irenaeus speaks of the serpent-human conflict “until the seed did come appointed to tread down his head,—which was born of Mary.” Irenaeus then appeals to Ps 90(91):13 as a prophecy of treading on serpents.⁵⁸

Irenaeus saw “her seed” as referring to Jesus as a part of all mankind, but also perhaps in a fuller sense as a prophecy of Mary’s virgin-born child who appeared in a literal sense from a woman. In this way the woman of Gen 3:15 has become a prophecy of the mother of Jesus. Michl pointed out that this sort of exegesis must be understood as belonging in the circle where Justin found the Passover meal to be a prophecy of the death of Christ⁵⁹ with the lamb a type of Christ and with the way it was roasted a symbol of the suffering on the cross. Besides typology, both Justin and Irenaeus also use allegory spun from the OT.⁶⁰ Both Justin⁶¹ and Irenaeus⁶² consider the prophecy of Isa 7:14 to be directly and uniquely fulfilled in Christ. A fourth sort of connection between OT statements and NT events

⁵⁴ *Adv. haer.* 3.23.7 (ANF, 1. 457).

⁵⁵ *Adv. haer.* 4.40.3 (ANF, 1. 524).

⁵⁶ *Adv. haer.* 5.21.1 (ANF, 1. 548–549).

⁵⁷ *Adv. haer.* 5.21.1 (ANF, 1. 549).

⁵⁸ *Adv. haer.* 3.23.7 (ANF, 1. 457).

⁵⁹ *Dial.* 40.1–3 (ANF, 1. 245).

⁶⁰ *Dial.* 91.4 (ANF, 1. 245); *Adv. haer.* 4.20.12 (ANF, 1. 492).

⁶¹ *Dial.* 43.7–8 (ANF, 1. 216); cf. 67.1; 68.6–8; 71.3; 77.1–4; 84.1–4.

⁶² *Adv. haer.* 3.21.1, 5–6 (ANF, 1. 451, 453).

is seen when Simeon, the descendant of Abraham, blessed Jesus. In the person of Simeon, Abraham saw Jesus' day.⁶³ What is said in the OT about a multitude can be centered in the NT on one individual.⁶⁴

VI. GREEK FATHERS

Origen quotes Gen 3:15 in saying that one cannot be a friend of Satan and Christ at the same time: "Let us hear how God puts enmity against him (the Serpent) so as to bring friendship with Christ."⁶⁵ In another place, after alluding to trampling on serpents (Luke 10:19), Origen exhorts: "Let us then pray that our feet may be so beautiful, so strong, that they can trample on the Serpent's head that he cannot bite our heel (Gen. 3:15)."⁶⁶ The influence of Romans on Origen should be obvious. Origen also cites Gen 3:15, using the equivalent "observe head and observe heel," but reverses "your seed and his seed," making God address the statement to the woman instead of to the serpent. Origen has salvation begin with woman as sin began with a woman but does not in that context quote Gen 3:15.⁶⁷ In another setting he changes the addressee: "You shall watch for his head and he shall watch for your heel."⁶⁸ Elsewhere he calls Christ "the undoing of the curse."⁶⁹

Eve and Mary as opposites are a commonplace after the time of Irenaeus, a motif that we will not trace further. Basil the Great (d. 379) cites the statement (Gen 3:15) to the serpent whom the devil used as an instrument. It is through Christ that men are able to trample the serpent.⁷⁰

The first case among Greek fathers that has come to my attention expounding the idea that "seed" in the Genesis passage is unusual is Serapion, a fourth-century bishop in Egypt, in *Catena in Genesim*:

But a woman does not have seed, only man does. How then was it said of The Woman? Is it clear that it was said of Christ whom the undefiled Virgin brought forth without seed? Certainly, He is a singular seed, not seeds in the plural.⁷¹

Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis (d. 403), after paralleling Eve and Mary cites Gen 3:15 and comments:

Now nowhere is to be found a seed of woman. Only, according to a figure, in the case of Eve, the enmity is understood between her own progeny and of both the serpent and the devil and envy existing in the serpent. The whole thing,

⁶³ *Adv. haer.* 4.7.1 (ANF, 1. 469-470).

⁶⁴ Michl, "Weibessame" 492-493.

⁶⁵ Origen *In Jer. hom.* 19.7 (PG, 13. 516D-517A; GCS 3 [1907] 188).

⁶⁶ *In Josh. hom.* 12, n. 2 (PG, 12. 887D-888; GCS 7 [1921] 386-387).

⁶⁷ *In Lucam hom.* 8 (PG, 13. 1819; GCS 9 [1930] 54-55).

⁶⁸ *Homilies in Genesis* 15.5.

⁶⁹ *Fragmentum in Lucam, orat.* 3 (PG, 13. 1902).

⁷⁰ *Quod Deus non est auctor malorum* n. 81-89 (PG, 31. 348, 349C-352C).

⁷¹ The text is cited in D. J. Unger, *The First Gospel* (St. Bonaventure: Franciscan Institute, 1954) 111.

therefore, cannot be fulfilled in a most perfect manner in her [Eve]. It will, however, truly be fulfilled in the holy Seed, the elect, most singular Seed, which was found [born] of Mary without the marriage relation of a man.⁷²

The case is more dogmatically stated by Isidore, bishop of Pelusium (d. ca. 435):

That Seed of The-Womán, whom God commands to be inimical and hostile to the Serpent (Gen. 3:15), is Our Lord Jesus Christ. For He is the Seed of The-Woman, alone born from her in such a manner, namely, that neither the life-germ of man intervened, nor was chastity diminished at all.⁷³

This interpretation that we have been tracing was never universally accepted. While these Greek writers were expounding Gen 3:15 as predictive of the virgin birth, others, reading *tērēsei* ("watch"), were seeing in it a conflict between the devil and all mankind. Cyril of Jerusalem declares that the catechumen must watch that the dragon who lies in wait not bite him. He needs to have his feet shod with the gospel of peace so that "if he does bite you, he may not hurt you."⁷⁴ He wishes that a hatred of the serpent be granted so that "as they lie in wait for your heel, you may crush their head."⁷⁵ Declaring that there is enmity that is laudable, Cyril cites the first half of Gen 3:15: "Friendship with the serpent produces enmity with God, and death."⁷⁶

Gregory of Nazianzus, commenting on the shoes the disciples were to take, allegorizes the flight from Egypt and the things of Egypt. Shoes are needed "in regard to the scorpions and snakes in which Egypt so abounds, so as not to be injured by those who watch the heel which we are bidden to tread under foot."⁷⁷

John Chrysostom saw in the verse the struggle between humanity and the devil, between good and evil.⁷⁸ Chrysostom comments to the serpent: "For I will give to him so much strength that he will continuously tread upon your head, but you I will make lie under his feet. See, my friends, how much care of the human race he manifests by the punishment given to the beast." Chrysostom then shifts from the literal serpent to the intellectual serpent (the devil): "For him, too, God humiliated and made subject under our feet and gave us the power to tread on his head." This idea he supports with an appeal to Luke 10:19.⁷⁹ Chrysostom has a double explanation of Gen 3:15—first, of the human race and its enmity against snakes, and second, of the enmity of men against Satan, which he introduces with the term "much more."

⁷² *Panarion*, lib. 3, haer. 78, n. 18–19 (PG, 42. 728C–729; GCS 3 [1933] 468–470). The text is cited in Unger, *First Gospel* 115.

⁷³ *Epistolarum libr.* 1, n. 426 (PG, 78. 417D).

⁷⁴ *Procatechesis* 16.

⁷⁵ *Catechesis* 6.35.

⁷⁶ *Catechesis* 16.10.

⁷⁷ *Second Oration on Easter* 19 (NPNF², 7. 430).

⁷⁸ *Homilae in Genesisim* 1 (PG, 54. 143–144).

⁷⁹ *In Genesisim hom.* 17.7 (PG, 53. 143).

Anastasius of Sinai in the seventh century spoke of the moral struggle between the Church and Satan.⁸⁰ He allegorizes the serpent to be the devil and the woman to be the Church, transforming the conflict to be in the latter days. He speaks of the absurdity of understanding the words about the serpent materially (*corporaliter*). "You must understand the divine speech about the serpent who comes under the intelligence [the devil], and about the church." The Church is the only adversary and enemy of the serpent. "His heel" is not the woman's heel. "He shall observe" is spoken of Christ, and "you shall observe his heel" is spoken of the Church and its sifting in the latter days.⁸¹

Procopius of Gaza had The-Woman to be a type of the Church. The woman's seed are "those who are born from her and endowed with virtue." The seed is Adam in whom all mankind is included.⁸²

VII. LATIN FATHERS

The virgin Eve/Virgin Mary parallel is expounded by Latin writers beginning with Tertullian in the early third century.⁸³ Tertullian seems to allude to Gen 3:15 in a collective interpretation when he says, "For he allowed a time for the battle so that men too might harm the enemy with the same free will with which he succumbed to him."⁸⁴

Tertullian considers that the jewelry worn on the neck or throat of a woman came from the forehead of dragons that evidently have been trampled. He asks in irony: "Is it thus that she will set her heel on the devil's head, while she heaps ornaments (taken) from his head on her own neck, or on her very head?"⁸⁵ Tertullian evidently takes Gen 3:15 as collective and allegorical but does not expressly discuss "her seed."

The Latin reading that uses feminine pronouns arose as early as the fourth century. Optatus of Mileva, who died before A.D. 400, when dealing with the death of the Bethlehem children declares that all innocence must suffer for Christ. He speaks of enmity with the woman's seed and quotes Gen 3:15, using "She [*ipsa*] shall observe" and "her heel."⁸⁶ Optatus, however, has the enmity to exist from the beginning with Abel's murder by his brother as the example. For him the seed must be collective.

Cyprian speaks of a victorious Christian having trodden on the serpent.⁸⁷ In a pastoral letter he admonishes that feet be wrapped with the teaching of the gospels so that the snake cannot bite when we tread on him.⁸⁸ Cyprian's allusion may as well be to Ps 90(91):1 and/or Luke 10:19

⁸⁰ *In Hexaemeron* 1.11 (PG, 89, 1033).

⁸¹ *In Hexaemeron* 7.

⁸² *Comm. in Genesim* 3.15 (PG, 87, 205AC, 208AC, 212B).

⁸³ *De carne Christus* 17 (PL, 2, 782; CSEL 70 [1942] 233).

⁸⁴ *Adv. Marcionem* 2.10 (PL, 2, 297C-298A).

⁸⁵ *De cultu feminarum* 1.6 (ANF, 4, 17).

⁸⁶ *In Natale Infantum qui pro Domino occisi sunt*. Text in Unger, *First Gospel* 173-174.

⁸⁷ *Ep.* 39.22 (CSEL, 3, 1-2, 582).

⁸⁸ *Ep.* 58.9.1 (644).

as to Gen 3:15. After citing Isa 7:10–15 about the virgin, however, Cyprian says, "This Seed God had foretold would come forth from the woman which (*quod*) would trample (*calcaret*) the head of the Devil." He then cites Gen 3:15 (in his only explicit citation of it), using the masculine pronouns "he" and "his."⁸⁹ The combined citations suggest that Cyprian saw Gen 3:15 as a prediction of the virgin birth. Cyprian, however, also writes about Celerinus who has experienced persecution: "Fettered his feet may have been, but the serpent was downtrodden, crushed and conquered."⁹⁰

With Ambrose, Gen 3:15 is cited not as "her seed" but as "the woman's seed" (*semen mulieris*). There are variants in the manuscripts between the pronouns *ipsa* and *ipse*. He comments: "Finally the Serpent was allowed to observe the heel of the woman and Her-seed (*mulieris et seminis ejus*), that it might do no harm and pour in its poison."⁹¹ Christ "crushed that Devil-serpent to whom He offered his heel but did not feel his poison."⁹² Ambrose has the soul tell Christ to go to the Father but not to leave the soul behind. He has the soul and Eve be the same and wants to avoid the Serpent's again seeking to bite The-Woman's heel and trip up Adam.⁹³ Ambrose prays: "Wash the heel of my soul, that I may be able to efface the curse, that I feel not the serpent's bite on the foot of my soul."⁹⁴ He is alluding to the task of treading on serpents (cf. Luke 10:19).

Augustine cites Gen 3:15 in the ordinary Latin form with *ipsa* and *observabit*: "She shall lie in wait for your head and you will lie in wait for her heel." He declares that the whole statement is made in figurative language, sees the devil working in the serpent, and declares that he discussed the words in his *Two Books on Genesis* against the Manicheans.⁹⁵ There Augustine allegorizes the seed of the devil to be the perverse suggestion and the seed of the woman to be the fruit of good works that the perverse suggestion resists.⁹⁶ He applies Gen 3:15 to the moral struggle of mankind: "The devil marketh thy heel, in order that when thou slippeth he may overthrow thee. He marketh thy heel, do thou mark his head. What is his head? The beginning of an evil suggestion."⁹⁷ In a caution against pride through which every wicked man has fallen, Augustine homilizes: "The serpent is watching when the foot of pride approaches you so that when you falter he may throw you headlong."⁹⁸ Augustine further makes Gen 3:15 a caution to the Church against pride, which he declares is the beginning of all sin.⁹⁹

⁸⁹ *Ad Quirinium* 2.9 (PL, 4. 704; Unger, *First Gospel* 165).

⁹⁰ *Ep.* 39.2.2 (ACW, 44. 55).

⁹¹ *De fuga saeculi* 41, 43 (PL, 14. 588–589; Unger, *First Gospel* 165).

⁹² *De interpellatione Job et David* 2.4 (PL, 14. 812D–813A).

⁹³ *De Isaac et anima* 5.43 (PL, 14. 516C).

⁹⁴ *On the Holy Spirit* 1.16 (NPNF², 10. 95).

⁹⁵ *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 11.36 (ACW, 42. 170).

⁹⁶ *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* 1.2.18 (PL, 34. 110).

⁹⁷ *On the Psalms* 49.6 (NPNF¹, 8. 170).

⁹⁸ *Discourse on Ps. 35* (ACW, 30. 247).

⁹⁹ *On the Psalms* 36.16 (NPNF¹, 8. 91).

Jerome observes that the OL *Ipse observabit* is given better in Hebrew as *Ipse conteret*, using the masculine *ipse* in both instances.¹⁰⁰ He then applies Gen 3:15 in the light of the crushing of Rom 16:20, which suggests a collective understanding of the statement. In another passage he adapts the Genesis statement as addressing Eve: "You (*tu*) shall observe (*observare*) his head, and he shall observe your heel."¹⁰¹ Jerome does not identify the woman or her seed but quotes Gen 3:15 in the same form when addressing mankind in general.¹⁰² In the Vg, Jerome likely wrote *ipsa*, which nearly all Vg MSS have. The reading *ipsa* was already known before him, and instead of the double use of *observare* he wrote *conteret* and *insidiaberis*.¹⁰³ In homilizing on shoes on the feet of the prodigal, Jerome sees shoes given "lest anywhere a lurking snake might attack the sole of his foot as he walked, and that he might tread upon serpents and scorpions."¹⁰⁴ Jerome includes "us" in "her seed" as he speaks of our steps being impeded by the serpent and of God putting Satan under our feet swiftly.¹⁰⁵

John Cassian sees Gen 3:15 as collective: "For the subtle serpent is ever watching our heel, that is, is lying in wait for the close, and endeavouring to trip us up right to the end of our life. One must 'watch his head,' that is watch 'the first rise of thoughts.'"¹⁰⁶ Cassian warns against covetousness: "Wherefore, though in the matter of all kinds of sins we ought ordinarily to watch the serpent's head, yet in this above all we should be the more keenly on our guard."¹⁰⁷

The moral struggle is further affirmed by Gregory the Great at the beginning of the seventh century who reads *ipsa* and *observare* in his Bible. In moralizing, Gregory uses Gen 3:15 to explain Ps 55:7, which in Latin reads *ipse calcaneum observabunt*.¹⁰⁸

Isadore of Seville (d. 630) moralizes the seed of the devil to be the perverse suggestion and the seed of the woman to be the fruit of good work by which the perverse suggestion is resisted.¹⁰⁹ Isadore was a collector of passages from the fathers and knew "certain others" who interpreted Gen 3:15 of the virgin of whom the Lord was born. He also used the expression "promised to be born of her in order to defeat the enemy." The crushing of the head is the termination of death. Isadore applies Ps 90(91):11 to the work of Christ:

Leo the Great is explicit that the seed is Christ: For he denounced to the Serpent that there would be the Seed of The-Woman who would crush (*contereret*) by His own power the haughtiness of the guilty head [the devil's], namely, He signified (*significans*) Christ, who would come in the flesh as God

¹⁰⁰ *Quaestiones hebraicae in libro Genesis* (PL, 23. 991).

¹⁰¹ *In Isaiam* 16.58 (PL, 24. 594); Unger, *First Gospel* 175.

¹⁰² *In Ezekeielen* 14.47 (PL, 25. 469).

¹⁰³ Unger, *First Gospel* 179.

¹⁰⁴ *Ep.* 21.25 (ACW, 33. 122).

¹⁰⁵ *Liber hebraicorum quaestionum in Genesisim* (PL, 23. 991).

¹⁰⁶ *Institutes* 4.37 (NPNF², 11. 231).

¹⁰⁷ *Institutes* 7.21 (NPNF², 11. 255).

¹⁰⁸ *Moralia in Job* 1.36–53, lib. 2 (PL, 75. 552a).

¹⁰⁹ *Quaestiones in Genesisim* c. 5, nn. 5–6 (PL 83. 221; Unger, *First Gospel* 208).

and man, and who, born of the Virgin, would by His incorrupt birth condemn the violator of the human race.¹¹⁰

In the twelfth century Abbot Rupert of Deutz asks:

For about what seed is this said except about the one that is Christ? He, really, alone is the seed of woman in such wise that He is not also the seed of man. . . .

Most certainly, then, here that Seed of The Woman is promised who is Christ.

For Rupert the connecting link between *ipsa conteret* and the rest of the Scripture that ascribes victory over Satan to Christ is the virginal conception of Mary's child.¹¹¹

Not all Latins followed this line of interpretation, which makes Gen 3:15 a unique prediction of the virgin birth. Bede summarizes Augustine with the seed of the woman being good works. He then identifies the seed of woman with the Holy Church,¹¹² but in his commentary on the Pentateuch after citing Augustine he says that Christ is the seed of the Virgin Mary. The seed of the devil are perverse men.¹¹³

Peter Damian (A.D. 1007–1072) homilizes from this passage that if honor is bestowed on one it should be trodden under the stern foot of discipline on the floor of the heart and that "it feel the blow at the very head of its temptation" lest it strike at the heel of our good deeds.¹¹⁴

VIII. SYRIAN WRITERS

Of Syrian writers, first is Ephraim who makes the Son of Mary the one who "has trampled on him [the devil] very much—for he is the serpent that still fights though it is crushed."¹¹⁵ "Christ has crushed death."¹¹⁶ "The foot of Mary trod under heel him who with his heel had wounded Eve."¹¹⁷ Ephraim plays on the motif of the rib of Adam: "There rose from the Rib a hidden power, which cut off Satan as Dragon."¹¹⁸ At the same time, in commenting on the Christian's armor Ephraim declares that the feet must be shod with gospel teaching "so that when the serpent is being trampled and crushed under our feet he may not be able to trip or bite us."¹¹⁹ In his work on Genesis, Ephraim reverses the order of the Genesis statement to "between her seed and your seed."¹²⁰ Ephraim in his commentary on Genesis gives Gen 3:15 mainly a literal interpretation.¹²¹

¹¹⁰ *Sermo 22 De nativitate Domini* 2.1 (PL, 54. 194A; Unger, *First Gospel* 201).

¹¹¹ *Commentar. in Genesim* (PL, 167. 304–305; Unger, *First Gospel* 214–216).

¹¹² *Hexaemeron* 1.1 (PL, 91. 581).

¹¹³ *In Pentateuchum commentari* (PL, 93. 232–233).

¹¹⁴ Letter 8.

¹¹⁵ *Carmina Nisibene* n. 22 and 38; Unger, *First Gospel* 144.

¹¹⁶ *Sermon de Domino nostro*; Unger, *First Gospel* 145.

¹¹⁷ *Hymni* 2.31 *De Nativitate Jesu Christi in carne*; Unger, *First Gospel* 145.

¹¹⁸ *Hymns on the Nativity* 3 (NPNF², 13. 232).

¹¹⁹ *Ep.* 581.9.1 (ACW, 46. 67).

¹²⁰ Unger, *First Gospel* 150.

¹²¹ T. Kronholm, *Motifs from Genesis 1–11 in the Genuine Hymns of Ephrem the Syrian* (Lund: Gleerup, 1978) 115.

By James of Edessa (ca. 700) the just are said to observe the head of the serpent.¹²² Mar Isodad of Merw (ca. 850) speaks of the perpetual enmity between Satan and us.¹²³ Moses Bar-Cepha (813–903) gives three explanations. He includes all men in the statement of Gen 3:15 but then says that “the seed of the woman (*sema feminae*) is the one born of her.” He gives an allegorical-moral interpretation in which men fight against Satan. In his commentary on paradise he explicitly makes the seed to be the human race, which crushes the beginning of temptation.¹²⁴

The early-tenth-century manuscript from the Mangana collection edited by Levene does not reflect any typological interpretation of Gen 3:15 or reference to the *Protoevangelium*. The struggle is made to be a general one with no reference to any particular individual or any foreshadowing of the outcome.¹²⁵ Gannat Bassame in the tenth century reproduced the commentary of Mar Isodad in abbreviated form.¹²⁶ Bar Hebraeus, a representative of the Syrian Jacobites in the thirteenth century, in his scholias on the OT sees Gen 3:15 as speaking of the moral struggle between Satan and man. The head of Satan is crushed when man seeks the things on high; man’s heel is bruised when he suffers for listening to Satan.¹²⁷

IX. THE REFORMATION

Erasmus in the *Enchiridion* allegorizes on the nature of snakes and comments: “Understand ‘woman’ as the carnal part of man. For this is our Eve, through whom the most crafty serpent lures our mind to death-bearing pleasures.”¹²⁸ The Christian must be ready to resist the onslaught of the devil “and hiss him away, crushing straightway the head of the plague-bearing serpent.”¹²⁹

Luther decries those who follow the Latin version and read “she will crush” as being exegetes who are misled by Satan. He finds even Nicholas of Lyra, who knew Hebrew, to be misled in his failure to refute the position. Not Mary but the lamb of God is the one who takes away sin. Luther affirms:

When we are given instruction in this passage concerning the enmity between the serpent and the woman—such an enmity that the Seed of woman will crush the serpent with all his powers—this is a wonderful revelation of the depths of God’s goodness.¹³⁰

¹²² In *Genesis* 33.15.

¹²³ J.-N. Voste, “Le proto-evangile selon l’exegese de Mar Isodad de Merw (c. 850) (Gen. 3:15),” *Bib* 33 (1952) 313–320; Unger, *First Gospel* 153.

¹²⁴ Unger, *First Gospel* 155.

¹²⁵ A. Levene, *The Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis* (London: Taylor’s Foreign Press, 1950) 158.

¹²⁶ Voste, “Proto-evangile” 319.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* 320.

¹²⁸ *Enchiridion* 1 (LCC, 14. 297).

¹²⁹ *Enchiridion*, ninth rule (LCC, 14. 363).

¹³⁰ M. Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” in *Luther’s Works* (ed. J. Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 1. 192–193. Quoted by permission.

Luther continues: "He clearly declares that the male seed of the woman would prostrate this enemy." Commenting on "her seed" he remarks:

He [God] says, "I will snatch away the woman and from her I will produce a Seed, and that Seed will crush your head. You have corrupted the flesh through sin and have made it subject to death, but from that very flesh I shall bring forth a Man who will crush and prostrate you and all your powers."¹³¹

Luther finds the statement to be indefinite for the purpose of deceiving the devil who does not know what woman is the producer of the seed: "He is mocking Satan and making him afraid of all women." Luther then connects the promise with the virgin passage of Isa 7:14. He notes:

Women gave birth up to the Flood and later until the time of Mary; but their seed could not in truth be called the Seed of the woman, but rather the seed of a man. But what is born from Mary was conceived by the Holy Spirit and is the true Seed of Mary, just as other promises given to Abraham and David testify, according to which Christ is called the Son of Abraham and the Son of David.¹³²

He continues:

It is, therefore, an amazing instance of synecdoche. "The woman's Seed," He says. This means all individuals in general; and yet He is speaking of only one individual, of the Seed of Mary, who is a mother without union with a male. Thus the first little expression, "I will put enmity between you and the woman," seems to denote all women in general. God wanted to make all women suspect to Satan; on the other hand, He wanted to leave the godly with a very certain hope, so that they might expect this salvation from all who gave birth, until the real one came. In the same way this "her Seed" is spoken most individually, if I may use this expression, concerning the Seed which was born only to Mary of the tribe of Judah, who was espoused to Joseph.¹³³

Luther also allegorizes the wording of Gen 3:15b: "It says 'heel' and means by that the blandishments of the senses. It does not say 'head,' because Christ is the head."¹³⁴ "The seed of the devil is in the body. The seed of the woman is the word of God in the church. The seed of the Devil is the very sin, tinder and concupiscence in the flesh."¹³⁵ Luther wrote to George Spalatin: "And he [Christ] will triumph in us over the old serpent, murderer, and author of sin, however much he may bruise Christ's heel."¹³⁶

At this period the *Coverdale Bible* of 1535 had a woodcut on the left of its title page, opposite one of Adam and Eve after the fall on the right, depicting the Redeemer treading on the serpent.

¹³¹ Ibid. 193.

¹³² Ibid. 194.

¹³³ Ibid. 195-196.

¹³⁴ *Ep. to the Hebrews* 12 (LCC, 16. 229).

¹³⁵ *Lectures on Romans* 6.6 (LCC, 15. 183-184).

¹³⁶ LCC, 18. 229.

John Calvin, on the other hand, understood the enmity differently:

I interpret this simply to mean that there should always be the hostile strife between the human race and serpents, which is now apparent; for, by a secret feeling of nature, man abhors them.¹³⁷

Calvin insisted that Jerome in using two different verbs in the Genesis statement had done so without reason since the same verb is repeated in Hebrew. Calvin then proceeds to allegorize the serpent into Satan. Calvin reads a neuter pronoun (*ipsum vulnerabit*) and comments adversely on the Vg feminine pronoun *ipsa*: "Therefore, by a common error, this most corrupt reading has been received. Then, a profane exposition of it has been invented, by applying to the mother of Christ what is said concerning her seed."¹³⁸ Calvin continues:

I do not agree with others respecting their *meaning*; for other interpreters take the seed for *Christ*, without controversy; as if it were said, that some one would arise from the seed of the woman who would wound the serpent's head. Gladly would I give my suffrage in support of their opinion, but that I regard the word *seed* as too violently distorted by them; for who will concede that a *collective* noun is to be understood of one man *only*? Further, as the perpetuity of the contest is noted, so victory is promised to the human race through a continual succession of ages. I explain, therefore, the *seed* to mean the posterity of the woman generally.¹³⁹

Calvin finds that the promise is that the human race would at length be victorious. He then appeals to Rom 16:20: "By which words he signifies that the power of bruising Satan is imparted to faithful men, and thus the blessing is the common property of the whole Church; but he, at the same time, admonishes us, that it only has its commencement in this world; because God crowns none but well-tried wrestlers."¹⁴⁰

Calvin states that the crushing of Satan's head "pertains to Christ and all his members in common," and the idea becomes to Calvin an assurance of the security of the believer.¹⁴¹ Again he says, "For the statement there concerns not only Christ but the whole of mankind. . . . Hence it follows that Christ was begotten of mankind, for in addressing Eve, it was God's intention to raise her hope that she should not be overwhelmed with despair."¹⁴²

Dietrich Philips of the more radical Reformation (ca. 1750) has Christ Jesus to be the true promised seed of the woman and to be the conqueror of the devil. But he continues: "All believers are the seed of the spiritual Eve. The children of God overcome the serpent and its seed, the world and all that is in it, by the blood of the Lamb."¹⁴³

¹³⁷ J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), I, 167.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* 170.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 171.

¹⁴¹ *Institutes* 1.14.18 (LCC, 20, 177).

¹⁴² *Institutes* 2.13.2 (LCC, 20, 478).

¹⁴³ *The Church of God* (LCC, 25, 231).

The notable variants in the early English Bibles (apart from spellings) are that Tyndale in his Genesis (1530) used "hatred" whereas, beginning with the *Great Bible*, all successive versions used "enmities" (as did the *Douay*). This term became a singular with the *Geneva Bible*. Tyndale took "seed" to be the antecedent of the two pronouns in the last sentence, translating them "that seed" and "hit" [*sic*]. The *Great Bible* had "the same" and "hys" [*sic*], but the first of these pronouns became "He" with the *Geneva Bible* and the second "his." The *Bishops' Bible* chose "it" for the first pronoun and "his" for the second. The *Douay*, quite out of line with the others, followed the Latin and found woman to be the antecedent. It has "she shal bruise" and "her heele." The *KJV* followed the *Bishops'* with "it" and "he"; but the *RV/ASV* made the pronouns harmonize and used "he" in both cases.

The *RV/ASV* precedent is followed in the *RSV*, *NASB*, *NIV*, *NAB* and *NKJV*. The messianic interpretation, however, is reflected in the *NKJV* by the capitalization of "He" and "His" as well as of "Seed." Earlier the Smith-Goodspeed version had used "your posterity and hers" and "they" and "them" for the pronouns; the *NEB* and *REB* have "they" and "their heel"; and *TEV* has "her offspring" and "their heel"—all of which reflect a collective interpretation of "seed."

The *NAB* carries an explanatory note that the text speaks of "all the descendants of the woman" but points out that later theology saw more than unending hostility between snakes and man. The serpent is regarded as the devil (Wis 2:24; John 8:44; Rev 12:9; 20:2). It continues:

Because "the Son of God appeared that he might destroy the works of the devil" (1 Jn. 3:8), the passage can be understood as the first promise of a Redeemer for fallen mankind. The woman's offspring then is primarily Jesus Christ.

The *JB* has "it" for the two pronouns of Gen 3:15 but also has a note calling attention to the fact that the Greek Bible has masculine pronouns setting the stage for the messianic interpretation of the Greek fathers, that the Latin version has feminine pronouns, and that the pronouns have been taken to refer to Mary, who in the messianic interpretation appears together with the Messiah.

X. COMMENTARIES

Modern commentaries do not discuss the phenomenon that in other Genesis passages besides Gen 3:15 *zera*^c has a feminine possessive pronominal suffix. They are almost unanimous, however, in rejecting the virgin birth prediction interpretation of Gen 3:15. Dillmann found the verse speaking of continued enmity between snakes and men with the second half of the verse merely depicting differing modes of contest in keeping with the nature of each.¹⁴⁴ C. A. Briggs commented that "the seed of the

¹⁴⁴ A. Dillmann, *Genesis Critically and Exegetically Explained* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1887), 1. 160.

woman embraces the human race as such, that is, all who take part in the conflicts of the race with the forces of evil," but then he spoke of an individual victor, the representative of the race.¹⁴⁵ Keil and Delitzsch saw the whole human race in the conflict.¹⁴⁶ S. R. Driver stated: "We must not read into the words more than they contain." He also found the statement centering on the strife without specific promise about the outcome.¹⁴⁷ Both Dillmann and Driver derived the idea of hope in the passage from the effectiveness of the curse of God on the serpent.

John Skinner explained Gen 3:15 as speaking of "the whole brood of serpents and the whole race of men." He said, "It is doubtful if, from the standpoint of strict historical exegesis, the passage can be regarded as in any sense a *Protoevangelium*."¹⁴⁸ U. Cassuto saw the conflict continuing through the generations but then suggested that a parable concerning the principle of evil may be involved.¹⁴⁹ S. Mowinckel declared that those who adopt the historical approach have abandoned the messianic interpretation and see in the passage a general statement about mankind, serpents, and the struggle between them that continues as long as the earth exists.¹⁵⁰

C. Westermann finds the parallel of "seed" in the verse to be pointing to a line of descendants and not to an individual. He considers "seed" to be collective. Furthermore, in the context of pronouncement of punishment "it is not possible that such a form has either promise or prophecy as its primary or even its secondary meaning."¹⁵¹ N. Sarna, after using "they" and "their heel" in the text, finds the woman to be representative of the entire human race, "as the reference to her 'offspring' shows."¹⁵²

XI. CONCLUSION

The interpretation of Gen 3:15 throughout history has confronted three basic issues: (1) whether the statement is a threat or a promise—a threat to the serpent or a promise to mankind or to Eve; (2) whether the passage is to be interpreted literally or allegorically; and, assuming some sort of figurative interpretation, (3) whether the expression "her seed" is to be interpreted as including all mankind, as including all mankind with reference also to Christ as the prime representative, or as uniquely predictive of the virgin birth of Jesus. These issues are to some extent intertwined.

¹⁴⁵ C. A. Briggs, *Messianic Prophecy* (New York: Scribner's, 1886) 75–76.

¹⁴⁶ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1951), 1. 98–102.

¹⁴⁷ S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1909) 49.

¹⁴⁸ J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (2d ed.; ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1930) 79–81.

¹⁴⁹ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on Genesis* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978) 101.

¹⁵⁰ Mowinckel, *He That Cometh* 11.

¹⁵¹ C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 260.

¹⁵² N. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 27.

The third assumes that the passage is a promise and that the serpent is to be understood as the devil.

To say that the passage is messianic does not necessarily imply that it is virgin-birth messianic. This paper has attempted to distinguish between those writers who give special attention to "her seed" from the mass of writers who parallel Eve and Mary and those writers who speak in general terms of Christ's victory over Satan. Its thesis is that what should have been first considered—whether the feminine possessive pronominal suffix attached to *zera*^c is a unique construction—has been ignored by exegetes. That being true, the passage has been made to say what should have never been attached to it. Making the woman to be the addressee had its influence in convincing interpreters that the statement was a promise rather than being a part of the curse on the serpent. Once the pronoun *ipsa* got into the Latin translation, and once "her seed" was elaborated into the terminology "woman's seed" and what that term suggested, there was really no way to exegete the passage apart from the idea of its predicting the virgin birth. A look at texts about Hagar and Rebekah in Genesis could have safeguarded interpreters from the whole misguided exegetical effort.