

**B**rant PITRE, *Isus și rădăcinile evreiești ale Mariei (Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary)*, traducere din engleză de Monica Broșteanu, Editura Humanitas, București, 2020, 227 pp.

Recently, Humanitas Publishing House released an exceptional work by Catholic theologian Brant Pitre, a professor at Notre Dame Catholic Seminary in New Orleans, Louisiana, where he is a professor of Bible Studies. This work is not the only translation from the author's work in Romanian, for several years, from his works being translated the following: *Misterul cinei de pe urmă: Iisus și rădăcinile iudaice ale Euharistiei (Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist. Unlocking the Secrets of the Last Supper)*, Editura Humanitas, 2016; *Isus Mirele: Cea mai frumoasă poveste de dragoste a tuturor timpurilor (Jesus the Bridegroom: The Greatest Love Story Ever Told)*, Humanitas, 2018 and *Fiul lui Dumnezeu? Pledoarie pentru Isus (The Case for Jesus)*, Editura Humanitas, 2017.

The paper I intend to present in the lines below, *Isus și rădăcinile evreiești ale Mariei (Jesus and the Jewish Roots of Mary)* is structured in 7 chapters, presenting the relationship between the Mother of God and the Savior Christ. These 7 chapters are preceded by an Introduction, in which the author presents generalities on the mariological problem as well as the presentation of the teaching about Mary in Jewish antiquity, respectively the Old Testament prefigurations regarding the Virgin Mother.

The first chapter of the work, entitled "The New Eve" demonstrates on a biblical basis why the Mother of God is called "woman" in some places in the New Testament, with exactly the same term as Eve in the Old Testament. This fact shows that for Christians the Mother of God is "the new Eve", meant to redeem the fall of the first Eve. In summary, the author shows that "according to the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation, Mary is not only the mother of Jesus. She is also the second Eve and the woman in Genesis 3, 15, the mother of the Messiah, whose

seed would defeat Satan and undo the fall of Adam and Eve by dying on the cross” (p. 41). The patristic perspective on this issue also shows that for the Church of the first centuries the Mother of God was considered “the new Eve” (pp. 42-43). In this context, the Roman Catholic teaching on the Immaculate Conception of Mary is also presented, in association with the sinless conception of the first Eve, although this argument is insufficiently theologically substantiated by the author.

The second chapter of the book entitled “The New Ark” presents the Mother of God and her virgin birth by analogy with the Ark of the Holy of Holies. In this context, the Old Testament texts are presented regarding the descent of the glory of the Lord over the Tabernacle of Testimony in which the Ark with the Tablets of the Law was kept, by analogy with the Virgin Mary over whom the Holy Spirit descended at the Annunciation, so that it supernaturally begets Christ the word of God (Luke 1, 35). Another illustration of the analogy between the Ark of the Old Law in the Old Testament is the texts of the Gospel of St. Luke which relate the visit of the Blessed Virgin Mary to her cousin, Elizabeth (Luke 1, 35-56). In conclusion, the author shows that both in the case of the Annunciation and in that of the visit of the Mother of God to Elizabeth, the wife of the priest Zacharias,

“Luke envelops Mary as the new Ark (...); (...) many researchers recognize the parallel between the Annunciation and the descent of the «cloud of glory» over the Temple. If so, then the remarks regarding the Ark and the account of the visit are perfectly consistent with the way Luke portrayed Mary earlier” (p. 64).

In the same sense, the author presents the text of Revelation 11, 19-12, 2, establishing an analogy between the Ark and the Woman in Heaven. In this context, the author presents another teaching specific to Roman Catholicism, namely the ascension of Mary. From this perspective, some patristic texts from the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries are presented, all of which emphasize that Mary’s body is God’s dwelling place on earth. By virtue of this fact, the Roman Catholic teaching is based on the fact that by falling asleep or moving out of this world, the Mother of God moves with her body to God in heaven, whose dwelling she was on earth. In support of this teaching, the author invokes two Byzantine patristic texts, one from

the seventh century, belonging to Modest, Patriarch of Jerusalem and one from the eighth century, belonging to St. John of Damascus. The chapter ends with the argument of the ascension of Mary with the body to heaven as a sign of our resurrection, the author showing that “the ascension of Mary shows us that the resurrection and ascension with the body are not only for Jesus. They are for us too” (p. 73).

Chapter 3 of the paper, suggestively titled “The Queen Mother” argues another Roman Catholic appointment and teaching, namely that of the Virgin Mary as “Queen of Heaven”, deducing this quality of the Mother of God from being the God-Bearer. From this perspective, the author presents the whole Old Testament vision of the queen-mother in ancient Israel, referring to the fact that in the Jewish monarchy the queen was in fact not the wife but the king’s mother, who ruled together with the king, being a very powerful mediator for the subjects to her son. The author then presents the New Testament perspective, identifying the Virgin Mary with the New Queen. Thus, it is presented the vision of Mary in the Gospel of St. Matthew, according to which she is the Mother of Emmanuel (Matthew 1, 18-25); then the vision of St. Luke, according to which the Virgin Mother appears under the name of “Mother of my Lord” (Luke 1, 41-45); and finally, the vision of Revelation, according to which the Mother of God appears as the “Queen of Heaven”, corresponding to the woman clothed with the sun, having the moon at her feet (Revelation 12, 1-2, 5). At the end of the chapter the author presents the teaching about the Virgin Mary - Mother of God, using for argumentation two texts from the fourth century, belonging to Saint Athanasius the Great and Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, in which explicitly the Mother of God is called “God-Bearer”. Another argument used by the author is the text of St. Luke “Mother of my Lord” (Luke 1, 43), which finally shows that Mother (greek *Meter*) of Lord (greek *Kyrios*) provides a biblical foundation for the Church’s teaching that Mary is also the “God-Bearer” (p. 93). The author concludes masterfully on this issue, showing that far from being “unbiblical”, *Theotokos* is a compound word, which comes directly from the Bible... Right on the front page of the New Testament, Mary is the virgin who will “give birth” (greek *tikto*) to the child who is “God (greek *theos*) with us”. In other words, Mary is the “God-Bearer” (pp. 93-94). From her quality of Mother of God derives the honor and intercession that Christians give her. In this respect, the author argues with the text of the hymn prayer “Under your mercy we escape,

Mother of God ...” dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> centuries. Other arguments used by the author in support of the intercessory prayers brought by Christians to the Mother of God are two texts from the fourth century, one belonging to St. Gregory of Nazianzus and another from the same century, belonging to the church writer Sozomen. At the end of this chapter, the author presents the veneration of Mary compared to the worship of God, showing that the ancient Christians who honored Mary and begged her intercession did not “worship” her as God. On the contrary, the same Christians who honored her as “Mother of God” completely rejected the idea of worshipping Mary, calling it blasphemy and idolatry” (p. 97). In support of this statement the author cites two texts, one of St. Epiphanius of Salamis, a fourth-century Eastern patristic author, and one on the veneration of the Virgin Mary and worship, due only to God from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

In chapter 4 of the paper, the theologian Brant Pitre presents the teaching regarding the everlasting virginity of the Theotokos. The author starts from the observation that

“if we interpret the testimony of the Gospel in its Jewish context of the first century, there are many elements that prove that from the beginning of her marriage Mary intended to remain a virgin because she had no children but Jesus“ (p. 103).

In the context of arguing this idea, the evidence regarding the Jewish oath of Mary’s virginity is presented, as well as the Old Testament perception regarding virgin girls. It all ends with the question of the Mother of God in the New Testament, addressed to the angel, when he brings the news that she will give birth to Christ, the Son of God: “How shall this be, since I have no husband?” (Luke 1, 34). Next, the author presents the proof of Joseph’s abstinence (Matthew 1, 20-21.24-25), which is also an important argument in support of the everlasting virginity of the Mother of God. Referring to the problem of what the Holy Gospel calls “brothers of the Lord”, the author points out that in ancient Jews, the word “brothers” (greek *adelphoi*) could be used to designate close relatives, such as cousins (p. 118). He even manages to prove that Jacob and Joshua, “are not sons of the mother of Jesus. They are not Joseph’s sons from a previous marriage, but of a man named Cleopas” (p. 121). Thus, the mother of the two could not be other than the one identified in the Holy Gospel as

“Mary of Cleopas” (John 19, 25). The author shows that these “brothers” of Jesus will become the first bishops of Jerusalem, the author using a text of Hegesipus of the second century to prove it, taken in the fourth century by the church writer Eusebius of Caesarea in his *Church History*. Later, referring to the perpetual virginity of Mary in ancient Christianity, the author presents three patristic testimonies, two from the East, belonging to St. Athanasius the Great and St. John Chrysostom, from the fourth century, and one from the West, from the fifth century, belonging to the blessed Augustine. In a theological approach, answering the question of why Mary’s perpetual virginity is important, Western theologian Brant Pitre answers that “Mary’s perpetual virginity refers to the eternal life of the world to come, to the resurrection and to the new creation, in which the ordinary relationships of marriage will no longer exist, because there will be no more death” (p. 127).

Chapter 5 of the work refers to the Birth of the Messiah, in this context being presented the Old Testament prefiguration regarding the painless birth of Mary (Isaiah 66, 7-8), but also to the texts of the prophet Micah (5, 1-2), in which the biblical author presents antagonistically, the torments of the birth of the Messiah. Referring to the text of the prophet Isaiah, the author of the work shows the following:

“Since the pains of birth are a consequence of the sin of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3, 16-19), they belong by definition to the ancient creation. In the new creation («the time to come»), women will not go through such torments. In other words, because the Messiah himself will inaugurate the new creation, his birth should be the beginning of this new creation, in which the effects of Adam’s and Eve’s sin would be nullified” (p. 134).

Seeking to provide a balanced response to the apparent antagonistic vision of the prophecies of Isaiah and Micah, the author goes on to present the New Testament frames, in which the painless birth of Jesus of which the Holy Fathers of the Church speak as St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Ephraim the Syrian and St. Gregory of Nyssa are nothing but the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. As for the prophecy of Micah, about the “torments of the birth”, they are seen as fulfillment in the texts of the Gospel of John, where we speak of the hours of Christ’s crucifixion (John 19, 25-27) and

the text of Revelation by the same biblical author, the evangelist John (Revelation 12, 1-6), in which the woman “in torment” is presented. In this context, the woman in Revelation is seen as the foreshadowing image of the “torments of the birth” of the Lord’s Crucifixion. The author shows from this perspective that

“as some contemporary researchers have shown, this passage is not a biography, but an apocalyptic vision. Indeed, there are several reasons to think that the vision of the woman who was struggling to give birth is not a literal description of what Mary suffered at Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus, but a symbolic description of what Mary suffered on Calvary, at the crucifixion of Jesus” (p. 139). So “Revelation 12 is not a literal description of the mystery of the Nativity, but an apocalyptic description of the mystery of the Cross.... The messianic birth in Revelation refers directly not to the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, but to the mystery of Easter morning: *the torments of birth correspond to the sufferings on Calvary*” (p. 141).

In favor of this statement that the Virgin Mary suffered the “torments of birth” at the Crucifixion of the Lord, the author also uses a text of St. John of Damascus from the eighth century.

Chapter 6 of the paper is suggestively titled “The New Rachel”, the author presenting the personality of Rachel in the Old Testament as reflected in ancient Judaism. Thus, the image of Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin from the Old Testament is described, Joseph being the Old Testament prototype of Jesus Christ. From this perspective, the author emphasizes that

“the New Testament not only describes Jesus as a new Joseph, but also makes some fascinating connections between Mary and Rachel. Indeed, if we see Mary as the *new Rachel*, we will also begin to understand why ancient Christians saw in Mary not only the biological mother of Jesus, but also the spiritual mother of the Church and powerful intercessor to God in heaven” (p. 156).

As can be easily observed, through the parallel Rachel - Mary the author seeks to substantiate another teaching specific to Roman

Catholicism, namely Mary the Mother of the Church, a teaching challenged in the Eastern theological space. The author emphasizes that Rachel “was blessed with great physical beauty” (p. 157). Referring to the image of Rachel in the Jewish tradition, the author shows that she is the image of the most powerful mediator. In this subchapter, the author also points out that “Rachel remained in the memory of the people as a woman who suffered greatly” (p. 160). On the other hand, he points out that “in the comments of the ancient rabbis, Rachel is portrayed not only as the «mother» of her people, but also as *the most powerful mediator* for Israel” (p. 161). So, according to Brant Pitre, Rachel was the woman “wife of Jacob / Israel, whose special role was to pray and intercede for her children, even though she was no longer here on earth” (p. 162). Basing his association between Rachel and Mary, the Mother of God, the author establishes several analogies between the two characters in the Old and New Testaments. Thus, “the killing of infants takes place in the vicinity of Rachel’s tomb”, she being buried on the road “to Bethlehem” (Genesis 35, 19). Then, the author points out that “although Rachel died, she somehow knows the sufferings of her descendants and mourns them like a mother of Israel” (p. 163). Continuing his argument, the author takes the assessment of a Protestant theologian, according to whom “Rachel, who wept in her tomb in Bethlehem during slavery (exile), was now weeping over another crisis, significant for the history of salvation” namely the killing of the 14,000 of babies by King Herod. “It is significant - the author emphasizes - that Matthew seems to share the belief that Rachel, although long dead, does not forget the suffering of her descendants” (p. 164). The author then takes up the presentation of the researcher David Flusser, according to which “since both suffer for their children, Rachel and Mary correspond to each other; in Matthew, *Rachel is a symbolic figure of the suffering mother...* Rachel’s grief for the dead children also symbolizes *Mary’s suffering* for her illustrious son” (p. 164). The author also mentions the conclusion of the researcher Jacob Neusner, who describes Rachel as “the ancient Israelite parallel of Mary”. In conclusion, starting from the texts of the two researchers, Brant Pitre considers that

“Mary, the grieving mother of the persecuted child ... from the Gospel of Matthew, is truly a new Rachel (...); it is easy to imagine Mary weeping not only for the persecution and exile of

her own son, but also for the lives of all the boys massacred in an attempt to kill her child” (p. 164).

The author then refers to the Book of Revelation, which depicts the woman with the sun, moon, and stars (12, 1-3), pointing out that from this perspective the text of Revelation concerning “the vision of the woman in heaven is *directly inspired by Joseph’s dream*, in which the sun, moon, and stars symbolize Jacob, Rachel, and their eleven sons” (Genesis 37, 9-11). On the other hand, he points out that “the woman clothed in the sun is not only the mother of the Messiah. She is also the mother of all God’s children” (p. 166). Another reference made by the author is to the episode described in the Gospel of St. John, which presents the image of His Mother and the “Beloved” Disciple, John, under the Cross of Jesus. “Just as Rachel gave birth to her second son, Benjamin, suffering and dying at birth, so Mary «gives birth» spiritually to her second son - the Beloved Disciple - through her inner suffering and Her «death» by the cross” (p. 167-168). The author concludes that if Mary is portrayed as the new Rachel, and the apostle John as a “new Benjamin”, this can provide an explanation for the problem ... of the reason why the author of the Gospel of John, refers to himself with the expression “Beloved Disciple” (John 13, 23; 19, 26; 21, 7; 21, 30).

“In other words, just as Benjamin was especially loved by Joseph because they both have *the same mother*....; just as Benjamin was Rachel’s «son of sorrow» because she had to die to give birth to him, so John becomes Mary’s «son of sorrow», because Mary becomes his mother only through the torment and «sorrow» she feels under the cross” (pp. 169-170).

The last subchapter of this sixth part of the work is entitled “Mother of the Church”, in which the author emphasizes that the Mother of God is the mother of all disciples, for “if Rachel was indeed the «matriarch» of her people - the mother of all Israel (Jeremiah 31,15), then it seems clear that Mary, the new Rachel, is the «matriarch» of the whole Church” (p. 170). The Mother of God is presented as the “maternal intercessor of heaven”, because Mary ... *is not «dead»*, Mary is a living intercessor; she is much more alive than any man on earth“ (p. 173), as an example the author using an old anonymous prayer from the III-IV centuries AD: *Under your mercy*



*we escape, Mother of God...*, which highlights not only her quality as “Mother of God”, but also as “protector” of her suffering earthly children (p. 173).

The last chapter of the work, the seventh, is suggestively titled “At the Foot of the Cross” and the theologian Brant Pitre presents the last words of Christ on the Cross in a historical and theological exegesis, in which He entrusts His Mother to the Beloved Disciple, John the Evangelist. The author takes a passage from a Protestant commentator on the Gospel of John, in which he shows that “Mary, the Mother of God, becomes the mother of the faithful, and the Beloved Disciple here seems to designate the ideal Christian convert” (p. 180). The author concludes that “Jesus invites all his disciples to enter into a *personal relationship with Mary*, to be their spiritual mother. His wish at the hour of death was for Mary to become the mother of all believers, not just of the Beloved Disciple” (p. 181). The last subchapter of this last part of Brant Pitre’s work, entitled “Behold Your Mother”, contains the author’s direct answer to the readers of this book when asked: “What happens when you remember the last words of Jesus and, like the beloved Disciple, you take Mary to be your mother?” (p. 181). The author’s answer comes directly and without detours:

“I tell you what happens. You also begin to know *Jesus* better. You begin to see Him more clearly. You begin to understand that everything the Bible teaches about Mary is based on what it teaches us about Christ.... You will find that Mary was looking at you long before you started looking at her. You will find that she prayed for you long before you started talking to her. You will discover that Mary loved you long before you learned to love her (...). Mary, like Jesus, is not dead. She is as alive as possible in the kingdom of heaven. She is already tasting the glory of the resurrection and the new creation. And she looks at you; she prays for you; she loves you. Right now, she is waiting to see if you will listen to Jesus’ last words and take her in yours: «Here is your mother!»”.

In the Appendix of his work, the author refers to other Jewish sources outside the Bible that tell us about Jesus and his Mother. He mentions here: *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, *The Apocrypha of the Old Testament*, the works

of *Josephus Flavius, Mishna and Tosephta, The Targums, the Babylonian Talmud, Midrashim and Rabbah*.

The work of the Western theologian Brand Pitre is presented as a mariological work, which tries to substantiate the Roman Catholic teachings about the Mother of God in its content, some of them common to the Christian East, although most specific only to the West, after its separation from the East, by the painful act of the Schism of 1054. In the articulation of the teachings presented about the Mother of God, the author refers to the prefigurations and typological faces of Mary in the Old Testament, prefigurations and types fulfilled and perfected in the New Testament. These Old and New Testament correspondences are highlighted by the texts of the Old Testament, placed in columns parallel to those of the New Testament, which all highlight the prefiguration-appearance, expectation-fulfillment relationship regarding the Mother of God, as “vessel of choice”, the one who carried in her womb the God-Incarnate Word. The foundation of these teachings is made by resorting to the texts of the Holy Fathers, especially Eastern ones, but also to the theological literature so rich on this subject, in the Christian West, both in Roman Catholicism and in Protestantism. Some teachings, such as the ever-virginity of the Mother of God or the Mother of God - God-Bearer, are explained very clearly and sufficiently clarified by recourse to the primary experience of the Church and the writings of the Holy Fathers of the early Christian ages. Others, on the contrary, are insufficiently argued and clarified, especially when it comes to new teachings, added until recently in Roman Catholicism, regarding the Mother of God, they do not have a solid theological basis and are not based on the theology and experience of the early Church.

Despite all these shortcomings, the work of the Western theologian Brant Pitre remains a very interesting one, especially in terms of the serious biblical assessment of the mariological issue and the interesting correspondences created between the Old Testament as expectation and foreshadowing of the Blessed Virgin and the New Testament as fulfillment of these prefigurations and expectations. From this perspective, the paper is a fundamental one, necessary for any researcher who stops on the study of this issue, whether it belongs to the Western space, or to the Eastern one.

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