

Charles PERROT, *Binecuvântată ești Tu între femei (Luca 1, 42): Fecioara Maria în contextul primului secol creștin (Blessed are you among women [Luke 1, 42]: The Virgin Mary in the Context of the First Christian Century)*, translation from French by Ștefan Munteanu, Editura Doxologia, Iași, 2018, 518 pp.

During 2018, the Doxologia publishing house in Iași published the Romanian translation of the rather extensive work by Professor Charles Perrot from the Catholic Institute in Paris, entitled *Binecuvântată ești Tu între femei (Luca 1, 42): Fecioara Maria în contextul primului secol creștin (Blessed are you among women (Luke 1,42): The Virgin Mary in the context of the first Christian century)*. It is the third volume in the collection “Scriptură, Tradiție, Liturghie”. As the author states in the introduction to his work, the book pursues a dual purpose: “To place the Mother of God among the women of the first Christian century and, starting from the testimonies offered in the New Testament, to distinguish some aspects regarding the way in which the first Christians referred to her” (p. 13). The research scope of this book is to distinct the Virgin Mary from other women, on the one hand, and on the other hand to understand the different references the first Christians make to her person. The author acknowledges the limitation of his research since he dealt only with “a part of the traditions concerning the Theotokos that have developed over time, but which is, admittedly, the fundamental part rooted in Holy Scripture” (p. 14). Although the work itself does not refer to the various apocryphal writings or the rich treasure of iconography, they nevertheless constitute important interpretations of the information transmitted by the text of the Holy Scripture and the essential testimonies of the honour given to the Mother of God in the early Christian Church. Continuing the introduction, however, Charles Perrot recalls the main documents in the apocryphal literature, the most important being the Proto-Gospel of James, which provides the most details about the Theotokos’ life up to the time of the Annunciation. Regarding the patristic writings, the Fathers of the Church from the second century sought the confession of Jesus Christ’s divinity, while the mention of the Mother of God was made in the context of affirming His humanity. In

this introductory part, the status of the biblical documentation regarding the Virgin Mary is signalled, identifying elements that “often resonate in different ways, with a very slightly different insistence from one scripture to another, and therefore from one Christian community to another, which explains moreover, the diversity of the transmitted traditions. This aspect already suggests that the reference to the Virgin Mary has progressively changed and amplified a little in the early Christian communities” (p. 21). The author also highlights some types of reading (spiritual, literary and historical) of the information transmitted by the New Testament which refer to the Theotokos. But he also presents the evolution of the research dedicated to it, first starting from the dogmatic and spiritual approaches, then continuing with those close to the texts of Holy Scripture. Then he reaches those which place her in the context of her time, ending with the observation that “such a consideration of historical realities does not seek to obscure the amazing uniqueness of her person”. For, at her own level, this daughter of Israel plays a unique role in renewing of the Covenant by the Nazarene (p. 30). The paper is divided into four parts. Starting with a synthesis regarding the world in which the Virgin Mary lived, it continues with an overall study of the information transmitted by the New Testament divided into three distinct moments: in the Pauline and non-Pauline Churches, in the Lucanian Churches and finally in the communities of St John. The structure of the work conforms to the traditional chronology attributed to the New Testament writings, beginning with the authentic Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle, followed by the Gospel of Mark in 70, the Gospel of Matthew and the writings of St. Luke, the Gospel and Acts of the Holy Apostles, and finally the Gospel after John around the 90s. In fact, the subject of this book summarizes and organizes around three themes: women in Israel in the first century, women in the New Testament and finally, the Virgin Mary of Nazareth.

In the first part the author offers a synthesis of the world from the time of the Theotokos. He evokes the name and age of the Mother of God, the clothing with all its ornaments and the traditions regarding the celebration of marriage. He presents the daily life of a young woman from Nazareth with emphasis on social status, education and religious life. Below are the diversity of discourses on women according to the Holy Scriptures and Hebrew traditions, a mention of the five women in the Saviour’s genealogy, a perspective on the condition of women in the first century as

evidenced by the writings discovered at Qumran, from the work of Philo of Alexandria and Joseph Flavius, and finally to the elements read in the Aramaic targums and some Jewish narrative traditions.

The second part deals with the first approaches of the person of the Theotokos in the New Testament. For a start, some details about the women in the Pauline communities and the equality between men and women are captured. Next, the author depicts the image of the Virgin Mary according to the Holy Apostle Paul. Although he barely mentions her in his Epistles, his testimony is of great importance, especially because he pointed out most clearly what distinguished the Mother of God from the other women of her time. Referring to the text in Galatians 4, 4-5, the author observes that “the form of honour, we might say, original of the Mother of God is evoked here: without this woman, Jesus could not have been one of us, and we would still be slaves then, without the ability to gain adoption” (p. 172). The author notices the Evangelist Mark’s reluctance towards the Virgin Mary, an attitude explained in the sense of remembering the importance of respecting a hierarchy of various statements concentrated in the confessions of faith. The conclusion of this part is the image of the Mother of God reflected in the Judaizing Church, the main source being the Gospel of Matthew, which considers her the mother of the Messiah, the son of David, from the family of the Righteous Joseph.

The third part offers a rich highlight of the role of the Theotokos in the first Christian communities, as it is presented in the Gospel of Luke. Thus, the presentation begins with an overview of the work of St. Luke the Evangelist and the names of other remarkable women he speaks of in the Gospel, close to the Blessed Virgin, but at the same time, distinct from her, as one can see: “All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers” (Acts 1, 14). In this context, the author concludes that the Virgin Mary “is situated through the times, after the Ascension and before Pentecost, in the earnest expectation of the coming of the Holy Spirit. [...] The Virgin Mary is present at the end of time, in these times of a new conception, when the Holy Spirit will give birth to the Church” (p. 251-252). After this overview, the author analyses major scenes contained in the accounts of the episode of Jesus’ childhood, such as: Annunciation; the visit of the Virgin Mary to Elizabeth, her kinship; the Birth of the Saviour and the Pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. At the end of this detailed

analysis of the few elements of St. Luke's account on the Nativity of Jesus, in which the person of the Theotokos is wonderfully highlighted, the author expresses some exegetical suggestions about a very delicate side of the Virgin Mary, namely, the virgin birth of Jesus. In order to affirm the virginity of the Mother of God not only before birth, but also after birth, Charles Perrot considers necessary to make some references to virginity, inserted in the context of the time, and to the so-called "Brothers of the Lord".

The fourth and final part of the work is dedicated to the Gospel of John and focuses on how it relates to the Theotokos. After some general details that characterized the John community and the main women mentioned by St. John the Evangelist, follows the description of two important pericopes in which in the foreground is the Mother of God: the wedding in Cana of Galilee and the words the Saviour addressed to His Mother on the Cross. These two moments are closely related if we take into account that the first one opens the public work of the Saviour and the second closes it, at the first the "hour" has not yet come, and at the second it has already come. The author concludes by showing that "the Virgin Mary is present there (at the Cana of Galilee), like the prophetic Remnant of Israel on the threshold of its messianic fulfilment. On the other hand, near His death, Jesus cares for His people just as His people should care for one another, and the Virgin Mary is again present there with them, as a sign of an emerging Church" (p. 423). At the end of this last part, the image of the Virgin Mary is captured as it appears from Revelation 12, 1-2. Here, the author of Revelation gives him a bright role when he evokes the Theotokos with the help of strongly impressive images. The author identifies this image with one of the first allusions to the Dormition and especially to the glory that surrounds it in the hearts of believers.

Professor Charles Perrot's work has a few conclusions that provide answers to two questions: Who is the Virgin Mary for God? And who is the Mother of God for us? This work dedicated to the Virgin Mary in the context of the first Christian century, according to the writings of the New Testament, in a historical and exegetical perspective, is a very interesting and necessary one not only in the academic theological area. In this space, the research deserves to be continued, and the debate on this topic remains open. Through its historical, exegetical and theological content, and through the scientific way of writing, with over a hundred books and

articles in the bibliography to which hundreds of notes and bibliographical references are added, this book becomes an adornment in the theological and intellectual training of the servants of the Holy Altars and finally of every Christian who wishes to enter into the deep mysteries of the language of Holy Scripture. Such a diversity of approaches regarding the person of the Theotokos, leads us to a clearer penetration of the role she had in the early Christian communities and the cult of honour she enjoys to this day among Christians.

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