

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

### THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY



The taking up of Mary into heaven at the end of her life, though not mentioned in Scripture, has been celebrated since the sixth century. The Feast of the Assumption on 15 August is part of recognised Roman Catholic doctrine, and this date is also kept by some other denominations as a special Feast of the Virgin Mary.

#### First Reading **Apocalypse (Revelation)** **11: 19, 12: 1–6, 10**

This last book of the New Testament is very different from its predecessors. It describes visions of heaven and earth not normally seen or heard by human beings, whether in the past, present or future. Its authorship (c.95 AD?) has long been associated with John, writer of the fourth Gospel, although others argue that it predates the destruction of the Second Temple (70 AD). Its language and imagery are striking and often difficult to understand, as if the author is speaking in code.

The **Ark of the Covenant** is a symbol of God's presence. It was normally kept in the Holy of Holies reserved for the high priest, but here is open for all to see.

The **woman's identity** in this passage is multifaceted and associated with **ancient myth**. The idea of such a woman was familiar to Greeks, Hebrews and Egyptians. In Greek mythology, Leto, also wearing a veil of stars, gives birth to Apollo in heaven, while the Roman emperor Nero similarly had statues portraying him as Apollo.

The author of Revelation makes these myths his own, drawing on **Old Testament references**. In Genesis, the Lord tells the woman that she will suffer pains in childbirth; while the prophet Micah (4: 9–10) describes Jerusalem as a woman giving birth. Here the woman finds **sanctuary in the desert**, just as the Israelites did when fleeing from Egypt (Exodus 15–16).

Only in the fourth century did interpreters begin to see **Mary** in the present passage. Others regarded the woman as a personification of the **Early Church**, struggling to make the Messiah accepted as the church was attacked by evil, represented here by the **dragon**. Protected by God, the **woman crowned with the twelve stars**, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, becomes a **vision of encouragement** to the suffering churches.

## Gospel **Luke 1: 39–56**

Mary sets off to meet her kinswoman Elizabeth following her encounter with the angel. Gabriel has announced that she is to conceive and bear a son, while Elizabeth is also expecting a child, despite her great age.

**Mary set out at that time and went as quickly as she could.**

Luke gives no reasons for Mary's journey. Was it because she wanted to congratulate Elizabeth; because she was afraid of the local stigma of being pregnant before marriage; or because she was frightened and seeking comfort from an old friend? We may each have our answers. Luke, however, gives a sense of the immediacy of Mary's decision.

#### **A town in the hill country of Judah**

Everything in Luke's account contributes to making this important encounter low key. No powerful local dignitaries are mentioned, and the location is a nameless town in the countryside. In a reversal of the normal social order of the time, the two pregnant women occupy centre stage.

#### **Elizabeth and Mary**

The Old Testament has many instances of older or barren women who conceive against all expectations: Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel in Genesis, and Hannah in the first book of Samuel. Mary, however, is a young girl, thought to be a young teenager, probably under 15 years old.

#### **Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit**

In Luke, this expression carries the same meaning as in the Old Testament: the person is empowered by God to perform a special task.

#### **A visit from the mother of my Lord**

This is the first time Jesus is called 'Lord'; thus far the term has been connected to God, but from now on 'The Lord' will refer to Jesus, as in the cry of Thomas the apostle: '*My Lord and My God*' (John 20: 28).

#### **Fulfilled promises**

The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is the Old Order meeting the New. Elizabeth is to give birth to John, a prophet in the Old Testament tradition, while Mary is to give birth to Jesus, God made man. He is the fulfilment of all the promises made by God in the Old Testament.

#### **Mary's song: The Magnificat**

The Old Testament has other similar songs: Moses and Miriam (Exodus 15), and Hannah (1 Samuel 2: 1–10). Luke also quotes the songs of Zechariah and Simeon, known respectively as the 'Benedictus' and the 'Nunc Dimittis' from their opening words in Latin.