Cosmos in a Painting – Reflections on Judeo-Christian Creation Symbolism

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ABSTRACT. *This paper addresses the cosmological assumptions underpinning an enigmatic variation on the Madonna-and-Child image, in which the Child Jesus appears as a dragon slayer. In order to evoke the mental landscapes that could make sense of this composition, the discussion visits folklore, Christian art, and the Scriptures. By and by, it finds that the enigmatic image analogizes the story of Genesis and an ancient dragon-fight myth, so that Mary's victory over the ancient serpent both redeems the fault of Eve and reflects God's primordial victory over the dragon. The image also draws on the traditional analogy between the Father's victory over marine chaos and the Son's overcoming of the Ancient Law, which allows treating the birth, baptism, and resurrection of Jesus as so many variations on a single theme. The discussion suggests that the enigmatic composition draws on a leitmotiv of scriptural writings – the defeat of the chthonic dragon, and the correlative victory of the celestial bird – and thus provides a striking example of symbolic condensation in a painting.*

KEYWORDS: *Christian Symbolism, Art, Dragon-slayer, Bible, Creation*

This paper proposes a quest for the cosmological assumptions underpinning a remarkable fresco, dated 1738, which I found painted on a house facade in Radovljica, Slovenia. This fresco, bearing the caption *Bitte fur uns, o H(eilige) Gottes Gebererin* ("Pray for us, oh Holy God's Scion"),[1] depicts the Virgin Mary holding her child, who, in turn, is engaged in the act of overpowering a dragon (see Figure 1). This detail is puzzling, for nothing in the New Testament appears to justify the notion of the Child Jesus enacting the venerable dragon-slayer's role – and yet, there must be an underlying rationale for this image.[2] Obviously the anonymous author of this fresco has sought to communicate something, but what might this be?

To solve this problem, it is best to start by getting a sense of the

fresco’s organizing ideas by looking at the composition as a whole. At first sight it is clear that the setting is tripartite, and the Madonna and Child stand between heaven and earth. On the celestial end of the painting, Mary’s blond head is covered with blue and is surrounded by a fluttering blue dove, by a solar orange blot, and by angelic heads. The fact that this heavenly region takes up most of the space in the painting suggests that the fresco emphasizes the notion that the Madonna stands above the sublunary realm where humankind dwells. Note that the whole sublunary region appears compressed, for the moon sits right on top of the earth. One level below, the deep blue earth hints to that chthonic/marine realm one may call the netherworld. At this lowest level, a red-and-greenish serpentine dragon raises its head close to the horned (crescent) moon. Interestingly, the dragon’s body is bent so as to replicate the lunar shape – and Mary’s right foot stands almost on the moonlike curve of the serpentine body. From above, the Child Jesus plunges a long-shafted cross vertically into the dragon’s throat. Overall, two things seem noteworthy. First, the vertical axis unifying this cosmic scenario is populated by both Mary’s body and the long-shafted cross. Second, two animals mark the ends of the vertical axis connecting heaven and hell – there is the celestial dove up above, and the chthonic snake down below.

At first glance, this is about as much as can be said about the Radovljica fresco. While it is clear that definite cosmological notions undergird the fresco, we are still clueless as to how to understand them. Therefore, we need to deploy a comparative procedure in order to reconstitute the conceptual universe that the fresco displays. This is possible because religious paintings tend to convey stable themes by means of multiple variants. Since each variant displays one particular point of view, by taking into account a number of variants we should get a fuller image of the underlying theme. In other words, variants tend to illuminate one another while bringing out the essence of the common theme. So, then, to understand this fresco we need to lay out its themes in a comparative framework. Sometimes the comparative materials will be other paintings, and sometimes they will be scriptural texts. Either way, the unchanging procedure will consist in reconstituting the mental context for each aspect of the fresco, while

Figure 1. The Madonna and Child Between Dove and Snake (Radovljica, mural fresco).

keeping in mind the big question – how do those themes make sense together? Hopefully, by the time we come to acknowledge that the Scriptures made constant use of dragon-slaying imagery ever since Elohim parted the abyss to create heaven and earth, the obscure dragon fight in the Radovljica fresco will have turned into a clue to a fundamental aspect of Judeo-Christian symbolic thought.

MARY'S IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Our path is pre-determined, so to speak, for the main scene portrayed in the Radovljica fresco is quite standard in Christian painting. As I have shown elsewhere (Vaz da Silva 2004; 2008: 115-19), depictions of the Madonna standing between heaven and earth regularly portray Mary's heavenly conception in terms of being above the moon and of defeating a snake. Such images suppose symbolic equivalence between the cyclic moon, the sloughing snake (both of which purportedly grow old and rejuvenate), and women's cyclic power to bear new life. The underlying logic is relatively straightforward. Whereas Eve became the mother of all humans, subjected to the cyclic moon under the spell of the primordial snake, Mary (deemed the New Eve) overcomes the procreative fate of women in the sublunary world. Thus, she is impregnated in the upper part of things – by a heavenly bird, through the ear – and thus stands above the moon while squashing the serpent of Eden under one foot.

One likely source for the Madonna's cosmic standing is chapter 12 of the *Book of Revelation,* which depicts "a woman clothed in the sun, and the moon beneath her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars", giving birth to the male child who "will shepherd all the nations with a staff of iron". In this most famous vision by St. John at the island of Patmos, a great dragon threatens the woman and the child, but at length the beast is defeated and goes away "to do battle with the rest of her seed". The reader may feel that this sounds familiar, and rightly so, for in *Genesis* 3:15 God had put eternal enmity between he snake's seed and the woman's seed. Indeed, the great dragon of the Book of Revelation is explicitly "the ancient snake".[3]

Fig. 2. “The Debt is Paid” by Leopold Layer (Stična Religious Art Museum).

So the main idea is clear. Whereas Eve was defeated by the serpent, and thus ushered humankind to its fate under the cyclic moon, Mary overcomes the beast and dwells above the moon, crowned by twelve stars – same number as the zodiacal constellations girding the rolling heavens. This theme is most suggestively depicted in an eighteenth-century painting by Leopold Layer, “The Debt is Paid”, kept at the Slovenian monastery of Stična (see Figure 2).[4] This painting displays the standard image of Mary: her cosmic standing with sunshine around her body, twelve stars and the dove above her head; and the moon, the serpent, and the earth below her feet. But Layer adds God to the upper part of to the picture so as to make clear that the dove symbolizes the spiritual conception of Jesus. Moreover, an angel erases the primordial fault in Eden as though to clarify that the dragon below Mary’s feet is the crafty snake of Eden. And, of course, the very name of this painting intimates that Mary in her spiritual conception is the New Eve. (By the same token, Jesus – whose sacrificial incarnation redeems the Original Sin – is the New Adam.)

In short, the Radovljica fresco makes use of a traditional theme. According to this theme, the Virgin Mary stands between heaven and earth. While standing above the moon, a heavenly bird impregnates her through the ear and she defeats the serpent that ushered women into sublunary procreation (for further details, see Vaz da Silva 2008: 115-19).

CHILD JESUS WITH CROSS

One remarkable thing about the Radovljica fresco is that it weakens the Madonna’s serpent-taming function. Although the impregnating dove flutters by the Madonna’s head in a heavenly setting, as expected, Mary does not quite step on either the serpent or the moon. Rather, it is her son who conspicuously counters the serpentine dragon with his cross. The image of the Child Jesus carrying his cross is anachronistic, of course, and this very fact suggests that theology (not biography) is at stake. Therefore, we must grasp why the Child Jesus should be yielding the cross of his future sacrifice.

In two early-sixteenth-century paintings by Raffaello, *Alba Madonna* (held at the National Gallery of Art, Washington) and *Madonna of Belvedere* (held at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), the Virgin sits with two babies – John the Baptist and Jesus.[5] In both paintings, John looks up at his divine cousin while holding the lower end of a miniature cross with his two hands – as though offering it – and Jesus grips the upper end of the cross with his right hand, as though accepting the offering. The intensity and solemnity of the scene belies the tender age of its actors. Indeed, this passing of the token of sacrifice depicts John the Baptist's famous assertion: "I am not Christ…I am sent before him.… He must increase, and I must be diminished" (Jn 3:28, 30; cf. Jn 1:19-27, Mt 3:1-4, 11:10, Mk 1:2). Significantly, Augustine saw in this progression from the precursor to the messiah a fit template for the progress of the faithful "unto Him who died for all, and rose again" (Sermon 194, in St. Augustine 1952: 121-2). This analogy clearly brings out the sacrificial implication of the cross the Baptist is passing on: whereas the Precursor announces redemption of human sins, it is up to the Saviour to suffer it through. Thus, in Mantegna's late fifteenth-century depiction of the two infants in *Holy Family* (kept at the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden), the forerunner holds a miniature cross and, while pointing to his divine cousin, wears a ribbon that reads (after Jn 1:36), *ecce agnus dei*. In the same vein, Grünewald's early-fifteenth-century *Isenheim Altarpiece* (held at the Unterlindem Museum in Colmar, France) depicts the Baptist – flanked by the lamb of God, which carries the cross and bleeds into the chalice of Holy Communion – pronouncing "He must increase, and I must decrease" even as he shows Jesus writhing in agony on the cross.[6] In short, the image of the Child Jesus yielding the cross emphasizes his sacrificial destiny.

Such destiny implies, of course, that Jesus was destined to die even before being born. To make this point, some painters have resorted to the strange expedient of depicting the incarnating Jesus already carrying his cross while in transit towards Mary's womb. Note that to depict the body of Jesus before he actually incarnated was a brave stance, for the dogmatic view that the Word took flesh in Mary's womb entailed that – as Thomas Aquinas (2002: 240) put it

trenchantly – anyone who affirms that Christ "brought down with Him a body formed of celestial matter…contradicts the truth of Scripture". So, what points were these daring painters making? Consider the "Annunciation" scene depicted in the mid-fifteenth-century altarpiece at the Sainte-Marie-Madeleine church (Aix-en-Provence), in which the Madonna kneels before a Gothic lectern, her red velvet robe covered by a mantle of gold brocade displaying a floral pattern. While the angel announces the impending incarnation of Jesus, God the Father sends his word downwards to Mary's exposed ear. The Word takes visible form as light rays, amongst which a tiny blond Jesus plunges into incarnation, head first, while carrying the cross. Likewise, in the early-fifteenth-century *Mérode Altarpiece* by Robert Campin (held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) a tiny Jesus carrying the cross plunges head first amidst the light rays which descend from a window towards Mary's receptive ear.[7] In order to understand this image, note the constant association in European thought of head-first presentation with normal birth, and of feet-first presentation with passing away (see Belmont 1971: 129-47; Vaz da Silva 2008: 63, 73; cf. Feilberg 1907: 369). In this notional context, a head-first plunge into the womb while carrying the sacrificial cross connotes both the birth and the death of Jesus.

Of course, this is in strict accordance with the theological point that Christ incarnates to die, and dies to resurrect. Jacopo da Varazze, in his thirteenth-century *Golden Legend,* stresses the correspondence between the Saviour's incarnation and his resurrection by fusing both events on the same calendar slot (March 25), and he merges the significance of Christ's birth and death by expressing the symbolic identity of the womb and the tomb – as Jacopo puts it, just as Jesus could leave his mother's sealed womb, so He could exit the closed tomb (Voragine 2004: 264, 284). Incidentally, the intermingling of the notions of birth and death underlying the assimilation of womb and tomb explains the tradition that Jesus was both born and buried in a cave.[8] And note that the analogy between descent into a womb and into a tomb is not specifically Christian. As Macrobius explains the stance of Neo-Platonism, the body "being a 'tomb' of the soul", incarnation entails being thrust "into the shades of death, as it were"

(Macrobius 1990: 130).

In light of such mental background, Christ's incarnation appears as a multilayered plunge into death – first descent into the womb (symbolically a tomb), and then descent into the tomb (symbolically a womb). Overall, homologies between descent into the womb and into the tomb on one hand, and between birth and resurrection on the other, suggest that the beginning and the end of Christ's sacrificial path blend into each other – for the divinity was born to die, and died to resurrect. Therefore, to acknowledge that the divine Word put on flesh to suffer redeeming passion amounts to granting that the long-drawn sacrifice of the Lamb of God started on the very moment of incarnation. In short, the plunging embryo with a cross bespeaks the death connotation of incarnation.

DRAGON FIGHT AND RESURRECTION

But, as we saw, the death connotation of incarnation is only half the story. The other half is the resurrection value of the Saviour's death – and this is precisely what Christian art has represented by means of dragon fighting. Indeed, extant depictions of Jesus overpowering the dragon show that the monster represents the marine/chthonic abode of the dead. For example, an illumination in a late-thirteenth-century Latin manuscript of the Gospel of Nicodemus depicts Jesus overpowering with his cross a dragon's head arising from the sea. This image refers to the tradition that the dead Christ, during the time he was buried, went down to hell and therein raised souls from the dead. Thus, the scene portrays Jesus keeping open the monster's jaws with the cross while he pulls out Adam and Eve, David, Solomon, and John the Baptist.[9] Another depiction of the same theme is shown on an altar cloth from the Narbonne Cathedral, dated c. 1375, displayed at the Louvre Museum in Paris.[10] This altar cloth, destined for use during Easter celebrations, presents a sequence of scenes bearing on the Passion and Resurrection. The last three scenes depict sequentially the Entombment, then Jesus (conspicuously covered with the stigmata of his recent crucifixion) keeping the sea dragon in check with his cross while he pulls Adam and Eve out of its mouth, and

finally the resurrected Christ's apparition to Mary Magdalene. Taken together, these images tell us that the dragon fight takes place while the Saviour is buried, and that, consequently, victory over the dragon symbolizes Christ's resurrection.

The foregoing discussion implies equivalence between Christ's entombment, descent into the netherworld, and incorporation by a dragon. In fact, this equivalence has been around by means of a well-known story. Jonah, famously swallowed and expelled by a sea monster, has long been considered a forerunner of the buried and resurrected Christ. As Matthew (12:40) put it, "as Jonah was in the belly of the sea monster for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights" (Jones 1968). Augustine (*City of God* 18.30) emphasizes the resurrectional implication of this image when he specifies that Jonah was "taken into the belly of the monster, and given back on the third day, … to signify that Christ would come back from the depths of Hell on the third day" (St. Augustine 1984: 798). And this idea takes visible form in Maerten van Heemskerck's mid-sixteenth-century *Triptych of the Entombment* (held at the *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts,* Brussels), which depicts the entombment of Jesus in a sarcophagus bearing in bas-relief the image of Jonah exiting the sea-monster's mouth, head first, in allusion to the forthcoming resurrection.[11] All this supposes equivalence between exiting the dragon's belly, exiting the netherworld, and resurrection. In other words, St. Augustine's point that Jesus "had to die and rise again" (*City of God* 18.46) has been metaphorically conveyed after the pattern of being swallowed and again expelled by a dragon, and has been visually represented in the guise of dragon fighting.

Let us pause a moment, for this symbolic nexus requires some reflection before we proceed. The equivalence between being passively swallowed, and then regurgitated, by a dragon and the act of actively fighting a dragon is as old as it is obscure. Think of it: why should a man's death and return to life within the dragon amount to the slaying of the dragon by a man? Classicist Jane Ellen Harrison, at finding one particular instance of this general problem in her field of expertise, provided a precious insight. She was considering a Greek vase-painting allusive to Jason's killing of the dragon and the

sowing of its teeth, which, however, shows Jason half inside the open mouth of the dragon – his head towards the outside – for, as Harrison (1963: 435) puts it, "the dragon-slayer is of the dragon's seed. He is being born anew from his jaws". Remarkably, this insight matches Vladimir Propp's independent conclusion that the dragon slayer is engendered by the dragon – in the twofold sense that one swallowed by the dragon acquires supernatural power even as he harms the beast from the inside, and that the dragon-slayer hero inherits the defeated dragon's traits – so that, as Propp (1983: 263-4) puts it, "the dragon overcomes the dragon". In the same vein (but, again, quite independently), Amanda Coomaraswamy (1943: 6) noted the tacit principle that the dragon slayer is related to the slain dragon or serpent "by filiation and younger brotherhood", and is "*alter ego* rather than another principle".

Such insights suggest that dragon slaying entails rejuvenation in much the same sense as the sloughing of snakes supposedly involves discarding the old self. Hence, St. Paul's famous casting of spiritual conversion in terms of stripping off the old man (Eph 4:22-23, Col. 3:9-10); hence, too, the longstanding idea that the young adder kills its father.[12] Indeed, depending on the perspective, the demise of the dragon may be seen as an act of self-renovation or as an aggression by the younger incumbent (see Coomaraswamy 1935: 2). Now, we know that the Radovljica fresco casts Jesus Christ as the New Adam, which implies positing transformation between acts in the New Testament and in the Old Testament. From this vantage, Jesus's fight against the dragon takes a wider significance – for this monster, as we shall see, is both the old serpent of Eden and the primeval sea dragon. In other words, the bold act of Jesus Christ repeats Elohim's primordial act, which suggests a longstanding connection between the dragon and the deity.

CYCLIC CREATION

At the beginning of things, the methodic ordering of the marine abyss in Genesis (1:1-13) – by separating light from darkness, upper waters from lower, and dry land from sea – was an attack on the

undifferentiated wholeness of chaos, tantamount to assaulting the primordial sea dragon. Indeed, Psalm 74 (13-14) states in the same breath that God split the sea in two, smashed the head of monsters on the waters, and crushed Leviathan's heads. Likewise, Job 26 (12-13) expresses the containment of primordial chaos by saying that God has calmed the sea and struck Rahab down, swept the heavens and pierced Leviathan. The constant idea is that the act of bringing primordial chaos under control consists in bounding unruly waters personified by the multi-headed dragon. Hence, the Lord himself describes in two parallel harangues his containment of the abyss waters and the taming of Leviathan (Jb 38:8-11, 40:25-31). Moreover, Yahveh mentions to Job that where the abyss is deepest lie the gates of death and the realm of shadows (Jb 38:16-17). Indeed, the "great fish" that swallows Jonah keeps him in *tehom,* the "abyss" (Jon 2:1, 6) – a word that also designates the primordial abyss of Genesis 1– and the monster's entrails are said to be the very belly of Sheol (Jn 2:1-3), which reportedly lay naked before God when he fought Rahab/Leviathan (Jb 26:5-14). In other words, the realm of the shadows lies in the sea dragon's entrails, which is precisely the implication of the portrayals of Christ's Harrowing of Hell as *sea-*dragon harassment.

Note that God did not actually eliminate the abyss, nor did he necessarily obliterate the dragon forever. Rather, he pent up the primordial waters so as to leave room for creation, and – according to certain sources (Jb 38:10, 40:25-30, see also Ginzberg 2003: 1:28, 1:30 n.124) – he made Leviathan a slave for life. Interestingly, this entails a cyclic nuance. On the one hand, according to Genesis 1, *tehom* is the preexisting abyss out of which Elohim's wind proceeds to create the world.[13] On the other, Psalm 104 offers the statement that God established the earth on its foundations, made the deep cover the mountains, and then pent up the waters so they will never again cover the earth (v. 6-9). Among God's creations is the sea with its creatures, where ships go, and "Leviathan that you formed to sport with" (v. 24-26). Intriguingly, this psalm conveys the notion that God made the abyss he then neutralizes, and created the dragon he then defeats (the view that God created the sea monsters is actually present in Gn 1:21, on which see Levenson 1994: 53-65). Now, to state that

God made the abyss he then neutralizes, and created the dragon he then defeats, implies a cyclical view of creation. Certainly, from a cyclical point of view it is not contradictory to posit that the abyss is primordial (insofar as it contains the next creation) and yet has been created (for it is a remnant of previous creations).[14]

There is growing scholarly acknowledgment that *creatio ex nihilo* is not, as Jon Levenson (1994: xxix, cf. 3-13) puts it, "an adequate characterization of creation in the Hebrew Bible". In this trend, modern translators tend to render Genesis 1:1 as, "When God began to create heaven and earth" (Tanakh 1988: 3) or, "In a beginning when God created heaven and earth" (TOB 1989: 51 n.b). Of course, the indefiniteness of such beginning is in line with the statement, in Psalm 104 (5-7), that God himself had unleashed (how many times before?) the flood he then quells. Moreover, Jewish traditions are familiar with the idea that God "made several worlds before ours, but destroyed them all". Indeed, extant stories in Rabbinical tradition recount that when the waters rebelled "God determined to let the whole of creation resolve itself into chaos again", but then withdrew this command even as he confined the waters (Ginzberg 2003: 1:1, 12). In light of the foregoing discussion, God's use of the rebellious waters for the purpose of destruction – and the subsequent quelling of the flood for creation – amounts to cyclically unleashing and then curbing the sea dragon, which is one possible way to understand the notion that Leviathan is God's plaything.

Although this time around God refrained from flooding the dry expanse, still the Flood story (Gn 6-9) confirms that God used to renew the world by allowing the deep to cover the mountains and then forcing the waters to subside (see Levenson 1994: 10-11). In Genesis 6 we learn that, since the earth had become corrupt before God, the Almighty instructs Noah to preserve the seed of every living thing inside a wooden ark. Then Genesis 7 describes how God causes the fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky to break open in order to blot out from the earth all existence he created, so that after forty days the waters cover even the highest mountains. Then Genesis 8 tells how, after the waters had swelled on the earth one hundred and fifty days, God decides to take action. As might be expected, such action echoes creation. First a divine wind stills the

waters (Gn 8:1 = Gn 1:2), and God quells the fountains of the deep and the floodgates of the sky, so that the rain stops and the separation between higher and lowly waters is reinstated (Gn 8:2 = Gn 1:7). Thereafter the waters recede steadily from the earth (Gn 8:3, 13-14 = Gn 1:9-10), which allows living creatures to again swarm over its surface (Gn 8:17 = Gn 1:22). Finally, chapter 9 makes it clear that, on the threshold of a renewed earth, Noah amounts to Adam. Just as God had exhorted Adam to be fertile and rule over the other living things (Gn 1:28), so now he blesses Noah and his sons to be fertile and dominate the other living things (Gn 9:1). But whereas Adam had caused the ground to be cursed (Gn 3:17), Noah actually redeems the soil from that curse (Gn 5:29, 8:21), which means that Noah is like Adam, only one level up in the time spiral – Adam with a clean slate, so to speak. And now the Creator pledges by solemn covenant never again to doom the earth because of man (Gn 8:21) – that is, never again to send a flood to destroy the earth (Gn 9:11).

Of course, there is no reason to doubt the Creator's sincerity regarding this pledge. Just like depictions of dragon fighting on creation became distant memories, so did stories of punishing floods become passé. And yet, the pattern of renewal by immersion in the abyss – and the inherent dragon imagery – have persisted in the Hebrew scriptures in symbolic forms. First, consider that a number of biblical texts assimilate the Pharaoh of Egypt to the great sea dragon (see Ez 32:2). The leading metaphor is that, like God drew out Leviathan with a fishhook (Jb 40:25), so he shall put hooks in the jaws of Pharaoh, the Nile monster (Ez 29:3-4); and, like God has left Leviathan as food for the denizens of the desert (Ps 74:14), so he will fling Pharaoh into the desert to feed the wild beasts (Ez 29:5, 32:4).

Interestingly, this symbolical association entails that the exile of the chosen people in Egypt amounts to dwelling in the abyss under the dominion of the sea dragon – and that, by the same token, their flight is equivalent to the liberation of dry land from the sea. Indeed, Jewish traditions maintain that when the Creator tore the primordial mass of water into two halves he informed the waters that they would be divided again for Israel's sake – which casts the partition of the Red Sea as a repetition of creation (Ginzberg 2003: 1:14 n. 52). Recall that the Israelites cross the Sea of Reeds when God splits the

waters with his wind in order to create a stretch of dry land (Ex 14:15-22, 29), after which the hosts of Pharaoh are flung into the deep (Ex 14:23-28, 15:4-10). Compare Isaiah's glorification of God's creation as a victory on three counts: defeating the dragon, quelling the deep waters, and making the abysses of the sea a road "the redeemed might walk" (Is 51:9-10).[15] And so, to repeat, the exile in Egypt amounts to being under the dominion of the sea dragon in the marine abyss, and the dry crossing of the Sea of Reeds amounts to the extraction of earth out of chaos. Which implies that the woeful exile of Moses and the Israelites in Egypt echoes the trials and tribulations of Noah and his chosen few in the marine abyss. The bottom line being that, even after God's covenant with Noah ended the cyclic ushering of purificatory floods, there remains a pattern of sending the elected few for a cleansing period – metaphorically, under the clutch of the dragon – before a fresh era can start and a new covenant be established. In this sense, to borrow Levenson's apt expression, "if Noah reiterates Adam, he also anticipates Moses" (Levenson 1994: 76).

This suggests that Adam, too, must somehow relate to the chaotic realm of the dragon. Interestingly, Genesis 13:10 states that the Jordan plain, being well watered, is like the garden of the Lord and like the land of Egypt. This association between the land irrigated by the Nile, where a metaphorical dragon dwells, and the Garden of Eden is interesting because this garden was reportedly watered by a flow welling up from the ground (Gn 2:5-6), and, of course, trouble there arose because of a serpent (Gn 3:1-13). Plainly, a conjunction between welling ground waters and the presence of a serpent/dragon is significant. It is tacit in the Flood episode – a regression to primordial chaos, in which all birds and land creatures (but not the marine monsters) perish – and it is explicit regarding the Nile "dragon." In all three cases, the predominance of ground waters and the inherent serpent/dragon ushers in a crisis followed by renovation. Adam's faltering before the serpent causes the fall of humankind, but then Noah's survival in the flood leads to a covenant, and Moses' victorious escape from the clutches of the Nile "dragon" prefigures a new covenant. In short, the mutually transforming roles played by Adam, Noah, and Moses unfold in a series of cyclic renewals that

involve facing welling waters, agonistic dragons/serpents, or both.

Joseph Fontenrose (1980: 162), while examining Mesopotamian materials, rightly stated that the image of a dragon swallowing the hero amounts to dispatching the latter to the realm of the dead, “for the monster’s belly was itself identified with the underworld.” Indeed, we know that the innards of the great fish that swallowed Jonah were likened to “the belly of Sheol” (Jon 2:1–3). In a variant image Noah and his companions have been kept in the entrails of an ark, tossed about in the waters that enshrouded all dead creatures. And, of course, Moses’ people were kept in the land of Egypt, dubbed Rahab (Ps 87:4; Is 30:7), which one reaches by going “down” (Gn 43:5, 15, 20) – like going “down” into Sheol (Gn 42:38, 44:29,31) – and again leaves by coming back “up” (Gn 50:5,24; Ex 13:19). In the same trend, insofar as Christ’s descent into hell has been compared to Jonah’s descent into Sheol at the heart of the sea, it must be reckoned as a regression into the primordial abyss out of which God elicited creation. It follows that Christ, on resurrecting out of hell, fights the same primordial dragon that God the Father tamed on transforming chaos into creation. And, intriguingly, the ritual of baptism – whereby individual souls are accepted into the New Law – repeats the ancient pattern of immersion in water, and rebirth, for a covenant with God. Which, by necessity, entails that dragon-slaying symbolism is inherent to the individual experience of spiritual admission into the Church.

BIRD AND SERPENT

To argue this point involves turning, at last, to the dove that flutters over the dragon-fight scene in the Radovljica fresco. We saw that this bird usually hovers over Mary in images that depict her standing above the serpent and the moon, and we know that such images imply that Mary overcomes the serpent. What is more, the gospels famously describe the dove fluttering over the scene of the baptism of Jesus Christ (Mt 3:16, Mk 1:10; cf. Lk 3:22, Jo 1:32). I am about to argue that all such dove apparitions mark a victory over the snake/dragon and the chaotic waters. In fact, this symbolic role of the dove is clear

on the very act of creation. Jewish traditions have long understood the statement that the spirit/wind/breath *(ruaḥ)* of God "hovered" (*m*^{e}*raḥepet*) over the primordial waters (Gn 1:2) in terms of the image of a dove fluttering over its nest (see Peters 1911: 44-77; Moberly 2000: 352-4; cf. Morgenstern 1920: 196).[16] The implied association between the dove and the wind of God,[17] engaged in separating the waters and in forcing the sea to give way to dry land, again shows in the Flood narrative. Here the wind of God quells the flood, and then the dove lets Noah know when the ground is dry again (Gn 8:1-12). Predictably, the exodus from Egypt is also a case in point. God describes his rescuing of the Israelites from the clutches of Pharaoh in terms of his carrying the chosen people "on eagle's wings" (Ex 19:4). And, even though that eagle is not a dove, another description of God taking care of his people in the desert uses the specific metaphor of the eagle *hovering* over its brood (Dt 32:11), which repeats the primordial image of God's *ruaḥ* hovering over the chaotic abyss like a dove over its nest.[18]

Moreover, as might be expected, the dove is implied in Jonah's emergence from the abyss. From as early as the 4th century CE, Jerome takes it as self-evident that Jonah is the "fairest of doves, whose shipwreck shows in a figure the passion of the Lord" (Jerome 2008). In the same vein, he boldly describes Jesus as "Jonah, that is to say 'dove' or 'suffering' (he is given both meanings, either because the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and stays with him, or because he has suffered for our wounds…)." And Jerome reckons that Jordan means "descent", so that Jonah (dubbed "the dove, or the suffering"), on metaphorically crossing the river eastwards, passes from the abode of the dead into the realm of the living (Jerome 2000). Which, again, takes us to the baptism of Jesus. The gospels make it clear that the Holy Spirit in dove shape descends upon Jesus as he emerges from the Jordan waters, and Byzantine icons show Christ standing over serpents in the Jordan (Stone 2002: 47-62). For instance, a remarkable illumination from an Armenian 16th-century manuscript shows the dove descending on Christ, who stands in the Jordan waters while trampling a *višap*, the Armenian dragon that amounts to Leviathan (Stone 2002: fig. 6, discussed in pp. 54-7).[19]

This said, it is time to note that the hovering dove marks the defeat

of the serpent because the two animals are deemed intimate enemies. Karen Joines (1968: 249-55) has called attention to “many cultic objects … decorated with applied serpents facing doves” in ancient Palestinian and Near-Eastern cults. Actually, the standoff between a celestial bird and the chthonic snake is a widespread motif (see Wittkower 1939). In examining this “bird and serpent myth”, Kalipada Mitra (1925: 86) feels compelled to explain the notion that serpents know (and can convey) the oracular language of birds because snakes are the victims of birds and “in nature the victims well understand the habits of their enemies that enable them to guard themselves against their attack”. On a different tack, James Frazer (1888: 181) chooses to stress that serpents eat birds and birds’ eggs, from which follows that “they are blood relations of birds, having the blood of birds in their veins”. Of course, each author is partly right. Together, they bring forth the notion that the two proverbial enemies, continuously ingesting each other in an endless circle, are ultimately consubstantial. Thus, Pliny (10.137) recalls a tradition that mentions “birds from a mixture of whose blood a snake is born, whoever eats which will understand the conversations of birds” (Pliny 1983: 381). This consubstantiality between cyclically interchanging predator and prey suggests an image of endless death and regeneration involving the unity of fighting halves. As Géza Róheim (1992: 17) points out, fairy tales present the two intimate foes as, indifferently (among others), a serpent and a bird, two serpents, or two dragons.

Having understood this, let us take note of the fact that the strife frequently happens on the World Tree. For example, Hilda Davidson (1990: 191-2) remarks that in South Borneo the strife of the bird and the serpent “is said ultimately to destroy the tree, but it always springs up anew” – and she compares this to the image of the Scandinavian world tree, Yggdrasil, which was a symbol of the constant regeneration of the universe. Quite independently, David Knipe (1967: 353) notes that “the eagle-and-serpent polarity in conjunction with the tree”, found in various traditions, supposes homology between the shedding of foliage, the molting of plumage, and the sloughing as symbols of renovation. In short, the fight between the celestial bird and the chthonic serpent on the *axis mundi* expresses on a broad transcultural basis the dynamism of cyclic cosmos.

CONCLUSION

This is why, I submit, this specific image appears in the Judeo-Christian scriptures whenever a new cycle unfolds from chaos. We have seen that depictions of various biblical events – such as Creation, Exodus, and Resurrection – draw on the constant image of victory over the chthonic dragon and the correlative victory of the celestial bird. This suggests a concept of time not as a linear axis of happenings, but rather as a harmony of meaningful events continuously transforming one another.

Regarding the Radovljica fresco, we saw that Mary's body and her son's cross stand vertically between the dove and the dragon, just as in other traditions the Tree of Life stands between the celestial bird and the chthonic serpent. In other words, the Radovljica fresco depicts the ancient *axis mundi* image in Christian terms. In so doing it analogizes the story of Genesis and the ancient dragon-fight myth, so that Mary's victory over the serpent reflects God's victory over the dragon. Moreover, the fresco superposes the Father's victory over marine chaos and the Son's overcoming of the Ancient Law. And it treats the birth, baptism, and resurrection of Jesus as so many variations on a single theme. Quite beside its aesthetic appeal, this enigmatic fresco is a lesson in symbolic condensation, tripartite space, and repetitive time.

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Notes

1 I owe the reading of the fresco's caption to Andrej Pleterski and Blaž Resman (respectively Institute of Archaelogy, and France Stele Institute of Art History, at the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts), whom I warmly thank here.

2 As the following discussion makes clear, both the baptism and the resurrection of Jesus bear unmistakable dragon-slaying symbolism. Elsewhere I have addressed at some length the symbolical recurrences

of the dragon theme in regard to the Passion as a whole (Vaz da Silva 2008: 145-56). Here I want to thank Nick Wyatt for the quite plausible suggestion that both the stilling of the storm and Jesus walking on the water evoke dragon-slaying imagery, although I was unable to follow up on this suggestion in the present discussion.

3 Unless otherwise stated, I am taking all New-Testament citations from Richmond Lattimore (1996).

4 Layer's painting is kept at the *Muzej krščanstva na Slovenskem,* Slovene Museum of Christianity, which I visited in 2003 thanks to the kindness of Mirjam Mencej (Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Ljubljana), and the sculptor Jiři Bezlaj. This photo, which I took there, is reproduced by permission of the *Muzej krščanstva na Slovenskem*.

5 Both the 1508 *Madonna of Belvedere* and the 1511 *Alba Madonna* may be viewed online at the Web Gallery of Art (http://www.wga.hu).

6 Both Andrea Mantegna's *The Holy Family* (1495-1500) and Mathias Grünewald's central panel of the *Isenheim Altarpiece* (c. 1515) may be viewed online at the Web Gallery of Art (http://www.wga.hu).

7 Both the Aix altarpiece (c. 1445) and the Mérode altarpiece (c. 1427) may be viewed online at the Web Gallery of Art (http://www.wga.hu).

8 The mid-second-century *Protevangelion of James* (18.1) states that Joseph, on realizing that the child was pressing to be born, took Mary into a cave; and, of course, the apostles concur in saying that Jesus's tomb was hewn out of the rock (Mat 27:60; Mk 15:46; Lk 23:50).

9 The illumination may be viewed in a fine recent French translation of the Gospel of Nicodemus (Gounelle and Izydorczyk 1997: 200). Regarding the Harrowing of Hell theme, see Peter Dinzelbacher (2002).

10 The Narbonne altarcloth may be viewed at http://www.photo.rmn.fr by running a search for "parement de Narbonne".

11 Van Heemskerck's 1559-60 *Triptych of the Entombment* can be viewed online at the Web Gallery of Art (http://www.wga.hu).

12 I am taking the information that "in medieval and modern Greek and other European folklore, the young adder is believed to kill its father" from Géza Róheim (1979: 532).

13 Likewise, in the Babylonian creation epic the preexisting watery abyss is impersonated by the primordial dragon Tiamat, whom Marduk slays

with the help of the winds and other storm weapons (Pritchard 1955: 61-8). On traces of the historical connection between Hebrew cosmogony and Babylonian and Sumerian myths, see Elena Cassin (1981: 228-9), Noah S. Kramer (1972: 37-41), and Mircea Eliade (1980: 76-7).

14 Compare to the Hebrew marine dragon of chaos the Vedic snake *Śeṣa,* or "remainder", which dwells in the chaotic waters in promise of the next cosmic renaissance (see Biardeau 1981: 241).

15 Unless otherwise stated, all Old-Testament citations are taken from the *Tanakh* (1988), translated by the Jewish Publication Society of America.

16 John P. Peters (1911: 44-7) argues that the bird image supposes the paradigm of the cosmic egg, which is quite alien to Jewish thought; and that, therefore, the *ruaḥ* of God is best interpreted in the Mesopotamian tradition of wind, the divine weapon against the primal dragon. On a different tack, Julian Morgenstern (1920: 196) argues that the Hebrew scripture might echo here the Phoenician theme of a cosmic egg. Whatever one may think about the embedment of the cosmic-egg idea in Genesis 1:2, my point is that the tradition of the hovering dove cannot be explained away, and, therefore, we need to understand how the presence of a bird fits in the fight against the dragon.

17 Incidentally, note that the association between the dove and the wind of God in Jewish tradition prefigures the association between the dove and the gushing divine Word in Renaissance depictions of the Annunciation (see Vaz da Silva 2008: 117-19). And, of course, the Holy Spirit takes dove shape in the gospels (see below).

18 R. Moberly (2000: 352) specifies, *a propos* the hovering *ruaḥ* of Genesis 1:2, "The one other usage of *rḥp* Pi. in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy xxxii 11". So the eagle *is* permutable with the dove. Moreover, Hebrew legends show that the dove is also permutable with the raven (see Ginzberg 2003: 1:37, 151-2 n.51), which is anything but strange in light of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown's remark that throughout the world contrasting birds (such as the white cockatoo and the black cockatoo, or the white cockatoo and the crow) are often selected as representing a relationship of opposition, which Radcliffe-Brown (1977: 64-5) defines as "the union of opposites … which combine to make a unity when they are joined together ".

19 The *višap,* Stone says, "is the mythical Armenian dragon, but the word is also used in the Armenian translation of the serpents in Psalm 73(74)" (p. 54).

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