Simone Weil seems to have been the first of all mankind to discern that the Woman in the Apocalypse chapter 12 was no one other than the Holy Spirit. This she did in her book La connaissance surnaturelle, Paris 1950, pp. 245–286. Her friend and biographer Simone Pétrement, an expert on Gnosis who in her study on dualism stressed the importance of grace in Gnosticism and Manichaeism, has amplified this observation with well chosen arguments.

Independently of these two learned and perspicacious mavericks, I have come to the same conclusion, though on different grounds, which I have mentioned in part in my commentary on the Apocalypse published by McGraw Hill in 1979. Here I wish to consider the same subject in a more detailed argument.

In my mind there can be no doubt whatsoever that the episode of this Woman in travail, who brings forth a child and flees into the desert, contains an allusion to the escape of the congregation of Jerusalem to Pella in Transjordania before the Jewish war broke out or at least came to an end. The Woman, then, is the Shekhinah or Holy Spirit, who follows the people of God into temporary exile.

Most patristic scholars know that the concept of Shekhinah played a very important role in kabbalistic and ḥasidic literature and was borrowed from there by modern philosophers like Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. According to the latter God descends and suffers with his people and wanders with them in exile. This idea can be traced back to the rabbinic literature of the second century, being of the same date as most rabbinic parallels to the New Testament:

1 “D’après les protestants, la femme céleste d’Apocalypse serait l’Église. D’après le passage de l’Évangile des Hébreux, cité par Origène, sur ‘ma mère le Saint-Esprit’, ce pourrait être le Saint-Esprit” (245); “La femme doit être le Saint-Esprit” (268).
Speaking about 2 Sam. 7,23 (“From before Thy people, whom Thou didst redeem to Thee out of Egypt, the nation and its God”) R. Akiba said: “were it not an undoubtedly authentic verse of Scripture, it would be completely impossible to speak in this way. Israel speaks as it were before God: you saved yourself, and so we find that in every place, where Israel was in exile, the Shekhinah was with them.”

If this is a valid parallel, then John the prophet seems to indicate that God himself, in his female manifestation of the Presence, accompanies the Ecclesia in her flight from Jerusalem. It is true that there is no rabbinic evidence that the Shekhinah already was conceived as a female hypostasis at such an early date, as she was in later mysticism, but Jewish Christianity and Early Gnosticism have often anticipated the concepts of later Kabbala. Moreover the related view that the Glory of God, the “kabod”, is present even in exile, is attested in the first chapter of the prophet Ezekiel, to be dated 593 B.C. Inspired by him, the greatest of all prophets, he who is called Deutero-Isaiah, describes at the very beginning of his writing how, at the end of time, the people in procession will go through the land of all the nations between Babylonia and Israel: the “kabod” will precede them and be their rearguard (Is. 40,5).

We may be fairly certain that in the passage discussed it is the Holy Spirit that is meant by the figure of the Woman. It is a well known fact that the Jewish Christians and the Syrian, Aramaic Christians, who received their faith from them, considered the Holy Spirit to be a female hypostasis. In the Gospel of the Hebrews the Holy Spirit says to Jesus during his baptism, that he is her first begotten “son” (filius primigenitus, frag. 2). In other words the Holy Spirit generates Jesus as Sort of God during his baptism, Jesus experienced this ceremony as a spiritual rebirth.

The Apocalypse of John, though written in Ephesus or its surroundings (Patmos), is a typically Jewish Christian writing. When its author describes the birth of the child, he probably alludes to the birth of the Messiah at his baptism. But then it becomes still more probable that the Woman who generates the child is the Holy Spirit.

---