



The Woman

(Rev. 12:1-2 NIV) A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. (2) She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth.





We should note that this scene in Revelation starts in Chapter 11 at verse 19; the chapter and verse markings are relatively arbitrary and are not part of Scripture. Unfortunately, sometimes we are misled by this.

This is a new scene in heaven. John is now about to describe a new series of visions, and so we expect to see some introduction. Virtually all commentators see this as NOT being in sequence; it is a flashback. The more modern writers see it more clearly, I suspect because it is now a much more familiar literary device.

The identity of the woman is much disputed. There are three primary theories, two of which may be synthesized into what I believe is the right answer.

- The Roman Catholic church holds that this is Mary. I reject this because of the symbolic nature of the passage. If the woman is literal, the dragon is too -- and show me the dragon.
- Most futurists hold that this is Israel. Recall that in their timing the church has been raptured - - and they are therefore very reluctant to see the church in anything. It is, however, the clearest of the "single" explanations. We shall see what problems this causes with the 1260 days.
- Many (but not all) historicists hold that this is the church. I suspect that the reason is that they wish to give no ground to the futurists. This view has a number of problems, the largest of which is that the church did not give birth to Christ (the obvious man child) but the other way around. The "solution" to this difficulty is to remember that the church will reign with Christ, thus will be given the rod of iron, and this is really the collection of believers. This, to me, seems strained.
- A good synthesis of the two views above is to view the woman as the "True Israel" -- those who truly follow God. This is appealing for two reasons:

It neatly solves the dilemma of a character who both gives birth to the Christ (Israel) and then is persecuted for 1260 days *immediately after*.

It also confirms the idea that the church is in fact connected to the true Israel.

Sun, Moon, and Stars We have already referenced in an earlier lesson the passage in Genesis 37:9-10 where these figures are used of people; in that instance, Joseph's father, mother and brothers. The fact that there are 12 stars must be construed as being either the twelve tribes or the twelve Apostles -- or both. In either event, the "True Israel" would fit.

There have been a number of interesting women who were convinced that they were this woman (though not nearly as many as there are men who are the two witnesses). Among them are

- Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, who said that Christian Science was the man child, she the woman and the dragon the "mortal mind" attempting to devour the truth.
- Joanna Southcott, who even announced the birth date for the child -- and literally failed to deliver (1815)
- Aimee Semple McPherson, founder of the Foursquare Gospel churches, frequently referred to herself as this woman.

The Red Dragon

(Rev 12:3-4 NIV) Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. (4) His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born.

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It is a curious fact: the commentaries for the historicist and futurist views have very little to say directly about these verses. I believe this is because the poetic view has tumbled to the truth: these verses begin with a flashback, a literary technique almost unknown in the 19th century (and thus unsuspected by the writers). We shall deal with the question of “when” at the end of the page.

Red, of course, refers to blood and murder (most appropriate for Satan).

Seven Crowns (the word means diadems, or kingly crowns) may be taken to mean seven kingdoms or kings. Side note: one way to tell the dragon from the beast (it can get confusing) is to note that the dragon has seven crowns -- the beast ten. The distinction will shortly be important.

Seven heads has been taken by the poetic to refer to the wisdom given Satan at creation (he was a cherub, evidently). Lindsey (alone, and without reference I can find) says that this and the ten horns imply a league of seven willing and three reluctant nations. In his earlier work this was identified as the Common Market.

Ten horns brings quickly to mind a select set of images. Unlike the number seven, which has many associations, the number ten does not. The first image we bring to mind is the ten toes of the statue in Daniel; recall, however, that Daniel's beast (from the sea) had seven horns. From its interpretation we see the first direct indication of **Rome**. We thus conclude that this dragon (which is later identified as Satan) is somehow associated with Rome. By its association with Satan, we can say that it is the spiritual, diabolic power behind Rome. But which Rome? The historicist says first the Roman Empire, and later the Roman Catholic Church. The futurist says some future reincarnation of the Roman Empire. (Hence Talbot's fascination with Mussolini in 1937)

Without flashback, timing becomes somewhat of a difficulty, especially for the historicists. The most flamboyant of them, Miller, skips chapters 12 through 15 altogether. As we have seen, they insist that the woman is the church; the 1260 days the 126 years. The problem comes with the pregnancy and the attempt to “**devour the child**”. If we extend the concept of the woman to include both Israel and Church -- the true Israel, and heirs of the promise -- then the problem can be solved with flashback. John is simply introducing us to the characters; we see in the devouring of the child the slaughter of the innocents by Herod. (Others have seen Roman persecutions here).

Flashback is dangerous; if used too much, it can seriously distort the chronology. The timing can be seen if we can determine *when* Satan fell. Does the Bible tell us? There are two places where Satan is seen as “falling” outside of Revelation: Isaiah 14:12 and Luke 10:18. In the first of those, we are dealing directly in prophecy. It is not clear that Satan is fallen to earth; the statement may be in the future (though not usually taken that way). It may also be taken that he is fallen from his first estate. Certainly throughout the Old Testament he presents himself before God.

In Luke, however, Jesus is clearly speaking in the present tense, and not in a prophetic passage. “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” When did he say this? When the seventy-two returned from preaching the Kingdom of God. If we accept this as the time that Satan falls (or close to it) the timing makes great sense for the historicist view. Satan falls when the Kingdom is established on earth -- and his time is short, as we will see. Some additional evidence for this can be found in Jude 1:6, where angels (i.e., demons) are spoken of as already being bound in chains for judgment.

The futurist view is simpler and more dramatic. This is the start of the Great Tribulation -- Satan arrives on earth, with no more access to heaven(?), and now the trouble really begins.

(By the way -- how do we know that Satan is bound by time? He had a beginning).

The Son

(Rev 12:5-6 NIV) She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. (6) The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.



If you will be kind enough to accept the “flashback” point of view here, it is fairly obvious who the “man child” is: Jesus Christ. John here summarizes Jesus’ life on earth in two events: birth and ascension. Most commentators (except the historicists) agree with this. Historicists have some trouble putting this section in proper order, and therefore argue that the “man child” is in fact the church. The argument is essentially symbolic:

- In verse 17, we see “the rest of her offspring” (obviously the saints) persecuted by Satan. The church is the mother of the saints.
- We are often referred to as “the body of Christ.”

That this point can be confusing (without flashback) is shown by Chuck Smith. He argues that it cannot be Israel (in contrast to other futurists); he argues that it might be Christ (denied by other futurists) and that it probably is the 144,000!

All these views can be harmonized in the flashback model.

Timing, on the other hand, determines the rest of the interpretation. For the futurist, this event (based on the 1260 days) starts mid-Tribulation, or at the start of the “Great Tribulation.” Thus, half way through Daniel’s last week, we see:

- Satan “falls” to earth (tied in with the “abomination of desolation” of Daniel, referenced by Jesus).
- Israel, in reaction to the abomination, flees to the desert (Where? Smith says Petra; McGee says probably Sinai)
- The timing is a literal 1260 days.

For the historicist, then, the timing is different:

- Satan falls at the time of Christ (or at the fall of the Pagan Roman Empire)
- The 1260 days refer to the power of the papacy, as we shall see (connected to Rome)
- The place in the desert is figurative for being out of sight.

Every author I’ve read has a different opinion; this one’s mine.

Michael and the Dragon

(Rev 12:7-9 NIV) And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. (8) But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. (9) The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

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There is one artistic point here in Durer's picture which I must bring to you. Notice the frantic mass of activity -- shown by density of detail -- in heaven; and the peaceful absence on earth. The war is in heaven; its reflection is upon earth.



This passage is now fairly well explained. It is good, however, to nail down a couple of symbols, as they will recur.

- The dragon means Satan. This is a useful distinction, for we will soon see (Chapter 13) a beast which has some similar characteristics. Recalling Daniel, we can now say the dragon is Satan, the spiritual, fallen angel; the beast is an earthly dominion of some sort.
- Stars, again, are angels (or demons) or, in a more general sense, spiritual powers. Recall that Paul told us that pagan gods were actually demons. (1 Corinthians 10:19-20).

Again, for the historicist this fall happens at the ministry of Christ (or at the end of paganism in the Roman Empire); the futurist says it must happen in the middle of Daniel's 70th week.

Hallelujah and Woe

(Rev. 12: 10-12 NIV) Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. (11) They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives as much as to shrink from death. (12) Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short."

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I am indebted to the redoubtable J. Vernon McGee for these three points; all my other commentators skip this part.

How does one overcome Satan? There are three ways pictured here:

- By the blood of the lamb. If you are not a Christian, or if you are a Christian trying to rely on your own strength, Satan will overpower you, sooner or later. Later, if you are strong and well principled; sooner, if you are weak and opportunist -- but it will happen.
- By the word of testimony. In sharing your faith, you strengthen your faith -- the best defense is a good offense. Why should Satan have the initiative in your combat with him?
- In martyrdom -- which is to say, in your love for Jesus Christ. This is simply an example that no man can serve two masters. If you love Jesus more than anything else -- more than life itself -- He will keep you with Him.

War

(Rev. 12: 12-17 NKJV) When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he persecuted the woman who had given birth to the male child. (14) The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. (15) Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overwhelm the woman and sweep her away with the flood. (16) But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. (17) Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring, those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

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Wings, in this context, probably comes from Exodus 19:4, referring to God's care of Israel during the exodus from Egypt. Lindsey speculates (does not state so specifically) that this might be an American airlift, as the eagle is the symbol of the United States. This would then be the Jews fleeing the Antichrist at mid-Tribulation.

The historicists hold that this is the "true church" (refer to the woman as "true Israel") in hiding.

What does Satan do about it? This passage is very difficult for the futurists: Smith sees it as an army pursuing -- and does not explain how the earth swallows it up. It can also be seen (of course) as a literal flood -- I have pictured it here as someone opening a floodgate. The historicist sees it as Satan flooding the world with false doctrine, in an effort to drown the true church in it.

This last is the only explanation which has a corresponding explanation in the "earth" "swallowing" the flood. The true church is in hiding; hiding in plain sight. To hide a leaf, do it in a forest. A man in a city!

There is one other spiritual point here: the universe is a place of order. There are natural laws; there are moral laws. The man who obeys the latter will be helped by the former!