

Revelation Bible Study #30

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Revelation 12:1-5

1 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. **2** She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. **3** And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. **4** His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. **5** She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, **6** and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

Introduction

Having been told that he must again prophesy, St. John begins to do exactly that as a new vision begins. Unlike the previous apocalyptic cycles we have gone through, the seventh trumpet is not immediately followed by a *new* cycle of sevens. Instead, the Apostle sees mysterious personas and a kind of otherworldly “bestiary” which impacts cosmic history. From this point forward, it is difficult to interpret the creatures and persons in this section without speculation: nevertheless, we shall endeavor to keep our interpretations free from the “outside influence” of historical movements and persons which are not identified in Scripture.

The other interpretive perspectives on Revelation are not so bound. The historicist looks for where these words have been fulfilled in Heaven or on Earth; the preterist looks for a mostly-earthly fulfillment in the circumstances surrounding the first Jewish war; the futurist looks to *current* signs of potential future fulfillment regarding eschatology; the idealist tries to find the messages pertinent to all generations – but with the difficult task of avoiding *inserting* his own ideals into the text, which not all idealists do. Whenever the exegete is forced to speculate (as many passages forthcoming shall do), using outside historical circumstances or external perspectives creates a risk of making one's entire interpretive message a house of cards. For instance, in the late 20th century there was a stir among futurist communities regarding a “Beast” supercomputer in Brussels which many a believer held was the “666” entity in Revelation 13. The story went that this computer would be utilized by the antichrist to control humanity from Belgium's capitol; unfortunately for these interpreters, it turned out that the supercomputer was a fabrication made by a speculative novelist.¹ Thus by taking an exegetical risk, entire systems of interpretation had to be re-worked with this massive correction in mind! By binding ourselves to the text of Scripture alone, we stand on much firmer ground.

Vs.1-2

1 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. **2** She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.

St. John records signs occurring in Heaven; he is not recording matters that he observes happening on Earth. However, note that they are not *Heavenly beings or realities* in Heaven. Unlike the

¹ <https://www.zdnet.com/article/it-myths-does-the-beast-of-brussels-know-everything-about-us/>

living creatures, the angels, the trumpets and seals and torches and Christ Himself, the woman and the dragon is portrayed as a sign – σημεῖον²³ – a visual miraculous authentication of a message God is giving, and potentially the message itself. In other words, the vision which St. John receives is directly shown to be symbolic. Previously, the Apostle watched heavenly realities have hard material effects on the physical world; now, earthly realities, circumstances and persons are represented in a kind of “stage play” in Heaven.

The vision takes on a dream-like quality, and thus consciously refers to dreams and visions mentioned in the Old Testament. The woman wearing the sun and a star-crown, standing upon the moon, is indicative of a connection to Israel. The Patriarch Joseph, given a prophetic gift, had a dream in which his father Jacob was the sun, his mother Rachel was the moon, and his eleven brothers were all stars – and all bowed to him.⁴ This was to indicate that he would be in a position of power by which his family would pay homage, fulfilled when he rose to power in Egypt. But in this passage, the celestial figures do not bow to the woman; they *adorn* her, identifying with her strongly enough that she forms a kind of representative relationship with them. Everything ancient Israel is, is found on her.

The imagery goes beyond a mere connection to Israel. The sun, moon and stars are an inheritance for the nations,⁵ so on the one hand they denote blessing. In fact, the stripping of the sun, moon and stars is a sign of wrath.⁶ But since their light and wondrous features were a temptation for ancient Israel, who in their times of apostasy frequently worshiped the celestial bodies.⁷ The woman then, being clothed with these entities, *is not stripped* of the blessing, as they are ever-present with her. In addition, since she wears them, she is given no reason to worship them. This is factored into finding her identity in the fifth verse.

Vs.3-4

3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. **4** His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.

The ninth verse identifies the red dragon as satan. The visage presented demonstrates the meaning inherent to the word δράκων,⁸⁹ which is related to the Greek term for *looking*. A dragon in this sense is something with a marvelous appearance, and it appears that the devil is taking pains to mock or appropriate things which belong to God alone. God appears on the throne with a reddish hue from His carnelian appearance,¹⁰ so the dragon has a similar color. The elders cast their crowns before God constantly, and Christ will be wearing many diadems upon His return,¹¹ so the dragon wears as many as he can. Finally, the seven torches of the Spirit are blasphemously copied as seven heads on the dragon; just as there are seven torches but one Holy Spirit, there are seven heads yet only one devil.

This also factors into the third of the stars being swept down. Various traditions identify the stars as angels, and claim that the devil recruited one third of the total number of angels in his war against God. After all, Abaddon is identified as both “star” and angel in the ninth chapter, and God cast him in order that he might accomplish the purposes for which he was sent. Thus a conclusion was

2 Transliterated “semeion,” Strong's #4592

3 <https://biblehub.com/greek/4592.htm>

4 Genesis 37:5-8

5 Deuteronomy 4:19

6 Isaiah 12:9-13

7 Jeremiah 8:1-3

8 Transliterated “Drakon,” Strong's #1404

9 <https://biblehub.com/greek/1404.htm>

10 Revelation 4:3

11 Revelation 19:12

drawn that the devil “cast” these angels in a sense of recruiting them, or they were thrown out of heaven as punishment for joining him. Whether this interpretation is correct remains a mystery, since St. John has told us that he saw it all as a *sign*, something deliberately symbolic: we are not given specific interpretive metrics by which we could say that the thing signified by the stars being cast are actually angels in rebellion – though this certainly could be the case. Whether this framing of the events is true, the point of the clause is not to tell us how many angels rebelled against God; instead, the point is to expose that the devil attempts to do things that *only God* has the right to do, from wearing crowns to sending out servants.

The dragon seeks to devour the Child, whose rule he knows shall undo his own. In Eden, God foretold that the seed of the woman would crush the head of the serpent,¹² and Isaiah prophesies concerning Leviathan (also called a dragon),¹³ that God shall slay him to establish peace and security for His people Israel.¹⁴¹⁵ While the devil knows that God will accomplish His purposes, it appears that he believes he can *delay* the inevitable in perpetuity if he only continues to persecute Christ and His Church as strongly as possible. The devil has not stopped for one instant since he began to attack the Divine. He had Christ killed, but this did not stop Him; he then persecuted the Church, but those who persecute the Church inevitably either stop or convert to Christianity themselves; since he cannot fully extinguish the Church and nor can he destroy Christ completely, he sends in subversive teachers to corrupt it from within.

Vs.5

5 She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

The woman gives birth to the Christ, whose “rod of iron” is mentioned in Psalm 2:9. In the letter to Thyatira Christ divulges that He will rule *through* His Saints.¹⁶ But before that is to happen, she is to be “nourished” - that is, kept in the God's care, for 1260 days. This is not a physical 1260 days, but being half of seven years suggests that the time period is symbolic of the Church era, from Pentecost to the Second Advent. Just as the deliverance of Christians takes on parallels with the Exodus throughout the seven trumpets, so too does the Israelite wandering through the wilderness finds its antitype in the Church's sojourn on earth before Christ returns.

This leads us to ask, who is the woman? At first appearance, we may be tempted to agree with the Catholic Church that she is the virgin Mary. After all, she is depicted as giving birth to Christ in this passage, something Mary most certainly did. However, this would produce difficulties in addressing the 1260 days as applying to her. The Scriptures do not countenance a 1260 day wilderness occlusion for Mary, though a Catholic exegete would speculate that this is in reference to Mary, Joseph and the Christ child sojourning in Egypt to hide from Herod.¹⁷ If that were the case, they would have to explain why our text has her in the wilderness *after* Christ's Ascension.

One may also note that the symbolism concerning the sun, moon and stars brings forth to mind the notion of ancient Israel, whose institution and choosing in the Old Testament was for the sake of producing and protecting the line of Christ. But before we say that ethnic Israel is represented by the woman, we must be careful to remember that the sun, moon and stars are *blessings* and an *inheritance*

12 Genesis 3:15

13 Isaiah uses the term תַּנִּין, “Tannin,” Strong's #8577, with a strong connotation of devourer found in Jeremiah 51:34 and Nehemiah 2:13. <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/8577.htm>

14 That is, the Church.

15 Isaiah 27:1-5

16 Revelation 2:27

17 Matthew 2:13-15

which are not stripped from her; in light of the generations that perished in the wilderness of Sin, the Assyrian Captivity, and the Babylonian Exile; in addition to the countless numbers of Israelites that worshiped false gods or bowed to Jeroboam's golden calves, such lofty status could not apply to the vast majority of them. To interpret the woman as representing the ancient race is made more confusing by the fact that the larger portion of them *persecuted* the prophets,¹⁸ actively joining in the dragon's campaign to prevent the incarnation of the Messiah!

Excluding ethnic Israel then, we are left with Mary, but left unsatisfied. Indeed Mary does give birth to the Christ, but the inheritance and blessing of the celestial bodies do not belong to Mary alone, and nor is she the only individual who contributed to bringing Christ's incarnation to pass. She is the product of four thousand years of effort to protect the faithful line; first through the line of Seth, then the line of Shem, then the line of Abraham to Jacob to Judah, all the way down to the Davidic dynastic line.¹⁹ Every last one of the faithful in this long line of stewards of the promises of God stands to receive the promise of inheritance through faith in Christ. Thus true answer regarding the woman's identity is that of the Church, the *true* Israel, preceding, including, after and *through* Mary. Though St. John very well may have seen Mary's likeness wearing the laurel of stars on her head and standing on the moon, she *represents* all the faithful saints who came before Her as part of God's plan to send Christ to earth to save sinners.

18 Acts 7:51-53

19 Luke 3:23-38