



THE REIGN OF SATAN

Satan Introduced

August 20, 2017

Revelation 12

The Woman and the Dragon

12 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.

Satan Thrown Down to Earth

7 Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. 11 And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. 12 Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

13 And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. 14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. 15 The serpent poured water like a river

Study Notes

out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. 16 But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. 17 Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

Chapter 12 marks a significant turning point in John's writing. The earlier visions seem to have been almost private, for John's eyes only, that he was to report to the churches. Now there are signs and portents in the sky, cosmic in scope. He is the witness, but the intimacy of private showings is gone. Perhaps the next several chapters are the content of the third woe, promised back in Revelation 11:14. But they represent a new stage in the drama.

The characters change as well. The symbolism of the next several chapters includes two women: one representing the people of God; the other representing the kingdom of this world. Now a dragon or serpent, along with other great monsters, take center stage, all representing the power of evil. The conflict between good and evil is shown in cosmic scale, to end only with the end of the entire old creation. In this sense, chapters 12 through 20 form a unity that has a very different character than the earlier sections of the book.

THE PORTENTS APPEAR

Revelation 12:1-6

12:1-6 Who is this woman? From the rest of the account, a case could be made for several different possibilities. She could symbolize Israel, persecuted so often and almost totally destroyed, yet destined to give birth to the Messiah. She could symbolize Mary, the mother of Jesus. She could symbolize the church, since later in verse 17 it is clear that she has other offspring who will be persecuted. Most likely, the symbolism is multiple and complex. She is the people of God, which includes Israel and Mary and the church. Mary is the biological link between Israel and the church, indicating that God redeemed the people and did not start over with a new people, abandoning the former ones. The twelve apostles also represent such a link with the covenant people, and the twelve stars in her crown point to such a connection. The concluding chapters of Revelation will also stress the role of the twelve as a connecting point between the old and the new (21:12-14).

The woman is clothed with the sun, bright and shining. She is a heavenly being. Yet at the moment she is introduced, she is in the pain of childbirth. In order to understand what these verses meant to their original audience, steeped in the Hebrew scriptures, we need to recall some of the specifics of Genesis 3: the curses on the serpent, the woman, the man, and the earth, all because of sin. In the case of the woman, she will suffer pain in childbirth. So the cosmic woman, clothed with the sun, is also a woman living under the conditions of sin.

She is faced now by the serpent, also in cosmic size. The serpent or dragon has seven heads, ten horns, and all the heads are crowned. This imagery is reminiscent of the seventh chapter of Daniel, in which Daniel relates his vision of four great beasts coming from the sea, the last one with ten horns. The beasts represent kingdoms whose rule is demonic and terrifying to God's people. Here in John's vision, there is a dragon whose rule is even

greater and more demonic. Rome is such an empire in John's time. But in this cosmic scale, the dragon is able to destroy not only earth but a third of the stars. The dragon is in direct opposition to the woman, waiting to devour the child that she is about to bring forth.

Steeped in the imagery of Genesis 3, John's hearers would not be at all surprised by this opposition. The curse on the serpent in Genesis 3:14–15 included the prophecy that the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the serpent would be in conflict. Whereas the descendent of the serpent would strike a heel, the seed of the woman would strike the serpent's head a mortal blow. The church understood this as a messianic prophecy.

The early church often referred to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the second Eve. Her child would undo the damage done by the first Eve and her progeny. This corresponds to Paul's use of the imagery of the first and second Adam in Romans 5:14. In paintings from the Middle Ages on, Mary is often portrayed as the woman clothed with the sun, with the crown of twelve stars on her head and the moon under her feet. That is a very limiting use of the imagery, however, since more than Mary herself is implied by the portent. At the same time, an overzealous desire to ignore Mary is equally limiting. For the early church, Mary was seen as a symbol both of Eve restored and of the church begun.

We are told that the child the woman bore was male and would "rule all nations with an iron rod." This would be a clear indication of the messianic character of the child, for this quotation from Psalm 2 was also a major messianic prophecy for the early church. The psalm begins with God laughing at the way the nations of the world conspire against God and God's anointed. Then the laughter turns to wrath. In Psalm 2:7 we read that God has said to the anointed one, "You are my son; today I have begotten you." Then the son is told that the nations will be given to him and that he will "break them with a rod of iron." So the child the woman brings forth is the anointed one, the true king of all, the Messiah.

This verse from Psalm 2 was quoted earlier in the letter to the church at Thyatira (Rev. 2:26–27), where Jesus says that he will give the authority to rule over nations with an iron rod to those who conquer and continue to do his works. Here in Revelation 12 it is the seed of the first woman who will contend with the terrible offspring of that first serpent in Eden. We are set for a cosmic battle between God and the forces of evil under whose power all the old creation lies. Even this woman, the one who brings forth the Messiah, suffers the pains of childbirth. She also is part of the old creation still to be redeemed by the one to whom she gives birth.

"But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne." There is a strange combination here of cosmic scope and earthly imagery. The woman is no longer in heaven, but in the midst of the old creation where evil holds sway. Her child is born here, and the danger from the dragon lies here, but her child escapes the danger and is taken to God's throne. If one assumes that Jesus is the messianic figure intended, which John does, then one can place all of his earthly ministry, even his death, in that one word "but." What matters in this dramatic picture is that the dragon did not destroy the child. Death may

have been a wound in the heel, but the Messiah is alive, beyond death, and is at the throne of God. In the Apostles' Creed, when the church confesses that Jesus has "ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God," it makes clear that the work of the Messiah has been completed on earth.

Meanwhile, the woman is left in this old creation. But she is not left defenseless. God has prepared a place for her in the wilderness, where she shall be nourished.

How long would this time in the wilderness last? The strange figure of 1,260 days is given—forty-two months; three-and-a-half years. A finite time, endurable because limited. The church is guaranteed its survival, its protection by God against the dragon. The church itself is guaranteed that, but individual Christians are subject to martyrdom—as we have already seen in earlier parts of this book and as we will see again. Any Christian's thought of preserving "my life" for the sake of the preservation of the church is not a sentiment Revelation would condone. The church is preserved by God, not by the actions of any Christians.

In one sense, these portents that indicate the coming of the Messiah and his triumph, now at God's throne, are only the beginning of the final struggle. They are the signal that the victory by the Messiah has been achieved. He is now at God's throne. Nothing can change that. But the dragon is still loose.

THE BATTLE IN HEAVEN

Revelation 12:7-12

12:7-12 The scene shifts and a new character, Michael, is introduced. The dragon is now in heaven along with his angels, fighting the great angel Michael and his angels. This is not to undo the victory won by the Messiah or to say that the defeat of evil depends on Michael rather than on God's Messiah. Precisely because that victory has taken place and the one born of the woman has escaped destruction by the dragon, the time has now come for secondary figures to do the mop-up operations.

Before the victory of the Messiah, the dragon's hold was strong. Now, because a mortal blow has been struck, he and his hosts can be defeated. The battle is short and direct. The dragon and his army have no power now, and Michael and his troops defeat them. But the defeat is only in heaven. The concluding battles still have to be fought on earth, though it is clear who will win.

What a strange idea that the dragon—or the serpent or the devil or Satan, for all these names are used here—should still be in heaven! Who is Satan? Clearly nothing is independent of God. All was created by God, and all of God's creation was good. The traditional view is that Satan is a fallen angel, created good by God but who used the freedom given by God to turn away from God. In that case, one might expect that such a fallen angel had left heaven a long time ago, perhaps even before the creation of this earth

and its people. The serpent in Eden shows that the devil was fallen and active.

But when we view the whole of scripture, the answer is not that simple. In Luke 10:18, at the point that the proclamation of the kingdom is begun by the seventy disciples, Jesus says, “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.” In Hebrews 9:23 we are told that the heavenly sanctuary needed to be cleansed by the sacrifice of Christ. The powers of evil had not only corrupted the earth, they had also disrupted heaven. The work of the Messiah was not only to free the earth from sin but also to cleanse heaven itself.

Yet all of this must be said within the context of God’s power and providence. Evil is never out of God’s control, and the overcoming of evil lies only in God’s power. The work of the Messiah is God’s work, ending the reign of sin. But until that time came, the power of evil had sway over all of creation, including the creation that is in heaven. The Messiah has come. His work has been accomplished. Heaven has been cleansed.

Who is Michael? In Daniel’s visions (Dan. 10:18–21), he is the leader of the heavenly hosts. Their specific task is to protect God’s people from the dragon and his angels in heaven. In Jude 9, Michael is called an archangel and is said to have argued with the devil over Moses’ body.

A hymn intrudes on the narrative of the woman and the dragon. Perhaps it was a hymn John first heard on this occasion in his vision; perhaps it was a hymn known to him already. It is, however, very appropriate and leads to the heart of the matter. Hymns are a constant feature of John’s visions. They point to great celebration in heaven. This hymn celebrates the full victory of the Messiah.

The one who has been thrown down, the devil, is here called “the accuser.” He brings to God accusations against the faithful ones. He also tempts the faithful to turn away from God’s paths, and this leads to the accusations of unfaithfulness. In the Garden of Eden, the serpent entices Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. In 1 Chronicles 21:1, Satan entices David to take a census of Israel, evidently to be sure that in human terms he had enough to win a battle, rather than trust in God’s power. In the first two chapters of Job, Satan accuses Job of being faithful only because things have gone well for him. God therefore lets Satan afflict Job so that his faithfulness can be seen. Job protests his innocence, but he finally discovers that in the face of the Almighty, to protest our innocence is to utter what we do not understand (Job 42:1–3). In Zechariah’s vision (Zech. 3:1–2), Satan is the accuser of the high priest who intercedes for the people. Instead of listening to Satan’s accusations, God rebukes Satan and forgives the guilt of the people. In other words, what saves the people is not their innocence but God’s forgiveness. Satan proclaims their guilt. God proclaims their forgiveness.

That is the pattern we see in this hymn. Satan is “the accuser of our comrades ... who accuses them day and night before our God.” The response is not that they are innocent and falsely accused. The response of the hymn is that “they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb.” They have lived by the forgiveness given through Christ. Furthermore, they

have given their lives testifying to this forgiveness, not to their own innocence. This is the heart of the gospel itself.

The hymn continues: In 12:12 the division between what has been freed from the power of evil and what has not been freed is made quite clear. Heaven can rejoice, for the powers of evil have ended their sway. Satan has been cast out. But he has been thrown down to the earth, so now is not the time for rejoicing here. The earth and the sea must now contend with the devil and his legions, who are aware of the victory of the Lamb. Satan “knows his time is short” because the decisive victory over him has been won, and therefore he is very angry.

A major item on the agenda of this whole book is to answer the questions clearly on the lips of many Christians in John’s day: If Christ has won such a victory, why are our lives in this world getting worse rather than better? Why are persecutions increasing? Why does Rome seem to have more and more power over us?” The answer of this hymn is that the woes upon earth can be expected to get worse, now that the devil has only this area in which to work. At this point, the devil is like a wounded animal, much more dangerous because it is mortally wounded.

THE PRESENT DANGER

Revelation 12:13–18

12:13–18 The mischief caused by this wounded dragon now begins in earnest. At the same time, the narrative of the woman who had given birth continues. Before the section on the war in heaven, she had gone into the wilderness to the place of refuge God had prepared for her. It is not clear whether what we find in verse 14 is a simple repetition or whether these words indicate that the woman had left her place of refuge for a time and has now returned. What is clear is that the earliest church did not face the same persecution from the Roman Empire as was now beginning to be faced by the churches in Asia Minor. God protects the woman, giving her eagle’s wings in order to go to the wilderness. Her time in the wilderness is the same as the 1,260 days in 12:6 (or the “forty-two months” of 11:2 and 13:5), though expressed differently. The duration now is given as “a time, and times, and half a time”—that is, three-and-a-half years. The message is the same: The church is preserved by God from the power of the devil; “the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18).

The dragon tries to destroy the woman in the wilderness. A great flood is unleashed from his mouth, like a river. There are parallels both to the Exodus and the Flood. Like the Exodus, the faithful need to be rescued from the danger of water. This is a reversal of the Flood story, for in the time of Noah, God created a flood in order to wash evil from the earth (Gen. 6:11–7:24). In this narrative, it is Satan who tries to wipe the faithful from the earth by means of a flood.

However, the woman is rescued. The source of her rescue is significant: It is the earth that comes to her aid. In Genesis 3, part of the curses resulting from sin is a curse on the ground, which became the enemy of humanity, making it difficult for the man to find food (Gen. 3:17–18). Now, as the powers of evil are being challenged, the earth comes to the aid of the faithful, swallowing up the flood that was intended to harm the woman.

No wonder the dragon was angry! First he and his angels were eliminated from heaven. Then he tried to attack the woman who was the symbol of the faithful on earth, but she was out of his range because even the earth, formerly under the power of evil, refused to cooperate and turned against his demonic intentions.

The concluding verses of the chapter set the stage for the dramatic chapters that are to follow. The wrath of the dragon is turned on those who are more vulnerable: the children of the woman, the faithful who are on the earth, those who keep God's commandments, those who remain faithful in their witness to Jesus. These are next in line. These are the ones to whom the entire book is written, and it clarifies for them why the powers of evil are turned against them. Those powers will be described much more fully in the next chapters.

The chapter concludes in a dramatic fashion: The dragon waits on the seashore. He is not finished. Remember that in the hymn that appeared in 12:12, both the earth and the sea shall see woe, because the dragon has been cast down to them. Now the dragon stands between the sea and the earth, about to make his next move. His target: the faithful on the earth.¹

a. The woman clothed with the sun (12:1–6)

1. *Sign (sēmeion)* is used often in the Fourth Gospel of Jesus' miracles. Here it seems to refer to a significant person rather than to a significant happening (so also in v. 3; 15:1). *In heaven* should perhaps be rather 'in the sky' (GNB) here and in verse 3. The action John is describing seems to take place on earth, but he sees the actors in the sky first of all. There is *a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head* (cf. Song 6:10). In this symbolism we must discern Israel, the chosen people of God. 'She comes standing upon the Old Testament revelation of reflected light and clothed with the New Testament revelation which is as the sun shining in his strength' (Torrance). The *twelve stars* will be the twelve patriarchs or the tribes which descended from them. The symbolism is that of Joseph's dream (Gen. 37:9; cf. also *Test. Naph.* 5:3–4). In view of this Old Testament symbolism it is unnecessary to see a reference to pagan mythology.

2. The figure of Israel as a travailing woman is found several times (Isa. 66:7–8; Mic.

¹ González, C. G., & González, J. L. (1997). *Revelation*. (P. D. Miller & D. L. Bartlett, Eds.) (pp. 76–84). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

4:10; 5:3; etc.). Especially important are some words of Isaiah:

As a woman with child and about to give birth

writhes and cries out in her pain,

so were we in your presence, O LORD.

We were with child, we writhed in pain,

but we gave birth to wind.

We have not brought salvation to the earth;

we have not given birth to people of the world.

(Isa. 26:17–18)

The old Israel could not bring ‘salvation to the earth’. That was accomplished only by the Son of God. John writes in the certainty that it has been accomplished. His description is vivid. He uses the Greek present tense, ‘cries’, and his participles ‘travailing’ and ‘being in pain’ (the latter not elsewhere in the New Testament of childbirth; it refers to torture) bring the scene before our eyes. The time of birth is near. Israel is about to give birth to the Messiah. For the early Christians there was an important continuity between the old Israel and the church, the true Israel. Here the woman is undoubtedly Israel who gives birth to the Messiah, but later in the chapter she is the church who is persecuted for her faith.

3. A second *sign* now appears in the sky. The *enormous red dragon* is undoubtedly Satan. It may not be out of place to recall that Pharaoh is called a dragon (Ezek. 29:3; 32:2; see RSV), for there is a good deal of symbolism associated with Egypt in this book. We have already seen that the language about the plagues is behind many of the troubles introduced by the seven trumpets. The great city, again, is Sodom ‘and Egypt’ (11:8). By contrast the song of deliverance is the song of Moses (who delivered from Egypt) and the Lamb (15:3). Egypt stands for all that is evil, and specifically for the oppression and persecution of the people of God. It is thus natural enough that the *dragon* has a place in Egypt.

We should also bear in mind other Old Testament passages which refer to the dragon and bring him into connection with kindred evil beings, such as Leviathan or Rahab (Job 26:12–13; Ps. 74:13–14; Isa. 27:1; 51:9). It is plain that to those versed in Old Testament scriptures the term *dragon* conjured up many associations of an evil being.

It is not clear why the dragon’s colour is *red*, but it may be no coincidence that the beast on whom the great whore sits is scarlet, as is her clothing (17:3–4). This red dragon is a fearsome creature with *seven heads and ten horns*. The horn is a symbol of strength, so that ten horns points to the mighty power of the dragon. Evil is strong; cf. the beast with ten horns in Daniel’s vision (Dan. 7:7, 24). The point of the seven heads is not immediately

obvious. But in antiquity several terrible beasts were said to have a multiplicity of heads (e.g. the Hydra). The thought may be that of the immense vitality of such an animal. It is very hard to kill. In the same way, opposition to the church on the part of the powers of evil is persistent. No sooner is it defeated in one place than it breaks out elsewhere. We should not overlook the fact that the beast, Satan's henchman, also has seven heads and ten horns (13:1; 17:3), and is scarlet in colour (17:3). We should understand that the evil we see on earth is made in the image of Satan.

The *crowns* on the dragon's head are crowns of royalty, *diadēmata*; *stephanos* in verse 1, and for which see note on 2:10, may denote rejoicing or victory. Moffatt brings out the difference by translating 'tiara' there and 'diadems' here. John pictures Satan as immensely powerful and as exercising sovereignty (or claiming it).

4. The dragon's *tail* now dragged *a third of the stars out of the sky* and threw them to the earth (cf. Dan. 8:10). As with a number of the trumpets, *a third* will denote a significant minority (8:7, 8, 9, etc.). This perhaps means that the activities of the evil one in other spheres have repercussions here on earth; many think there is a reference to fallen angels. But all this is apparently no more than a preliminary flexing of his muscles. His primary interest is in devouring the child about to be born. Satan was hostile to Jesus from the very beginning (cf. Herod's attempt to slay the Christ child, 2:13–18). He tried to destroy him from the moment of his birth. It might be asked why the dragon did not simply devour the woman, which would have effectually accomplished his purpose. But John is setting forth spiritual truth in pictorial form, not giving us a chapter in the natural history of the dragon.

5. The woman gave birth to a 'male son', the adjective putting some emphasis on the sex, which is, of course, given in the noun. The child was destined for world dominion. The *verb* to rule is literally 'to shepherd'. It speaks of absolute authority (see on 2:27), and the *iron sceptre* of firmness (not tyranny, as the English idiom might be held to indicate). Who *snatched up* the child to heaven John does not say, nor how it was done without the dragon's being able to prevent it. But in this book God is all-sovereign. He does what he wills. So now John's point is that he protects the incarnate Son from destruction by Satan. The 'how' does not matter. Sovereignty is further indicated by the reference to the *throne*.

Some find difficulty in the fact that there is no reference to any event in the life of Christ. John omits everything between the birth and the ascension. This has been drawn into an argument that John is not composing freely in this section, but taking over a pagan myth. But this is to overlook a feature of his method. John is quite capable of concentrating on one thing at a time so that he omits quite important considerations which are not immediately relevant. Thus he describes heaven in chapter 4 without mentioning Christ, while in chapter 5 he emphasizes the central place of the Lamb. Here his subject is not strictly Christ, but the church. He is showing how the incarnation gives encouragement to believers. Satan tried hard to destroy Christ. But he did not succeed. Christ came right through to the ascension. Let believers take heart. God always effects his purpose.

6. *The woman fled into the desert*, more exactly ‘wilderness’ (RSV). She was thus protected from the dragon just as surely as was her Son, but in a different way. Many draw attention to the flight of the Christians to Pella at the time of the siege of Jerusalem. This does illustrate flight but does not seem to be quite the point. ‘To the Jewish people the wilderness spoke of divine provision and intimate fellowship’ (Mounce). The woman’s place was *prepared for her by God*. Her flight was foreseen and God provided for her (cf. the manna for the Israelites in the wilderness, and the provision made for Elijah, 1 Kgs 17:4). The agent God employed is not important enough to be mentioned (as often in this book). For the period of 1,260 days see the note on 11:2. The period is given here in exactly the same form as in 11:3, the time of the prophecy of the two witnesses. It is not unlikely that we should link the two. God protects his people during the time of their witness.

b. Satan cast out (12:7–12)

This little vision teaches that we are caught up in a wider conflict than the one we see. The thought is not quite that of Paul who spoke of wrestling ‘against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms’ (Eph. 6:12). John is speaking of spiritual forces indeed, but the conflict is not simply one between demons and men. Angelic forces are also engaged. Our struggles are not to be shrugged off as insignificant. They are part of the great conflict between good and evil.

7. *Michael* is the leader of the heavenly hosts; they are *his* angels. This accords with his description as an ‘archangel’ in Jude 9. Michael is apparently a warlike angel (Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9). His enemies, the dragon’s helpers, are also called *angels* (the term means ‘messenger’ and there may be evil messengers as well as good ones).

8. The result of the battle is the defeat of the dragon, so that he and his angels *lost their place in heaven*. He had been the accuser of God’s people (Job 1:6–9; 2:1–6; Zech. 3:1ff.), but now he has no place in heaven.

9. He is *hurled down*. In this significant moment he is described very fully. He is the *great dragon*, and *that ancient serpent*, which is probably meant to awaken recollections of Genesis 3. He is both *the devil* (the word means ‘slanderer’) and *Satan*. This latter is the older name. It transliterates a Hebrew word which means ‘adversary’. It applies to human adversaries such as those God raised up against Solomon (1 Kgs 11:14, 23), while the Philistines used the term of David (1 Sam. 29:4). When used of angels it at first had no derogatory associations and it is used, for example, of ‘the angel of the Lord’ who confronted Balaam (Num. 22:22; NIV ‘to oppose him’=‘as his satan’, his adversary). But the term came to be used for the adversary of mankind, the spirit that accuses people before God, such as Job (Job 1:6) and Joshua the high priest (Zech. 3:1). The title ‘Accuser’, ‘Satan’, became attached to him in an exclusive sense.

This name for the evil one would have made a specially strong impact in the first century, for there was a well-known and well-hated figure called the *delator*, the paid

informer. He made his living by accusing people before the authorities. It is not a large step from 'accuser' to 'slanderer' and thus 'the satan' is not infrequently called 'the devil'. In addition to accusing and slandering, the evil one deceives and John brings out the scope of this activity by saying that he *leads the whole world astray*. Barclay comments, 'Satan, as it has been put, stands for the sleepless vigilance of evil against good.' John repeats the information that Satan was cast out, this time adding his destination, *to the earth* (cf. Luke 10:18; John 12:31), and the fact that *his angels* were cast out *with him*.

10. John hears yet another *loud voice* and again the speaker is not named. But the plural *our* shows that it comes not from an individual but from a group. *Our brothers* leads some to conclude that they are not angels. This, however, does not follow, for angels can call men brothers (22:9). It seems probable that here angels are meant. But the point is not really important. The words are a song of triumph. The co-ordination of *the salvation, the power, the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ* makes a very impressive list. *Power (exousia)* means 'authority' rather than 'physical power' (as it does in 9:3, 10, 19). *His Christ* emphasizes the complete sovereignty of God, but at the same time puts the Saviour in the closest connection with the Father.

The reason for the song of triumph is that Satan has been overthrown. He is *the accuser of our brothers* and that he has been busy comes out in the words *who accuses them before our God day and night*. The picture is one of implacable hostility on the part of Satan as well as of the complete triumph of God. Satan urged the sins of the *brothers* in the highest court. But now he has been overthrown and is completely powerless against them. Christians accordingly are not working towards victory, but from a victory already achieved (Bewes, p. 66).

11. It can be said that *they overcame him*, where the emphatic pronoun puts stress on the fact that *they* did this and the aorist tense on the completeness of the victory. But the martyrs did not win their triumph themselves. They overcame *by the blood of the Lamb*. What the Lamb has done avails for his followers. With this is linked *the word of their testimony*, for the redeemed bear their witness to their Redeemer. To give way in the face of persecution is to fall away from Christ and to lose everything, but to stand firm means final victory over Satan. That John has the martyrs in mind is clear from the words *they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death*. But the same quality of devotion is required from all the followers of the Lamb (cf. Luke 14:26; John 12:25).

12. Because of what Christ has done, and because his victory extends to the 'brothers', the voice calls on the *heavens* and those who live there to be merry (*ouranos*, 'heaven' is found fifty-two times in Revelation, but this is the sole occurrence of the plural; it is not easy to see why). The verb *dwell (skenoō) originally meant temporary dwelling (living in a tent, skēnē), but plainly it has lost all such sense here. It means a permanent home. While the rejoicing is called for from the inhabitants of heaven, it is plain that people on earth can rejoice too. Their citizenship is in heaven. And, though they suffer grievous troubles on earth, they are assured that these are temporary and that already the triumph is being*

savoured in heaven. But for now there is *woe* for them on *earth* and *sea*. The devil has come down to them in great anger, knowing that he has only a little time, the time that remains before the second advent. *Time* is *kairos*, perhaps used here in the sense 'a suitable time' (cf. 1:3; 11:18). Not much time remains suitable for the activities of the evil one. The troubles of the persecuted righteous arise not because Satan is too strong, but because he is beaten. He is doing all the harm he can while he can. But he will not be able to do this for much longer.

c. War between Satan and the woman and her son (12:13–17)

Satan's persistent hostility towards the people of God is developed. Since the Man Child is safe from his hostility, Satan turns his attention to the woman and the rest of her children.

13. The 'war in heaven' (v. 7) appears to be an attempt to destroy the Man Child. Baulked in that attempt *the dragon* turns his attention to the mother. The persecution of the church is not primarily of human origin; it is Satan's reaction to his defeat in heaven. Since his activities must now be confined to earth, he hits out against those associated with his conqueror.

14. To *the woman* were given (it is not said by whom) *the two wings of a great eagle*, which probably indicates ease and speed of flight. The woman was able to flee into the wilderness (*desert*; cf. v. 6), to *the place prepared for her*. The wilderness is the opposite of 'the great city' which is 'Sodom and Egypt' (11:8) and which always opposes God and God's people. In the days of old, God's people escaped from Egypt into the wilderness, and symbolism from Egypt is in mind throughout this chapter. Physically the members of the church live in the world, the great city. But they do not belong to it; their true home and their sure refuge is far from the great city, i.e. in the wilderness.

The eagle's wings call to mind the word of God to his people, 'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself' (Exod. 19:4; cf. Deut. 32:11; Isa. 40:31). The woman is to *be taken care of*, though it is not said by whom. That God provides for her is important, the agent he employs is not. For a *time, times and half a time* see note on 11:2; here the forty-two months may contain an allusion to the forty-two stages in the wilderness wanderings (Num. 33:5ff.). During this period the woman is secure in her hiding place and inaccessible to Satan. He is now called *the serpent* but there appears no real difference from 'the dragon' (v. 13).

15. It is not clear whether the events of this verse follow those of the preceding or whether they are given as an example of the protection afforded the woman. But *the serpent* adopted a novel method of trying to drown her or at least carry her off. He ejected water from his mouth *like a river* so that she might become 'riverborne' (*potamophorēton*). This descriptive word is found in a papyrus of 110 BC (MM) and is thus not a coinage of the Seer. But no other example appears to be cited of its use of a person. Swete sees in the figure 'the thought of the godly wrestling with a flood of evil'. This thought may well be

present as also a reference to Egypt again, for as they escaped from that land the people of God were in danger from water.

16. The woman found an unexpected ally in the earth, which swallowed the river emitted by the dragon. Ancient literature does not afford an exact parallel, though some remind us that rivers were known to plunge beneath the earth (there was one near Colosse). More apposite is the song of Moses, 'You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed them' (Exod. 15:12). In time of difficulty the Lord delivers his servants in one way or another. Some commentators hold that John means that in the natural moral order established on earth there is that which helps the Christian church. This is an unlikely interpretation, for in this book the world and the church are set over against one another. Those outside the church do not help it but persecute it. The church's help comes from God.

17. The woman not being vulnerable to his attacks, the *dragon* proceeded to vent his rage on the remainder of her offspring (cf. Gen. 3:15). These are further explained as *those who obey God's commandments* (cf. 14:12) and *hold to the testimony of Jesus* (see note on 1:2). Satan is at war with all Christians. He is not able to accomplish his purpose against God and therefore he does what he can in opposing God's people.²

REVELATION 12:1-6

The Woman and the Dragon

I once attended a memorial service for a famous sportsman, a cricketer who had been a boyhood hero for me and for many others. The church was packed, and a special place was reserved for other cricketers who had played with or against the great man and who had come to pay their respects. I was standing near the door when these other cricketers, a few dozen of them, walked in—and it was a very frustrating moment. Most of them, without a doubt, had also been household names. But for me and many others who were there, it was impossible to identify most of them. We remembered how they looked in their sporting prime, in their teens, twenties and thirties. Now, in their sixties, seventies and in some case eighties, they were unrecognizable. Several of us agreed afterwards that we wished they could have worn little labels with their names on, so that the rest of us would know who we were looking at. We might even have asked for their autographs.

That problem of identification is, of course, the problem which we face in chapter after chapter of Revelation. We see these characters come and go across the pages. We know that

² Morris, L. (1987). *Revelation: an introduction and commentary* (Vol. 20, pp. 152–160). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

there's a high probability that John intends them to represent, symbolically, some biblical theme or person, or (as in chapter 11) the corporate identity of God's people. But we wish he could have given them at least a little label, now and then, to give us a clue.

In the present chapter, there is one clue in particular which John has let slip, just in case we might have missed the point completely. The child whom the woman bears is the boy 'who is going to rule all the nations with a rod of iron' (verse 5). That is an obvious reference to Psalm 2:9. As we saw in the previous passage (11:18), John is applying that Psalm explicitly, as many other early Christians had done, to Jesus himself. He is the **Messiah**, the one whom God calls to bring the nations into line (even though we, with chapter 5 behind us, know that Jesus' own way of accomplishing that end is very different to that imagined by the violent Jewish nationalist movements of the time).

This small but vital clue has led some to suggest that the woman in the story is Mary, the mother of Jesus. But this is too hasty by far. That's not how this kind of symbolism works, and John tells us explicitly that she is a 'sign', not a literal mother. It is far more likely that two figures stand behind her. First, there is Israel herself, frequently in scripture referred to as 'daughter Israel', the bride of $\Upsilon\text{H}\text{W}\text{H}$. She is here seen not as the faithless Israel rebuked so often by the prophets, but as the true, faithful Israel, the nation that had struggled to stay in God's path and follow his vocation. It is from this faithful Israel, admittedly ultimately through the 'virgin daughter of Israel', Mary herself, that the Messiah is born. But this woman, who now takes centre stage in God's purposes for his world, is the 'priestly **kingdom**, holy nation' of Exodus 19:6. She represents the entire story of God's people, chosen to carry forward his plans for the nations and indeed for the whole creation. That is why the sun, moon and stars form her robe, her footstool and her crown.

That is why, too, the forces that range themselves against the creator God are determined to strike at her, and at her child. Finally, with a swish of his majestic tail, the villain appears on stage—the villain who, we quickly learn, stands behind all the trouble that we have seen in the earlier chapters. The dark secret is revealed; the real problem is identified; the curtain has risen on the drama-within-the-drama, the central action which forms, now, the central scene in the whole book. The woman and her child are carrying the purposes of God for the world. The dragon is doing his best to snuff out those purposes before they can get under way. With the unveiling of the **gospel** of the lion-lamb there goes, as well, the unveiling of the ultimate mystery of evil.

The second image behind the woman in this passage may well be Eve, the original mother of all human **life**. It is Eve, after all, who is told that her 'seed' will crush the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). The two identities go together. If the woman is 'Israel', she is for that reason the one in whom God's purposes for humanity are to be realized. And that purpose includes, as a central and necessary part of the agenda, the crushing of the ultimate power of evil. The destroyer is to be destroyed.

The dragon himself will be more fully revealed later on, when the mystery of his seven

heads and ten horns (imagery popular in Jewish thought from at least as far back as the book of Daniel) will be made clearer. But already we see that he is a figure of considerable power. He is himself, after all, 'in **heaven**' (verse 3). As in the Old Testament, 'the Adversary', the '**satan**' (for this is who he is, as we see in verse 9), is part of the heavenly court, who rebels against the creator's plans for his world. This is, to be sure, another great mystery. But the results of this rebellion are not in doubt: attacks from all sides on the people of God, in the years leading up to the birth of the Messiah, are followed, at that birth itself, by an attempted attack from the would-be 'king of the Jews', Herod (Matthew 2). The dragon is thwarted in his attempt to devour the child at birth. He is then further thwarted because, in a remarkable compression of the entire story of Jesus' life, the child is snatched away to God and his throne (verse 5). In other words, Jesus himself wins the victory through his death, **resurrection** and **ascension**, and is therefore no longer vulnerable to anything the dragon can do.

The woman, meanwhile—the faithful people of God—remains in danger. This, again, can scarcely refer to Mary, and at this point it can't refer, either, to the ethnic people of Israel. As is true all through the book, John believes that since Jesus is Israel's Messiah, Israel is redefined around him, so that the woman who flees to the desert to be looked after by God for a temporary period (three and a half years: 1,260 days) must be the church itself. Once more, John is telling a story in which his readers discover that they are not merely spectators but actually participants. They are part of the 'woman', part of the family who are to be looked after even though, as we shall see, the dragon is now pursuing them (12:13). The idea of the woman fleeing into the 'desert' is probably yet another reference to the **Exodus** story, where the people of Israel escape from the tyrant Pharaoh by going off into the wilderness, even though they have fresh challenges to face once they get there.

The stage is set. The Woman will be with us, in one way or another, right through to the end of the book, though there will be another Woman, a horrible caricature of this one, who will occupy plenty of attention along the way. The Dragon, too, will be with us much of the way, and part of the whole point of chapters 12–20 is to enable the church for whom John is writing to understand how he operates and how, therefore, his power must be overthrown. The church needs to know that its present struggles and sufferings are not a sign that God has gone to sleep on the job. They are the sign that a great, cosmic drama is being staged, in which they are being given a vital though terrible role to play.

REVELATION 12:7–18

The Dragon Is Angry

A happy argument took place in the changing-room after the end of the match. Who had scored the winning goal? There had been a big scramble in the goalmouth; the ball was bouncing to and fro; two of the attacking players had both swung a foot at it simultaneously. Both were aware of boot on ball, and the next second the ball was in the

net and the match won. So who scored the goal?

The manager overheard the discussion and came in with a different spin. ‘Actually’, he said, ‘I scored the goal.’ They rounded on him. ‘What d’you mean?’

‘Think about it’, he said. ‘I chose you both to play today. I taught the others how to get the ball up front in just that situation, and I taught you both how to get past the defenders and be there at the right moment. Without that, the goal wouldn’t have happened. I scored that goal.’

Eventually it went down on the sheet as credited to both the players, but the manager had made his point and they knew it. There are more levels than at first appear to the question of who won the decisive victory.

That’s the puzzle in this passage, because a decisive victory has been won, but it seems that two quite different groups of people have been involved in winning it. There is ‘war in **heaven**’—an alarming enough concept; Michael, the great archangel of Daniel 10, summons all his angels to fight against the dragon and his angels. If we are able to give this any meaning in our imaginations, it must be that the moral and political struggles of which we are aware, the battles between good and evil, between justice and injustice, which go on in this life, reflect a more primeval battle which has taken place in the spiritual sphere. Michael has won, and the dragon has lost. This loss means that he is thrown down to the earth, ejected from heaven altogether.

But wait a minute. The song of victory which follows this great event gives credit for the victory, not to Michael, but to God’s people on earth. ‘They conquered him’, says the loud voice from heaven, ‘by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony, because they did not love their lives unto death’ (verse 11). So who defeated the dragon? Was it Michael, or was it the martyrs?

Well, in a sense it was both. The heavenly reality of the victorious battle is umbilically joined to the earthly reality of the martyrs’ deaths. As followers of the lamb, they believe that they have already been saved by his blood, and that his self-giving to death is the pattern which they must now follow. And that is what wins the battle.

The dragon is, after all, ‘the **accuser**’. The early church learned to see this supernatural ‘accusing’ activity standing not far behind all the ‘accusations’ that were levelled against them. Such accusations included both the informal ones, whispered by their critical neighbours, wondering why these people weren’t joining in with the usual pagan festivities, especially the imperial religion; and the more formal ones, brought by the authorities, and carrying an official penalty, often death. All sorts of slanders and lies were told about the early church. The Christians learned to see them for what they were: accusations from ‘the father of lies’ (John 8:44).

Once again John is positioning his hearers on the map of the great cosmic drama. They

are to know, and celebrate, the great victory which has already been won: ‘the accuser’ has no place any more in heaven, because the death of Jesus (who claimed in Luke 10:18 that he had seen the **satan** fall like lightning from heaven) has nullified the charges which the celestial Director of Prosecutions would otherwise bring. But he will do his best, in the time remaining, to attack the woman who has fled to the wilderness, even though, as in Exodus 19:4, God has given her eagles’ wings so that she could fly away.

What follows only just avoids descending into a comic-strip cosmic car chase. The dragon spits out a jet of water like a river to carry the woman off; the earth opens its mouth to swallow up the river; the woman escapes; and the dragon, angry, turns his attention elsewhere—precisely to the woman’s ‘children’, further defined as ‘those who keep God’s commands and the testimony of Jesus’. In other words, once again, you too (John is saying to his readers) are part of this drama. Don’t be surprised that the dragon is out to get you, with more of his foul but powerful accusations, spat out like a flood. Trust that the God of creation will look after you. (It’s fascinating that it is the *earth* that comes to the woman’s rescue; creation itself is shown to be on the side of God and his people, rather than working alongside the dragon.)

You must expect, though, that more is to come: more persecution, more attacks, more false accusations. ‘Woe to the earth and the sea’ (verse 12) ‘because the devil has come down to you in great anger, knowing that he only has a short time.’ The decisive battle has been won, and the devil knows it; but his basic nature of ‘accuser’ is now driving him, more and more frantically, to the attack, to accuse where it’s justified and where it isn’t, to drag down, to slander, to vilify, to deny the truth of what the creator God and his son, the lamb, have accomplished and are accomplishing. This is the ongoing battle in which all Christians are engaged, whether they know it or not.

The picture John has sketched in this chapter, to encourage and warn his readers and all those who, even today, read his book, is just the opening scene. More is to come. The dragon ends up standing on the sand beside the sea. And the sea, as all ancient Jews knew, was the dark place out of which monsters might emerge.³

³ Wright, T. (2011). *Revelation for Everyone* (pp. 106–113). London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox.