

WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

THE DRAGON, THE WOMAN, AND THE MESSIANIC CHILD: 12:1-17

The next four chapters form another interlude before John again addresses the judgments in the form of the bowl-cups of wrath. In these chapters, the focus is upon the anti-God forces in opposition to the people of God who must face them. John already has alluded to the fact that the close of the age will see an intense persecution of God's people (6:11; 7:13-14; 11:7-10). Now he takes up this theme in detail to describe just how this persecution will arise.

Chapters 12 and 13 are dominated by four figures, the woman, the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. Here the Revelation reaches the height of the apocalyptic genre, for the visions describe the deadly struggle between the people of God and the powers of Satan. The early church would have seen in these visions a reflection of their own struggle against imperial Rome, which for them epitomized the forces of evil arrayed against the church. Yet the vision is put forth in the imagery of the end of the age, and this sort of imagery is, as we have noted, quite characteristic of apocalyptic.

The Woman (12:1-2)

Chapter 12 uses an internationally known symbol from the ancient world to depict the struggle between the people of God and the powers of evil. An almost universally known myth in ancient times was the picture of a dragon prepared to harm the soon-to-be-born son of a pregnant woman. It is to be found in the mythology of Greece, and even further back, in the mythology of Mesopotamia and Egypt.¹ Two things should be noted in this regard.

First, though John's imagery parallels the ancient myths, it would be going too far to say that he approved of the ancient cultures or religions in which these myths arose. Rather, as a creative writer he made use of an international symbol in order to communicate effectively, much like today one might refer to an "Achilles heel" or a "Trojan horse."

Examples of References to the Dragon in other Ancient Near Eastern Literature

"Because you smote Leviathan, the twisting serpent, (and) made an end of the crooked serpent, the tyrant with seven heads, the skies will become hot (and) will shine."

Keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit 1.5.1.1

"Surely I lifted up the dragon...[and] smote the crooked serpent, the tyrant with the seven heads."

Keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit 1.3.III.40-42

In Mesopotamian literature, the defeat of Leviathan is credited to Anat or Baal in the ancient past. In the Bible, of course, it is credited to Yahweh but in the indeterminate future (Isa. 27:1).

Second, John's primary source is doubtless the Old Testament itself, which also draws from the common mythological symbolism of the ancient world. It is the Old Testament that depicts the people of God as like a pregnant woman struggling to give birth to the messianic people and the messianic age (Isa. 26:17-18; 66:7-13; Mic. 5:2-4). For Israel, the exile was like a woman in birthing labor who longed for freedom and release (Mic. 4:10-12). The barrenness of God's people in exile would be reversed when, like a wife returned to her

¹ G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Revelation of John [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 191-197.

husband, they would give birth to the ongoing messianic community (Isa. 54). Furthermore, it is the Old Testament which develops the symbolism of the dragon as the arch opponent of God. At the dawn of creation and at the Red Sea, Yahweh subdued the primeval dragon-monster (Ps. 74:12-14; 89:9-10; Isa. 51:9-10; Job 9:13; 26:12). It will be Yahweh who will utterly defeat this dragon at the end of the world (Isa. 27:1).

Against this background John paints the picture of the woman, the child, and the dragon. To make her identity unmistakable, he alludes to the dream of Joseph (Ge. 37:9; cf. Testament of Naphtali 5:1ff.) by describing her as associated with the sun, moon, and stars, the imagery of the chosen people of God. The woman is the “mother” of the Messiah, and this being so, some interpreters have thought her to represent either Mary, Israel, or the Church. The interpretation that she is Mary fits awkwardly with the remainder of the passage (e.g., 12:6, 13-16). The interpretation that she represents the people of God is more plausible. If it is Israel, it is the Israel of faith, which includes all the people of faith, not merely the Jews of the Old Testament. If it is the Church, it should be understood in the broader sense so that the woman embraces all the people of God, including the Old Testament people of God. There is every reason to see a firm continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God in the New Testament.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Dispensationalists interpret the woman as referring to Old Testament Israel, and her offspring as those Jews coming to faith during the Great Tribulation. Non-Dispensationalists interpret her as referring to the true Israel, made up of both Jew and Gentile. Do the terms “our brothers” (12:10) and “those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (12:17) and those who overcome “by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony” (12:11) shed any light on this discussion?*

The Dragon (12:3-4)

John uses the dragon imagery to represent the powers of evil which sought to devour the Messiah as soon as he was born. Such opposition recalls Herod’s slaughter of the innocents (Mt. 2:16-18). Later, John will specifically identify the dragon as Satan (12:9). The dragon is pictured with seven crowned heads and ten horns, and this description helps to solidify the direct connection between the dragon and the beast to be described later (13:1). If the number seven has its usual symbolic meaning, then the seven crowned heads represent the fullness of evil political power in the world system. In the ancient Babylonian myth, Leviathan, the



This incised Sumerian shell (ca. 2600 BC) depicts Leviathan, the seven-headed monster, who confronts a hero or a god. The dragon goes by various names in ancient literature, such as, Leviathan, Behemoth, Rahab, Tannin, Yam, Nahar, Tiamat, and Nahash. Note, especially, that one of the seven heads has been wounded, a feature that John will use later (13:3).

dragon-monster, is depicted as a tyrant with seven heads. John will later address the crowned heads in more detail as they relate specifically to the beast (17:9-11).

Horns symbolize centers of power, especially political power (cf. Zec. 1:18-21). In apocalyptic literature, sometimes they may refer to nations, sometimes to individual rulers, and sometimes to both, moving fluidly from one to the other. This imagery of ten horns draws from the visions of Daniel as he surveyed the future of world history. In Daniel's vision, the ten horns represented ten kings. John does not here give any additional information about the identity of the ten horns, but later he will address them (17:12-14)

The dragon's tail swept the sky, flinging a third of the stars to the earth. This picture, also, draws from Babylonian mythology in which Tiamat, the seven-headed monster of the sea, threatened the gods and threw down a third of the stars of heaven in a frightful flexing of her muscles. It is from this passage in the Book of Revelation that the notion is derived that a third of the angels joined Satan's rebellion against God in the beginning and fell with him (12:4, 9). Such might be the intended meaning, but other interpreters link the expulsion of Satan with Jesus' victory over death in the cross and resurrection (Jn. 12:31; 16:11), or else, something yet to happen in the future near the end of the age. In any case, the stated goal of the dragon-monster is to destroy the Messianic child.

PSALM 2 IN EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Psalm 2 describes Yahweh's anointed Son, and it likely was used as a coronation piece for the kings in David's dynasty. Among early Christians, this psalm was used to identify and explain the person, life, and meaning of Jesus. The acclamation "you are my Son" (2:7) is directly captured in the words of God, the Father, at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration (Mk. 1:11; 9:7; cf. 2 Pet. 1:17-18). When the early church faced persecution, it was to this psalm that they turned with its language of the raging of earthly kings against the Messiah (Ac. 4:25-26). Paul quotes from this psalm in a sermon to underscore the truth of Jesus' resurrection (Ac. 13:32-33).

The Messianic Child (12:5)

The woman gave birth to a son who would rule the nations. The description is drawn from Ps. 2:7-9, where the King of Zion is given dominion over the nations of the world so that he might rule them with a rod of iron. John has used this imagery previously in asserting that God's people will share in the ruling privileges of Jesus the Messiah (2:27; cf. 3:21). In his description of the Messianic Son, John only includes the beginning and ending points of Jesus' earthly existence, his birth and ascension, but these events effectively include the entirety of Jesus' life, which the early Christians would have known well.

The Flight of the Woman (12:6)

The flight of the woman into the desert after the ascension of Christ describes the period of the tribulation. The whole age of the church is not envisioned, and there is no reason to believe that John even conceived of it stretching ahead for hundreds of years. Rather, John moves immediately to the next known event in the purpose of God for his people, the period of great tribulation just prior to the end of the

age. The time period described here coincides exactly with the prophecy of the two witnesses, who represent the people of God in their final testimony to the world (11:3). The woman, who also represents the people of God, shall be protected during this terrible period (7:3-4; 9:4; 11:5-6), though at the end of it, the powers of evil shall temporarily prevail (6:11; 11:7-10; 13:7-10, 15; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2).

The flight into the desert draws from the memory of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, where she was protected by God until her final entry into the land of promise (Dt. 8:2-5). In 12:13ff. John will further elaborate on the wilderness experience of the church in the tribulation.

The War in Heaven (12:7-12)

There are several ways in which the heavenly war is interpreted. Some refer it back to the very beginning of time and regard it as a cosmic battle shortly after the fall of Satan.² Others see it as a symbolic battle representing Christ's victory in the cross and resurrection (cf. Jn. 12:31). Still others see it as a sort of "last ditch effort" on the part of Satan at the end of the world, a conflict of which there is a hint in Daniel 12:1. Finally, there are those who feel that it should be kept free from time considerations altogether and interpreted as symbolic and mythological (cf. Lk. 10:18). Any of these views are sensible, and the biblical information is scant enough to prohibit a firm conclusion. Probably, the fact of the conflict is more important than its time. In any case, the point which John derives from the heavenly war is that the devil and his minions will attempt to wreak vengeance upon God's people (12:12-13). As such, John sets the stage for the massive persecution of the church.

Before John describes this terrible persecution, however, he pauses to announce the victory of God's people and the triumph of God's kingdom. This announcement is proleptic and anticipates the impending final consummation. In the announcement, which is poetic and probably hymnic, John again draws from the opening lines of Psalm 2 in referring to "God... and his Christ [Messiah]" (cf. 11:15). His description of the dragon is taken from the Old Testament imagery of the accuser (Job 1:9-11; 2:4-5; Zec. 3:1). The salvation of God's people, here referring to their final victory, is accomplished through the shed blood of Jesus and their faithfulness to the Christian gospel. The overthrow of Satan, however, is not his final destruction. He still wields great power in the earth. Only those in heaven are completely safe from his evil intent.

The Dragon Pursues the Woman (12:13--13:1a):

John has now set the stage for his description of the terrible persecution of the church. The dragon will seek to vent his anger upon God's people, but they shall be protected by God for three and a half years (12:6). The imagery of the flight into the desert recalls the exodus from Egypt in which God bore Israel through the desert "on eagles' wings" (Ex. 19:4). The torrent of water designed to destroy the woman draws upon the memory of the Red Sea and the mythological dragon-monster whom God subdued there (Isa. 51:9-10). Finally, the dragon stood upon the seashore so as to call forth the beast from the sea, the terrible instrument of his revenge upon the church.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Do you find it surprising that the Bible contains stock imagery, such as, the woman and the dragon, which were well-known in the ancient world?*
- *What might the vision of Satan's expulsion from the heavens and his consequent rage have said to Christians near the end of the 1st century?*

² Of this view, however, it may be said that those who prefer it seem to derive more from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Dante's *Inferno* than from the Bible.