
Into Thy Word Bible Study in Revelation

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Revelation 12:1-6: “The Women and the Dragon”

General idea: John now sees a most significant event as a woman clothed in the brightness of the sun is standing on the moon and wearing a crown of stars; she is pregnant and in the pains of labor. Then, he sees a large, red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, wearing seven crowns. This dragon strikes down one third of the stars and throws them to earth, desiring to devour the baby to whom the woman is giving birth. The woman gives birth to the child who is to lead all nations, and he is taken away by God so the dragon cannot get him. The woman flees to the wilderness where she is cared for by God for a time.

Vs. 1-6: This passage is written in the style of a Greek play depicting the mythology of the Greek gods such as the struggle of *Leto* giving birth to *Apollo* and *Python* and the Egyptian account of their gods *Isis* and *Typhon* as she gave birth to *Horus*. John is using Jewish *apocalyptic* language. Understanding the literature and metaphors—what the First Century Jew saw—gives us a richer meaning of what the text (God) is seeking to communicate with us today. John uses this captivating style to show the struggle as God gives birth to Israel, Israel giving birth to Jesus, while Jesus is being opposed by Satan. This section also starts the “Third Cycle” of John’s Revelations/visions (Rev. 12:1-14:20). These images deal with spiritual warfare, the conflict of good and evil, of light and dark, rooted in history and with ramifications for the future. These passages also deal with symbolism that is deeply rooted in Judaism as well as the plan and work of our Lord and the heralding of His Second Coming. The application is our being and remaining faithful to our Lord and continuing our witness and maintaining character in the midst of persecutions. We are also called to bear Fruit in and with His light as His witnesses against the dark forces, to a corrupt and conflict-ridden world with all its trappings of contradictions and confusion (Eph. 6:10-20).

- *Sign.* Usually means something seen in the sky or an astronomical event. Here, it is an illustration, conveying an event that is unexpected and astonishing. As with most symbols and metaphors in Scripture, it is an expression with the intention of pointing to something beyond it (Luke 21:11, 25; Acts 2:19).
- *A woman.* refers to righteousness and motherhood (as Israel is portrayed as mother to the race), faith, and to the Christ. It is possibly a reference to “The Madonna,” Mary, the mother of Jesus. It was a very powerful symbolic image in ancient cultures, especially Judaism. This would have been a comfort to the struggling Messianic community. Classically, some, especially the Catholics, see this as Mary and the drama of the incarnation of Christ prior to His arrival on earth. (It is interesting to note that the *Christian Scientists* see

this woman, her spirit, as the founder of their cult.) Is. 62:5.

- *Clothed*. Referring to dignity and exalted Israel, or, to God's glory.
- *Sun, with the moon*. These are Jewish references to Abraham and Sarah, referring to the birth of the people of Israel, their hope, and blessings to come.
- *Twelve stars*. This is a symbol of the 12 tribes of Israel and refers to Joseph's dreams. In conjunction with the woman and context, it is clearly referencing Israel. Some see this as satan's rebellion (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6). This term or passage has nothing to do with astrology or the zodiac, other than it uses similar imagery for illustration sake but not as substance (Gen. 37:9-10; Lev. 19:26-28, 31; 20:6; Deut 18:9-14; Is. 8:19; 47:12-13; Jer. 10:1-2).
- *Pregnant*. In contrast, a virgin meant someone who is faithful, and a prostitute meant someone who is pregnant and not married, denoting unfaithfulness. This is meant to contrast the heavenly with the evil, faithful and heavenly Jerusalem versus the harlot and oppressor Babylon, reviled in Israel for its destruction of the Temple, the theft of the Ark, and the captivity of the people (Is. 7:14; 9:6; 26:18-19; 54:1; Micah 5:3; John 16:21; Rev. 17:5; 21:2).
- *Pain*. As in struggle, good versus evil, our will versus God's will, satan's opportunist ways versus God and the righteous people of faith. This can also mean the suffering of waiting for the Messiah to come and/or waiting for the second coming.
- *Give birth* refers to the birth of the Messiah; it also denotes being saved, either as faithfulness, or being saved by Christ. It also meant for Jews, the captives of Babylon, traveling back to Israel to rebirth the nation and Jerusalem (Is. 54:1-4; 66:7-13; Micah 4:10; 5:2-3; Rev. 12:17).
- *Red dragon*.... The term "dragon" literally means "serpent" or "sea monster" such as the *leviathan*, and symbolizes monstrous evil (common in Canaanite and Mesopotamian myths), and Heracles and his battle with the *hydra*. A dragon is also a description of satan who is the enemy of God, who is a terrifying and destructive beast, and who seeks the total devastation of God's people. This image is not meant to terrify us, but show us how he works so we can beware and defend. This was also a metaphor for Babylon and the enemies of Israel and God. It is very unwise to read in meanings that are not there to this and other metaphors (apocryphal book "Bell and the Dragon;" Gen. 3:1-15; Psalm 74:13-15; 89:9-10; Is. 27:1; 30:7; 51:9; Ezek. 29:3; Luke 10:18; 11:14-23; John 12:31; Col. 2:15; Rev. 12:7-9; 13:2; 20:2).
- *Seven heads*. This represents domination, and also refers to astuteness and universal wisdom (Rev. 13:1).

- *Ten horns and seven crowns* is the image of great power as well as battle and warfare, depicting how satan rises up to battle God, but he is sent to everlasting torment in Rev. 20:10!
- *Tail swept a third of the stars* is a Jewish metaphor for the power of Heaven fighting on behalf of Israel. This also meant pouring rain and rebellion. This also referred to satan's betrayal and rebellion and the fall of 1/3 of the angels under him. This metaphor also meant to sin or to fall into sin and be corrupted. For us, it can mean the rebellion against Christ (Judges 5:20; Is. 24:21; Dan. 12:3; Rev. 8:10).
- *He might devour her child.* Satan was unable to prevent Christ's incarnation and redemption, thus, he seeks to manipulate and destroy His followers (Matt. 2:13-18; Luke 4:28-29).
- *Gave birth ...a son.* Referring to deliverance, this metaphor also pointed to Augustus in Greek thought, and to a *savior* in Judaism and early Christianity. This theme was a great comfort to the early persecuted Church. This, in the early Church, referred to the Messianic enthronement of Jesus Christ, His birth, death, resurrection, and Lordship (John 16:21).
- *A male child.* This is a perhaps a recoding of the fulfillment of Micah 5:3: *Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.* It refers to Christ's incarnation, His role as Messiah and Savior, and how His triumph and accomplishments certify this fact (Is. 7:14; 9:6). As Jesus' words state, *how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks* (Matt. 23:37-39).
- *Rule all the nations... Iron scepter.* Meaning the coronation of a divine leader who will conquer evil. This doesn't mean oppression or dictatorship; rather, it refers to a caring shepherd, and at the same time, God's strength, authority, and right to rule (Rev. 2:27; 11:15; 19:15).
- *Child was snatched up to God.* May refer to the ascension of Christ. In Greek myths, children were taken and hidden from their enemy until they were old enough, trained to defend themselves, and could go after their oppressors. The image here is that our God protects, and desires us to mature, be trained up, and be ready to defend (Psalm 2:6-9; Is. 9:6-7; Micah 5:3; Acts 1:9; 2:33; Heb. 1:1-3; 12:2).
- *Desert/Wilderness* means "spiritual refuge," and refers to how the people of God, after the Exodus, wandered for 40 years, their faithfulness and betrayal, and the grace of God. Also, their waiting for their inheritance of the Promised Land. In the Early Church, this was referred to as the period between Jesus'

first coming and His second coming. The Jews were expecting a deliverance from the Romans by a second Exodus (Hosea 2:14).

- *Taken care of* means spiritual protection, as God promises His protection to a persecuted Church (Rev.13:5).
- *1,260 days* perhaps refers to the great tribulation of Daniel, but more likely is a metaphor for trials and troubles. This does not mean a literal number but a type of trouble such as persecution (Dan. 9:2-24; Rev. 11:2).

In this passage, we see God, who cares and protects, and satan, who seeks to destroy. We see God, who sends a good King, and satan, who seeks to kill that King so he can be a bad king. This passage is very clear in its Jewish imagery as it is reminiscent of the struggle of satan who refuses to submit before God, who seeks to usurp God's rule and plan, who desires to influence and control the world for evil, and who hates righteousness and all things of God. This is also a picture of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ who comes to earth as a child; satan vehemently seeks to prevent His birth and destroy His redemptive plan and work. The woman is often seen as Israel who is called to mother and birth righteousness and be the example of God to the world (Psalm 2:9-12).

In this passage, we also see God, who deeply loves us and has a plan, even against the most heinous evil powers, persecutions, and disruptions of liberty and life. God is in control! As a Christian, we are a deeply and truly loved child of God; we are accepted in Him and we have a plan that is in Him; thus, we have no need or reason to freak, fear, or to stress, for He is in control and is Sovereign. Satan cannot buffet against Him nor can he buffet against us when we are in Christ.

The Preterist view: There are two prevailing views in the veracity of this passage. One sees it as the continual destruction of Jerusalem; Babylon represents Jerusalem as viewed from the throne room of God, while the Church is in conflict with worldly principles. The other view sees Babylon as Rome, the great persecutor of the saints, while the judgments still wage against Jerusalem. The woman is seen as the faithful Jews escaping Jerusalem. The Dragon is the beast from Daniel representing Old Testament Babylon. The birth of the child is seen as the birth of the Church, not the birth, life, or work of Christ. The *Desert* is the Jews' escape, prior to the destruction. Others see this passage as the miracle of the safety of the Christians who all escaped the fall of Jerusalem.

The Futurist view: They see this passage as the middle of the Great Tribulation where the antichrist breaks his contact with Israel, shuts down the Temple, and becomes the "abomination of desolation" in Matthew 24. (However, this is not from the text, but speculation.) Others in this camp see this as an interlude when God is giving other descriptions of important events prior to the great judgment or

outside of the timeline. The *woman* is seen by Catholics as Mary in her post-“assumption” (the Catholic view is that Mary is partially divine and exalted, because she is Mother of God, *was assumed body and soul into the glory of heaven.*) role. Others in this camp see her as representative of the Church, or people who are faithful, or the professing Church. *Male child* is seen as the promise to overcome, or the Church triumphant. Others see it as Jesus and His Jewish heritage. The *stars* are a reference to Joseph’s dreams; others see this as the holiness of Christ. Few in this camp see the *dragon* as Satan; rather, they see it as a metaphor for the Roman Empire or an incarnation of the Beast of Chapter 13. The *stars*, in reference to the Dragon, are not considered literal stars; rather, they are seen as perhaps asteroids, airplanes, a look back to Satan’s revolt against God, or the evil political forces of the day. *Devour* is seen as Satan’s failed attempt to stop Christ. (It is interesting to note that their theories are very contradictory of one another.) The *Desert* is seen as the persecution of the Jews in the last days (with great debate on how, when, and where they will be refuges to, and concerned only with their speculations about the text). *1,260 days* is seen as the last half of the Tribulation or the time of the persecution of the Jews. (It is amazing how one can read a passage and totally miss the point, or read in what one wants to see and ignore what is actually there.)

The Idealist view: They see this passage as a metaphor and story of the birth of Christ, the slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem, and the coming of His Kingdom and His ascension. Thus, this passage is not prophetic; rather, it deals with what has already taken place during our Lord’s life on earth and satan’s unsuccessful attempts to intervene and destroy Christ and His work. As with the Historicist view, the Idealists also see this passage as dealing with the internal affairs of the church and its struggle to stay faithful. The *woman* is faithful Israel, *stars* are Joseph’s dreams, the *labor* is the pains of the persecuted Church, The *dragon* is the evil political rulers, the *stars* are the rebellion of satan, and the *child* is Jesus, His birth, and the One who frustrates Satan’s plans. The *Desert* is God’s power, control, faithfulness, and care for the Church.

The Historicist view: They see this passage as another interlude to give us insights and information of events that have already taken place or covered prior in Revelation. Many see this as the struggle of the inward status and affairs of the church, its battle of inward corruption and missed opportunities and liberalism or apostate-ism, or becoming more secular and less spiritual. The *woman* is seen as the vision of the true and righteous Church, its promise, mission, and success. Giving *birth* is about the political struggles of the Church; the *sun* and *stars* are seen as the Romans and other outside influencers. *Male child* is seen as the children of the Church and the *dragon* is an image of Rome and/or satan or any persecutor. The *stars* are seen as the period of Rome in 313 A.D.—the great persecutions before the conversion of Rome. The *child was snatched up* is seen as the conversion of Rome in 324 A.D. and the *rod of iron* as the dominion of the Church afterwards.

The Essential Inductive Questions (for more Inductive questions see Inductive Bible Study):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me?
4. How am I encouraged and strengthened?
5. Is there sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
6. How can I be changed, so I can learn and grow?
7. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
8. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
9. What can I model and teach?
10. What does God want me to share with someone?

Additional Questions:

1. How would you react to an unexpected and astonishing astronomical event, such as a huge asteroid headed toward earth?
2. If you were to write a play about the drama of the incarnation of Christ, how would you do it? How do you see God in this passage?
3. What do you think the images in this text are, such as a large red dragon with seven heads and ten horns wearing seven crowns? Why do most Christians prefer to speculate instead of researching to see what these images meant to the original audience and language?
4. Why do you suppose John also uses the style of a Greek play and the mythology of the Greek gods?
5. How and why does understanding the literature and metaphors—what the 1st century Jew saw—gives us a richer meaning of what the text (God) is seeking to communicate with us today? What happens when we refuse to interpret Scripture in the light of its context and word meanings or see that some of these imageries are deeply rooted in Judaism? (Remember, we can disagree, but never divide over these non-essential issues, and always discuss in love and respect.)
6. Why does the Church struggle to stay faithful? What are the things that cloud our seeing His desire to lead His church in His precepts?
7. How can the fact that God deeply loves you and has a plan for everyone in your church help you better run His church His way?
8. How can you better feel and know that God is in control even against the

most heinous evil powers, persecutions, and disruptions of liberty and life?

9. How do you see the relevance of this passage to your life? How would you contrast Satan's opportunist ways versus God and the righteous people of faith?
10. Jesus said, *how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks*. What does it mean to your spiritual growth that He is a caring Shepherd, and at the same time He has the strength, authority, and right to rule? He is not a mean oppressor or a dictator; thus, what is Jesus to you? What are you going to do about the fact that He desires for you to mature, be trained up, and be ready to defend yourself? What would your life and church look like if more people were doing this?
11. How can you be better at remaining faithful to our Lord and continue your witness with character in the midst of the stresses of life? What about if things get real bad, such as persecution?
12. Since we are also called to bear Fruit and operate with His light as His witness, how can you better stand against dark forces for a corrupt and conflict-ridden world with all its trappings of contradiction and confusion?