

SESSION 6

REVELATION 12:1-17

*The Woman and the Dragon***I. OVERVIEW**

Before advancing to the ultimate triumph, a parenthesis in thought is inserted in order to focus on the conflict between the forces of evil and the rule of God. From a literary standpoint, John is turning aside to explain the underlying cause for the hostility about to break upon believers. Mounce notes, "The stage is set for the final confrontation. Chapters 12–14 introduce the actors who play the major roles."¹

Obviously, God's dealings with the world are aimed at bringing Satan out into the open. He must be exposed, and his evil intentions must be revealed as deserving of the fullness of God's wrath. Thus, these three chapters highlight Satan and his agents, the Beast (Antichrist) and the False Prophet. They are the ones who lead the opposition to God and seek to lead mankind away from God.

II. INTERPRETATIVE DIFFICULTIES

The imagery of Rev 12 once again brings the interpreter to his toes. Fortunately, certain crucial aspects are explained (e.g., the dragon and the child); on the other hand, others remain vague (the woman, the wilderness, the offspring). The latter has resulted in wide-spread speculations. Alan Johnson, for instance, follows Caird, Farrar and Ford to understand the wilderness in a non-literal manner as "the place of safety, discipline, and testing."² Symbols are certainly employed, but they also represent literal truths. Furthermore, care needs to be taken that we do not abuse the presence of symbols by reading into them a meaning that the human author (and divine Author) did not intend for them to have. Even conservative scholars have been guilty of excessive allegorization regarding this chapter, and the student should be aware of this.

The time references in this chapter are also important to this discussion. Should they be taken literally or non-literally? I have observed that both Mounce and Johnson have taken the "3 1/2 year" references (42 months, 1260 days) in a non-literal manner. I feel that this issue needs to be addressed, because this contributes to other weaknesses in their interpretative schemes. Therefore, I will begin my approach to Rev 12 by defending a literal understanding of the time reference of 3 1/2 years.

A. The Time Period

The following temporal references are made in the text:

vs 6 "The woman fled into the wilderness . . . so that there she might be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days."

¹Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, 234.

²Alan Johnson, "Revelation," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 516.

vs 14 ". . . that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she was nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent."

Similar temporal references are made elsewhere in the book: "forty-two months" (Rev 11:2), "twelve hundred and sixty days" (Rev 11:3), and "forty-two months" (Rev 13:5).

Significantly, these are parallel to the temporal references in Daniel:

Dan 7:25 ". . . and they will be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time."

Dan 9:27 ". . . but in the middle of the week he will put a stop to sacrifice and grain offering" [the expression "week" in Daniel means 7 years].

Dan 12:7 ". . . it would be for a time, times, and half a time."

Dan 12:11 "And from the time that the regular sacrifice is abolished, and the abomination of desolation is set up, there will be 1290 days" (3 1/2 years plus 1 month).

The phrase "time, times and half a time" in Rev 12:14 is the same as the 1260 days of 12:6, as the parallel features clarify (a woman fleeing to the wilderness to be nourished). 1260 days is 3 1/2 years (based on a Jewish prophetic month of 30 days/month). This phrase "time, times and half a time" clearly alludes to the same phrase in Dan 7:25. In the Daniel 7 passage, the little horn is in view who arises prior to Messiah's kingdom (7:22) and takes command of the 10 kings. The context clearly portrays him as the latter-day Antichrist. Note Dan 7:25,

"And he will speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Highest One, and he will intend to make alterations in times and in law; and they will be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time."

The same expression is used in Dan 12:7, which in that context involves Israel's "time of distress" (Dan 12:1) from which the Jews are to be rescued. A close study of Daniel will reveal that the little horn in Dan 7 is the same as the "prince who is to come" of Dan 9:26-27. In Dan 9:27, he establishes a 7 year covenant with Israel, only to break it during the middle of this period. Thus, for the final 3 1/2 years, this prince will cause desolations upon the Jews and their city. This final "half week" is obviously parallel to the 3 1/2 years of Dan 7:25. Now, here is the point: the covenant of one "week" is part of Daniel's 70 week prophecy, where each "week" represented a period of 7 years. The first 69 weeks of years (483 years) leading up to Messiah's first advent and crucifixion were *literally fulfilled*. Hence, if the first 69 weeks were fulfilled as literal 7 year periods, does it not seem probable that the final week will also be a literal 7 year period? Therefore, from the breaking of the covenant (midpoint of the final week) until the destruction of "the prince who desolates" is 3 1/2 years (Dan 9:27). Because Dan 9 is parallel to Dan 7, the "time, times and half a time" of Dan 7:25 is also a literal 3 1/2 year period. Since Rev 12:6, 12:14 and 13:5 look back to Dan 7, they too should be taken literally!

The comparison above therefore demonstrates that the period during which the woman flees into the wilderness in Rev 12 is a literal 3 1/2 year period, during which the Antichrist (empowered by Satan) shall be persecuting the Jews. Mounce, however, takes the time reference as "a conventional symbol for a limited period of time during which evil would be allowed free reign" (221), and even equates this with the "times of the Gentiles" of Luke 21:24. This spiritualizing of the time period goes hand in hand with his interpretation of the woman as the church. Hence, the church throughout the ages (the times of the Gentiles) is nourished by God in the wilderness. This, too, is spiritualized to mean "God's place of spiritual refuge" (239). Yet the time reference (1260 days) cannot be a symbol of the entire

period between the ascension and the *parousia*, because Rev 13:5 indicates that it is in the time of Antichrist's reign, which is surely confined to the Tribulation of the future.

Alan Johnson has fallen into the same trap and comes up with the woman being the "new Israel" composed of both believing Jews and Gentiles (514), and the wilderness representing a place of "safety, discipline, and testing" but not a literal wilderness (516). He, too, began by departing from a literal understanding of the 42 months (503). This only entangles him in a very unnatural interpretation of the "woman's offspring" in Rev 12:17. Since he has already taken the woman to be the complete believing community of Jew and Gentile, who is left to be called "the rest of her offspring"? Johnson follows Swete and Caird in calling the woman "the believing community as a whole" and the offspring of the woman as the "individuals of the community" (519). This is irrational to me. If the believing community as a whole are protected in the "wilderness" from Satan's harm, how can certain individuals of that "whole" be persecuted by Satan at the same time?

I think these difficulties would be avoided by being careful in the interpretation of the 3 1/2 years. If this period is taken literally, then it would not make much sense for the wilderness to be spiritualized as a "spiritual refuge" or "God's activity of disciplining His people," for these are surely not confined to any 3 1/2 years of history. To view the 1260 days as a literal 3 1/2 year period would lead to viewing the wilderness literally. If the wilderness is taken literally, then the view of the woman being the "church" is also negated. If believers suffer immense persecution during the Antichrist's reign (13:7), how could the church be sheltered in a literal wilderness from Satan's harm for this crucial 3 1/2 years?

B. The Wilderness

To view the wilderness in a literal sense is also reasonable in light of other Scripture. Matt 24:15-22 reveals a "flight" of people that takes place during the tribulation (cf. Mk 13:14-22). This is to take place when the "abomination of desolation" is set up in the holy place (Matt 24:15). Although some (mistakenly) take this episode to refer to the abomination of the temple by the Romans in AD 70, this should properly be looked upon as still a future event: (1) the preceding verse establishes that this event is closely connected with "the end" (24:14); and (2) the flight resulting from this "abomination" occurs during "a great tribulation" (24:21). Toussaint remarks, "It may be concluded then that the abomination of desolation spoken of in Daniel's prophecy and referred to by Christ is an idol set up in the temple by the man of sin who is opposed to Jesus Christ."³

This is consistent with 2 Thess 2:4 which states that the Antichrist will "exalt himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God." Also, we are told in Rev 13:14-15 that an "image" of the Antichrist will be erected that is to be worshipped. I think it is very possible that this image of the beast will be the "abomination of desolation" spoken of in Matt 24:15. Regarding this episode in Matt 24, Toussaint concludes,

This future period of time will be inaugurated with the signing of the covenant by the nation Israel with the wicked prince that shall come. In the middle of the week, or after three and a half years, that wicked prince will cause the temple worship at Jerusalem to cease. At that time, the abomination of desolation will be introduced in the temple (274).

Therefore, after the image of the beast is set up right in the holy place of the Jewish temple, Jesus instructs his hearers to "leave town" . . . to get out of Jerusalem because of the horrible

³Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King; A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), 273.

difficulties that will take place there (cf. Zech 14:2). "Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation . . . then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains" (Matt 24:15-16). This scene takes place at the midpoint of the 7 years (comp. Dan 9:27; 12:11), which is in accord with the time references in Rev 12.

III. SELECTED COMMENTS

A. The Woman and the "Male Child" (Rev 12:1-6)

Now that the biblical background is established and this flight is seen to follow that horrible act whereby the image of the Antichrist is set up in the holy place of the temple to be worshipped, we can discuss the identity of the woman. Mounce calls her the "messianic community, the ideal Israel" while at the same time designating her "the church" (236). Alan Johnson also calls her "the believing covenant – messianic community" which includes "the church" (514).

These suggestions are improbable. The woman most likely is restricted to the Jewish nation or at least a Jewish element of it.⁴ If this flight in Rev 12:6 is correctly to be related to the flight pictured in Matthew 24, then those fleeing are Jewish: "let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains" (Matt 24:16). This is confirmed by the imagery associated with the woman in Rev 12:1 - "clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars." Undoubtedly, this is an allusion to Joseph's dream in Gen 37:9-10. The twelve stars represent each of Jacob's 12 sons who became the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel (which receive attention elsewhere in Rev—see 7:4-8; 21:12). The child (who is clearly Jesus—in light of 12:5 which pictures Him ruling with a rod of iron—cf. Rev 19:15; Ps 2:9) is also from Israel. Therefore, the most appropriate interpretation of the woman is a symbol (note 12:1 calling her a "sign") of either the Jewish nation or the believing remnant within the Jewish nation (cf. Rom 9:6).

At any rate, the whole nation of Israel will not flee to the wilderness, but only those who belong to Christ and are obedient to His instructions given in Matt 24. This will primarily involve the messianic Jews in the land of Israel. The bulk of the Jewish nation in the land will not flee, but will remain and eventually face incredible warfare and destruction (cf. Zech 12:2-3; 13:8; 14:2). Apparently the "two witnesses" mentioned in 11:3 remain in Jerusalem during this time.

Addendum: Do the words "caught up" in Rev 12:5 refer to the ascension of Christ or the rapture of the church?

The Greek word for caught up is ἀρπαζω, which is used in 1 Thess 4:17 of the rapture. However, it is used of other situations, including the Apostle Paul's being *caught up* to heaven in a vision (2 Cor 12:2,4). So, it is not a technical term for the rapture. Related to this problem is whether the "male child" is an individual or a corporate symbol. Contextually, he could be either, since the "woman" is a corporate symbol and the "dragon" is individual. Verse 4 seems to give us some resolution to the problem. Satan's

⁴ Take note of Rev 12:4-5 which states that "the woman" gave birth to a male son. The "woman" is surely the Jewish people, as the Apostle Paul affirms elsewhere—"from whom is the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom 9:5). She cannot represent all "the elect" of God (from both the OT and NT) or the Church, since there would be no explanation for "the rest of her offspring" in Rev 12:17. Furthermore, the "woman" cannot represent Mary: (1) the "woman" is a symbol according to Rev 12:1, not a literal individual; (2) she is nourished in the wilderness for 3 1/2 years (which connects her with the Tribulation); and (3) Satan is said to make war with the "rest of her offspring," (12:17), which would make no sense in relation to Mary.

desire to devour the child seems chronologically in close proximity to the incarnation. This would suggest that it is the ascension of Christ that is in view, not the rapture.

B. Heavenly Warfare and Satan's Expulsion (Rev 12:7-12)

The reference to Michael and his angels in 12:7 may be connected to Dan 12:1. In the Daniel passage, Michael is described as the great prince who stands guard over the Jewish people. He is said to "arise" in Dan 12:1, which may correspond to his warfare with Satan in Rev 12. Notice in Dan 12:1 that as soon as Michael "arises," there is said to be "a time of distress such as never occurred."

The war in heaven mentioned in Rev 12 must refer to a time in Daniel's 70th "week." First, the following reference in 12:11-12 to the martyrs and earthly woes must refer to events of the Tribulation. Second, the statement in Rev 12:12, "knowing that he has only a short time," implies a brief period of time he has remaining until he will be thrown into the abyss (Rev 20:1-3). Most likely, this war in heaven takes place at the mid-point of Daniel's 70th "week" (= 7 years). This probably explains why he is pursuing the woman into the wilderness. With little time remaining, he wants to "go all out" to persecute the woman and her offspring.

In Revelation, we see three steps to Satan's ultimate defeat: (1) he is expelled from heaven (probably 3 1/2 years before the Second Coming); (2) he is bound in the abyss for 1000 years (after Christ's return); and (3) he is eventually thrown into the Lake of Fire (after the Millennium and before the New Creation).

C. Satan's Persecution of the Woman and Her Offspring (Rev 12:13-17)

Although the believing portion of the Israelites in Judea flee to the wilderness for safety when the image of the Antichrist is erected in the temple, Satan still is able to harm other believers. This will probably be done through the agency of the Antichrist (Rev 13:7).

This group who is persecuted is called "the rest of her offspring" (12:17). There are three possibilities as to the identity of this group. One, this could be the believing Jews living elsewhere in the world, since the flight in Rev 12:6 is only a local situation in Israel. Two, this may look at Gentile believers as well. The word translated offspring is σπέρματος, often translated "seed." Christ acknowledged that even the unbelieving Jews were Abraham's seed by birth (Jn 8:37). In the epistles, this concept took on a more refined meaning. Christ is Abraham's seed (Gal 3:16). Consequently, those who are united with Christ become Abraham's seed, "heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:29). This latter reference pertained to even Gentiles who were believers in Christ. In this sense, Gentiles could be included in the "woman's offspring." Third, the "rest of her offspring" might be a specific reference to the 144,000 mentioned in Rev 7 (so Thomas, 2:142). Note that the terminology describing them is similar to Rev 14:12-13 and 20:4, where martyrs are described. Is this why they are standing with the Lamb on Mount Zion (Rev 14:1-5)?

Apparently the flight of the woman into the wilderness involves the believing Jews in the land of Israel who heed Jesus' warning in Mt 24:16 after the "abomination of desolation" has been set up. There is no hint in the text as to the location of "the wilderness," and it is best not to speculate. This flight takes place approximately 3 1/2 years (= 1260 days) before the Second Coming of Christ. During this time, these believers are "nourished." The word translated "nourished" is from the Greek word *trophō* (τρέφω), which in classical Greek meant "support" or "maintain." In the LXX, it sometimes meant "to keep alive" (see Gen 6:19; Is 7:21). Thus, the Lord supernaturally preserves and cares for them (recall God's supernatural *nourishment* of Elijah in 1 Kgs 19:1-8).

The flight is said in Rev 12:14 to be aided by "the two wings of the great eagle." This is obviously not literal, but rather an allusion to OT expressions. In Ex 19:4, similar imagery was used to describe God's supernatural deliverance of Israel from Egypt (cf. Deut 32:11). Likewise, Satan's attempt to "pour water like a river" after her probably draws on OT imagery. Perhaps, in light of Isa 8:7-8 (cf. Jer 47:2), this looks at an army raised up by Satan to pursue those who are fleeing. The "earth opening its mouth" would then suggest a *divine deliverance* paralleling what God supernaturally did for the Hebrews at the Red Sea—though in some different manner. The allusions to the literal flight from Egypt in earlier history tends to confirm that this "flight" of Rev 12 is also a literal one. When Satan cannot destroy those who flee to the wilderness—because God supernaturally aids them—he turns his attention to "the rest of her offspring" (possibly the 144,000?).

III. CONCLUSION

Before the midpoint of the 70th week of Daniel, there is an angelic war that occurs which results in Satan and his angels being thrown down to earth (they previously had access to both heaven and earth). At this point, Satan moves the Antichrist to break his covenant with Israel and put a halt to the regular sacrifice of the temple (Dan 9:27—which implies the Jews have rebuilt a temple). In its place, the Antichrist takes his seat in the temple demanding to be worshipped in place of YHWH Elohim. The image of the Antichrist is also erected in the holy place of the temple, and is to be worshipped. Upon seeing this "abomination," a multitude of Messianic Jews heed Jesus' warning to flee Jerusalem. They retreat to a "wilderness area" for the final 3 1/2 years of the tribulation where God protects and cares for them. God works a supernatural deliverance for them (just as He did for the Hebrews who fled Egypt). Satan is allowed, however, to harm "the rest of her offspring."

There is an historical prefiguration of this tribulation scene that took place in the 1st century shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. This is recorded in Eusebius III.V:

The whole body, however, of the church at Jerusalem, having been commanded by a divine revelation, given to men of approved piety there before the war, removed from the city, and dwelt at a certain town beyond the Jordan, called Pella. Here, those that believed in Christ, having removed from Jerusalem, as if holy men had entirely abandoned the royal city itself, and the whole land of Judea; the divine justice, for their crimes against Christ and his apostles, finally overtook them, totally destroying the whole generation of these evildoers from the earth.

A LESSON FOR OUR LIVES

Satan accuses us before God continually (Rev 12:10; cf. Job 1:9). God has totally forgiven us all our sins (Eph 4:32).