

The Woman, the Dragon, and the War in Heaven (Revelation 12:1-9)

When assembling a jigsaw puzzle it's always best to start with the border and the most obvious elements of the scene. When interpreting Revelation 12:1-9 it's best to start with the most obvious characters in the text. For example, the dragon in verse 3 is identified as Satan in verse 9. The male child in verse 5 is described as ruling the nations with an iron scepter, a clear reference to Jesus Christ when compared with Psalm 2:9, Revelation 2:27, and Revelation 19:15. With these pieces of the puzzle in place, the rest of Revelation 12:1-9 becomes easier to interpret. As a whole, this passage describes the ancient and future conflict between Satan, God, God's Son, and God's chosen people. In it we gain a heightened awareness of the spiritual battle and a stronger sense of Christ's victory. The Lamb is Lord!

A woman—God's chosen people are glorious in His sight (12:1-2).

This chapter begins with a sign in the form of a woman. This woman is glorious in appearance and she is expecting a child. Symbolically, this woman refers to the nation of Israel.

John saw a symbolic woman clothed with the sun, standing on the moon, and wearing a crown with twelve stars (12:1).

Verse 1 clearly states that this part of John's vision is a great sign, that is, something with great significance that's to be interpreted symbolically. It's best to interpret these passages literally unless there's good reason to interpret them as symbols. In this case, symbolism is clearly in view. John saw this vision in heaven, that is, from the vantage point of heaven even though the events take place on earth. In this vision John saw a woman. This woman was clothed with the sun. She had the moon beneath her feet and was wearing a crown consisting of twelve stars on her head. The immediate impression from this description is one of glorious splendor. But who is this woman? Because she gives birth to the Messiah (verse 5), some have taken her to be Mary the mother of Jesus. However, the woman also flees into the desert after the ascension of Jesus and is present in the future days leading up to the return of Christ. Therefore, a specific woman like Mary doesn't make for a satisfying interpretation. The woman symbolizes something else.

The imagery of the sun, moon, and stars is reminiscent of Joseph's dream about his father, mother, and brothers in Genesis 37:9-11—the progenitors of the nation of Israel. Furthermore, the Old Testament often describes Israel as a woman, the wife of Yahweh God (Isaiah 54:5-6; Jeremiah 31:31-32; Ezekiel 16:8; Hosea 2:16). In a national sense, Israel formed the ancestry of the Messiah, the male child born to this glorious woman. Taken together, these indicators point to the woman as a symbolic representation of the nation of Israel, God's chosen people. From the vantage point of heaven, Israel is glorious in God's sight. She wears the sun, symbolic of her radiant relationship to God (compare Revelation 1:16; 10:1). The moon upon which she stands may be symbolic of permanence or stability (compare Psalm 72:5; 89:37) as well as glory (1 Corinthians 15:41). The stars likewise reveal the glory of the Creator (1 Corinthians 15:41) and because there are twelve stars in the woman's crown these probably

symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel. The crown is that of one who has been victorious. In spite of Israel's spiritual lapses, God sees her as a glorious woman who ultimately is victorious because of the birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

The woman was expecting a child and cried out from her birth pains (12:2).

In John's vision the glorious woman is pregnant. Her time for delivery is so near that she's already crying out from birth pains. Literally, she is "distressed" in her delivery. The arrival of her child, the Messiah, will be met with great difficulty. Historically, the Jewish people have suffered greatly including the years of exile leading up to the time of Christ's birth. But the fact that God's Messiah would enter this world through the nation of Israel adds to the glorious nature of the woman in John's vision. God views His chosen people as glorious in His sight. Although this woman is not properly identified with the church, since the church didn't contribute to the birth of the Messiah, the parallel truth that God views His people today as glorious should encourage all believers in their walk with Jesus.

**A dragon—God's enemy
is bent on destruction (12:3-4).**

The next character in this passage is a great red dragon. Like the woman, the dragon is designated as a sign. The dragon is symbolic of God's ancient enemy, Satan.

John saw a symbolic red dragon with seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns (12:3).

From his vantage point in heaven John saw another sign similar in significance to the woman who symbolized the nation of Israel. This second sign was a great red dragon. It was great in size as well as power. Its color, red, stands for its deadly nature. The dragon had seven heads, ten horns, and seven crowns on its heads. These descriptions are similar to those in the book of Daniel. Daniel 7:6 describes a beast with four heads, the heads each representing four regions ruled by four powerful rulers. In Daniel's prophecies, horns represented powerful kings and their kingdoms (Daniel 7:24; 8:21-22).

The great red dragon in John's vision is clearly identified as Satan (Revelation 12:9). The seven heads would represent seven national entities, destructive kingdoms and their kings empowered by Satan. These seven kingdoms probably dominate the world scene in succession and could be identified with ancient Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and a future kingdom much like Rome (compare Revelation 17:9-10). The ten horns, like the ten horns on the beast in Daniel's vision (Daniel 7:7-8, 20, 24), refer to ten powerful kings who will rule simultaneously over the last world empire (compare Revelation 17:12). The seven heads, or world empires, will wear seven crowns. The word for crowns in this verse refers to a crown of royal authority, a king's crown in contrast to a victor's crown. The fact that these crowns rest upon the dragon's "heads" (plural) seems to indicate that each head carries a crown, that is, each world empire exerts political dominance. Taken as a whole, the symbolic red dragon stands for Satan and his empowerment of the dominant world empires led by powerful human kings. These empires will culminate in a future empire that makes a last stand against the Lord Jesus Christ at His return.

The dragon's tail drew one third of the stars from heaven and threw them to the earth (12:4a).

Stars sometimes refer to angelic beings (Job 38:7; Revelation 9:1). Since the great red dragon is described as a sign, a symbol, it seems that these stars are not physical stars but are instead symbolic of angelic beings. The dragon's tail sweeps one-third of the stars from heaven to earth. According to verse 8, Satan's angels will lose their place in heaven. Verse 4, therefore, describes a time in which Satan drew one-third of the angels away from their favored position in heaven and landed them in a position of evil influence on the earth. When Satan rebelled against God he enticed one-third of the angels to follow him in his nefarious plot.

The dragon stood in front of the woman with the intention of devouring her child (12:4b).

Next the dragon, Satan, having rebelled against God and taken other angelic beings with him took his position in front of the woman, national Israel, to devour her child. Satan's plan to thwart God's redemptive purpose for humankind involved an attempt to destroy the Messiah before He could die sacrificially for human sin. Satan has constantly attempted to interfere with God's redemptive plan. When Herod the Great issued the order to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem, Satan was clearly behind this king's actions (Matthew 2:16-18). But God would protect His Messiah. The dragon, Satan, is bent on destruction at every turn, but God is still in control.

**A male child—God's Messiah
fulfilled His redemptive purpose (12:5-6).**

While the woman and the dragon are designated as signs, the male child carries no such designation. Instead, this character in the drama is a literal individual, Jesus Christ. Jesus fulfilled His redemptive purpose and was consequently caught up to heaven.

The woman gave birth to a son who will rule the nations and whom God snatched up to His throne in heaven (12:5).

The woman gave birth to a son, a male child (Isaiah 9:6)—the masculine gender emphasizes the identity of this child as an individual rather than a group of people. The woman, as previously indicated, refers to national Israel, so the child born to the woman was a Jewish baby boy. This baby boy is described as one who "is about to shepherd all the nations with an iron rod." To shepherd is to rule, often with gentleness but, when necessary, with power. An iron rod refers to a firm and just rule. This male child will rule over all the nations. His reach will be global. By comparing Psalm 2:9, Revelation 2:27, and Revelation 19:15 it becomes obvious that the woman's child is the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Following Jesus' birth he was eventually "snatched up" to God's throne, a reference to Jesus' ascension and exaltation (Acts 1:9; Philippians 2:9-11). The fact that no mention is made of Jesus' earthly ministry, death, or resurrection implies that these events, far from being insignificant, were book ended by His birth and ascension for a reason. They were accomplished facts. Jesus fulfilled His redemptive

work at His first coming and was taken up to heaven. Jesus, the Lamb of God, is Lord over the whole earth. He will reign as a shepherd-king with gentleness, justice, and power.

The woman will flee into the desert where God will protect her for 1,260 days (12:6).

Following the woman's delivery of her son she will find it necessary to flee into the desert (Matthew 24:15-20). The reference to 1,260 days places this event in the future (compare Revelation 11:2, 3; 12:14; 13:5). Satan will intensify his persecution of God's chosen people, national Israel, as the return of Jesus Christ approaches. But God will prepare a place of refuge for the Jews in that day, a place both remote and secure. He may work through the geo-politics of that day but will nonetheless protect His people. In that place of protection "they," probably a reference to both God the Father and God the Son, will sustain the chosen people for what is likely the last three and a half years leading up to Jesus' second coming. Having fulfilled His redemptive work at His first coming, Jesus Christ will rule as Lord over all the nations at His second coming.

**A war in heaven—God's
enemy faces certain defeat (12:7-9).**

The cosmic spiritual battle between God and Satan and good and evil will enter a new phase in that future day. At that time Satan will be forever restricted from having access to heaven and heaven's Creator.

Michael and his angels will defeat the dragon and his angels in a battle in heaven (12:7-8).

Half way through the Tribulation Period, three and a half years before the return of Jesus Christ, a great war will break out in heaven. The holy angels under the leadership of the archangel Michael (Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1; Jude 9) will make war with the fallen angels under the leadership of the dragon, Satan. The dragon and his angels will fight back with all their might, but they won't win this powerful spiritual war. They will no longer have access to heaven where Satan has accused God's people day and night (Revelation 12:10; compare Job 1:6-11; 2:1-5).

The dragon—Satan—and his angels will be thrown out of heaven to the earth (12:9).

Having lost the war in heaven, Satan will be thrown down to the earth where his hatred for God's people will be intensified. The dragon is here identified as "the ancient serpent," pointing back to Genesis 23:1-7 (compare 2 Corinthians 11:3). He is also called "the devil," meaning one who slanders others, as well as "Satan," meaning adversary. The dragon is characterized by deceit—he's deceived the entire inhabited world down through the centuries. Through his deceit he's convinced people that life is better without God's authority. All false ideologies, philosophies, religions, and worldviews have their source, often imperceptibly, in Satan (John 8:44; 2 Corinthians 4:4).

Satan will be thrown down from heaven along with the wicked angels who followed in his rebellion. The war in heaven will end. Satan will be defeated. God will prevail. However, the

spiritual war on earth will continue for a brief time more until Jesus returns and establishes His kingdom on earth. Until that time God's people can rest assured that the Lamb is Lord, that Jesus Christ will reign, that right will win over unrighteousness, and that life is far better under the rule of God than that of self or Satan. The enemy's defeat is certain and the Lord's victory is sure. When we gain a heightened awareness of the spiritual battle we'll also gain a stronger sense of Christ's victory. The Lamb is Lord!