

The Great Red Dragon

Revelation 12 & 13 Part One

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A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

And there was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down--that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

"Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short."

When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared

for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring--those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And the dragon stood on the shore of the sea.

Revelation 12 begins what appears to be a new section in the Book of Revelation. Indeed, in some ways it can be thought of as the key to the entire book. Alluding as it does to the cosmic struggle between the forces of darkness and the kingdom of God, the chapter depicts a graphic account of just how malicious the opposition gets.

The pattern of *sevens* continues in the section that now unfolds from 12:1 to 15:4 in the following way:

- (1) the conflict of the serpent with the woman and her seed (12:1-13-1a)
- (2) persecution by the beast from the sea (13:1b-10)
- (3) persecution by the beast from the land (13:11-18)
- (4) the Lamb and the 144,000 standing on Mount Zion (14:1-5)
- (5) the proclamation of the gospel and of judgment by three angels (14:6-13)
- (6) the Son of Man's harvest of the earth (14:14-20)
- (7) the saint's victory over the sea beast and their victory song (15:2-4)

Concerted opposition is a principle that is written on every page of Scripture as it unfolds the purposes of God that at every stage in its development. This had been signaled to us as early as Genesis 3. There we are informed of the opposition of the seed of the serpent to the seed of the woman, and of the eventual triumph of the latter over the former: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15). Bible readers through the centuries have seen that principle as the key that unlocks all of history! Everything that happens in the Scriptures, and everything that ever will happen is part of the cosmic battle between these two seeds: Christ and Satan.

The Book of Revelation is, in many ways, an elaborate portrayal of this very point: that Christ builds His church within the precincts of the gates of Hell (c.f.

Matt. 16:18ff) and can therefore expect to know the brutal hostility of Satanic opposition as it emerges and develops. The assurance given, of course, is that Christ will be triumphant in all that He purposes to do. Of this, there can be no uncertainty. Jesus reigns!

What has been implicit in chapters 1-11 is now brought to the surface; what has only been hinted at is now made clear. It is Satan who lies behind the antagonism, he it is who orchestrates the flurried and desperate attacks upon every attempt to bring the purposes of God to fruition. There have been hints of this already: in 6:8 (the Rider who was called Death and Hades), and 9:11 (the King named Abaddon, or Apollyon), for example. The previous chapter, too, had mentioned a beast that ascends from the Abyss (11:7). But, now in chapter 12, his identity is revealed as "that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray" (12:9). The various manifestations of evil that follow: the beast, the false prophet and the whore of Babylon, each one will ultimately be destroyed, and that, because the doom of Satan himself is equally sure and certain.

Three truths are inter-woven here that repeat themselves elsewhere in the pages of Scripture:

- (1) Satan is implacably hostile to the purposes of Almighty God.
- (2) Satan is a defeated foe whose doom is written (12:5, 7-12). This knowledge, like Hitler in the bunker, does not prevent him from venting his spleen in anger even though he knows that victory in the ultimate sense is an impossibility. He "knows that his time is short" (12:12).
- (3) The people of God are inevitably caught up in this cosmic battle. Furthermore, there is no expectation in the Scriptures that we are to look forward to a time when the church will be removed from this battle, not until the Second Coming itself when the battle will be brought to its final denouement and Satan and all who belong to him will be cast into "the lake of burning sulphur" (20:10).

The second truth mentioned above, that Satan is a defeated foe, needs another aspect of truth added to it for completion: that Satan's power is contained within the overruling purposes of God. We are told in the opening pages of the Book of Job that Satan has a frenetic quality about him (he is depicted as walking "to and fro" in the earth Job 1:6 – 'that great peripatetic' as John Trapp called him!), he has authority to touch Job only because God gives it to him. His influence is contained within the decree of God. This twin polemic: that Satan is hostile but under restraint, is what Revelation wants Christians to know. There is a fight in which we are bound to take part and, even though some will suffer terribly and may even die as a consequence, Satan will never achieve the ultimate victory he desires. He may, to cite Luther's hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is our God*, kill the body, but he can never destroy the kingdom that God builds. It is within that

framework that the details of this opposition is now described.

The Woman giving Birth (12:1-2)

Reminiscent of the story of how Python attempted to prevent the birth of Apollo, son of Zeus, but failed and was consequently killed himself by Apollo four days after his birth, Revelation 12 depicts Satan's attempts to prevent the birth of Jesus Christ. It is here that the opposition of the seed of the serpent to the seed of the woman is at its fiercest,

The story that follows is described in terms of the twin *signs* of a pregnant woman about to give birth and "an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns" (12:1,3). The woman is depicted as "clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (12:1). The allusion reminds us of Jacob, his wife and the eleven stars that bow down to Joseph in his dream (Genesis 37). A similar allusion, but with no stars, is found in Isaiah 60:19-20. The idea seems to be a picture of the church as it emerges from the period we call b.c. into the period we call a.d. (c.f. 7:4-8). The crown alludes to the fact that the church shares in Christ's kingship (cf. 2:10; 3:11; 4:4, 10; 14:14).

Tempting as it is to see here a depiction of Mary, the allusion seems to be a more general one. Roman Catholic interpreters who have favored this interpretation for obvious reasons must then deal with the further allusion that having been driven into the desert she gives birth to other children (12:17), a considerable problem for the Catholic doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity! It is better to see this remarkable figure as bringing together those allusions in Scripture to the church as a woman (Jer. 4:31; Isa. 52:2; 54:1-6; 61:10; 62:1-5, 11; 66:7-13; Gal. 4:26-27; 2 John 1,5; 3 John 9). The contrast will be made in chapter 17 between the believing community of God's covenant people represented by this woman in birth pangs and the unbelieving community represented by a whore! John may have had in mind the passage in Isaiah 26 describing Israel's oppression by Assyria:

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 pain. (Isa. 26:17-18)

The Dragon (12:3-6)

The initial description of the second sign, "an enormous red dragon," might lead us to think that what is being depicted is metaphorical for evil in a general sense. It is interesting that even the most literal interpreters of Revelation assume that

something metaphorical is being described here!

Allusions to Satan as a dragon follow Old Testament depictions of Egypt (and Pharaoh) as a "sea dragon" in the exodus (Pss 73:13-14; 89:10; Isa. 30:7; 51:9; Ezek. 29:3; 32:2-3). The description of him as having ten horns reminds us of the fourth beast of Daniel 7 (vv. 7, 24) who also comes from the sea and was identified as Rome. All of this might lead us to think that John is describing a generic quality of evil arraigned against the church. But the idea of a creature with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads is more than a generic picture of evil; it is a depiction in gory detail of the devil himself. He is described in exactly the same way as the beast from the sea in the next chapter (13:1).

The color red here, as in 17:3-6 of the whore and 6:4 of the red horse, is linked with blood, specifically, the blood of martyred saints (17:6; 6:9-10). His work is ultimately deathly in nature. Furthermore, Satan is a pretender, living in denial of reality. Thinking himself king (the seven crowns, seven for completeness arising from the creation and rest in seven days) the devil pretends to power. Power he has and we will be fools not to reckon with it. We ignore Satan's malice at our peril. To be found unprepared is to be guilty of presumption that can easily lapse into a fatal apostasy. Hence we are told of what the devil does. With his tail, the dragon sweeps a third of the stars and throws them to the earth, and this *before* the birth of the Messiah is recorded.

To what event or series of events does John allude? Bearing in mind that Revelation telescopes history in pursuance of its explanation of the purposes of God, almost any of the great persecutions of the Old Testament period could be a consideration, including the Babylonian exile; but, more probable is the time period from the end of Old Testament recorded history until the coming of Christ. We know from the book of Esther, in the fifth century BC when King Ahasuerus reigned, that under the pressure of Haman, the king orders that all the Jews be destroyed. Tempting, too, is the actual account of King Herod's brutal attack on Bethlehem following the birth of Jesus And the consequent flight into Egypt (Matt. 2:13-18). But as verse 5 now makes clear, John has much more in mind as he condenses the entire life and ministry of Jesus Christ into a few crisp phrases: "She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to His throne" (12:5). The fact that Jesus was 'snatched' to heaven would seem to point to that fact John has in view the opposition that culminated in the death of Christ at Calvary. Many, including the disciples, seemed to draw the conclusion that Calvary had meant the defeat of the Messianic claims of Jesus. It is a signal to the importance of the resurrection in the New Testament that it gives to this scenario the conclusive proof and seal that God had accepted the offering of Christ and that the purposes of God with respect to His elect were secured by the accomplishments of His Son.

Revelation 12:5 attests to the reality of Satanic opposition against Christ. Indeed, the work of Christ can be understood from the perspective of His conquest and final victory over Satanic opposition. To cite John from another source: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (1 John 3:8). Having arisen, He now wields His iron-like scepter in control of the destiny of the nations (Psa 2: 7-9). Christ is the Victor!

What happens to the church as a consequence of Satan's inability to destroy the male child? Verse 6 tells us that the woman flees into the desert where she might know the protection of God for 1,260 days. As we argued in the previous chapter, this represents the period which commences at the ascension of Christ and continues to the end of history and His return. By putting it in the form of days, the brevity of this time is highlighted, something which would be welcomed by those who first read the Apocalypse whose immediate sufferings John has in mind.

It is crucial to observe that the focus and motive of the Book of Revelation is that during this period of warfare God protects His church. In the desert, as God's people in the Old Testament could well relate, the people of God experienced both trial and protection. "God... brought you through that great and terrible wilderness, where the fiery serpent is... [God] fed you there with manna in the wilderness... so that He might afflict you and test you and do you good in your latter days" (Deut. 8:14-16). It is the realization that God has so ordained the life of the church in this world in such a way that trials form the way of pilgrimage, and divine protection the great assurance given.

The Heavenly Battle (12:7-12)

The section 12:7-12 describes the same events but from the point of view of heaven. All of this may have been taking place on earth, but an even greater reality is taking place in heaven. It describes the defeat of Satan himself by the forces of Michael and his angels together with the Son of Man in heaven. It is a profound description, one that we meet in the opening chapter of Job, that whilst battles take place in this world, a corresponding heavenly war takes place which gives a bigger explanation for the trouble that besets the church here on earth. John is continuing an allusion to the Book of Daniel in which the battle of Michael and the Son of Man against the wicked angels of Persia and Greece is described as one that also involves the opposition of forces outside of this world (Dan. 10:13,21). We wrestle, not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in high places (Eph. 6:12).

The battle between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his army ends up in the defeat of the latter and the expulsion of the dragon from heaven (12:7-8). The description is given in the very language of Daniel's prophecies (Dan. 7:21; 10:20). It is only now that the metaphorical language is broken and the identity of

the dragon revealed by the twin names, 'devil' and 'Satan,' names which mean 'slanderer' and 'deceiver' respectively (12:9). The one who deceived Adam and Eve, slandering the character of God in the process, is now described as leading 'the whole world astray' (12:9). As then, so now, he finds himself defeated: he is "hurled to the earth, and his angels with him" (12:9; cf. Gen 3:4-5). In anticipation of this, one of the disciples would say, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven..." (Luke 10:18).

The vision is not left to interpretive imagination. The hymn which follows gives a clear representation of what the previous verses have indicated. A "loud voice" is heard (12:10), the source of which appears to be the same as that in 6:10, namely, the martyred saints in their cry for vengeance.

What is in view is the fulfillment of the prophesy of the second Psalm, significant as that psalm is in the Christological pronouncements of the New Testament, something which we have already seen in 11:15. The hymn in verse 10 is not anticipating the coming of kingdom rule on the part of Christ so much as celebrating the fact that that rule has already been established. "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of His Christ" (12:10).

We have already alluded to 1 John 3:8 and the significance of the death and resurrection of Christ in terms of the defeat of the power of the devil. Paul says something similar in Colossians 2:15, whenever he says of Christ: "Having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in the cross." Revelation 12 provides us with a four-fold way in which the devil's work is manifested:

- (1) The ancient serpent who has now grown into the Dragon (vv.3-4,7-9) who sought to destroy the Christ, but failed;
- (2) Satan, the prosecuting counsel against believers (v.4);
- (3) The devil, who hurls his fiery darts of temptation against them (v.4);
- (4) The accuser of the brethren who fills his diary with a record of their sins in order to blackmail them (v.10).

Yet, the brethren overcame him (12:11). How? "By the blood of the lamb" said the loud voice from heaven, "and by the word of their testimony, for they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death" (12:10-12). Through his death, Christ disarms him who had the power of death, and releases His people from their lifelong satanic bondage to the fear of death (cf. Heb. 2:14-16). From that fear they had been most gloriously delivered! Satan's power over Christians (the fear of death) has been destroyed.

The Protection of God's People (12:13-17)

Verse 13 now fills out what had been hinted at in verse 6, viz., that the church which flees into the desert is pursued by the, now, angry dragon. He is angry because he has been hurled out of heaven and having failed to destroy Christ he now goes after those who are Christ's instead. Satan, who can never accept the reality of his situation, now attempts to destroy the security of the desert by "spew[ing]... water like a river." It is, of course, the same attempt that was made in the exodus from Egypt, but Satan's plan backfired when the flood waters of the Red Sea came in deluge and judgment upon the Egyptians and not the Israelites. Then, as here, the earth swallows the flood and keeps the people safe. It is the intervention of the power of God in his care and protection of his people.

Every attempt of the gates of hell to destroy Christ's church is subject to defeat (Matt. 16:18). But Satan can never accept it. Having failed against the church in the Old Testament, he continues his warfare against "the rest of her seed," probably an allusion to the church in the inter-adventual period. It is a singular mark of the New Testament covenant community that they are described as "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus" (12:17). The source of power that enables the church to stand "in the evil day" (Eph. 6:18) is that which comes from their relationship to Jesus, and that which is evoked by the quality of their lives. The closer they are to King, the more likely they are to draw the enemy's fire. But, equally, the more likely they are to know the protecting grace of their Father in heaven.

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