

A Woman, a Dragon, and a Deliverer¹

Revelation 12:1-16

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I am sure we are all familiar with the famous nativity scene of Jesus' birth. A manger of hay. A few common farm animals. Joseph and Mary admiring their new baby boy. Some shepherds on the fringes. The scene is celebrated with re-enactments and statuary on millions of front lawns across America and the world.

The calm and quiet scene has produced world famous lyrics describing it,

*"Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon virgin, mother and child
Holy infant so tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace."*²

You likely know those lyrics. They reinforce a perspective on Jesus' birth as sweet and cuddly, simple and common.

The merchandizing of Christmas depends on the general population equating Christmas with sentimental family times "echoing Christmases long, long ago." Chestnuts roasting on an open fire; after all, it is the most wonderful time of the year.

I'm not going to ruin your sentimental Christmas. The Bible does it just fine all by itself. There is no better place than the description of Jesus' birth in Revelation 12. I'll bet most of us have not heard this passage as a Christmas passage and I'll guarantee you it's never been read once before the kids open their presents on Christmas Day. If it was read, the kids would be too terrified to open a single present.

As you turn to Revelation 12, it's always difficult to start in the middle of a book of the Bible with a message. There is always a context and flow of thought that helps interpret the passage. In this case we are dropping into the middle of the hardest book of the Bible to interpret. Why? Most of Revelation is written in a genre known as apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic literature was very common in the ancient world, less so now. Although before we think them to be unrealistic, remember that most of our popular movies today involve heroes with superhuman powers and aliens from other worlds. What might future people think about our intelligence in 500 years when they watch a rerun of *Spider-Man* or *The Incredible Hulk*?

*"The most important thing to know about the literary form of the book of Revelation is that it uses technique of symbolism from start to finish. Instead of portraying characters and events directly, much of the time the author portrays them indirectly by means of symbols."*³

¹ From a heading in *New Bible Commentary*, Gordon Wenham, J. Alec Motyer, D.A. Carson, & R.T. France, editors, page unknown.

² Joseph Mohr (lyrics), *Silent Night*, 1818.

³ Leland Ryken & Philip Graham Ryken (Ed.), *ESV Literary Study Bible*, p. 1853.

This "symbolic reality" is powerful as it engages not only our minds but also our imaginations. But therein also is the interpretive challenge of Revelation. Imagination is less objective than a gospel or a letter.

This Christmas passage includes symbols, but none that obscure the main point.

"And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days. (Revelation 12:1-6 ESV)

Any families read this passage on Christmas morning? I didn't think so.

This symbolic realism is describing spiritual realities that lie behind historical events. The Apostle John isn't as interested in writing history as explaining the meaning of history, especially redemptive history.

A Woman...God's People

"A great sign appeared in heaven." (verse 1) What is this sign? It's not a billboard, rather it is a woman. She is described in a most extraordinary way. She was "*clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.*" (verse 1)

Obviously no human woman could ever be clothed with the sun or have the moon under her feet. This is symbolic language describing her glory and her majesty. It takes the sun to clothe her and the moon to hold her up. And she is wearing a crown of twelve stars.

Numbers in Revelation are really important. The twelve stars are our best clue as to her identity. She is about to give birth to the Messiah (spoiler alert!). Can you think of anything that has twelve somethings that births the Messiah?

This woman is Israel. Her identity is going to be further clarified in this chapter when *after* the redemptive work of Jesus, she is provided for and protected by God. She is the church. It's best to look at this woman as symbolizing generally the people of God. Prior to the Messiah that identity primarily rested in Israel as the visible earthly expression of God's people, and after Jesus, it is the church. In verse 1 she is in labor. She is in agony. She is a woman about to give birth and the physical agony causes her to cry out in pain.

A Dragon...Satan

The next sign is a frightening one. "*And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems.*" (verse 3) This dragon's identity is not left to chance. John identifies him in verse 9, "*And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.*" (verse 9)

Isn't a dragon a fitting description for Satan? Notice the symbols. *Red*. Picture aggressive, blood-thirsty, bent on war. *Seven heads with seven diadems*. A diadem was a crown. *Ten horns*. A horn is a symbol of power. He has seven crowns and ten horns. To give you a sense of scale, John notes that with a sweep of his tale a third of all the stars disappear from the heavens. That's a big dragon.

I think of the line from *The Hobbit* where the dwarves are at the Lonely Mountain. They hear a rumble and feel the ground beneath them shake and one of the dwarves asks in fear, "Was that an earthquake?" The aged dwarf Balin says, "That, my lad, was a dragon."⁴ The dragon in *The Hobbit* is the most impressive dragon I have ever seen. Smaug is huge and terrifying. But he is no match for this dragon. This dragon is the enemy of Almighty God. This dragon is the prince of darkness. This dragon is Satan himself.

Look where he is and what he intends, "*And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it.*" (verse 4) He is there in the very moments of the birth ready to devour the child the moment he appears. Who must this child be?

The Male Child...Jesus

"*She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.*" (verse 5) Remember, John isn't writing history, he is using symbols to describe redemptive history. This is John's account of Christmas, "*She gave birth to a male child.*" What are we told? He is male. His destiny is "*to rule all the nations.*" With what? "*A rod of iron.*" This pictures his absolute justice as he rules the whole world.

Obviously this is Jesus. His incarnation and birth bring into human time and history the very person of God. His arrival was the fulfillment of the longings of Israel. These are pictured like a pregnant woman in hard labor, yet longing for the arrival of the child.

The scene is a tragic one. There is a murderer in the birthing room. There is an assassin poised in the manger of Bethlehem. I've never seen a nativity scene with a giant dragon hovering over it. Have you? That would kind of ruin it, wouldn't it? The manger. The shepherds. Mary and Joseph. And a massive dragon about to swallow the child.

Yet there he was. What was his intent? Satan has known God's plan to conquer him ever since Genesis 3:15,

*"I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel."* (Genesis 3:15)

From the beginning, a child born of a human woman would be the destruction of Satan. He knew it. He knew who it was that was coming.

So we see throughout the story of history Satan's very intentional efforts to thwart the fulfillment of the promise of God, through the Jewish people "birthing" the Messiah.

⁴ Imdb.com, *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, 2013, Quotes.

Satan's War on God

Genocide/hatred against the Jews

Hatred of the Jewish people is ubiquitous throughout history. Think of how the Egyptians persecuted them after Joseph's death. Their nation was destroyed by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, yet there was a remnant that endured. The book of Esther tells of a plot to destroy the Jews. This isn't just ancient history. Is it a coincidence that the man most widely believed to be the most evil man of the modern era, Hitler, also hated the Jews? Is the Holocaust a coincidence or who really was behind all that?

Without stepping into politics at all, can I just note that this week the moving of the US embassy to Jerusalem set off protests all over the world? Would a similar move in Zimbabwe or New Zealand make front page news? No. It's this little people group that for millennia has so often had antipathy against them. Coincidence? Or might "*that, my lad, be a dragon?*"

Hatred and murder of Jesus

Let's just think about the extraordinary events of Jesus' life. Matthew tells us about some wise men from the East who show up, perhaps a year or two after Jesus' birth. First they go to Jerusalem. Why? Where else would the king of the Jews be born? The whole city is shocked at their appearance and what they say, "*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?*" (Matthew 2:2) We have come to worship him. King Herod was a maniacal and pathological king. He decides to use the wise men to find this potential threat to his throne. He tells them to find the child and then he himself would come to "worship" him.

The wise men go to Bethlehem (you likely know this story), they find Jesus, they worship him, they lavish him with expensive gifts. But God tells them in a dream not to go back to Herod. God also tells Joseph to leave quickly for Egypt. They do. Herod discovers the wise men had not returned to him. He orders every child two years and under in the whole region to be killed. Who was really behind that?

Years later, Jesus hasn't eaten anything in 40 days. He is alone in the desert. Who shows up in his moment of weakness? Satan. He tempts Jesus to sin. Why? To eat the child. To destroy the plan of God.

Another example. Jesus' right hand man takes Jesus aside and rebukes him for talking about dying. What did Jesus say? "*But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.'*" (Matthew 16:23) Jesus sees who was really behind Peter's words.

How about Judas? We can say he was motivated by money or political gain and that's why he betrayed Jesus, but the Bible says there was something else going on. "*Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve.*" (Luke 22:3)

The night Jesus was betrayed, Pilate's wife had a dream that compelled her to tell Pilate NOT to do anything to Jesus (Matthew 27:19). Who was behind that?

The ultimate moment for Satan where he thought, *at last I've got him!* must have been the cross. What Revelation calls "*devour the child*" seemed to be what happened when Jesus died on the cross.

This brings us back to Revelation. The scene is that just as the child is born and the dragon is about to eat the child, look at verse 5, "*but her child was caught up to God and to his throne.*" What is this describing? Jesus' ascension. "*And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*" (Acts 1:9)

John describes Christmas and the Ascension, but no life and ministry here in Revelation. Why? I don't know. But what we do know is the point that he is making. Behind what we see in history and the story of Jesus and Christmas is a cosmic and ancient war. It started when Satan first longed to rise to the level of God himself. The first sin was pride and self-love. Satan was the pinnacle being in God's angelic creation. Powerful. Beautiful. Evil twisted that power and beauty into an equally powerful evil and hatred. How would you illustrate Satan's betrayal and treachery? How about a massive red dragon with seven heads, all of whom are ready to murder Jesus the moment he is born? That'll work.

We must see Christmas beyond the sentimental or even Jesus coming to save us. Yes, that is wonderfully true. But beyond our salvation is God's victory over Satan and the demonic hoard and evil and everyone else who is part of the kingdom of darkness. This reminds us of the stakes and who our real enemy is.

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day." (Ephesians 6:12-13)

Christmas was wonderfully about a baby in a manger who was wondrously also the very Son of God. We rightly sing the songs and celebrate.

But the sentimental Christmas is also a ruse of the devil to blind us to the deeper truth. Jesus' birth was an act of war. Jesus' birth was God's ancient purpose fulfilled to crush the head of Satan.

This dragon is still alive and well. He hates God and he hates us. He hates the gospel and he hates the church. He hates Christian marriage and he hates Christian families. He is a destroyer and he continues to seek to destroy God's purpose in redeeming and restoring a lost humanity through the gospel and the church. We may do well to add a giant red dragon to our nativity scenes. It would help us recognize this dragon in our homes, in our bedrooms, in our small groups, in our families, and in our lives. In spite of Christmas and Ascension, he continues his war against God.

So what should we do? This brings us back to the woman in Revelation 12. Something incredible happens to her. To find out what, you'll need to come back next week.

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