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THE WOMAN IN REVELATION 12

Tom's Perspectives

by Thomas Ice

And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth.

—Revelation 12:1–2

Down through church history virtually all Christian interpreters of Revelation 12 have understood the symbol of the woman in labor as the church. This began to change about 200 years ago when literal hermeneutics were more rigorously applied to the Book of Revelation and Bible Prophecy in general. It took this long for some within the church to begin to overcome the stranglehold that replacement theology or supersessionism had on the church. For most of her history, when Christians read biblical passages, they automatically assumed that it was referring to them and the church. Most have thought that the church has forever replaced Israel and that Israel, as a nation, has no future. This is why a correct understanding of who the woman in Revelation 12 represents is a watershed issue for understanding Revelation as a whole.

HOW TO INTERPRET SYMBOLS

Revelation 12 is said by some to be the most symbolic chapter in the most symbolic book in the New Testament. That may very well be true! Even though symbols are used to tell the prophetic story of Israel, the symbols are clear when interpreted by comparing Scripture with Scripture. Arnold Fruchtenbaum rightly tells us “that every symbol in the Revelation is explained either elsewhere in the Revelation itself or somewhere else in the Bible.”¹ In this passage, as well as throughout the Book of Revelation, symbols represent literal, historical persons, places or things. John MacArthur says, “The literal approach to interpreting Scripture allows for normal use of symbolic language, but understands that it points to a literal reality.”² We use symbols for athletic teams. The Bears beat the Lions, 35–21. It is understood that both teams had humans playing for their squads, but their team mascots are bears and lions. The same approach is used in many prophetic sections of both the Old and New Testaments where symbols are used of people and kingdoms.³ “The symbols used in this book are taken from the Scriptures themselves and thus do not allow arbitrary interpretations to be imposed upon them.”⁴

WHY THE WOMAN REFERS TO ISRAEL

Who does the woman of Revelation 12 symbolize? While Catholics and most replacement theologians believe that the woman in this passage is the Church, even preterists like Gary DeMar are able to realize that the biblical symbolism of Genesis 37:9–11 demands that Revelation 12 uses it to refer to Israel.⁵ However, preterist err in seeing it as a reference to Israel in the past and not including the future. How can we be sure that the woman represents Israel?

First, the context immediately preceding chapter 12 sets the stage for our view, as well as the larger context of the entire Book of Revelation. “And the temple of God which is in heaven was opened; and the ark of His covenant appeared in His temple, and there were flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder and an earthquake

and a great hailstorm" (Rev. 11:19). The ark of the covenant is never associated with the church but always with the nation of Israel. This gives a Jewish flavor to the context and prepares the way for God's disclosure about Israel in chapter 12.

Second, Israel is often represented throughout the Old Testament as a woman (Isa. 26:18; 47:7–9; 54:1–6; 66:7–8; Jer. 4:31; 31:32; Lam. 1:1; Ezek. 16:32; Hosea 2:16; Micah 4:9–10; 5:1–3). John Walvoord says, "In the Old Testament, Israel frequently is presented as the wife of Jehovah, often in her character as being unfaithful to her husband. Here the godly remnant of Israel is standing true to God in the time of the great tribulation."⁶ This fits into the overall motif since this woman gives birth to a son.

Third, John's reference to the sun, moon, and stars in his description of the woman relates to similar descriptions of Israel in the Old Testament (see Gen. 37: 9–11). In Genesis 37 the sun refers to Jacob, "who stood in the lineage to inherit the blessings of the "Abrahamic covenant."⁷ The moon represents Rachel, Jacob's wife and the matriarch of the 12 tribes of Israel. The 11 stars in Genesis 37 refer to the sons of Jacob (the 12th star to whom the 11 bow is Joseph, thus 12 stars) and the 12 tribes of Israel or Jacob. This is "a clear reference to the twelve tribes of Israel, not only in Joseph's dream (cf. Gen. 37:9–10), but also by comparison with the twelve tribes in Rev. 7:5–8 and 21:12."⁸ J. Dwight Pentecost also points out other Old Testament passages "where heavenly bodies are associated with Israel's history" (see Josh. 10:12–14; Jud. 10:12–14; Ps. 89:35–37; Jer. 31:35–36).⁹

Fourth, it is Israel and not the church that gives birth to the male child (verse 5) within biblical imagery. Paul confirms this when writing concerning the Israelites, "from whom is the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:5). It is obvious the male child refers to Christ since Revelation 12:5 says He will rule the nations with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:9). Jesus is also said to rule with a rod of iron in Revelation 2:27 and 19:15. John 4:22 also tells us that "salvation is from the Jews," which means that redemption came through the nation of Israel in the form of their Messiah—the male child.

Fifth, since we are dealing with the male child of 12:5, then we should note a parallelism between Revelation 12 and Micah 5 that supports the notion that the woman in Revelation refers to Israel.

The parallelism between Revelation 12 and Micah 5 helps to identify the woman as Israel. In Micah 5:2 is recorded the birth of the ruler. The rejection of this ruler results in the setting aside of the nation ("therefore will he give them up," Mic. 5:3). The nation will be in travail "until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth" (Mic. 5:3), that is, until the accomplishment of God's purpose. The same program is outlined in Revelation 12.¹⁰

Sixth, a comparison of Revelation 12:7–9 with Daniel 12:1–7 confirms the identification of the woman as Israel. Gary Cohen notes:

In Revelation 12, we see a woman being persecuted by Satan, and Michael the archangel at this time fights against Satan (vv. 7–9). Likewise, in Daniel 12:1 when Daniel's people are said to be in their "time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation," a time lasting 3 ½ years (3 ½ times—Dan 12:7), Michael "shall . . . stand up" and contend for Israel, Daniel's people. Thus both Revelation 12 and Daniel 12 show Michael contending against Satan concerning the 3 ½ year Great Tribulation of Israel.¹¹

Seventh, John's reference to the woman's flight into the wilderness (verse 14) is reminiscent of Israel's past wilderness experiences. As in the Exodus Israel was carried on "eagles' wings" and protected from the Egyptians (Exod. 19:4) so also the woman will be carried to a place of protection—the "wilderness" (verse 14). Just as the nation was sustained by the manna during the wilderness wandering, so the woman is "nourished" in the wilderness. As the wilderness in Israel's past has been a place of God's protection and provision, so it will be in Israel's future. God will preserve a remnant. It should be noted that the flight of the woman to the wilderness is the same flight indicated by Jesus in Matthew 24:16 where those in Judea are warned to flee into the mountains. Those heeding Christ's warning will find protection, but the rest will perish. Of Israel God said, "I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness, and speak kindly to her" (Hos. 2:14). Revelation 12 illustrates God's faithfulness in caring for Israel even in the most difficult of times known as the great tribulation.

Eighth, when the woman is taken to refer to Israel, it harmonizes all of the imagery throughout the rest of Revelation 12. However, if the woman refers to Mary, then when did she flee into the wilderness for 3 ½ years? If it is a reference to the church or the people of God (including Gentiles) then when did the church give birth to Jesus or flee into the wilderness so that the Dragon made war with the rest of her offspring?

"All this is seen in connexion with Israel; for God intends, as far as this world is concerned, all power and glory to circle round Israel," notes William Kelly. "As for the church, she will have all in perfection with Christ, and in Christ; but as far as the earth is concerned, Israel will be the centre. The woman is the symbol of God's purpose as bound up with Israel."¹² Maranatha!

ENDNOTES

¹ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*. (Tustin, CA: Ariel Press, 2003), p. 267.

² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Revelation 12–22* (Chicago: Moody, 2000), p. 3.

³ For example a great deal of symbols are used in Daniel 2 and 7. In Daniel 7 a lion represents Babylon (verse 4), a bear represents Medo-Persia (verse 5), a leopard represents Greece (verse 6), and an unidentified beast represents Rome (verses 7–8).

⁴ James Allen, *What The Bible Teaches: Revelation* (Kilmarnock, Scotland: John Ritchie, LTD, 1997), p. 303.

⁵ Gary DeMar, *Last Days Madness: Obsession of the Modern Church* (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 1999), pp. 146–47.

⁶ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), p. 188.

⁷ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), p. 120.

⁸ Thomas, *Revelation 8–22*, pp. 120–21.

⁹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 288.

¹⁰ Pentecost, *Things To Come*, p. 289. For a more extensive development of this point see William Kelly, *Lectures on The Book of Revelation* (London: G. Morrish, 1868), pp. 255–56.

¹¹ Gary G. Cohen, *Understanding Revelation: An Investigation of the Key Interpretational and Chronological Questions Which Surround the Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1968] 1978), pp. 136–37.

¹² Kelly, *Revelation*, p. 253.