

The Story Behind Christmas

Revelation 12:1 Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. 2 Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth. 3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. 4 His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. 5 She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne.

6 Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

7 And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, 8 but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. 9 So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. 10 Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.

11 "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. 12 "Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time." 13 Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male *Child*. 14 But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. 15 So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. 16 But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. 17 And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ¹. (Rev. 12:1-17)

Some governments include in their secret services and intelligence forces agents of disinformation. They have people who deliberately confuse and mislead by spreading false rumours, or even things that make people scoff. If you want a very serious and sensitive piece of information to be overlooked, turn it into something that is comical, silly, or ridiculous.

I believe that is very much what Satan does with the truth about Christ's birth. He does spend time trying to deceive, trying to say it didn't happen or that it happened in other ways. But when Satan's weapons of deception and intimidation don't work, one of his other great weapons is what the agents of disinformation do: trivialisation. To trivialise something is to treat it as less serious, of less import, of mere incidental value. It is to take something great and make it ordinary, average, even forgettable.

One of the travesties of the modern era is that the meaning of this tremendous event we celebrate has been trivialised. Something with cosmic, universal importance has become a time not just of joy, but of silliness, of frivolity, of foolishness. Drunkenness, immorality, and revelling have come to dominate this time instead of the sober and serious wonder it deserves. And when it isn't the grosser sins of worldliness, it is the much more subtle sins of sentimentalism, loving ourselves with misty-eyed generosity, feeling warm about our warmth, oozing sweetness over pictures of snow and presents. Christmas is to be enjoyed, but it has largely dominated by irreverent and foolish celebration.

A second travesty is that Christmas is an event deeply rooted in the nation Israel, but it is not recognised by the people of Israel. This will sound surprising, but it is probably true to say that Christmas represents one of the greatest achievement of the Jewish people, but because of the blindness that is on Israel, it is now an accepted idea that Jewish people don't celebrate Christmas.

But here we have a passage that will teach us that Christmas is both serious and Semitic. Usually, at Christmas time, we'll study one of the passages in Matthew or Luke, or perhaps an Old Testament passage like Isaiah 9 or Micah 5, or even a New Testament passage on the Incarnation like John 1:1 or Philippians 2. But Revelation 12, though an unusual Christmas text is powerful because it is a really the story behind and beyond Christmas.

We have here a cosmic, behind the scenes view of Christmas and its after effects. Like the book of Job shows us the heavenly scene behind Job's trials, Revelation 12 shows us the heavenly and spiritual scene behind Christmas.

But what we are going to see in this passage is the profound and deep seriousness of Christmas. It is a message that goes beyond even human culture and embraces the war in the heavenlies, the war between God and His rebel angel, Satan. It is a story that comprehends 6000 years of human history. And we are going to see that it is a deeply Hebraic.

Now John tells us what kind of thing we're about to read. Verse 1 of chapter 12 tells us that this is a sign. A sign is not the reality, but something that points to the reality. When you are driving into Johannesburg, you will see signs on the highway that point to Johannesburg. But that metal sign is just a marker. The reality of Johannesburg is much bigger than that three-metre sign. The sign points to something bigger than itself.

So we are going to see that this sign contains symbols and images that point to a much bigger reality. The book of Revelation is well-known for its symbols, and difficult apocalyptic imagery. Interpreting Revelation is challenging because if you interpret what are obvious symbols too literally, you end up with something absurd. Interpret it too symbolically, and you can end up with any interpretation you want.

Fortunately, Revelation 12 has some symbols which are already interpreted for us.

This passage has three characters: a woman, a dragon, a child. It also contains events which begin thousands of years ago, but then proceed even beyond the present moment into the future. Our focus this morning is not going to be to deal with every event in this chapter, but with the events surrounding the birth of the Lord, so our focus will be the first five verses of this passage. So we will watch and learn from this sign by looking at the woman, the dragon, and the child.

I. The Woman

Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. 2 Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth.

And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. 5 She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron.

The book of Revelation actually has several symbolic women. We read about a woman called Jezebel in chapter 2, symbolising immorality and idolatry in the church. We then read about a prostitute riding a beast in chapter 17, symbolising the false apostate church, having given herself over to the world and to secular power. In chapter 19 we read of the bride of the Lamb – the true church, who keeps herself chaste for Christ.

And then we have this woman here in chapter 12. Who is she?

Three woman have been proposed. First, Mary, Jesus's physical mother. Second, the church, as a symbol of the mother of the faith. Third, Israel. It can't be all three of those, it can only be one.

Many believe this is Mary, but it is not likely. Mary did flee with Joseph into Egypt, but there is no record of it being 1260 days, nor of anything like persecution of Mary before or after that time. We can't really make sense of what it means for her to fly with the wings of an eagle nor of a flood from Satan. Most of all, it doesn't seem to mean Mary, because it says the rest of her offspring were those who kept the commandments of God and had the testimony of Jesus Christ. Mary did have other children, and it seems they did eventually all come to faith, but this seems to be a persecution of believers, not simply one biological family. Believers are never called the children of Mary.

That leaves two other likely contenders: the church, or Israel.

The problem with saying that this is the church is that it seems to get the order backwards. The church did not give birth to Christ, in many ways, it was Christ who birthed the church through His death, Resurrection, ascension and sending of His Spirit. The church is also never called a wife giving birth; it is always described as a bride, chaste and waiting for the wedding ceremony.

So it seems the most likely contender for who this woman is is that she is a symbol of Israel, and particularly regenerate, born again Jewish people, beginning with Abraham, extending all the way to Mary. This is the Jewish nation.

One proof of that is that this woman is said to be clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars

Now that seems to be a clear allusion to the dream of Joseph in Genesis 37:9-11:

9 Then he dreamed still another dream and told it to his brothers, and said, "Look, I have dreamed another dream. And this time, the sun, the moon, and the eleven stars bowed down to me." 10 So he told *it* to his father and his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What *is* this dream that you have dreamed? Shall your mother and I and your brothers indeed come to bow down to the earth before you? (Gen. 37:9-10)

There, the sun and the moon are Jacob and Rachel, and the stars are the sons of Jacob, who would become the twelve tribes. So this woman is being identified with the same idea: the Abrahamic Covenant, Israel and his sons.

But now John sees that this woman is not in a normal state. She is in a state of extreme pain and anguish. She is crying out in anguish and pain. Why? She is in labour, she is going through the agony of delivering a baby. We find out that this baby is no ordinary baby, but will turn out to be the King of the world: the Messiah.

Through this image, John tells us that of all nations and peoples that have lived, the nation of Israel has suffered and travailed most to bring forth their most precious gift: a Saviour for all people. Pain and struggle have characterised this people. Some of this pain has been brought about by their own disobedience to God. Some of it has been God's refining of them. And some of it, and the passage makes clear, is the satanic hatred of the people who would give the world its true King.

Think of Pharaoh, trying to have the Hebrew boys killed at birth. Think of the nations Amalek and Edom trying to destroy Israel before it reached the promised land, or the nations warring against it once it was in. Think of the Assyrians carrying off the ten northern tribes, and planting their own people in the land. Think of the book of Esther, and Haman trying to eliminate all the Jewish people in one day. Think of the Greek persecutor Antiochus, or the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70, and later of much of the land in 135. Then think of the terrible expulsions, the Crusades, the pogroms, the Holocausts of Hitler and Stalin. But through it all, they remain a people. You don't

know any Babylonians, or Amalekites or Gergashite. But you do know Israelites, because they remain with us.

I stood in Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Israel. I overheard a Jewish tour guide saying to a group: the more they try to destroy us, the more we remain.”

This has been a nation struggling, wrestling, sometimes with God, sometimes against God, but bearing an unusual burden. Why? Because this nation was to bear the Child who would rule all nations. This nation's efforts culminated, climaxed in one Man: the Messiah Jesus.

But that brings us to the second sign in this account.

II. The Dragon

3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. 4 His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born.

A dragon is next character in this scene. A great, fiery red, or flaming dragon appears. Now a little further down in the passage, we are told who this is:

9 So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

This is none other than the Devil, the enemy of God, Satan, the deceiver. A serpent in the first book of the Bible, and a Dragon in the last book of the Bible. Always allied with reptiles: dragons, serpents, leviathan, those creatures with a strange beauty mixed with ugliness, poisonous and deadly. This is what Satan is like, a predator, poisonous, dangerous, difficult to kill. A giant, man-eating, extremely dangerous creature. Take a black mamba, give it legs, and now inflate it to the size of an elephant, and now you are getting the idea.

Satan is described as having seven heads and ten horns with seven crowns. In Daniel 7 the fourth beast has ten horns, which predicted the Roman empire. We later read of the beast of chapter 13 who also has seven heads and ten horns. Likely this is showing that Satan is the power behind fallen unsaved empires and governments. God is sovereign over the Earth, but there is a sense in which Satan is the god of this world. When Adam sinned, he abdicated his role as under-king of the world and left a vacuum which Satan and his forces have usurped. That's why Jesus calls Satan 'the ruler of this world' four times. Paul calls him the god of this age, and the prince of the power of the air. John tells us that **1Jo 5:19** the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.

Now this Dragon has not been alone in his rebellion to God. We read in verse 4: His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth.

Now the stars in Scripture are often a reference to angels. Lucifer himself is called the morning star. Job 38 says 7 When the morning stars sang together, And all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:7)

So when it says that Satan swept a third of the stars from heaven to Earth, it likely refers to the fact that Satan convinced a third of the angels to join him in his rebellion against God. We see something like that in verse 7 : And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, (Rev. 12:7)

How many that is, we don't know, and when that took place, we don't know. Probably within the first creation week, and probably billions, if not much more.

But this cosmic rebellion against God is at the very centre of human history. The earth and mankind, have become chess pieces in a cosmic match between God and the rebel angel, Satan. Satan is seeking the glory and worship that belongs to God, and seeking the lordship of the Earth, and with it, the universe.

In fact, only one nation has ever been ruled by Yahweh Himself: Israel. Only one ethnos, one people group has ever submitted directly to the true God and Creator, and that is the people God called for Himself: Israel. Every other nation and empire has, to some degree, been under the sway of the wicked one. So you can get an idea of why the woman would be a thorn in the flesh of the dragon.

Satan hates Israel because they remind him of his fate. Satan hates Israel because this nation travailed in pain to bring forth the Messiah who saves souls from Satan's grip and will one day rule all nations. Satan hates Israel because it was from the pens of Israelites that God's Word came to the world. Satan hates Israel because it was from the twelve-tribed Israel that came the twelve apostles and the church that would take the Gospel to all nations.

At the centre of the dispute over who is more glorious and who deserves to rule was this nation Israel, and her greatest Son, her greatest achievement: the second Adam, the Messiah.

So we read of what the Dragon did when it saw what this nation was about to bring forth.

And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born.

The Dragon knew that this Child was the only true challenge to his power. He knew that this Child is the true heir to the throne, the real prince. And so the Dragon wanted to prevent Him from taking more than a step on this Earth. In fact, some think that this goes back to Genesis 6, where the sons of God took daughters of men, and attempted there to pollute the human bloodline and prevent the seed of the woman ever bringing forth Messiah. And then in Genesis 10 we see the establishment of Babel, where Satan set up a counterfeit virgin birth, with the mother-child cult under Nimrod and his wife, Semiramus. And then all the attempts to destroy the Hebrew people, from Pharaoh to Balaam to the kings of Assyria, Greece and Rome.

And we then see the Dragon, the prince of the power of the air, working in his rulers through Herod. Herod hears through the wise men that a natural born king of Israel has been born in Bethlehem. He tries to get close to the child through deceit so that he can assassinate this prince. But when he sees that the Magi have tricked him, his cruel wrath and hatred is seen in an indiscriminate and mass slaughter of all the children in Bethlehem under two years old.

We sing Silent Night, Holy Night, All is Calm, all is bright. We imagine beautiful peaceful skies, and the star of Bethlehem shining over a stable or a cave. And perhaps it was so, outwardly. But in the angelic realm, there was a terrifying roar of fury, as the Dragon thrashed and kicked to devour the Child. Who knows what angelic swords crossed that night? Who knows what clashes took place in the second and third heavens that night while Joseph and Mary lovingly looked at his tiny, sleeping face.

Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt until Herod had died.

But we see other attempts on the life of this Child later on: people in Nazareth trying to throw Him off a cliff, mobs seeking to stone Him. I wonder at what point the Dragon understood that when Jesus was dying on the Cross, it was precisely the moment when the Child had won, and he had lost.

So we came then finally to the third character in this sign.

III. The Child

5 She bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne.

Here in this verse we have the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ summed up. Jesus is born of the virgin Mary, a true daughter of Israel. We see her deep devotion to Israel and the Messianic vision in her famous song of praise in Luke 1, since titled the Magnificat. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, took up His adopted father's trade, had half brothers and half sisters, and lived in obscurity for thirty years. When the time was right, God called Him to be baptised by John, and begin His three-year Messianic ministry, culminating in His sacrificial death on the Cross.

For three days later, He rose from the dead, sinless, vindicated and victorious. Forty days later, He ascended, and as this text tells us, He was caught up to God's throne. And there, the Father said to the Son the words of Psalm 110: The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool." (Ps. 110:1).

It was then that Psalm 2 was taking place: 7 "I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. 8 Ask of Me, and I will give You The nations for Your inheritance, And the ends of the earth for Your possession. (Ps. 2:7-8)

Once the Child is born, and the Dragon fails to devour him, He inevitably wins. The true Prince has been born, has survived, and now takes His throne in Heaven, waiting for the day when He will bind Satan for 1000 years and take up His throne on Earth.

The rest of the chapter tells us that after Christmas, after Christ's resurrection and ascension, the Dragon is now defeated and desperate. At some point in the future, He is cast from even the third Heaven, and the Great Tribulation on Earth begins. Satan takes revenge on the Jewish people, and persecutes them, particularly believers. But believers have this hope:

11 "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. (Rev. 12:11)

Christmas is actually the story of the defeat of the Dragon, of the second Adam born, the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham and David. It is the story of a drama that began before the Garden of Eden, and its decisive moment was in a lonely place called Bethlehem. And its ripple effects will be felt through the most trying time the world will ever go through, through a time of peace and joy on the Earth, and into the New Jerusalem. It's a story of the special nation chosen to nurture the Messiah in its womb, and bring Him forth for all peoples.

It's so much more than Santa and sleighbells. It's a serious, joyful drama of who is the king of the world. With Revelation 12 in mind, listen again, with new ears, to these words you've heard so many times, and consider the difference between the Child ruling, and the Dragon ruling:

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King!*

*Let ev'ry heart prepare Him room,
and heav'n and nature sing,*

*No more let sins and sorrows grow,
nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
far as the curse is found,*

*He rules the world with truth and grace,
and makes the nations prove
the glories of His righteousness
and wonders of His love.*