

Christmas in Revelation: People of God vs Enemy of God

Revelation 12:1-6

Turn to Rev 12 please. At Christmas time we set up Nativity scenes in our home. We have two. One is Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus in a shed, Mary's on her knees facing the baby, there are some sheep resting there. Baby Jesus has a halo.

The other scene has Mary and Joseph and three wise men and one shepherd, all on their knees, worshipping the baby. A sheep and a goat are lying down and resting.

John in Revelation puts it a little differently. In Revelation, there are just two figures in the nativity scene. First there is just a woman, a royal looking woman, seems to be like a queen. She is pregnant, and about to give birth, and it is a difficult birth. She is crying out in severe pain, and the baby is not coming quickly.

And then the second figure arrives. A huge red dragon, grotesque and powerful, vicious and hostile. This dragon comes up to the woman and stands in front of her, watching and waiting, so he can eat the baby as soon as it is born.

Would we set up a nativity scene like that? Would you paint that on a Christmas card? Send it to all your friends and relatives with a nice note: "We love you lots; Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!" Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright.

Matthew's birth story of Jesus, and Luke's story, are not as quaint and warm as we picture them. There is hardship in those stories, and I'm not sure the nativity scenes in our house ever occurred. Joseph and Mary were just trying to survive.

But John in Revelation shows us the spiritual tension and danger that's taking place around Jesus' birth in Bethlehem.

The Queen of Heaven Rev 12:1 *A great 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.*

This woman's accessories are the sun, moon, and stars. The sun is her robe, a remarkable picture. The moon is under her feet, apparently as a footstool. And she has a crown of twelve stars. We'll talk in a few minutes about who she is, but it says she is a sign, a symbol, which probably means this is not an actual woman, it is not Mary. The dragon also is a sign, a symbol.

Severe Pains, a Difficult Birth 12:2 *She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth* [NRSV]. For this one verse I'm not using the NIV. Verse 2 sounds like worse labour pains than usual. NIV downplays this, NRSV more accurate to the Greek words.

Some childbirths are longer and more difficult than others, and this woman's labour seems to be one of those long, hard ones.

The Ruling Dragon 12:3 *Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads.*

Seven heads with seven crowns mean the dragon is also a royal character of some kind, a princely being. The dragon rules in some way. In the OT a horn is frequently a symbol for strength, so the ten horns would mean great strength.

Ten horns on seven heads is difficult to imagine, is it not? But Revelation offers us impressionist art rather than replica art, and if we press John's Revelation for technical accuracy, it will tie us in knots.

The Dragon Destroys 12:4a *Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth.* The dragon is a symbol for Satan, for the devil; we learn that in 12:9. Some think these stars refer to fallen angels, to spiritual beings that God created to serve him but who turned away to serve Satan. That may or may not be true.

Either way, the dragon destroys a third of the stars. Without having any idea what the stars might symbolize, it's clear that the dragon has enormous power, and that it is a destructive power. The woman was clothed with God's heavenly creation, but the dragon attacked and destroyed it. That's the real point. It shows us the dragon's power, and his hostile nature.

If these stars are good spirits turned bad, this image tells us they were not willing participants in this rebellion against God. They were bullied by the dragon, pressured in some way. This is the dragon's power and nature.

12:4b *The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born.*

There: The dragon destroyed a third of the stars, and prepares to destroy the child. **Now we have John's nativity scene.** The heavenly woman (v2) *was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.* (v4b) *The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born.*

Who is the Woman? Because John calls the woman a sign, a symbol, she is not likely Mary. A Jewish believer in one of John's churches in Asia would immediately assume the woman was Israel. The OT prophets often spoke of Israel as God's wife. The twelve stars in her crown would be the twelve tribes of Israel.

Matthew and Luke both have long genealogies for Jesus. We tend to dismiss these. We assume they don't really matter, since Jesus was born of a virgin. But Matthew and Luke, the ones who taught us that Jesus was born of a virgin, take care to line up all of Jesus' Jewish ancestors.

In Genesis, the sun and moon and stars bow down before Joseph, in a dream that got Joseph in some trouble. In that dream, the sun and moon and stars meant the rest of Israel. So a Jewish believer reading Revelation would say the woman is Israel, with some good reasons.

But a Gentile believer in one of John's churches would assume the woman was the church, the bride of Christ. Jesus called himself the bridegroom, and he told parables about his father preparing a great wedding feast. And other NT Scriptures also speak of the church as the bride of Christ. The twelve stars on her crown would be the twelve apostles rather than the twelve tribes.

In Revelation, John brings those two together. The woman is the true people of God through the ages, both Israel and the church, one true people of God. In the beginning of Rev 21 we read that the new Jerusalem, the Holy City, is also the bride. God's people are the city, God's people are the bride, two different symbols for one reality.

And later in Rev 21, we read that the city has twelve foundations, and the twelve foundations of the city are the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And the city also has twelve gates, and on the twelve gates are written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel (Rv21:12-13). Again, the woman is the one true people of God including both Israel and the church.

The Woman Gives Birth to a Ruling Son 12:5a *She gave birth to a son, a male child, who "will rule all the nations with an iron scepter."* This line, "will rule all the nations with an iron scepter," quotes Psalm 2, which is a psalm predicting the Messiah, the descendant of David.

So we know who the child is, it's the coming Christ that Ps 2 described, who is also Jesus of Nazareth. Which we all knew anyway. But we can see now why the dragon wants to devour the child. The dragon has heads and crowns, that is, *the dragon* plans to rule the nations with an iron scepter. But this child is destined to rule the nations with an iron scepter.

Therefore, the dragon MUST, absolutely must, destroy that child. Who will rule the nations? It will be one of those two, either that child or that dragon. The dragon will rule ONLY if he destroys that child.

And for us to grasp this properly, we need again to see Christ as a ruler *produced by the people of God*. We like it that God sent his Son. That is true, God sent his Son, born of the virgin Mary.

But remember also that God told David, "I will set YOUR ancestor over MY house and MY kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever." 2 Chron 17:14. David's line, in the tribe of Judah, in the nation of Israel, would give birth to this child who would rule forever.

The woman, who is the people of God, is in terrible labour pains, trying to produce this child that will rule the nations. The dragon, the enemy of God, is waiting for the birth, because he plans to rule the nations and he must at all costs destroy that child.

The woman, for her part, needs that child to succeed. If the Messiah Saviour never appears, the people of God are lost. If the Messiah Saviour appears but is defeated, the people of God are lost.

The people of God versus the enemy of God, only one will survive in the end, their conflict centered on this child: the woman in great pain, trying desperately to produce the child, the dragon close by and alert, needing desperately to destroy the child = John's nativity scene.

The Child is Saved 12:5b *And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.* Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and about 35 years later he ascended to God and to his throne. John packs those 35 years into a moment. He was born, and grabbed to God.

In this picture, the whole time of Jesus' life on earth is a time a great danger and vulnerability. That whole time the dragon is trying to devour the child. "Snatched up to God." I get the feeling that God was SO MUCH relieved to get this important child out of harm's way, into a place of safety. Great relief in heaven.

There is another side to this. John's churches are being persecuted by Rome. Who is ruling the nations? So far, the dragon is still ruling the nations. We find the image of Jesus ruling the nations with a rod of iron a bit severe. We want a kinder, gentler ruler.

But if we were believers in John's persecuted churches (and always remember that Revelation was written to persecuted believers in the first century), then a Christ who will rule the Romans and the rest with a heavy iron scepter is the best thing we could imagine, may it start soon.

There IS someone who will do this, and there WAS a time when that plan was vulnerable, but that time is OVER, that future ruler is now safe with God, and will return when God is ready.

The Protected Woman 12:6 *The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.*

There is quite a bit of exodus language in Revelation. Three places talk about a sea monster like this dragon: Ps 74:13-15; Ezk 29:3-5; 32:2-4. In each case it refers to Egypt, and Ps 74 specifically to the exodus. God parting the waters of the Red Sea was splitting the heads of the sea monster.

In Exodus, God led Israel out of Egypt into the desert, in the desert Israel was safe from Egypt. That's the picture here. The woman flees into the wilderness just as Israel fled Egypt, and as God cared for Israel in the wilderness, so God cares for the woman, his people.

In Revelation 12, the Dragon has plan A, plan B, and plan C. The dragon's plan A, the one that needed to succeed, was to destroy the child. Plan A failed, which means the dragon is doomed. He will not rule the nations, the woman's child will, and the dragon will be banished.

That banishing has not happened yet, but is inevitable, and he knows it. The dragon's plan B is to pursue the woman. He's doomed, and frustrated. 12:13: *When the dragon saw that he's been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the child.*

In the paragraph after that, the dragon attacked the woman in different ways, but they all failed. The dragon would like to destroy the people of God, wipe the people of God off the earth. But he cannot. It will never happen. The church, my brothers and sisters, will never be put out on earth. Plan B also fails.

Now to plan C: 12:17 *Then the dragon was enraged at the woman [because she bore the child, and he could not destroy her or the child], and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring – those who keep God's commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.*

The woman is the whole people of God, together, as one. Individual believers in God are each seen as her children. All of us together are the woman, individually we are her children. Plan B was to destroy the woman, but that's not working any better than plan A, so plan C is to make war on individual believers.

Individual believers are also protected in Revelation. They are sealed, every believer has the name of the Father and of the Lamb written on their foreheads. We read about that in Rev 7 and Rev 14. They are sealed BEFORE the trouble starts, and at the end, after the trouble, there has not been one casualty. Every one sealed ends up with the Lamb at the end.

The basic message of our paragraph is one of comfort and encouragement and hope. 12:1-5a give us a painful and dangerous situation, the people of God laboring in pain to produce the child who will rule the world, and the great dragon focused on destroying that child.

But v5b tells us that the child WAS born, and now God keeps the child safe until his time comes. It will happen. And v6 tells us that the woman, the people of God, are also protected by God. We are like Israel in the wilderness. God has brought us out of Egypt, out of the dragon's reach, and he will keep us safe.

These things were written so the Asian churches in the first century would understand what was happening to them, so their difficulties would make sense, and so they would see that the big picture is still encouraging.

And we here today, this story has affected our last year. Things happened to us this last year because of this conflict. This is our spiritual environment. And if the Lord waits to return, this paragraph will shape our coming year as well. Revelation 12 show us the bigger nativity scene.

Jesus' last words to the disciples in John's Gospel, before his arrest. "In the world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Prayer: Eternal God, tomorrow we remember the birth of Jesus, Mary's child, the child you promised would rule the nations, the child you promised would rule your people and your kingdom forever. Thank you that he is safe, that his time of danger is over. Thank you that as you cared for Israel in the wilderness, and carried them on eagles wings, so also you care for your people now, we who are your bride. Lord Jesus, come soon. Amen.

Benediction: *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. Amen.* [Rom 16:20]

Appendix: Rv 12:6 mentions 1260 days in the wilderness. This introduced in Rv 11:2-3, 42 months = 1260 days of trouble. Also Rv 13:5. Numbers 33 lists the entire journey of Israel in the wilderness through 42 locations. Wilcox concludes that the "42" indicates God's care of Israel during the wilderness journey, and that Revelation gives one "month" to each of those locations, but the real message of Revelation is that God is leading his people out of "Egypt" through the wilderness into the promised land, and the 42 months = 1260 days symbolically indicate God's care of the church as he did with Israel in the wilderness. I think that Wilcox is probably right in this, because there is quite a bit of other exodus imagery in Revelation: plagues, darkness, frogs, water turned to blood, hail, altar of incense, lampstands, etc.