

Revelation Chapter 12 Handout

This is a story with three main characters (the woman, the child and the dragon). In three scenes it will play itself out as an ancient story line with which the people would be familiar.

It is a plot still used today. A usurper (the dragon) is doomed to be killed by a child who will be born (child) will plot to take the throne which is not his. The prince is miraculously hidden away until he is old enough to defeat the usurper. This is the story of Apollo whose mother, Leto, when ready to give birth is pursued by the dragon Python who sought to kill her. Only on the island of Delos is the mother welcomed where she gives birth to her child. Apollo finally kills Python. In Egyptian myth we have Isis, the pregnant mother of Horus, who is pursued by Set the red dragon. Ultimately Isis kills the dragon.

A second image that ties in is that in AD 83, the Emperor Domitian's son dies. Domitian then proclaims the child to be a god and the child's mother a divine mother of a god. Coins of the time show the child with 7 stars in his hand (representing the 7 planets) as well as the child and the moon...showing forth the golden age.

A third image comes from the Old Testament where Isaiah (54:1-6); Jeremiah (3:20); Ezekiel (16:8-14) and Hosea (2:19-20) all use the image of a woman associated with Israel.

A final view of this chapter is that it is a retelling of the Exodus story with the characters being updated to Christ as Moses and the woman as the people of Israel.

12 A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.

A woman - much discussion has been given to the identity of the woman. The Catholic church has wanted to associate her with Mary, however it appears that she is symbolic of a larger community (see note above) and probably represents Israel... the chosen people of God. However she could also represent the people of God, the faithful covenant believing community of God, which includes both Israel and the church. All of those who are prepared to receive the Lord.

Clothed with the sun - she shares the brightness of God and of the lamb

Moon - this represents permanence, the moon is always there as a creation of God

Twelve stars - again a reference to the twelve tribes

Birth pangs - the messianic community has been suffering as a prelude to the birth of the messiah (Is. 26:17; 66:7-8)

3 Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and

threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born.

*A great red dragon – again note similarity to earlier myths. This is a creature with “great” power, someone who is not to be treated lightly
Seven heads and ten horns – this extends the image that while it may be a single entity, it extends its reach to others... heads being kings (diadems) and horns being centers of power
His tail swept a third of the stars – this could refer to his ability and power to harm either part of God’s creation or to harm the saints who are often referred to as stars. (Daniel 8:10, 24)
Dragon stands before the woman – here we have the ultimate threat to the plan of God. If Satan can stop the birth then all is lost... we see images of Herod killing the children and of the crucifixion.*

5 And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

*Gives birth – the dragon is not able to stop the birth
Male child – most commentators have taken this to be Jesus, however there are those who also see in this child a collective image of the church... since we are all in Christ and are the body of Christ this has some merit.
Who will rule – Christ and the church will rule together according to John
Snatched away and taken to God – Snatched away is probably the crucifixion and taken away to God is probably the ascension.
Woman fled – this could be the flight into Egypt (if woman is Mary) however it is more likely that it refers to a time of testing, much as Jesus went through a time of testing in his wilderness journey (as did Israel after leaving Egypt)
Nourished – both Jesus and the people of Israel were nourished by God and so God’s people in this time of testing will be taken care of as well. God has not forgotten them*

7 And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world--he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

*War broke out – the timing of the battle is important. It takes place after Jesus has returned to heaven. He has accomplished this task of dying for the world to defeat sin and all of its power in the world.
Heaven – this tells us that evil is cosmic in scope. It is not limited to just the earth or our lives here.*

No longer any place in heaven - it is clear now that the tide has turned... no longer will Satan wander around like he did in the book of Job. The sides are finally set.

He is thrown down - Satan is going to have to take his last stand. Now that he is defeated in heaven he will make a stand on the earth... meaning he will try to overcome God's people here. Satan will be more focused in his attacks. This does not make Satan the ruler of the earth... remember God is still Lord and ruler and his people shall reign.

10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming,
"Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Messiah,
for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down,
who accuses them day and night before our God.
11 But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony,
for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

Now have come - this is a proclamation that things are changing. The battle is not only engaged but the "allies" have landed at a spiritual Normandy. God's kingdom has a beachhead in heaven and it making progress on earth.

Salvation, power and kingdom of our God - all of this is available to the saints in their efforts to stand fast. They are not powerless and alone

Who accuses them day and night before God - this was Satan's job, to bring the truth of sins to the eyes and ears of God.

Blood of the Lamb - This victory has been made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus and by the willingness of the angels (and by extension the church) to proclaim the salvation by grace which has come to them in Christ. They are free from the power of sin and so can stand fast in the face of the enemy.

Did not cling to life - their salvation is assured even if their bodies die... so there is nothing that can separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus

12 Rejoice then, you heavens
and those who dwell in them!
But woe to the earth and the sea,
for the devil has come down to you
with great wrath,
because he knows that his time is short!"

Rejoice then you heavens - Satan is banished from the place of God and so there is great joy

Woe to the earth and the sea - Satan is now marshalling his forces for one last push (The spiritual Battle of the Bulge) in order to maintain his very existence.

His time is short - this is a promise to all who believe that the war is over even if the battle is not yet done

13 So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. 14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time.

He pursued the woman - this again points to the woman being the faithful people of God (Jew and Gentile). So Satan now will chase them in order to conquer them and get revenge. The word for pursue here is also the word for persecute. So Satan is using the Roman's as his agents of persecution.

Eagles wings - this is a direct quote from Exodus 19:4 where God tells the Israelites that he had carried them out of Egypt (from the snake Pharaoh) on eagles wings... and they went into the wilderness

Time and times - this again is that interim period which precedes the final victory.

15 Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. 16 But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. 17 Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus. 18 Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore.

Poured water like a river - this represents chaos and destruction. Flood reminds us of Noah and the chaos. But this time...

The earth came to help the woman - the very creation of God rises up to save God's people. Satan is now on his own. God's good creation stands with those who are faithful.

Dragon was angry - the dragon is finding itself in a losing cause but cannot give it up and so anger is the only option.

Make war - the dragon is going to find those who are vulnerable and try to exterminate those who are faithful to Jesus... meaning... those who are reading this letter. So the suffering of the people is not from God leaving them, but from Satan attacking them because they are faithful

Took his stand on the sand of the seashore - the sea has always depicted chaos for the Israelites. In the end of Revelation there will be the comment that there is no more sea... meaning no more chaos. The sea was where the serpents lived who threatened God's people. So Satan takes his stand at the edge of chaos... the one place where he might be able to find some aid.