



Revelation 12: Female Figures and Figures of Evil

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THE TWELFTH CHAPTER OF THE APOCALYPSE DESCRIBES A HEAVENLY WOMAN clothed with the sun and crowned with twelve stars. Together with the Bride of Christ and the Whore of Babylon, she is one of three symbolic women who appear in the visions of John of Patmos. A fourth woman, apparently an influential teacher in the church in Thyatira, is regarded by John as a false prophet, a “Jezebel” (Rev 2:20). Each woman of the Apocalypse is unequivocally aligned either with God or with Satan. These female images are part of a system of symbols used by an author who speaks to his audience in code.

The woman of Revelation 12 is the mother of a son who is snatched into heaven. She is persecuted by a dragon, flees into the wilderness, and there is nourished by God. This symbolic woman has been variously interpreted as the Virgin Mary, Israel, Eve, and the church. In actuality, her identity is multifaceted. This essay will explore the many aspects of her identity, examining those which are derived from the Old Testament, as well as those which come from sources outside the Bible. In particular, I will explore the woman’s relationship to the dragon, since this will shed light on how we are to understand the woman.

I. THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN

At the opening of chapter 12, John of Patmos describes his vision of a heavenly woman persecuted by a dragon:

And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, and the

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moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars, and she was pregnant and was crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth. And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. And his tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them down to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman as she was about to give birth, in order that he might devour her child when she gave birth. Then she gave birth to a son, a male, who is to rule all the nations with an iron rod. And her child was snatched away to God and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she may be fed for one thousand two hundred sixty days. (12:1-6)

The woman in this vision is depicted as a goddess would be. She appears with the moon beneath her feet and the twelve stars of the zodiac as her crown. Similarly, the Assyrian Juno wore a crown of precious stones, corresponding to the twelve signs of the zodiac. Other Greco-Roman goddesses were clothed or crowned with stars. Apollo's mother Leto wears a veil of stars.¹ Ancient coins picture the Ephesian Artemis with stars and a crescent moon.²

The plot of Rev 12:1-6 is similar to pagan myths that would have circulated in the Roman empire at the time of the writing of the Apocalypse. In Greek myth, the dragon Python tries to kill the infant sun-god Apollo, but Apollo's mother Leto escapes to the island of Delos and gives birth there. Apollo later returns to kill the dragon. Parallels between Revelation 12 and the Leto myth include the mother's flight through the air (Leto flies from the monster, assisted by the north wind), the aid of the elements (earth or Poseidon), and the intervention of God or Zeus.³ A similar Egyptian myth describes Set the dragon who pursues Isis and who is eventually killed by Isis's son Horus.

The myth of the dragon of darkness and chaos defeated by the rising sun-god was known in a number of forms in the ancient world. This myth was adapted by the Roman imperial court for political purposes—for what the twentieth-century reader might call “public relations.” Roman coins show rays of light emanating from the emperor's head as though he were the sun-god. Nero had statues erected, depicting himself as Apollo. Augustus connected his rule with the “golden age” of Apollo, who reigned during a time of peace and prosperity. In the Roman imperial recasting of the solar myth, the mother goddess was Roma, her son was the emperor, and the dragon represented the powers of evil, darkness, and chaos which threatened to overwhelm the empire.⁴

While modern biblical scholars might say that John “borrowed” pagan goddess imagery to make his point, it is important to note that John of Patmos would argue that the *opposite* is true. The author of Revelation suggests that it was instead

¹R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920) 2:315-16.

²Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1976) 71.

³*Ibid.*, 67.

⁴M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989) 151.

the pagan idolaters who borrowed and perverted the story of the woman and the dragon. John implies that the well-known solar myth, including its use by the Roman imperial court, is a parody and a lie. In fact, the entire book of Revelation describes the imperial court's myths and practices as a parody of the reality of God's heavenly kingdom. The worship and praise offered to the emperor is a shallow and corrupt imitation of the heavenly worship offered to God and the Lamb. In Revelation 12, John counters the imperial version of the myth by revealing the true identity of the woman crowned with the stars: she is the mother of the Messiah. Furthermore, the author sees through Roma's disguise and reveals her for who she truly is, the harlot in chapters 17-18.

Unlike the woman of Revelation 12 who appears in heaven, Roma is of the world. The author calls her Babylon (Rev 17:5), but she rides a beast with seven heads, evoking the picture of Rome's seven hills. The women, both seen in the desert, are intended as foils to one another. The woman of chapter 12 is clothed with God's heavenly lights, while the harlot is clothed with extravagant earthly clothing. The woman of chapter 12 is the mother of the Messiah and a giver of life; the woman of chapters 17-18 is "the mother of harlots." She is a prostitute and a killer who drinks the blood of martyrs. The women's relationship to the chaos monster is contrasted. The heavenly woman has the water monster as her enemy and is threatened by a flood; the harlot is "seated on many waters" (17:1) and rides the beast from the sea. The former is protected by God; the latter is destroyed. John's message is clear: the queen of heaven is *not* Leto, Roma, or any other pagan goddess.

II. MOTHER EVE

In a setting in which Christians were likely to have known the pagan myths about the birth of the sun-god, John tells the story using vocabulary and motifs which evoke other connotations, familiar images from Israel's scriptures. There are numerous verbal similarities with the Septuagint. Though John has probably taken over an earlier myth, he has made it very much his own with his unique ability to weave together Old Testament words and bits of phrases to give voice to his visions.

One of the first recognizable Old Testament references is the story of Eve and the serpent. The dragon is called "the ancient serpent" (12:9), evoking the memory of the serpent of Genesis 3. In 12:17, the dragon makes war "with the rest of her seed," just as God predicted that there would be enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (Gen 3:15). The echoes of Genesis 3 are deliberate. John believed that the serpent's hatred of Eve prefigured Satan's persecution of the church. Furthermore, Revelation 12:2 describes a woman in pangs of childbirth, reminding us that Gen 3:16 prophesied that the woman would suffer while giving birth. In John's appropriation of the Genesis 3 passage, the woman's birthpangs are the eschatological birthpangs of the mother of the Messiah.

III. ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS

Throughout his revelation, John makes use of Exodus imagery, showing that the Christian experience of persecution parallels the suffering and deliverance of the ancient Israelites in Egypt. For instance, certain Christians are protected from an angel of destruction by God's mark (9:4). The saints sing the song of Moses by the sea (15:2-3). In Rev 12:13-17, the dragon's persecution of the woman echoes the story of Israel in the wilderness:

And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male. And the two wings of the great eagle were given to the woman, so that she might fly from the serpent into the desert to her place where she is fed for a time, and times, and half a time. Then from his mouth the serpent poured out water like a river after the woman, in order that he might sweep her away. But the earth came to the aid of the woman; and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which the dragon poured out of his mouth. And the dragon was angry with the woman and went away to make war with the rest of her seed, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the witness of Jesus.

The woman, like Israel, is threatened by a flood of waters. She was given the eagles' wings in order to escape into the desert, reminding readers that God told the Israelites, "You yourselves have seen what I have done to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Exod 19:4). Like Israel, the woman of Revelation 12 finds the desert to be a sanctuary. There she is nourished by God, just as Israel received bread from heaven. The Exodus story is frequently told in terms of God's conquering of the chaotic water monster. This motif was taken up in the literature of the intertestamental period. The struggles of the Jewish people against their enemies was a part of the cosmic battle between Satan and God. Satan, frequently portrayed as a dragon, tries to claim God's sovereignty for himself. The dragon can also represent an oppressive ruling nation which fights on the side of evil.⁵ God's defeat of the dragon was part of the Jews' eschatological hope, often connected with the coming of the messiah.⁶ John makes use of this typology to describe the time of the church's persecution at the hands of the Roman empire prior to Christ's defeat of the dragon at Armageddon.

IV. MARY

Later Christian exegetes equated the woman of chapter 12 with Mary, the mother of Jesus. This passage influenced the development of doctrines of the

⁵Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 31. Other Jewish apocalyptic influence in Revelation 12 can be seen in Michael's battle with the dragon in 12:7-9. The time of the woman's desert sojourn is 1260 days, or "a time, and times, and half a time." This is a reference to Dan 7:25, where the saints of the Most High are given into the hand of Antiochus (the fourth beast in Daniel) for "a time, two times, and half a time." John uses the same amount of time to describe the period when the nations will trample the holy city in 11:1-3.

⁶The second-century B.C.E. *Testament of Asher* 7:3 says that the Most High will save Israel when he visits the earth "crushing the dragon's head in the water." *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday) 1:818.

bodily assumption and coronation of the Virgin Mary. Artistic portrayals of Mary frequently show her crowned with twelve stars.

On the literal level, Revelation 12 does not completely preclude the equation of the woman with Mary. For instance, the persecution of the woman and her child reminds one of the holy family fleeing into Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod (Matthew 2). In both cases, their flight is precipitated by divine intervention. Furthermore, the woman in 12:17 has offspring who probably represent the church. In John 19:26-27, Jesus gives his mother to his disciple, so that (according to later exegesis) Mary becomes the mother of the church. However, the author of Revelation probably does not intend for the woman in chapter 12 to be equated primarily with the biological mother of Jesus. The events in chapter 12 do not fit what happened at Bethlehem. God's rescue of the male child more closely fits the resurrection or the ascension. Even though the story depicts the rescue of Christ the newborn infant, one must remember that John is a symbolic thinker who consistently resists literal interpretation and strict chronological constraints. In Rev 19:11, the child who was snatched up to heaven appears again as a full-grown man seated on a white horse. He is the one who defeats Satan's forces once and for all.

The early church writers did not interpret Revelation 12 in a mariological sense until the fourth century, as mariological speculation increased.⁷ Nevertheless, Mary cannot be completely left out of discussion of Revelation 12, because she, like the woman clothed with the sun, is the one who gave birth to the Messiah.

V. ECCLESIA AND THE CROWN OF STARS

Following the child's birth, the woman underwent persecution by the dragon, and the dragon made war on her other children. It is perhaps the description of the woman's other children in 12:17 which best reveals the identity of the woman. Her children are "those who keep the commandments of God and hold the witness of Jesus." In other words, the woman is the messianic community; she is the church in continuity with Israel. John, most likely a Jewish Christian, frequently emphasizes the continuity between Judaism and the Christian faith. Christians are the *real* Jews (2:9; 3:9). For John, Israel's true children are the faithful Christians who are persecuted by the dragon. The dragon is Satan, the ancient enemy of God. He is angry that the child has escaped his grasp, so he vents his anger by waging war on the church and her children. The war takes the form of the persecution that Christians must undergo. The dragon's tail sweeps down a third of the stars (12:4). These may be his death throes, for we read in 12:7-12 that he was cast down from heaven and that he has been conquered by the blood of the Lamb (12:11). Verse 12 reminds us that the devil's time is short.

The crown of stars gives us information about the woman who wears it. The crown (*stephanos*) is used elsewhere to describe the reward given to those who are faithful unto death (2:10 and 4:4). The *stephanos* has connotations of victory, for the

⁷Raymond E. Brown et al., *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 235.

word can refer to the wreath worn by victors at an athletic competition. The suffering church already wore the crown which was promised to those who would endure—those who would be faithful unto death (2:10). The hearers of John's Apocalypse knew there was the potential for bloody martyrdom and debasement at the hands of the emperor. Internal evidence suggests that the church at Smyrna was probably already undergoing some form of persecution (2:10), and there are hints that Philadelphia may have been similarly threatened (3:10). Those facing possible martyrdom were assured that the church wore the crown of victory even as she endured the devil's attacks.

The woman's crown contains twelve stars. For John, the number twelve represented both Israel and the church. In his description of the New Jerusalem (21:12-14), the Bride of Christ is adorned with twelve jeweled gates for the twelve tribes, and twelve foundations for the twelve apostles. While the goddess Juno wore a crown made up of the twelve stars of the zodiac, the glorious stars in the crown of the true queen of heaven (Rev 12:1) are the tribes of Israel.

VI. THE FOUR WOMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

According to John of Patmos, the present order was corrupted by Satan and thoroughly polluted with idolatry. The empire, its rulers, its rites, and even its monetary system were evil. John believed that it was immoral and dangerous for Christians to make any accommodations to the present political and social order. Thus he condemned the unnamed woman prophet of Thyatira as a "Jezebel," for she was teaching "her children" that it was acceptable to eat meat which had been sacrificed to idols (2:20-23). The epitome of idolatry was Roma, the Whore of Babylon, who rode the beast, committed fornication with the kings of the earth, and was drunk with the blood of the martyrs. Instead of a starry crown, she wore on her forehead the title "Mother of Whores."

In contrast to the impurity of Roma, the New Jerusalem is presented to the Lamb as a pure virgin bride. While John of Patmos places a high premium on sexual purity (the 144,000 who sing praises before the Lamb's throne in chapter 14 are virgin men "who have not defiled themselves with women"), John's primary concern is the rejection of idolatry. The prophet Jezebel's "fornication" (2:20) refers not to literal sexual immorality, but, rather, to what John finds far more offensive: accommodation to an idolatrous society.

Some recent interpreters have expressed ambivalence about the female imagery in John's revelation, objecting to the virgin/whore dichotomy in his symbolic system, categories reflecting a culture that emphasizes male control of female sexuality.⁸ However, I would argue that the vision of Revelation 12 has an enduring message for Christians, both male and female. Unlike the numerous authors throughout Christian history who argue that there is an ancient and treacherous

⁸Susan R. Garrett, "Revelation," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 382.

alliance between woman and Satan, John points to their primordial enmity. The enmity between the serpent and the woman in Gen 3:15 prefigures Satan's persecution of the church.

John's Apocalypse is a call to resist evil any time a violent culture or political system makes idolatrous claims of sovereignty over Christians. While the pure Bride of Christ transcends evil, and Jezebel and Whore of Babylon embrace evil, it is the woman of Revelation 12—the mother of Satan's mortal enemy—who is confronted with evil face to face. Giving birth to the Messiah in the face of the dragon, the woman represents the struggle of real Christians to remain faithful and devoted to God alone. Pursued and persecuted by Satan, protected and nourished by God, the woman crowned with the stars is a vision given for encouragement to the suffering churches and to all who endure the devil's attack.