

The Conflict in Heaven and Earth

by John F. Walvoord

The sermon explores the conflict in heaven and earth, introducing the seven personages of the tribulation, including the woman (Israel), the man-child (Christ), and the great red dragon (Satan).

Scripture: Revelation 12

Topics: "End Times", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

John F. Walvoord delves into chapters 12 through 14 of the book of Revelation, introducing the key actors of the tribulation period, including the woman symbolizing Israel, the dragon representing Satan, the man-child referring to Christ, Michael representing the angels, and the two beasts symbolizing the world dictator and the false prophet. The great tribulation unfolds around these main characters, emphasizing the persecution and divine protection of Israel as a godly remnant. The chapters depict the cosmic battle between good and evil, the ultimate victory of the saints through the blood of the Lamb and their unwavering testimony, and the intense persecution faced by the faithful remnant of Israel during the end times.

Transcript

In chapters 12 through 14 of the book of Revelation, the great actors of the tribulation time are introduced in another parenthetical section ending at 14:20. As many commentators have noted they are seven in number: (1) the woman, representing Israel, (2) the dragon, representing Satan, (3) the man-child, referring to Christ, (4) Michael, representing the angels, (5) Israel, the remnant of the seed of the woman, (6) the beast out of the sea, the world dictator, and (7) the beast out of the earth, the false prophet and religious leader of the world. About these main characters swirls the tremendously moving scene of the great tribulation. First to be introduced and of prime importance as a key to the whole situation is the woman representing Israel.

The First Great Wonder, The Woman Clothed with the Sun: Israel (12:1-2)

12:1-2 And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.

The first of the seven personages to be introduced in this section of Revelation is described as a great wonder in heaven, or, better translated, a great "sign" in heaven (Gr., *semeion*). Though what John

beholds excites his wonder, he does not use the Greek word for wonder (*teras*), a word which does not occur in the Revelation. The main point is that it is a sign or symbol of important truth rather than merely a wonder. Subsequently, six other signs or miracles (cf. Greek) are mentioned (12:3; 13:13-14; 15:1; 16:14; 19:20). This sign in verse 1 is distinguished by being called "great." Though the sign is seen in heaven, it apparently portrays a reality on the earth, for subsequently the woman pictured is persecuted by Satan in the great tribulation. The woman is described as clothed with the sun, having the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. Further, she is with child and waiting the imminent birth of her son.

Many explanations have been offered for the identity of this woman. The woman does not represent Christ, nor the church in general, but rather Israel as the matrix from which Christ came. By contrast, other representative women are mentioned in the Apocalypse such as Jezebel (2:20), representative of false religion as a system; the harlot (17:1-7, 15-18), the apostate church of the future; and the bride, the Lamb's wife (19:7), the church joined to Christ in glory. In the Old Testament, Israel frequently is presented as the wife of Jehovah, often in her character as being unfaithful to her husband. Here is the godly remnant of Israel standing true to God in the time of the great tribulation.²²⁰

The description of the woman as clothed with the sun and the moon is an allusion to Genesis 37:9-11, where these heavenly bodies represent Jacob and Rachel, thereby identifying the woman with the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. In the same context, the stars represent the patriarchs, the sons of Jacob. The symbolism may extend beyond this to represent in some sense the glory of Israel and her ultimate triumph over her enemies. This identification of the woman as Israel seems to be supported by the evidence from this chapter. Israel is obviously the source from which have come many of the blessings of God including the Bible, Christ, and the apostles. The twelve stars seem to refer to the twelve tribes. The persecution of the woman coincides with the persecution of Israel.

The woman as the nation of Israel is seen travailing in birth and awaiting delivery of her child. Frequently in Scripture the nation Israel is pictured in the tribulation time as going through great trial and affliction. Though, historically, the nation gave birth to Christ through the Virgin Mary, the implication of verse 2 is that the references are to the sufferings of Israel as a nation rather than to the historic birth of Christ. It may refer to the sufferings of the nation in general over its entire troublesome history. If strictly interpreted, it may signify the travail of Israel at the time of the first coming of Christ as borne out by verses 3 and 4.

The Great Red Dragon: Satan (12:3-4)

12:3-4 And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.

The second great sign appearing in heaven is described as a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns upon his heads. From the similar description given in 13:1 and the parallel reference in Daniel 7:7-8, 24, it is clear that the revived Roman Empire is in view. Satan, however, is also called the dragon later in 12:9, and it is clear that the dragon is both the empire and the representation of satanic power. The color red may indicate his murderous characteristics. The seven heads and ten horns refer to the original ten kingdoms of which three were subdued by the little horn of Daniel 7:8, who is to be identified with the world ruler of the great tribulation who reigns over the revived Roman Empire.

The tail of the dragon is declared to draw a third part of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. This seems to refer to the gathering under his power of those who oppose him politically and spiritually involving his temporary subjugation of a large portion of the earth.

The dragon is seen awaiting the birth of the child with the intent to destroy it as soon as it is born.²²¹ The allusion here is unmistakably to the circumstances surrounding the birth of Christ in Bethlehem (the dragon referring to the Roman Empire at that time as dominated by Satan) and the attempts of Herod to destroy the Baby Jesus. It is significant that Herod as an Edomite was a descendant of Esau and of the people who were the traditional enemies of Jacob and his descendants. Whether motivated by his family antipathy to the Jews or by political consideration because he did not want competition in his office as king, Herod nevertheless fulfilled historically this reference to the destruction of children in Bethlehem (see Matt. 2:16-18).

The Man-Child: Christ (12:5-6)

12:5-6 And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days.

The woman identified as Israel in verses 1 and 2 is said in verse 5 to bring forth a man-child who is destined to rule all nations, but who for the time being is caught up to God to the throne. Though expositors have somewhat agreed that the woman is Israel, there has been considerable difference of opinion on the identity of the man-child. Some have contended that this is the New Testament church destined to reign with Christ and that the act of being caught up to God is the rapture. Though the woman with child is identified with Israel collectively rather than with the Virgin Mary specifically, the interpretation that the man-child is Christ Himself is far to be preferred. The Greek words for "man-child" (Gr., *hyion arsen*) with their emphasis upon his gender (*arsen* means "male") favor identification of the child as Christ rather than as the church which would be feminine. As Alford points out, the interpretation of *arsen* as neuter rather than masculine does not change its meaning nor the definite masculine character of *hyion* meaning "son."²²² Alford concludes, "The man-child is the Lord Jesus Christ, and none other."²²³ He is described as destined to rule all nations with a rod of iron. This is an allusion to Psalm 2:9, where in connection with Christ's reign over the earth, it is declared, "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." A similar expression is found in Revelation 19:15, where it is stated of Christ, "He shall rule them with a rod of iron." His rule over all nations with a rod of iron is to be distinguished from His rule over Israel which is of more benevolent character (cf. Luke 1:32-33).

The catching up of the man-child to God and to His throne seems to be a portrayal of the ascension of Christ. Alford interprets this as meaning that "after a conflict with the Prince of this world, who came and tried Him, but found nothing in Him, the Son of the woman was taken up to heaven and sat on the right hand of God. Words can hardly be plainer than these."²²⁴ An alternative view is that the "catching up" refers to the flight to Egypt. Shortly after the birth of Christ, Joseph was instructed to flee to Egypt in order to escape the wrath of Herod. Later Joseph and his family were directed to return to Nazareth. Some accordingly have objected to the idea that the child caught up to God pictures the ascension on the ground that "was caught up" connotes being delivered from danger, which was not the case at the ascension of Christ, but which was true in the flight to Egypt.

The Greek word here (harpazo,) sometimes is used to mean "to seize" or "to catch up" as a wild beast would its prey, as in John 10:12 where the wolf "catcheth" them and scattereth the sheep. However, the same word is used for the rapture of the church in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 where the church is caught up to heaven. This same word is likewise used of Paul being caught up to paradise (2 Cor. 12:2, 4) and of the Spirit of God catching up Philip (Acts 8:39). If the identification of the twenty-four elders is properly to be regarded as the church in heaven, it would seem to mix metaphors to have the church represented as a male child, especially when the church is regarded in chapter 19 as the wife and bride. There is no good reason for not identifying the man-child as Christ and interpreting the drama of verse 5 as the panorama of His birth, life, and ascension. The fact that He is caught up not only to God but to "his throne" is another indication that Christ is intended.

Attention is then directed, however, to the mother of the child, again represented as Israel. Here she is seen in the time of great tribulation as fleeing into the wilderness to a place prepared of God where for 1,260 days she is cared for (again the exact length of three and one-half years). There is obviously a tremendous time lapse between verses 5 and 6, but this is not an uncommon occurrence in prophecy; the first and second comings of Christ are frequently spoken of in the same sentence. Inasmuch as Israel is in comparative tranquillity and safety in the first three and one-half years of Daniel's seventieth week (Dan. 9:27), the reference must be to the preservation of a portion of the nation Israel through the great tribulation to await the second coming of Christ.

Satan Cast out of Heaven by Michael the Archangel (12:7-9)

12:7-9 And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

Though the conflict of the end of the age is primarily on earth, attention is directed in this section to the war which will be waged in heaven. Michael and his angels (that is, the holy angels) fight against the dragon (identified in verse 9 as the devil, Satan) and the wicked angels associated with him, with the result that Satan and his hosts are cast out of heaven. The description of Satan in verse 9 is quite significant as all of his important titles are given. He is described as "the great dragon," a term which also applies to the empire which he dominates in the end time. He is referred to as "that old serpent," a reference to the Garden of Eden and the temptation of Eve. The title "Devil" is from the Greek diabolos, from the verb diaballo,, which has the meaning of "defaming" or "slandering." He is the master accuser of the brethren. The name Satan, from the Hebrew, has the meaning of "adversary." This name is mentioned fourteen times in the book of Job, and occasionally elsewhere (1 Chron. 21:1; Ps. 109:6; Zech. 3:1-2). Coates observes that Satan is seen in three characterizations in opposition to Christ. As accuser of the brethren, he is in opposition to Christ as priest; as the one who brings forth the first beast, he is in opposition to Christ as king; as bringing forth the second beast, the false prophet, he is opposed to Christ as prophet.²²⁵

The concept that there is a spiritual warfare in the very presence of God in heaven has been resisted by some expositors, preferring to regard this war as being fought in the atmospheric or the starry heaven rather than in the very presence of God.²²⁶ The event here prophesied was predicted by Daniel the prophet in Daniel 12:1, where it is recorded that Michael shall "stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people." This event marks the beginning of the great tribulation defined in Daniel

12:1. It is undoubtedly the same event as in Revelation 12.

Of course it seems strange that Satan should have access to the very throne of God, yet this is precisely the picture of Job 1, where Satan along with other angels presents himself before God and accuses Job of fearing God because of God's goodness to him. Thus early in biblical revelation Satan is cast in the role of the accuser of the brethren, the title given him in Revelation 12:10. Beginning at this point in Revelation, therefore, Satan and his hosts are excluded from the third heaven, though their temporary dominion over the second heaven and the first heaven continues. Satan's defeat in heaven, however, is the occasion for him to be cast into the earth and explains the particular virulence of the great tribulation time. Note that even as Satan accuses the brethren before God day and night prior to his being cast out of heaven, so the four living creatures of 4:8 cease not day or night to ascribe holiness to the Lord.

The prophetic events here described must therefore be taken at their face value. Satan, described as deceiving the whole world, that is, the inhabited earth (Gr., oikoumene,,), is now limited in the sphere of his operation. A major step is taken in his ultimate defeat. The saint of this present dispensation, who is now the object of satanic attack and misrepresentation, can rest assured of the ultimate downfall of Satan and the cessation of his ability to afflict the saints of God. Though the events of this chapter deal in general with the end of the age, it is clear that they do not come chronologically after the seventh trumpet. Rather, the fall of Satan may be predated to the time of the seals in chapter 6, or even before the first seal. His fall begins the great tribulation.

Announcement of the Coming Day of Satan's Wrath and the Ultimate Victory of the Saints (12:10-12)

12:10-12 And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death. Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time.

As John beholds Satan and his angels being cast from heaven, he hears a loud voice described as saying in heaven, "Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ." The loud voice is not identified and probably cannot be with certainty. Some have ascribed this voice to God Himself, some to angels, some to the twenty-four elders, some to the martyred saints in heaven mentioned in 6:10, because they also cry with a loud voice.²²⁷ Support for the latter view is given in that in the same verse the loud voice mentions "the accuser of our brethren." This would seem to eliminate angels and indicate saints in heaven. The "loud voice" may very well be the shout of triumph of the tribulation saints longing for and anticipating their ultimate victory and triumph.

The salvation mentioned as now impending refers not to salvation from the guilt of sin but to salvation in the sense of deliverance and completion of the divine program. The reference to strength (Gr., dynamis) implies that now God is going to strengthen His own and manifest His own strength. The declaration that the kingdom of our God is now impending refers to the millennial kingdom when Christ will reign on the earth. Coupled with this is the power or authority (Gr., exousia) of Christ. The expression "his Christ," also mentioned in 11:15, parallels "his anointed" in Psalm 2:2, against whom the kings of the earth rebel but under whose sway they are certain to come.

The victory of the saints in that hour is revealed in verse 11, where it is declared that they overcame Satan by the blood of the Lamb, by the word of their testimony, and by the fact that they loved not their lives unto death. The accusations of Satan are nullified by the blood of the Lamb which renders the believer pure and makes possible his spiritual victory. The word of the saints' testimony opposes the deceiving work of Satan in that the preaching of the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. The saints' dedication to their task in which many of them die as martyrs is recognized by the statement "They loved not their lives unto the death." The word for "loved" is the word for profound love (Gr., agapao,,). Though they do not foolishly seek a martyr's death, they do not regard their own lives (literally "souls"; Gr., psyche) as precious. They follow the instruction given to the church in Smyrna (2:10) of being faithful unto death as well as the example of the Saviour who laid down His life for the sheep (John 10:11, 15; cf. Matt. 16:25).

The voice from heaven continues, exhorting the listeners, especially those in the heavens, to rejoice because of this great victory. At the same time the voice pronounces a solemn woe upon the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea. The awfulness of the hour ahead is attributed to the fact that the devil has been cast into the earth and has great wrath because he knows his hour of confinement is near. The word for "wrath" (Gr., not orge,, but thymos) means a strong passion or emotion but carries less weight than orge. It is an emotional rather than a rational state of mind and stems from his own awareness that his days are numbered. The short time or season (Gr., kairos) refers to the time of the great tribulation after which Satan will be bound for the duration of the millennial kingdom. Though many of the judgments of God inflicted on the earth during the great tribulation originate in divine power rather than satanic influence, the afflictions of the inhabitants of the earth spring largely from the activities of Satan, resulting in the martyrdom of countless saints and in widespread human suffering of every kind.

The Persecution of Israel in the Great Tribulation (12:13-16)

12:13-16 And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child. And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent. And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth.

The immediate aftermath of Satan's being cast out of heaven is his persecution of the woman which brought forth the man-child. This apparently is the beginning of the great tribulation of which Christ warned Israel in Matthew 24:15-22. This had its foreshadowing in Herod's slaughter of the infants following the birth of Christ (Matt. 2:16). It seems here to refer specifically to the great tribulation which is yet future. The persecution of Israel is a part of the satanic program to thwart and hinder the work of God. As far as Israel is concerned this had its beginning in the delay in the birth of Isaac which was overcome by the miraculous intervention of God. This hindrance continued in the delay in the birth of Jacob and in countless means used thereafter to persecute the descendants of Jacob, including the effort in the time of Esther to blot them out completely. Israel is hated by Satan not because of any of its own characteristics but because she is the chosen of God and essential to the overall purpose of God for time and eternity.

Into this scene of satanic persecution is injected the divine intervention of God. The woman is described as being given two wings of a great eagle in order to enable her to fly into the wilderness into her place. This figure of speech seems to be derived from Exodus 19:4 and Deuteronomy 32:11-12 and similar passages where God uses the strength of an eagle to illustrate His faithfulness in caring for Israel. The

same flight is indicated in Matthew 24:16 where Christ exhorts those in Judea to flee to the mountains. Some have felt that the reference here is to some specific place such as Petra, where at least a portion of Israel might be safe from her persecutors. Verse 14 implies that there is some supernatural care of Israel during this period such as that which Elijah experienced by the brook Cherith, or that which Israel experienced during the forty years she lived on the manna in the wilderness. Whether natural or supernatural means are used, it is clear that God does preserve a godly remnant, though according to Zechariah 13:8, two-thirds of Israel in the land will perish.

The time element of Israel's suffering is described as "a time, and times, and half a time." This again seems to be a reference to the three and one-half years, the mention of time being one unit, the second reference to times, being two units, which the addition of one-half a time would make three and one-half units. A parallel reference is found in Daniel 7:25 and 12:7 referring to the same period of great tribulation. The dragon is here called a serpent (Gr., ophis; cf. Matt. 10:16; John 3:14 where the word is used in other contexts; Rev. 12:9, 14-15; 20:2 where "serpent" is used in connection with the devil).

In the persecution of Israel, the serpent is described in verse 15 as casting water as a flood out of his mouth that the woman might be carried away. Verse 16 reveals that the earth helps the woman by swallowing the flood. Various interpretations have been given to this description. Some, like J. B. Smith, prefer to take this literally as a flood of water let loose to sweep away Israel down some valley.²²⁸ In this case, the earth would be either naturally or supernaturally enabled to swallow the water to prevent it from overtaking the Israelites. However, the contour of the Holy Land, and the fact that Israel would probably not all flee in the same direction combine to make a physical interpretation, such as Smith offers, improbable.²²⁹

It is more plausible that this passage should be understood in a symbolic way. The flood cast after Israel is the total effort of Satan to exterminate the nation, and the resistance of earth is the natural difficulty in executing such a massive program. The nature of the terrain in the Middle East, including many areas not heavily populated, provides countless places of refuge for a fleeing people. Whether the exact meaning of these two verses can be determined with certainty, the implication is that Satan strives with all his power to persecute and exterminate the people of Israel. By divine intervention, both natural and supernatural means are used to circumvent this program and to carry a remnant of Israel safely through their time of great tribulation.

The Persecution of the Godly Remnant of Israel (12:17)

12:17 And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

The last verse of chapter 12 states that the dragon is especially angry with those within the nation Israel who "keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." While the program of Satan is against the Jewish race as such, anti-Semitism as a whole will reach its peak against Jewish believers during this period. There is a double antagonism against those in Israel who turn to Christ as their Messiah and Saviour in those critical days and maintain a faithful witness. Undoubtedly many of them will suffer a martyr's death, but others will survive the period including the 144,000 sealed in chapter 7.

The remnant mentioned here (Gr., to,,n loipo,,n), literally "the rest," is not the same term for "remnant" used elsewhere as in Romans 9:27 (Gr., hypoleimma) and in Romans 11:5 (Gr., leimma). However, all these words come from the verb leipo, but normally when used of a remnant the prefix hypo is added. Though

the word, therefore, is a different form, the similarity is such that there is no good reason for denying that this is indeed the godly remnant. Smith attempts to build a distinction between the woman in verse 14 as Israel in Judea and the remnant in verse 17 as Israel elsewhere in the world.²³⁰ But there does not seem to be sufficient evidence to make this distinction. Rather than a geographic contrast, the difference seems to be between the nation as a whole symbolized by the woman and the godly remnant in the nation who turn to Christ.

Taken as a whole, chapter 12 is a fitting introduction to the important revelations given in chapter 13. Here are the principal actors of the great tribulation with the historic background which provides so much additional information. Israel, Satan, Christ, the archangel, and the godly remnant figure largely in the closing scenes of the age. Next the two principal human actors are introduced: the beast out of the sea and the beast out of the earth, the human instruments which Satan uses to direct his program during the great tribulation.

220 As J. B. Smith points out, Israel in the Old Testament frequently is represented symbolically as a woman related to the Lord as her husband (cf. Isa. 54:3-6; Jer. 3:6-10; 31:32; Ezek. 16:32; Hosea 2:14-16; 3:1). (See *A Revelation of Jesus Christ*, p. 181.)

221 The Greek expression for "as soon as" is literally "whenever" (Gr., *hotan*).

222 Henry Alford, *The Greek New Testament*, IV, 668.

223 *Ibid.*

224 *Ibid.*, IV, 668-69.

225 C. A. Coates, *An Outline of the Revelation*, p. 137.

226 Joseph A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse*, p. 308.

227 Smith, p. 186.

228 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

229 *Ibid.*

230 *Ibid.*, pp. 191-92.

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