

*Revelation 12 (NIV)*

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. <sup>2</sup>She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. <sup>3</sup>Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. <sup>4</sup>Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. 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. <sup>5</sup>She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. <sup>6</sup>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.

<sup>7</sup>Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. <sup>8</sup>But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. <sup>9</sup>The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him.

<sup>10</sup>Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

“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 brothers and sisters,  
who accuses them before our God day and night,  
has been hurled down.

<sup>11</sup>They triumphed over him  
by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony;  
they did not love their lives so much  
as to shrink from death.

<sup>12</sup>Therefore rejoice, you heavens  
and you who dwell in them!  
But woe to the earth and the sea,  
because the devil has gone down to you!  
He is filled with fury,  
because he knows that his time is short.”

<sup>13</sup>When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. <sup>14</sup>The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach. <sup>15</sup>Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. <sup>16</sup>But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. <sup>17</sup>Then the dragon was enraged at the woman 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.

*A red dragon brings chaos and destruction. A child brings peace and righteousness.*

The island of Delos is not from Patmos, where John lives in exile and has his vision. In Greek mythology, Delos was the birthplace of Apollo, god of the sun and the son of Zeus. Apollo’s mother, Leto, fled to the island to escape the dragon, Python, who was determined to kill Zeus’ son. Instead, the divine Apollo returned to the island and killed the mighty dragon.

Every one of John’s readers and hearers would have known the story of Leto and the dragon well. It was a popular and important story in the larger Greco-Roman mythology. So much so that the story was appropriated by Roman and Greek politicians. Augustus designated himself “Apollo” and minted coins with the rays of sun radiating from his

profile. Nero built a statue of himself as Apollo. Thus, Rome becomes Leto, the Queen of Heaven, and the emperor becomes the son who kills the dragon, the source of all wickedness.

John the Seer, as he has sometimes been called, appropriates the story of Leto and Python for his own purposes, as he strives to express the revelation given to him by God. He recasts the main characters to tell the larger story of God, his people, and the victory of righteousness.

Understandably, on first reading Revelation chapter 12, Christians see the woman as Mary, the mother of Jesus. Yes, the woman bears a son in the story, but John intends for us to see more than Mary in the image of the woman. She is cosmic, clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet. She wears a crown of twelve stars. She gives birth to a son who rules with an iron rod, the Messiah. She is not only Mary, but also Israel, the people of God, who is also the mother of the Messiah. Indeed, we can look past Israel to Eve, the mother of all humankind. These are the sorts of layered cosmic images we are to bring to John's vision.

Think big! When the woman flees to the wilderness, she is Israel fleeing into Sinai. Even creation works to save her, as the Red Sea swallowed up Pharaoh and his army when the Israelites fled. The stars in her crown and the moon at her feet help us to see that she is bride of the Almighty, she is the full span of God's people, encompassing not only the true Israel but the Church.

The Son in John's vision is certainly the Messiah. It is Jesus the Christ. His story of birth, life, crucifixion, and resurrection are compressed into this: "the child was snatched up to God and his throne." From birth to exaltation in a handful of words.

But it is the dragon who really captures our attention, an enormous red dragon with seven heads,<sup>1</sup> ten horns,<sup>2</sup> and wearing seven crowns. This dragon is as bad as bad gets, as wicked as wicked gets, as cruel as cruel gets. The red dragon is perfect in his evil. And the dragon aspires to God's throne, hence the crowns on the dragon's heads. In v. 12, the dragon is identified. He is Satan, the *diabolos* (in the Greek), who leads the world into temptation.

We quickly see that this drama is meant to help us grasp the larger story of what is happening on earth. There is a struggle that we cannot see directly, between the forces of justice and those of injustice, between the good and what seeks to destroy the good. The curtain is being lifted for us, so that we can see who is really persecuting and seducing the followers of Jesus. Yes, it is Rome in the flesh, but there are powers at work behind Rome, more ominous and powerful than even the emperor and his legions. In his commentary on Revelation, Christopher Davis writes:

In Revelation 12, John seems to be presenting Satan not so much as an individual being (although that is not excluded), but as the leader or personification of all the forces of evil that oppose God and his Messiah. The dragon stands for Satan himself as the ancient corrupter of the human race and rival to Christ (Satan, the devil, seven crowns, the one "who leads the whole world astray"), demonic powers (stars flung from heaven), evil political powers (ten horns, the one who sweeps the stars from the sky), and the forces of evil and chaos in general (dragon, serpent, Leviathan, seven heads). Satan is the individual evil behind evil in its variety of forms.<sup>3</sup>

And even though the child, the Messiah, has been exalted to the throne, the struggle between the forces of light and darkness goes on. Michael leads the angels of God against the dragon and his minions. The dragon loses, of course, for God always wins. The dragon may not know it, but he lost before he started. Nonetheless, there is still plenty of room for the dragon to create havoc as he is thrown down to the earth, where he will roam around like a wild, caged animal grabbing some of John's readers in its mouth.

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<sup>1</sup>The seven heads recall the image of "leviathan," the dreaded sea monster of Jewish apocalyptic literature. Remember that, particularly for the Jews, the sea was the place from which the monsters came.

<sup>2</sup>The ten horns recall the beast from Daniel 7. Throughout Revelation, the palette John uses is primarily the Hebrew scriptures.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, C. A. (2000). *Revelation*. The College Press NIV commentary (249). Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub.

Who is it that has triumphed over the dragon? The straightforward answer would be God, for the cross represents the victory of God. Yet, look again at verse 11. The “they” in “they triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb” is the full company of martyrs, those who have testified to Jesus and were killed for so doing. The martyrs gathered under the altar of God in chapter 6 are the ones who have triumphed over the dragon. Remarkably, we weak and sinful humans have been made a part of God’s victory, for the martyrs in this represent the entire body of Christ in this.

As the heavens cry out with joy for God’s salvation and for the defeat of the Accuser<sup>4</sup>, the earth trembles. Why? Because the earth is inside the cage of the raging dragon, who can’t win but is still free to tempt and lead astray.

When the dragon realizes that earth is now his home, he pursues the woman (now, plainly the Christians are in view). But when a river pours out of the dragon to engulf the woman, even the earth itself pitches in, opening up and swallowing the torrent. The earth and all that is on it have a stake in this too. Just as the stones cry out for Jesus (Luke 19:40), so creation battles the dragon. The dragon then charges off in his fury to pursue those who keep God’s commands and faithfully testify to Jesus.

In the closing moment of this scene, our hearts are chilled. The dragon stands on the shore looking out across the sea, the place from which the great monsters come (13:1). The dragon is about to call forth chaos and destruction.

#### *A Christmas Story?*

So what do we make of this drama? This may seem a bit odd (ok, a lot odd) but, in a way, chapter 12 is John’s Christmas story. A child is born who will rule with the authority. This child is pursued by Satan, who strives to bring this child to death (through Herod) or, years later, through temptation in the wilderness. But Satan/the red dragon/the accuser does not win. God’s victory is certain, won by the child, now a man, on a cross just outside Jerusalem. No matter how you look at this story, it ends the same way, God wins . . . but the story is not yet “over.”

Eugene Boring helps us to see the larger meaning of this chapter’s drama:

The action which takes place in heaven is a reflection of events in this world: the life and death of Jesus, the witness of Christians who are “faithful unto death” (2:10). Although John uses mythical language, there is a sense in which John has reversed the order of myth as understood in the pagan world. There, earthly history is only the by-product of events in the heavenly world among the gods. In Revelation the scene of God’s saving activity is on this earth, in the life of Jesus and the lives of Christians. The incarnation, crucifixion/resurrection, and testimony of Christians happens on earth, and *that* results in the defeat of the evil powers in the transcendent world.

Although the devil and his angels are already defeated in the real world, the transcendent world of God’s reality, they have been cast down to *this* world, angry and frustrated. Like a poor-loser football team hopelessly behind with only three and a half minutes to go, having already lost, they determine to do as much damage as they can in the remaining brief time. This is precisely how John perceives the situation of his suffering fellow Christians—and those trying to decide whether to suffer or to yield to the cultural pressure. To line up with the Roman cult is to cast one’s lot with an enemy already defeated. All that is necessary is to hang in there (*hypomone!*) until the End. The only way to lose in such a situation is to switch sides or to quit.<sup>5</sup>

So there’s a few questions for us: Will we hang in there? Will we persevere? Will we remain faithful to Jesus, regardless of the pressures or opportunities to conform to the world’s way?

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<sup>4</sup>In Hebrew, *ha-satan* means “accuser.” In the Old Testament, the Accuser is part of the heavenly court and charged with making accusations against the humans, as in the book of Job. In the New Testament, the Accuser becomes a much more fully-drawn figure who is called “Satan” and works directly against the purposes of God.

<sup>5</sup>Boring, M. E. (1989). *Revelation*. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching (159). Louisville: John Knox Press.

## More on the story of Leto and Python

It is a difficult thing for us to place ourselves alongside the original readers of John's Revelation, just as it is when we come to any other book in the Bible. We are modern people, born in a very different age, with different stories floating around in our heads. Thus, learning a bit more about Leto and Python helps us to grasp John's meaning and his art. The following is taken from Christopher Davis' commentary.

According to the myth, Zeus, the highest god in the Greek pantheon, has sexual relations with the goddess Leto, who becomes pregnant with the sun god Apollo. Zeus then marries the goddess Hera. Zeus' new wife, Hera, becomes jealous of Leto, and so she forbids all the lands of the earth to give her rival a resting place for giving birth. She also sends Python to destroy Leto and her offspring. Python, a monstrous serpent that emerges from the waters of the Deluge, is the Greek version of Leviathan.

Taking pity on Leto, the sea god Poseidon sends a dolphin that conveys her to the floating island of Delos. Zeus fixes this island in the Aegean Sea, in a place not far from Patmos, and then floods it with shallow water so that Leto will not give birth on land. Clinging to a palm tree on the island, Leto endures nine days' labor before giving birth to Apollo, the sun god. When he is four days old, Apollo kills Python at Delphi. He then inaugurates a "golden age" among the gods, full of music and celebration.

Certain Roman emperors of the first century (e.g., Augustus, Nero, and Domitian) adapted the Apollo myth for purposes of political propaganda. Domitian, for example, liked to dress in the costume of Apollo and to be portrayed as the sun god in works of art. The emperor thus presented himself as a "new Apollo," the divine son of the goddess Roma (Rome), who overcomes the "serpent" (that is, whatever obstacles are preventing the peace and prosperity of the Empire) and inaugurates a "golden age" for Rome.

The Apollo myth, which would have been well known to the first readers of Revelation, provides the key to understanding Revelation 12. Exiled on the island of Patmos—not far from Delos—John probably heard the story told again and again. He was no doubt familiar with how the Emperor Domitian used the myth to portray himself as the divine savior of the Empire. However, John knows that both Apollo and Domitian are "pretenders," mere parodies of Christ. In writing Revelation 12 John says, in effect, "Let me tell you about the one who truly overcomes the 'serpent' (Satan) and who truly launches a 'golden age' (the 'eschatological age' of the kingdom of God)." Finding common ground with his Hellenistic readers, John adapts the Apollo myth and Christianizes it, using the myth to express important truths concerning the Lord he serves. The Apollo myth thus provides the overall "plot" or "story line" for this part of the Apocalypse.<sup>1</sup>

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. John takes a popular mythological story of his day and reshapes it to tell the story of Jesus. Does this seem odd to you? Perhaps this reminds us of the emotional power of stories, myth or not. What stories do Americans tell to illustrate who we are? How much of these stories are based in fact? For example, John Henry is an important American tale about man against machine, but there is no more than a kernel of truth to it. Yet such stories carry much of who we think we are. Why do you think John would use a mythological story, a folktale, to tell his readers of his vision?
2. As we seem to each week in this series, we come back to the question of faithfulness to Jesus in the face of persecution and ostracism. Do you have any stories from your own life of when you felt ostracized because of your faith? To which portions of our Christian proclamation do most non-believers want to turn a deaf ear?
3. John tells the story of Jesus in a just a few words: "the child was snatched up to God and his throne." A few things are left out? If you had to tell the story of Jesus in five short sentences what would you say? In three sentences? In one sentence?

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

These passages are Old Testament scriptures used by John in chapter 12.

<p><b>Monday, Psalm 2</b> The one who rules with an iron rod</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Psalm 74: 13-14; Isaiah 27:1-6</b> Leviathan!</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Daniel 10:12-11:1, 12:1</b> Michael, the chief prince of the angels</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6</b> <i>Ha-satan</i> accuses Job</p>
<p><b>Friday, Isaiah 66:7-9</b> Israel goes into labor and gives birth to a son</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Weekly Joys and Concerns</b></p>

