

# Enter: The Dragon Exegesis of Revelation 12:1-6

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**My remembrance of Dr. Bill Arp:** I had the privilege of studying Greek under Dr. Arp while pursuing my PhD. My first impression of Dr. Arp was that of soft-spoken, elderly gentleman who disdained technology and paused for an inordinately long time before answering a question. I came to respect him as a man of God with a brilliant mind who could not only understand and explain complicated linguistic theory, but also remember the names and hometowns of his students. Dr. Arp genuinely loved the Lord and his word, and he created a hunger in the minds of his students. Along with introducing me to NT Discourse Analysis, Dr. Arp impressed on all his students the importance of determining the author's intended meaning of a passage. This led to my exegetical work in determining the meaning of the Revelation 12:1-6 pericope and its place in the context of the book of Revelation as a whole.

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“The Bible may be said to begin and end with the story of a Serpent. In the book of Genesis, a serpent, more subtle than any beast of the field, tempted the woman in Paradise; in the Book of Revelation a dragon stood before the woman to devour her child,” observes Edward Ulback.<sup>2</sup> Although the contents of Revelation 12:1-6 have served to ignite the imagination of readers for generations, the meaning has befuddled the mind of many an interpreter. This cryptic vision includes complex symbolism such as a dazzling woman arrayed in celestial bodies

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Ulback, “The Serpent in Myth and Scripture.” *BibSac* 90, no. 360 (October 1933): 449.

who births a son; the mysterious removal of the man-child destined to rule the nations; and a multi-headed dragon with a ferocious appetite and a tail powerful enough to dislodge stars from their heavenly abode. Yet the author's single, intended meaning of the passage is both attainable and foundational for understanding the ensuing events of the Apocalypse.

### Textual Criticism

The passage that innocently begins with the clause Καὶ σημεῖον μέγα ὄφθη ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ (Rev 12:1, UBS4) ends with the statement: καὶ ἐστάθη ἐπὶ τὴν ἄμμον τῆς θαλάσσης (Rev 12:18, UBS4).<sup>3</sup> The treatment of this final clause is a matter of contention among modern translations.<sup>4</sup> Several witnesses replace ἐστάθη with ἐστάθην, including the Majority Text and the Vulgate.<sup>5</sup> However, the presence of this variant can be explained by reasoned eclecticism.<sup>6</sup> Internally, the third person singular is initially given preference over the first person singular due to the shorter and more difficult reading axioms.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the inclusion of the first person singular ending can be explained as either an unintentional addition due to the

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<sup>3</sup> Revelation 12:1-13:18 is a literary unit that stands in apposition to Revelation 14:1-13. The opening of the temple in Revelation 11:19 serves to introduce the section, and the two visions of Revelation 14:14-20 draw it to a close.

<sup>4</sup> The ESV attaches the clause “And he stood on the sand of the sea” to the end of 12:17. The NET creates an additional verse and adds the referent “And the dragon stood ...” (12:18). The NASB also inserts the clarifier “The dragon,” but places the clause in 13:1. The NKJV also places the clause at the beginning of chapter 13, but interprets it according to the variant “Then I stood. ...” This sampling demonstrates the difficulty this passage has caused.

<sup>5</sup> *New English Translation Novum Testamentum Graece Greek text and critical apparatus Nestle-Aland* (Dallas, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft: 2004), 656.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Wallace, “Laying a Foundation: New Testament Textual Criticism,” in *Interpreting the New Testament Text*, ed. Darrell Bock and Buist Fanning (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006, 45). Reasoned eclecticism is a balanced approach that “treats external and internal evidence equally.”

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

proximity of τὴν or as an intentional attempt by a copyist to force ἐστάθην to agree with εἶδον (Rev 13:1).<sup>8</sup> Externally, credible witnesses that support the third person singular reading include Papyrus 47, Aleph, A, and C.<sup>9</sup> Finally, a grammatical analysis of the passage would assign either ὁ δράκων as the antecedent of ἐστάθη or the author as the antecedent of ἐστάθην.<sup>10</sup> Contextually, the use of the coordinate conjunction καὶ in the subsequent clause grammatically links the events of Revelation 12 to the events of Revelation 13, indicating that the rise of the beast ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης is initiated by the one who stood ἐπὶ τὴν ἄμμον τῆς θαλάσσης. Accordingly, the contents of Revelation 12:1-6 serve to introduce the dragon as the primary antagonist of humanity, a theme that is continued in Revelation 13. This is the ancient serpent (Rev 12:9) who instigated the conflict in Genesis 3 and will ultimately be crushed by Jesus Christ when he returns (Rev 19:11ff). The sinister events that follow are set in motion by this ancient enemy of mankind, as revealed to John in epic form. Therefore, on to the scene of the apocalypse, enter: the dragon.

### Genre Analysis

No academic consensus exists regarding the literary form of Revelation. Because the author introduces his work with the term ἀποκάλυψις (Rev 1:1) and later describes it as προφητείας (Rev 1:3), the two most common genres assigned to Revelation are apocalyptic and prophecy. These labels are typically employed either independently or collectively, and they are normally implemented to defend the use of allegory or intertestamental literature as exegetical tools.<sup>11</sup> Collins provided

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<sup>8</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 681.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> ὁ δράκων of 12:3ff is the central character of the narrative. The author plays a passive role in this passage.

<sup>11</sup> Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 284. Osborne identifies apocalyptic intertestamental literature as a major interpretative source. Walvoord explains the use of

the foundation for the classification of the apocalyptic genre by comparing the recurring characteristics of late antiquity eastern Mediterranean writings.<sup>12</sup> His seminal views on apocalyptic genre have been developed by recent scholarship. Bandy states, “The book of Revelation belongs to the apocalyptic/prophetic genre, and the apocalyptic genre by definition is highly symbolic. It is not intended to be interpreted in a literal manner.”<sup>13</sup> Beale concurs with Brandy, initially defining Revelation by “the three genres of apocalyptic, prophecy, and epistle”<sup>14</sup> before ultimately labeling the literary sub-genre dubbed “Apocalyptic-prophetic.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast, Thomas rejects both the apocalyptic label and the subsequent hermeneutics that accompany it, electing instead for a “Visional-prophetic” sub-genre.<sup>16</sup>

The concerted efforts of form critics to identify the literary form of Revelation with either ἀποκάλυψις or προφητείας have

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allegory (*The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1966], 16).

<sup>12</sup> John Collins, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” *Semeia*, no.14 (1979): 5. Collins ultimately defines apocalyptic as “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world” (9).

<sup>13</sup> Alan Bandy, “The Hermeneutics of Symbolism: How to Interpret the Symbols of John’s Apocalypse,” *SBJT* 14, no.1 (Spring 2010): 48. Although Bandy accurately identifies the symbols of Revelation as visual metaphors, his genre-driven hermeneutic forces him into to allegorical conclusions.

<sup>14</sup> Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 37. Beale rightly notes the “epistolary form” of Revelation stating, “This book both begins and concludes in typical epistolary manner” (38-39). Therefore, at minimum, the argument can be made that Revelation is a conglomerate of narrative, prophetic, apocalyptic, and epistolary genres. Beale finally appeals to Carson, Moo, and Morris’s identification of Revelation’s genre as “a prophecy cast in an apocalyptic mold and written down in letter form” (Ibid.).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 29.

resulted in anachronistic use of both words. Neither noun was originally implemented by the author of Revelation to identify the literary genre of his work. The nominative absolute phrase Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ actually introduces the author's subject.<sup>17</sup> This phrase serves as the title of the book, rather than a revelation of the author's literary form. And, as Collins ironically notes, "The title is not a reliable guide to the genre."<sup>18</sup> Stronger support for genre identification could be garnered from the phrase τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας, which is utilized by the author in order to appeal to divine authority.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, while recognizing that classifying Revelation as any genre is a highly speculative exegetical decision, this article will approach Revelation as a prophetic book of Scripture.

### Exegetical Method

The prophecy of Revelation was communicated through a series of visions that are introduced with the aorist verb ἐσήμανεν (Rev 1:1).<sup>20</sup> These visions contain highly symbolic language that is challenging to decipher. Fruchtenbaum identifies two extreme, errant approaches to interpreting the symbols of Revelation. The first, which assumes that the book cannot be understood, results in idealism; while the second, which ascribes the symbols to "unchecked speculation" results

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 50, 120-21. Wallace identifies Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as a plenary genitive, making the entire phrase the title, and Christ the theme.

<sup>18</sup> Collins, "Introduction," 2. If Collins's definition of apocalyptic genre is to be given credence in modern scholarship, then so should his method of application.

<sup>19</sup> BAGD, 722. BAGD identifies this term as "Utterances by Christian prophets." Wallace identifies this as a genitive of apposition, functioning exegetically (*Greek Grammar*, 95-99). To assign a literary form of either prophecy or apocalyptic to this text based on these words would be an anachronistic fallacy.

<sup>20</sup> Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 50-51. Beale stresses the "symbolic communication" nuance of the root.

in sensationalism.<sup>21</sup> Defining a consistent hermeneutic method to interpret the symbols of Revelation is essential for accurate exegesis.

There are six exegetical guidelines to interpreting the symbols of the Apocalypse. First, all symbols in Revelation will be treated as metaphors. Osborne asserts that meaning of these metaphors is, “Found ... in the use of that symbol in its ancient setting.”<sup>22</sup> This principle restricts the expositor to identifying the author’s intended meaning for each symbol, thereby preventing sensationalism. Second, Bandy affirms that “Symbols are intended to reveal meaning rather than conceal it.”<sup>23</sup> Not only does the author intend to convey a single message with each symbol in Revelation, but the meaning of each symbol is attainable. Application of this principle satisfactorily addresses the idealistic fringe of interpretation. Third, Thomas notes that a normal, grammatical historical method of interpretation must be applied to all Scripture. However, Thomas argues that this method must retain “a distinction between symbols and figurative language.”<sup>24</sup> Such a literal approach will recognize that the symbols in Revelation 12:1-6 are intended to communicate a message while maintaining that the author is conveying the contents of an actual vision. Fourth, when the author of Revelation assigns a meaning to a symbol anywhere in Revelation, that symbol must be consistently interpreted by the author’s guidelines everywhere in Revelation. For example, in Revelation 12:1-6, ὁ δράκων is identified as ὁ Σατανᾶς (Rev 12:9) and τῶν ἀστέρων τοῦ οὐρανοῦ are identified as οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτοῦ (Rev 12:9).<sup>25</sup> These symbols must be consistently interpreted throughout the Apocalypse. Fifth, when the author of Revelation does not

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<sup>21</sup> Arnold Fruchtenbaum, “The Use of the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 28.

<sup>22</sup> Osborne, *Hermeneutical Spiral*, 283.

<sup>23</sup> Bandy, “Hermeneutics of Symbolism,” 49.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 35-38.

<sup>25</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 29. Also, Bandy, “Hermeneutics of Symbolism,” 49-51.

explain the meaning of a symbol, Scripture must interpret that symbol. Although scholars disagree on the exact number of OT allusions in Revelation, most acknowledge that the OT is referenced hundreds of times throughout the book.<sup>26</sup> The author's consistent appeal to the OT coupled with his theme of Christ's return makes the OT and the gospels the primary tools for interpreting the symbols of Revelation. Finally, the reader may only search beyond the bounds of Scripture for the meaning of a symbol when instructed to do so by the author (Rev 13:18; 17:9). This final principle precludes the dependence on zodiac charts, intertestamental apocalyptic literature, or even current events to interpret Revelation.<sup>27</sup>

### Theological Approach

There are several competing theological approaches that influence the interpretation of Revelation. These include the preteristic, idealistic, historicist, futurist, and eclectic viewpoints.<sup>28</sup> Preterism approaches Revelation with the presupposition that the text describes events that have been fulfilled in the first century.<sup>29</sup> Adherents to the idealistic school view Revelation as a "symbolic portrayal of the conflict between good and evil."<sup>30</sup> Both methods consider Revelation "a highly figurative book that we cannot approach with straightforward literalism."<sup>31</sup> Historicism perceives Revelation

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<sup>26</sup> Fruchtenbaum, "Use of the OT," 28. Fruchtenbaum identifies about 550 allusions. Thomas notes, "Of the 404 verses in the Apocalypse, 278 allude to the OT Scripture" (*Revelation 1-7*, 40).

<sup>27</sup> Walvoord, *Revelation*, 27.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 8-10. Although this list is not exhaustive, these first four approaches are representative of the major theological views of Revelation. See also Beale who combines elements of several traditional viewpoints into an "eclectic approach" (*Book of Revelation*, 44-50).

<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Gentry, "A Preterist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on Revelation*, ed. Stanley Gundry and Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 37.

<sup>30</sup> Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 48.

<sup>31</sup> Gentry, "Preterist View," 38.

as “a panorama of church history from John’s time until the second advent.”<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, the futurist interprets Revelation “very literally and generally sees the order of the vision as representing the historical order of future events.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, futurists interpret the body of Revelation (Rev 4:1-19:10) as describing the events of the tribulation. The tribulation is a future seven-year period of judgment on earth directly pertaining to Israel, immediately preceding the return of Jesus Christ, and developed from Daniel 9:24-27. Finally, eclectic modes, albeit Pate’s, “Progressive Dispensationalism,”<sup>34</sup> or Beale’s “Redemptive-Historical Form of Modified Idealism,”<sup>35</sup> attempt to blend elements of the first four approaches into one theological system. Following Thomas as a result of “sufficient recognition to the prophetic style of the book and a normal hermeneutical pattern of interpretation based on that style,”<sup>36</sup> this paper will approach Revelation from a futuristic perspective. The theological approach of the expositor will have profound implications on the outline and interpretation of the book.

## Outline

Due to conflicting theological approaches and genre assignments, the structure of Revelation has suffered from exegetical ailments of chias-o-mania and hept-o-mania in contemporary scholarship. Both of these fallacies appeal to form criticism and theological presuppositions for their structural support. *Chias-o-mania* describes the growing trend in contemporary scholarship to redact a verse, passage, chapter, or even book into a chiastic outline. Lee’s twenty-point outline

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 30.

<sup>33</sup> Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 47. Beale ascribes this term to dispensational futurism and notes the section of Revelation 4:1-22:5.

<sup>34</sup> Marvin Pate, “A Progressive Dispensational View of Revelation,” in *Four Views on Revelation*, 140.

<sup>35</sup> Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 32.



of Revelation typifies this practice.<sup>37</sup> Lee utilizes an eclectic theological approach to construct her chiasm, combining futurist, idealist and feminist theology in order to create a parallel between the events of Revelation 13 and the events of Revelation 14 at the center of her model.<sup>38</sup> Lee is then forced to pair Revelation 12:1-6 with Revelation 17:1-6. Lee is able to justify her exegetical decisions by identifying the woman as the primary character of Revelation 12:1-6.<sup>39</sup> However, as a result of her structural approach, the dragon gets lost in Lee's chiasm.

Akin to Chias-o-mania is propensity of hept-o-mania. *Hept-o-mania* is an academic fallacy that forces the structure of Revelation into an unnatural series of seven. Painter's outline of Revelation as four series of sevens set between a prologue and an epilogue is a prime example of hept-o-mania in modern scholarship.<sup>40</sup> In order to validate his outline, Painter incorporates an eclectic theological approach, implementing both historicist and idealistic elements into his exegetical decisions. Painter places the co-text Revelation 12:1-6 within the context of the seven trumpet judgments, thereby grammatically linking these judgments to the churches of Pergamum and Laodicea.<sup>41</sup> As a result of Painter's heptomological outline, the dragon gets buried in history.

The preceding critiques of chias-o-mania and hept-o-mania neither intended to deny the fact that chiasms exist in Scripture

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<sup>37</sup> Michelle Lee, "A Call to Martyrdom: Function as Method and Message in Revelation." *NovT* 40, no. 2 (April 1998): 174. Lee and Painter are intended to be representative of a trend in modern exegesis.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 178. This represents the heart of Lee's outline for Revelation, "the moment of decision."

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-79. Not only is the woman elevated to the position of main character of the narrative, but the dragon is absent from Lee's outline. By redacting the dragon and placing the woman of Revelation 12:1-6 in apposition with the prostitute of Revelation 17:16, Lee sacrifices meaning on the altar of form. This author asserts that the prostitute of Revelation 17:1ff actually stands in apposition with the bride of Revelation 19:7ff.

<sup>40</sup> John Painter, "The Johannine Literature," in *A Handbook to the Exegesis of the New Testament*, ed. Stanley Porter (Boston: Brill, 2002), 559-62.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

nor to encourage expositors to ignore the thematic use of the number seven in Revelation. Instead, they illustrate the fallacy of imposing a preconceived structure onto the text. In contrast to these contrived outlines, Walvoord develops his outline from the text of Revelation 1:19, explaining that, “The advantage of this outline is that it deals in a natural way with the material rather than seizing on incidentals.”<sup>42</sup> Beale and Thomas also note the significance of Revelation 1:19 when constructing an outline of the book. Beale utilizes an eclectic theological approach and genre criticism to apply this verse to Daniel 2:28.<sup>43</sup> Conversely, Thomas implements a futuristic approach in order to capture the “telescopic arrangement” of the judgments as they unfold in a linear pattern.<sup>44</sup> Due to its simplistic structure, this paper will develop an outline based on Revelation 1:19, utilizing a futuristic approach first developed by Ryrie as follows:<sup>45</sup>

- I. The things that you have seen (1:1-20)
  - A. Prologue (1:1-11)
  - B. Vision of Christ (1:12-18)
  - C. Command to write (1:19-20)
- II. Those that are (2-3)
- III. Those that are to take place after this (4-22).
  - A. Heavenly interlude (4-5)
  - B. The tribulation (6:1-19:10)
  - C. The return and reign of Christ (19:11-20:15)
  - D. The eternal kingdom (21:1-22:5)
  - E. Epilogue (22:6-21)

### **Author and Date**

The author identifies himself as Ἰωάννη four times in the book of Revelation (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), leaving consistent expositors such as Robertson to conclude that “the traditional

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<sup>42</sup> Walvoord, *Revelation*, 48.

<sup>43</sup> Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 152ff.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Ryrie, *Revelation*, 11.

and obvious way to understand the name is the Apostle John.”<sup>46</sup> Early church writers including Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, and Origen support this view.<sup>47</sup> Irenaeus testified that the apostle John wrote Revelation while banished on Patmos during Domitian’s reign, which is consistent with the author’s testimony in Revelation 1:9.<sup>48</sup> Dionysius of Alexandria issued the first recorded challenge to the identity of the author in the middle of the third century AD, and speculations have since abounded.<sup>49</sup> Due to the pseudonymous nature of intertestamental apocalyptic literature, contemporary scholarship tends to follow Dionysius’ lead and attribute the authorship of Revelation to someone other than the apostle John.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, preterism rejects a late date of writing on theological grounds, requiring an early date as a foundation for its theological system.<sup>51</sup> However, if the text of Revelation and the historical church witness is to be given any credence, then all evidence supports the apostle John authoring the book of Revelation circa AD 90-95.<sup>52</sup>

### Literary Context

Revelation 12:1-6 contains the first two of seven signs in the book of Revelation.<sup>53</sup> This pericope is set within the context of the future, seven-year period of tribulation. From the onset of the tribulation, events that are initiated in heaven (Rev 4-5) transpire on earth (Rev 6). John uses οὐρανῶ seven times and

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<sup>46</sup> Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1933), 272.

<sup>47</sup> Alan Johnson, *Revelation*, in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 404.

<sup>48</sup> Ryrie, *Revelation*, 8-9.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 2-11. This author recognizes the contemporary debate between BC/AD and BCE/CE and deliberately chooses to implement the Anno Domini system over the Common Era system.

<sup>50</sup> Painter, “Johannine Literature,” 557.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 30.

<sup>52</sup> Walvoord, *Revelation*, 12-14.

<sup>53</sup> Ryrie, *Revelation*, 89.

γῆν six times in Revelation 12 to emphasize the interplay between heaven and earth. At the conclusion of Revelation 11:15-19, the final trumpet judgment sounds, commencing the final seven bowl judgments of Revelation 16. These bowl judgments culminate with the return of Christ in Revelation 19:11ff. However, before these judgments are unleashed, John is shown a vision that contributes valuable background information to the events that are about to transpire. Revelation 12:1-6 introduces the primary antagonist of the tribulation, briefly recounting his nefarious activity in history (Rev 12:1-5) before revealing his violent plans for the future (Rev 12:6ff). The dragon of Revelation 12 is unveiled as the ancient enemy of the human race. The same serpent that once tempted the woman in Eden will one day persecute the “woman” in the future. The dragon that attempted to usurp Christ will ultimately cause the rise of the antichrist. The events of Revelation 12:1-6 serve to recount the dragon’s movements throughout history and into the future as he briefly experiences limited authority upon the earth.

### **Original Translation**

And then an incredible sign appeared in heaven: A woman was wearing the sun, and the moon was beneath her feet, and a wreath of twelve stars was upon her head! And being very pregnant, she cried out in agony with contractions, indicating that she was about to give birth. And then another sign appeared in heaven: First behold, a great, fiery red dragon with seven heads, and with ten horns, and with seven crowns upon his heads! Then his tail dragged away one third of the stars of heaven and cast them down to the earth. Next, the dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, because he intended to devour her child as soon as she gave birth to him. Then she gave birth to a man-child, the one who is destined to shepherd all nations with an iron staff. Next, her child was suddenly snatched away to God and to his throne. And finally the woman fled into the wilderness where a place has been prepared for her by God in order that they might sustain her for 1260 days.

## Grammatical Analysis

John introduces Revelation 12 with the clause: Καὶ σημεῖον μέγα ὄφθη ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ. The use of καὶ as a coordinate conjunction grammatically links this statement to the preceding clause as the author continues to narrate events with a linear thought process. John had just witnessed the temple of God being opened ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ where several signs were ὄφθη to him, including the ark, lightning, a voice, thunder, an earthquake, and hail (Rev 11:19). These signs are reminiscent of John's initial throne-room vision that initiated the Tribulation (Rev 4:5). The perfective aspect of the aorist ὄφθη provides the background for the narrative. Furthermore, the use of ὄφθη, as opposed to John's standard introductory phrases Μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον (Rev 4:1) or καὶ εἶδον (Rev 13:1), is emphatic.<sup>54</sup>

John summarizes the symbols of Revelation 12 as σημεῖον μέγα, further underscoring the magnitude of the vision that is about to transpire with an emphatic adjective.<sup>55</sup> This event is the first heavenly sign in Revelation to be modified with μέγα, indicating its unique status (Rev 13:3, 15:1).<sup>56</sup> The incredible sign that appeared in heaven is part a scene that unfolds before John's eyes, beginning with a γυνή. This γυνή is the second of four women in the book of Revelation, all of which are symbolic.<sup>57</sup> Theologians have long debated the identity of the woman of Revelation 12. As early as the third century, Hippolytus identified the woman as "the church," a label that many modern theologians have embraced.<sup>58</sup> Oecumenius, who

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<sup>54</sup> Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 387.

<sup>55</sup> BAGD 497. μέγα stresses the intensity and importance of the subject, not just the size.

<sup>56</sup> Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 387. Considering all the signs and symbols John has witnessed up to this point in the Apocalypse, the significance of this adjective is accentuated by translating it as "incredible."

<sup>57</sup> Ryrie, *Revelation*, 89. The three other symbolic women are Jezebel (Rev 2), the harlot (Rev 17), and the bride (Rev 19).

<sup>58</sup> William Weinrich and Thomas Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, XII, Revelation* (Downer's

represents the dominant theological mindset of the medieval era, maintained that the woman symbolized “the mother of our Savior.”<sup>59</sup> Contemporary scholarship has further complicated the issue by attempting to interpret apocalyptic symbols with pagan mythology like Apollo and the Python; or by utilizing the zodiac to relate the woman to the constellation Virgo and the dragon to the constellation Hydra.<sup>60</sup> Finally, throughout history, expositors of the Apocalypse have also maintained that the woman represents Israel.<sup>61</sup>

Applying a consistent hermeneutic method to the symbol of the pregnant woman will result in identifying her as Israel. Since the text of Revelation does not reveal the identity of the woman, interpreting this vision is dependent upon comparing her description with Scripture. First, the symbol of a pregnant woman is used throughout the OT to refer to Israel (Isa 66:7-8; Jer 4:31; Mic 4:9-10).<sup>62</sup> Second, the threefold symbols associated with the woman include τὸν ἥλιον... ἡ σελήνη..., and στέφανος ἀστέρων δώδεκα. These symbols refer the reader back to Genesis 37:9-11, where Beale observes, “The sun, moon, and eleven stars are metaphorical respectively for Jacob, his wife, and the... tribes of Israel.”<sup>63</sup> Finally, the symbolic activities associated with the woman include ἔτεκεν υἱὸν ἄρσεν ... and ἔφυγεν εἰς τὴν ἔρημον. The fact that the woman begets the child precludes the woman from being identified as the church, since Fruchtenbaum rightly maintains, “It would be an anachronism: the church would have to give birth to the Messiah, when in fact the opposite is true.”<sup>64</sup> The action of the woman fleeing alone into the wilderness for a specific time

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Grove: IVP, 2005), 173. For a contemporary example, see Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 631.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>60</sup> Ulback, “Serpent,” 450-55. See also Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 626-27.

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, *Revelation*, 513-14.

<sup>62</sup> Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 288.

<sup>63</sup> G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 1123.

<sup>64</sup> Fruchtenbaum, “Use of the OT,” 34. See also Matthew 16:18.

period precludes her from being identified as Mary, since Mary was never persecuted in this manner.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, the application of a consistent hermeneutic approach that utilizes Scripture to interpret symbols of Revelation restricts the identification of the woman as a metaphor for Israel.<sup>66</sup>

After describing the woman, John continues his linear thought process with the phrase καὶ ὄφθη... σημεῖον ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, connecting the subsequent vision with the preceding one.<sup>67</sup> However, instead of describing a σημεῖον μέγα, John describes a δράκων μέγας. A general consensus exists concerning the identity of the dragon as Satan due to John's declarative statement in Revelation 12:9. The description of the dragon also bears a similarity to Daniel's fourth beast (Dan 7:7-8) and a striking resemblance to the θηρίον that later rises out of the sea (Rev 13:1). The dragon's color is described as πυρρός, indicating his warlike nature.<sup>68</sup> The threefold symbols associated the dragon are antithetically parallel to those of the woman. In place of the sun, the dragon has κεφαλὰς ἑπτὰ. In place of the moon, the dragon has κέρατα δέκα. And, in place of a wreath of twelve stars, the dragon wears ἑπτὰ διαδήματα. While the woman wears her στέφανος for identification purposes, the dragon dons his διαδήματα as a symbol of authority.<sup>69</sup> Multiple διαδήματα are worn by two other characters in the book of Revelation; the θηρίον in Revelation 13:1ff and the King of Kings who defeats both the δράκων and the θηρίον in Revelation 19:11ff.<sup>70</sup>

As the main character of Revelation 12, the dragon has two distinct movements in this initial vision. With his first

<sup>65</sup> Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 287. See also Ryrie, *Revelation*, 89-90.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Thomas, *Revelation 8-22 An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 120-21.

<sup>67</sup> Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 388.

<sup>68</sup> This "fiery red," or "redder than scarlet" (BADG, 731) is twice depicted in the Apocalypse. Here, it is used to describe the creature that initiates πόλεμος ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ. In Revelation 6:4 it describes the color of the horse whose rider λαβεῖν τὴν εἰρήνην ἐκ τῆς γῆς. In both visions, πυρρός is associated with war.

<sup>69</sup> Ryrie, *Revelation*, 90.

<sup>70</sup> Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 389.

movement, ἡ οὐρὰ αὐτοῦ σύρει τὸ τρίτον τῶν ἀστέρων τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἔβαλεν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν γῆν. Based on John's identification of the stars as fallen angels (Rev 12:9), Fruchtenbaum notes the theological significance of this statement: "This is the only verse revealing how many angels fell with Satan in his original revolt."<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, Fruchtenbaum explains that identifying the dragon's stars as a metaphor for angels while maintaining that the stars in the woman's wreath is a metaphor for Israel can be reconciled as follows: "When a star is used symbolically for an angel, no actual star is seen. Rather, an angel is seen but called a star, as in Revelation 8:11-12 and 9:1"<sup>72</sup> Robertson notes the judgmental language associated with John's use of ἔβαλεν.<sup>73</sup> This language of judgment spills over into the subsequent pericope when the dragon shares in the fate of his followers and is himself ἐβλήθη from heaven.<sup>74</sup> The dragon's violent demeanor escalates as he moves throughout the narrative, seamlessly navigating between history and future, heaven and earth.

The second movement of the dragon in the narrative demonstrates his intent to devour τὸ τέκνον. Interpreting this symbolic gesture through the gospel record allows the expositor to conclude that this action metaphorically refers to Satan's multiple attempts to destroy the Messiah as prophesied in Genesis 3:15; from Herod's slaughter (Matt 2:16-18), through the temptation (Matt 4:1-10), and ultimately to the crucifixion (Luke 22:3).<sup>75</sup> These symbolic movements set the scene for the events to follow in the Apocalypse, explaining why the fury of the dragon will be unleashed upon the woman in the tribulation.

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<sup>71</sup> Fruchtenbaum, "Use of the OT," 35. A consistent hermeneutic approach identifies this as a past event.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 33-34.

<sup>73</sup> Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 358. Compare John's use here with Revelation 12:9, 13; 14:19.

<sup>74</sup> The force of the judgmental language in Revelation 12:9 is emphasized by use of the aorist passive. The dragon's actions are returned onto him. This judgment motif is directly stated later in Revelation 13:10.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 125.



The third symbolic character revealed to John in Revelation 12:1-6 is the υἱὸν ἄρσεν. It is this man-child, and not the woman, who is the primary focus of the dragon's ire. The imagery John employs to describe this man-child is that of a shepherd-king with an iron staff. John's use of ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ here (Rev 12:5) and in Revelation 19:15 is identical to Psalm 2:9 in the LXX.<sup>76</sup> Although some expositors have attempted to identify the man-child as the church and explain the symbol of his removal as a metaphorical description of the rapture, the Messianic overtones of Psalm 2 coupled with the gospel record of the ascension (Luke 24:51) require that this incident be interpreted as a metaphor for the ascension of Christ.<sup>77</sup>

The scene of Revelation 12:1-5 functions as a recapitulation of Israel's role in God's plan to redeem mankind and judge evil. These two signs provide the necessary backdrop for the eschatological events that unfold in Revelation 12:6-13:18. Once this soteriological summary is complete, an indefinite period of time lapses between Revelation 12:5 and Revelation 12:6. This prophetic gap directly correlates to the gap between Daniel's sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks (Dan 9:24-27).<sup>78</sup> Two futuristic events are recorded at the conclusion of the pericope, beginning with the clause: ἡ γυνὴ ἔφυγεν εἰς τὴν ἔρημον. Preterist theologians attempt to apply this event to the historical flight of Christians to Pella prior to the Roman siege of Jerusalem. However, Thomas aptly notes that such an interpretation "would be meaningless to John's readers in Asia Minor."<sup>79</sup> A more accurate hermeneutic method relies on Christ's predictive prophecy in the Olivet discourse to interpret this section (Matt 24:15-21). Therefore, this final clause in Revelation 12:6 foretells a future flight of Israel at the mid-point of the coming Tribulation.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 126.

<sup>77</sup> Walvoord, *Revelation*, 189-90.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 127.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

John concludes this pericope with the statement: ὅπου ἔχει ἐκεῖ τόπον ἡτοιμασμένον ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, ἵνα ἐκεῖ τρέφωσιν αὐτὴν ἡμέρας χιλίας διακοσίας ἐξήκοντα. Robinson notes that the ἵνα purpose clause coupled with the present tense verb indicates that provision for Israel will be a continued action for the duration of the allotted time of 1260 days.<sup>81</sup> This period directly relates to Israel's future period of tribulation prophesied in Daniel 9:27 as  $\text{ג'ו'ש'נ' י'צ'ד'}$ . Hoehner notes that Daniel's use of a 360-day lunar calendar would equate to exactly 1260 days.<sup>82</sup> During this future time of persecution Israel will require divine protection. Ryrie notes, "Since Satan failed to kill Christ, he turns his attention to the woman—Israel—to pour out his vengeance on her. The details of the persecution for the last three and a half years of the Tribulation are recorded in verses 13-17."<sup>83</sup> John utilizes a third-person plural verb in order to indicate that multiple parties will provide protection for Israel during this crisis. Although Robertson identifies this as an "indefinite plural ... indicating that others will see to immediate administration of her needed nourishment,"<sup>84</sup> nothing grammatically precludes the expositor from applying the nearest antecedents of τὸ τέκνον and τὸν θεὸν to it (Rev 12:5). This final statement indicates the distinct roles both God and Christ will perform regarding the future preservation of Israel during the tribulation.

## Conclusion

The highly symbolic introductory vision of Revelation 12:1-5 serves to lay the foundation for the eschatological action of Revelation 12:6-13:18. Satan's intense, displaced fury toward Israel and Israel's subsequent need for divine protection can only be understood in light of the entire sequence of historical

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<sup>81</sup> Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 391.

<sup>82</sup> Harold Hoehner, "Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, Part VI: Daniel's Seventy Weeks and New Testament Chronology," *BibSac* 132, no 525 (1975): 62-63

<sup>83</sup> Ryrie, *Revelation*, 90-91.

<sup>84</sup> Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 391. See also Thomas, *Revelation* 8-22, 127.

events that are summarized in Revelation 12:1-5. The author's intended meaning of this text can be ascertained by utilizing a hermeneutic method that relies on Scripture to interpret the symbols God revealed to John. Furthermore, due to its foundational nature, a careful exegesis of Revelation 12:1-6 is essential in order to understand the events that immediately follow it. These events include the intense persecution of Israel during the future period of tribulation and the rise of the antichrist. Both of these events are the direct result of the actions of the primary antagonist of the human race whose grand entrance into history, foiled plot to destroy the Messiah, future failure to annihilate Israel, and his coming demise are all visually portrayed across the heavens for John to witness and record.