



Revelation 12:1-9 Sermon Notes

The Sign of the Woman

Chapter 12 begins with a sign in the heavens: a pregnant woman, clothed in celestial splendor, about to give birth to the Messiah. Who exactly is this woman? The woman is most likely a sign representing God's faithful people, the Messianic community, in the Old and New Testaments. Just as the great Prostitute appears in Revelation to represent the community of the world in its hostility toward the gospel, so this woman represents the community that holds firmly to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Notice, the woman's apparel: sun, moon, and twelve stars. This almost certainly alludes to Joseph's dream and so connects the woman with Old Testament (OT) Israel:

Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream and this time the sun and moon and the eleven stars were bowing down to me." Genesis 37:9

Notice that the OT also portrays God's people at times as being pregnant and giving birth, particularly in prophecies concerning God's future salvation:

As a woman with child and about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pain, so were we in your presence, O LORD. We were with child, we writhed in pain, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to the people of the world. But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead. Isaiah 26:17-19

But the woman not only represents God's people in the OT giving birth to the Messiah. She also stands for God's people in the New Testament (NT) who proclaim Jesus and his gospel. The woman

continues to enjoy God's provision even after the Messiah's ascension (Rev 12:6) and she is explicitly associated with faithful Christians later in the chapter (v 17). Furthermore, later in Revelation the church is described as "the bride" (literally "the woman" - 19:7).

The woman in Revelation brings to mind Paul's words in Galatians:

But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, "Be glad O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains, because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her that has a husband." Galatians 4:26-27

The Sign of the Dragon

The Greek word *drakon* (dragon) is used in the Greek translation of the OT a number of times. Sometimes *drakon* refers to literal snakes, or to large sea creatures. But it also can carry the sense of a hostile sea monster of sorts, particularly one that is hostile to God's people. And so *drakon* is applied figuratively to the enemies of God's people. For instance, the Psalmist describes the victory over Egypt as the Red Sea as a slaying of the serpent (*drakon*):

But you, O God, are my king from of old; you bring salvation upon the earth. It was you who split open the sea by your power; you broke the heads of the monster in the waters. It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan and gave him as food to the creatures of the desert. It was you who opened up springs and streams; you dried up the ever flowing rivers. Psalm 74:12-15

Or again in Isaiah:

Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the LORD; awake as in days of old, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that sea monster through? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made a road in the depths of the seas, so that the redeemed might cross over? Isaiah 51:9-10

And even later, in the time of Ezekiel, Pharaoh is again compared to the *drakon*:

In the tenth year, in the tenth month of the twelfth day, the word of the LORD came to me, "Son of man, set your face against Pharaoh king of Egypt and prophesy against him and against all Egypt. Speak to him and say, 'This is what the sovereign LORD says: I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, you great monster lying among your streams. You say, "The Nile is mine; I made it for myself." But I will put hooks in your jaws and make the fish of your streams stick to your scales. I will pull you out from among your streams, with all the fishing sticking to your scales. Ezekiel 29:1-4

Similarly, Jeremiah compares Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon who sacked Jerusalem, to the *drakon*:

Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has devoured us, he has thrown us into confusion, he has made us an empty jar. Like a serpent he has swallowed us and filled his stomach with our delicacies and then has spewed us out. Jeremiah 51:34

The dragon from Revelation 12 has reared its ugly head(s) again and again against God's people, whether through Pharaoh in Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, King Herod and Caesar in Rome or through persecuting nations today. But behind them all stands the great dragon, Satan himself.

Sweeping the Stars from the Sky

The dragon's terrifying destructiveness is on display when "his tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to earth" (Revelation 12:4). To what does this astronomical vandalism refer?

One view sees this element as depicting a primordial event in which Satan drew a portion of the angels of heaven after him. The stars then symbolize the "fallen angels" who now serve him, and join him in his war against heaven (12:7,9). Stars have been explicitly identified in Revelation as symbolizing angels (see 1:16,20).

However, another possibility seems more likely. The dragon's tail sweeping away one third of the stars could also describe the dragon's persecution of God's people. The event described in Revelation 12:4 almost certainly alludes back to Daniel 8:9-10:

Out of one of them came another horn, which started small but grew in power to the south and to the east and toward the Beautiful Land. It grew until it reached the host of the heavens, and it threw some of the starry host down to the earth and trampled on them.

This rebellious horn, typically seen as first fulfilled by Antiochus III in Palestine in the 2nd century BC, grows in power until it throws down the stars and tramples on them. The imagery of Revelation is remarkably similar. Interestingly, in the next verses Daniel then goes on to say,

It set itself up to be as great as the Prince of the host. It took away the daily sacrifice from him and the place of his sanctuary was brought low. Because of rebellion, the host of the saints and the daily sacrifice were given over to it. It prospered in everything it did and truth was thrown to the ground. Daniel 8:11-12

This indeed comports with the blasphemies Antiochus committed against the temple and the Jews. And note specifically in these verses that the saints are brought low. It is possible that the casting down of the stars is a symbolic description of the trampling down of God's people. Not only are angelic beings in Daniel described as representing earthly peoples, but God's saints themselves are associated with stars (see Daniel 12:3).

So it's possible that when the dragon sweeps away stars with his tail in Revelation 12:4, it's a symbol for his assault on the Messianic community and part of the travails of the woman (12:2) giving birth to the Messiah. The Greek word used for her pain is associated commonly with judgment, torment and persecution, but is never elsewhere associated with labor pain. Also, the Greek verb translated "swept" (12:4) is used elsewhere in the NT with the sense of "dragging" someone or something away by force. This better fits an image of God's people being dragged down by violence rather than of angels joining sides with the dragon.

But whether the sweeping of the stars refers to the fall of angels or the persecution of the saints, the fundamental image of the dragon's malevolence and destruction remains unchanged.