

Who Is the “Woman Clothed With the Sun”?

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April 14, 2010

Revelation 12:1, 2: “Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. Then being with child, she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth.”

Nothing in the world can be more beautiful than a woman. When John saw this lovely lady in vision, he was astonished. Her clothing was the most glorious that ever a woman wore—the sparkling brilliance of sunlight itself. Compared to it, the world’s most fashionable dress designs look like rags. Who is she?

Man’s love for woman is a sweet and tender experience. God has put this love in our hearts so that we might more easily understand the love that Jesus feels for His people. “Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for her” (Ephesians 5:25). No man will give himself for a woman unless he finds in her that perfect “other half” of his own being. That is how Jesus feels toward His church.

All through the Bible, a lovely woman is a symbol of God’s church. Jeremiah says, “I have likened the daughter of Zion [the church] to a lovely and delicate woman” (Jeremiah 6:2). Paul likens the church to “a chaste virgin” presented to Christ in marriage (2 Corinthians 11:2). The Song of Solomon suddenly comes to life with meaning for

us when we consider that it is a song of Christ to His bride, the church.

Therefore a pure woman in Bible prophecy is the true church; and a harlot would be the fallen, apostate church (see Revelation 17:1-6).

The “moon under her feet” is aptly a picture of the old Jewish era passing away as the Christian church arises in glory. The Mosaic ordinances reflected the light of the gospel as the moon reflects the light of the sun. The “garland of twelve stars” is usually understood to be the ministry of the twelve apostles who established the church.

Revelation 12:3-5: “And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as it was born. And she bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and to His throne.”

As is usual, the Bible does not leave us to guess what its symbols mean. Verse 9 clearly says that the “great dragon” is “the Devil, and Satan, who deceives the whole world.” But he is not permitted to come to us in person to deceive us or to harm us. He must find someone who will serve as his “hand” to do what he wants done. He always works through human agents. When he sought to destroy the infant Jesus as soon as He was born, whom did he use for this wicked purpose?

All who have read the story in Matthew 2 know

that it was the Roman-appointed Herod the Great, King of Judea. Matthew records that Roman soldiers under Herod's command marched into Bethlehem to kill all the baby boys two years old or under. The "dragon" therefore did his work through pagan Rome. John wants us to recognize that the "seven heads and ten horns" mean that this "dragon" is the same power as the "beast" we see in Daniel 7:7, 8, which also has ten horns. Many threads tie the Revelation to Daniel. Each one explains the other.

All through His life on earth, Jesus felt the force of the "dragon's" wrath against Him. Well He knew that a greater power than pagan Rome lay behind it! History is a great war between Christ and Satan.

Strangely enough, it was in heaven that the war began. Satan was not always the devil, the deceiver. He was "the anointed cherub who covers; and I [the Lord] established you; you were on the holy mountain of God; you walked back and forth in the midst of the fiery stones. You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you. . . . Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty." Ezekiel 28:14-17. Satan gloried in the highest position held by any created being in God's great universe. Respected and praised by all the myriads of angels, he enjoyed the name of Lucifer, "the morning star."

But sin began with him while he knelt before the altar of God. He desired to be what he was not, to enjoy a higher level of being than he had been created to have. "How are you fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! ... For you have

said in your heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars [angels—compare Jude verses 6 and 13] of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation on the farthest sides of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:12-14).

Lucifer loved self—that is why he used the word "I" so much. He also loved to climb up higher than his fellows that is why he boasted of exalting himself so much. How many of us have indulged the same foolish desire ever since Lucifer invented "the mystery of iniquity," a new principle—love of self.

It was no small thing for the highest created being in heaven to start a rebellion. So serious was the problem started by Lucifer's charges against God that one-third of the angel host ("a third of the stars of heaven") joined in the rebellion. These are now evil angels, who seek to perform Satan's commands, and are ever becoming more masterful in the arts of deception. It is they who pretend to be the spirits of the dead and who work miracles in order to lead men and women and youth to join them in rebellion against God (see 2 Corinthians 11:13-15; Isaiah 8:19, 20; Ecclesiastes 9:5).

Revelation 12:6: "Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days."

When Jesus was taken up to God and to His throne, He left His people behind. Christ had defeated Satan, and the defeat made Satan angry. Knowing that Jesus loved His church as His dearest

possession, Satan turned to vent his rage upon her, hoping either to seduce her away from her loyalty to Christ, or failing this, to destroy her. He succeeded in seducing many unconverted people who professed to follow Christ, to depart from Him. But he could not seduce those who believed the word of Christ. He therefore determined to try to destroy them.

Thus it was that for 1260 years the true church of Christ was forced to “flee” into the “wilderness” for refuge. From all parts of Europe, persecuted people came to seek this refuge among the mountains of northern Italy and southern France. Some of them were known as Waldenses. Their homes and churches can still be seen in their valleys walled in by the mighty snow-crowned mountains that kept out the invaders who time and again would have destroyed them were it not for the protecting hand of God.

These were the faithful Christians who preserved the Bible for us, often at the cost of their lives. Throughout the Dark Ages they continued to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, though burdened by persecution and poverty. They were the true church “in the wilderness.”

Before we look further at the true church during her centuries of trouble, John takes us back to learn more about the war in heaven:

Revelation 12:7-10: “And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast

out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, ‘Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.’”

From reading Jude 9 and Daniel 12:1, we learn that Michael is Christ Himself. The name means, “Who is like God?” Christ is called God in Hebrews 1:8. He alone can bear the name of ‘Michael.’

People are surprised to learn in these verses that all wars had their beginning in heaven; and that Christ Himself fought the first one! But we are not to understand that the war was fought with guns or swords. Rather, it was fought with ideas—good against evil.

Satan charged God with being cruel and unfair to His creatures. He accused Him of trying to keep them down, to prevent them from enjoying themselves. He said that the law of God was a yoke of bondage, and that everyone should be free to do just as he pleased, to serve himself, to get ahead through selfishness. Satan boasted that he could do a better job than God was doing, and that his rule would bring greater happiness. Christ maintained that the law of unselfish love is the only way that leads to life and happiness.

As we have seen, one-third of the angels joined Satan in rebellion. Two-thirds remained loyal to God. Thus Satan was “cast out” of heaven.

The Bible says that he tempted our first parents. Eve was deceived (1 Timothy 2:13, 14), and Adam joined her in obeying the suggestions of Satan (see Genesis 3:1-19). Thus they actually welcomed Satan “into the earth,” their perfect, happy home. From that time Satan usurped the place of “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31).

But not yet was Satan confined to this earth. In the book of Job we read of how he used to be admitted to the parliament of heaven, doubtless as the “ruler of this world” in place of Adam who would have attended as one of the “sons of God” if he had not sold out his position to Satan (see Job 1:6-12). Satan was a lone rebel in the meeting. The other “sons of God” were watching to see how his plans were working out on the earth. Could Satan indeed produce a better government than God? Were his ideas better than God’s law? Sin was something new that they had never seen before. Was it something good?

If a lingering question or doubt remained in their minds, it was settled once and for all when they saw Satan direct his servants to crucify Christ upon the cross. Now, at last, sin had blossomed forth and produced its ripened fruit. Christ, having taken our human flesh and nature, had revealed the unselfish love of God and Satan hated Him for it, acting out his hatred by murdering Him. If it had been in his power to do so, he would have murdered the Father also, because Jesus said, “He who hates Me hates My Father also” (John 15:23). “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer” (1 John 3:15).

When the “sons of God” of the unfallen universe,

with all the loyal angels, saw what Satan’s plan meant, they at last realized clearly what sin is. Then it was that Satan was finally “cast out,” and the voice spoke from heaven, “Now salvation has come, . . . for the accuser of our brethren has been cast down.” As Jesus went to His cross, this happy assurance sustained Him. “Now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all . . . to Myself” (John 12:31, 32). Not only people, but angels and unfallen beings would also be drawn to Him by His cross. The whole universe would again be reconciled to God. When he crucified the Lord, Satan was over-stepping himself, defeating his own cause!

But not only did Christ defeat Satan. Christ’s followers, weak and sinful as they are, also defeat him. With the “eye of faith” they see Jesus crucified. His love constrains them to deny self, and to live for their Redeemer. Satan’s cruelty cannot turn them from their loyalty. He finds himself being beaten on all sides! Note the next verse:

Revelation 12:11: “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.”

It is sin to believe that Satan is too strong for Christ, or too strong for you if you believe in Christ. Those who “love their lives,” who love self, who cherish earthly security, are voting in favor of Satan’s government. They may not realize that they are doing this, but every refusal to bear the

cross on which self is crucified with Christ becomes a decision for Satan and his rebellion. If one believes the gospel, he believes the “good news” that Satan is defeated and is “cast out.”

Oh, how many people today cringe under the power of Satan, refusing to believe that he is defeated once and for all. “Satan is too strong for me!” they wail. They might as well cry out at noontime, “The midnight darkness is so dense I cannot see!” Only a person who is blind to the “Sun of righteousness” (Malachi 4:2) will live a moment longer under Satan’s cruel darkness. Let us “walk at liberty,” and let us sing this song: “O Lord, truly I am Your servant; I am Your servant, and the son of Your maidservant; You have loosed my bonds” (Psalm 119:45; 116:16).

Revelation 12:12-16: “Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time.” Now when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman who gave birth to the male Child. But the woman was given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent. So the serpent spewed water out of his mouth like a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away by the flood. But the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the flood which the dragon had spewed out of his mouth.”

Why didn’t the Lord destroy Satan as soon as he crucified Christ, and put an end to the great war there and then? Why must he be given another chance, as it were, even if it is “a short time”?

There are three reasons:

(1) You and I could never be really happy unless we shared Christ’s victory. “To him who overcomes . . . even as I also overcame” (Revelation 3:21) is a precious promise of joyous fellow-ship with the Son of God. If you didn’t have a battle to fight yourself, you would be only a redeemed vegetable.

(2) It is only fair that Satan be given a chance to prove whether or not you and I really choose to “walk at liberty,” or whether we are content with the bondage and darkness of sin and rebellion.

(3) God’s people are to become the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem, and are to be part of the beautiful “woman” whom Jesus loves as His Bride. A man who is highly educated wants a wife who has also been educated. Then they will enjoy each other’s company. Jesus was “educated” by His experience in our flesh when He defeated Satan. His church is “educated” by sharing the “fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philippians 3:10).

The “time, times, and half a time” is the Bible way of saying three years and a half. Counting twelve months to a year, this is the same total of 42 months (compare Revelation 13:5, where the same period of time is brought to view). Counting thirty days to a month, 42 months is 1260 days, the same period of time we found in verse 6 of this chapter. As we shall see in the next chapter, this is the same

time period which began in A.D. 538 and ended in A.D. 1798.

The “water” which the “serpent spewed out like a flood” may refer to the armies that many times marched against God’s people during those dark years of persecution. It may also refer to the many cleverly invented false doctrines which had their origin with Satan. Falsehood is Satan’s best tool.

In either case, “the earth helped the woman” in that the persecuted church was saved from destruction. The armies of her enemies were turned back; the false doctrines were over-come by truth proclaimed by men of God such as Luther, Wesley, and others.

Does God have a true church in the world today? Out of all the hundreds of different kinds of churches, is there one that God claims as “the woman” of Revelation 12?

There are sincere people who say that God does not have one true church, that all churches are equally true, and that all paths lead to heaven, regardless of what one believes. But the Bible says that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,” and “one body” which is “the church” (see Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 Corinthians 12:12, 28). Every true follower of Jesus is seeking to find that true church of which Jesus Himself is the Head.

A good lock cannot be picked by a thief. It will open only at the insertion of its true key which has been made especially to fit that lock. Revelation 12:17 provides us with the key for finding the true church in the world today. Try that key in many churches, and it will not fit. Their doors will not

open to God's key. Only one church can be the “lock” that this “key” fits perfectly. Let us note the next verse:

Revelation 12:17: “And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

Let us carefully examine the four characteristics of the true church as found in this verse:

(1) It is a church that the devil hates. We can join most churches and the devil will not oppose us. No sacrifice is required. No cross needs to be borne. There is no opposition from the world. It teaches the same doctrines as the woman “clothed with the sun” in verse 1 of this chapter. In other words, it has the same faith and teachings as the church of the apostles. The true church is one throughout history. The name that a certain church has adopted now may mean nothing more than a coat of paint. Look beneath the surface, and test the teachings and practice with the church which Christ and His apostles founded. If we see a train enter a tunnel, we will see the same train emerge at the other end of the tunnel. The church of the apostles went into the “tunnel” at the beginning of the 1260 years of persecution, as it fled into the “wilderness.” When it emerges again in full view before the world, it will be the same church in spirit and in faith as it was originally. It holds the same body of truth through the centuries.

The word translated as “the rest of her offspring” is rendered as “the remnant” in the King James Version. It means the last part of the descendants

of the apostolic church—Christ's true followers in the very end of time. If we buy a piece of cloth from the beginning of a bolt, it will have a certain pattern and color. If we later should buy the "remnant" of that bolt of cloth, it will have exactly the same pattern and color as the first piece we bought. Many churches have added so many teachings borrowed from paganism and traditions of men that the apostles would never be able to recognize the "pattern" today.

(3) The true church "keeps the commandments of God." James tells us that if we break one of the ten commandments, we are guilty of breaking them all (James 2:10-12). Therefore, it cannot truthfully be said that any church is keeping the commandments of God if it keeps only nine of them. Almost all popular churches today continue to transgress the fourth commandment, which says: "The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work" (Exodus 20:8-11).

All the crime, selfishness and infidelity that poison modern life are the direct result of violating the ten commandments of God. The Sabbath stands as the seal of that holy law.

If that one commandment (or any other) is violated, no true obedience of the other nine remains possible, for the motive is no longer love for God and loyalty to Him. Keeping the true Sabbath is just as important as keeping the other commandments that God wrote with His own finger. And to keep the commandments of God is to love as God loves. "Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10). God's true church is therefore a

church which is filled with the love of Christ, supreme love for God, and Christlike love for our neighbor.

(4) The true church has "the testimony of Jesus." John explains this for us as being "the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:10). "God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets" (1 Corinthians 12:28). The gift of prophecy did not die out with the apostles. Jesus gave this gift to His church when "He ascended on high" (see Ephesians 4:8, 11), and the gift was to remain with the church through all time right up to the second coming of Christ, because it was given "for the equipping of the saints till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man" (verses 12-14).

Paul told the Corinthian church that "the testimony of Christ" would remain with them until "the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ," "to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:4-8). The "spirit of prophecy" manifested to the "remnant church" is a wonderful gift, but it does not take the place of the Bible, nor does it contradict any Bible teachings. "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (1 Corinthians 14:32).

Each one who yields himself to follow Christ will be led to the true church. "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock, and one shepherd" (John 10:16).