

THEFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

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Revelation 12 The real War of the Worlds

Which Millennialism?

It's pretty clear and almost universally accepted that John's visions in Revelation are highly symbolic and dramatised, rather than being photo-realistic descriptions of how things physically are or will be. But this universal acceptance leaves plenty of scope for interpreting the symbols in radically different ways – so much so that Christians have fallen out big time over these interpretations.

For the longest time, I have tended to avoid getting involved in these debates. It's not that it isn't interesting to speculate about what secrets Revelation contains about the future of the earth and more to the point of the human race; just that it seemed like a lot of bother to go to when the end result could never be certain. Because the visions are so weird and the possible interpretations so many, it seems foolish to be dogmatic about any one position, and quite perverse to fall out with anyone because of it.

Arguably the different theories have some importance and at a stretch can affect the way we actually go about our lives today; but for the most part, it seems academic and largely irrelevant. Much more important to study, preach and teach what God is truly like and how we can come to know him better, than to worry about interpreting dragons and scrolls.

You may be aware of the various “millennialisms” which people adhere to – pre-millennialism, where Christ returns to rescue the church from the world before establishing a thousand-year reign on earth; post-millennialism, where a thousand-year reign of the church on earth is followed by Christ's return; and amillennialism, where the millennium is figurative of the entire period between Christ's first and second comings. Pre-millennialism is probably the most exciting, and leads to variants where the church is rescued or “raptured” either before or after a 3.5 year period of terror called the Tribulation.

Whilst I was at University, a friend of mine coined a term which summed up my feelings well. Ian Macauley, who is now pastor of one of Glasgow's Baptist churches, introduced the term “Pro-millennialism” – which basically meant he wasn't really sure what was going to happen, but whatever God had in store he was all for it!

Yet now, thanks to only taking a three month sabbatical instead of a six month one, I find myself having to expound on one of the very passages which hitherto I have been able to sit on the fence with my head in the sand about.

I will try to do justice to it, and to give you enough background on various interpretations to make up your own mind. But having studied the breadth of viewpoints out there, I have come to my own conclusions as to what the various elements of this vision mean. I'm not going to be dogmatic about the details – apart from anything else, you can always press an analogy too far – but as you will see there is a big-picture here which is important to grasp. For behind the imagery of dragons and women, warring angels and spewing serpents, there is a revelation of just how much God loves us, just how much he has done, is doing and will do for us, and just how much we owe him. If we do nothing else besides appreciate that big picture more as a result of this service, then we will be better placed to go out into the world to live for him.

The Visions

The vision before us is of a battle between a glorious woman and a fearsome dragon. The woman is heavily pregnant, and when she gives birth the dragon tries to destroy the child as soon as he is born. But before he can do so, the child is snatched up to safety in heaven, and the woman flees to the desert for 3 and a half years.

There is a great battle in heaven between the dragon and his followers, and the archangel Michael and his angels. The dragon loses and is cast down to earth, where he tries to vent his wrath on the woman, but she is given wings like an eagle and is able to flee from him. The dragon tries to overpower her with a torrent of water, but the earth swallows it up; so the dragon diverts his attention to the woman's other children instead.

Pretty amazing stuff!

Whatever God intends to get across in this passage, the imagery is certainly memorable – and that was half the point! Just as Jesus used to teach in parables, telling memorable stories that people could relate to and hopefully remember, so John is given vivid pictures of events that his readers will also remember. However, we don't have John's interpretations of these things, which is where the fun starts!

The Dragon

To make matters easier, we will start with the Dragon. I say easier because John tells us who the dragon is in verse 9 – he is Satan, the ancient serpent from the Garden of Eden story. So far so good. But what is the significance of his appearance? He is red – the colour of blood, death and murder – as well as the colour of cartoon devils. Clearly this signifies his evil and destructive intent. But he also has 7 heads, ten horns, and 7 crowns on his heads – even by dragon standards, that's weird.

Remember though that he is introduced as a Sign. This is not a description of the physical appearance of Satan, but it tells us something of his character.

I'm sure PZ and others will have told you about the significance of numbers in Revelation. Most commentators accept that they are symbolic, with each number having a consistent meaning throughout not just Revelation but the whole of scripture.

7, for instance, is the number of divine completeness or perfection, such as the number of days in a week, including the day of divine rest. 10, on the other hand, indicates more measured or limited completeness, a completeness which is limited by God's decree. We have 10 fingers and 10 toes, that is complete. But it is more of a human completeness than 7, which is a divine perfection. I must admit the difference is a bit moot; if you read enough of this stuff, you soon find that there are non-sequiturs (or break-downs in logic) in all the detailed interpretations of Revelation.

So the point seems to be that 7 heads represent God-given authority; odd for Satan, but we will come back to that. The 10 horns means incredible strength – horn was the ancient metaphor for strength. But that strength, though great, is limited and under God's final authority. The 7 crowns indicate perfect and complete kingship; again not something we would attribute to Satan.

But we must remember Satan is a deceiver, and that deception applies to the way he wants us to see him, as much as in what he says to us. God has given Satan authority on earth – so when Jesus was being tempted, Satan was able to offer him the kingdoms of earth, because that was his domain. But he himself is not the perfect King; the crowns are a deception.

Now one of the other joys of prophecy and symbolism is that there tends to be several levels to its meaning and fulfilment. When we read in Revelation 17 of the heads and the horns, we find them linked to empires and kings of the world, and to hills or mountains.

Apparently Rome is build on 7 hills, although when Ashlea and I were there last month it was pretty difficult to tell. 7 undulations, maybe; but mountains they are not. Nevertheless, there is a view that the dragon's heads represent Rome, both the Roman empire – which would be an obvious interpretation for the people of John's day – and the Roman Catholic church, which in it's apostasy is another obvious institution to play into the revelation imagery. The 10 horns are more difficult to make fit, though each generation makes a good attempt to align these with 10 powerful nations of their day.

A decade ago, when the European Union had 10 members, the EU was identified as the Beast. Now that it has expanded, the interpretation seems rather more fanciful!

I think the point of all this is that numbers are important, primarily as a symbolic thing. But God also tends to align real things with symbolic numbers too – there are seven days in a week after all! However, to try spot the Beast in modern politics by forcing 7s and 10s to match is to miss the point.

The point is Satan is a powerful adversary, one whom even Michal did not insult (see Jude 9).

The Woman

Now we can look at the woman, the first symbolic sign:

- She is described as a “great and wondrous sign in heaven”;
- She is clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and twelve stars forming a crown on her head.
- She gives birth to a son who will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre.
- She is also persecuted by Satan both before and after the child is born.
- And finally, she has other children who are explicitly identified as those who obey God’s commands and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

What do these things remind you of?

Well, the sun moon and stars should remind us of Joseph’s dream which got him into so much hot water – the stars were the twelve sons of Israel, the sun was Israel himself, and the moon his wife Rachel. This suggests the woman is the nation of Israel.

The one who will rule the nations is surely Christ himself. Mary gave birth to Christ, so is the woman Mary?

Those who hold to the testimony of Jesus are Christians like you and I, so maybe collectively we are the church, and in a sense Israel gave birth to the Church since the Gospel was given first to Jew, then Gentile.

So the two main theories are that the woman is Israel, or that she is the Church. The idea of her being the church links intimately with the idea that there was a “church” in Old testament times – those who truly followed God, who had faith in his salvation. So it’s not as barmy as it sounds to see the church bring Christ into the world, as Mary and Joseph certainly qualified as having faith in God.

To be frank, I can’t get too excited about the distinctions between these two main ideas. Whether you call the pre-Christian Israel the Church or not, it is clear that the key meaning of the pregnant woman is the people of Israel from whom the Christ came. More precisely, she stands for that portion of the people of Israel who kept faith with their God and hence lived out his purposes – and chief amongst the purposes of God for Israel is to bring about the birth of the Christ, who would save the world. More precisely still, the woman stands for the entire line of the Messiah from Eve through to Mary.

The enmity of Dragon and Woman

So now we have identified the main actors, what about the play itself? What can we learn about human history and destiny from this vision?

The first and most obvious part of the drama is the enmity between the dragon and the woman. Why does Satan hate the people of God so much?

As with many profound questions, the answer lies back in the first chapters of the Bible. In Genesis 3 we have the story of how Satan, in the form of a serpent, tempted Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. When God pronounces his punishments for this, he says in verse 15:

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.

Let's stand back a bit from the familiar story and think about what was going on there.

Satan is a created being. We don't know for sure, but it seems he was one of the most powerful creatures, one of the leaders of the angels if not the leader; second only to God himself. For some reason which we will never fathom, God gave his creations the ability to rebel. So Satan chose to rebel against God, desiring the forbidden Number 1 spot for himself. We don't know precisely when he first rebelled, though clearly it was before Genesis 3, if not before the creation of Man.

From that moment on, Satan set himself in enmity against God. Presumably, he did not see his cause as futile in the same way that we now do; he must have really thought he had a chance of being the most mighty being in existence, that he could defeat God.

We also don't know how quickly he descended from being the beautiful star of the morning – see Isaiah 14:12 - to this dreadful beast of Revelation. The amount of time is irrelevant; what is important to understand is that the road of rebellion against God leads to your own destruction. Satan could never become more God-like than God himself and so take over God's Number 1 slot as the most perfect being. His choice was either to continue in his exalted position under God, or to seek to destroy God and everything he stood for – and so to become the Devil, the diabolical one.

When God created Man, it was obvious that Man was the apple of God's eye. Again for a reason we will never understand, God loved the creature that he made in his own image much more than we could ever think justified. I wonder if it is possible that this incredible love actually played a part in Satan's downfall? Was he jealous that God should lavish his love on such a weak and feeble creature of the dust, rather than on the glorious and powerful star of the morning? Did that tip him over the edge, did he think God had lost his marbles, and so ought to be replaced as King of Heaven?

Whether that was the case or not, it is clear that, having fallen himself, Satan quickly realised that one way of hurting the God he now hated would be to harm his most precious creation. So, taking the form of a serpent, he entered the Garden of Eden and approached the Woman, with terrible results.

But Satan, for all his guile, does not see the beginning from the end. He does not know the full consequences of his actions. For sure, God was heartbroken at the fall of man; but he was not surprised! He had a plan to deal with this prospect all along, and the woman and her seed are vital to it. The seed of the woman would be Satan's downfall, and so Satan made it his Number 1 goal to destroy that seed before it destroyed him.

Neither Eve nor Satan knew how long they would have to wait. There is some suggestion that they both thought that the promised seed would be her first-born child. But it became apparent that it was Abel and not Cain who had God's favour. Thinking that Abel might be that promised seed, Satan put Cain up to murdering his brother. But still God's plan was not thwarted.

And so the saga continues through countless generations. Satan seeks to identify and annihilate the promised seed, but God is always a step ahead of him and ensures the safety of the line which will eventually bring his own Son into the world.

Eventually, Mary gives birth to Jesus in a stable, away from the attention of Satan who remember is not all-seeing. Satan is once again too late when he prompts Herod to slaughter all the male children of Bethlehem, for Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt in the nick of time.

Now in our chapter the entire life, death and resurrection of Christ is skipped over completely – the child is born, and is then snatched up to God's throne – but we know the story.

Having failed to prevent his birth, and his development into a grown man, we know of how Satan tracked Jesus down to the desert, but failed to tempt him there. Had he succeeded, that would have nullified the plan of God. We know too how he entered Judas to ensure he would betray Christ, and how as a result Jesus was crucified. Presumably Satan thought that by killing Jesus he would win the final victory over God, he would prevent the Seed from crushing his head, and he would be able to claim his place as #1 in heaven.

But marvellously it was God who won the victory, far from being defeated Christ ascends to heaven to the throne which Satan so wanted for himself!

Now, it was not just to avoid having his head crushed that Satan wanted to destroy the Seed. The other story here, arguably of more importance to us, is the fate of the human race. You see, having disobeyed God, we sided with Satan against God. We gave up our right to enjoy God's company and presence, and instead put ourselves under Satan's dominion.

That is why he is the Prince and Power of the air (Ephesians 2:2), why he could offer Christ the kingdoms of earth, why his symbolic beast has God-given authority over the earth. You can imagine the glee Satan had when he claimed the apple of God's eye as his own prize after their fall in Eden.

Now Satan may have expected God to hand them over spirit body and soul there and then, to be tortured in hell forever as a result of their fall. But instead, God allowed them to continue to live on the earth until they grew old and died. How unfair! Moreso, when they died, God allowed all those who had faith in him to join him in heaven, rather than to suffer in hell! How outrageous – surely that was breaking the rules!

The War in Heaven

Now we come to another controversial bit – the war in heaven between Michael and Satan. Of course there are lots of ideas of what is going on here, of what sort of fighting there was, who exactly Michael is, and even when it took place.

I always thought that this war must have happened as soon as Satan rebelled. That somehow he was able to persuade a vast number of angels to side with him, and that he was immediately ejected from heaven. It stands to reason that the all-powerful God would not want his enemy lurking around his home. And it also fits with Satan being on earth in the Garden of Eden.

But having read up on this more I'm not so sure. Take his very name, Satan, the Devil. Although we do get our word diabolical from the root for Devil, both those names mean "The Accuser". He accuses God's people of all sorts of wrong, whether the accusations are justified or not.

Further, we know from Job that Satan had a regular audience with God, and it was here that he made his accusation – that Job only served God because it was convenient for him.

Could it be that Satan and his angels could come freely into heaven during the whole of the Old Testament period, to bring their accusations to God? [Rev 12:10-11]

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 Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame 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."

We know that God did not treat those who had faith in him as their sins deserved – despite their sin, they were able to come to heaven when they died on earth. God was looking forward to the salvation which Jesus would win, in order to allow this to be so. But Satan, intent on preventing that salvation plan, was indignant that their souls belonged to him and God's own rules. And so he was able to press those accusations against the saints.

God rightly insisted on looking forward to the salvation that would be one for those saints, so forever denied Satan's requests. Perhaps this is why God didn't ban Satan from heaven while at the same time allowing sinners in – to expel Satan because of his sin while at the same time allowing in his people might be seen as unfair?

But after the cross, Satan's hold on mankind was broken. Salvation had been won, and now there could be no more argument, no more accusations against the saints, because Christ's blood had incontrovertibly paid for us all. At last Michael and the loyal angels could expel Satan and his hordes from heaven, for ever!

No more could Satan accuse!

You see what pivotal moments the Cross and the Resurrection are. The whole of time is divided into before and after this. Before, Satan could freely accuse God's people of their sins, and press his claim to their souls. After, there could be no condemnation for those who had faith in Christ Jesus – whether after the event, like us, or before the event, like the Israelites and others who believed God would one day save his people.

The Struggle on Earth

Now that he could no longer prevent the coming of the Seed, and indeed had been cast forever out of heaven, you might think Satan would give up! But no, he continues to work to thwart God's plans, in vain hope that by so doing he can overthrow him at last.

Satan knows that both Israel and the Church are to play a pivotal role in the end times. So if he can destroy one or both, then maybe he will get the upper hand. That is why the Jews have come under such oppression, and why the church too has been so often been under attack.

Left to our own devices, we would be helpless against Satan – but as depicted here by those eagle’s wings, God gives us what we need to escape from him. He has prepared a place for us to shelter from the devil’s onslaught. It is depicted as a desert, a place where life cannot survive on its own, a place which is separate from normal society. This is repeated in verses 6 and 14, and in both verses we are told that God would take care of her for 1,260 days, or “a time, times and half a time”. Both references are to a period of 3.5 years, which of course gives rise to another clutch of theories about what is meant.

At one end of the spectrum, the most dramatic interpretation is that there will be a period of literally 3.5 years when Satan will be rampant on earth – the Tribulation - but the church will be miraculously removed from out of his reach. Or if the woman is Israel, 3.5 years where the Israelites will shelter in a literal desert. Some go as far as to pinpoint the location as Petra, in the Jordanian desert, where settlements were carved out of the rock 2000 years ago as the capital of the Nabataean empire. According to the most whacky theories, the place is kept stocked with food, water, and evangelical tracts in Hebrew in readiness for the Jews to flee there!

On the other hand, the most symbolic interpretation of this comes from recognising that 3.5 is half of 7, that number of completeness. Maybe this refers to half of the completeness of time. What divides time in two? Well, we’ve seen that the death and resurrection of Christ does this; so what these verses are saying is that Israel and/or the Church will be kept safe during the complete period of human history from the time of Christ on to his second coming.

Conclusions

In our troubled time, where the turmoil on the world’s stock markets and banks is likely to affect us all sooner or later, it is reassuring to know that our security does not come from the institutions of this world. Just as God could care for the woman in the desert where we would think life could not survive, so he can and will care for us even when our circumstances look dire.

This is no hollow promise or wishful thinking; it makes perfect sense, when we realise the big picture of the big story that has been going on since the creation, and that we have caught a glimpse of in tonight’s passage.

Since before the days of Adam and Eve, God has loved his created people with a love so strong that nothing and no one can deter him from bringing it to fulfilment. All Satan’s schemes have failed so far, and all future schemes will fail too, for God is preserving his people for no lesser reason than to prepare us to be the bride of his one and only son.

He longs to share eternity with us!

Let us then live in the light of this tremendous revelation, not doubting God’s ability or willingness to care for us through all the storms of life, not letting the pressures of life or the temptations of the world distract us from our mission of worshipping him and of making him known to those around us.