

*Charts: The Third Parenthetical Visions: Chart #15*

## PREFACE

We need to begin our exploration of the remaining parenthetical visions by taking care of some housekeeping: We need to get our bearings in the text, and point out the main characters that play critical roles in this final act of the Eschaton. Most important, however, we need to reexamine our interpretive approach to these visions.

*Structure*

As we saw in our last session, the seventh angel sounds his trumpet in 11:15; however, the narrative events that the trumpet actually produces—the pouring out of the seven bowls of wrath—are not chronicled until Chapter Fifteen, which records the *preparation* of the last seven plagues, with the seven bowls actually being poured out in Chapter Sixteen. Christ does not return, marking the official end of the Tribulation, until the middle of Chapter Nineteen.

In between, roughly in Chapters Twelve to Fourteen, we have the parenthetical visions that we will be examining in the next few sessions.

**Note:** I included the text from our last session (11:15-19) in with these parenthetical visions for organizational purposes, even though the subject and tenor of that passage is different in nature from the rest.

**Read Revelation 12:1-2.**

v1

A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars;

Verse 1 begins with “A great sign appeared in heaven.” The word translated “sign,” *semeion*, means just that—not “wonder” as the KJV has it—a sign is an outward (visible) indication of secret power or truth. John MacArthur makes an excellent point regarding this that will help us properly digest the visions here and in the next few chapters.

*MacArthur:* [A “sign”] describes a symbol that points to a reality. The literal approach to interpreting Scripture [which we are following in this study] allows for normal use of symbolic language, but understands that it points to a literal reality.

Well, that's a good start, but what about later fantastical imagery *not* labeled a "sign" that, like these signs, we literalists will not interpret absolutely literally, such as the description of "the beast from out of the sea"? What is the difference?

Don't MacArthur's words pardon all those interpreters that see the Roman Catholic papacy at every turn in the Revelation, or those who blithely dictate that any reference to "days"—such as the two witnesses prophesying for 1,260 days—of course means years?

I think it is necessary to pause for some analysis on this before we plow into these sometimes fantastical, even bizarre, parenthetical visions. For we will indeed be concluding that they are not what they appear to John to be, and beyond that, they often mean *more* than just one thing. (For example, the beast from the sea is not *just* Antichrist, but represents, as Walvoord puts it, "a revelation of the revived Roman Empire in its period of worldwide dominion." That is, Antichrist will be the head of that confederation.)

And please understand my reason for taking time with this. Some may find this hard to believe, but I do not intentionally drag out these studies, for I have no desire to try the patience of those in attendance. However, my philosophy is this: Why bother to make the study at all if you're not going to get down to the bare metal to understand the fullness of God's word. It would have taken one, maybe two sessions to deliver to you the skeleton of the eschatological timeline, but what good would that be without understanding what lies beneath the surface, the reasons for and explanation of the events, and, not least, how they are related to each other *and* our relationship with God? So please bear with me as I make some important distinctions regarding the interpretation of these apocalyptic texts that we find in not just the Revelation, but Daniel, Ezekiel, and many of the other prophecies.

### *The Historical View*

Many of the interpretations we take issue with, that seem almost ridiculous to those in the dispensational camp, come from those with an *historicist*, or historical, perspective on Revelation. Those in this camp see all the events and visions of the Tribulation and Millennium (Chapters 4-19, and 20:1-6) being played out during what we would call history: between the first century and present day. They find *historical, past* events behind everything that *we* see in the future. They would conclude that we are already in the Millennium.

**By the Way:** Those with the exhaustive *ESV Study Bible* will find a helpful discussion on this and other perspectives, along with simple charts, in its introductory pages to the Revelation.

Those in the historicist camp pepper their interpretations with ancient Roman emperors, medieval events, the Reformation, and especially the papacy of the hated (in their eyes) Roman Catholic church.

### *The Allure of Apocalyptic Language*

Then there are those who seem to insist at every turn that since this is apocalyptic literature it *must*, by its very nature mean something other than what it says. Every object, every individual, every fantastical creature, every action represents something other than how it is described in the text. A literalist, dispensational approach to the end times rejects this.

### *The Critical Importance of God's Word as Reference*

All right, so I am teaching a literalist, dispensational, pretribulational, premillennial approach to the Last Things. How, then, can I look at v1 of our text and conclude that the “woman clothed with the sun” is Israel, and that in v3 “a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems” is not just Satan, but also represents a revived Roman empire? A good and fair question.

There are two answers to that question. The immediate response is that both of these scenes are introduced as “signs” (*semeion*); we are told straight away that these visions represent something else—something tangible and actual.

In this text, the second answer is most pertinent to the scene in v3. Here we are told that the dragon had “seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems.” How do we know this represents a revived Roman empire? Well, God’s word tells us so. [Turn please to Daniel 7](#). The prophet Daniel is shown a vision of four terrifying beasts that come “up from the sea”; Daniel 7 is a rich treasure trove for the study of the Eschaton, and we will be returning, but for now we are going to focus our attention on the description of the fourth beast.

### **Read Daniel 7:7-8.**

As we might imagine, Daniel required some help in translating this vision, and he got it from a (heavenly) bystander within the vision. Since our purpose here is not to explain the Daniel passage but to discover our second answer for the interpretation of the *Revelation* vision, permit me to pick and choose from the bystander’s explanation.

**v17:** *First we learn that* “These great beasts, which are four in number, are four kings who will arise from the earth.’

**vv19-21:** “Then I [[Daniel](#)] desired to know the exact meaning of the fourth beast, which was different from all the others, exceedingly dreadful, with its teeth of iron and its claws of bronze, and which devoured, crushed and trampled down the remainder with its feet, and the meaning of the ten horns that were on its head and the other horn which came up, and before which three of them fell, namely, that horn which had eyes and a mouth uttering great boasts and which was larger in appearance than its associates. I kept looking, and that horn was waging war with the saints and overpowering them.”

*Here we have, in Daniel, the introduction of Antichrist as one who devours three of the kingdoms, leaving seven, and one who overpowers “the saints,” that is, Israel.*

**vv23-25:** *Then the bystander in the vision offers more details about the fourth beast.* “Thus he said: “The fourth beast will be a fourth kingdom on the earth, which will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth and tread it down and crush it. As for the ten horns, out of this kingdom ten kings will arise; and another will arise after them, and he will be different from the previous ones and will subdue three kings. He will speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Highest One, and he will intend to make alterations in times and in law; and they will be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time.” *That is, three and one half years—the last half of the Tribulation.* [Now back to Revelation 13.](#)

In Chapter Thirteen we have the emergence of “a beast coming up out of the sea,” and notice his description in vv1-2:

Then I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns were ten diadems, and on his heads were blasphemous names. And the beast which I saw was like a leopard, and his feet were like those of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. And the dragon gave him his power and his throne and great authority.

We won’t get into specifics right now (we certainly will later), but we see right off the similarity between this beast, the beast in Daniel 7, and the dragon in Chapter 12 of Revelation. Yet in Chapter Thirteen we are told that this beast’s powers were given to him by “the dragon.” So we must conclude that this beast is *not* Satan himself.

Let me cite John Walvoord’s conclusion for our passage in Chapter Twelve.

*Walvoord*: The second great sign appearing in heaven is described as a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns upon his heads. From the similar description given in 13:1 and the parallel reference in Daniel 7:7-8, 24, it is clear that the revived Roman Empire is in view [i.e., a confederation of evil states bent on world domination]. Satan, however, is also called the dragon later in 12:9, and it is clear that the dragon is both the empire and the representation of satanic power. The color red may indicate his murderous characteristics. The seven heads and ten horns refer to the original ten kingdoms of which three were subdued by the little horn of Daniel 7:8, who is to be identified with the world ruler of the great tribulation who reigns over the revived Roman Empire [i.e., Antichrist].

Thus we have our two answers for us literalists to have the temerity to interpret these visions as we will.

- In Chapter Twelve they are identified as “signs,” and
- God’s word itself will at times give us the interpretation we need.

### *The Main Characters*

Most commentators like to point to the seven main characters that are introduced in Chapters Twelve to Fourteen; at first my response to this was, “So what? We’ve seen most of them already.” But then I realized that there may be some merit in establishing, or at least reminding ourselves, who these characters are, and under what names or titles we are to know them.

*In Chapter Twelve:*

- A woman clothed with the sun: Israel
- A great red dragon: Satan and his confederation of states
- A male child: Christ Jesus
- The angel Michael
- The remnant of Israel

*In Chapter Thirteen:*

- A beast coming up out of the sea: Antichrist, world dictator
- Another beast coming up out of the earth: the false prophet, religious leader

Now we are ready to return to our text at the beginning of Chapter Twelve, and the first sign, that of the woman.

*... a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars;*

And right off the bat we are able to turn to God's word for the interpretation of this fanciful sign in heaven—back to Genesis and one of the dreams of Joseph.

### **Read Genesis 37:9-11.**

Thus that passage not only illumines the Revelation passage for us, but whatever questions arise in v9 are answered in v10: What do the sun and moon represent in the dream? Joseph's father and mother. What do the stars represent? Joseph's brothers. [Back to Revelation 12.](#)

So we can identify the woman in this sign as Israel, since the sun is Jacob, the moon is Rachel, and the twelve stars their sons—the twelve tribes of Israel. Interestingly, the “crown” is *stephanos*, not the crown of kingship, but the crown given to victors. Ultimately Israel will be victorious through God's defeat of their enemy.

v2

and she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth.

In John's vision this “great sign” is being seen in heaven, but the passage speaks to events on earth, and especially those during the Great Tribulation, as well as the birth of Christ. The woman is pregnant, and we learn from v5 that this is no ordinary child, but the Messiah.

And she [\[the woman in v1\]](#) gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron; and her child was caught up to God and to His throne.

As Walvoord states it, the woman represents “Israel as the matrix from which Christ came.” And repeatedly in Scripture the travails of a rebellious nation or individuals are likened to the travails of women in childbirth.

### **Read Isaiah 26:16-18.**

Beyond that, however, v2 probably refers more to the national distress from without—from Rome around the time of Christ's birth—rather than any difficulty for Judah in “birthing” the Messiah ([Micah 5:2-5a](#)).

### **Read Revelation 12:3-4.**

v3

Then another sign appeared in heaven: and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems.

A second principal character is introduced into the narrative, and for a second time John employs the adjective *megas*, translated “great,” which in this context could mean either large, or terrifying, or important—or all of the above.

**Note:** There is a lot of time-shifting going on in Chapter Twelve. I suggest that the best way to digest these passages is to not get lost in reconciling the time frame of one passage to the rest, but to just let your mind flow back and forth with the text, for it does a good job of defining the time frame for each scene. It is clear, for example, the woman and child in vv1-2 and v5 refer to the birth of Christ Jesus, approximately 4 BC. Meanwhile, though the *appearance* of the dragon speaks of the present Tribulation, the dragon’s *actions* skip around in the past, from the birth of Christ to the beginning of the Tribulation. Each time frame for each scene is not difficult to discern from the text, so just let yourself flow with it.

Like his righteous counterpart God, Satan works his will through the individuals and nations of this fallen world, and here these kings and nations are represented by the appearance of this monster; we get an explanation for these seven heads with their diadems (crowns of power and authority) and the ten horns in Chapter Seventeen. [Turn there please](#). And once again, we will dig deeper into Chapter Seventeen when we reach it in our study, but for now let us use it as a reference for Chapter Twelve.

### **Read Revelation 17:7, 9-13.**

*MacArthur:* The seven heads with their seven diadems represent seven consecutive world empires running their course under Satan’s dominion: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, and Antichrist’s future empire. The final kingdom, ruled by Antichrist will be a ten-nation confederacy; the ten horns represent the kings who will rule under Antichrist (Daniel 7:23-25). The shifting of the diadems from the dragon’s heads to the beast’s horns (13:1) reveals the shift in power from the seven consecutive world empires to the ten kings under the final Antichrist.

v4

And his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child.

Once again God’s word will explain for us the first sentence in this verse—and we don’t even have to leave the neighborhood.

### **Read Revelation 12:7-9.**

This passage explains for us that the “stars” referred to in v4 are Satan’s (evil) angels; when he is thrown out of heaven they are thrown out with him, here pictured as the dragon’s tail sweeping to earth with him one third of the angels in heaven—which is a rather sobering number. Just think: at one time one third of the angels in heaven were in opposition to God!

*And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child.*

When we put the pieces together, when we add to the present text the references later in Revelation and the Daniel passages, we can see that at the moment of the Messiah’s birth—this One who would eventually return home to His Father in heaven (v5), only to one day return to do battle with Satan’s evil, (and win), eventually casting the dragon into a thousand-year dungeon only to release him so that he can be thrown into the eternal lake of fire—as the time drew near for Messiah to be born, Satan would work through the leading power of the day, Rome, to do away with Jesus the Christ before He can grow into manhood, and take His throne to rule all the world (v5).

Satan earlier, in a similar fashion, worked through the king of Egypt to “devour” the child Moses, a Levite, through whom God would one day deliver His laws for Israel ([Exodus 1:8-2:10](#)). Ultimately all that Satan has devised against the Lord God and His Christ has failed.

The other day, in a phone conversation with a young woman from the Des Moines company that installed our satellite internet, she pointed out that they were last out to our place for a service call in 2019. My response was, “Oh, only three years. That recent?” She took the opposite tack; seeing it as a longer period, she said, “Well, a lot can happen in three years.” From the perspective of 71 years, 3 are a trifle; to a woman of perhaps 30 years, 3 are more significant.

When we back away and squint, looking at the long picture of all that Satan has devised against God, from Eden to the birth of Christ, to the Tribulation and the investiture of his evil powers in his servant Antichrist—after all that was set in place leading up to it, three and one half years of power over the world seems so trivial, so futile and meaningless compared to the one-thousand years plus an eternity during which Messiah, the Son of God will reign.

All that effort, all that time, for what? For Satan, his angels, and his human servants, an eternity of being burned alive in the lake of fire.