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Revelation 1-11

Revelation 12-22

THE MACARTHUR
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY

REVELATION 1-11

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Back to the Future (Revelation 1:1–6)

1

The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near. John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1:1–6)

Many people are fascinated, even obsessed with the future. They faithfully read their horoscopes, seek out Tarot card readers, have their palms read, feed on futuristic science fiction material, or call one of the many “psychic hot lines” advertised on TV. Some people delve more

deeply into the occult, seeking out mediums (as did King Saul), futilely and sinfully attempting to obtain information about what is to come by “consult[ing] the dead on behalf of the living” (Isa. 8:19). The dead cannot, of course, respond to such efforts at contact, but demons do, masquerading as the dead and propagating lies.

All such attempts to discern the future, however, are in vain. There is only One who knows and declares the future: God (Isa. 44:7; 45:21; 46:9–10). Only in Scripture can truth about the future be found. The Old Testament prophets, particularly Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Zechariah, provide glimpses of the future. So did our Lord in His Olivet Discourse, along with Peter and Paul in their inspired writings. But the book of Revelation provides the most detailed look into the future in all of Scripture. The fitting capstone of God’s revelation to man in the Bible, the book of Revelation unveils the future history of the world, all the way to history’s climax in the return of Christ and the setting up of His glorious earthly and eternal kingdom.

By way of introduction, John lists eleven characteristics of this marvelous book: its essential nature, central theme, divine source, human recipients, prophetic character, supernatural delivery, human author, promised blessing, compelling urgency, Trinitarian benediction, and exalted doxology.

ITS ESSENTIAL NATURE

The Revelation (1:1a)

These two words are essential to understanding this book. Many people are confused by the book of Revelation, viewing it as a mysterious, bizarre, indecipherable mystery. But nothing could be further from the truth. Far from *hiding* the truth, the book of Revelation *reveals* it. This is the last chapter in God’s story of redemption. It tells how it all ends. As the account of the Creation in the beginning was not vague or obscure, but clear, so God has given a detailed and lucid record of the ending. It is unthinkable to believe that God would speak with precision and clarity from Genesis to Jude, and then when it comes to the end abandon all precision and clarity. Yet, many theologians today think Revelation is not the precise record of the end in spite of what it says. They also are convinced that its mysteries are so vague that the end is left in confusion. As we shall see in this commentary, this is a serious error that strips the saga of redemption of its climax as given by God.

Apokalupsis (**Revelation**) appears eighteen times in the New Testament, always, when used of a person, with the meaning “to become

visible.” In Luke 2:32, Simeon praised God for the infant Jesus, describing Him as “a Light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.” Simeon exulted that the Messiah had been made visible to men. Paul spoke in Romans 8:19 of the manifest transformation of believers in glory as “the revealing of the sons of God.” Both Paul (1 Cor. 1:7) and Peter (1 Pet. 1:7) used *apokalupsis* to refer to the revelation of Christ at His second coming.

The book of Revelation contains truths that had been concealed, but have now been revealed. Though it nowhere directly quotes the Old Testament, 278 of its 404 verses refer or allude to Old Testament prophetic truth, and it amplifies what was only initially suggested in the Old Testament.

The Apocalypse reveals a great many divine truths. It warns the church of the danger of sin and instructs it about the need for holiness. It reveals the strength Christ and believers have to overcome Satan. It reveals the glory and majesty of God and depicts the reverent worship that constantly attends His throne. The book of Revelation reveals the end of human history, including the final political setup of the world, the career of Antichrist, and the climactic Battle of Armageddon. It reveals the coming glory of Christ’s earthly reign during the millennial kingdom, the Great White Throne judgment, and depicts the eternal bliss of the new heaven and the new earth. It reveals the ultimate victory of Jesus Christ over all human and demonic opposition. The book of Revelation describes the ultimate defeat of Satan and sin, and the final state of the wicked (eternal torment in hell) and the righteous (eternal joy in heaven). In short, it is a front-page story of the future of the world written by someone who has seen it all.

But supremely, overarching all those features, the book of Revelation reveals the majesty and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. It describes in detail the events associated with His second coming, revealing His glory that will one day blaze forth as strikingly and unmistakably as lightning flashing in a darkened sky (Matt. 24:27).

ITS CENTRAL THEME

of Jesus Christ, (1:1b)

While all Scripture is revelation from God (2 Tim. 3:16), in a unique way the book of Revelation is *the* revelation—the revelation of Jesus Christ. While this book is certainly revelation *from* Jesus Christ (cf. 22:16), it is also the revelation *about* Him. The other New Testament uses of the phrase *apokalupsis Iēsou Christou* (**Revelation of Jesus Christ**)

suggest that John's statement in this verse is best understood in the sense of revelation about Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 1:7; Gal. 1:12; 2 Thess. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:7). The Gospels are also about Jesus Christ, but present Him in His first coming in humiliation; the book of Revelation presents Him in His second coming in exaltation. Every vision and description of Him in Revelation is one of majesty, power, and glory.

Christ's unveiling begins in 1:5–20, where He is revealed in His ascended majesty. Those verses also provide a preview of His second coming glory. In chapters 2 and 3, as exalted Lord of the church, He reproves and encourages His church. Finally, chapters 4–22 provide a detailed look at His second coming; the establishing of His millennial kingdom, during which He will personally reign on earth; and the ushering in of the eternal state.

W. A. Criswell, long-time pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, gave the following explanation as to why Christ must yet be revealed in glory:

The first time our Lord came into this world, He came in the veil of our flesh. His deity was covered over with His manhood. His Godhead was hidden by His humanity. Just once in a while did His deity shine through, as on the Mount of Transfiguration, or as in His miraculous works. But most of the time the glory, the majesty, the deity, the wonder and the marvel of the Son of God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, were veiled. These attributes were covered over in flesh, in our humanity. He was born in a stable. He grew up in poverty. He knew what it was to hunger and to thirst. He was buffeted and beaten and bruised. He was crucified and raised up as a felon before the scoffing gaze of the whole earth. The last time that this world saw Jesus was when it saw Him hanging in shame, misery and anguish upon the cross. He later appeared to a few of His believing disciples, but the last time that this unbelieving world ever saw Jesus was when it saw Him die as a malefactor, as a criminal, crucified on a Roman cross. That was a part of the plan of God, a part of the immeasurable, illimitable grace and love of our Lord. "By His stripes we are healed."

But then is that all the world is ever to see of our Saviour—dying in shame on a cross? No! It is also a part of the plan of God that some day this unbelieving, this blaspheming, this godless world shall see the Son of God in His full character, in glory, in majesty, in the full-orbed wonder and marvel of His Godhead. Then all men shall look upon Him as He really is. They shall see Him holding in His hands the title-deed to the Universe, holding in His hands the authority of all creation in the universe above us, in the universe around us, and in the universe beneath us; holding this world and its destiny in His pierced and loving hands. (*Expository Sermons on Revelation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969], 1:16–17)

Even a cursory glance through the book of Revelation reveals that Jesus Christ is its main theme. He is “the faithful witness” (1:5); “the firstborn of the dead” (1:5); “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5); “the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8; 21:6); the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:8); “the Almighty” (1:8); “the first and the last” (1:17); “the living One” (1:18); “the One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands” (2:1); “the One who has the sharp two-edged sword” (2:12); “the Son of God” (2:18); the One “who has eyes like a flame of fire, and . . . feet . . . like burnished bronze” (2:18); the One “who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars” (3:1); the One “who is holy, who is true” (3:7); the holder of “the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, and who shuts and no one opens” (3:7); “the Amen, the faithful and true Witness” (3:14); “the Beginning of the creation of God” (3:14); “the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah” (5:5); “the Root of David” (5:5); the Lamb of God (e.g., 5:6; 6:1; 7:9–10; 8:1; 12:11; 13:8; 14:1; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7; 21:9; 22:1); the “Lord, holy and true” (6:10); the One who “is called Faithful and True” (19:11); “The Word of God” (19:13); the “King of kings, and Lord of lords” (19:16); Christ (Messiah), ruling on earth with His glorified saints (20:6); and “Jesus . . . the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (22:16). The book of Revelation reveals the majesty and glory of the Lord Jesus Christ in song, poetry, symbolism, and prophecy. In it the heavens are opened and its readers see, as did Stephen (Acts 7:56), visions of the risen, glorified Son of God.

ITS DIVINE SOURCE

which God gave Him (1:1c)

In what sense is the book of Revelation a gift from the Father to Jesus Christ? Some interpret the phrase **which God gave Him** in connection with Jesus’ words in Mark 13:32: “But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.” In the humiliation of His incarnation, when He “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant” (Phil. 2:7), Jesus restricted the independent use of His divine attributes. In the book of Revelation, those holding this view argue, the Father finally gave Jesus the information He lacked in His incarnation and humiliation.

There are two insurmountable difficulties with that view, however. The most obvious one is that the book of Revelation nowhere gives the day or hour of Christ’s return. Thus, it does not contain the very information the Father was supposedly revealing to the Son. Further, the glori-

fied, ascended Son resumed the full use of His divine attributes more than half a century before the book of Revelation was written. Being fully God and omniscient, He had no need for anyone to give Him any information.

In reality, the book of Revelation is the Father's gift to the Son in a far deeper, more marvelous sense. As a reward for His perfect, humble, faithful, holy service, the Father promised to exalt the Son. Paul explains,

Christ Jesus, . . . although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:5–11)

Christ's exaltation, promised in the last three verses (9–11) of that passage, is described in detail in the book of Revelation. It thus contains the full disclosure of the glory that will be Christ's at His return—His ultimate reward from the Father for His faithfulness during His humiliation. The first token of the Father's pleasure with the obedient Son was His resurrection; the second was His ascension; the third was the sending of the Holy Spirit; and the last was the gift of the book of Revelation, which promises and reveals the glory that will be Christ's at His second coming.

The book of Revelation, then, details the Son's inheritance from the Father. Unlike most human wills, however, this document can be read because it is not a sealed, private document. But not everyone has the privilege of understanding it, only those to whom God unveils it by His Spirit.

ITS HUMAN RECIPIENTS

to show to His bond-servants, (1:1d)

To further exalt and glorify His Son, the Father has graciously granted to a special group of people the privilege of understanding the truths found in this book. John describes those people as **His [Christ's] bond-servants**. *Doulois* (**bond-servants**) literally means "slaves" (cf. Matt. 22:8; Mark 13:34). The *doulos* (bond-servant), however, was a special type of slave—one who served out of love and devotion to his mas-

ter. Exodus 21:5–6 describes such slaves: “But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,’ then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently.”

This is why unbelievers find the book of Revelation incomprehensible; it was not intended for them. It was given by the Father to the Son to **show** to those who willingly serve Him. Those who refuse to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord cannot expect to comprehend this book. “A natural man,” explains Paul, “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor. 2:14). To His disciples, when on earth, Jesus said, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. . . . Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Matt. 13:11, 13). Unbelievers couldn’t grasp what Jesus meant when He was teaching about present spiritual realities. Neither can they grasp the future realities. Divine truth is hidden from the worldly-wise. The unbelieving skeptic finds in the book of Revelation nothing but chaos and confusion. But to the loving, willing **bond-servants** of Jesus Christ, this book is the understandable unveiling of prophetic truth about the future of the world.

ITS PROPHETIC CHARACTER

the things which must soon take place; (1:1e)

The book of Revelation’s emphasis on future events sets it apart from all other New Testament books. While they contain references to the future, the Gospels primarily focus on the life and earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Acts chronicles the history of the church from its beginnings on the day of Pentecost until the imprisonment at Rome of the apostle Paul. The New Testament epistles, like the Gospels, contain glimpses of the future. Their primary emphasis, however, is explaining the meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and applying it to the life of the church in the present. Thus, the first five books of the New Testament are about the past, and the next twenty-one about the present. The last book, though it contains some information about the past (chap. 1) and the present (the seven churches in chaps. 2–3; although actual historical churches of John’s day, they depict the types of churches found throughout the church age), focuses on the future (chaps. 4–22).

As in all prophetic literature, there is a dual emphasis in the book of Revelation. It portrays Jesus Christ in His future glory along with the blessedness of the saints. It also depicts the judgment of unbelievers in Jesus Christ leading to their eternal damnation. Commentator Charles Erdman notes:

This is a book of judgments and of doom. The darker side of the picture is never for a moment concealed. God is just. Sin must be punished. Impenitence and rebellion issue in misery and defeat. Here is no sentimental confusion of right and wrong. Here is no weak tolerance of evil. There is mention of “the Lamb that hath been slain,” but also of “the wrath of the Lamb.” There is a “river of water of life,” but also a “lake of fire.” Here is revealed a God of love who is to dwell among men, to wipe away all tears, and to abolish death and sorrow and pain; but first his enemies must be subdued. Indeed, The Revelation is in large measure a picture of the last great conflict between the forces of evil and the power of God. The colors are lurid and are borrowed from the convulsions of nature and from the scenes of human history, with their battles and their carnage. The struggle is titanic. Countless hordes of demonic warriors rise in opposition to him who is “King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.” Upon them “woes” are pronounced, “bowls” of wrath are poured out, and overwhelming destruction is visited. A brighter day is to come, but there is thunder before the dawn. (*The Revelation of John* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966], 12)

The profound and compelling truths in the book of Revelation are thus bittersweet (cf. 10:9–10).

Soon translates *tachos*, which can mean “in a brief time,” or “quickly.” It is true that there is a certain brevity to the future events depicted in this book. The unprecedented, unimaginable judgments that sweep the earth do so in a brief period of time. In just seven years, the evil world system is deluged by the horrific wrath of God. Even the thousand-year earthly kingdom is brief by God’s standards (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8). It is also true that the Rapture, when Christ returns for His church, takes place “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52).

But that is not the primary meaning of *tachos* in this context. The idea is not the speed with which Christ moves when He comes, but the nearness of His coming. The use of *tachos* and related words in Revelation supports the understanding of its meaning here as “soon.” In 2:16, Jesus warned the church at Pergamum to “repent; or else I am coming to you quickly,” while in 3:11 He comforted the faithful church at Philadelphia by telling them, “I am coming quickly.” Chapter 11, verse 14, declares, “The second woe is past; behold, the third woe is coming quickly.” An angel told John that “the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants the things which must soon take

place” (22:6). The Lord Jesus Christ three times declared, “I am coming quickly” (22:7, 12, 20). In all those cases *tachos* (or words related to it) clearly refers to the imminence or nearness of an event, not the speed at which it happens. The *tachos* word group is used in a similar sense throughout the New Testament (e.g., Acts 17:15; 25:4; Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 4:19; Phil. 2:19, 24; 1 Tim. 3:14; 2 Tim. 4:9; Heb. 13:19, 23; 2 Pet. 1:14). Thus, **the things which must soon take place** about which John wrote do not happen in a brief time span, but are imminent (cf. 1:3; 22:6).

Believers are not to try to set the “times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (Acts 1:7). Instead, they are at all times to heed their Lord’s warning to “be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming” (Matt. 24:42). The knowledge that the events depicted in the book of Revelation are **soon to take place** has and should motivate Christians to live holy, obedient lives (2 Pet. 3:14).

ITS SUPERNATURAL DELIVERY

and He sent and communicated it by His angel (1:1f)

The book of Revelation is unique in New Testament literature because it is the only book **sent and communicated** to its human author by angels. In 22:16 Jesus reaffirmed the truth taught here, declaring, “I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches.” Angels were involved in the giving of the book of Revelation to John just as they were in the giving of the Law to Moses (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2). Not only were angels involved in transmitting the book of Revelation to John, but they also play a prominent role in the scenes it depicts. Angels appear in every chapter of Revelation except 4 and 13. The words *angel* or *angels* are used seventy-one times in the book of Revelation—more than in any other book in the Bible. In fact, one out of every four uses in Scripture of those words is in the book of Revelation. This book, then, is an important source of information on the ministry of angels.

ITS HUMAN AUTHOR

to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. (1:1g-2)

The human agent to whom the angelic messengers communicated the book of Revelation is here identified as **His** [Christ’s] **bond-**

servant John. As noted in the Introduction, this was John the apostle, the son of Zebedee and brother of James. As also noted in the Introduction, John wrote the book of Revelation while in exile on the island of Patmos (1:9).

The enormity of the visions John received on that barren island staggered him. Throughout his gospel, John never directly referred to himself. Yet here he bookends his vision with the statement, “I, John” (1:9; 22:8)—an exclamation that expressed his amazement that he was receiving such overwhelming visions.

As he had loyally **testified** to the first coming of Christ (John 19:35; 21:24; 1 John 1:2; 4:14), so John faithfully, under the Spirit’s inspiration, testified **to all that he saw** concerning His second coming. Specifically, John bore witness **to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ.** Those phrases appear together again in 1:9 (cf. 12:17), and are used synonymously, since “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (19:10). The **word of God** expressed in the book of Revelation is **the testimony** about the coming glory of **Jesus Christ** given to His church (cf. 22:16) and recorded by His faithful witness, John.

ITS PROMISED BLESSING

Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; (1:3a)

The book of Revelation is bracketed by promises of blessing (beatitudes, as in Matt. 5:3–12) to those who read and obey it (cf. 22:7; Luke 11:28). But those are only two of the seven promises of blessing the book contains; the rest are equally wonderful: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on! ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them’” (14:13). “Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and keeps his clothes, so that he will not walk about naked and men will not see his shame” (16:15); “blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (19:9); “blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection” (20:6); “blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city” (22:14).

The three participles translated **reads, hear, and heed** are in the present tense. Reading, hearing, and obeying the truths taught in the book of Revelation (and in the rest of Scripture) are to be a way of life for believers. The change from the singular **he who reads** to the plural **those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things**

which are written in it depicts a first-century church service. It was common practice when the church gathered for one person to read the Scriptures aloud for all to hear (cf. 1 Tim. 4:13). Dr. Robert L. Thomas explains that “because writing materials were expensive and scarce, so were copies of the books that were parts of the biblical canon. As a rule, one copy per Christian assembly was the best that could be hoped for. Public reading was the only means that rank-and-file Christians had for becoming familiar with the contents of these books” (*Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody, 1992], 60). Since only Scripture was to be publicly read, John’s “obvious intention that the Apocalypse was to be read publicly argued strongly from the start that it be included among those books that eventually would be recognized as part of the NT canon” (Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 62–63).

The book of Revelation is God’s final word to man, the culmination of divine revelation. Its writing marked the completion of the canon of Scripture (cf. 22:18–19), and its scope encompasses the entire future sweep of redemptive history (1:19). Therefore it is imperative that believers pay diligent heed to the truths it contains.

ITS COMPELLING URGENCY

for the time is near. (1:3b)

This phrase reiterates the truth taught in 1:1, that the events depicted in the book of Revelation are imminent. **Time** does not translate *chronos*, which refers to time on a clock or calendar, but *kairos*, which refers to seasons, epochs, or eras. The next great era of God’s redemptive history is **near**.

That the return of Christ is imminent, the next event on God’s prophetic calendar, has always been the church’s hope. Jesus commanded His followers to watch expectantly for His return:

Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps lit. Be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master will find on the alert when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect. (Luke 12:35–40)

“The night is almost gone,” wrote Paul to the Romans, “and the day is near” (Rom. 13:12). The apostle thought that he might be alive when the Lord returns, as his use of the plural pronoun *we* in such passages as 1 Corinthians 15:51–58 and 1 Thessalonians 4:15–18 indicates. The writer of Hebrews exhorted his readers to “[encourage] one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25). James encouraged struggling believers with the reality that Christ’s return was imminent: “Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. . . . You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. . . . Behold, the Judge is standing right at the door” (James 5:7–9). “The end of all things is near,” Peter reminded his readers (1 Pet. 4:7), while in 1 John 2:18 the apostle John added, “Children, it is the last hour.”

Despite the skepticism of the scoffers, who demand, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation” (2 Pet. 3:4), the Lord Jesus Christ will return. And His return is **near**.

ITS TRINITARIAN BENEDICTION

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. (1:4–5a)

Unlike modern letters, in which the senders put their names at the end of the letter, ancient letters sensibly named their writers at the beginning. Thus **John** identifies himself as the writer and names **the seven churches** (listed in 1:11) **that are** in the Roman province of **Asia** (modern Turkey) as the recipients. **Grace to you and peace** was a standard greeting in New Testament letters (cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; Philem. 3), but this greeting introduces a benediction from the exalted Trinity (cf. 2 Cor. 13:14).

The phrase **Him who is and who was and who is to come** identifies the first Person of the Trinity, God the Father, described here in anthropomorphic terms. Because it is the only way we can understand, the threefold description (cf. 1:8; 4:8) views God in time dimensions (past, present, and future), although He is timeless. The eternal God is the source of all the blessings of salvation, all grace, and all peace.

The seven Spirits who are before His throne refers to the Holy Spirit. Obviously, there is only one Holy Spirit; the number **seven**

depicts Him in His fullness (cf. 5:6; Isa. 11:2; Zech. 4:1-10). The Holy Spirit in all His glory and fullness sends grace and peace to believers; He is the spirit of grace (Heb. 10:29) and produces peace in believers' lives (Gal. 5:22). Here He is seen in the glory of His place in the Father's presence in heaven.

Grace and peace also flow **from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.** He, too, is seen in the glory of His exaltation. It is only fitting that John mentions Christ last, and gives a fuller description of Him, since He is the theme of the book of Revelation. A **faithful witness** is one who always speaks and represents the truth, and that certainly characterizes the Lord Jesus Christ. He was a perfect witness to the nature of God. Revelation 3:14 calls Him "The Amen, the faithful and true Witness." "For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world," He declared to Pilate, "to testify to the truth" (John 18:37). Jesus Christ, the faithful witness who cannot lie and lived and spoke flawlessly the will of God, promises believers salvation's grace and peace.

The second description of Jesus, **the firstborn of the dead,** does not mean He was chronologically the first one to be raised from the dead. There were resurrections before His in the Old Testament (1 Kings 17:17-23; 2 Kings 4:32-36; 13:20-21), and He Himself raised others during His earthly ministry (Matt. 9:23-25; Luke 7:11-15; John 11:30-44). *Prōtotokos* does not mean **firstborn** in time sequence, but rather first in preeminence. Of all who have ever been or ever will be resurrected, He is the premier one. God declares of the Messiah in Psalm 89:27, "I also shall make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." The book of Revelation records the unfolding of that promise.

The third title, **the ruler of the kings of the earth,** depicts Christ as absolutely sovereign over the affairs of this world, to which He holds the title deed (cf. 5:1ff.). That Jesus Christ is the sovereign King of the earth is repeatedly taught in Scripture (e.g., 19:16; Ps. 2:6-8; Jer. 23:5; Zech. 9:9; Matt. 2:2; 21:5; Luke 19:38; 23:3; John 1:49). He is Lord, having a name "above every name" (Phil. 2:9-11), who, according to the Father's plan and the Spirit's work, grants believers His royal blessing of grace and peace.

ITS EXALTED DOXOLOGY

To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1:5b-6)

The work of Christ on behalf of believers caused John to burst forth in an inspired doxology of praise to Him. In the present, Christ loves believers with an unbreakable love (Rom. 8:35-39). The greatest expression of that love came when He **released us from our sins by His blood**—a reference to the atonement provided by His sacrificial death on the cross on our behalf.

Here is the heart of the gospel. Sinners are forgiven by God, set free from sin, death, and hell by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. God made Him our substitute, killing Him for our sins, so that the penalty was fully paid for us. God's justice was satisfied and God was able then to grant righteousness to repentant sinners for whom Christ died.

Christ's love also caused Him to make **us to be a kingdom** (not the millennial kingdom, but the sphere of God's rule which believers enter at salvation; cf. Col. 1:13) in which we enjoy His loving, gracious rule and almighty, sovereign protection. Finally, He made us **priests to His God and Father**, granting us the privilege of direct access to the Father (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9-10).

John concludes his doxology with the only proper response in light of the magnitude of the blessings Christ has given believers: **To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.** That is to be the response of all who read this marvelous book in which that future glory and dominion is clearly presented.

THE MACARTHUR
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY
REVELATION 12-22

John MacArthur

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The War of the Ages— Part 1: The Prelude (Revelation 12:1–6)

1

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; and she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth. 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. 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. And she 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. Then the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days. (12:1–6)

The Bible warns that “pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (Prov. 16:18). The most notorious and tragic illustration of that principle, the one with the most far-reaching consequences, was Satan’s prideful rebellion against God. By it Lucifer, having fallen from heaven like lightning (Luke 10:18), was cast down

from his exalted position as the “anointed cherub who covers” (Ezek. 28:14). He forfeited his place as the highest created being and became the supreme enemy of God. Satan’s rebellion touched off a cosmic war throughout the universe—a war dwarfing any other war in human experience. Satan’s war against God is a two-front war. By leading a mutiny against God among the angels, Satan attempted unsuccessfully to destroy the paradise of heaven. By leading a mutiny against God among men, Satan destroyed the earthly paradise of the Garden of Eden, plunged the whole human race into decay and corruption, and usurped (temporarily) the role of the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 16:11).

The opening campaign of Satan’s war of the ages took place in heaven. When he rebelled (Isa. 14:12–15; Ezek. 28:12–17), one-third of the angels foolishly and wickedly cast their lots with him (see the discussion of v. 4 below). None of them could have known what the eternal consequences of their choice would be. Wanting to be like God, they became as much unlike Him as possible. These fallen angels (or demons) became Satan’s storm troopers, doing the bidding of their evil commander. They fight against divine purpose, making war with both the holy angels and the human race.

When Adam and Eve plummeted into corruption by choosing to listen to Satan’s lies and disobey God, the human race became embroiled in the cosmic war of the ages. In fact, since the Fall the earth has been the primary theater in which that war has been fought. Though already fallen, every member of the human race faces the same choice as the angels did in eternity past: to fight on God’s side or on Satan’s. Remaining neutral is not an option, for in Matthew 12:30 Jesus declared, “He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.”

The final battles of Satan’s long war against God are yet to be fought. They will take place in the future, during the last half of the seven-year tribulation period, the time Jesus called the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:21). At that time Satan, aided by the absence of the raptured church and the presence of increased demon hordes (9:1–11), will mount his most desperate assaults against God’s purposes and His people. But despite the savage fury with which those assaults will be carried out, they will not succeed. The Lord Jesus Christ will effortlessly crush Satan and his forces (19:11–21) and send him to the abyss for the duration of the millennial kingdom (20:1–2). After leading a final rebellion at the close of the Millennium, Satan will be consigned to eternal punishment in the lake of fire (20:3, 7–10).

The sounding of the seventh trumpet will proclaim the triumphant victory of the Lord Jesus Christ over the usurper, Satan: “Then the seventh angel sounded; and there were loud voices in heaven, say-

ing, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever” (11:15). There will be joy in heaven because Christ has defeated Satan and established His eternal kingdom. Thus, the outcome of the war between Satan and God is not in doubt. Christ’s ultimate triumph is certain.

Though chapter 11 records the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the effects it produces are not described until chapters 15–18. The seventh trumpet will sound near the end of the Tribulation, launching the brief, but final and devastating bowl judgments just before Christ’s return in power and glory. Chapters 6–11 describe the events of the Tribulation up to the sounding of the seventh trumpet; chapters 12–14 recapitulate that same period, describing events from Satan’s vantage point. In addition, the latter section takes the reader all the way back to the original rebellion of Satan (12:3–4). The chronological narrative of the Tribulation events then resumes in chapter 15.

The Tribulation will feature both the unprecedented judgments of God’s eschatological wrath and the desperate fury of Satan’s efforts to thwart God’s purposes. That deadly combination will make the Tribulation the most devastating period in human history (Matt. 24:21–22). During that time, horrifying events will take place, caused both by God’s judgments and by Satan’s fury.

Before describing that final war, the inspired apostle John first introduces the main characters involved in it: the woman (Israel), the dragon (Satan), and the male child (Jesus Christ).

THE WOMAN

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; and she was with child; and she cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth. (12:1–2)

The first thing John saw in this vision was a **great sign**—the first of seven signs in the last half of Revelation (cf. v. 3; 13:13, 14; 15:1; 16:14; 19:20). *Mega* (**great**) appears repeatedly in this vision (cf. vv. 3, 9, 12, 14); everything John saw seemed to be huge either in size or in significance. *Sēmeion* (**sign**) describes a symbol that points to a reality. The literal approach to interpreting Scripture allows for normal use of symbolic language, but understands that it points to a literal reality. In this case, the description plainly shows that the woman John saw was not an actual woman. Also, the reference to “the rest of her children,” those “who keep

the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus” (v. 17), shows that this **woman** is a symbolic mother.

The **woman** is the second of four symbolic women identified in Revelation. The first, though an actual woman, had the symbolic name Jezebel (2:20). She was a false teacher and symbolizes paganism. Another symbolic woman, depicted as a harlot, appears in 17:1-7. She represents the apostate church. The fourth woman, described in 19:7-8 as the bride of the Lamb (cf. 2 Cor. 11:2), represents the true church. Some argue that the **woman** in this present vision represents the church, but as the context makes clear (cf. v. 5), she represents Israel. The Old Testament also pictures Israel as a woman, the adulterous wife of the Lord (Jer. 3:1, 20; Ezek. 16:32-35; Hos. 2:2) whom God will ultimately restore to Himself (Isa. 50:1). A reference to the ark of the covenant (11:19) adds further support for identifying the **woman** as Israel.

That Israel will play a key role in the end-time drama is not surprising. The seventieth week of Daniel’s prophecy (the Tribulation) will primarily concern Israel, just as the first sixty-nine did (cf. Dan. 9:24-27). Israel’s presence in the end times is consistent with God’s emphatic promises of her continued existence as a nation:

Thus says the Lord,
 Who gives the sun for light by day
 And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night,
 Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar;
 The Lord of hosts is His name:
 “If this fixed order departs
 From before Me,” declares the Lord,
 “Then the offspring of Israel also shall cease
 From being a nation before Me forever.”
 Thus says the Lord,
 “If the heavens above can be measured
 And the foundations of the earth searched out below,
 Then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel
 For all that they have done,” declares the Lord.
 (Jer. 31:35-37; cf. 33:20-26; 46:28; Amos 9:8)

Further, Israel’s presence during the seventieth week of Daniel’s prophecy is in keeping with God’s promises to her of a kingdom (Isa. 65:17-25; Ezek. 37:21-28; Dan. 2:44; Zech. 8:1-13) and national salvation (Zech. 12:10-13:1; 13:8-9; Rom. 11:26).

Often as an instrument of God’s judgment, Satan has persecuted the Jewish people throughout their history. He knows that to destroy Israel would make it impossible for God to fulfill His promises to the Jewish people. God will not allow him to do that, but will use Satan to chas-

ten Israel. It comes as no surprise that the devil will intensify his persecution of Israel as the establishment of the millennial kingdom draws near. As previously noted, the seventh trumpet will sound near the end of the Tribulation. Only weeks, or perhaps a few months at most, will remain after it sounds until the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. With his time running out (cf. v. 12), Jewish people will become the special target of Satan's hatred and destructive attacks.

John saw that the **woman** was **clothed with the sun, and had the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars**. That fascinating description reflects Joseph's dream, recorded in Genesis 37:9–11:

Now he had still another dream, and related it to his brothers, and said, "Lo, I have had still another dream; and behold, the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." He related it to his father and to his brothers; and his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have had? Shall I and your mother and your brothers actually come to bow ourselves down before you to the ground?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

In the imagery of Joseph's dream, the sun represents Jacob, the moon Rachel, and the eleven stars Joseph's brothers. The allusion to Joseph's dream is fitting, since his life parallels Israel's history. Both endured the indignity of captivity in Gentile nations, yet were in the end delivered and exalted to a place of prominence in a kingdom.

That the **woman** was **clothed with the sun** reflects redeemed Israel's unique glory, brilliance, and dignity because of her exalted status as God's chosen nation (cf. Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 1 Kings 3:8; Pss. 33:12; 106:5; Isa. 43:20). It also links her with Jacob (the sun in Joseph's dream), an heir in the Abrahamic covenant; Israel's continued existence as a nation reflects the ongoing fulfillment of that covenant (cf. Gen. 12:1–2). The reference to **the moon under her feet** may be a further description of Israel's exalted status. It could also include the concept of God's covenantal relationship with Israel, since the **moon** was part of the cycle of Israel's required times of worship (cf. Num. 29:5–6; Neh. 10:33; Ps. 81:3; Isa. 1:13–14; Col. 2:16). The **crown** (*stephanos*; the crown associated with triumph in the midst of suffering and struggle) **of twelve stars** (Joseph being the twelfth) on the woman's **head** refers to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Having described the woman's attire, John noted her condition: **she was with child**. That also is familiar Old Testament imagery describing Israel (cf. Isa. 26:17–18; 66:7–9; Jer. 4:31; 13:21; Mic. 4:10; 5:3). That

the woman is pregnant further confirms her identity as Israel; the church cannot be a mother since she is not yet married (19:7-9; 2 Cor. 11:2). Being pregnant, the woman **cried out, being in labor and in pain to give birth**. Just like a pregnant woman in labor feels pain, so the nation of Israel was in pain, waiting for Messiah to come forth. The cause of some of the pain is the persecution by Satan, who attempts to destroy the mother. The nation was in pain when the Messiah came the first time. So will it be at His second coming. Ever since the first promise of a Redeemer who would come to destroy him (Gen. 3:15), Satan has attacked Israel. For centuries, Israel agonized and suffered, longing for the Child who would come to destroy Satan, sin, and death, and establish the promised kingdom. No nation in history has suffered as long or as severely as Israel has—both from God’s chastening, and also from Satan’s furious efforts to destroy the nation through whom the Messiah would come.

Having described the woman’s agonizing labor pains, John introduces the cause of her suffering.

THE DRAGON

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. 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. (12:3-4)

With the second sign, a new character emerges on the scene: the woman’s mortal enemy, dramatically portrayed by **another sign that appeared in heaven**. Verse 9 clearly identifies the **great red dragon** as Satan (cf. 20:2). Satan, of course, is not an actual **dragon** (any more than Israel is an actual woman) but a malevolent spirit being, a fallen angel. The symbolic language used to describe him pictures the reality of his person and character. Only in Revelation is Satan referred to as a **dragon**; before that he is called (among other names) a serpent (Gen. 3:1ff.; 2 Cor. 11:3). A dragon is a far more terrifying symbol. In the Old Testament the same Hebrew word translated *dragon* (Isa. 27:1; 51:9) is also translated *monster* or *sea monster* (Gen. 1:21; Job 7:12; Pss. 74:13; 148:7; Jer. 51:34; Ezek. 29:3; 32:2). It pictures a large, ferocious, and terrifying animal. **Red**, the color of fiery destruction and bloodshed, further stresses Satan’s vicious, deadly, destructive nature. In the words of Jesus, “He was a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). The Hebrew word for “ser-

pent” (*nachash*) used in Genesis 3:1 is used interchangeably in some texts with the Hebrew word for dragon (*tannin*) (cf. Ex. 7:9, 15). So the animal Satan used in the Garden of Eden was a reptile, but one not yet cast down to its belly (Gen. 3:14). Likely, it was more upright—a dragon standing upon two legs, cursed to walk on four legs close to the ground, or slither like a snake. **Red** is a fitting color for the **dragon**, since he attacks both the woman and her child.

Ezekiel 29:1–5, which describes Pharaoh as the enemy of God, captures the essence of this frightening imagery used to describe Satan:

In the tenth year, in the tenth month, on the twelfth of the month, the word of the Lord came to me saying, “Son of man, set your face against Pharaoh king of Egypt and prophesy against him and against all Egypt. Speak and say, ‘Thus says the Lord God,

“Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt,
The great monster that lies in the midst of his rivers,
That has said, ‘My Nile is mine, and I myself have made it’

I shall put hooks in your jaws

And make the fish of your rivers cling to your scales.

And I shall bring you up out of the midst of your rivers,

And all the fish of your rivers will cling to your scales.

I shall abandon you to the wilderness, you and all the fish of
your rivers;

You will fall on the open field; you will not be brought together
or gathered.

I have given you for food to the beasts of the earth and to the
birds of the sky.””

The **dragon** is further described as **having seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads were seven diadems**. He is depicted as a seven-headed monster that rules the world. Satan has been allowed by God to rule the world since the Fall and will continue to do so until the seventh trumpet sounds (11:15). The **seven heads** with their **seven diadems** (*diadema*; royal crowns symbolizing power and authority) represent seven consecutive world empires running their course under Satan’s dominion: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, and Antichrist’s future empire (17:9–10). The final kingdom, ruled by Antichrist, will be a ten-nation confederacy; the **ten horns** represent the kings who will rule under Antichrist (17:12; cf. 13:1; Dan. 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.

Satan’s pervasive, evil influence is not limited to the human realm, but extended first into the angelic realm. In the picturesque language of

John's vision, the dragon's **tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth.** The references to the dragon's angels in verses 7 and 9 indicate that the **stars of heaven** are angels. The genitive case offers further support for that interpretation: these are **stars** belonging to **heaven**; that is their proper abode. Angels are depicted symbolically as **stars** elsewhere in Scripture (9:1; Job 38:7).

When Satan fell (Isa. 14:12-15; Ezek. 28:12-17), he **swept away a third of the** angelic host with him. Along with their defeated leader, those evil angels were cast from heaven **to the earth.** (It should be noted that although he was cast from his dwelling in heaven, Satan, in this present age, has access to God's presence; see 12:10; Job 1, 2. As noted in the discussion of 12:7-9 in chapter 2 of this volume, he will be permanently barred from heaven after his defeat by Michael and the holy angels during the Tribulation.)

The number of angels who joined Satan in his rebellion is not revealed, but is vast. Revelation 5:11 says that the number of the angels around God's throne numbered "myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands." *Myriad* does not represent an exact number; it was the highest number the Greeks expressed in a word. Since one-third of the angels fell, and 9:16 reveals that two hundred million demons will be released from captivity near the Euphrates River, there must be at least four hundred million holy angels. Uncounted thousands of other demons will have already been released from the abyss earlier in the Tribulation (9:1-3). In addition to those two groups of bound demons, there are millions of others who are currently free to roam the earth and the heavenly realm (cf. Eph. 6:12; Col. 2:15). They, along with evil men under his control, assist Satan in his unholy war against God. Adding the (unrevealed) number of these unbound demons to the calculations given above increases the numbers of both the holy angels and the demons.

As the next event in his dramatic vision unfolded, John noted that **the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child.** Throughout history, Satan has bent all of his efforts toward persecuting the people of God. Abel was a righteous, obedient man; Satan prompted Cain to kill him. In his first epistle, John wrote, "Cain . . . was of the evil one and slew his brother. And for what reason did he slay him? Because his deeds were evil, and his brother's were righteous" (1 John 3:12). Seeking to produce a mongrel, half-human half-demon and thus unredeemable race of men, Satan sent demons ("sons of God"; the same Hebrew phrase refers to angels in Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Pss. 29:1; 89:6) to cohabit with human women (Gen. 6:1-4).

Because they were the chosen people through whom the Messiah was to come, and by whom the good news of forgiveness was to be

proclaimed, Satan reserved his special hatred for Israel. After Joseph's death, the Israelites became slaves in Egypt. In that place, the fates both of the nation and of its human deliverer hung by a slender thread.

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we." . . .

Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other was named Puah; and he said, "When you are helping the Hebrew women to give birth and see them upon the birthstool, if it is a son, then you shall put him to death; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live." But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt had commanded them, but let the boys live. So the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, and let the boys live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife can get to them." So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied, and became very mighty. It came about because the midwives feared God, that He established households for them. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying, "Every son who is born you are to cast into the Nile, and every daughter you are to keep alive."

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was beautiful, she hid him for three months. But when she could hide him no longer, she got him a wicker basket and covered it over with tar and pitch. Then she put the child into it and set it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. His sister stood at a distance to find out what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the Nile, with her maidens walking alongside the Nile; and she saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid, and she brought it to her. When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the boy was crying. And she had pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call a nurse for you from the Hebrew women that she may nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go ahead." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Then Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me and I shall give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him. The child grew, and she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. And she named him Moses, and said, "Because I drew him out of the water." (Ex. 1:8–9; 1:15–2:10)

From a human perspective, Pharaoh attempted to destroy the Israelites because he believed them to be a threat to his power. But in

reality, Pharaoh was an operative of Satan, who sought to wipe out the people from whom the Messiah would come. It is also true to say that Satan was acting within the purposes of God for Israel. The courage of the Hebrew midwives and God's sovereign protection of Moses, whom He would later use to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage, thwarted Satan's schemes.

During the period of the judges, Satan used Israel's pagan neighbors in an attempt to destroy them. Yet God preserved His people through all of those assaults, raising up judges to rescue them from their oppressors. Later, Satan tried to use Saul to murder David and thus eliminate the messianic line (cf. 1 Sam. 18:10-11). During the days of the divided kingdom, the messianic line twice dwindled to one fragile child (2 Chron. 21:17; 22:10-12). Still later, Satan inspired Haman to undertake his genocidal mission against the Jewish people (Est. 3-9). But God used Esther to save her people from disaster. Throughout their history, the devil incited the Israelites to murder their own children as sacrifices to idols (cf. Lev. 18:21; 2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chron. 28:3; Ps. 106:37-38; Ezek. 16:20).

Having failed to wipe out the people of God and the messianic line, Satan desperately attempted to murder the Messiah Himself before He could do His saving work. John saw that **the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she gave birth he might devour her child** (Christ). Satan attacked Jesus first through Herod, who attempted to kill the baby Jesus:

An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up! Take the Child and His mother and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the Child to destroy Him." . . .

Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. (Matt. 2:13, 16)

At the outset of our Lord's earthly ministry, Satan tempted Him to mistrust God (Matt. 4:1-11). But the devil's efforts to get Jesus to abandon His mission did not succeed. Satan tried to use the people of Nazareth to kill Jesus (Luke 4:28-30), but their enraged attempt to "throw Him down the cliff" (v. 29) ended in failure when He calmly "pass[ed] through their midst, [and] went His way" (v. 30). Satan's other attempts to cut short Jesus' earthly ministry also ended in failure, "because His hour had not yet come" (John 7:30; 8:20). Even the devil's seeming victory at the Cross was in reality his ultimate defeat (Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14; 1 Pet. 3:18-20; 1 John 3:8).

THE MALE CHILD

And she 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. Then the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days. (12:5–6)

In spite of all of Satan's relentless efforts to prevent it, the woman (Israel) **gave birth to a son**. The incarnation of the **male child**, the Lord Jesus Christ, "who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh" (Rom. 1:3; cf. Rom. 9:5), was the fulfillment of prophecy (cf. Gen. 3:15; Isa. 7:14; 9:6; Mic. 5:2). Israel brought forth the Messiah. The Bible emphasizes that Jesus was of Jewish lineage. He was a son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1), a member of the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10; Mic. 5:2; Rev. 5:5), and a descendant of David (Matt. 1:1; cf. 2 Sam. 7:12–16).

Nor will Satan be able to hinder Christ's coronation; He will **rule all the nations with a rod of iron** during His earthly, millennial kingdom (v. 10; 2:26–27; 11:15; 19:15). Psalm 2:7–9 indicates that this rule is a breaking, shattering work of judgment. In fact, the verb *poimainō* (**rule**) carries the connotation of "destroy," as it does in 2:27. The Messiah will come and destroy **all the nations** (19:11–21) and in His kingdom have dominion over the nations that enter to populate that kingdom. An iron rod is also one that cannot be broken. Just as all of Satan's past efforts to hinder Christ have failed, so also will his future efforts fail (cf. 11:15). The phrase **rod of iron** speaks of the resoluteness of Christ's rule; He will swiftly and immediately judge all sin and put down any rebellion.

Between Christ's incarnation and His coronation came His exaltation, when He **was caught up to God and to His throne** at His ascension. Christ's exaltation signifies the Father's acceptance of His work of redemption (Heb. 1:3). Satan could not stop Christ from accomplishing redemption and therefore being exalted to the right hand of the Father as a perfect Savior. In his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter declared, "God raised [Christ] up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:24).

But though he is a defeated foe, Satan will not give up. Unable to stop Christ's birth, ascension, or rule, Satan still assaults His people. He has already instigated the genocidal massacre of Jews in Europe, as well as the death of countless thousands throughout history. During the Tribulation, Satan will increase his efforts to destroy the Jewish people, so that the nation cannot be saved as the Bible promises (Zech. 12:10–13:1;

Rom. 11:25-27). And so that there will be none left alive to enter the millennial kingdom, he will seek to kill believing Jews. As always, Israel will be his prime target. In a brief glimpse of what will be described more fully in verses 13-17, John noted that **the woman fled into the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God, so that there she would be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days** (cf. v. 14). God will frustrate Satan's attempt to destroy Israel during the Tribulation by hiding His people, just as the Lord Jesus Christ predicted:

“Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains. Whoever is on the housetop must not go down to get the things out that are in his house. Whoever is in the field must not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! But pray that your flight will not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath. For then there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will.” (Matt. 24:15-21)

Antichrist's desecration of the temple will send the Jewish people fleeing **into the wilderness**. The exact location where God will hide them is not revealed, but it is probably somewhere east of the Jordan River and south of the Dead Sea, in the territory formerly occupied by Moab, Ammon, and Edom (cf. Dan. 11:40-41). Wherever their hiding place will be, they will be **nourished** and defended by God (cf. vv. 14-16), just as their ancestors were during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The length of Israel's stay in hiding, **one thousand two hundred and sixty days** (three and a half years; cf. 11:2-3; 12:14; 13:5) corresponds to the last half of the Tribulation, the period Jesus called the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:21). Those Jews who remain behind in Jerusalem will come under the influence of the two witnesses, and many in that city will be redeemed (11:13). Eventually, in spite of Satan's efforts, “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26).

The great cosmic war of the ages between God and Satan that began with Satan's rebellion is set to reach its climax. In this passage John provided important background information on that war and introduced its key figures. Then his vision turned to a description of the war, both in its heavenly and earthly phases, and its inevitable outcome.