

# A good story

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**St Andrew's - 19th February 2023 - Revelation 12:1-12**

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*1 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. 3 And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. 4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. 5 She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, 6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.*

*7 Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, 8 but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9 And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. 10 And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. 11 And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. 12 Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”*

## Introduction

- What makes for a good story?
  - Heroics
  - Struggle
  - Plot - there has to be change and development
  - Redemption
  - The best stories have eucatastrophe - a good catastrophe, an unexpected happy ending. When all looks lost, it turns out good.
- Myths, Legends, Fairy stories
  - More to life than just the natural - the supernatural, the magical is a part of normal life in fairy tales.
  - Good conquering evil
  - Love conquers death, Love conquering all
  - Living happily ever after
- Why do we like certain stories? What is it about certain stories that endures? Why is it that we enjoy stories that have certain elements?
- We're going to look at what at first glance is quite a fairy tale like story - it's mythic, it's larger than life.

## The passage

Revelation can be hard to interpret. We've looked over the past weeks at various parts of the book, some more obvious to interpret than others. The beginning of the book, and the letters to the churches aren't too difficult on the face of it. Then next week we'll look at one of the most enjoyable bits, as we see the end of the story. But the chapters in between can be pretty hard - what are the seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls meant to symbolise? Who are the witnesses? How literally are we to take descriptions of the beasts? Are these about the future? Are they about the past? Both? Neither? There's all manner of interpretations.

Today's chapter is a comparatively easy one in that it tells us directly who some of the characters are, which is really helpful, but still it's larger than life and exaggerated. Surely this isn't something that actually literally happens?

Verse 1 tells us a most important fact about the passage:

And a great sign appeared in heaven...

This is a sign, a symbol, not something to be taken literally, but rather it points to deeper truths. John is using imagery that his readers might be familiar with to tell something more important than just a story of a dragon's downfall.

Maybe the most similar story that the first century reader of Revelation would know was the Greek myth of Leto and the Python. The myth itself has many variations, but here's a brief synopsis of the parts that are similar:

Leto, is pregnant with the twins Apollo and Artemis, by Zeus. Some accounts say that Zeus' wife Hera hears about this and is not pleased, so she sends the Python, a symbol of chaos, a huge serpent, after Leto. Other accounts say that there was a prophecy that the offspring of Leto would destroy the python. Either way, the Python constantly chases Leto, but she finds refuge on the island of Delos (not all that far from Patmos where John was writing this). She's there until she gives birth to her children and then when Apollo is only a few days old, he obtains a bow and arrow and goes and kills the Python.

Hopefully you can see the parallels there.

For us, the most important parallels we see with this story are not Greek myth, or even our own dragon slaying legends like St George, but rather scripture itself. John takes his imagery primarily from the Old Testament as he writes Revelation, so that's where we want to get illumination for the story we read.

The first Old Testament reference of relevance is Genesis 3 (verse 14-15):

*14 The Lord God said to the serpent,*

*“Because you have done this,  
cursed are you above all livestock  
and above all beasts of the field;  
on your belly you shall go,  
and dust you shall eat  
all the days of your life.*

*15 I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and her offspring;  
he shall bruise your head,  
and you shall bruise his heel.”*

A reader of the Old Testament would have seen the parallel - this is a story whose origin goes back to the beginning of things.

## The Characters

So what are we to make of the characters in the story we see here?

### The woman

The first person we meet is the woman. v1-2:

*1 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.*

Sun, moon and twelve stars - remember Joseph's second dream in Genesis 37 (verses 9-10):

*9 Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." 10 But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?"*

The imagery here is that of Israel - the twelve tribes that formed God's people.

Another Old Testament image is that of Jerusalem, which is pictured by the prophets as a woman in labour. Isaiah 66 (verses 7-8):

*"Before she was in labor  
she gave birth;  
before her pain came upon her  
she delivered a son.  
8 Who has heard such a thing?  
Who has seen such things?  
Shall a land be born in one day?  
Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment?  
For as soon as Zion was in labor  
she brought forth her children.*

Similar language is found in Micah chapters 4 and 5, Zion described as a woman in labour.

Then we hear later in verse 5 that she gives birth to a son, and then in verse 6 she flees to the wilderness, where she is nourished by God, in a place He has prepared for her. In verse 14, we see this repeated - she is given the wings of an eagle to fly into the wilderness.

Who else spent a time in the wilderness? And was nourished by God whilst they were in the wilderness? Israel. Exodus 19:4:

*'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.*

See also that she's clothed with the sun - she's clothed in brightness. She's very much the new Jerusalem we see later on too - she's more than ethnic, or Old Testament Israel, she's God's chosen people the church too.

However, she is also in this story very much persecuted, which leads us onto the next character we see. The dragon.

## The dragon

This is an easy one to identify, because it says exactly who the dragon is. Verse 9:

*And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world*

Verse 10 calls him "the accuser of our brothers who accuses them day and night before our God". This is Satan, described in his enmity to God.

As you'd expect there are Old Testament references here too. Daniel chapter 7 speaks of a ten horned beast, like the one here, who wages war on God's people at the time the Son of Man comes to unveil His kingdom. The original tempter, deceiver, was the serpent in the garden. And pagan empires that opposed Israel are likened to dragons (Jeremiah 28:34, Ezekiel 29:3).

Verse 4 says that 'his tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them down to earth'. One interpretation of this is that Satan took a third of the angels with him in his fall. The number of demons that join Satan in his sin is not small.

He's powerful and monstrous and he attempts to thwart God's plans. He seeks to cut off the woman's child at the first opportunity, but he's prevented. That brings us to the next character, the child.

## The child

Verse 5:

*She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne*

This is one who rules the nations - my Bible translation has a footnote that says that in the Greek the word for "rule" used here is the word for "shepherd", which gives us a clue.

Again, the Old Testament helps us here. Psalm 2 (verses 7-9):

*7 I will tell of the decree:  
The Lord said to me, "You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you.  
8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.  
9 You shall break them with a rod of iron  
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."*

This is God's son, Jesus Christ, given the nations as his heritage, ruling with a rod of iron.

From God's chosen people, from the woman in the story, comes one who will rule over everything. And he ascends to heaven to rule and reign.

In the first century, rulers, particularly the Roman emperor, would associate themselves with Apollo, they took for themselves the position as a god that brings order by defeating the monster of chaos. But here, we see that challenged completely - the ruler that people seek, the one that brings order from chaos, is Jesus Christ.

## 1260 days

We've already mentioned the wilderness and the next major symbol is the 1260 days that the woman spends in that wilderness. The same period of time is mentioned elsewhere in Revelation - in chapter 11, the witnesses prophecy for this amount of time. It's also mentioned in different forms - in chapters 11 and 13 we see the period of 42 months. Later in chapter 12, we see the same time in the wilderness described as 'time, times and half a time' - or three and a half times in other words. All of these expressions of time equate to three and a half years.

And as you'd expect, John is referencing the Old Testament, again Daniel, where we have two mentions of 3.5 times.

I don't think it's the case that these periods should necessarily be taken literally. The woman is protected in the wilderness for a symbolic period of time, not for exactly 1260 24-hour days.

The other major number we see in Revelation is seven, associated with perfection, with completeness. But here we're seeing these things happen for an incomplete amount of time, half of seven. The message I think is that this time in the wilderness is not forever - it's going to end.

## Michael and his army of angels

Next up is Michael and his army of angels. Now John has made very clear how familiar he is with Daniel's prophecies, and again, that's where we first hear of Michael. Daniel 12:1:

*At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.*

Some translations say that Michael protects, guards, or watches over the people of Israel. Jude identifies Michael as an archangel, and he's the only person in scripture identified with that term.

I think Michael is included here in contrast to the dragon. Michael is the good guy in Daniel's apocalyptic visions, identified as a chief angel in Jude, so I think John is using him as an opposite to Satan. Both angels, both powerful, good versus evil.

Now some say that Michael is another name for Jesus - that they are one and the same person. Jehovah's Witnesses most obviously believe this. But I don't think that's right - Jesus is represented in the story already and there's nowhere in scripture that identifies Jesus and Michael as the same person. There are places in scripture that say Jesus is no angel - he is greater than angels - Hebrews 1:5-8, for example.

In the story, Michael leads the loyal angels against Satan's angels. So where is Jesus? He's on the throne, ruling and reigning over the whole affair.

## The people

Lastly, the people - verse 10, those who are accused by the accuser, those who, verse 11, have conquered the accuser by the blood of the lamb.

That's us - that's the church - another representation of her, like the woman we saw is a representation of God's chosen people. And it's clear that it's the church persecuted. Verse 11 tells us that 'they loved not their lives even unto death' - they died for their faith, were persecuted, but still they conquered.

## What do we learn from the passage?

But this story is not written just to tell a good tale. It's written to teach us something, to be applicable to John's audience, and by extension us.

## Satan

First, what does this teach us about Satan? Well we see that he's formidable, he has an army of fallen angels with him, he accuses us day and night, but also that he lost the battle in heaven and that the people in the story have conquered him.

There's two main ways we get things wrong about Satan.

On the one hand, we can ignore him completely. This is unwise - 1 Peter 5:8:

*Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*

Satan is real, powerful and dangerous and we shouldn't ignore what he's up to.

On the other hand, sometimes we think far too much of him. I think we've probably all seen someone say something like this - someone wakes up late, "well that's Satan ruining my day". You lost your temper - must be Satan's influence behind that. We can blame everything on Satan.

We shouldn't give Satan all the credit - we're quite capable of making our own mistakes. The world, the flesh and the devil - we live in a fallen world, as people born sinners, and yet sometimes we act as if Satan is behind everything.

Some of this comes from a mistaken view of who, or what, Satan is. Satan is not like God - he's a creature like we are. It's so obvious this, but until it was actually pointed out to me, I didn't realise what a faulty view I had - Satan is confined to one time and one place, just like us. He might be powerful, but he's limited. He can't know everything, can't be more than one place at once. He's not God's opposite in any sense.



So Satan is formidable, but greatly limited. We should take him seriously, but not obsess about him. As I mentioned, he might have a third of the angels on his side, if we accept that interpretation of verse 4. So he's only outnumbered two to one, and that's only counting angels. He has lost the battle in heaven, he will lose the battle on earth. Verse 12:

*Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"*

Satan is like a cornered animal - he attacks us, not because he thinks he can win in the end, but because what else can he do?

## Us

Which brings us to what we learn about ourselves from this story.

In this story, we're the woman in the wilderness, in a similar way that Israel was in the wilderness. Israel had been set free from slavery, gone through this figurative baptism experience as they crossed the red sea. The wilderness is a place of hardship, not an easy place, but one where God is protecting and providing for the people. And the Israelites have the sure promise of God that the promised land is coming, a land where all the hardship of the wilderness is over.

We're figuratively in the wilderness now - as Christians, we're set free from our slavery to sin, we're looking forward to when all things are made new, and we just have to put up with some hardship in the meantime.

But the point is that whilst there is persecution and suffering in the wilderness, God's protection is also there, and the end of this time is sure. This is not forever. As we await Christ's triumphant return, we can be confident, both that he will come again, and that in the meantime, we can trust God to keep us ultimately secure.

The other way we see ourselves in the story is as those that 'conquer by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony'.

This conquering is proclaimed from heaven - it's not something we say, or make up, but this loud voice from heaven in verse 10 tells us "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come". Verse 12, "Therefore, rejoice"!

What is clear is that Christ has dealt the decisive blow to Satan, and whilst Satan isn't gone yet, we overcome by the blood of the Lamb, that is, by trusting in Christ and his work on the cross.

We also overcome by the word of our testimony. One opinion on this is that the blood of the Lamb is our defence and this is our offence - our offensive tactic is the gospel, it's telling others what God has done for us. We do battle by telling what God has done, by testifying to His goodness and salvation. We overcome by constantly clinging to Jesus and what He has done for us, by spreading the good news of Him, and by loving Christ more than our own lives.

When things look very dark and disturbing for the church, we can be sure that God provides for us, and that all will be well in the end.

## Conclusion

So why do myths and fairy tales and the archetypal stories resonate so much with us? Because the best stories reflect something about reality. The world we live in does have a good ending, it does feature struggle and redemption and good vs evil. There is a point at which all looks lost, but the hero triumphs. True love really is transcendent.

The story of reality is like a fairy tale - the brave knight kills the dragon, rescues the princess, and they get married. This is the story of the universe, Christ defeats Satan and sin, rescues his bride, the church.

Jonathan Edwards said this:

*The creation of the world seems to have been especially for this end, that the eternal Son of God might obtain a spouse.*

If that's really true, then it's no surprise we're attracted to stories that reflect that truth. We were made for such a story.

Next week, Joyce will continue our look at Revelation and take us to the end of the book, where we'll see the end of the story, where Christ and his bride, as you'd expect, live happily ever after.