

The Identity of the Woman in Revelation 12:1-6

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Abstract: *The identity of the woman in Revelation 12: 1-6 is apparently shrouded in a symbolism that is consistent with apocalyptic literature. This has, however, engendered scholarly debates as a result of divergent views on the issue. There is also lack of unanimity in hermeneutical approaches. The study attempts to refute or affirm certain interpretations about the identity of the woman in order to provide an acceptable interpretation. Some commentators regard the woman in Revelation 12 as a sign, church, Mary, Israel or the redeemed. All these interpretations are not without difficulties because they ignore essential features of the woman. The woman in Revelation 12 is the community of God's people in the Old Testament which spans to the church in the New Testament. A corroborative witness tacitly provided by verses 13 to 17 (referring to the other offspring of the woman) conclusively reveals that the woman in Revelation 12 is also the church. This implies that the woman in Revelation 12:1-6 has a dual application, meaning God's people in the Old Testament and God's church (people) in the New Testament.*

Key words: *identity, woman, apocalyptic, hermeneutics, Israel, church*

I. Introduction

Revelation 12 begins the third and last major section of the book of Revelation: a revealing of the contents of the little scroll (Rev. 10). Chapters 12-13 according to Stefanovic, set the stage for the great climax of earth's history; they introduced the actors who will play the major roles in the final battle [1]. The first six verses of Revelation 12, identify the three major characters of the chapter: the woman, the child and the dragon. The chiasmic structure demonstrates that these chapters (12&13) form the central portion of the book [2]. Some scholars however see this chapter as the great controversy between Christ and Satan [3]. Revelation 12 is one of these overviews, providing a history stretching from the time before humans existed until the time just before Christ's return as King of Kings and Lord of Lords [4].

The identification of the woman is important for a correct interpretation. However, the identity of the woman is not explicitly stated, which is consistent with the nature of apocalyptic genre. However, John gives more than enough information to make her identity known [5]. Despite this, the range of interpretation varies from one scholar to another. Most would contend that this woman refers to a community rather than to an individual person as Mary; her exact identity, whether a religious subgroup within ethnic Israel such as messianic Judaism or eschatological Israel remains a subject of debate [6]. The question remains, What is the identity of the woman? Could she be Mary, the Church, the Nation of Israel, every believer or what?

The purpose of studying these texts is to ascertain the identity of the woman in Revelation 12:1-6; to affirm or refute certain interpretations about the identity of the woman. It attempts to bring an end to the debate or better still, provides an acceptable interpretation to the identity of the woman, by a careful consideration of all suggested assumptions of who the true identity may be. As much as possible, the study is contextually limited to Revelation 12:1-6. Therefore, the focus is on the woman in chapter 12 of the book of Revelation and not (except by inference) tracing the concept of woman in the scripture.

II. Imagery in Revelation 12

Biblical scholars have long debated whether Revelation is an apocalyptic work or a prophecy, since the book itself claims to be a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 18-19), and the messages presented are apocalyptic in style [7]. Revelation by common consent has been one of the most difficult of all books of the Bible [8]. hence, there is no consensus on the interpretation of the last book of the Bible [9].

2.1 Brief Interpretation Methods or Approaches to Revelation

The interpretation of Revelation has customarily fallen along the lines of four major, essentially conflicting, hermeneutical approaches: preterist, historicist, futurist, and idealist [10]. However, Strand alludes to three main approaches [11]:

Preterism: The preterist method holds that the book of Revelation addresses primarily the situation of the Christian church in the Roman province of Asia in the first century A.D [12]. *Historicism*: The historicist approach argues that Revelation supplies a prophetic overview of church history from the first century until the return of Christ [13]. *Futurism*: the futurist interpretation looks upon the book of Revelation as treating mainly events of the future – not merely John’s future but our own [14]. Proponents of this view tend to interpret Revelation 4-22 as still unfulfilled [15]. *Idealism*: the idealist approach to Revelation has sometimes been called the “spiritualist” view in that it interprets the book spiritually, or symbolically [16]. The idealist interpreter would see the book as containing a symbolic description of the ongoing struggle between good and evil which cannot be applied to any historical time period or place [17].

2.2 Reasons for Using Symbols

Ancient literature, like modern, makes frequent use of imagery and of figures of speech such as metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, hyperbole, and others in stressing the reason for the use of symbols [18]. Paulien states, “The words that people use and the meanings that those words carry are the product of a people’s past experience. Language is limited in expression to that which is familiar to people in a given time and place. Even the future can only be described in the language of a people’s past and present experience” [19]. Strand suggested three reasons for the use of symbols in the book of Revelation, as well as in other apocalyptic literature; these include: to protect the community using them; for effective illustration of message; and for traditional use (common parlance of the community using them) [20].

2.3 Some Suggestions for Interpreting Symbols

Kenneth Strand gave some useful suggestions for interpreting symbols which may be useful for this section. These are:

1. Understanding the symbol for what it is: it is symbol, which is fluid and representative in nature.
2. Recognize the reasons for using the symbol.
3. Discover as far as possible the source or sources of the symbolism, noting both the original meaning and derived meaning for the community using it.
4. Consider the symbol standpoint of the literary type in which it occurs.
5. Note the relationship of the symbol to the main theme that is being treated.
6. Consider the symbol within its immediate literary context or textual setting.
7. Interpret the symbol in relationship to its conventional usage or usages within the community using it, determining its precise meaning on the basis of the theme being treated and the immediate textual setting in which the symbol appears.
8. For historical application, take care not to “tailor-make” history to fit preconceived ideas of what the application of the message should be; rather let the message itself be the guide as to historical fulfillment.
9. Do not seek to find an application for every detail of an extended symbolism; instead, get the main picture or lesson. Parts of symbolic presentations are often there simply to round out the picture.
10. Recognize that the extent of a symbolic presentation may vary from a simple metaphor to an extended allegory and that the meaning of a specific symbol may vary in different contexts [21].

However, a meaningful understanding of Revelation’s messages must start with paying careful attention to the Old Testament as the primary source from which John gleaned the symbols and images in his book. Once the Old Testament background to a symbol is determined, efforts should be made to understand how the Old Testament images under consideration were transformed by the gospel. Then, a study should be given to the context in which the inspired author used that symbol to ascertain its adapted meaning [22].

III. Background Source of Revelation 12

In recording the visions he saw, John drew symbols almost entirely from the Old Testament while responding to first-century religious, social, and cultural milieu [23]. It has been demonstrated by many scholars that out of 404 verses in Revelation, 278 contain references or allusions, direct or indirect, to the Old Testament [24]. This suggests that the Christians of John’s time would have perceived the similarities between Revelation and the Old Testament and eventually would have understood “the book’s symbols in the light of the Old Testament background” Jon Paulien notes that “whoever tries to understand Revelation without a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament will find it virtually impossible to understand the book” [25].

However, some scholars are of the opinion that the imagery used by John in Revelation 12 is of contemporary or pagan myth. Beasley-Murray, alludes that John utilizes the elements of a well-known myth, found in the folklore of many culture [26]. It is against this backdrop, according to some scholars, that the myth was literally fulfilled by the Caesar; hence, to them, ‘John rewrites the old pagan myth deliberately to contradict

its current political application' [27]. That is, God's salvation of the world is based upon Christ's authority and not Caesar's, who is but another pretender to the messianic throne [28].

Yet the question that should be of immediate concern is: Did John draw more directly on OT parallels? Some cite Genesis 37:9-11, where "the sun, moon, and eleven stars appear together in Joseph's vision... yet while the sun, moon, and twelve stars are parallel in both accounts, the other details are quite different" [29]. Drawing such a correlation may be considered tenuous since, for example, the woman and the child who are central in John's account are totally absent from Joseph's dream. Thus to conclude that John intended his readers to interpret this chapter on the basis of the Genesis material is unlikely.

Alan suggests that in the Old Testament, the imagery of a woman is frequently associated with Israel, Zion, or Jerusalem (Isa. 54:1-6; Jer. 3:20; Ezek. 16:8-14; Hos. 2:19-20). Therefore, this background seems to provide a much closer link to the intended significance of chapter 12 than the other proposed parallels [30]. However, he concludes that there seems to be in chapter 12 a blending of elements from Old Testament concepts, Jewish materials, ancient mythical stories, and possibly the Domitian child myth. Regardless of the sources or allusion, he states that John reinterprets the older stories and presents a distinctively Christian view of history in the imagery of the woman and the child [31].

Contrary to this opinion, Beale suggests that "in chapter 12 John records the same story, but he gets his account from the OT" and that none of the pagan stories from Babylon, Ugarit, Persia, Egypt, or Greece has all the essential elements found in Revelation 12 [32]. It is easy to agree with Morris that the lesson associated with a pagan sun goddess that may be learned is purely incidental. John is an artist in words with a divinely given message and it violates the integrity of the text to degrade him to the level of a copyist of ill-digested pagan myths. The corpus of writings attributed to John demonstrates his antipathy towards paganism. It would therefore be extracting from the text more than the original intention of the writer or amount to unwarranted conjectures to attribute John's ideas to pagan sources [33].

IV. The Woman as a Sign

The woman of Revelation 12, like the young woman of Ezekiel 16 (and like Eve in her God-given fur coat), is outfitted in luxurious apparel. She is "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" [34]. The Greek word *semeion* is used often in the Fourth Gospel of Jesus' miracles [35]. It is used seven times in Revelation; it refers four times to the miracles performed by Satan's allies to deceive the world at the time of the end (Rev. 13:13-14; 16:14; 19:20). Here and in 12:3 and 15:1, however, the word seems to mean a striking visual scene that capture one's attention [36]. Though what John beholds excites his wonder, he does not use the Greek word for wonder (*teras*), a word which does not occur in the Revelation [37]. This show that the woman is more than a mere woman-she signifies something, since John generally uses "sign" to refer to a miraculous event or object [38].

Beale sees the woman's brightness as a heavenly identity and heavenly protection of the people of God, as well as their purity, which safeguards their ultimate spiritual invincibility against persecution and corruption by temptation, deception, or any vice [39]. However, Morris suggests that we must discern Israel, the chosen people of God in this symbolism and he argues that the twelve stars will be the twelve patriarchs or the tribes which descended from them. The symbolism is that of Joseph's dream (Gen. 37:9; cf. also *Test. Naph. 5:3-4*) [40]. Despite this summation, some scholar sees this as representing the twelve apostles [41].

V. The Woman of Revelation 12

The identity of the woman has been the subject of much debate. The four major opinions are:

1. The woman represents the church with the 12 stars representing the 12 apostles.
2. The woman represents Mary with the 12 stars representing the 12 apostles.
3. The woman represents Israel and the 12 stars represent the 12 tribes of Israel.
4. The woman represents the redeemed and the 12 stars represent the apostles and the tribes of Israel.

However, "to identify the women we just need to look at her qualifiers" [42].

5.1 Woman as the Church

Some commentators are of the opinion that the woman represents the church. Because the woman appears as a heavenly sign, Ladd understands the woman as the "ideal church in heaven" [43]. This, however, makes no sense of the woman's man-child, who surely belongs to earth, as Ladd himself admits [44]. In the words of Smith, verses 1 and 2 cover a period of time beginning just previously to the opening of the Christian Era, when the church was earnestly longing for and expecting the advent of the Messiah, and extending to the full establishment of the gospel church with its crown of twelve apostles (Luke 2:25, 26, 38) [45]. In his argument, the woman, the church, had the moon under her feet; that is, the Mosaic period had just ended, and the woman was clothed with the light of the gospel sun, which had just risen [46].

If Smith argument is right, then by anticipation the church is represented as fully organized, with its twelve apostles, before the man child, Christ, appeared upon the scene. He concludes by saying “there is no ground for misunderstanding the passage; and hence no violence is done to a correct system of interpretation by this representation” [47]. However, “the woman could not possibly be the church as some try to interpret her, since the church did not bring Christ into the world, but Christ brought the Church” [48].

5.2 Woman as Mary

Some commentators (primarily Roman Catholics) argue that the woman of Revelation 12:1 is Mary, the mother of Jesus [49]. Some catholic exegetes endeavor to do justice to the OT background of Zion as the mother of the faithful by suggesting that in this passage the woman has a double aspect. She is the messianic people of both covenants, but as represented by Mary, in whose person the tradition is made from the synagogue to the Christian church [50]. Hence, the male child to whom the virgin Mary gives birth is preserved from the slaughter of the innocents, but the devil does not cease to attack him throughout his ministry and even during the hours of his dying [51]. There is however something amiss in this interpretation because it ignores the symbolic nature of the book of Revelation. It also overlooks what happens in the rest of the chapter which is “contrary to what could have been said about Mary (especially if the literary interpretation is in view here) [52]. Mary never was pursued by the dragon for “1260 days”; neither persecuted, flees into desert, and has other children, who are described as faithful Christian and all this goes beyond anything that could have been said about Mary and her children [53].

5.3 Woman as the Nation of Israel

Some identify the woman exclusively with the Jewish people, the nation of Israel. This view seems to be supported by the reference to the woman giving birth to the messiah or “male child” (v. 5) “the woman in this drama is clearly demonstrated to be Israel (the seed bearer of Messiah) through whom the Messiah, Jesus Christ, (the child) entered the world” [54]. According to Morris, the symbol represents Israel, the chosen people of God; and that the twelve stars will be the twelve patriarchs or the tribes which descended from them [55]. Therefore, it seems likely that the woman here represents Israel, the people of God [56]. Ted Montgomery strongly suggests that this “woman” is not symbolic of Christianity or the Church, a view which is embraced by some Christians, since the Church did not “replace” Israel; rather, it was grafted into Israel [57].

Roman Catholic theologian Father Hubert J. Richards agrees that the Revelation 12 woman refers to Israel. Concerning the woman of Revelation 12, Father Richards argues the interpretation that the woman is Mary could stand only if “the verse is isolated since what follows has very little relevance to our Lady. Nor is it any honor to Mary to apply any and every text to her without thought...”[58]. However, this view has internal problems. “The dragon’s persecution of the woman after the messiah’s birth can hardly refer to the devil’s attack on the nation as a whole but could apply only to the believing part of the people. The whole intent of the passage is to explain the persecution of the believing community, not the persecution of the nation of Israel as a whole” [59].

5.4 Woman as the Redeemed

Since the context indicates that the woman under attack represents a continuous entity from the birth of Christ until at least John’s day or later, her identity in the author’s mind must be the believing covenant-messianic community [60]. Beale suggests that it is too limiting to view the woman as representing only a remnant of Israelites living in trial at the last stage of history, rather the woman symbolizes a believing community extending from before the time of Christ’s birth to at least the latter part of the first century A.D. (vv. 13-17) [61].

Furthermore, in the following verses (13-17), the persecution is not directed against a nation of believers and *unbelievers* but a pure community of faith. The preceding analysis leads to the conclusion that the woman in 12:1-2 represents the community of faith in both Old and New Testaments ages. Some commentators tend to agree with this position: “The woman who gives birth to Messiah represents the true church through its entire history – from Adam and the Jewish nation to the Christian Church” [62]. Some see it as the church of both the OT and NT [63]. However, if this woman represents the Redeemed from both the Old and New Testament, the people of God, then it should be noted that there are not 24 stars in her crown; and could the woman still be a symbol of believers of both the Old and New Testaments, like the 24 elders are?

VI. Conclusion

The use of “people of God” as generic name for the “Church” and the “Redeemed” may lead to a wrong premise; however, it is required of scholars to distinguish between the Church of the Apostles and the one in the wilderness, in order to remove any form of ambiguity between the two concepts. Evaluation has been done on the various views of identifying the woman in Revelation 12; however, the symbolic representation

suggests a community of people rather than an individual. While some are of the opinion that the nation Israel (the Jewish) gave birth to Jesus and have been God's people from the wilderness (applying the imagery to Old Testament Text) and some see it as the Church, it will be noted that mostly, the reference to Church has to do with New Testament Apostolic Era.

However, the interpretation that the woman in Revelation 12 is the community of God's people in Old Testament which spans to the church in the New Testament seems more plausible because of verses like 13 to 17. A reference to the other offspring of the woman in the passage interlocks with the contextual evidence, as interpreted by many, that the woman is also Christian. Hence in this context, the woman features as the Church. In a nutshell, the woman in Revelation 12 has dual application, as the earlier verses 1-2 suggest God's people in the Old Testament and the later verses as God's church (people) in the New Testament.

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