

# Revelation Twelve (vv.1-17)

## The **Wonders** in Heaven [12.1-6]

- A kingdom has already been established on earth under the authority of the devil – the “kingdom of the world” (11.15). Before the eternal kingdom of Christ can be established, the kingdom of Satan must be removed.
- These *three* chapters (Revelation 12-14) explain the origins of the conflict (**12**) and introduce the key protagonists – Israel (symbolised by a woman), Christ (the man child) and the dragon (Satan). He has *two* associates (**13**), the beast from the sea (man of sin) and the beast from the land (false prophet). Ultimately, victory is assured for the saints because of the *redeeming* Lamb and the *reigning* Son of man (**14.1, 14**).

**v.1.** The phrase **great wonder** [*mega sēmeion*] is the first of *seven* signs in Revelation, and is the same word used by John in his gospel – a *sign* is a visual or physical symbol pointing to something beyond itself, especially something with a spiritual significance. The woman is therefore not an actual woman but is representative of another entity or group. The sign itself is of **great** importance, i.e. highly significant. The whole scene illustrates the conflict that has raged between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent since the days of Genesis 3.15. John sees a **woman**, the second of *four* symbolic women in Revelation – Jezebel (2.20), the harlot (17.1-7) and the bride of the Lamb (19.7-8). This woman is not the virgin Mary nor the church. Quite clearly, she represents Israel – the nation that gave birth to Christ. In the OT, Israel is frequently pictured as a *woman* (Isaiah 54.5; Jeremiah 31.32), and a *travailing woman* (Isaiah 26.17-18; Micah 4.10).

The woman is represented as a queen sparkling with light. She has twelve stars *above her head*, the moon *beneath her feet*, and *in between* she is **clothed with the sun**. The radiance of the sun suggests Israel’s supreme and unique glory as God’s chosen nation (cf. Psalm 104.2). The **moon** shines by reflected sunlight and speaks of the God-given authority and dominion Israel will exercise in the Kingdom. The **crown** [*stephanos*] **of twelve stars** indicates Israel’s sovereignty. Her twelve tribes will be the administrative channel by which God will regulate the nations of the world in the Kingdom. Together, the sun, moon and stars allude to Joseph’s dream in Genesis 37.9-10.

Note. The woman appears as a queen (v.1), a mother (v.2) and a fugitive (v.6).

- As a **queen**, she represents *Israel ideally* (future). This is what God has in mind for Israel. She will be the head of the nations, shining with light and standing in regal glory during the millennial kingdom.
- As a **mother**, she represents *Israel historically* (past). Israel has always been the object of the devil’s hatred because she was the nation of God’s choice to bring in the Messiah.
- As a **fugitive**, she represents *Israel prophetically*. Israel will again become the special object of the Devil’s persecution at the midpoint of the tribulation. She will flee from the Promised Land into the wilderness to be protected of God.

**v.2.** The woman **being with child** recalls the original promise of a coming Messiah who would crush the serpent’s head – He would be the ‘seed of the woman’ (Genesis 3.15). Ever since, Israel has been an expectant nation. The woman “*was screaming in labour pains, struggling to give birth*” [NET]. In the OT, Israel is often presented under the figure of a woman in labour pains, mostly because of her suffering at the hands of their enemies under the disciplining hand of God (cf. Isaiah 26.17-18; Jeremiah 4.31; Micah 4.10, 5.2-3). However, in this context the figure likely implies the awful persecution Israel suffered during OT days before Christ was born. Such persecution was inspired by Satan in an attempt to stop the birth of Christ and destroy the people of God. There is a sense in which the real travail of the nation is yet future in the terrible anguish of the tribulation period (cp. Isaiah 66.7; Matthew 24.8). The nation will *again* give birth to the Messiah for after the anguish and pain of the tribulation, Christ will come forth as the Son-Sovereign to claim His kingdom (Jim Allen).

**v.3.** A second **wonder** (sign) **appeared** in heaven, this time in the form of a **great** (enormous) **red dragon**, a symbol of Satan (v.9). The fiery-red colour indicates his destructive and murderous intent (John 8.44). The figure of a dragon is used in the OT as a representation of the enemies of God’s people, e.g. Egypt and Babylon (cf. Isaiah 27.1; 51.9-10; Ezekiel 29.3). The word “dragon” is also used by the AV to describe some kind of literal serpent or sea monster (Psalm 91.13) – perhaps the dragon is not as mythical as some might think! The picture here represents Satan as ferocious and terrifying. The dragon has **seven heads** and **ten horns**, symbols which will appear again (13.1; 17.3). As 17.9 will show, the seven heads represent seven mountains (the scriptural symbol for kingdoms), which are associated with seven kings. In the present context, these likely picture seven kingdoms that have persecuted and sought to extinguish Israel (and therefore the promised Messiah) down through the ages of time. These nations are Egypt (Pharaoh, cf. Exodus 1.22), Assyria (Sennacherib, cf. Isaiah 7.13-14), Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar, cf. Jeremiah 51.34), Medo-Persia (Ahasuerus, Esther 3), Greece (Antiochus Epiphanes, cf. Daniel 11.21-32) and Rome (Caesar, Matthew 2.16-18). The seventh and final empire, from John’s perspective, had not yet arrived but would take the form of the empire of the Beast during the great

tribulation (cf. 17.9-10). Whilst the heads represent successive kingdoms, the **ten horns** represent ten kings which will rule together with the Beast in a ten-kingdom confederacy (cf. Daniel 2.42; 13.1; 17.3, 12). It should be noted that the **seven crowns** (diadems) on the dragon's heads (symbolising sovereignty) are later seen on the beast's horns (13.1) – there will be a shift in regal power from the consecutive world empires to the final empire of the Beast which be shared with ten kings. **v.4.** John saw the **tail** of the dragon **draw** (or drag away) a **third part of the stars of heaven** and **cast** (to throw with force) them **to the earth**. The stars “of” (not “in”) heaven likely represent angelic beings whose proper realm is heaven. Stars are often used to represent angels in Scripture (cf. Job 38.7; Isaiah 14.12; Revelation 9.1) and this passage speaks of the dragon “and his angels” (v.7). This is probably, therefore, a reference to the original rebellion of Satan who drew a third part of the whole angelic host after him in his iniquity. Both the Devil and his fallen angels were cast out of heaven to take up their present abode in the atmospheric heavens (cf. Luke 10.18; Ephesians 2.2), though still having access to God's presence (v.10). There could also be a suggestion here, that at the time of the birth of Christ, Satan brought his entire demonic host to earth to destroy Him (Matthew 2.16-18) and oppose His ministry. There is no doubt demonic activity was at its zenith during the life of Christ. The dragon is therefore pictured as **standing** ready **before the woman** to **devour her child**.

**v.5.** The woman (Israel) **brought forth** (gave birth to) a **man child** [*huios*] – the Lord Jesus. The expression “man child” is literally ‘a male son’. The unusual language is somewhat reminiscent of Isaiah 9.6, and probably emphasises both the humanity and deity of Christ – He is born of Mary, a true human being, but at the same time, the eternal Son of God. The ultimate purpose of this Son is to **rule** [*poimainō*] **all nations with a rod of iron**. Though the word can mean ‘to tend (feed) as a shepherd’ the context here suggests the stronger rendering of ‘destroy’ is appropriate (cf. 2.27; 19.15; Psalm 2.9). Christ will destroy all nations gathered in opposition to Him at His coming (19.11-21) and in His kingdom He will have complete dominion. An iron rod cannot be broken. So, just as the dragon failed in his efforts to devour the Child at the first coming, he will also fail in hindering the establishment of His kingdom at His second coming. Her **child** [*teknon*] was **caught up** [*harpazō*, the same word is used of the rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4.17] **unto God** and **to His throne**, speaking of the ascension of the Lord Jesus. The picture passes over the life and death of Christ, to show Him sitting on the throne of God in the place of executive power. All God's purposes for mankind are guaranteed and realised in Him.

**v.6.** With the Child beyond the reach of the dragon, his animosity was redirected towards the **woman** (Israel). The picture now progresses to tribulation days, and more specifically, the last 3.5 years (1,260 prophetic days) when the Devil will particularly direct his animosity towards the Jews. At the midpoint of the tribulation, with the abomination of desolation raised in the temple in Jerusalem, the true remnant of Israel will flee out to the **wilderness** – to be hidden and preserved of God (Matthew 24.15-21). The location of this safe haven is not exactly given, but it appears to be a *mountainous* area (Matthew 24.16), a *barren wilderness* (Revelation 12.6, 14) and *easily defensible* (Isaiah 33.16). Micah 2.12 pinpoints the place as Bozrah, located in the rocky, mountainous and wilderness region of Mount Seir in Edom. Petra is situated in a basin within Mount Seir and is totally surrounded by mountains and cliffs making this the ideal hiding place from the enemy and fulfilling the requirements of the Scriptures cited above (cf. Daniel 11.41). This is a haven **prepared of God** – He is the source of their protection (cf. Isaiah 26.20-21). The phrase **that they should feed her there** is an indefinite plural indicating that others will administer her nourishment (Matthew 25.37, 40). The verb to **feed** [*trephō*] is an all-embracing word and means to ‘supply all that is needed for her well-being’, it covers much more than food (Jim Allen). The period of her hiding is the last 3.5 years or **1,260 days** of the tribulation which, with reference to Israel, is called “the time of Jacob's trouble” (Jeremiah 30.7). Jim Allen says, *“It is clear that, just as God intervened supernaturally to preserve Elijah for three and a half years when the apostate nation of Israel was under disciplinary drought in the reign of Ahab, so He will preserve this remnant through this latter-day apostasy. The apostate of Israel, who have been deceived by the false prophet, are identified with the worship of the Beast (13.12). The orthodox of Israel who will not bow to the image as in the days of Elijah flee for their lives and are divinely protected and supplied.”*

## The War in Heaven [12.7-12]

### **The Conflict [vv.7-9]**

**v.7.** This section explains the concentrated persecution of the Jews during the second half of the tribulation. In the first half, they appear to be living in relative peace, enjoying the covenant that has guaranteed their security (Daniel 9.27). But, at the midpoint, everything changes because of a cosmic conflict! John observes **war in heaven**, the *aorist* being better rendered by, “Then war broke out in heaven,” [NET]. The reason for the war is not given, but it could be that Satan has observed the rapture of the church and subsequent events in heaven, and realises his time is “short” (v.12). He therefore makes his final assault on the throne of God. The conflict is between **Michael and his angels** and the **dragon and his angels**. Daniel 12.1 describes the same events, “*And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was,*” i.e. the great tribulation. Michael is mentioned five times in Scripture. He is one of the angels of highest rank, being one of the “chief princes” and the only

angel described as an “archangel” (Jude 9). He has an angelic host at his command and is depicted as the defender of Israel against satanic attack (Daniel 10.21; 12.1). **v.8.** The dragon **prevailed not**, that is, he was overcome (defeated). Consequently, there was no more **place found** for them **in heaven**, meaning they were completely excluded from the regions of heaven accessible to angelic ministration. From this point, the Devil will no longer have any access to God to make accusations against the saints (cf. Job 1.6, 9-11; Zechariah 3.1). **v.9.** The **great dragon** and his angels were **cast out** (exiled) of heaven **into the earth** (cf. v.13). This is only the beginning! At the end of the tribulation the devil will be cast into the abyss for the duration of the kingdom (20.3), before being cast ultimately and finally into the lake of fire (20.10). Note the *five* different names used in this verse to describe the Devil – both his character and work:

- **Great dragon.** Describes his character as one who is destructive, murderous, fierce and ferocious.
- **Old serpent.** Points back to the dawn of history in Eden. Suggestive of *subtlety* and *treachery*. He is a wily foe!
- **Devil** [*diabolos*]. The word means to *slander* or *defame*. He is the *accuser* of the saints (Job 1.6).
- **Satan** [*Satanas*]. A transliteration from Hebrew, meaning *adversary*. He is the enemy of God and His people.
- Deceiver, **which deceiveth the whole world**, lit. ‘the one deceiving the world’. The present tense indicates that this is Satan’s habitual activity – he has always been the master of deception as the “father of lies” (John 8.44). Deception will dominate the world during the tribulation, believing the lie that the man of sin is God (13.14; 2 Thessalonians 2.9-11).

### The Comfort [vv.10-12]

**v.10.** The war in heaven results in a call to *worship* for those in heaven (vv.10-12a), and a pronouncement of *woe* for those on earth (v.12b). John heard a **loud voice in heaven**, likely the collective cry of the martyred saints of the first half of the tribulation (cf. 6.10) since they refer to “our brethren” which cannot be the language of angels. The casting out of the devil is viewed as a precursor of his final defeat, and one more step in the establishment of God’s kingdom on earth. The language is therefore anticipatory (proleptic), affirming that so certain is the victory of Christ that His kingdom has **now come**. And with this kingdom comes **salvation**, not merely personal redemption, but physical deliverance of the saints from the various woes of the tribulation (Matthew 24.13) and deliverance for creation from the ravages of sin’s curse. This has been accomplished by divine power, or **strength** [*dynamis*] that crushes all opposition resulting in the establishment of the **kingdom of our God** on earth and the **power** (ruling authority) **of His Christ** (cf. Psalm 2.8; Matthew 28.18). Every knee will bow to Him (Philippians 2.9-11)! The word **for** (or ‘because’) gives the defeat and banishment of Satan and his angels from heaven as the reason for this triumphant anticipation of the kingdom. Satan is further described as the **accuser** of the **brethren** (saints still living on earth), a word used for a legal opponent in a court of law. Since Eden, the uninterrupted and characteristic practice of the Devil (**day and night**) had been to appear before God to accuse His saints of sin (cf. Job 1.6-12; 2.1-6; Zechariah 3.1). His heavenly role as accuser has now ended, though his role as persecutor of the brethren will intensify after he no longer inhabits heaven.

**v.11.** Yet, the final victory belongs to these saints for **they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb**. The language anticipates the intense persecution which these saints will endure in the latter half of the tribulation, persecution which will result in martyrdom for they **loved not their lives unto the death**. This was the secret of their strength! They did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die (cf. Luke 14.26). The *aorist* suggests a moment of crisis when these saints chose death rather than to renounce Christ. The model of such an attitude is, of course, the “faithful witness” – Christ Himself (cf. 1.5; 2.13; 3.14). Though these saints had not yet died, the *aorist* **overcame** anticipates the victory as having already been won. “They themselves”, in addition to Michael, won a victory over the dragon – Satan and his hordes have again suffered defeat, this time by the saints on earth. These indeed are the true “overcomers” (cf. 2.7). The twofold cause (ground) of their victory is the **blood of the Lamb** – the full and sufficient answer to every charge of the accuser, and **the word of their testimony** – the unwavering, faithful witness they gave to Christ, even to the point of death.

**v.12.** **Therefore** refers back to the substance of v.10 – the **heavens** (plural) and those that **dwell in them** (probably embracing angels and saints) can **rejoice** because these realms have now been cleared of Satan and his angels, presenting a glimpse of the imminent blessing of the kingdom and vindication of the saints. In contrast, rejoicing in heaven is answered by **woe** (a warning of imminent, intense distress and anguish) for those who **inhabit the earth and the sea**. Indeed, these are the regions from which the two beasts emerge in the next chapter (13.1, 11). The particular warning here is not that of divine wrath, but the **great wrath** [*thymos*] of the devil as, having been cast down from heaven, earth is now his dwelling place. *Thymos* describes a more turbulent, emotional fury rather than a settled, rational anger [*orgē*]. The reason for the devil’s great rage is not only his exile from the heavens, but the knowledge that **he hath but a short time** (season) – 3.5 years to be exact before he will be banished to the abyss and Christ will receive His kingdom. This is therefore the period of Satan’s final assault on the people of God.

### The War on Earth [12.13-17]

**v.13.** The final paragraph of the chapter takes up the story from v.6. The **woman** (Israel) has fled into the wilderness because of the **persecution** of the **dragon** now **cast unto the earth**. The word **persecution** [*diōkō*] means ‘to put to flight’ or ‘to chase’, picturing the nation as a hunted prey with the devil in hostile pursuit. His particular ire against Israel may be because many of the nation will refuse to worship the Beast and his image, or because Christ will not come until the Jews turn in national repentance to recognise Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah (cf. Matthew 23.37-39). Perhaps Satan may think that if he was able to destroy the Jews, he could prevent the inevitable.

**v.14.** One of the great enigmas of history (as far as men is concerned) is the survival of the tiny and ancient people of Israel. Again, God will have His protecting hand upon them. So, **to the woman were given** (a divine *passive*) **two wings of a great eagle** with which to **fly into the wilderness**. Undoubtedly, this is a literal flight of Jews from Israel against the backdrop of the abomination of desolation in Jerusalem (Mark 13.14). The symbolism of the **great eagle** echoes the deliverance of Israel from Egypt as they were pursued by another dragon (Pharaoh, cf. Ezekiel 29.3). Exodus 19.4 says, *“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself.”* On that occasion God delivered them by opening a dry path through the Red Sea. This same figure symbolically depicts another as yet undisclosed supernatural means for Israel’s deliverance. Eagle wings in scripture symbolise *strength* (Isaiah 40.31), *speed* (Psalm 18.10) and *protection* (Deuteronomy 32.11; Isaiah 31.5). Israel’s flight into the **wilderness** was prophesied by the Lord Jesus (cf. Matthew 24.15-16) and could be to a place like Petra in the wilderness region of Mount Seir (see notes on v.6). Just as Israel was **nourished** with manna and quails in the wilderness (Exodus 16), and Elijah with food at the brook Cherith (1 Kings 17.1-6), so she will be supernaturally supplied in this day – possibly with the help of individual Gentiles (cf. Matthew 25.31-40). The period of Israel’s hiding is now given as **a time, and times, and half a time**, a period which is given in days in v.6 to show God’s concern for every day His people suffer. The period here is given in prophetic language (from Daniel 7.25; 12.7) equating a “time” [*kairos*] with a year (in the context of Daniel). Thus the time period in view is again 3.5 years referring to the last half of the tribulation. The woman flees **from the face** (presence) **of the serpent** suggesting a policy shift from dragon ferocity to *subtlety* and *treachery* as he hunts his prey.

**v.15.** In order to destroy her, *“the serpent spouted water like a river out of his mouth after the woman in an attempt to sweep her away by a flood,”* [NET]. Although this could be a literal attempt to flush Israel out of Petra by a physical flood, the OT uses a flood as a metaphor for *overwhelming evil* (cf. Job 27.20; Psalm 18.4; Isaiah 43.2) or a *military invasion* (cf. Isaiah 28.2; Daniel 9.26). This is therefore likely symbolic language to describe an extermination policy directed against Israel. **v.16.** But, miraculously, **the earth helped the woman** by opening **her mouth** and swallowing **the flood**. Again, whilst this could refer to God opening the earth by means of an earthquake to swallow a literal flood of water, it is more likely symbolic language to describe a supernatural intervention to thwart the attempts of the Devil, perhaps by destroying his pursuing army. Again, the same kind of language is used of the destruction of the Egyptians at the exodus, *“Thou stretchest forth thy right hand and the earth swallowed them up,”* (Exodus 15.12). **v.17.** Consequently, **the dragon was wroth** [*orgizō*] **with the woman** – the Greek word describing a blazing temper tantrum. The cause of such fury is the continued existence of the woman (Israel) despite all his efforts. With his extermination campaign in full swing, the dragon **went to make war with the remnant** (remaining ones) **of her seed** (descendants), clearly identified as true believers by the two clauses that follow. Whilst some of the nation is divinely protected in the wilderness, there will be other believing Jews (“my brethren”, Matthew 25.40) scattered across the world. These will become the special object of the dragon’s fury. It is quite possible the 144,000 are included within this number, as they are seen standing victorious with the Lamb after the conflict is over (14.1-5). These individuals **keep** (obey) **the commandments of God** and maintain loyal **testimony** to **Jesus Christ** amid such a hostile atmosphere.