

## Of Witnesses, a Woman and a Dragon

It will not surprise anyone who has read Revelation to know that much of the language of this book is in symbols. The puzzling thing for the casual reader is that those symbols are not easy to interpret. It's harder for us to get at their meaning than it was for the first-century readers of John's visions.

Here are some of the symbols we have seen so far:

- sun, moon and stars go dark = major political upheaval, the rise and fall of nations
- stars falling from heaven = God judging fallen angels and the people or nations they represent
- seven horns = perfection of power
- seven eyes = perfection of wisdom
- 144,000 = all God's people, Jew and Gentile, from every nation on earth, a number too great to count.

Today we will look at some more symbols and try to see how they shed light on the revelation of John on Patmos.

Chapter 10 of Revelation is a chapter of mystery. There are seven thunders that sound and John is about to write down what they say, but is told to keep it secret. There is a scroll that seems to contain the "mystery of God", a revelation of what is yet to be accomplished, but which has previously been revealed by the prophets. John is told to eat the scroll and, while it tastes sweet, he gets acid reflux, or something like it, after he's eaten the scroll. But in this account of the scroll, there is symbolism that helps us see what's going on; it has to do with the angel.

*Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, surrounded by a cloud, with a rainbow over his head. His face shone like the sun, and his feet were like pillars of fire. And in his hand was a small scroll which he had unrolled. He stood with his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land. And he gave a great shout, like the roar of a lion. (10:1-3)*

What is this description intended to tell you? The angel represents the presence of the Lord. Look carefully at the images that are used in this passage:

1. Clothed with a cloud (Dan. 7:13, Son of Man), but more typically in OT, this refers to God. e.g. in the wilderness, His presence in pillar of cloud "The angel of Yahweh" who is referred to as Yahweh in Gen. 16:10; 22:11-18; 24:7; 31:11-13; Exod. 3:2-12; 14:19; Judg. 2:1; 6:22; 13:20-22 ...
2. Rainbow on his head (Ezekiel 1:26-28) This has already been used in Revelation 4:3 of the throne
3. Face like the sun (Jesus on Mt. of Transfiguration in Matt. 17:2), also Christ in Rev. 1:16
4. Feet like pillars of fire (Christ's feet as burnished bronze, glowing in the

furnace in Rev. 1:15) Also, Yahweh in wilderness as “pillar of fire” (Ex.13:20-2)

5. Shout like a lion (e.g. Jesus as lion of Judah in Rev. 5:5)

The conclusion is that the angel in this vision represents the presence of Yahweh with His people. The allusions to His presence in the OT wilderness wanderings are here compared to His presence with His “witnesses”.

The stance of the angel is also significant as he stands with his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land. This indicates the authority of the angel of God over all of God’s creation.

A final comment on John being told to eat the scroll, that it would taste sweet, but the result would be uncomfortable. John is being asked to identify with God’s prophetic word, that the word of God is sweet and life-giving, but the result of delivering that word would not be “success”, that, just as Ezekiel had been warned (2:10), the word of the Lord would be rejected by a rebellious people.

Chapter 11 begins with John being given a measuring stick and asked to measure the temple of God and the altar and to count the number of worshipers. The temple in Jerusalem was probably not standing when the visions of Revelation were given ... unless John was on Patmos during Nero’s persecution of the 60’s. The temple was destroyed in A.D. 70 by the Romans. So what is John being asked to measure?

In the Old Testament, “measuring” something was either an indication of protection or of judgment. For example, in Amos 7 the Lord measured Israel against a plumb line and then spoke against the sin it revealed. And during Manasseh’s evil reign over Judah, God said He would measure the people of Jerusalem by the same standard He had used to measure Ahab (2 Kings 21:13), and went on to describe the judgments they would face.

But just as often, the picture of measuring something is used to illustrate security, safety from harm. A clear example is found in Jeremiah 31:39 which says that a measuring line will be stretched out over the hill of Gareb and across to Goah.

*And the entire area ... will be holy to the LORD. The city will never again be captured or destroyed. (v. 40)*

The most extensive use of this metaphor in the Old Testament is found in Ezekiel chapters 40-48 in which an angel measures various parts of the temple complex. It is this passage in Ezekiel which forms the basis for what John describes in his revelation. In both Ezekiel and in Revelation, the measuring of the temple indicates that God will be present there. Where? He will be present among the people of God, the “living temple” that Peter refers to in his writings (1 Peter 2:5), and what Paul describes as the “Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16. The temple that is being measured and offered the security of God’s presence is the church, the people of God from every nation under heaven.

So, the question that will linger in the minds of some will run something like this: “Will the temple in Jerusalem be rebuilt, maybe in our lifetimes, and will this physical

temple have a role in the fulfilment of the visions that John describes in the book of Revelation?" Maybe, but I don't think that is a necessary conclusion based on the text of Revelation. John describes some vivid images in this book and if we insist on them being physical realities that he sees taking place, then we have to push them all into the future, thousands of years after the lives of the people he is writing to and having no direct relevance to the crises they were facing. If his readers were familiar with the writings of the Old Testament, they would understand the imagery of measuring as protection and would likely relate it back to his description of the sealing of believers, the 144,000, the people from every tribe and tongue and nation that was too great to count, in chapter 7. There is a repetition of images in these chapters; seals and trumpets, plagues and judgments, sealing the believers and measuring them for their protection.

The next challenge we come to is in the next verse. In 11:1, John is asked to measure the Temple of God and count the worshipers. In verse 2, he is told that the outer courtyard will be trampled by the nations for 42 months. The number 42 months, 3 1/2 years, 1260 days, is a number that comes from various places in the Old Testament. It has a symbolic meaning, which we will get to in just a minute. First, 42 is the number of stages in Israel's journey through the wilderness after the exodus. 42 months is the length of time it did not rain after Elijah the prophet said that it wouldn't rain until he said so. 42 is the number of generations that Matthew records from Abraham to Jesus and he does it in 3 sets of 14; from Abraham to David, from David to the exile and from the exile to Jesus' birth. 42 is also a number found twice in the book of Daniel, in 7:25 and 12:7. In both passages, Daniel is told about something that will last for a time, times and half a time. The time is one year, times is two years and half a time is six months. Add them up and you get 3 1/2 years, or 42 months, or 1260 days.

In Revelation 12, John uses this Daniel number -- "A time and times and half a time" - to describe the period during which the Dragon, Satan, goes after the woman who has given birth to the Messiah. Clearly, then, the number, like the other numbers used in Revelation, is not a statistic, but a symbol. It stands for the time of the end, sometimes called the last days, but referring to the whole period between Jesus' coming to earth the first time and when He comes again a second time.

This helps us make sense of the two witnesses, which follow in verse three:

*I will give power to My two witnesses, and they will be clothed in sackcloth and will prophesy during those 1260 days. (11:3)*

What's the significance of two witnesses? Two was the number required to establish something as true in a court of law, before a judge (e.g. Deut. 17:6; 19:15). Israel was told not to convict someone of a crime unless there were two witnesses testifying to the person's guilt. And in the New Testament, Paul tells Timothy not to receive an accusation against an elder except on the testimony of two or three witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19). The sackcloth represents the role of a prophet and also the spirit of repentance. So, prophetic teachers call a rebellious world to repentance during the

whole time between Christ's life and ministry and His return at the end of the age. There are other indications in this passage, including the two lampstands, and two olive trees, that should lead us to conclude that the two witnesses represent the faithful church, the church that, despite intense opposition, continues to bear witness to the truth of the gospel.

This interpretation has the additional benefit of helping us see what this prophecy would have meant to the early church. I'll read quickly through the first part of chapter 11 and then summarize the message as it would have been heard and understood during a time of Roman persecution.

*Then I was given a measuring stick and I was told, "Go and measure the Temple of God and the altar, and count the number of worshipers. But do not measure the outer courtyard, for it has been turned over to the nations. They will trample the holy city for 42 months. And I will give power to My two witnesses, and they will be clothed in sackcloth and will prophesy during those 1260 days." These two prophets are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of all the earth. If anyone tries to harm them, fire flashes from the mouths of the prophets and consumes their enemies. This is how anyone who tries to harm them must die. They have power to shut the skies so that no rain will fall for as long as they prophesy. And they have the power to turn the rivers and oceans into blood and to send every kind of plague upon the earth as often as they wish. When they complete their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the bottomless pit will declare war against them. He will conquer them and kill them. And their bodies will lie in the main street of Jerusalem, the city which is called "Sodom" and "Egypt", the city where their Lord was crucified. And for three and a half days, all peoples, tribes, languages and nations will come to stare at their bodies. No one will be allowed to bury them. All the people who belong to this world will give presents to each other to celebrate the death of the two prophets who had tormented them. But after three and a half days, the Spirit of life from God entered them and they stood up! And terror struck all who were staring at them. Then a loud voice shouted from heaven, "Come up here!" And they rose to heaven in a cloud as their enemies watched. And in the same hour there was a terrible earthquake that destroyed a tenth of the city. Seven thousand people died in that earthquake. And everyone who did not die was terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. The second terror is past, but look, now the third terror is coming quickly. (11:1-14)*

John has been told to mark out a line of protection for the true believers, while those who remain uncommitted are facing a tough time while mixing with the people who belong to the world. It's going to take some courage for them to be counted among God's people. God's faithful witnesses will be given all the powers that the Old Testament witnesses were given, including Moses, Elijah, Joshua and Zerubbabel, but they will be hated by those who love the world and will suffer at the hands of the evil spiritual powers arrayed against God's Kingdom. Then they will be vindicated and

exalted by God, the world will be judged and some people will be saved in the midst of the crisis and judgment that will be going on all around them.

This is a message for their time and it's a message for our time as well. There are significant evil forces that oppose the Kingdom of God and that will launch attacks against the people who want to follow Jesus. In that part of the world, in that day, you could lose your job, you could be sent to the political prison on Patmos, you could be banned from the marketplace where people bought their food, you could even be burned to death. In our day and in our part of the world, the cost is not as high, but you could be labelled a hater, some will lose their jobs, some will be shunned and mocked and ostracized. In other parts of the world, the cost is much higher and we've read the stories of many faithful witnesses around the world who have given their lives bravely for refusing to deny the name of Jesus.

Now, to chapter 12. The seventh trumpet has sounded and "loud voices in heaven" have declared that the whole world has now become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever. The twenty-four elders indicate that the time for the final judgment has come; the opportunities for repentance seem to be running out and rewards and destruction will soon follow.

John says that a great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven and then describes seeing a woman clothed with the sun with the moon beneath her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She is pregnant and she is in labor. Suddenly John sees another sign: a large red dragon with seven heads and ten horns with seven crowns on his heads. His tail drags down 1/3 of the stars -- remember that stars are often used in John's apocalypse to refer to fallen angels. The dragon stands in front of the woman, ready to devour her baby as soon as it is born. But when the boy is born, he is snatched up to heaven before the dragon can get at him, the woman runs into the wilderness where God will care for her for 1260 days - 3 1/2 years - 42 months.

In Isaiah, a woman is often pictured as an image of a restored Israel (52:2; 54:1-6; 61:10; 62:1-5) In Revelation, this restored Israel is a picture of the church and this time period, 42 months, is the church age, the time we're now living in. A sign points to something greater than itself and the sign of the woman points to Mary, giving birth to Jesus who had been taken up into heaven by the time John is writing, and also to the church. Note that 12:17 tells us that the "rest of her offspring" are "those who obey God's commandments and hold to the testimony!"

A dragon, in the Old Testament, is always a symbol for an evil kingdom, a kingdom that attacks God's people Israel. This dragon has ten horns, and so it is a reference to the fourth beast of Daniel 7:7. Ten is one of the numbers of completion and the horns are a symbol of power, so the dragon represents a great force. The dragon trying to destroy the child is Satan trying to destroy Jesus, and we see that in Herod's murder of the little boys of Bethlehem, the plots of the Pharisees against Jesus and, ultimately, His crucifixion. The dragon trying to destroy the rest of the woman's offspring is Satan trying to destroy Jesus' church, a picture that would have been very meaningful to the seven churches of Asia Minor near the end of the first century and is

still very meaningful for us today.

But between those two events comes the climax of a great battle in heaven:

*Then there was war in heaven. Michael and the angels under his command fought the dragon and his angels. And the dragon lost the battle and was forced out of heaven. This great dragon - the ancient serpent called the Devil, or Satan, the one deceiving the whole world - was thrown down to the earth with all his angels. Then I heard a loud voice shouting across the heavens: "It has happened at last - the salvation and power and kingdom of our God, and the authority of His Christ! For the Accuser has been thrown down to earth - the one who accused our brothers and sisters before our God day and night. And they have defeated him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of their testimony. And they were not afraid to die. Rejoice, O heavens! And you who live in the heavens rejoice! But terror will come on the earth and the sea. For the Devil has come down to you in great anger, and he knows that he has little time." (12:10-12)*

The rest of the chapter has to do with Satan's attacks on the church and with God's protection and provision for His people as they endure the hatred of the enemy.

Let's close with some observations and applications:

1. The great victory in heaven, Michael defeating the dragon, was a picture of the great victory of Jesus Christ on earth when He lived the perfect life and then sacrificed that life for the salvation of people and the glory of His Father. This is the turning point, the place where love wins and where hatred and death and fear lose their position of power. This is the constant strength and hope of the church -- that our God has won, that His victory assures us of our victory, and that all fear really is gone.
2. Our ongoing victory is tied to our willingness to be witnesses, not in our defense -- we're not the ones on trial -- but in Jesus' defense. When we speak highly of Him, when we choose to honor His Name, when we offer ourselves in His service, we are overcomers. We are among the faithful witnesses whom God will honor.
3. We are aware of Satan's attacks and his anger against true believers, but we may not be as aware of God's gift of protection. We see the woman in 12:13 and following - now representing the church - fleeing into the wilderness and having God protect her there. You may feel that your faith is small, that your trials and temptations are big, that Satan gets too many victories in your life. But the message of this part of Revelation is that God is protecting that mustard seed of faith, that He is guarding your heart in Christ. His love is enough to see you through until the end of the journey.
4. The symbolism of Revelation points us to a God who has known all of these things from before time began. He has prepared for the rebellion of the human race, for the rise of evil, and He has been and will be the victor, the triumphant king.