The Power of Literary Art in Revelation 12:1–6

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Abstract

Revelation's symbolisms and catastrophic descriptions greatly influenced the Western world. Yet the book has not been much examined for its literary and narrative qualities, except by some critics who were more interested in fragmenting it into disconnected sources than understanding the richness of its literary production. A thorough analysis of its literary resources, however, reveals the greatness of its style, the sense of its purposes, and the unity of the book. There are rich intertextual relations with the Old Testament, especially with Genesis and Daniel, as well as repetition, numerology, cross-references, and a cyclic plot. When the art in the narrative (especially in 12:1–6) is considered, not only does the book become extraordinary for the readers, but its theological and moral meanings become more accessible.

Introduction

The book of Revelation is *sui generis* in its literary style. It seems to be a fictional work. Sometimes Christian readers and scholars seem to ignore this completely. Perhaps they consider it unspiritual to think of an inspired, canonical book, as a story with fictional aspects. Many readers, as well as commentators, hasten to find theological meanings in its texts with little regard for the "instrument" through which these concepts are transmitted, which is *literature*, and in this case, apocalyptic literature.

An analysis of major studies of Revelation shows that the prime concern of most scholars is not the identification of the existing literary aspects' influence on the process of building the narrative text.[1] R. H. Charles saw in some of the literary aspects (such as the repetitions) marks of composition or interpolation, but paid little attention to the narrative form of the book.[2] Likewise, J. Massyngberde Ford admits that "the construction of this apocalypse is unique; in fact, it is the most exquisitely and artistically constructed of all the apocalypses";[3] nevertheless, he considers this exquisite and artistic construction definite proof that the text as we have it is the work of an editor. Adela Yarbro Collins, in her acclaimed Harvard University thesis, tries to understand the use of mythological material in chapter 12 from Greek literature, but does not do the same research regarding the Old Testament.[4] Richard Bauckham, in one of the better works on the subject, approaches some of Revelation's literary qualities in isolated texts that he considers "pioneering and preliminary."[5] David Aune devotes much room in his three-volume commentary to "literary analysis," but the phrase in his commentary means identifying the Jewish, and mainly the non-Jewish, origins of the symbols.[6] Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland study how the book has been received;[7] their work confirms how most readers throughout the history of interpretation have not been aware of its literary genre. David Barr is one of the few who tries to read Revelation as a narrative, offering resources to understand the complexity of the plot; he does it, however, at only an introductory level.[8]

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[1] Obviously, there are exceptions, such as Victorinus of Pettau in the fourth century.

[2] Charles argues that John, Revelation's original author, died before finishing the book, and the almost-ready series of independent documents he left was put together by a faithful but unintelligent disciple. R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), 1:1.

[3] J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 46.

[4] Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, HDR 9 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976).

[5] Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 1. Bauckham's other work on Revelation is also useful: Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[6] Revelation's text, according to Aune, came be in the present literary form in two main stages, which he defines as "first edition" (1:7–12 and 4:1–22:5), and "second edition" (added 1:1–3 and 22:6–21). These two main editions represent the two primary stages in the composition of Revelation that are easier to detect. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC 52a (Dallas: Word, 1997), cxxi.

[7] Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

[8] David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 1998). See also the helpful chapter by Leland Ryken, "Revelation," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand

According to Barr, artistic literary aspects in general include the constitutive internal elements of the meaning of a text, such as plot, characterization, point of view, and temporal distortions.[9] According to Robert Alter, the analysis of artistic literary aspects also includes "discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units."[10] Obviously, it is not always possible to analyze all these aspects in only one text.[11] The aim here is not to provide a substitute for traditional exegesis; on the contrary, it is to reinforce exegesis by focusing on one scene, Revelation 12:1–6.[12] My primary goal is to identify its relation with the Old Testament, besides its essential narrative aspects, which make the vision so splendidly meaningful. In the case of Revelation, the literary art of narrative is the instrument through which the theology of the book is built and transmitted.

I. *Contextual Aspects in Chapter 12*

The long-awaited sounding of the seventh trumpet, as the opening of the seventh seal, ends up being an anticlimax. Instead of a detailed description of Christ and his church's victory over the forces of evil, there is a simple description in the form of a proclamation that the world has become God's world and his kingdom has been established (Rev 11:15–18). This represents progress when compared to the seventh seal, which has only revealed silence in heaven for half an hour.[13] However, there are no details of how the forces of evil have been destroyed; there is a report of "voices" in heaven celebrating the victory that has already happened. On the other hand, the description is not surprising, for it maintains the pattern established earlier of simultaneous recapitulation and anticipation of coming events, delaying the full

Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 458–69, and the work of James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* (Boston: Brill, 1998). It is a useful work, with an interesting narrative approach, but it is more topical than discursive.

[9] David L. Barr, "The Apocalypse of John," in *The Blackwell Companion to the New Testament*, ed. David E. Aune (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 647.

[10] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 13.

[11] In a previous article I presented the literary aspects involving the numbers in Revelation. Leandro A. de Lima, "The Numbers in Revelation: The Importance of Literary Analysis to the Interpretation of the Book," *Fides Reformata* 18.1 (2013): 9–23 (Online: cpaj.mackenzie.br/fidesreformata/arquivos/edicao_33/artigos/230.pdf).

[12] The scene in Rev 12:1–6 is a piece of the big picture in chapters 12–13.

[13] However, this silence does not mean emptiness; rather, it evokes significant content. Already in the Old Testament, silence may have a sense that involves enemies' destruction as well as rest for the saved ones (Pss 31:17; 115:17; Isa 47:5; and Ezek 27:32). For more concepts related to this silence, see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 446–54.

description in order to create a thrilling and expectant effect as to the continually postponed outcome, as it seems common in the book of Revelation.

By announcing the ending without describing it, John raises the readers' expectations for more details and information while gradually introducing new elements. This aspect of progress and repetition is one of the main literary devices of the work, as perceived since the days of Victorinus at the end of the third century.[14]

Chapter 12 starts a new section, the fourth one,[15] which is central in the book's pattern of seven as a whole.[16] This section is decisive in terms of content, for it reveals the details about the great battle previously announced by the seventh trumpet and in the sixth seal, emphasizing what really is behind the conflict between the church and the world. When we study this part, "everything invites us to consider Revelation 12 as a second treatment of the themes of the preceding chapter. But this parallelism should not be allowed to mask the progression in thought that marks the new elements."[17]

The last verse of chapter 11 describes that after the seventh trumpet is sounded, "God's temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant. And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a severe hailstorm" (Rev 11:19).[18] As in Revelation 4:5, 8:5, and 16:18, the announcement anticipates something grand: in this case, the central description of the book with the main characters of the plot: the woman, the son, and the dragon (and the two allies of the dragon of chapter 13).

These are followed by an abrupt transition, when the scene focuses on heaven and we see a woman and a dragon. According to Bauckham, "we must accept that the abrupt transition is intentional. John has made it abrupt precisely in order to create the impression of a fresh start."[19] In chapter 12

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[14] As far as we know, Victorinus (who died around A.D. 304–305) was the first to notice that the book of Revelation recapitulated a story. He says, "We must not regard the order of what is said, because frequently the Holy Spirit, when He has traversed even to the end of the last times, returns again to the same times, and fills up what He had before *failed* to say." Victorinus, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of the Blessed John* (*ANF* 7:352).

[15] This follows the idea, current since Victorinus, that the book recapitulates the same story, and, since Tichonius, that it is divided into seven sections (according to Augustine's and Bede's accounts). The sevenfold division was also established by the Venerable Bede, *The Explanation of the Apocalypse*, trans. Edward Marshall (Oxford and London: James Parker, 1878), 3–4; and by many modern authors, such as William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1949).

[16] The seven sections probably are Rev 1–3; 4–7; 8–11; 12–14; 15–16; 17–19; 20–22.

[17] Pierre Prigent, *L'Apocalypse de saint Jean*, CNT 14 (Lausanne: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1981), 176.

[18] All citations follow the NIV.

[19] Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 15.

the story of redemption is recapitulated; however, it is not done repetitively and monotonously; rather, it makes use of symbolic, bellicose language, which revives the great themes of the Old Testament in the scene of confrontation between the pregnant woman and the dragon and applies them to the consequences of this battle in heaven and on earth. In the elements used by John the entire Old Testament (as well as the New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old Testament) is before the readers, and they will see it in a new, significant way as they realize how it thoroughly applies to their own situation.

II. *The Creative Use of Genesis 3*

Collins's thesis is that the battle between the woman and the dragon is a Christian rewriting of the Python-Leto-Apollo myth and the Seth-Isis-Horus myth.[20] Based on the study of Joseph Fonterose,[21] Collins shows that the Greek version of the myth was well known in the regions where Revelation was read at the end of the first century, besides identifying similarities with Revelation 12.[22]

John possibly knew about this myth and about many others,[23] and it may be that he used them for his purposes[24]—perhaps to establish a dialogue with Greek readers. Nevertheless, scholars such as Bauckham and Greg Beale have demonstrated in a more consistent way that the apocalyptical imagery used by John is based mainly on Old Testament imagery. Bauckham notes that the narrative of the woman and the dragon recalls the enmity between the woman and the serpent (Gen 3:15) and portrays the people of God (Israel) as the Messiah's mother.[25] Beale also sees "the beginning

[20] Although the scholar has become known for the theory, Charles had already mentioned it at the beginning of the twentieth century, and he considered that it was said for the first time in 1794 by Dupuis. Charles, *Revelation of St. John*, 1:312.

[21] Joseph Fonterose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), 262–64.

[22] Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 66.

[23] Other combat myths referred to include the source of the Gnostic *Apocalypse of Adam*, the Babylonian myth of creation regarding Tiamat and the monster with seven heads, which was killed by the god Marduk when Tiamat swept a third of the stars out of the sky. Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, NTC 20 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 353. Charles posited almost a century ago that part of the combat story comes from the Zend religion of Persia. Charles, *Revelation of St. John*, 1:308. For other propositions, see Prigent, *L'Apocalypse*, 177–82.

[24] The same John to whom the fourth Gospel is attributed has also made use of terms known outside of Judaism, such as the concept of the Logos used in Neoplatonic philosophy, which he applied to Jesus in John 1:1–2, 14.

[25] Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 15.

fulfillment of Gen. 3:15–16" in the text.[26] Indeed, chapter 12 of Revelation echoes, broadens, and interprets the old narrative of chapter 3 of Genesis. The table below shows how the themes and characters of Genesis 3 are expanded in Revelation 12:

Genesis 3:14–16	*Revelation 12:1–4, 9*
14 So the LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, Cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust. 15 And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." 16 To the woman he said, "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you."	1 A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. 2 She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. 3 Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. 4 Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. 9 The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth.

The two texts refer to a pregnant woman who suffers the pains of labor and to a woman's son (offspring); they show the enemy (dragon-serpent) and mention enmity, besides establishing the enemy's debasement. Up to this point, the similarities are clear, but the broadened meaning given by the Revelation text through its symbolism is remarkable. The woman (who was naked in Genesis, then clothed with leaves, and finally with garments of skin) is now dressed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a

[26] G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1123.

crown of twelve stars on her head. We can also see the elevation of the dragon. In Genesis 3 it is a deceitful, devious serpent, using guile, trying to deceive with words, but it is debased and has to slither. In Revelation 12, on the other hand, the dragon sweeps a third of the stars out of the sky and channels its rage towards the woman in order to devour the son, and it is finally hurled from the sky to the earth. Thus, Revelation is pointing to a higher and broader fulfillment of this passage.

We note then that the source of chapter 12 is more naturally found in Genesis 3 than in the Greek and Egyptian myths. Revelation interprets the narrative of Genesis 3, applying its story as a pattern to describe the whole of God's history with his people.

So we can perceive how Revelation makes use of creative intertextuality. As Barr says, "intertextuality refers not only to the relation between one and another text, but to their mutual influence."[27] And also notice that Revelation 12 interprets the figure of the serpent-dragon as the devil himself, an interpretation unique in the Scriptures. By reading only Genesis 3 one cannot conclude with certainty that the serpent was indeed a fallen angel. However, John explicitly reveals this (Rev 12:9), changing the way his readers understand Genesis 3.

III. *Analysis of the Narrative Plot in Revelation 12:1–6*

I will now investigate the plot in Revelation 12:1–6, analyzing the textual choices of figure and action that interpret the Old Testament.[28]

According to Tzvetan Todorov, narrative not only consists of action or a state, but "requires the unfolding of an action, change, difference."[29] Two principles Todorov considers essential units of a narrative are succession and transformation.[30] So a narrative begins with equilibrium, goes through a state of disequilibrium, and then does not return to the original equilibrium, but moves to a new state, a new equilibrium. As Yves Reuter summarizes it, "narrative would define itself as transformation of a state into another state."[31] Narrative texts are built by devising elements that give sense to the

[27] Barr, "The Apocalypse of John," 640.

[28] A more complete analysis of other literary resources of chapters 12–13 of Revelation is found in the author's doctoral thesis: Leandro A. de Lima, "Apocalipse como Literatura: um estudo sobre a importância da análise da arte literária em Apocalipse 12-13" (PhD diss., Universidade Mackenzie, São Paulo, 2012). Freely translated as "Revelation as Literature: a study on the importance of the analysis of literary art in Revelation 12–13."

[29] Tzvetan Todorov, *Os gêneros do discurso* (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1980), 62.

[30] Todorov, *Os gêneros do discurso*, 64.

[31] Yves Reuters, *Introdução à análise do romance* (São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1996), 49.

narrative. Among these are the construction of characters, the definition of the time of the narrative, construction of scenery or the definition of space, and the way the narrator tells the story, conducting the development of the plot. Todorov defines plot thus:

> The minimal complete plot can be seen as the shift from one equilibrium to another. …The two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement.[32]

Todorov proposes this as the structural pattern found in most narratives. Moreover, to understand the multiplicity of narrative actions, scholars indicate "functions" that may "be reduced to a finite set, common to all stories."[33] Reuter cites the study of Russian Vladimir Propp, who found thirty-one "functions" that build the common foundation of narratives. From the initial situation, where characters are introduced, the plot develops through situations involving departure, interdiction, transgression, interrogation, information, reaction, displacement, and reconciliation; it concludes with the false hero's punishment and the true hero's reward.[34] Because of the complex structure of "functions" in narrative, a "quinary scheme" (with five stages), or "canonical scheme of narrative"[35] was developed:[36] an initial state, conflict (or disturbing force), dynamics, solution (or balancing force), and final state.[37]

In the discussion of Revelation 12 presented here, the following terms corresponding to those presented by Reuter are used in a flexible way: introduction, conflict, development, climax, and outcome. Attention is given to characters, time, setting or scenery, and the narrator's style. The focus is on the symbolic and artistic use of the Old Testament in the interpretation of the messianic story as a whole, in the context of John's readers.

1. *Introduction (vv. 1–2)*

The scene starts with the introduction of the main characters in a cosmic conflict, as well as the place of conflict.

According to John, the entire vision is "a great sign … in heaven." Aune believes the "sign" may be a reference to a sign or constellation in Greco-

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[32] Tzvetan Todorov, *A estruturas narrativas* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1970), 88.

[33] Reuter, *Introdução à análise do romance*, 47.

[34] Ibid., 47–49.

[35] "Schéma quinaire" and "schéma canonique du récit."

[36] Yves Reuter, *A análise da narrativa: o texto, a ficção e a narração* (Rio de Janeiro: Difel, 2002), 35–36.

[37] 1. Etat initial (EI); 2. Force transformatrice (FT); 3. Dynamique d'action (DA); 4. Force équilibrante (FE); 5. Etat final (EF).

Roman astrology.[38] However, the Old Testament discloses heaven as the stage for the signs of God on earth (Gen 1:14–17). Moreover, the stars symbolize Abraham's posterity (Gen 15:5; 26:4). Therefore, the great "sign in heaven" situates the readers on the Creator's great stage (Ps 19:1), through which he unveils his gracious purposes to his listening people.

The first character to appear in heaven is "a woman." We can notice that she herself is a narrative. Her arrival is beset with great meaning for John's audience.[39] Some interpreters have thought of her as Jesus's mother Mary, and others have identified her as the church.[40]

The character's two given descriptions, which point to her physical and psychological states, identify her and the scene as a whole. A physical description of her garments and her suffering due to pregnancy is reinforced by the torment of the dragon's persecution. As well as Genesis 3, another passage in the Old Testament adds relevant information: Joseph's dream (Gen 37:9), which refers to Joseph's father, mother, and eleven brothers, and he himself the twelfth one, or the twelfth star (i.e., the core of Joseph's family with the twelve tribes of Israel,[41] represented by their patriarchs).[42] John seems to infer that the glorious woman is in fact the people of Israel,[43] genealogically ascending to Eve, who was tempted by the serpent (dragon) in Genesis 3.[44] Therefore, she represents the promised descendants, from Eve to Mary.

The woman's labor pains are also important, for the divine promise was embedded in the mitigated curse, as Eve would conceive in great pain. It is important to remember that in Genesis God threatened man and woman with death if they disobeyed him (Gen 2:17). God's great gift to the woman is conception and childbirth, which guarantees the continuity of life. Many times in the Old Testament, the nation of Israel is described as a woman,

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[38] David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, WBC 52b (Dallas: Word, 1998), 664.

[39] In the seven churches, the scroll would be read by one person and "heard" by the others (Rev 1:3).

[40] In biblical literature, and mainly in rabbinic literature, the image of woman is not usually associated to virtue. The text about Eve is the chief example of this. The woman was tricked by the serpent, as Paul confirms even while highlighting the honor of her motherly function (1 Tim 2:12–15).

[41] Victorinus wrote, "And the crown of twelve stars signifies the choir of fathers, according to the fleshly birth, of whom Christ was to take flesh." Victorinus, *Apocalypse* (*ANF* 7:355).

[42] Beale and Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament*, 1123.

[43] The *Testament of Naphtali* mentions the sun and the moon; Levi is identified as the sun and Judah as the moon (5:1–4).

[44] Hippolytus insisted that by using the image of a woman John intended "most manifestly the Church, endued with the Father's word, whose brightness is above the sun." Hippolytus, *Treatise on Christ and Antichrist* (*ANF* 5:217). Tyconius and Methodius also insisted on this classic ecclesiastic interpretation of the woman. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 136.

the wife of Yahweh, an unfaithful wife at times, just as Eve was (Jer 31:31; Ezek 16:1–58; and Hos 3:1).[45] Sometimes the nation of Israel also appears as "pregnant" or feeling the torments of pregnancy (Isa 26:17–18; Jer 30:6). Therefore, although the woman's image is a description of all promised "offspring" from Eve to Mary (Gal 4:4), she alone wears the "clothes" of Israel, the ancient covenant people, the redeemed church of the Old Testament.

Therefore, the crying out of the glorious woman echoes from the sky and evokes hope and the expectation of her son's birth, which has been announced throughout the Old Testament. It is the divine announcement that the Messiah is finally going to be born. This may be considered as the state of original equilibrium (Todorov), which evokes the situation restored by God in Genesis 3, after the cursing of the serpent.

2. *Conflict (vv. 3–4a)*

With the glory and frailty of the woman, another great sign also appears in the sky. At this moment, John catches his readers' attention. He says, "Look!" —an imperative (καὶ ἰδοὺ)[46]—and then describes a great red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns. In this way, John directs the readers' view away from the pregnant woman's radiant beauty to the dragon's abhorrent might. So the antagonist enters the scene, but the readers now understand he has always been there, since the start.

The dragon is a common creature in the mythology of many peoples. Jean Chevalier characterizes the dragon figure as an "active and demiurgic principle; divine power, spiritual breath, celestial symbol, power and life, that which is part of the beginning of the world, coming out of primordial waters."[47] In the Old Testament, the dragon is an image of a great sea monster; it receives many titles, such as *tannin* (Job 7:12; Isa 27:1), Rahab (Pss 87:4; 89:10), and Leviathan (Job 3:8; 41:1; Pss 74:14; 104:26; Isa 27:1; and Jer 51:34). At some moments, the figure symbolizes the nations of Egypt and Babylon (Isa 51:9; Jer 51:34; Ezek 29:3; 32:2). "It therefore seems hardly reasonable to have recourse to the hypothesis of a borrowing from mythology in order to account for an image that comes straight out of the OT and Judaism."[48] Thus, throughout the biblical text the dragon is the opponent, the great threat to the people of God, which uses the nations to oppress the woman.

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[45] On the other hand, in the book of Revelation, it is clear that God's people, redeemed by the Lamb, are a faithful wife to the Lamb (Rev 19:7; 21:9).

[46] Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 356.

[47] Jean Chevalier, *Diccionario de los Símbolos* (Barcelona: Editorial Herder, 1986), 429.

[48] Prigent, *L'Apocalypse*, 187.

In Revelation the dragon is explicitly identified as Satan, the one who desires to deceive the nations (Rev 20:3). In the narrative of chapter 12, six characteristics of the dragon display its power: it is enormous (μέγας) and red (πυρρὸς), it has seven heads, ten horns, seven crowns on its heads (διαδήματα), and with its tail it sweeps a third of the stars out of the sky and flings them to the earth. The description of the tail's movement sweeping and flinging stars out of the sky, besides pointing to the creature's colossal size, probably also conveys the idea of the number of angels Satan led in his rebellion and who, because of him, ended up flung to earth.[49] In both Revelation and the Old Testament stars sometimes symbolize angels.[50] The location of the dragon in the sky also points to something paradoxical. It should not be there, for the sky is the place of God's presence. It is a usurper.

A terrible picture is presented. What will the monstrous dragon do regarding the glorious, though fragile, pregnant woman?

3. *Development (v. 4b)*

The readers' worst fears are confirmed when the narrator says that the dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth so that it might devour her child at the moment of birth. The dragon's intentions are revealed, increasing the tension. The gigantic, terrifying creature stands in front of the woman with the malign intention of devouring the son, frustrating the people of God's expectations of promised life and blessing, and annulling the divine curse pronounced against it.

Thus, the author develops a scene of initial tension, which will later unfold in several sections throughout the book, and consequently the reality behind the whole of Revelation: the efforts of the dragon to destroy the Son of God and, consequently, his "mother." Both looking back at the Old Testament and visualizing the future, the author shows this destruction to be the main goal of the persecutor, the reason for all his actions; this is how he interprets Christ's history, as well as the history of the people of God in both testaments.[51]

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[49] For the theory that it refers to the saints of God, see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 637.

[50] In the Bible, "stars" are associated with celestial creatures, God's servants who obey his orders, i.e., angels. In the book of Job, it is said that the stars were present at the creation of the world: God laid the cornerstone "while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" (Job 38:6–7).

[51] Lenski is correct when affirming that "Satan's intention towards the child is not difficult for us to understand either, for Satan certainly manifested this from the beginning, with Herod's homicidal scheme, and in Christ's temptation, extending up to his crucifixion." Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1935), 367.

In Genesis 3:15 God announced to the serpent that a descendent of the woman would crush its head. It is therefore possible to interpret the reference in Revelation to the moment the dragon "stood in front of the woman" awaiting the birth of the Son to devour him, as the curse uttered by God to the serpent in Genesis 3:15 predicts.[52] It is also possible to see it as implied every time the Old Testament indicates that the continuity of the "woman's seed" is threatened. The passages in Genesis are examples of this, such as when Cain murders his brother Abel and when God himself decides to destroy the world with the flood. Each step of the story narrates that the woman's promised offspring is at risk of disappearing but is always rescued through God's intervention, as when Abraham is supposed to have a son but Sarah is sterile, or when God orders Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and later provides an offering in his place. Throughout the Old Testament, the royal offspring faces threats of extinction but escapes by divine help in unusual ways (2 Kgs 11:1–2). This is the background of the "torments" (βασανιζομένη) suffered by the pregnant woman.

Finally, since the dragon failed to prevent the birth of the woman's son, the only action left for it was to try to kill him while he was still a child. The mass murder of males under the age of two in Bethlehem ordered by Herod was certainly engraved in the minds John's readers when they read this description.[53] It is possible to notice, however, that the son was taken away (Matt 2:13–18), in this case not a mere escape from one country to another, but by the beginning of the great dragon's final defeat.

4. *Climax (v. 5a)*

As the scene goes on, the son's birth is announced as that of a great king, and so the scene reaches its climax: "She gave birth to a son, a male child, who 'will rule all the nations with an iron scepter'" (Rev 12:5). The quotation, taken directly from Psalm 2, contains the promise that the Messiah will rule the nations (Ps 2:7–9). This "son," therefore, is at the heart of the cosmic conflict recorded in the Bible. No name is given; he is simply called "son" or "male child." As son, he will rule the nations with an iron scepter. For John's readers, there could be no doubt to whom the text referred: Jesus the Messiah. In the scene of chapter 12 he is, to a certain extent, a helpless baby. In weakness and strength the humanity and divinity of the lamb and

[52] Alluded to in Rom 16:20 in reference to the church. The church will triumph above Satan.

[53] As Bede writes, "And a figure of this deceit was shewn in Herod" (Bede, *The Explanation of the Apocalypse*, 82).

the lion are intertwined (Rev 5:5–6). The climax of the tension is reached with the question, will the dragon achieve its intent to devour him?

5. *Outcome (vv. 5b–6)*

The closure of the narrative is reached with the assertion that the dragon failed in its malign purpose: "And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne" (Rev 12:5). Here is found a temporal abbreviation, an ellipsis, for Jesus's entire life is described by the act of being born and raptured to the throne of God. According to Isbon Beckwith, "the words are added to emphasize the completeness of Satan's failure; the Messiah, so far from destroyed, is caught up to a share in God's throne."[54] This rapture is a symbolic reference to Jesus's ascension in Acts 1:9. The effect of temporal abbreviation highlights two elements in the redemptive work of Jesus: his birth and ascension.

The rise of the son up to the throne of God is the description of this son's victory, which has already been celebrated in the chapter 5 of Revelation, when the lamb "took" the scroll from God's right hand and was recognized by all inhabitants of heaven. He is "on the throne," that is, he assumes the power and authority to rule heaven and earth (Matt 28:18–20).

While the son is raptured to the throne, the woman escapes to the wilderness, where she is threatened by the dragon but protected by God.[55] There is an explicit temporal reference to the period she is sustained in the wilderness: one thousand two hundred sixty days. Despite being temporal, it is not a literal reference.[56] The time that the outer court of the temple is trampled on by Gentiles is the same prophesied by the two witnesses clothed in sackcloth (Rev 11:2–3). These all happen in the "post-paschal"[57] period when the church (the other descendants of the woman) will testify while enduring the dragon's persecution. Therefore, "it is a reminder that the story of God's people as John witnesses is the story of a new Exodus."[58]

The remaining questions at the end of the scene are the following: What will the dragon do now? Could not such a terrible, ferocious, creature devour

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[54] Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 624.

[55] It is important to notice that "wilderness" in the Bible is the place of temptation as well as the place of opportunity to encounter God. Beale notices that "place" (τόπος) in the New Testament is a synonym for "temple" and in the Septuagint is a common synonym for "sanctuary." Beale, *Revelation*, 649.

[56] The period is probably a "consistent reference to the final three and one-half years of the 70-week prophecy in Daniel 9." Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, NAC 39 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2012), 266.

[57] Prigent, *L'Apocalypse*, 176.

[58] Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 2006), 181.

a little baby? Will it accept defeat? Who is its immediate target, since the son has been raptured to heaven? The woman who has escaped to the wilderness comes into view again. Suddenly, the dragon finds itself without the slightest possibility of reaching its prey. What will happen to the woman? Will the dragon be able to pursue her in the wilderness?

After describing the dragon's banishment from the sky as an after-effect of the son's rising to the throne (Rev 12:7–17), John returns in the next scene to the woman's persecution after the birth of the Messiah, showing that the dragon's banishment from heaven is one of the reasons for its rage against her. John associates the dragon's persecution of the woman with that of the "rest of her offspring" (Rev 12:17). He tells the believers of the seven churches that they are the woman's "offspring" who continue to exist in the world and that for this reason they are under the dragon's temporary rage. This is why they are suffering persecution.

Conclusion

Through one scene with celestial pictures John succeeds in telling the whole story, involving his readers in the plot in an extraordinary way. He summarizes the great biblical story of the Old and New Testaments—substantiated by the grand promise of the coming of the Messiah, and of the consequent persecution God's people go through before and after Jesus's birth. The literary power of this encompassing scene unveils before the readers the great cosmic battle originating in Eden and going on until the end of time. John's readers saw themselves in this scene, not only because they understood what it represented in the past of biblical history, but also because they understood what it represented in their present: they were under torment imposed by the dragon, the Roman Empire. At the same time, the victory of the woman, who amidst suffering gave birth to the Messiah, and the victory of the Messiah, who was raptured from the dragon's grip and rose to the throne of God, remain as a testimony to the readers that the path to victory does not lead to escape through human means. On the contrary, the path to victory is through relying completely on God's purposes, as shown by being faithful to his calling even when undergoing suffering.

This is a strong message: the power the dragon seems to have in the world is an illusion. It is subjugated, suffering successive defeats. This is the reason for its rage against the church, before and after the coming of Jesus. However, Christ's victory is the guarantee of the definitive victory of the church, which is protected by God.

This analysis of Revelation 12:1–6 shows the same narration pattern as the rest of the book of Revelation: powerful scenes rooted in the Old Testament bring deep disclosures of the biblical story, shedding bright light on the Old Testament, and unveiling for the readers their place in God's extensive plan. Studying Revelation by considering its literary art may enable a better understanding of its theological and ethical content.[59]

[59] Editorial note: The author of this article was not able to consult *Reading Revelation: A Thematic Approach* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2012) by W. Gordon Campbell, whose article on Calvin's *Harmony* appears in this issue.