

Revelation

Lesson #10

The Woman and the Dragon

(12: 1-18)

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Review

With the opening of the seven seals and the sounding of the first six trumpets, John was stunned by his vision of the catastrophic disasters that struck humanity and the earth itself; it sickened him. But the visions continued. Two witnesses appeared in (what was left of) Jerusalem, prophesying for 1,260 days, hated by all who heard them. A great beast arose from the abyss, waged war against them and killed them, leaving their torn corpses lying in the street for three and a half days, while the whole world rejoiced.

And then, to the horror of all, the corpses began to draw breath, they stood on their feet and they ascended into heaven. With that, a great earthquake struck Jerusalem and a tenth of the city collapsed, killing thousands.

And then the seventh trumpet sounded.

Preview

Lesson #10 introduces a flashback to a time before Genesis 1: 1, giving us context for the story that we are reading. Chapter 12 opens with a great sign appearing in the sky: *“A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth”* (12: 1). And then a huge red dragon appears in the sky, seeking to devour the child!

War breaks out in heaven, the dragon leading his minions and the archangel Michael leading God’s army of angels. Michael and his army thunderously defeat the dragon and his crew, casting them down to earth where the dragon vows revenge. He hunts the woman who had fled with her child, to devour him and those who follow him.

For John Milton this is epic material, grist for the greatest epic poem in the English language, *Paradise Lost*.



As we ended Lesson #9 an angel blew the seventh trumpet, accompanied by a great chorus of praise from the twenty-four elders who had once again hit the deck.

We have one more woe to go.

But instead of forging ahead, John makes an abrupt turn, observing two signs in the sky, which leads John through a series of visions, visions that give us the “back story” of Revelation, of how all this came about to begin with.

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“A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon and stars under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. It’s tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth.”

(12: 1-4a)

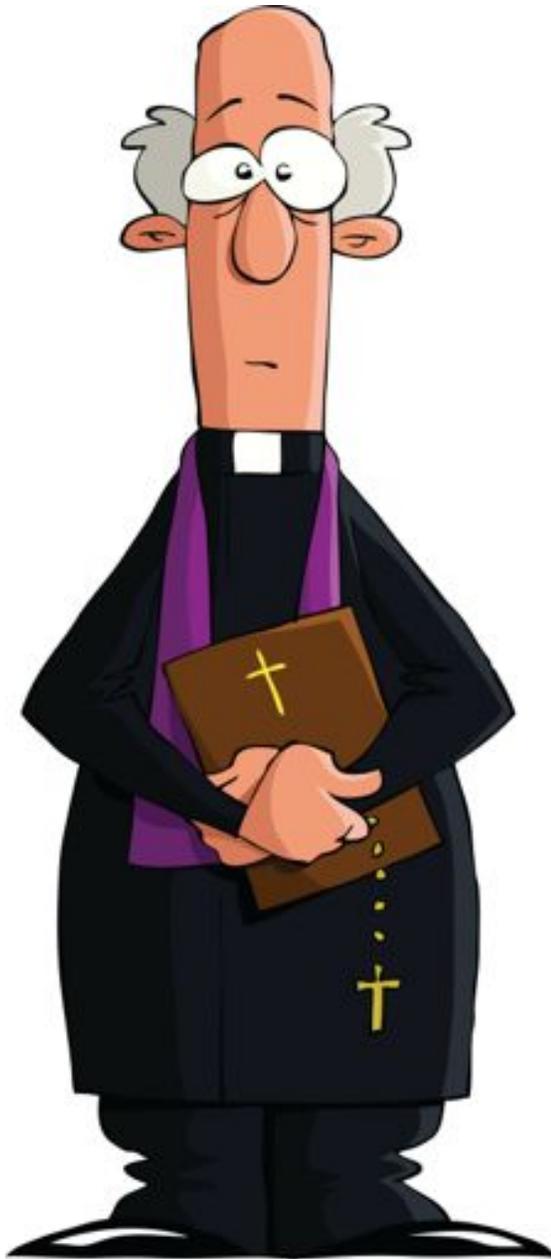
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William Blake. *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (watercolor, ink and graphite), c. 1805. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C..

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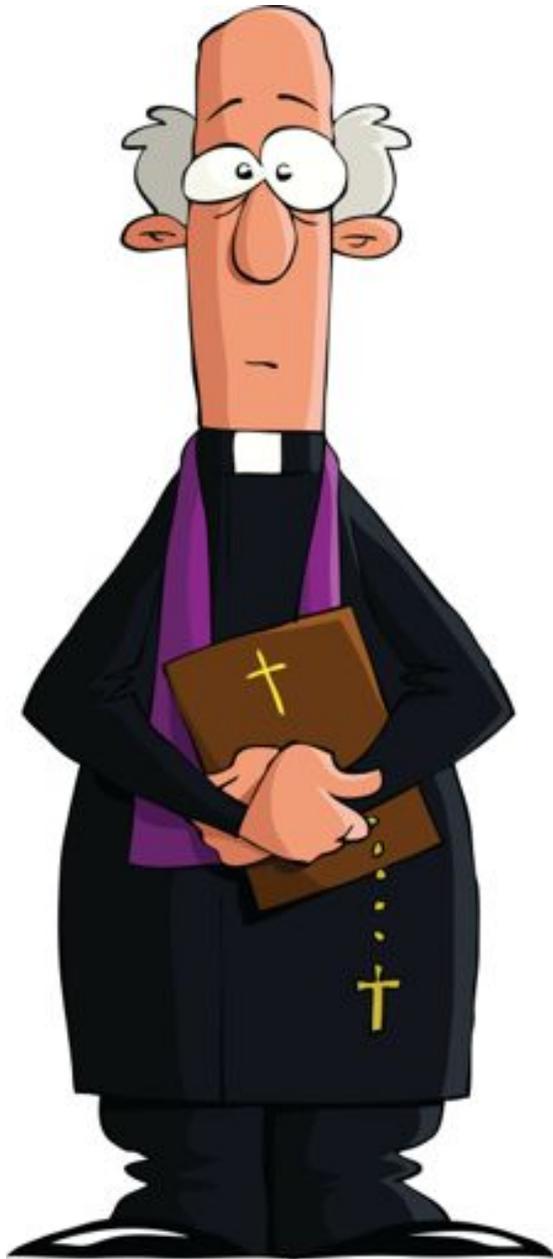
Most Roman Catholics immediately identify the woman “clothed with the sun” as Jesus’ mother, Mary, crowned with twelve stars, with the moon under her feet.

In the Roman Catholic world the iconography is unmistakable.



**“Our Lady of Guadalupe” (image on the *tilma* of Juan Diego), 1531.
Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico City.**

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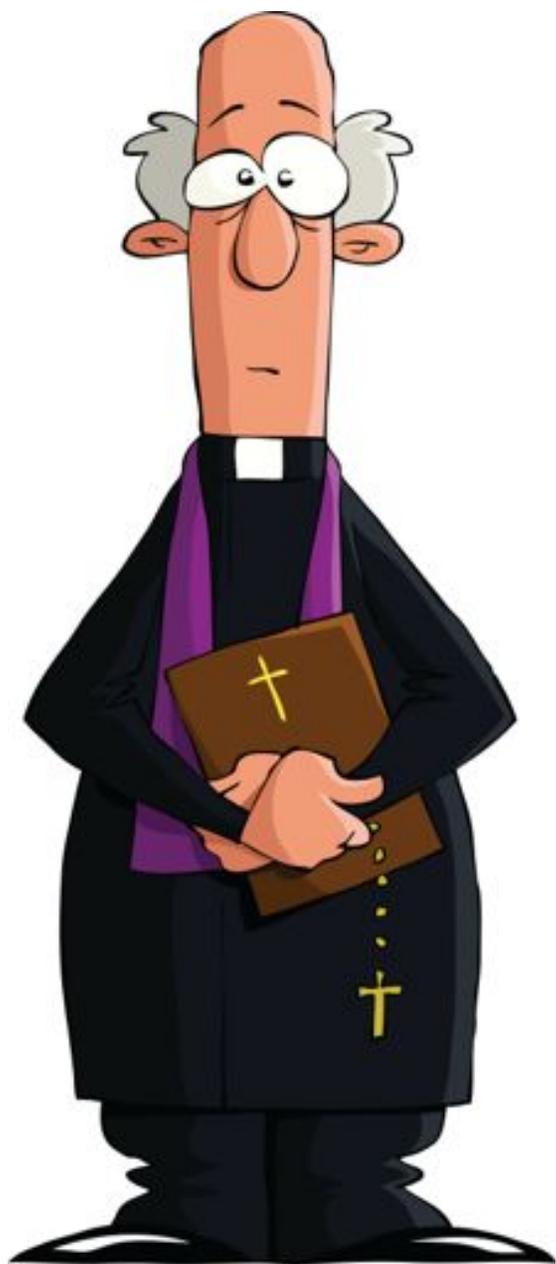
Here's the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe:

On December 9, 1531, the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared to Juan Diego, a Mexican peasant of Aztec descent, who requested that a church be built on the hill of Tepeyac outside of Mexico City.

Juan Diego obediently passed on her request to the skeptical archbishop of Mexico city, who demanded proof that Mary spoke to him.

Later, embarrassed and wanting to avoid Mary, Juan Diego skirted around Tepeyac, but Mary intercepted him, saying, "Am I not here, I who am your mother?" Mary then instructed him to gather flowers from Tepeyac and present them to the archbishop on her behalf. Juan Diego did, and when he opened his *tilma* (or cloak) in the presence of the archbishop, Castillian roses dropped out, and Mary's image was imprinted on the *tilma*.

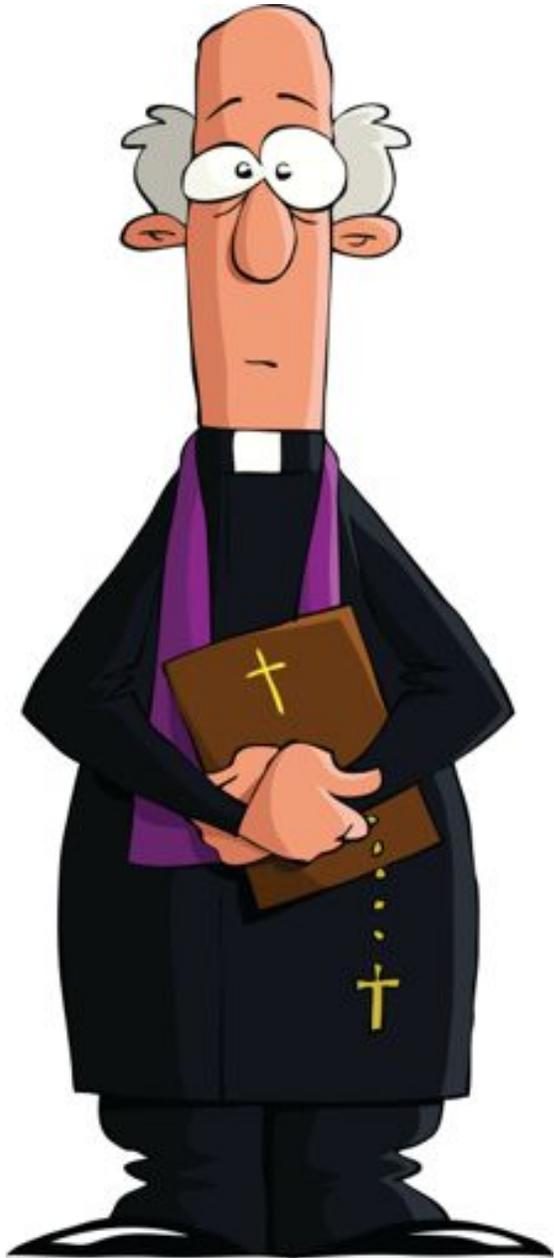
The image is on display in what is now the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. It is the most visited Catholic pilgrimage site in the world, and the world's third most visited sacred site.



Yet, in Scripture the symbolism of the “woman clothed with the sun” runs much deeper.

On the *first level* the woman clothed with the sun in Revelation personifies Israel, God’s covenant people, often portrayed in Scripture as the “daughter of Zion” (Psalm 9: 14; Isaiah 10: 32; Jeremiah 4: 31 . . .); as a mother (Psalm 87; Isaiah 66: 8-11 . . .); and as the bride of the Lord (Isaiah 49: 18, 54: 5; Jeremiah 2: 2 . . .).

It is through Israel that the Messiah will come, through Israel that God’s plan of redemption will extend to all humanity; hence, Israel is clothed with the sun, the moon is under her feet, and she wears a crown of twelve stars, symbolizing her universality.

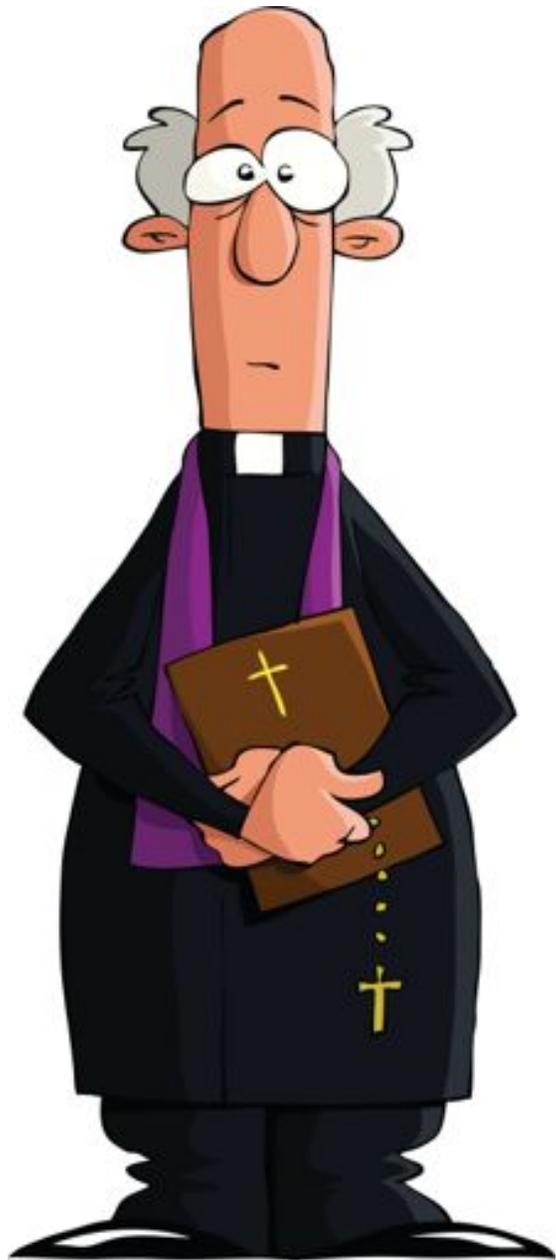


The imagery comes directly from the story of Joseph's dream in Genesis 37:

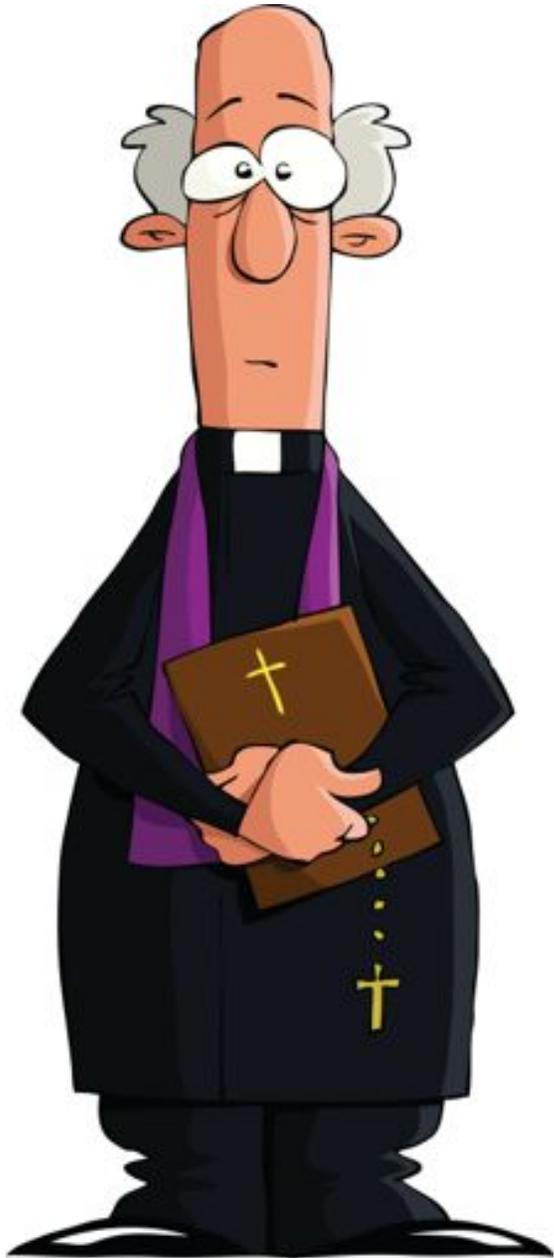
“I had a dream,’ he said, ‘this time the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.’ When he told it to his father and his brothers, his father reproved him and asked, ‘What is the meaning of this dream of yours? Can it be that I and your mother and your brothers are to come and bow to the ground before you?’”

(37: 9-10)

In the dream, the sun is Jacob; the moon is Rachel, Joseph's mother; and the stars are Joseph's brothers, the founders of the tribes of Israel.



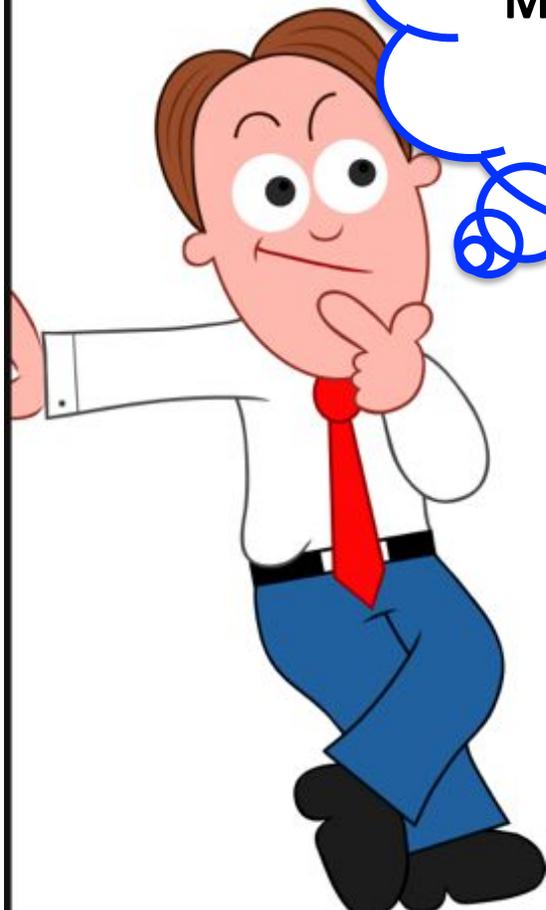
On a second level the woman clothed with the sun is, indeed, Mary, Jesus' mother, who gives birth to him, raises him, stands at the foot of the cross as he suffers and dies, buries him, and who, after his resurrection and ascension, is his most ardent disciple, joining the Apostles in the upper room (Acts 1: 13-14).



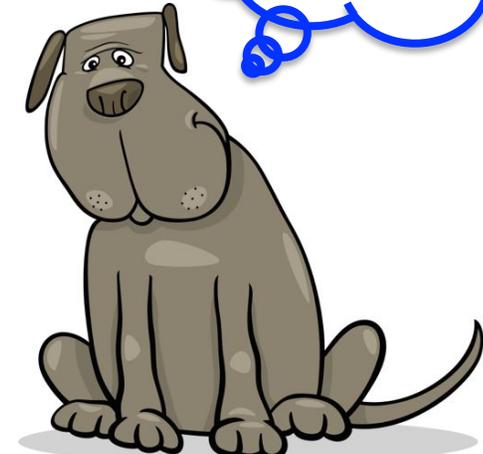
On the third level Mary not only gives birth to the Messiah, literally bringing him into the world, but through her son, Jesus, she is mother of the Church, as well, for as Jesus was born through her, so are we born anew through him, and collectively, we are the Church.

On the cross Jesus said his mother: *“Woman, behold, your son.”* And then he said to John, his cousin and beloved disciple: *“Behold, your mother”* (19: 26-27).

It was St. Ambrose of Milan (mentor to St. Augustine) who first called Mary “Mother of the Church,” and since the fourth century, Christians have understood her in this way, as we see in the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe .



I see. So, the “woman clothed with the sun” is Israel from whom will come the Messiah; Mary, the *literal* mother of the Messiah; and the Church, the mother of us all.



Got it!
But who's the dragon?

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William Blake. *The Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (watercolor, ink and graphite on paper), c. 1805. Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn.

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We read that the dragon's *"tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to earth"* (12: 4). Five verses later, we identify the dragon with certainty:

"The huge dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceived the whole world, was thrown down to earth, and its angels were thrown down with it."

(12: 9)

Jesus refers to this event in Luke 10: 18 when he says, *"I have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky,"* a scene that occurs prior to Genesis 1, the "back story" of Revelation.

Ezekiel also alludes to it:

“You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom, perfect in beauty With the cherub I placed you; I put you on the holy mountain of God, where you walked among the fiery stones. Blameless were you in your ways from the day you were created, until evil was found in you Therefore I banished you from the mountain of God I cast you to the ground I brought fire out of you; it devoured you You have become a horror”

(27: 12b-19)

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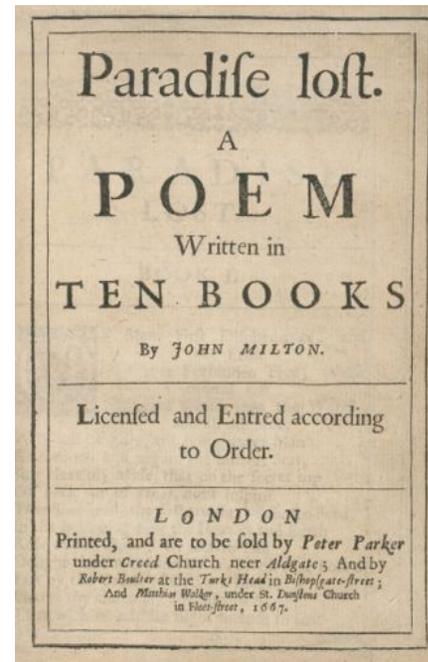
We'll read about the great war in heaven momentarily, a war in which Lucifer, the most glorious of the angels, rebelled against God, wanting to take God's place on the throne of heaven. One third of the angels joined him, and he and his crew were thunderously defeated, hurled to the ground, left writhing in pain on a lake of fire.

Satan then vows revenge, and we next meet him in Scripture in the Garden of Eden, where we're told that the serpent "*was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the Lord God had made*" (Genesis 3: 1). Satan vows to destroy God's new creation, to devour humanity. And he starts with Eve.

This is the epic subject of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.



This is REALLY
good stuff!



Title page to *Paradise Lost*, 1st ed., 1667.
Houghton Library, Harvard University.

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“Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth. She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and his throne. The woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God, that there she might be taken care of for twelve hundred and sixty days.”

(12: 4b-6)

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Look at the parallels on our three levels:

- Egypt was about to devour Israel, when Israel escaped to the wilderness during the Exodus, where God sustained her with manna and water from the rock;
- Herod was about to devour Jesus, when Mary escaped to Egypt with Jesus and Joseph, where God sustained them through gold, frankincense and myrrh, gifts of the three kings; and
- The world was about to devour the Church, when the Church escaped on its earthly pilgrimage, where God sustained it by his Word, the Eucharist and the fellowship of believers.

The 1,260 days, of course, are the same 3 ½ years we have seen before in both Daniel and Revelation, an incomplete period, half of seven years, the number of completion.

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“Then war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels battled against the dragon. The dragon and its angels fought back, but they did not prevail and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The huge dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceived the whole world, was thrown down to earth, and its angels were thrown down with it.”

(12: 7-9)

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A few notes before we get started:

- We meet the archangel Michael in Daniel 12: 1, where we are told:

“At that time there shall arise Michael, the great prince, guardian of your people; it shall be a time unsurpassed in distress since the nation began until that time.”

In the Revelation flashback it is this Michael who leads the war in heaven, defeating Satan and his crew.

- The “huge dragon” is called ὄφις ἀρχαῖος, “ancient serpent”; διάβολος, the “Devil”; or Σατανᾶς, “Satan.”
- Satan is called a πλάνοσ, “deceiver” here, as are false teachers in 2 John 7. To John, they’re all cut from the same cloth.

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Now, we take a closer look at the war in heaven through the imagination and prodigious poetic skills of John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667; 1674)—the greatest epic poem ever written in the English language!

Eugène Delacroix. *Milton Dictates "Paradise Lost" to His Daughters.* (oil on canvas), c. 1826.

G. H. Hamilton Collection, Williamstown, MA.



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At the start of *Paradise Lost*, John Milton invokes Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, to inspire him as he tells his tale:

*“Of Man’s first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
Sing, Heavenly Muse . . .
Instruct me, for thou know’st; thou from the first
Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread,
Dove-like sat’st brooding on the vast Abyss,
And mad’st it pregnant: what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That, to the height of this great argument
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.”*

(Book 1, 1-26)

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**Simon Voulet. *The Muses Urania and Calliope* (oil on panel), c. 1634.
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.**

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Guido Reni. *Archangel Michael and Satan*
(oil on canvas), c. 1636.

Santa Maria della Concezione, Rome.

*“Say first—for Heaven hides nothing from thy view,
Nor the deep tract of Hell—say first what cause
Moved our grand parents, in that happy State,
Favoured of Heaven so highly, to fall off
From their Creator, and transgress his will
For one restraint, lords of the World besides.
Who first seduced them to that fowl revolt?*

*Th’ infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile,
Stirred up with envy and revenge, deceived
The mother of mankind, what time his pride
Had cast him out from Heaven, with all his host
Of rebel Angels, by whose aid, aspiring
To set himself in glory above his peers,
He trusted to have equaled the Most High,
If he opposed, and with ambitious aim
Against the throne and monarchy of God,
Raised impious war in Heaven and battle proud,
With vain attempt.”*

(Book 1, 27-44)

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Hieronymus Bosch. "Fall of the Rebel Angels"
[right-hand panel of *The Haywain Triptych*]
(oil on panel), c. 1510-1516.
Prado Museum, Madrid.

***"Him the Almighty Power
Hurled headlong flaming from th' ethereal sky,
With hideous ruin and combustion, down
To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
In adamant chains and penal fire,
Who durst defy th' Omnipotent to arms.***

***Nine times the space that measures day and night
To mortal men, he, with his horrid crew,
Lay vanquished, rolling in the fiery gulf,
Confounded, though immortal. But his doom
Reserved him to more wrath; for now the thought
Both of lost happiness and lasting pain
Torments him: round he throws his baleful eyes,
That witnessed huge affliction and dismay,
Mixed with obdurate pride and steadfast hate.***

(Book 1, 44-58)



**Peter Brueghel the Elder. *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* (oil on oak), 1562.
Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.**

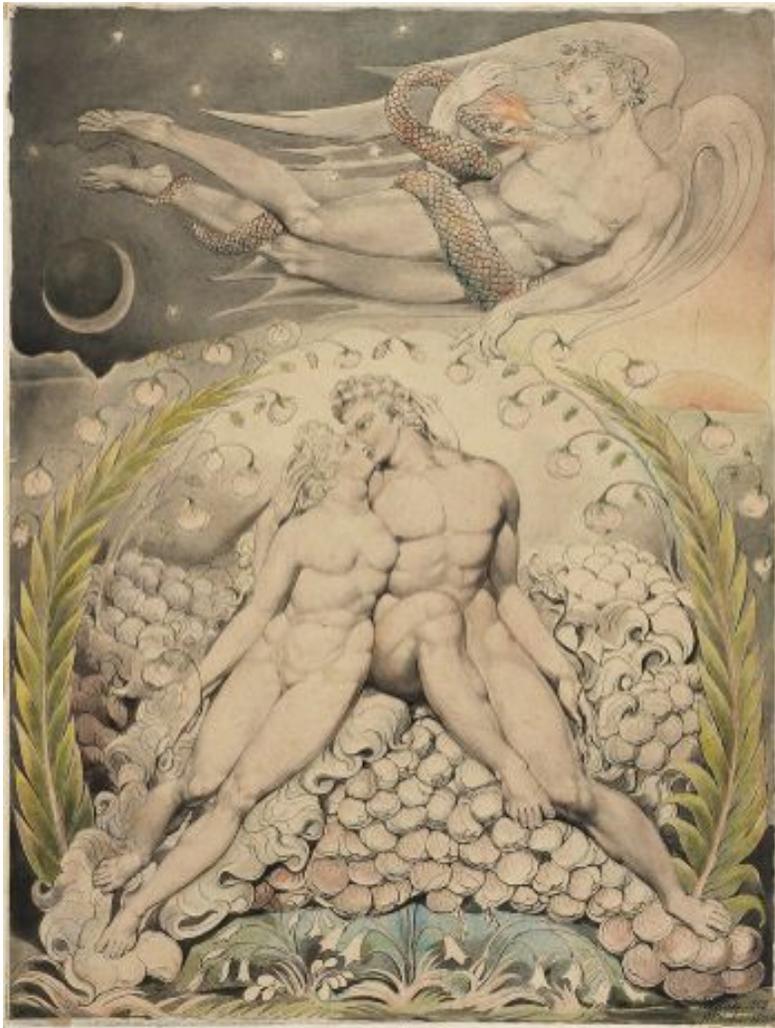
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William Blake. *Satan Arousing the Rebel Angels*.
(pen, ink watercolor on paper), 1808.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

With huge effort, Satan and his crew raise their huge bodies up from the fiery gulf, take to the air in search of land, where they build Pandemonium, their war counsel chambers.

How best to take revenge on God? Some counsel another all-out war; some accept their fate, reasoning that it is *“better reign in Hell than serve in Heaven”* (Book 1, 263).



William Blake. *Satan Watching Caresses of Adam and Eve.*
(pen, ink and watercolor on paper), 1808.
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

**But Beelzebub, Satan’s lieutenant,
has a better idea.**

*“There is a place
(if ancient and prophetic fame in Heaven
Err not)—another World, the happy seat
Of some new race, called Man, about this time
To be created like to us, though less
In power and excellence, but favoured more
Of him who rules above . . .
Thither let us bend all our thoughts, to learn
What creatures there inhabit, of what mould
Or substance, how endued, and what their power
And where their weakness: how attempted best,
By force or subtlety. Though Heaven be shut,
And Heaven’s high Arbitrator sit secure
In his own strength, this place may lie exposed . . .
[Perhaps] some advantageous act may be achieved
By sudden onset—either with Hell-fire
To waste his whole creation, or possess
All as our own, and drive, as we were driven,
The puny habitants; or, if not drive,
Seduce them to our party . . .”*

(Book 2, 345-368)

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Lucas Cranach the Elder. Adam and Eve
(oil on beech wood), 1533.
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

And that's what they do. We next meet Satan in Scripture in the Garden of Eden where he begins his seduction of Eve. Genesis 3 warns us:

“Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the Lord God had made. He asked the woman, ‘Did God really say, ‘You shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden?’

“The woman answered the serpent, ‘We may eat of the trees of the garden; it is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said, ‘You shall not eat it or even touch it, or else you will die.’”

(3: 1-3)



**And so, our
scriptural epic
begins!**

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“Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

**‘Now have salvation and power come,
and the kingdom of our God
and the authority of his Anointed.**

**For the accuser of our brothers is cast out,
who accuses them before our God day and night.**

**They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony;
love for life did not deter them from death.**

**Therefore, rejoice, you heavens,
and you who dwell in them.**

**But woe to you, earth and sea,
for the Devil has come down to you in great fury,
for he knows he has but a short time.’”**

(12: 10-12)

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Here, the voice of an angel speaks as if the kingdom of God were already established on earth, but 12: 12b says otherwise:

*“But woe to you, earth and sea,
for the Devil has come down to you in great fury,
for he knows he has but a short time.”*

Once Satan challenges God, it is a foregone conclusion that God will prevail, conquering Satan, sin and death through the shed blood of his Son on the cross.

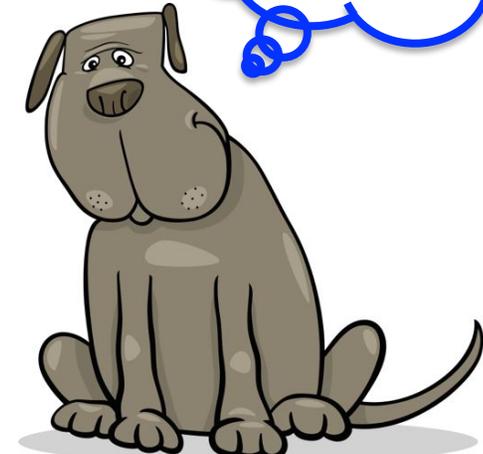
Although a fierce battle remains to be fought, here Revelation assures us that it is already won.

Notice that “the accuser of our brothers is cast out [βάλλω, “to throw”] is the very same verb used of Satan and his crew when they are “throned down” or “cast out” [βάλλω, “to throw”] out of heaven in 12: 9.

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A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue pants. He is leaning against a vertical black line on the left, with his hand on his chin in a thinking pose. A large blue thought bubble is connected to his head.

So, Satan is a 2-time loser, and he'll be a 3-time loser before it's all over!

A cartoon illustration of a grey dog sitting on the ground. A blue thought bubble is connected to its head.

Three strikes and you're out!

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“When the dragon saw that it had been thrown down to the earth, it pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly to her place in the desert, where, far from the serpent, she was taken care of for a year, two years, and a half year. The serpent, however, spewed a torrent of water out of his mouth after the woman to sweep her away with the current. But the earth helped the woman and opened its mouth and swallowed the flood that the dragon spewed out of its mouth. Then the dragon became angry with the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring, those who keep God’s commandments and bear witness to Jesus. It took its position on the sand of the sea.”

(12: 13-18)



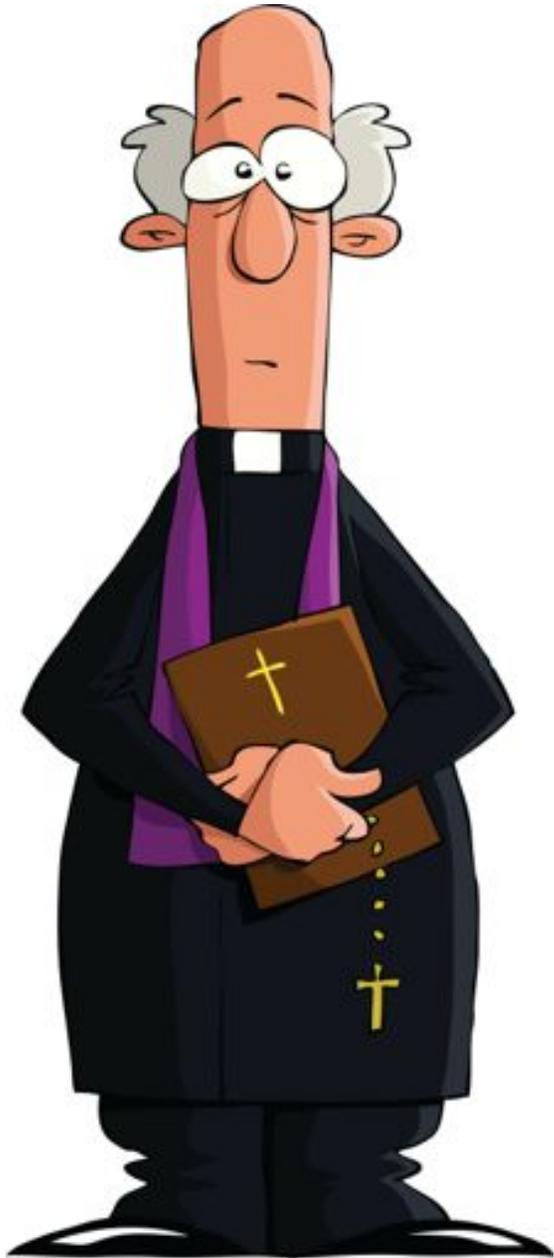
•The dragon now pursues the woman who had given birth to the male child. Again, our text operates on three levels, the woman as:

1. Israel (Pharaoh pursues the Israelites after the Exodus);
2. Mary (Herod pursues the infant Jesus after his birth in Bethlehem); and
3. The Church (Jew and Gentile alike persecute the early Church).

•Giving the woman “two wings of the great eagle” recalls God’s promise in Isaiah that those who hope in the Lord will “soar as with eagle’s wings” (40: 31).

•And the woman saved from the “spewing water” recalls Israel being saved from the waters of the Red Sea; Mary from the lies of Herod; and the Church from the words of the “deceivers” and “antichrists” who persecute it.

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Fiercely angry with the woman, the dragon storms off to wage war against the woman's offspring: us.

But it's a desperate act, one doomed to failure, although it will bring a great deal of suffering as a result.

No matter what Satan throws at the Church, God will come to her rescue and save her. When Jesus said of the Church, "*The gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it*" (Matthew 16: 18), he meant it.

Questions for discussion and thought

1. Who is “the woman clothed with the sun”?
2. What do the sun, moon and twelve stars represent?
3. Who is the dragon, and what are the stars that he swept away and hurled to the earth?
4. Why does the angel who speaks in Revelation 12 use the present tense in reference to a future event?
5. Confronted with the dragon’s violence against the woman and her child, how does God protect them?

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