

Sermon: Who is that woman?

Revelation 12.1-17

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Who is your mother? People who do not know their mother often lead miserable lives in search for the person who carried them for 9 months, who nurtured them. Not knowing where we come from can create great pain and loneliness in people.

In his vision of heaven, St John had a vision of a pregnant mother. What we see, when we look over the shoulder of St John, may look a bit like Star Wars. A pregnant woman, a dragon that tries to kill her baby, and when he is not successful, he tries to kill the woman. The baby is saved, the woman escapes. What can we learn from this imagery?

1 The woman

It is quite common in Roman Catholic art to represent the Virgin Mary as standing on a crescent moon with twelve stars around her head. Does St John here paint an image of the mother of Jesus? Is she the queen of heaven?

It is interesting to read different bible commentaries on this passage, and it will not surprise you that how the Biblical experts view the virgin Mary, influences how they understand the passage that we have read. Listen to Warren Wiersbe, Baptist pastor.

Since the child is identified as Jesus Christ [...], this symbolic woman can be none other than the nation Israel. (Warren Wiersbe, in his *Be-series* on Rev 12:1-6)

From a Baptist pastor you can expect that he distances the woman as far as he can from the virgin Mary. 'The woman can be none other than the nation Israel'. And Wiersbe really means: all Jews.

Matthew Henry, a Reformed preacher wrote a well-known commentary on the Bible that is still used by many. He has another view:

The church, under the emblem of a woman, the mother of believers, was seen by the apostle in vision, in heaven. She was clothed with the sun, justified, sanctified, and shining by union with Christ, the Sun of Righteousness. (*Commentary on the Bible*, on Rev 12:1-5)

Is the woman in heaven the Virgin Mary? Is she Israel? Is she the church? I do not claim to have all the answers, but allow me to weave those views together somewhat.

To begin with, in the gospel of Luke, Mary is presented as the representative of Israel – but not of all of Israel, but of believing Israel. She is the faithful, obedient woman that God desired Israel to be but that Israel seldom was.

In the Old Testament, the chosen people, are often collectively called the Bride of God.

Isaiah says: 'Your Maker [God] is your husband' (Isa 54:5). Jeremiah complains that Israel has played the harlot in disloyalty to God (Jer 3:6-10). Hosea hears God say: 'I will betroth you to me for ever' (Hos 2:19, 20).

When Jesus was born, he was brought forth by the Virgin Mary, the representative of the faithful part of Israel, whereas most Jews had not remained faithful to the covenant of God. That is why it is not very hard to see in the woman in heaven both the Messianic remnant of Israel and Mary; they brought the Son of God into the world.

In the New Testament, the church of God is seen as the combination of faithful Israel *with* those from the nations who have accepted the Messiah of Israel. Together we are one church, with Abraham, and David, and Isaiah, and Paul, and John and all believers.

Therefore the same language of marriage is used again in the New Testament: In Revelation we hear of the marriage feast of the Lamb and the Bride of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7; 21:9). Paul writes to the Corinthian Church, 'I betrothed you to Christ, to present you as a pure bride to her one husband.' (2 Corinthians 11:2).

This will give us a line of approach. It was from the chosen people that Jesus Christ sprang in his human lineage. It is for the ideal community of the chosen ones of God that the woman stands.

Out of that community Christ came and it was that community which underwent such terrible suffering at the hands of the hostile world. We may indeed call this the Church, as long as we remember that the Church is the community of God's people in *every* age.

And I have no problem at all to also see the Virgin Mary in this imagery, as the perfect faithful bride of God who represents God's people.

If you find it difficult to envision Mary to be honored in heaven as clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, with a crown of 12 stars on her head, I empathize with you. This glorious image of her as the queen of heaven is problematic. It seems so outrageous.

It is even more outrageous to accept the idea that this is a picture of the whole church! But this is exactly how God envisions his church. And you as well - as part of the believing community, faithful Israel, as followers of Jesus Christ.

If we look at our past, if we look at our heart, if we look at our life, we may feel like dirt. But how does God see those who are part of his community? He says to you: "you are my queen, my king."

God lifts you up to heavenly heights. He sees brightness around you, through the work of Jesus Christ. He thinks the world of you - so why would we focus on the dirt? On our imperfections?

2 Persecuted but beloved

St John wrote his book to encourage the persecuted church. The world may despise the true Israel, the woman, and hold her in very low esteem, but from God's point of view she is a radiant bride.

A good reason to not accept that the woman in Rev 12 stands for all of Israel, but only for the believers in Jesus Christ, is that in his book of Revelation, St John has earlier spoken of the Jewish synagogue as 'the synagogue of satan'.

In the first century, not the Roman Empire but the synagogues were responsible for persecuting the church. It would be rather weird if John would now envision those same people as the radiant community that brought forth Jesus Christ into the world. 'The synagogue of satan' is not the radiant woman, but if anything, the awful dragon.

John describes the persecution of the Church by painting the picture of a dragon who first wanted to kill Jesus Christ, and as he failed - because Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, he persecuted the woman and her other offspring. Let me read Rev 12:5 again:

She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.

First God saved his own Son - he rules in heaven now. And then he also took care of the woman, of his people. In Rev 12 John writes more about this.

When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent's reach. [...]

We read here that the faithful followers of God from whose community Jesus was born, were protected by God, and that the evil dragon then tried to also kill the rest of those who were born of the woman.

The woman fled to the desert where God took care of her while the dragon raged and persecuted. Very interesting is something we read in one of the first church history books, written by Eusebius of Caesarea around the year 300 AD. He describes what the church in Jerusalem did before that city was destroyed by the Roman armies in the year 70:

The people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafed to approved men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea called Pella. And when those that believed in Christ had come there from Jerusalem,

then, as if the royal city of the Jews and the whole land of Judea were entirely destitute of holy men, the judgment of God at length overtook those who had committed such outrages against Christ and his apostles, and totally destroyed that generation of impious men. (Church History iii.5)

Pella was a desert city. Did St John predict this concrete event of God saving his people from the most horrendous persecution and destruction of Jerusalem? Was he even advising that church in Jerusalem to escape? Maybe. In any case, St John shows us how God cares for his people. The nations may rage, but our Lord protects His own; He takes care of his Bride. God is our refuge.

3 Saved in the desert

God has a place of refuge for those who need protection. If we feel low, accused by the evil dragon that we are not good enough for God, He protects our mind and our heart. He is with us to show us that in his sight, we are his pure, white, radiant bride. Like the Virgin Mary.

If we are afraid of the power of the evil one and what may happen to our lives, God shows us that He comes to our aid with all of his heavenly forces: St Michael and all his angels, yes God himself fights for us to protect us. Our life is hidden with Christ in the secure hands of God.

How does God save his people? 'The woman fled to the desert where God has prepared a place for her.' The Bible often portrays the cities as locations of evil and the desert as the place where to find God.

I do not think this is a suggestion to all of us to go and live in Wadi Natrun as hermits. God protects his children in the city as well. But I do think we should see a hint in this that we should spiritually separate us from sin and wickedness. We are living in the midst of our cultures, and we fully participate in the life of our nations and our cultures. But we must take great care to be in the spiritual place where God can protect us.

The book of Revelation shows that in the struggle in this world, many Christians are physically persecuted. Some suffer and die. Sometimes God saves people in miraculous ways, like the Christians of Jerusalem who escaped to the desert city of Pella.

But *all Christians* are saved by escaping to their own desert - by developing a desert of silence and solitude in their own life - in their heart and mind. That is where we may meet with God, and in meeting God, in being with God - the one who lifts you up as a radiant queen or king - is our true salvation.

I regularly use a book, *Celtic Daily Prayer*, for my devotions. I came across a useful quote about our need for silence.

Deserts, silence, solitudes are not necessarily places but states of mind and heart. These deserts can be found in the midst of the city, and in the every day of our lives. We need only to look for them and realize

our tremendous need for them. They will be small solitudes, little deserts, tiny pools of silence, but the experiences they will bring, if we are disposed to enter them, may be as exultant and as holy as all the deserts of the world, even the one God himself entered. For it is God who makes solitude, deserts, and silences holy. (Celtic Daily Prayer, 2002, p. 800)

Conclusion

Our salvation is in being with God through Jesus Christ. Let the nations roar. Let the enemy attack

you. You know that in the eyes of God, as part of his church, he honors you as he honors his own Son.

Your sins are wiped out, and you have been crowned, with the Virgin Mary and with all his saints, with honor. And when times are hard, he protects you in the hollow of his hand.

No better place to be, than to be with Him in the desert, far away from the noise of all that draws us away from Him who is our life and our salvation.

+ In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit