

# The Woman Clothed in the Sun

Revelation 12:1-2

By Phillip G. Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2017-04-30

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## Text

12:1 A great sign appeared in the sky: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. 2 And being pregnant she was crying out in labor, being in great pain to give birth.>

3 And another sign appeared in the sky: behold, a dragon, huge, fiery red, having seven heads and ten horns, with seven diadems on his heads. 4 And his tail grabbed a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth.>

And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth in order to devour her Child as soon as she gave birth. 5 And she bore a Son, a male, who would shepherd all the nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was snatched up to God, even to His throne.>

6 And the woman fled into the wilderness to where she has a place prepared by God, so that they may nourish her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

## Introduction

We are entering a new major section of the book that takes us back in time to even before the birth of Jesus. And this section (chapters 12-15) constitute the heart of the book of Revelation. Let me remind you quickly of the structure of this book. Unlike Western methods of writing, where we begin with a theme sentence and work it out, Hebrews often worked toward the central theme with a chiastic structure where the first half might be labeled ABCDEF and then the second half fills out the themes of the first half in reverse parallel structure of EDCBA. And each of the seven main sections of this book starts with an introduction that gives the heart of that section. Well, chapter 12 is the introduction to the heart of the book, so you could say that chapter 12 is the heart of the heart of the book. This means that understanding chapter 12 is critical. We can't just quickly breeze over it.

And one of the controversies that needs to be settled is the identity of the three main characters of this chapter: the dragon, the man-child, and the woman. Even though verse 9 clearly identifies the dragon as Satan, there are a number of odd theories that say otherwise. Even though verse 5 identifies the man-Child as Christ, there are some commentaries that strenuously try to argue other identities. But today I want to focus on the identity of this fascinating woman of verse 1.

## I. Identity of the woman

### A. *Roman Catholic view - this is Mary*

And there actually isn't a huge amount of controversy on who she is. You can discount all of the cults (like Christian Science) who claim that their leader is the one symbolized by this woman. I'm also going to ignore the Dispensationalist interpretation. Dispensationalists like to make the entire passage as referring to the preservation of unbelieving Judaism - something that nowadays even Dispensationalists are having a hard time swallowing. But amongst orthodox commentaries, there are four main views. Most of the early church, most Protestants, and even some Roman Catholics have taken the woman as a corporate representation of God's people (some say Old Covenant people, some say New, and some say both). And that is the way I take it. I take it as a picture of Zion. The Old Testament pictured Zion as a woman who would have travail and birth pangs as she gave birth to the Messiah.

But the arguments in favor of her being Mary have been strong enough, that I want to deal with that theory first before we dig into the meaning of the first two verses. Roman Catholic dogma claims that this passage proves that Mary is the Queen of heaven. In fact, they use this passage to teach that she was without sin, was assumed bodily up into heaven by way of a miracle (some say after a peaceful death and others say without dying). And to prove that it was a bodily assumption, they point to the fact that this woman has feet. They teach that she rules over all the universe as the queen of heaven, that she is now a co-redemptrix with Jesus, and that she is the mother of the church. Now obviously, there are plenty of other Scriptures that would disprove that Marian Theology. But this is usually their go-to passage.

But even those who don't buy into Marian Theology might be tempted to think that this woman must be Mary. After all, verse 5 identifies the male Child as Jesus, and who was Jesus' mother - it was Mary. And isn't exactly the same word for "sign" used in the Bible for the virgin birth? Yes, it was. In Isaiah 7:14 God promised to give a "sign" saying that a virgin would conceive and bear a child - Jesus. What could be a greater sign than the virgin birth? And that is actually a pretty strong argument.

We know from verse 9 that the dragon is a symbol for Satan. So when the dragon attempts to kill the man-child in verse 4, it makes sense to apply this to Herod's attempt to kill Joseph, Mary, and Jesus in Matthew 2. Verse 4 says,

And his tail grabbed a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth in order to devour her Child as soon as she gave birth.

What could be a more straightforward interpretation than the Roman Catholic literal application of this passage to Mary? Satan stood behind Herod the Great and sought to kill Jesus as soon as He was born. And that is true. Lord willing, next week I am going to be preaching on that passage. We don't question the fact that verse 4 gives the spiritual behind-the-scenes picture of why Herod wanted to kill Jesus. There was spiritual warfare happening. But we also believe that it gives the spiritual behind the scenes picture of the heavenly Zion bringing forth the Incarnation. But back to their interpretation, on the surface it seems like a fairly solid argument.

And yet another argument in favor of the Mary interpretation is that it makes sense to apply verse 6 to her flight into Egypt just before Herod killed all the babies in Bethlehem. Verse 6 says,

And the woman fled into the wilderness to where she has a place prepared by God, so that they may nourish her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

So on some levels it makes sense to make this woman Mary. I've considered that. I've considered every option.

### ***B. Main Protestant view - this is Zion***

But while Protestants do not deny that Mary was the specific vehicle through whom Zion brought Jesus into the world, the immediate context, the Old Testament symbols being used here, and Christ's own words have convinced most people that Mary is not directly in view. Most take this as either the Old Testament Israel, the New Testament Church, the people of God in all ages, or the heavenly Zion, which is the mother of us all.

### **Four context hints that Rome is incorrect**

Let's look first of all at four hints in the immediate context that militate against the Roman Catholic interpretation. The first problem with their interpretation is the order of the events. Verse 1 has the woman appearing in heaven before she gives birth to the child, whereas Roman Catholics say that verse 1 is describing the end of her life - her bodily assumption to heaven to become the queen of heaven at her death. But verse 1 occurs before verse 2. There is an order in these verses. Whoever this woman is, she appears in heaven before Christ is born into the world. That is a major problem for the Roman Catholic view.

The second problem is that verse 6 says that the woman flees into the wilderness where she is protected for one thousand two hundred and sixty

days, and verses 13-17 apply that period of time to the time of trouble from AD 67 to AD 70. But was Mary even alive at the time of that war? And the answer of church fathers and of history is an absolute no. She seems to have died sometime in the 50s. Even Roman Catholics teach that she died at the age of 72 sometime in the mid-50s. And simple math demonstrates that. If Jesus was born in 5 or 4 BC, and if she conceived at the age of twelve or thirteen (assuming a very young age for the sake of argument), then according to Roman Catholic teaching, she would have been assumed to heaven around AD 56. But that is far too early for the Roman war. So the immediate context of the war of AD 67-70 simply does not fit their interpretation. And it doesn't even fit a non-Roman-Catholic interpretation.

As I mentioned at the beginning, Roman Catholics try to rescue their theory by saying that verse 6 applies to their flight into Egypt, not to the AD 67-70 flight. Egypt is a wilderness. So voila - she stayed in Egypt for three and a half years. The problem is that Matthew 2:19-23 makes clear that as soon as Herod died, an angel told Joseph and Mary to return to Israel, which they immediately did. Well, Herod died in 4 BC. If you count forward from the earliest date that Jesus could be born, and then add the forty days mentioned in Luke 2 which were required by the law before Mary could present Jesus in the temple, and then her traveling back to Bethlehem, you barely have a year that she could have been in Egypt. If Jesus was born in 4 BC, then they were in Egypt for less than a year.

And on the web there are various chronologies that work these early events in Christ's life out for you. Answers in Genesis has a good one. But, assuming the earliest date proposed for Christ's birth, even if they slowly made their way from Egypt to Nazareth, it would still be early 3 BC, and still make their sojourn in Egypt barely over a year. Yet verse 6 is quite explicit that it is an exact number of days - one thousand two hundred and sixty days that the woman is hidden in the wilderness. That adds up to three and a half years. So her stay in Egypt is two and a half years short of what is required by this text. It doesn't fit.

In any case, interpreting the three and a half years as being in Egypt in 4 BC contradicts the parallel part of the chiasmic structure of this chapter where verses 13-17 interpret the three and a half years as being the three and a half year war against Jerusalem. So that is a major problem to the Mary interpretation. It forced me to see the woman as something going beyond her.

But even if you were to ignore that problem, there is another problem for the

Roman Catholic theory. Verse 17 says, "So the dragon was furious with the woman and off he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, those who keep the commands of God and hold the testimony of Jesus." The problem for Roman Catholics is that the Greek word for offspring is σπέρμα, a word, that if taken literally would refer to your own biological children. They don't believe she had any other children, and the word 'rest of' in verse 17 (rest of her children) implies that she did if you take the passage in a literal way. Now, that's not a problem for them if they take it symbolically, which of course they do. They say that the literal Mary is the symbolical mother of the church. The problem is, they jump back and forth between literal and symbolical. If Roman Catholics want to take Mary as the only referent rather than as the literal symbol of something else that is going on, then they should acknowledge that Mary had other children and was not a perpetual virgin. That they are unwilling to do.

But even if you are not a Roman Catholic and you believe that Mary had other children by Joseph (something clearly affirmed by several Scriptures) verse 17 still does not make sense. According to history, her literal children were dead by AD 70. Now, I am not saying you should take it literally. John doesn't want us to. He calls all this a sign or symbol. And commentators point out that "the rest of her offspring" in verse 17 is grammatically defined by the next clause - all those "who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus." In other words, the children appear to be a reference to the corporate people of God, not simply Mary's literal children. So that argues for a corporate or symbolical interpretation for the whole passage.

And there is yet another problem for the Roman Catholic theory. Verse 2 says, "she cried out in labor and in pain to give birth." If you read much on Roman Catholic forums you will discover that it is a rather embarrassing verse to them because Roman Catholic dogma says that Christ came out of the womb without the pains of childbirth and indeed, without any vaginal delivery whatsoever. Here is how the Catechism of the Council of Trent words it,

But as the Conception itself transcends the order of nature, so the birth of our Lord presents to our contemplation nothing but what is divine. Besides, what is admirable beyond the power of thoughts or words to express, He is born of His Mother without any diminution of her maternal virginity, just as He afterwards went forth from the sepulchre while it was closed and sealed, and entered the room in which His disciples were assembled, the doors being shut; or not to depart from every-day examples, just as the rays of the sun penetrate without breaking or injuring in the least the solid substance of glass, so after a like but more exalted manner did Jesus Christ come forth from His mother's womb without injury to her maternal virginity. This immaculate and perpetual

virginity forms, therefore, the just theme of our eulogy. Such was the work of the Holy Spirit, who at the Conception and birth of the Son so favored the Virgin Mother as to impart to her fecundity while preserving inviolate her perpetual virginity.<sup>1</sup>

So they teach that the baby Jesus miraculously passed through the walls of the abdomen and into Mary's arms with absolutely no pain. So how do they reconcile that doctrine with verse 2, which says that this woman "cried out in labor and in pain to give birth"? They say that this was a reference to her giving birth spiritually at the cross. And I think, "Now wait a minute! You just used verse 2 to prove that it had to be Mary since only Mary gave birth to Jesus, and now you are saying verse 2 is the cross and verse 4 is the birth?! That makes no sense." You see, that spiritual interpretation undermines their insistence that it was Mary and Mary alone who could give birth to Jesus. You can't spiritualize verse 2 and literalize verses 4-5. They are all referring to the same birth. You can't have it both ways. Either verse 2 refers to the birth of Jesus or the death of Jesus, but it can't be both. If it refers to the death of Jesus, it completely undermines their strongest argument that this is literally Mary exalted to the heavens rather than Zion.

So those are four hints in the context that there is something much bigger going on here than Mary's giving birth to Jesus. I don't have a big issue if you do say that it is Mary. I have a big issue with the Roman Catholic interpretation which exalts Mary almost above Jesus. Protestants don't deny that Mary was the mother of Jesus, but they say that this passage seems to be pointing beyond her in some way. She may be the literal sign, but what was symbolized? She doesn't symbolize herself.

### **Christ's words in Matthew 12:46-50**

And Jesus gives the answer of what was symbolized in Matthew 12. He doesn't deny that Mary was His mother, but in various places in the Gospels He downplays that role and up-plays the role that Zion, the people of God had. I'll read verses 46-50 of Matthew 12.

Matt. 12:46 While He was still talking to the multitudes, behold, His mother and brothers stood outside, seeking to speak with Him. Matt. 12:47 Then one said to Him, "Look, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, seeking to speak with You." Matt. 12:48 But He answered and said to the one who told Him, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" Matt. 12:49 And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! Matt. 12:50 For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother."

Notice that Zion fulfills the role of being both mother and brothers, just as we will see that Revelation 12 shows that Zion plays the role of both mother and brothers of Jesus. And Christ's last words are almost identical to

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<sup>1</sup> Catechism of the Council of Trent, Part 1: The Creed, Article III.

Revelation 12:17 that defines the offspring of the woman as being those who keep God's commandments. They are the brothers of Jesus.

You see, where Roman Catholics exaggerate the importance of Mary, Jesus downplayed her importance in the Gospels. For example, who did He appear to in His resurrection appearances? Not to Mary. He appeared to four women and many men, but not once to Mary. Why? And when Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, He told her to tell His brothers about His resurrection (John 20:17), which in context turns out to be the disciples, not His physical brothers. He was calling His disciples His brothers. Of course, his flesh and blood brothers hadn't believed in Him yet. But it illustrates that it wasn't flesh and blood relationships that played the highest role. At the wedding in Cana of Galilee, when His mother asked Him to do something about their having run out of wine, He says to her, "Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me?" Why does He call her "woman" instead of "mother"? He wasn't insulting her. But He was more and more downplaying the role of mother and helping her to adjust to being under His Lordship in the same way that any other believer would be. It's no longer an issue of how do I serve you, but of how your concerns relate to Me and My calling. In fact, at the cross Jesus tells the apostle John that from now on John was to think of Mary as John's mother and Mary was to think of John as her son. Can you see the distancing of physical relationship? It's not as if He doesn't take His responsibilities seriously. He did. And He made sure that John would after He died. But there is not a shred of evidence in the Bible that Mary is supposed to play the high exalted role that the Roman Catholic church has her play. On the way to the cross there was a woman who was blessing Mary, saying, "Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!" (Luke 11:27). If Roman Catholic blessings of Mary are correct, you would expect Jesus to encourage that kind of language. It's almost identical to what Roman Catholics recite every day. But rather than encouraging that, Jesus corrects her sharply. Jesus said, "On the contrary (- the Greek is *Μενοῦνγε*, which the dictionary says is a strong correction - "On the contrary") blessed are those who hear the words of God and keep it."

What is going on in all those passages? And why does Revelation 12 emphasize the corporate woman giving birth to Christ rather than Mary? I believe that 2 Corinthians 5:16 gives the answer. It says,

Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer  
The relationship of flesh and blood to Christ is not to be emphasized. Rather,



the spiritual relationship of Christ to His people is to be emphasized. And that is exactly what Revelation 12 does. So the words of Christ negate the Roman Catholic interpretation which exalts her to an almost more important place than Jesus Himself has.

## **Old Testament background to this passage explains all**

### ***Symbols borrowed from Genesis 37***

But the Old Testament symbolism that stands behind this passage all points to a corporate interpretation as well. These were symbols of Israel. Commentaries point out that the only Old Testament passage that has all these symbols is Genesis 37. What was the dream that Joseph had of Israel in Genesis 37? It was the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowing down to him. The sun was said to represent Jacob (the husband), the moon represented Leah (the mother), and the eleven stars plus Joseph represented the twelve tribes of Israel. But commentators like Beale point out that the vision as a whole showed Jacob, Rachel, and the twelve patriarchs to be symbols of the heavenly Zion. If you take these symbols as the background to Revelation 12:1 then the woman has to be Zion. And Zion was portrayed as a woman.

***God's people likened to a woman (Is. 26,49-50,54,66; Jer. 3-4, Lam. 1, Ezek. 16; Hos. 1-4; Mic. 4; etc.) and are called the virgin daughter of Zion (2 Kings 19:21; Ps. 9:14; Is. 1:8; 10:32; 16:1; 37:22; 52:2; 62:11; Jer. 4:31; 6:2,23; Lam 1:6; 2:1,4,10,13,18; 4:22; Mic. 1:13; 4:8,10,13; Zeph. 3:14; Zech. 2:10; 9:9)***

In your notes I give sample Scriptures of how Israel was portrayed as a woman over and over again (Is. 26,49-50,54,66; Jer. 3-4, Lam. 1, Ezek. 16; Hos. 1-4; Mic. 4). And I've also listed a bunch of verses where God's people are called the virgin daughter of Zion. That was a very common theme in the Old Testament. In fact, it was so common that many commentators insist that this image in Revelation 12 would have instantly been seen by Jews who read this chapter as being a symbol of Zion, not of Mary. All the symbolism points to holy Zion.

***God's people in the time of Christ likened to a woman in labor pains and giving birth to a man-child (Isa. 26:17-18; 51:2-3,9-11; 66:7-9; Mic. 4:9-10; 5:3; cf. Hos. 13:13)***

But more to the point of our passage, this Old Testament woman, called Zion, was often represented as a woman in labor pains giving birth to a man-child who would bring them deliverance. It was a very common image. And some of the labor passages have Messianic tones. I'm not going over all the references in your outline, but at least you have some of them. Even the non-

Messianic passages (which relate to Israel's redemption out of exile) are still beautiful symbols of the coming of Messiah.

***Zion is viewed as a mother with "seed" (see σπέρμα in LXX of Is. 54:1-3; 61:9-10; 65:9,23; 66:10,22). Paul sums this up in Galatians 4:26 as "the Jerusalem above... which is the mother of us all"***

And interestingly, in light of Revelation 12:17, which speaks of the seed or σπέρμα of the woman, commentators note the numerous passages which speak of Zion being a mother with seed, a word translated σπέρμα in the LXX. All true believers are said to be the offspring of Zion, the mother of us all. That would be seed corporate. But the coming Messiah was her seed singular. So there is a seed of Zion (singular - Messiah) who has brothers and sisters (the seed corporate).

Of the corporate seed of Zion, the apostle Paul says in Galatians 4:26, "the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all." And if you want to get into the technical details of the argument, you can study the passages that I have put in your outline. There is overwhelming evidence that the woman should be seen as Zion giving birth to the Messiah. And based on both Christ's references to birth pangs and Old Testament references to birth pangs, these represent the hundreds of years of persecution and suffering that the church endured as they waited, and prayed for, and longed for Messiah to come.

But rather than going through a bunch of the Old Testament verses at this point, I will reference a few as I go through the passage phrase by phrase in a couple of minutes. The Old Testament symbolism so strongly points to a corporate interpretation that many Roman Catholic scholars have been forced to concede that Revelation 12 simply cannot be used any longer to teach their Marian theology. Instead, Revelation 12 is in effect giving an exposition to Psalm 48 and Psalm 87, both of which give the theology behind the hymn we will be singing, "Glorious Things Of Thee Are Spoken, Zion City of Our God." Verse 1 especially helps us to value the bride of Christ. This is how God sees the bride. We may see her as messed up, but God sees her as gloriously clothed in the garments of Christ.

### **The structure of the book points to a corporate interpretation**

But there are two more quick arguments that I will give in favor of the corporate interpretation. The whole structure of the book points to a corporate interpretation as well. On the back table I have 11x17 outline of the book. The book was written as a chiasm with the B and E sections

pointing to the church and the C and D sections pointing to the persecutors of the church. Well, this is thematically in the section that deals with both the persecutions and the victories of the church. It would be odd for the introduction to the church to deal with an individual rather than the church. So structure of the book lends some weight.

## **The chiastic structure of chapter 12 points to a corporate interpretation**

And lastly, the chiastic structure of chapter 12 points to a corporate interpretation. Verses 1-11 can be divided into an ABCDEF sequence and verses 12-17 perfectly reflect a backwards EDCBA structure. And you can see that on the outline as well. Each of those sections are parallel to and interpret each other. Well, when you examine each of the sections where the woman occurs in each half, you see that the second half clearly teaches a corporate woman. If you take the chiasm at all seriously, then the woman in the first half must be corporate as well.

This was the almost universal interpretation of the church in the first centuries and it has been the dominant view of the church of all ages. Hopefully some of the background and meaning will come out as we go through the first two verses phrase by phrase. And verse 2 is as far as we are going to be able to get this morning.

## **II. Exposition of verses 1-2**

John begins by saying, "A great sign appeared in the sky..." First, it is called a sign. John had already warned us in chapter 1 that much of the book would be filled with symbols, but here he wants to make doubly sure that we do not try to interpret this in a literal way. The woman is a sign or a symbol. But we saw that the signs of Revelation still point to a literal historical event. So it is not either/or. Chilton thinks that the literal sign in heaven was the lining up of the Zodiac in 4 BC. It's a fascinating discussion. He points out that there was one time in history when the constellations lined up in exactly this order. so that may be the literal symbol. Others think the literal sign was a vision seen in the sky similar to the vision seen of Christ in AD 66. I've not seen any historical evidence, but I am open to that. Others think that it was the actual virgin birth that symbolized Zion giving birth. I'm not sure you have to decide on the literal historical event to be able to understand what was symbolized by that event.

Second, notice that this sign appeared in heaven. Isaiah 7:14's sign appeared on the earth; this one appears in heaven. Pickering translates this as the sky,

but the Greek word for "sky" is οὐρανῶ, which would have been better to translate as "heaven." Now, could God have made a literal vision of this woman in the sky? Yes, He could have. I won't be dogmatic on the literal referent. What I want us to consider is the meaning of what was symbolized. In Philippians 3:20 Paul says, "our citizenship is in heaven..." We are part of the kingdom of heaven invading earth, and it shouldn't surprise us if the citizens of earth fight back and they persecute us. Zion's identity is with heaven.

Psalms 87 (another fabulous Psalm that stands as the background to this passage) not only speaks of the Messiah as having His springs in the beautiful and glorious heavenly Zion, but says that believing Jews and Gentiles alike are all born in Zion. As Jesus told Nicodemus, we are "born from above" (the literal rendering of what the old KJV translated "born again.") Every time a person is converted, there is a birth that the heavenly Zion has achieved. We are born from above. Everything in the New Covenant kingdom comes from above. So Psalm 87 speaks of this heavenly Zion and says of believers from Philistia and Tyre, "This one was born there." And "when He registers the peoples; 'This one was born there.'" The heavenly Jerusalem, the heavenly Zion, the heavenly bride finds its origin in heaven even though they may dwell on earth. And that is why Colossians 3 tells us that we must seek those things which are above, where Christ is. Our resources, our legal power, our citizenship protection, our financing - everything comes from heaven. If you are a part of Zion, then like Christ you can say, "My kingdom does not originate from this world; it invades this world."

The next two words in verse 1 are "a woman." As I have mentioned already, over and over Zion is referred to as a "she" in Scripture and is called the "virgin daughter of Zion" (2 Kings 19:21; Ps. 9:14; Is. 1:8; 10:32; 16:1; 37:22; 52:2; 62:11; Jer. 4:31; 6:2,23; Lam 1:6; 2:1,4,10,13,18; 4:22; Mic. 1:13; 4:8,10,13; Zeph. 3:14; Zech. 2:10; 9:9). In my notes I have 25 references to the daughter of Zion.

Next, this woman is "clothed with the sun..." This woman is reflecting the glory of her husband, the Lord Jesus Christ. You will remember in Joseph's dream that Jacob (the husband) was the sun. But who becomes the husband of the spiritual Zion? Jesus. Now it might be objected that the Zion that travails to bring forth Jesus is the Old Covenant community. And it certainly includes them. But as several commentaries have pointed out, by the time you get to verse 6 and following the woman represents the New Covenant Community since they are the church, fleeing from the persecution of the

beast. So which is it? Some argue that the woman is Old Testament Israel and others argue that it is only the New Testament church. But covenant theologians have correctly pointed out that it is really both - the whole people of God. The bride of Christ constitutes every believer from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22. And this woman radiates the glory of her husband.

In the Old Testament, Jehovah was the Sun. In this book, Jesus is the Sun. Well, Jesus is Jehovah. He preexisted as the Son of God. Revelation 1:16 says of Jesus, that "His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength." Revelation 21:23 says that the temple of heaven will need no sun because Jesus is its light. And just as chapter 10 showed that the angel who continually ministered in Christ's presence could not help but radiate some of Christ's sunshine glory, this bride, because of her being in the presence of Christ is clothed with His brightness and glory.

Now let's consider that for a bit. While we are here on earth, we struggle to find 2 Corinthians 3 to be true of us. In that chapter Paul says that Moses' face shone because of being in God's presence. But he goes on to say, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (v. 18). He is saying that what happened to Moses, can happen to us. I've met people who have spent so much time in God's presence that they radiate God's glory. When I meet with them, it makes me long for more of God's presence in my own life. But this bride in heaven is so close to her husband that it is as if she is clothed in the sun. If there was ever a glorious image of Zion, this is it. Isaiah 60 predicts the New Covenant and says that Christ's light will be the glory of the bride. Numerous passages point to Jesus as the Sun. I have 28 in my notes. 2 Sam 23:4; Ps 67:1; 84:11; Prov 4:18; Isa 9:2; 30:26; 49:6; 60:1-3, 19, 20; Hos 6:3; Mal. 4:2; Matt 4:15, 16; Luke 1:78; 2:32; John 1:4, 8, 14; 8:12; 9:4; 12:35, 36, 40; Acts 13:47; 26:18; Eph 5:8-14; 2 Pet 1:19; 1 John 2:8; Rev 2:28; 22:16.

But how can Jesus be both the Lord of the woman and the offspring of the woman? This was the same question Jesus posed to the Pharisees: how can the Messiah be both the Lord of David and the Son of David? But miraculously, He was. He originates Zion and in some sense Zion originates Jesus - at least as to His humanity. From Genesis 3 and on He is the seed of the woman. But it is the Zion above that is symbolized by Eve, and that is symbolized by Sarah's conception, and by Mary.

Anyway, the passage goes on to say, "with the moon under her feet..." What does the moon do? It reflects the light of the sun. If the moon stood as the

Old Testament era that faintly reflected the light of the sun through rituals, types, and symbols, then having it under her feet shows that the Old Covenant is not yet finished, but it is certainly waning. It is ready to pass away within that generation. And of course Christ was said to be born in the last days of the Old Covenant. And of course, this book is preoccupied with the glory of the New Covenant outshining the old. The ceremonial laws of the Old Testament are still useful, but they only faintly reflect the light of the Sun - Jesus.

It goes on, "and on her head a crown of twelve stars..." Most commentators take this as a reference to either the Old Testament Israel (represented by the twelve patriarchs, who are stars) or to the apostles. But given the timing as preceding the birth of Jesus, I believe it is a reference to the twelve tribes of Israel, a symbol of the unity of God's people - especially since commentators agree that Genesis 37 forms at least part of the background. You see, the conflict between the woman and the serpent didn't start in the first century. It goes all the way back to Genesis 3 where God cursed Satan and said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; and He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel" (v. 15). Eve became a symbol of Zion's war with Satan's kingdom. The way Roman Catholics interpret Genesis 3, Mary has the serpent under her feet and Mary would have had to have preexisted. But it was Zion that was at enmity with the serpent, and Zion's children.

Verse 2 goes on to say, "And being pregnant she was crying out in labor, being in great pain to give birth." In verses 2-6 we have moved from heaven to earth, from the glories of the ideal Zion to the sufferings of the earthly Zion. Most commentators draw out dozens of Old Testament passages that predict that Israel would travail with birth pangs as the time approached for the Messiah to appear. Those birth pangs represent the true Israel's persecution and suffering. Leon Morris says,

The time of birth is near. Israel is about to give birth to the Messiah. For the early Christians there was an important continuity between the old Israel and the church, the true Israel. Here the woman is undoubtedly Israel who gives birth to the Messiah, but later in the chapter she is the church who is persecuted for her faith.<sup>2</sup>

Faithful Israel had longed for the coming of the the Messiah who would provide salvation and reverse the curse upon the earth. They endured a great deal as they by faith looked to His coming. And God promised that those sufferings would not be in vain. In Isaiah 66 He guaranteed that though Zion was suffering in labor pangs, she would give birth. Ian Boxall says,

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<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 153.

She represents the community which through a long and often-turbulent history prepared the way for the Messiah's coming and now continues his witness. In her story, John sees the sweep of salvation history from Eden to new Exodus in Christ. Her labour pains are particularly acute because the dawning of the messianic age brings with it intense tribulation for the people of God (the 'birthpangs' of Mk 13:8 and par.).<sup>3</sup>

That's as far as I will go this morning. Next week we will get into some of the intense spiritual warfare that the passage talks about. But I wanted to settle the question of the identity of the woman today.

And I do want to conclude with one additional admonition, and that is that we should value the church of Jesus Christ like verse 1 values the church. Is the church perfect? No. That's why it needs to be clothed in Christ Himself. The church's glory is Christ's glory. That is the only glory worth seeing. But it is important that we learn to see Christ in the church and to see His glory in the church.

Verse 1 shows that she is glorious and her destiny is glorious. It is easy to get frustrated with how far short of this glory the church of today really falls. But it helps us to not get as frustrated when we remember three things.

First, verse 1 describes the church as she appears to God clothed in Christ Jesus - clothed in the Sun. This is not just her destiny, but her legal status. The church shares in the glory of Christ. She is secure in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and if God does not cast her away, neither should we. We need to look at a messed up church through the eyes of her position in Jesus. That will help us to love her more.

Second, remind yourself that you too fall far short of this glory of God, yet God values you. This will give you a little bit of humility. God can see past the less than pleasant aspects of travail and birth pangs and the blood and perspiration and see the woman for who she is. We need to try to do the same.

Third, pray that the church would more and more reflect the glory of heaven - that God's will would be done in the church of earth as it is in heaven. Amen. Let's pray.

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<sup>3</sup> Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2006), 178–179.