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Revelation Text 07: Chapter 12-15a

This is the continuation of a series on the book of Revelation which began with a general introduction (five units) and an explanation of the text in the first half of the book, chapters 1 through 11 (six units). The present unit is the first of an additional six that will complete this look at the text.

This is one of twelve units taking a closer look at the text of Revelation, section by section. If you like this material:

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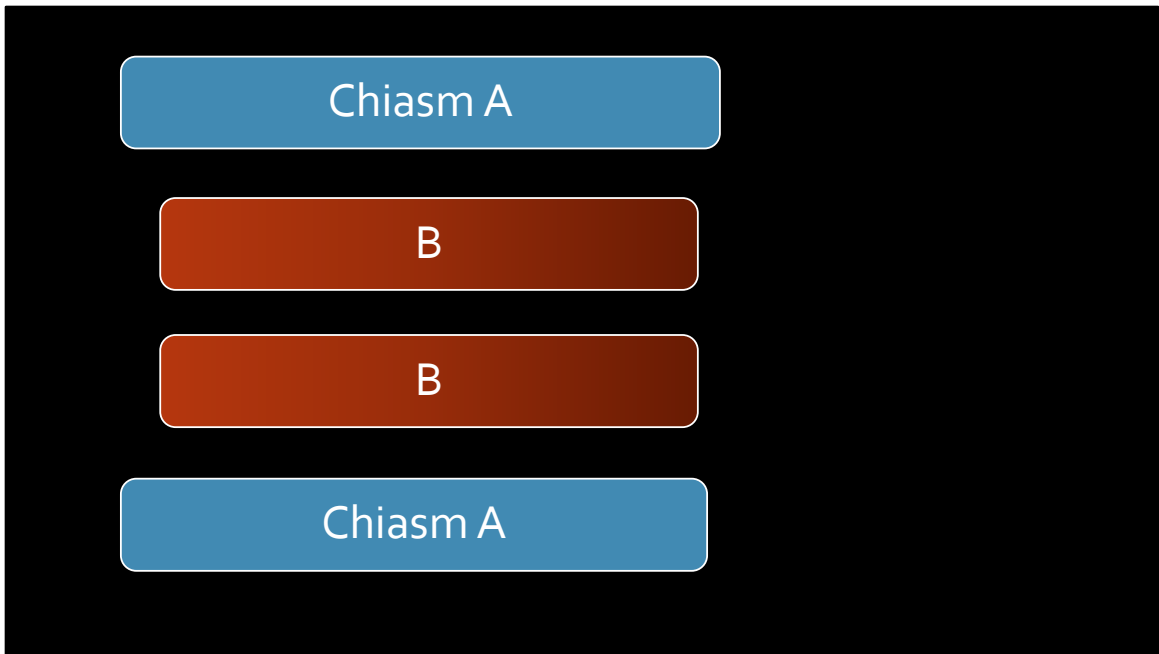
Prologue	In the Spirit	In the Spirit				In the Spirit		In the Spirit	Epilogue
	Letters	Seals	Trumpets	Signs	Bowls	Babylon	Judgment	Jerusalem	
Setting				11:19					
Scene 1				12					
Scene 2									
Scene 3									
Scene 4									
Scene 5									
Scene 6									
Church Interlude									
Scene 7				15:2-4					

Where are we in the book? It is the beginning of a series of seven ‘signs’. It runs until chapter 15:4. Each of the seven scenes in this section is introduced with the words, “and I saw.” This is sometimes lost in translation, so your Bible may not show this, but the pattern is there in the original Greek.

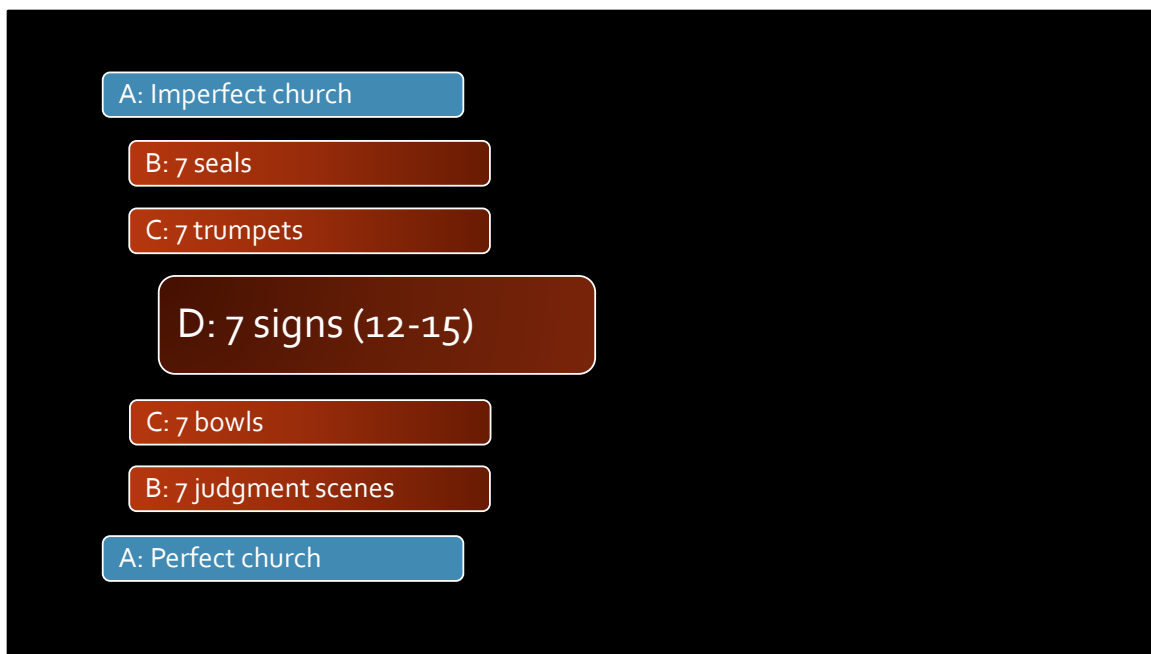
As elsewhere in the book, we begin with a setting, a peek into the heavenly temple. For the present section, it is 11:19, just one verse. Notice that once again the chapter division is unfortunate; this verse has nothing to do with chapter 11 but everything with chapter 12. The setting is short but what John gets to see is extraordinary: he sees the temple opened in such a way that he can look all the way into the holy of holies and see the ark of the covenant. In the earthly temple, only the high priest got to see the ark, and that only once a year.

This serves as an indication of what is to follow: things will become visible that are normally hidden. I don’t think it is an exaggeration to say that this is the most important section in the book. It is the revelation within the revelation. Here, we get to see what is *really* going on, we get to peek behind the screen. For this reason, I have taken a bit more time for this section; I will deal with it in two units instead of

just one.



The importance of this section is confirmed when we take a step back and look at the whole book. It turns out that Revelation is a huge chiasm. A chiasm is a text in which the parts are repeated in reverse order, as illustrated here: A B B A. The text can be shorter than a sentence or it can be much longer. Crucial is that there is repetition or at least a clear correspondence between elements.



How is Revelation a chiasm? The book begins with seven letters to churches, showing us the imperfect church, the church as it was in the days of John, and in many ways still is today. It will end with a look at the new Jerusalem, the church made perfect.

The letters are followed by the opening of seven seals and the blowing of seven trumpets, all leading to various upheavals and plagues. This corresponds with the seven bowls and the seven judgement scenes that we still need to look at. The parallels between the trumpets and the bowls are strong; both series reflect the 10 plagues in Egypt. The correspondence between the seals and the judgement scenes is less clear.

This leaves us with chapters 12-15 as the centre. Often with a chiasm, the most important content is in the middle; this is certainly the case here. We have come to the heart and centre of the revelation. In these chapters, we get to understand more fully what is going on, why the Roman Empire would bother to persecute the church – what is this *really* about? These chapters will tell us.

As an aside, this is called Kline's chiasm, named after Meredith Kline, the Bible scholar who first described it.

Clothed with the sun,
with the moon under
her feet, and on her
head a crown of twelve
stars

(Rev. 12:1 ESV)



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The first sign John gets to see is a double one, and it takes all of chapter 12; it includes a woman and a dragon. The woman is “clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (12:1). Where does this come from? Think back to the book of Genesis and the story of Joseph. In one of his dreams, the sun, the moon, and 11 stars bow down before the star representing Joseph. In this dream, the sun and the moon represent Joseph’s parents and the stars his brothers. This is therefore a symbol of Israel or better, as we will see later in this chapter, of the messianic community, the community of faith. The woman is, after all, also the mother of those who continue to keep the testimony of Jesus, that is, believers in Christ. Believers before and after Christ are portrayed here as a single community, without making a distinction between OT Israel and the NT church.

In the OT, it is not unusual to represent and personify the people of Israel as a woman; this is a common image in the prophets.

The woman is pregnant and about to give birth. This, too, is an image used by the prophets in the OT for Israel as the community of faith.

The child, of course, is Jesus. For this reason, many Catholic interpreters understand

the woman as Mary. Many statues or portraits of Mary show her with a crown of 12 stars, like here. But it really is a picture of Israel struggling to bring the Messiah into the world. Which means we have gone back from the future to the past! In chapter 11, with the seventh trumpet, everything was over and complete; here, we are looking at something that had already happened when John wrote his book.

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Seven heads and ten horns, and
on his heads seven diadems

(Rev. 12:3 ESV)



The other thing John sees in this first scene is a dragon with seven heads and 10 horns. The 10 horns speak of a fullness of strength. The seven heads are more difficult to interpret. Perhaps they show that evil has many forms and is hard to conquer. Interestingly, the mythology of the ancient Canaanites, Israel's OT neighbours, speaks of Leviathan as a seven-headed monster and a dragon, so the idea is not new.

Notice the contrast. Jesus is represented here as a child and elsewhere as a lamb. He faces a dragon and in chapter 13 a beast. Innocence and vulnerability against raw power.

What the dragon wants, is to 'devour' or destroy the child as soon as it is born. What did this look like in normal history? If you look carefully, the answer to the question is in the picture. The historical and earthly counterpart is Herod the Great murdering the small children of Bethlehem. We are looking at an apocalyptic retelling of the Christmas story here.

Revelation leaves out any reference to the earthly ministry of Jesus; as soon as the

child is born, he is caught up into heaven.

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Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

(Rev. 12:7-9 ESV)



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Starting in verse 7, however, we do get to see the effect of Jesus' ministry on earth, culminating in the cross: war breaks out in heaven, and as a result, the dragon and his angels are thrown down onto the earth. This is worth reading:

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. (Rev. 12:7-9 ESV)

This shows us in apocalyptic imagery what it meant that Jesus died for us on the cross.

Again it is worth noting the contrast. The dragon is the deceiver, whereas Jesus is the true witness, the one who is later called "Faithful and True" (Rev. 19:11). The war is therefore about what is true and what is false, it is about what people will believe. No wonder its main weapon is the sword that comes out of the mouth of Jesus: it is by

the word of truth that he conquers.

The text gives us a clear key to decode the symbol of the dragon; John leaves no doubt about his identity. There are echoes here of the fall in Genesis 3, where the serpent deceives Adam and Eve. There are also echoes from the book of Job. *Satan* means *opponent* and *devil* means *slanderer* or *accuser*. In Job, the opponent appears before God to slander Job. In verse 10, Satan is therefore called the accuser of the brethren. But he cannot do this anymore. As Romans 8:1 tells us, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Satan can no longer appear before the throne of God to accuse God's people.

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And they have conquered him
by the blood of the Lamb and
by the word of their
testimony, for they loved not
their lives even unto death.

(Rev. 12:11 ESV)



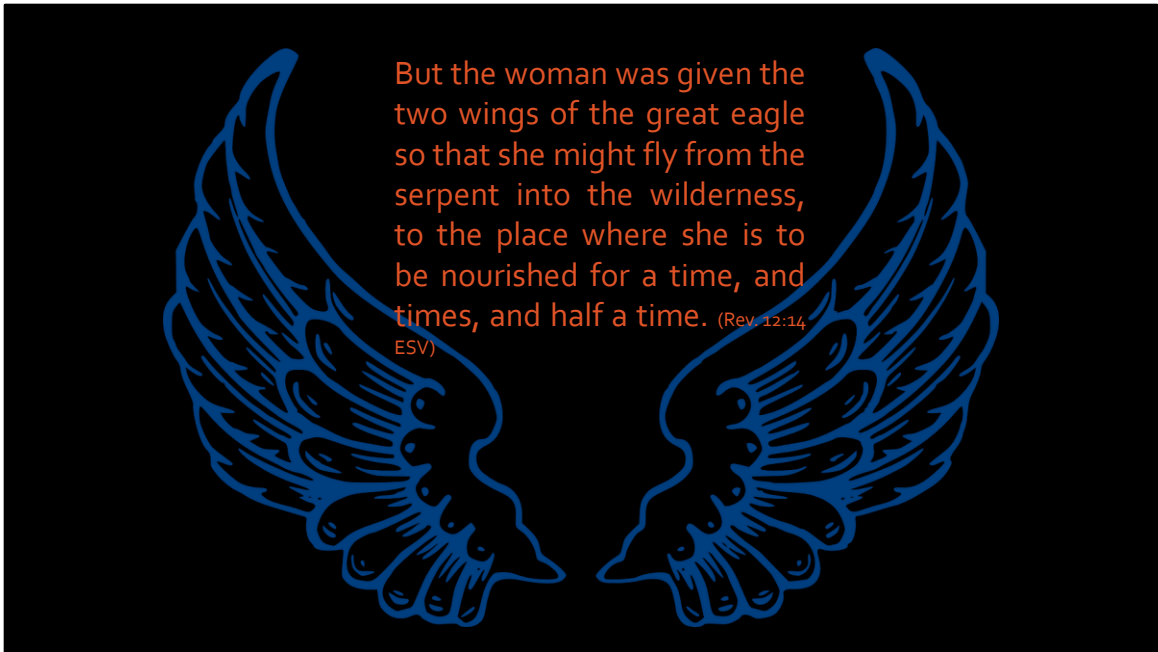
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They conquer him by the blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony, their confession of faith.

The war scene explains a lot about the world Christians live in: it is a war zone. This passage is filled with references to the OT. But it also takes up the mythology of the ancient world, of other nations. I mentioned Canaanite mythology and the dragon Leviathan, whom Baal, the leading Canaanite god had to slay. Another Canaanite myth speaks about Baal fighting and initially being defeated by the sea god, Yam. Such myths about cosmic conflict, usually between the established gods and some fearsome monster represented by the wild and chaotic sea, were common.

Revelation shows the true version of such myths, the real story about the world. There are cosmic conflict and cosmic war indeed, but not as the ancients imagined it.

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Now back to the woman.

In 12:6, the woman flees into the wilderness, where God has prepared a place for her and where she is taken care of for 1260 days. We have seen this period before: in chapter 11, it is the time of the two witnesses. In 13:5, by the way, it is the length of time the beast is permitted to reign, 42 months. And here in verse 14, it is a time, and times, and half a time, but because of the parallel to 12:6, this has to mean 3 ½ years as well. It stands for a time of intense persecution, reminiscent of Antiochus Epiphanes' reign of terror in the second century BC.

What does it mean that the woman is given the two wings of the great eagle? This is taken from Exodus 19:4: when Israel arrived at Mount Sinai, God spoke: I have carried you on eagles' wings.

It turns out, then, that this is the exodus story, a new exodus. The woman is both Israel and the church; she is the community of the Messiah, of those who believe in his coming. This woman symbolically escapes into the desert, just like Israel coming out of Egypt did literally.

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The exodus story in Revelation 12 continues. The dragon attempts to sweep the woman away with a flood from its mouth.

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But the earth ... opened
its mouth and swallowed
the river that the dragon
had poured from his
mouth

(Rev. 12:16 ESV)



In the original exodus, when Israel is pursued, it is the sea that swallows up her pursuers. Here, it is the earth that helps her.

There is even more here than a recapitulation of the exodus. Many ancient readers would have recognized another myth in the background, that of Apollo and Python. There are different versions of this myth. Clear is, when Leto, the mother of Apollo, was pregnant with him, the serpent Python came after her to prevent the birth of Apollo. In some versions, this has to do with a prediction that her child would kill the serpent. As Leto was running for her life, the sea god, Poseidon, intervened to help her. He created a new island in the sea where she could hide and give birth to a child. Later, Apollo did indeed kill the serpent.

Sounds a bit like what we read here. It is not that the Bible accepts such myths as true. To repeat what I said before: Revelation shows in a sense the true version of such myths, the real story about the world. This is what it is all about. Not gods battling with chaos or dragons, not Apollo killing Python, but Satan opposing God and his people.

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At the end of chapter 12, the dragon has failed both to devour the child and to destroy the fleeing woman. We are told in verse 17 that he goes off to make war on the rest of her offspring (who clearly are believers in Jesus; the woman therefore encompasses both Israel and the church).

At this point, the church has grown too large and has spread too wide to be easily destroyed. In the initial phase, when it was limited to Jerusalem, destruction seemed a realistic option. This is no longer the case. Satan can persecute individual believers and churches but cannot hope to destroy the church as a whole.

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So far, the dragon has failed. At the end of chapter 12, we find him standing on the sand of the sea, furious but ineffective. He knows he needs a new strategy. In chapter 13, we will find out what that new strategy looks like.

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