

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

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Go Deeper Excursus 29 Diverse Interpretations of the Male Son of Revelation 12

When viewed in light of modern commentaries on the book of Revelation, the interpretation that the male son represents the corporate body of Christ is a minority view and seemingly idiosyncratic.

If we limit ourselves to modern commentaries, consult study Bibles, or hear lectures and sermons on Revelation 12, then we would assume the interpretation of the male son as the individual, Jesus Christ, to be an open and shut case. Jacob Smith writes, “The reference here is unmistakably to the birth of Christ in Bethlehem of Judea.”¹ And J. Dwight Pentecost notes, “Since this child is born ‘to rule all nations with a rod of iron’ (Rev 12:5), it can only refer to Christ, the one whose right it is to rule.”² He later asserts that the allusion to Psalm 2:9 “identifies the man child here as none other than Jesus Christ.”³ A survey of commentators from a variety of exegetical and theological perspectives reveals the same kind of straightforward identification of the male son as none other than Jesus Christ.⁴ However, the more cautious words of George Faber in 1808 reveal a less confident assessment of the *status quaestionis*: “In short, I consider the symbol of the *man-child* as a complete *crux criticorum*. Much has been written on the subject, but I have read nothing

¹ Jacob B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, ed. J. Otis Toder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1961), 183.

² J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 215.

³ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 286.

⁴ Pierre Prigent, *Apocalypse 12: Histoire de l'exégèse*, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Biblischen Exegese*, vol. 2, ed. Oscar Cullmann, Ernst Käsemann, et al (Tübingen: Mohr, 1959), 145; Heinz Giesen, “Symbole und mythische Aussagen in der Johannes-Apokalypse und ihre theologische Bedeutung,” in *Studien zur Johannes-apokalypse*, *Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände, Neues Testament*, vol. 29, ed. Gerhard Dautzenberg and Norbert Lohfink (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000), 62; Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 231–234; William R. Newell, *Revelation: Chapter-by-Chapter*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1994), 175–76; Ford C. Ottman, *The Unfolding of the Ages in the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1967), 284–85; Henry Barclay Swete, *Commentary on Revelation*, reprint (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977), 151; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22, An Exegetical Commentary*, ed., Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 125–26; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 189–90.

that is *wholly* unobjectionable. It is possible, that some future commentator may be more successful in his inquiries than those who have preceded him.”⁵

Although the identification of the male son in Revelation 12:5 as Jesus Christ alone has dominated the modern history of interpretation of that text, the corporate interpretation of the male son has always had representatives and, at times, appears to have held a place of particular importance. Methodius’s comments from the fourth century are illustrative of one ancient voice:

O faultfinder, it will not even be possible for you to show that Christ Himself is the one who is born. For long before the Apocalypse the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word was fulfilled. And John speaks concerning things present and things to come. But Christ, long ago conceived, was not caught up to the throne of God when He was brought forth, from fear of the serpent injuring Him. But for this was He begotten, and Himself came down from the throne of the Father, that He should remain and subdue the dragon who made an assault upon the flesh. So that you also must confess that the Church labors and gives birth to those who are baptized. As the spirit says somewhere in Isaiah: “Before she travailed, she brought forth; before her pain came, she was delivered of a man-child. Who hath heard such a thing? Who hath seen such things? Shall the earth be made to bring forth in one day? Or shall a nation be born at once? For as soon as Zion travailed, she brought forth her children.” (Methodius, *On Chastity* 8.7)

Among modern, post-Reformation interpreters, we can discern several variations of this corporate identity of the male son. Many see a dual significance whereby the woman and male son literally and historically represent Mary and Jesus, but they also carry a prophetic or allegorical sense.⁶

On the other end of the spectrum, some interpret the text purely allegorically, in what can be described as an “idealist” sense. Thus Thomas Hall in 1658 interpreted the woman as the church and the male son impersonally as “reformation” of the church, which always results in persecution from the dragon (Satan).⁷ I. R. Park interpreted the birth of the male child as “regeneration through Christ,” in which true conversion to Christianity is fixed and enshrined in the heart, the figurative “throne of God.”⁸ Quite unique among a more allegorical interpretation, William Wall understood

⁵ George Stanley Faber, *A Dissertation on the Prophecies, That Have Been Fulfilled, Are Now Fulfilling, or Will Hereafter Be Fulfilled*, vol. 1 (Boston: Andrews and Cummings, 1808), 62. (Italics in original.) William Thomson notes several interpretations prevalent in his day: “By *the male-child, or the Son*, whom the woman brought forth, some have understood a race of manly Christians, and others have understood the powerful truth of the Gospel: and some have understood Constantine” (*The New Testament, with Some Preliminary Observations and Notes Critical and Explanatory*, vol. 3 [Kilmarnock: H. Crawford, 1816], 436).

⁶ David Pareus, *A Commentary upon the Divine Revelation of the Apostle and Evangelist John*, trans. Elias Arnold (Amsterdam: C. P., 1644), 264; Thomson, *New Testament*, 436.

⁷ Thomas Hall, *A Practical and Polemical Commentary or, Exposition upon the Third and Fourth Chapters of the Latter Epistle of Saint Paul to Timothy* (London: John Starkey, 1658), 388, cf. 128.

⁸ I. R. Park [a.k.a. John Ranicar], *A New Exposition of the Apocalypse*, 3rd ed. (London: Smith, Elder, and Co.,

the woman as the apostolic church while the male son is holy Scripture: “This the devil strove to devour as soon as it was written, by mixing spurious scriptures, and monstrous doctrines of heretics with it.”⁹ The early view of John Nelson Darby in 1839 can also be regarded as an “idealist” position. He understood the vision to refer not to historical or prophetic events but to a general picture of the relationship of various participants in God’s plan. Thus the initial vision of the woman in heaven refers to the positional reality of the church, whose subject is Jesus Christ, while the later actions of being pursued and fleeing refer to the actual historical experiences of God’s people.¹⁰

A common historical interpretation of Revelation sees the events of Revelation 12 as having been fulfilled in the first few centuries of the church. Francis Roberts identified the woman as the persecuted church of the first three centuries, traveling in the midst of Roman oppression to “bring forth *Christ mystical*, (*viz.*, iChrist formed in his mystical body and members, 2 Cor. 12.12. Gal. 4.19.) into the Roman world.”¹¹ When the male son is “caught up” to the throne of God, this could represent divine protection in the midst of the dragon’s attacks,¹² or it could refer to the ascent of the church to political power in the fourth century: “As Christ himself was in his ripe age taken up to God’s supreme Throne: so Christ mystical, when maturely grown in his Kingdome, was exalted to the Roman Throne, *viz.* under *Constantine*.”¹³

Several commentators have identified the woman as the New Testament “church” personified.¹⁴ Thus the male son is not Christ (who could not have been literally birthed by the church),¹⁵ but he is the company of those “born again” through the church’s ministry and united

1832), 152, 154.

⁹ William Wall, *Brief Critical Notes, Especially on the Various Readings of the New Testament Books* (London: William Innys, 1730), 396.

¹⁰ John Nelson Darby, *Notes on the Book of Revelations; to Assist Enquirers in Searching into That Book* (London: Central Tract Depot: 1839), 69–93.

¹¹ Francis Roberts, *Clavis Bibliorum: The Key of the Bible, Unlocking the Richest Treasury of the Holy Scriptures*, 4th rev. ed. (London: Peter Parker and Thomas Guy, 1675), 605. (Italics in original.)

¹² Anonymous (“A Graduate of the University of Cambridge”), *The Rule, Based on the Word of God, for the Calculation of Time in the Prophecies of the Old and New Testament* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1843), 30.

¹³ Roberts, *Clavis Bibliorum*, 606. See also John Worthington, *Miscellanies* (London: John Wyat, 1704), 66–67. Cf. Thomas Newton, *Dissertations on the Prophecies, Which Have Remarkably Been Fulfilled, and at This Time Are Fulfilling in the World*, vol. 2 (New York: William Durrell, 1794), 279–280; Thomas Pyle, *A Paraphrase, with Notes, on the Revelation of St. John*, 2d ed. (London: Robinson, 1795), 110; Thomas Scott, *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, vol. 6, 5th ed. (London: Seeley, Hatchard, & Son, 1822), 503; John Ranicar Park [a medical doctor and lay student of Scripture], *A Concise Exposition of the Apocalypse*, 2d ed. (London: James Duncan, 1825), 39. Adam Clarke, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ with Commentary and Critical Notes*, new ed. (Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait & Co., 1844), 515; David Nevins Lord, *An Exposition of the Apocalypse* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1847), 313–336.

¹⁴ Thomson, *New Testament*, 436.

¹⁵ Thomas Scott, favoring the corporate interpretation, but specifically Christian emperors, argues against the male child as Christ: “Some commentators, indeed, would interpret this *man child* to be Christ Himself; but this cannot be meant, for He was born of the church of Israel, not of the Christian church; nor is He ever spoken of as ‘the Son of the church,’ but rather as the Husband, or even the Father of it” (Scott, *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 503).

in Christ.¹⁶ Christopher Wordsworth (1849), citing Psalm 2:9, acknowledged that “at first sight these words appear applicable only to CHRIST.” He then noted, “But, we must remember, that what is true primarily of Christ alone, is, by virtue of His union with all true members of His body, and by reason of the working of His grace, transferred to *them*.”¹⁷ However, he interpreted the rule of the church with Christ in heavenly places in this age, as in Ephesians 1:20, applying Revelation 3:21 to this present spiritual reign of Christ with the church. The catching up of the male son, therefore, refers to those who depart to heaven—the church triumphant—while the woman remains on earth as the church militant.¹⁸

Others interpret the woman as the entire people of God without clearly distinguishing Old and New Testament dispensations. In this case, the male son could represent the Messiah as the child of the one covenant community. Moses Stuart interpreted the woman as “the church all glorious and resplendent in the eyes of God” and then noted, “The man-child who is born, and who is ‘to rule all nations with a sceptre of iron’ (Ps. 2: 9. Rev. 12: 5), is doubtless the *Messiah*.... *The child caught up unto God*, is the Saviour ascended to glory.”¹⁹

The English Baptist, Hanserd Knollys (1599–1691) commented on Revelation 12:5, “*And she brought forth a Man-Child who was to Rule all Nations with a rod of iron*; which is Christ and his Saints, as one mystical Body.... The *man-child* brought forth was *Christ*, and his *Saints*, the *spiritual* Seed of this *mystical* Woman, the Church of the firstborn written in Heaven.... This Child was prophesied of, *Psal.* 2.6, 7, 8, 9, 10. And also his Saints shall have the Dominion over the Nations, *Dan.* 7. 27, 28. and *Rev.* 11. 15.”²⁰ Anglican priest Thomas Wilson (c. 1563–1622) wrote, “[Childe or Man-Childe.] Eyther Christ alone, or joyned to the Church his body, to which hee communicateth his owne power, according to his promise, *Rev.* 2, ver. 27. *Rev.* 12, 5.”²¹

Some have limited the identity of the woman historically to the “Jewish church” (that is, Old Testament Israel). After this identification, the male son may then be understood as (1) only Jesus Christ, (2) as Jesus Christ in union with the body of Christ, the church, or (3) as a special remnant from among the larger body of Christianity. Henrietta Bowdler represents the first position, interpreting the woman as “the times of the church under the Jewish dispensation,” pointing to Joseph’s dream as the key to understanding the symbolism. This Jewish church brings forth not

¹⁶ Benjamin Colman, *Some of the Glories of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Exhibited in Twenty Sacramental Discourses, Preached at Boston in New England* (London: Ford and Farmer, 1728), 84.

¹⁷ Christopher Wordsworth, *Lectures on the Apocalypse: Critical, Expository, and Practical*, 2nd ed. (London: F. & J. Rivington, 1849), 257.

¹⁸ Wordsworth, *Lectures on the Apocalypse*, 258–59. Cf. Charles William Boase, *The Elijah Ministry: Tokens of Its Mission to the Christian Church Deduced from the Ministry of John the Baptist to the Jews* (Edinburgh: Robert Grant & Son, 1868), 559–560.

¹⁹ Moses Stuart, *Hints on the Interpretation of Prophecy*, 2d ed. (Andover: Allen, Morrill, and Wardwell, 1842), 114.

²⁰ Hanserd Knollys, *An Exposition of the Whole Book of the Revelation* (London: Hanserd Knollys, 1689), 41, 161–62. (Italics in original.)

²¹ Thomas Wilson, *A Complete Christian Dictionary*, ed. Thomas Wilson and John Bagwell, 3rd ed. (London: William Iaggad, 1622), s.v. “Childe or Man-Childe.”

the Christian church but Jesus Christ himself: “She brings forth a man-child ... *i.e.* Christ, as Ps. ii.9.”²² For the second option, Hans Wood rejected the identification of the woman as representing the New Testament church on the basis of the identification of the male son:

It is altogether necessary to a due apprehension of the subsequent Revelation, that the object before us be not mistaken. The Christian Church has been supposed to have been figured in this Woman. The crown of twelve stars may agree as well to the twelve Apostles, as to the twelve tribes, did not her parturiency and seed denote an offspring, which gives one descriptive character of the Christian Church, in a spiritual descent from the Jewish.²³

Wood went on to argue that “there can be no question that Our Lord and his Church are intended by the man child, ‘who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron;’ because the words, taken from prophetic Scripture, are unappropriable but to him.”²⁴ Finally, representing the third option, an anonymous author in 1845 identified the male son with the firstfruits or the 144,000 described in Revelation 7.²⁵

²² Henrietta Maria Bowdler, *Practical Observations on the Book of the Revelations* (Oxford: J. Fletcher, 1787), 18. Cf. Franklin Weidner, *Annotations on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, The Lutheran Commentary, vol. 12, ed. Henry Eyster Jacobs (New York: Christian Literature, 1898), 156–157.

²³ Hans Wood (Jn. M-d), *The Revelation of St. John Considered as Alluding to Certain Services of the Jewish Temple* (London: T. Payne & Son, 1787), 157.

²⁴ Wood, *Revelation of St. John*, 160. Cf. Henry Goodwyn, *The Judgment Seat of Christ* (London: Elliot Stock, 1876), 57.

²⁵ Anonymous, *The Retrospect, Being an Enquiry into the Fulfillment of Prophecy during the Last Twenty Years* (London: Painter, 1845), 106.