

Counterpoint: Comparative Views of the Woman in Revelation 12

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Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics 2025

The Apocalypse of Jesus (or of John) overwhelms the reader with Old Testament allusions and many figures of speech along with much symbolic language. Nonetheless, dispensationalists have insisted that the literal, grammatical-historical approach to interpretation should be maintained throughout the book. This conviction is challenged by a number of ancient and modern interpreters. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on this debate through the lens of Rev. 12:1. Although not necessarily the most important or controversial section of Revelation, the twelfth chapter opens with a highly debated and enigmatic vision: “A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” What follows is an analysis of the various viewpoints, ancient and modern, and the reasoning behind those positions concerning the interpretation of this emblematic language. Such a task is not simple. One writer outlined 28 different views of the woman in Rev. 12:1!¹ Nevertheless, the goal is to discover if theological interpretation clouds the exegesis of the verse in context or if there are contextual elements that bolster various viewpoints.

Ancient Commentaries

The historical sources discussed below are selective, but probably the most useful in determining ancient views of the woman in Rev 12:1. The attempt has been made to find the clearest examples which can be cited easily rather than quotes that are hard to track down.

Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170 – c. 235)

This important early Church Father clearly identifies the woman: “Now, concerning the tribulation of the persecution which is to fall upon the Church from the adversary, John also speaks thus: ‘And I saw a great and wondrous sign in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.’”² Thus, the persecution of the woman by Satan in Rev. 12:13-17 points to oppression of the Church. Hippolytus further explains:

By the “woman then clothed with the sun,” he meant most manifestly the Church, endowed with the Father’s word, whose brightness is above the sun. And by “the moon

¹ Bertrand Buby, “The Fascinating Woman of Revelation 12,” *Marian Studies*, Volume 50, Issue 1, Article 9. This resource can be found at <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/marian-studies/vol50/iss1/9>.

² Hippolytus of Rome, “Treatise on Christ and Antichrist,” 60. The resource I am using is *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Novatian, Appendix*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, vol. 5, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 217.

under her feet” he referred to her being adorned, like the moon, with heavenly glory. And the words, “upon her head a crown of twelve stars,” refer to the twelve apostles by whom the Church was founded. And those, “she, being with child, cries, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered,” mean that the Church will not cease to bear from her heart the Word that is persecuted by the unbelieving in the world. “And she brought forth,” he says, “a man-child, who is to rule all the nations;” by which is meant that the Church, always bringing forth Christ, the perfect man-child of God, who is declared to be God and man, becomes the instructor of all the nations.³

Right away the dispensationalist is struck by the lack of reference to Genesis 37:9-10 and the dream of Joseph involving sun, moon, and stars. There is no understanding related to the sun as Jacob, the moon as Joseph’s mother, and the eleven stars as his brothers. To Hippolytus, the sun apparently refers to the brightness of God and His word. The imagery of the moon points to heavenly glory of the Church. Moreover, the idea of the Church giving birth to Christ shows an ongoing proclamation of Christ given by the Church. Such a view runs away from grammatical-historical interpretation.

Victorinus of Petovium (d. 303 or 304)

Victorinus, bishop of Petovium, left us an interesting commentary on the text of the book of Revelation. The woman is clearly the Church: “The woman clothed with the sun, and having the moon under her feet, and wearing a crown of twelve stars upon her head, and travailing in her pains, is the ancient Church of fathers, and prophets, and saints, and apostles, which had the groans and torments of its longing until it saw that Christ, the fruit of its people according to the flesh long promised to it, had taken flesh out of the selfsame people.”⁴ However, an interesting twist is found in that the fathers, prophets, saints, and apostles most likely include the Old Testament saints and prophets since Christ had “taken flesh out of the selfsame people.” Jesus had come in Jewish flesh. In this way, Victorinus views Israel as the Old Testament Church. Later in the paragraph, Victorinus shows attention to Gen. 37:9-10: “And the crown of twelve stars signifies the choir of fathers, according to the fleshly birth, of whom Christ was to take flesh.”⁵ However, the sun alludes to the “hope of resurrection and the glory of the promise,” while the moon speaks of “the fall of the bodies of the saints under the obligation of death.” Thus, Victorinus is inconsistent in his use of Gen. 37:9-10 to inform the imagery of Rev. 12:1.

³ Hippolytus of Rome, “Treatise on Christ and Antichrist,” 61.

⁴ Victorinus of Pettau, “Commentary on the Apocalypse of the Blessed John,” 12.1. The resource I am using is *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and Liturgies*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis, vol. 7, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 355.

⁵ Ibid.

Methodius (d. 311)

Methodius, a martyred bishop in Asia Minor, joined the majority of Church Fathers in believing that the woman of Rev 12 is the Church: “For I think that the Church is here said to give birth to a male.”⁶ Naturally, some explanation of what it means for the Church to birth Christ is needed. Methodius goes on to give a slightly obtuse statement, “since the enlightened receive the features, and the image, and the manliness of Christ, the likeness of the form of the Word being stamped upon them, and begotten in them by a true knowledge and faith, so that in each one Christ is spiritually born.”⁷ In other words, the concept of the Church giving birth to Jesus is not a reference to the Old Testament Church (Israel) bringing the Christ child into the world. It is a picture of the regeneration of individual believers as the Church does its work of reaching the world. In this way, the vision of Rev. 12 is about the present age and not some future end-time scenario.

Concerning the remaining aspects of the vision, Methodius equates the sun which clothes the woman to the truth of the Word of God; although the ancient commentary is not as clear as we would like, the stars seem to bolster the notion of the brightness of the Church. So far, the allegorical understanding appears to be winning the day. Methodius, however, saves his most contrived depiction for identifying the meaning of the moon:

Now the statement that she stands upon the moon, as I consider, denotes the faith of those who are cleansed from corruption in the laver *of regeneration*, because the light of the moon has more resemblance to tepid water, and all moist substance is dependent upon her. The Church, then, stands upon our faith and adoption, under the figure of the moon, until the fulness of the nations come in, labouring and bringing forth natural men as spiritual men; for which reason too she is a mother.⁸

As one reads this statement, the word *imagination* comes to mind. While one must always take the concepts of faith, corruption, cleansing, Church, adoption, and spirituality in a serious way, this approach is entirely non-textual. The writer is using allegory to arrive at a theological understanding of this part of Holy Scripture.

Tyconius (4th Century)

Tyconius, one of the most important African theologians of the fourth century, is often overlooked. Yet, his commentary on the Apocalypse is one of the most important treatises on

⁶ Methodius of Olympus, “The Banquet of the Ten Virgins,” 8.8. The resource I am using is *Fathers of the Third Century: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius the Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. William R. Clark, vol. 6, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886), 337.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 336–337.

the book at that time. Concerning the woman of Rev. 12, his commentary yields a number of significant statements. First, he begins his discussion of the chapter with the words, “*And a great sign was seen in heaven, which now also is seen in the church.*”⁹ Hence, the woman is the church. The imagery of the sun and moon fits with Tyconius’ bipartite theme of good and bad in the same thing. Thus, the sun speaks of the good about the church and the moon about the bad (although he posits some good in this imagery). Certainly, there is no reference to Gen. 37:9-10. Later on, Tyconius gives his commentary on verse 5 to bolster the notion that the woman is the church: “And the woman gave birth to a male child; that is, the church [gave birth] to Christ, then to his body.”¹⁰ However, commenting on the crown of twelve stars, he identifies them as the twelve apostles *or* the twelve tribes of Israel.¹¹ Tantalizingly, he does not elaborate. Most likely, Tyconius is using the term *Church*, as many of the Church Fathers were already doing, to refer to the saints of all times including primarily Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church.

Oecumenius (990?)

The Church Father named Oecumenius provides one of the most uncertain characters among the Fathers. The New Advent *Catholic Encyclopedia* identifies him as the Bishop of Trikkha in Thessaly (Greece) around 990, thus, rather late compared to the previous examples.¹² However, there is a definite attachment of this name to a commentary on the Apocalypse which is of uncertain date. The reason for its inclusion in this discussion is that it may be one of the earliest interpretations identifying the woman in Revelation 12 as the Virgin Mary. Surprisingly perhaps, earlier Church Fathers normally accept the woman as the Church and not the Virgin.

The precise statement of Oecumenius’ commentary on Rev. 12:1 is as follows:

He is speaking of the mother of our Savior, as I have said. Naturally the vision describes her as being in heaven and not on the earth, as pure in soul and body, as equal to an angel, as a citizen of heaven, as one who came to effect the incarnation of God who dwells in heaven ... and as one who has nothing in common with the world and the evils in it, but wholly sublime, wholly worthy of heaven, even though she sprang from our mortal nature and being. For the Virgin is of the same substance as we are.¹³

⁹ Tyconius, *Exposition of the Apocalypse*, translated by Francis X. Gumerlock (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 121.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹² Adrian Fortescue, “Oecumenius” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911); <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11214b.htm>; Accessed 12 July 2025.

¹³ Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, trans. John N. Suggit, vol. 112, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 107.

One can see some of the conceptual ideas of a developing Marian theology in these words. The identification of the woman of Rev. 12:1 is straightforward.

The other elements of the vision are also plainly expressed. The sun refers to Christ or the preaching of the gospel for which the term “the sun of righteousness” (Mal. 4:2) can be applied.¹⁴ The moon refers to the law of Moses. Hence, the picture is the downtrodden Law of the Jewish people over against the righteousness of Christ and His Church. For the twelve stars, the commentator notes that “the Virgin is crowned with the twelve apostles who proclaim the Christ while she is proclaimed together with him.” The birthing of Jesus in 12:5 is the normal, physical delivery of a child.

In Oecumenius’ presentation, there is no appeal to the dream of Joseph in Gen. 37:9-10. Hermeneutically, one might sympathize with a surface reading of the woman as Mary, who actually in history gave birth to Jesus (more on this later). In some ways, this approach might be superior to seeing the woman as the Church. Nonetheless, the writer’s overall method does not do close observation of the text. For example, what would it mean for the Virgin to be a “sign”? Additionally, there is an arbitrariness to the identification of the sun as Christ or the preaching of the gospel and of the moon as the Law of Moses. While the dichotomy between Moses and Christ is certainly taught in Scripture (e.g., John 1:17), there are no contextual clues that would naturally lead an interpreter to insert them into this vision in Rev. 12.¹⁵ This raises the methodological question of how to link to passages elsewhere in Scripture without immediate contextual support in the text at hand.

Modern Commentaries¹⁶

The predominance of modern commentaries (including evangelical works) assert that the woman in Rev. 12:1 is in some ways the Church. The discussion below will examine the interpretive issues under the categories of Roman Catholic (RC) interpretation, nondispensational views of the woman usually as the Church, and the dispensational view. There will be some overlap between the first and second categories, but an examination of the RC view by itself will prove useful.

Roman Catholic (RC) Interpretations of Revelation 12

¹⁴ Oecumenius makes the mistake of identifying the phrase “sun of righteousness” as coming from Habakkuk instead of Malachi.

¹⁵ It is possible perhaps to appeal to the works of the two witnesses in chapter 11, which mirror those of Moses (11:6). However, the Moses-Christ dichotomy is not expressly described in the presentation of chapters 11 & 12.

¹⁶ I have consulted 32 commentaries, study Bibles, and other resources for this analysis. The result can only be labeled as preliminary, but on the whole I believe the results are accurate in representing various views.

It is a fact that RC liturgies often invoke Rev. 12:1 to celebrate the Virgin Mary.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the official Vatican Catechism does not directly address the identity of the woman.¹⁸ There is a statement in the Vatican II documents that has been taken to refer to the woman although no explicit reference is cited: "In the meantime the Mother of Jesus in the glory which she possesses in body and soul in heaven is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come. Likewise she shines forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10), a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim People of God."¹⁹ Another Catholic catechism comments on Acts 2: "When depicting Pentecost, Christian artists often put Mary at the centre of the picture, where she is seen with the flame above her head. She is the type or image of the Church, filled with the Spirit of Jesus."²⁰ Additionally, this American catechism, written shortly after Vatican II, states the connection of Mary with the Church using imagery that could link to Rev. 12 although it does not reference the passage:

The early Church had the mother of Jesus in its midst. As apostolic times go on, the Church speaks more and more about her. The latest gospels, Luke and John, speak of her at the most important places.

At the Annunciation she symbolized the people of Israel. At Pentecost she appears as the symbol for the new people of God the woman who after her birth-pangs thinks no more of her pain (Luke 2:35; Jn 19:25).

The Church of which Mary is thus the image consists of all of us. In this sense, Mary is our sister. But the Church is also a mother for each of us. And in this sense Mary is our mother, since she is the living personification of the Church.²¹

One can see here a possible connection to the birth pangs of the woman in Rev. 12:2. The entire perspective sets up the concept that both Mary and the Church are represented by the woman in Rev. 12.

One clear example of laying out the identity of the woman in Rev 12 as Mary, while meshing it with ecclesiology, is found in the words of Pope John Paul II.

The words uttered by Jesus from the Cross signify that the motherhood of her who bore Christ finds a "new" continuation in the Church and through the Church, symbolized and represented by John. In this way, she who as the one "full of grace" was brought into the mystery of Christ in order to be his Mother and thus the Holy Mother of God, through

¹⁷ Edmondo F. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, translated by Maria P. Johnson and Adam Kamesar (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 174 n. 23.

¹⁸ For the official catechism of the Vatican, see https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM; Accessed 18 July 2025. I could not find any reference to the woman of Rev. 12 in this document.

¹⁹ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 68; This part of the Vatican II documents was given on 21 November 1964. The resource I used for these documents is Austin P. Flannery, ed., *Documents of Vatican II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 422.

²⁰ *A New Catechism: Catholic Faith for Adults* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 200.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

the Church remains in that mystery as "the woman" spoken of by the Book of Genesis (3:15) at the beginning and by the Apocalypse (12:1) at the end of the history of salvation. In accordance with the eternal plan of Providence, Mary's divine motherhood is to be poured out upon the Church, as indicated by statements of Tradition, according to which Mary's "motherhood" of the Church is the reflection and extension of her motherhood of the Son of God.²²

Thus, the woman in Rev. 12 is identified as Mary but her mystical relationship to the Church brings the Church along with her. In this way, the Church can be seen at least lurching in the shadows of the passage.

Not all Catholic commentators see Mary in Rev. 12:1 even in connection to the Church. Moloney acknowledges that The RC interpretation normally points to the Virgin as the answer, but that this idea should be rejected: "If the scene is 'a portrayal of Jesus' birth,' then why is the popular Roman Catholic understanding of the woman described so splendidly in verse 1 as the mother of Jesus generally (and rightly) disregarded by contemporary scholarship?"²³ Moloney notices the Gen. 37:9 vision of Joseph and considers the OT teaching of Israel as a woman in the discussion. In the end, he appears to reject any specific identification of the woman as Mary, Israel, or the Church. Instead, he opts for the conclusion that the woman represents mankind and sees the passage as retracing the steps of Gen. 2-5 and later invoking imagery from the Exodus.

A second RC exegete who does not see Mary in Rev. 12:1 is Lupieri, who initially sounds like John Walvoord: "The symbology must therefore represent the whole of Israel in the loins of Jacob, Rachel, and the twelve patriarchs."²⁴ However, after the fast start he fades down the stretch: "It seems logical to conclude that the woman is a heavenly representation of Israel," but it is "of that faithful Israel which is also true Christianity, as is made apparent at the end of the chapter in which 'the remnant of her seed...keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus' (v. 17)."²⁵ So, in the end, Lupieri holds that the woman is the Church understood as the people of God essentially in both testaments. The significant contribution to the debate is that he raises, as many nondispensational evangelicals do, the idea that Rev. 12:17 forces the conclusion that the woman is the Church. This is a major methodological and exegetical issue that should be dealt with by dispensationalists.

The final example of RC teaching on this topic comes from the *New American Bible*.²⁶ The note at Rev. 12:1 mentions Gen. 37:9-10 and does not mention the view that the woman is

²² Pope Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 24; https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html; Accessed 18 July 2025.

²³ Francis J. Moloney, SDB, *The Apocalypse of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 174. SDB stands for the Salesians of Don Bosco, the order to which Moloney belongs.

²⁴ Edmondo F. Lupieri, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, 189.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The translation appears to have been made in 1970 and copyrighted by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. The study notes for the Bible were apparently added later by William H. Sadler, Jr. in 1979. The edition I am using is *The New American Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983).

Mary: “The woman adorned with the sun, the moon, and the stars symbolizes God’s people in the Old and the New Testament; cf Gn 37, 9f. The Israel of old gave birth to the Messiah (5) and then became the new Israel, the church, which suffers persecution by the dragon (6.13-17).”²⁷ Hence, this RC view ignores the Marian view in favor of the view that the woman is the Church which encompasses the people of God in all ages.²⁸

Nondispensational Interpretations of Revelation 12

In this section, nondispensational views outside of Roman Catholicism will be discussed, most of them evangelical. The presentation will be organized by listing each commentator by name and resource in a table format followed by some analysis after the table.

Alford, <i>Alford’s Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary</i> – Alford clearly establishes his view that the symbolism of the woman “points to the Church, the bride of God: and of course, from the circumstances afterwards related, the O.T. Church, at least at this beginning of the vision.” ²⁹ He elaborates further: “... I have been led by these circumstances to think whether after all the woman may represent, not the invisible church of God’s true people..., but the true visible Church: that Church which in its divinely prescribed form as existing at Jerusalem was the mother of our Lord according to the flesh, and which continued as established by our Lord and His Apostles.” ³⁰
Aune, <i>Revelation 6-16</i> – Aune gives a rather detailed and fanciful discussion of chapter 12. However, there is clarity in that he rejects the identification of the woman as Israel with these words: “If the woman of 12:1 represents Israel, the problem is that there is no OT passage that personifies Israel as a mother and also speaks of her bearing a child Messiah.” ³¹ Instead, he argues “Here [v. 6a] and in v 14 the woman appears to be understood as the personification of the Christian community, which began to experience persecution following the birth and ascension of the Messiah.” ³²
Barnes, <i>Book of Revelation</i> – At the outset, Barnes is clear and dogmatic: “The woman, beyond all question, represents the church.” ³³ Additionally, “the woman herself flees into the

²⁷ Ibid., 1346. The last mentioned passage in the quotation (6.13-17) could be a typo. Reading it as either v. 13-17 or 12:13-17 would make sense. However, Lupieri could be equating the physical disturbances of the sixth seal (stars of the sky falling to earth) to the falling of the stars in Rev. 12:4 thereby linking the two passages.

²⁸ Many of the references in this study do not really address the prepatriarchal saints (the ones before Israel existed) as a separate category. I am assuming that usually it is just a way of talking about OT saints using the moniker *Israel*.

²⁹ Henry Alford, *Alford’s Greek Testament: An Exegetical and Critical Commentary*, Volume IV, Part II (Grand Rapids, MI: Guardian Press, 1976), 667.

³⁰ Ibid., 674.

³¹ David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 52B (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 688.

³² Ibid., 691.

³³ Albert Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the Book of Revelation* (London: George Routledge & Company, 1852), 342.

wilderness – an act representing the obscure, and humble, and persecuted state of the church.” ³⁴
Beale, <i>The Book of Revelation</i> – The woman is the “Messianic community.” ³⁵ He goes on to say that “Vv 2-6 reveal that this woman is a picture of the faithful community, which existed both before and after the coming of Christ. This identification is based on the OT precedent in which the sun, moon, and eleven stars represent Jacob, his wife, and the eleven tribes of Israel (Gen. 37:9).” ³⁶ In addition, Beale notes plainly, “The twelve stars represent the twelve tribes of Israel.” ³⁷ However, Beale also ties this identification to the seven stars in Rev. 1:16 which, of course, relate to the Church. As a result, he concludes, “This then is another example of the church being equated with the twelve tribes of Israel (see on 7:4-8). Ch. 12 presents the woman as incorporating the people of God living both before and after Christ’s coming.” ³⁸
Beckwith, <i>The Apocalypse of John</i> – Beckwith uses verse 17 to help delineate who the woman in 12:1 happens to be: “The dragon is defined (v. 9) as Satan. The woman is not so explicitly defined, but in designating her as the mother of the Messiah, and at the same time as the mother of Christians (v. 17), the writer shows unmistakably that he intends the reader to see in her what St. Paul (Gal. 4 ²⁶) calls ‘our Mother,’ the ideal people of God.” ³⁹
Blount, <i>Revelation: A Commentary</i> – Blount states, “It is unlikely that John has in mind an individual woman historical or otherwise. Mary, the mother of Jesus, did not give birth to the entire people of God as this woman will (Rev. 12:17).” ⁴⁰ There is clarity in Blount’s presentation. Two more quotes: First, “The twelve stars, then, represent the completeness of the church that finds its foundation and indeed its genesis in this woman;” ⁴¹ Second, “The Old Testament texts and Rev 12 emphasize the same key themes. Faced with hostile opposition, God’s ability to create a people of faith, symbolized in the agonizing labor process of the celestial woman/Zion, will prevail. The woman in extreme labor pain, then is both the Israelite and apostolic (the twelve stars of v. 1) people of faith...” ⁴²
Boring, <i>Revelation</i> – Boring states his view this way: “The woman is not Mary, nor Israel, nor the church but less and more than all of these...She reflects the historical experience of the People of God through the ages, Israel and the church...” ⁴³
Hendriksen, <i>More Than Conquerors</i> – The amillennialist Hendriksen teaches that the woman “symbolizes the Church” and that “Scripture emphasizes the fact that the Church in both dispensations is one. It is one chosen people in Christ. It is one tent; one vineyard; one family—Abraham is the father of all believers whether they are circumcised or not—one olive

³⁴ Ibid., 344.

³⁵ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 624.

³⁶ Ibid., 625.

³⁷ Ibid., 626.

³⁸ Ibid., 627.

³⁹ Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 616. The commentary was originally published in 1919 by the Macmillan Company.

⁴⁰ Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 225.

⁴¹ Ibid., 227.

⁴² Ibid., 227-28.

⁴³ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), 152.

tree; one elect race; royal priesthood, holy nation, people for God's own possession; one beautiful bride; and in its consummation one new Jerusalem whose gates bear the names of the twelve tribes and whose foundations are inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles." ⁴⁴ Hendriksen adds to our consideration this last point, the appeal to the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21) and the mention of the tribes and the apostles to help identify the woman in Rev. 12.
Ladd, <i>A Commentary on the Revelation of John</i> – He comments, "this heavenly woman is mother both of Messiah and of the actual church on earth (her 'offspring,' vs. 17). Therefore, it is easier to understand the woman in a somewhat broader sense as the <i>ideal Zion</i> , the heavenly representative of the people of God (Isa. 54:1; 66:7-9)." ⁴⁵ Notice the appeal to verse 17 to establish the woman as the Church, or more particularly, the people of God.
Lenski, <i>The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation</i> – Lenski explains chapter 12 this way: "Here there is pictured <i>the effort of Satan against Jesus and then against his church during the New Testament era until the end</i> " (emphasis his). ⁴⁶ In reference to the twelve stars, he notes, "Only in the number of the stars we have an added symbol, 'twelve' being the number of the church, the number of the patriarchs and of the apostles, both of whom are combined in 'twenty-four' (see 4:4)." ⁴⁷ Finally, Lenski summarizes: "John sees the church in her real glory, for which reason also she is seen here in heaven and not on earth ... Jesus uses a woman to represent the church in two of his parables (Luke 15:8; Matt. 13:33)." ⁴⁸
Mounce, <i>The Book of Revelation</i> – The woman is "the messianic community, the ideal Israel." ⁴⁹ He goes on to note, "It is out of faithful Israel that the Messiah will come. It should cause no trouble that within the same chapter the woman comes to signify the church (v. 17). The people of God are one throughout all redemptive history." ⁵⁰
Osborne, <i>Revelation</i> – Osborne notes Gen. 37:9-10 as the backdrop to the image of the woman. However, he summarizes this way: "Therefore, it seems likely that the woman here represents Israel, the people of God (with 12:17, where she represents the church we can conclude that she represents the whole people of God, Israel and the church)." ⁵¹
Witherington, <i>Revelation</i> – He notes, "It is possible that the reference to twelve [stars] refers to the twelve tribes of Israel rather than the zodiac and so would be a symbol for the whole people of God." ⁵² Witherington refers to the woman as the Messianic community which most likely includes both OT Israel and the NT Church.

To summarize some of the main issues surfaced in the examples above, and to which dispensationalists must give response, we find the following:

⁴⁴ William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 135.

⁴⁵ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 167.

⁴⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Revelation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1943), 361.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 362-63.

⁴⁹ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 231.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁵¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 456.

⁵² Ben Witherington, III, *Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 168.

1. The opinion of these writers for the most part is that the woman in Rev. 12:1 is the Church or in a general sense the people of God (grouping of the saved of all time). Many still acknowledge the background of Gen. 37:9-10 as the basis for the image, but move beyond Israel, while including believing Israel, in the meaning of the picture.
2. One major basis given for seeing the Church as at least part of the image of the woman is verse 17 later in the chapter: "So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and sent off to make war with the rest of her children [offspring], who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus." Those using this verse to bolster the identification as the Church are Beckwith, Blount, Ladd, Mounce, and Osborne. This conclusion contrasts with those who see the offspring of the woman as a reference to believing Jews during the tribulation.
3. Other passages throughout Revelation were invoked to help support conclusions. Beale links the stars of 1:16 (angels of the seven churches, see v. 20) to the stars of Rev. 12:1 even though the number and context are different. He also cross-references 7:4-8 relative to the identification of the woman as the Church. In that passage, Beale holds that the 144,000, far from being from the tribes of Israel as ethnic Jews, represent the saved of all ages including the Church as the New Israel.⁵³ More difficult for the dispensationalist perhaps is Hendriksen's appeal to both Israel (tribes) and the Church (apostles) together in the New Jerusalem (21:12-14). Lenski alludes to 4:4 and its 24 elders as evidence of the unity of the people of God which should assist the reading of 12:1. In all of these attempts to determine meaning, at least within the book of Revelation there is something akin to a biblical-theology approach for interpretation, even if the conclusions are somewhat faulty.
4. Additionally, appeals theologically to other passages elsewhere in the Bible are used to support the idea that the woman is the Church. Beckwith appeals to Gal. 4:26 ("Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother") to help explain the reference to the woman in Rev. 12 as a mother. Lenski points to parables of Jesus citing Luke 15:8 and Matt. 13:33. The woman searching for a lost coin (Luke 15) somehow demonstrates the symbol of a woman representing the Church. The identification of the woman in Matt. 13:33 in the parable of the leaven as the Church appears to be an unwarranted stretch of the meaning. But Lenski uses it to support the idea that the woman in Rev. 12:1 is the Church.
5. The dispensationalist looks at how these exegetes have handled Rev. 12 and wonders if there is a significant practice of theological interpretation of Scripture. The result may be a downplaying of the local context. It is the identification of the offspring in 12:17 that may in large measure decide the case.

⁵³ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 416-23.

Dispensational Interpretations of the Woman in Revelation 12

Similar to the table format above, dispensational commentators will be presented on the issues of the woman in Revelation 12.⁵⁴ After the table, a few comments will provide a summary of views and issues.

Darby, *Synopsis* – Darby gives a clear and concise understanding: “The first symbolical person...is a woman clothed with the sun, having a crown of twelve stars, and the moon under her feet. It is Israel, or Jerusalem at its centre as in the purpose of God (compare Is. ix.6, and Ps. lxxxvii.6).”⁵⁵ Notice that Darby does not invoke Gen. 37:9-10 (at least here in the Synopsis). Instead, he links to Isa. 9:6 (a child is born; a son is given) and Ps. 87:6 (a reference to those born in Zion). Concerning the attack of Satan on the woman later in Rev. 12, Darby explains, “and the dragon turned to persecute individually the faithful remnant of the seed—the Jews who held fast by the word.”⁵⁶ Darby sees the chapter about Israel through and through.

Fanning, *Revelation* – In an excellent analysis on this issue, Fanning comments, “it seems more natural to understand the ‘woman’ as ethnic Israel, God’s OT people, who figure so prominently in God’s plan to redeem and renew the world (cf. John 4:22). At various places Rev clearly refers to the extension of Israel’s salvific blessings to include gentiles (e.g., 5:9-10; 14:6), but interpreters are too quick to see all of Rev this way and read Israel out of the picture entirely.”⁵⁷ Fanning alludes to Gen. 37:9-10 as the backdrop to the passage. Concerning the offspring of 12:17, he suggests, “The explanation that makes the most sense is to understand the ‘woman’ protected in her refuge (vv. 6, 14) as a representative body of ethnically Jewish followers of Jesus (who are described also as the sealed 144,000 from every tribe of Israel in 7:4-8; 14:1-5) and ‘the rest of her offspring’ as other ethnically Jewish believers who will not escape satanic persecution in those terrible days to come.”⁵⁸

Govett, *On Revelation*, Vol. 2 – He comments that chapter 12 “shows how the Jewish remnant, though all earthly power be against them, their temple and city taken, and their prophets slain, are yet preserved.”⁵⁹ In this, Govett is correctly taking notice of the context of the previous chapter 11. He also holds that Jerusalem as well as Israel is in view.⁶⁰ Although he is somewhat fuzzy on the point, it seems that his partial rapture view leads him to see the offspring of v. 17 as referring not only to ethnic believing Jews but also true Christians who did not qualify for the pre-trib rapture.⁶¹

⁵⁴ My examples are not limited to traditional dispensationalists. Fanning is a progressive dispensationalist. In addition, Govett is a partial rapturist.

⁵⁵ J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 5:535-36. The edition I am using is the one published by Bible Truth Publishers printed in 1980.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5:538.

⁵⁷ Buist M. Fanning, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 349-50, n3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 361.

⁵⁹ Robert Govett, *On Revelation* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Co., 2010), 2:1. This work was originally entitled *The Apocalypse: Expounded by Scripture* in 1861.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:5-7.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2:66.

<p>Ironside, <i>Revelation</i> – The venerable teacher here states plainly that “it is impossible that the woman should symbolize the church.”⁶² Joseph’s dream in Gen. 37:9-10 establishes the case. “Israel is the mother of whom, as concerning the flesh, Christ came. The church did not give birth to Christ. He founded the church.”⁶³ Concerning the offspring of v. 17, Ironside notes, “Unable to destroy the nation as such, he [Satan] makes a special effort to ruin the rest of her seed, or the remnant that keep the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus.”⁶⁴</p>
<p>Keathley, <i>Studies in Revelation</i> – Keathley accepts that the woman in 12:1 is Israel based upon the Gen. 37:9-10 identification, the twelve stars deduced from that passage as the twelve tribes of Israel, the coming of Christ through the Jewish people, and the persecution of Israel in the last half of the tribulation.⁶⁵</p>
<p>Newell, <i>Book of Revelation</i> – Newell gives nine reasons that the woman in Rev. 12 represents Israel. I will summarize three of them here: 1) there is an Israelitish culture (chapter 11) in the context; 2) the image of the woman in 12:1 comes from Gen. 37:9 which established the image as Israel; 3) Israel not the Church gave birth to Christ (Rom. 9).⁶⁶ Newell seems to suggest that the pre-trib rapture prevents the identification of the woman as the Church. This would be a theological argument and not an exegetical one.</p>
<p>Patterson, <i>Revelation</i> – Patterson rejects both the interpretation that the woman in Rev. 12 is the Virgin Mary and that she is the Church, noting that the latter is less likely than the former.⁶⁷ He appeals to Joseph’s dream in Gen. 37:9 to established the identity of the woman as ethnic Israel.⁶⁸ Patterson appears to take the offspring in 12:17 to refer to both Jewish and Gentile believers, even using the word <i>church</i>.⁶⁹ This could be problematic and requires more study.</p>
<p>Ryrie, <i>Ryrie Study Bible</i> – He notes for 12:1 that the woman “represents Israel, who gave Christ to the world (v. 5) and who will be persecuted severely during the Tribulation (v. 13).”⁷⁰ His later notes also suggest the offspring of verse 17 are Jewish.⁷¹</p>
<p>Thomas, <i>Revelation 8-22</i> – Thomas states, “The evidence for limiting the symbolic meaning of the woman to national Israel is strong.”⁷² He gives four major reasons for this identification: 1) the appeal to Joseph’s dream in Gen. 37:9-11; 2) the OT figure of Israel as a travailing woman; 3) the local context of Rev. chapter 11 (especially the ark of the covenant in 11:19); 4) the presentation of Israel in the rest of the book in contrast to the church: “Another picture of the 144,000 in 14:1ff. (cf. 7:1-8) renews the emphasis on the Jewishness of this context. It is begging the question to assert that Revelation makes no sharp distinction between the people of God in the OT and the church in the NT (contra Beckwith, Swete). That distinction</p>

⁶² H. A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1920), 209.

⁶³ Ibid., 210-11.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 218.

⁶⁵ J. Hampton Keathley, III, *Studies in Revelation* (Biblical Studies Press, 1997), 206.

⁶⁶ William R. Newell, *The Book of Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1935), 170-71.

⁶⁷ Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2012), 260-61.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 261.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 271.

⁷⁰ Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible: Expanded Edition NASB95* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 2028.

⁷¹ Ibid., 2030.

⁷² Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 120.

has already appeared in 7:1-8 and appears once again in the great sign of the woman in chapter 12.”⁷³ This last point raises the methodological question of whether some interpreters theologically force a unity of Israel and Church onto the text.

Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* – Walvoord comments, “The woman does not represent Christ, nor the church in general, but rather Israel as the matrix from which Christ came.”⁷⁴ He cites several reasons for this view, two of which are the following: 1) the image is defined for us in Gen. 37:9-11; and 2) appeal to OT passages alluding to Israel as a woman married to the Lord. He takes the offspring of v. 17 as Jewish believers during the last half of the tribulation period.

The difference between the dispensational understanding of the woman in Rev. 12 and the views of the Church Fathers, later Catholics and other nondispensationalists (including evangelicals) is quite clear. For the most part, there are two main options – the woman is Israel or she is the Church (Mary would be a distant third on the scorecard). Our final analysis below discusses how the dispensational approach argues its position and why overall this methodology is superior to the other readings of Scripture in this matter.

Concluding Analysis

The ideas which emerge from the dispensational analysis given above in contrast to other views contribute in some way to developing proper hermeneutical and methodological practice.

1. The first observation is that dispensationalists keenly appreciate *antecedent revelation*. To say it another way that distinguishes dispensationalists from others is that we believe that the progress of revelation is highly significant for interpretation. Everyone believes the Bible was progressively given, but not everyone believes such progression affects interpretation, especially those who read the NT back into the OT. In the discussion of Rev. 12, there are two illustrations of the use of antecedent revelation that can be mentioned.

- (1) One example is the appeal to the vision of Joseph in Gen. 37:9-10 to define the woman of Rev. 12:1 as ethnic or national Israel. It is a simple fact that this is the one place in Scripture where the image has already been revealed. The only difference is that in the dream there are eleven stars and not twelve (as in Rev. 12:1), although the twelfth star is implicitly Joseph himself in the dream. By itself this understanding should rule out such notions as the sun stands for the brightness of the Word of God or the light of the Church or ideas that the moon represents regeneration. The Genesis text explicitly tells us that the sun, moon, and stars point to Jacob, Joseph’s mother, and his brothers. Joseph’s dream encapsulates, not the collection of the saved of all time, but the nation of Israel itself as the text in Genesis plainly states.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966),

Dispensationalists acknowledge this origin of the “sign” of Rev. 12:1 rather straightforwardly. While some nondispensationalists grant this as a starting point, the Israel image is viewed as expanded by the NT text. The basis for this expansion will be discussed below.

- (2) The second example of the appeal to antecedent revelation is *the historical observation that Christ started the Church*. Christ’s predictive statements in Matt. 16:18 and Acts 1:5 coupled with the events of Acts 2 (see also Acts 11:15-16; 1 Cor. 12:13) show that Christ initiated the Church, not the other way around. This truth informs the meaning of the woman in Rev. 12:1 by means of negation. It rules out the identification as the Church. Attempts to read into the image of the woman giving birth in Rev. 12:5 an ongoing birthing of proclamation about Jesus is a theological reading into the text, a form of eisegesis. Instead, the passage should simply be taken to teach that the nation of Israel (in a sense we can say the Jewish people) brought the Messiah into the world. Jesus came in Jewish flesh.
2. The second observation is that dispensationalists attempt to read the text of Rev. 12:1 using literal, grammatical–historical interpretation. Certainly, others claim to do so as well. Unlike many nondispensationalists, however, the dispensationalist does not shy away from letting the text demonstrate Israel’s role throughout the many prophecies of the Apocalypse as one fleshes out the biblical theology of the final book of the Bible.
 - (1) First, within chapter 12 itself, the flow of the chapter makes perfect sense if one accepts the Gen. 37 identification of the woman as national Israel.
 - a. The woman (Israel) is preparing to bring the Christ-child into the world (vv. 1-5).
 - b. The dragon (Satan, serpent, devil – v. 9) is an enemy attempting to prevent the Messiah from being born (v. 4). The history of the dragon is given including his first fall from heaven (v. 3) thereby demonstrating his credentials as the major enemy. Later on, Satan and his angels battle with Michael and the good angels (this takes place at the halfway point of the future tribulation period; cp. Dan. 12:1).
 - c. After losing this battle, Satan and his bad angels are cast down to earth never to have access to heaven again (v. 8). Satan is angry (v. 12) and persecutes Israel (v. 13). But Israel is supernaturally protected by God (vv. 14-16).
 - d. As a result, the dragon’s anger erupts to the point that he then attacks believing Jews outside of national Israel (v. 17), a point to be developed further below.

- (2) Second, dispensationalists do not accept the attempt to associate the seven stars and lampstands of Rev 1:12-20 with the twelve stars in Rev. 12:1. The use of this link in order to establish the unity of the Church and Israel is problematic. The basis for the link is usually voiced as the mention of stars. However, the number of stars is different and the context is different. In 1:11, the seven churches are listed giving the immediate background for the imagery in 1:12-20. This is followed by the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 & 3. On the other hand, in 12:1, you have an image from the OT that was clearly defined and a previous chapter 11 that is filled with Israelite imagery (see below). If the picture of stars is the reason for the linkage of chapter 1 to chapter 12, why not choose the stars of 12:4? Obviously, no one sees the connection of the followers of Satan to the churches of chapter 1 and whoever the woman represents in chapter 12. However, this observation shows that it is more than the mention of the stars that informs the association. At this point, the dispensationalist wonders if a theological definition of church as the people of God in all dispensations is being read into the text of the Apocalypse when the uniqueness of Israel is denied in the interpretation.
- (3) Third, a literal reading of the Apocalypse leads to an understanding of national Israel's role in the end time tribulation period. Dispensationalists believe exactly what the text says when the 144,000 of Rev. 7:4-8 are 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel (see also 14:1-5). This puts Israel squarely on the map as part of the end time story. In addition, in chapter 11, the chapter before the giving of the woman as a sign, we can observe several indicators pointing to a national Israel: (1) the temple (v. 1); (2) the altar of the temple in (v. 1); (3) the Gentile court of the temple (v. 2); (4) the two witnesses (vv. 3-14); (5) Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified (v. 2, 8); and the mention of the ark of the covenant in a heavenly temple (v. 19). Certainly, dispensationalists must reflect on the meaning of the heavenly temple of v. 19 in contradistinction from the earthly temple of v. 1, but overall, the idea that ethnic Israel is not mentioned in the book of Revelation must be discarded by an attention to these details within the biblical theology of the book. Thus, it is not surprising or out of bounds to see national Israel being persecuted by Satan in the end time tribulation in chapter 12.
- (4) Fourth, dispensationalists allow for some sharing between Israel and the Church.⁷⁵ For example, the Church and Israel share God Himself, the Messiah, the coming kingdom, and a present mission to be a light to the world. The concept of sharing comes up in the discussion at a couple of places. For example, Lenski holds that the

⁷⁵ Mike Stallard, "What Do Israel and the Church Share from a Traditional Dispensational Viewpoint?" *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 20 (Spring 2016): 5-26. This article was first presented at the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics, Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, PA, September 2015.

24 elders of 4:4 point to the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles representing the Church. This interpretation is used to identify the woman in 12:1 as the Church, seen as the people of God of all ages (see earlier discussion). In other words, the 24 elders of 4:4 keeps the 12 stars of 12:1 from being *just* the children of Israel. Dispensational interpretations are varied, a sampling holding that the 24 elders are either angels,⁷⁶ the Church,⁷⁷ or the redeemed of all ages.⁷⁸ Regardless of which dispensational view is asserted, the fact that Israel and the Church share some things does not assure that the Church is the New Israel or that somehow the word *Church* is used to label the people of God of all ages. In a way similar to Lenski's use of 4:4, we noted earlier that Hendriksen appeals to the New Jerusalem and the bringing together of Israel and the Church in the description of the city (Rev. 21:12-14) to identify the woman of 12:1 as the people of God in general from both Old and New Testaments. The dispensationalist notes that Israel and the Church can share the New Jerusalem without surrendering the uniqueness of national Israel and without identifying the woman as a spiritual rather than a national entity (see also Heb. 12:22-24).

- (5) At this point, the summary statement can be given from the dispensational viewpoint: There is no need to posit a theological understanding that refuses Israel a place in God's future.
3. The third observation involves how a dispensationalist understands verse 17 in context: "So the dragon was enraged with the woman, and went off to make war with the rest of her children, who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus." Earlier, several nondispensational interpreters took the statement that the children (offspring) of the woman must be Christians because they are described as believers (those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus). Since the woman's offspring are believers, then the woman must be the Church, according to this view. Thus, methodologically, verse 17 is used to define the woman in 12:1. Dispensationalists, on the other hand, use the identity of the woman as Israel, based upon the antecedent revelation of Gen. 37:9-10 and the context of Israelite markers in the book (Rev. 7, 11, 14), to help identify the woman of 12:1 as Israel. Then, the rest of her children (v. 17) refers to other Jews who had trusted in Jesus but were elsewhere in the world and not part of the Jewish people who had gone to the wilderness under the persecution of the devil. All of this makes perfect sense in the context of chapter 12 and the entire Apocalypse.

⁷⁶ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 348.

⁷⁷ Walvoord, *Revelation*, 105-107.

⁷⁸ Patterson, *Revelation*, 172.

In light of this analysis, it is important to note that the dispensationalist believes that his methodology is consistent and helpful in understanding this important part of God's Word. In these days of growing hostility to national Israel and to the Jewish people in general, it is important that when Scripture speaks of Israel using any language, that wording should be taken at face value. The woman of 12:1 is Israel.