

- 1 A seed as numerous as the stars of heaven; the new heavens, that is, the saints in Christ, heirs according to the promise.
- 2 A seed as numerous as the sand on the sea shore; the new earth, that is, Abraham's fleshly descendants, the people of Israel.

In the next study we shall see that, as we look further into Revelation 21, it becomes clear that this vision of a new heaven and a new earth that John sees is also based upon the covenant made with the fathers of old. The two cannot be separated.

(To be continued)

Understanding Revelation 12

3. The interpretation of Revelation 12:5-17

David Green

THE VERSE-BY-VERSE interpretation of Revelation chapter 12 in tabulated form is completed in this article, but a detailed consideration of important links with other parts of the Bible will be left to the fourth and final part of this study.

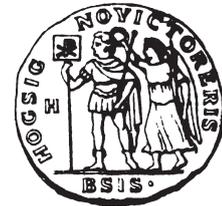
Christian support for Constantine

The apostate church regarded Constantine as being the servant of Christ who was fighting the battles of the Lord. After his conversion, the 'Chi-Rho' monogram, signifying the title 'Christ', was prominently displayed on his soldiers' shields and standards. It also appears on all Constantine's coins from A.D. 315. This monogram usually consisted of X, with P superimposed, but there is some evidence that the form used at Milvian Bridge in 312 was the letter X with the right hand top bent over.¹ The Christians saw Constantine's victories as evidence that he was inspired and led by the Lord of hosts, but the opposing pagans saw them as proof that their gods had fallen before the power of God and His Christ (12:10).

The downfall of the dragon (v. 9)

In one of his coins Constantine pictured his defeat of the pagan Roman power as a dragon being trodden under his foot, and in another pinned down by the Christian 'Chi-Rho' standard (see picture). This suggests that the Christians of those days considered that the vision of the man-child and Michael was fulfilled in the person of Constantine.

It is interesting to note the language used by Constantine when writing to the Church historian Eusebius, a bishop who lived through those times. He referred to his victories as being due to the providence of God: "that dragon having been



Above: Coin depicting a woman with a bow placing the coronal wreath of victory on Constantine, who is holding a standard with the Christian 'Chi-Rho' monogram.

Below: Constantine's victory over paganism depicted as a dragon being pinned down by the 'Chi-Rho' standard.



Pictures of coins taken from *The Revelation: Which Interpretation?* by Brother Graham Pearce. Used by permission of the Christadelphian Scripture Study Service.

deposed from the governance of affairs, by God's providence"; and, "that dragon driven from the administration of public affairs by the providence of the great God, and by my ministry". We are also informed by Eusebius that a picture of Constantine was set up over the palace gate, with the cross over his head, and under his feet a dragon

1. Lactantius, tutor to Constantine's son Crispus, from about 317.

| Table 1 The interpretation of Revelation 12:5 | |
|--|---|
| Symbolic event | Interpretation |
| The woman gave birth to “a man child, who was to rule all nations”. | Because Constantine espoused the cause of the Christians, many of them supported him in his bid for power. So, in a sense, apostate Christianity gave birth to the Emperor Constantine. The birth of the man child took place towards the end of A.D. 312 when he established his power base at Rome. He then controlled the whole of the western third of the empire and was considered chief of the three emperors. |
| The child was “caught [literally, seized, taken by force ²] up unto God, and to His throne”. | This is not a reference to God’s dwelling place. The throne of rulership in any kingdom belongs to God, Who gives it to anyone He wishes (Dan. 4:17,25,32; Rom. 13:1). By defeating Licinius in 314 and again in 324, the force of Constantine’s victorious armies took him up to the throne of the whole empire in the Roman political heavens. |
| “To rule all nations”. | Not only did Constantine rule all the nations of the existing Roman Empire, but he also added others which he had subdued, such as the Scythians and Sarmatians. Some of his coins or medals carry inscriptions such “the conqueror of all nations” and “everywhere a conqueror”. ³ |

transfixed with a dart and falling headlong into the sea.⁴ Thus Constantine realised that his victories in the name of Christ demonstrated the false nature of the Roman gods. From these references to the fallen dragon it is clear that the Christians of those days considered that Revelation 12 had reference to their times.

The Kingdom of our God has come (v. 10)

The apostate Christians of Constantine’s day welcomed the political involvement of the Church in

the affairs of the Roman State. With the downfall of their pagan enemies and their rise to imperial favour, they thought that the Kingdom of God as prophesied by the Old Testament prophets

2. See Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.
3. *Dissertations on the Prophecies*, Thomas Newton, London, 1826, pp. 602-3.
4. Newton, *op. cit.*, pp. 604-5.

The Arch of Constantine in Rome, erected in A.D. 315 in commemoration of Constantine’s victory over Maxentius in A.D. 312, one of the key victories in his triumph over paganism. To the right of the Arch is the Colosseum.



PICTURE: web.mit.edu

| Symbolic event | Interpretation |
|--|---|
| v. 6. The woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished for 1,260 days. | The Catholic Church, which was supported by Constantine and subsequent Christian emperors, excommunicated certain Christian groups, for example the Donatists, and this resulted in persecution by the state. These groups existed mainly in the remoter parts (wilderness) of the Roman Empire, where they "found safety and protection in obscurity" for the long period of 1,260 years, see comment on verse 14 in Table 4. |
| v. 7. War in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and his angels. | The war in heaven was a fight for power among rulers who struggled for supremacy in the Roman heavens. These were Licinius and his pagan supporters on the one hand (the dragon and his angels) and Constantine and his Christian supporters on the other (Michael and his angels). Michael is a symbolic name for Constantine meaning 'one who is like God'. He acted as the instrument of God in starting the process whereby Christianity eventually replaced paganism throughout the empire. |
| v. 8. The dragon and his angels were defeated, and no place was found for them in heaven. | Paganism lost its power base at Rome in A.D. 312 and in the Illyrian third in 314. |
| v. 9. The dragon and his angels were thrown down to the earth. | The supreme ruling power in the Roman Empire, which was located at Rome, was now Christian. However, paganism still existed as a force to be reckoned with, particularly in the east, where Licinius was its sponsor. |
| v. 9. The dragon is described as the ancient serpent, the devil and Satan. | The devil (Gk. <i>diabolos</i>), meaning 'false accuser' or 'slanderer' of God's people, is here the power of sin organised in a military and political form against Christianity and in support of paganism. An earlier example is to be found in 2:10, where the Smyrnan Christians were told that the devil (in the form of the local authorities) would imprison some of them. It is also called Satan (adversary) because of the antagonism shown towards the people of God by the officials of the pagan Roman Empire. |
| v. 10. The dragon is described as "the accuser of our brethren". | The pagan Roman authorities had charged Christians with offences against the state, particularly because of their failure to participate in pagan rites such as emperor worship. |

had arrived. This is illustrated by the following comments by Eusebius:

"From that time on a day bright and radiant, with no cloud overshadowing it, shone down with shafts of heavenly light on the churches of Christ throughout the world".⁵

"By contrast, the church that was desolate and rejected by men has by her inspired endurance won the victory we have seen . . . These things were foretold in words long ago, and set down in sacred books; but the fulfilment has reached us no longer by hearsay but in fact".⁶ From this comment it can be seen that Eusebius considered that Old Testament passages relating to the future Kingdom of God on earth were being fulfilled in those days.

In another passage, he speaks about "men of God [bishops?]" entering the palace without fear, and some sitting at the emperor's table or at tables on either side. Eusebius comments that "it looked like the very image of the kingdom of Christ; and was altogether more like a dream than a reality".

This way of viewing the events of those days was made much easier by the fact that the Church was at that time gradually dispensing with the doctrine of the millennial reign of Christ on the earth. Christ's own teaching regarding his return to this earth was treated as a mere allegory. The

5. Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, p. 381, Penguin Classics edition.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 391.

| Table 3 The interpretation of Revelation 12:10-12 | |
|--|---|
| Symbolic event | Interpretation |
| vv. 10-12. “Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ . . . Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them”. | Great rejoicing took place throughout Christendom at the changed circumstances of the woman, from being a persecuted church to a politically powerful but apostate church that enjoyed the support of the Emperor Constantine. At that time the Christians considered this complete reversal of their previous persecution to be a foretaste of the Kingdom of God. |

doctrine of the Millennium was finally banished by the Church through the influence of Greek theology introduced by Jerome (347–420), and the teaching of Augustine (354–430) that “the Catholic Church in its empirical form was the kingdom of God”.

Gibbon sums up these changes in Church doctrine in the following words: “The doctrine of Christ’s reign upon earth was at first treated as a profound allegory, was considered by degrees as a doubtful and useless opinion, and was at length rejected as the absurd invention of heresy and fanaticism”.⁷

In fact Origen (*circa* 185–254) had sowed the seeds of this error in the third century, but no doubt it had been the earlier introduction of the doctrines of heaven-going at death and the immortality of the soul that had paved the way for this new teaching. “That the Saviour is to reign a thousand years among men before the end of the world, had been believed by many in the preceding [second] century without offence to any . . . In this century [third] the millenarian

7. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbon, Ward, Lock & Co., London, vol. 1, ch. 15, p. 310.

| Table 4 Interpretation of Revelation 12:12-17 and 13:2 | |
|--|--|
| Symbolic event | Interpretation |
| v. 12. “Woe to the inhabiters of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you . . . because he knoweth that he hath but a short time”. | <p>Pagans such as Licinius could see the writing on the wall for the religion of their forefathers as the new religion of Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire and increased in power and influence. The emperor at Rome had repudiated the gods of his ancestors and now worshipped “a god whom his fathers knew not” (Dan. 11:38). Licinius acknowledged that his battles against the forces of Constantine were a contest between the pagan gods of the Romans and the foreign god of the Christians.</p> <p>The “short time” was the period A.D. 320 to 324 when Licinius persecuted Christians in his final years. That was followed by another short time when the Emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363) tried to reinstate paganism.</p> <p>Further woe to the inhabitants of both earth and sea came about as a consequence of the warfare in 324, when Constantine’s armies fought those of Licinius in land and sea battles. This warfare was the result of the pagan dragon plotting to eliminate Constantine in its effort to get back into the political heaven.</p> |
| v. 13. When the dragon had been thrown down to the earth he “persecuted [pursued, RSV]” the woman who had given birth to the man child. | <p>Persecution continued in the areas still under pagan control, that is, the eastern third. It is a problem as to why no distinction is made between the cast-down pagan dragon of verse 13 and the pseudo-Christian dragon of verse 14 that replaced it in the Roman heavens.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(Continued overleaf)</i></p> |

Table 4 Interpretation of Revelation 12:12-17 and 13:2*(Continued from previous page)*

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>v. 14. The woman escaped from the face of the serpent by fleeing into the wilderness.</p> | <p>The persecuting power had at first been pagan but became pseudo-Christian in character. This change is implied by the fact that at the first the dragon knew that its time was short (v. 12), but now (v. 14) a long period of time amounting to 1,260 years is prophesied. Further evidence for this change is to be seen in the second verse of the next chapter. Here the dragon is seen to be the source of power and authority in the empire, and so must be occupying the Roman heavens. The pseudo-Christian church, symbolised by the woman in heaven, excommunicated heretics and caused the Christianised dragon to persecute them. The wilderness symbolises the remoter parts of the empire, where the dissenters found a degree of protection.</p> |
| <p>v. 14. The woman is given the two wings of a great eagle to fly from the serpent into the wilderness. There "she is nourished [taken care of, NIV] for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent [out of the serpent's reach, NIV]".</p> | <p>The eagle is a well-known symbol of the Roman power, being the ensign of the Roman legions and depicted on their battle standards (<i>cf.</i> Deut. 28:49; Lk. 17:37). If the eagle's head represented Rome and its body Italy, then its two wings were the northeastern and southwestern regions of the empire. The dissenters witnessed against the Catholics in these areas for 1,260 years.</p> <p>A "time" equals a prophetic year of 360 days, so 3½ times amounts to 1,260 years on the day-for-a-year principle. During this period there was some persecution, but also a fair degree of immunity from torture and death. At the end of this period (312 + 1,260 = A.D. 1572) there commenced widespread and violent persecution of Protestants by the Catholic authorities in various European countries. Examples are the massacre that commenced in France on St. Bartholomew's Day 1572, and further massacres following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.</p> |
| <p>v. 15. The serpent spewed water out of his mouth in order to sweep away the woman with a flood (torrent, NIV).</p> | <p>A flood of water symbolises an army sent to destroy (Isa. 8:7,8; Jer. 46:7,8). It is said to issue from the serpent's mouth because commands had gone forth from the Roman emperor to eliminate all heretics and schismatics. For examples see Table 3 in Part 1 (Nov. 2005, p. 433).</p> |
| <p>v. 16. The earth helped the woman by opening its mouth to swallow the flood.</p> | <p>The Dissenters were persecuted by the state authorities at the instigation of the Catholic Church, but were protected by the armies of those who rose up to defend their political and religious liberties, such as the Circumcellions of North Africa in the fourth century.</p> |
| <p>v. 17. The dragon was enraged with the woman and went to make war with the remnant of her offspring who keep God's commandments and bear testimony to Jesus.</p> | <p>As prophesied in Genesis 3:15, the serpent and its seed will always be at enmity with the woman and her seed, until the power of sin is finally destroyed. Amongst the people represented by the persecuted woman were those who had a knowledge of the Truth, but they were a mere remnant compared with those who protested against the evils of the papal system but still held false orthodox doctrines such as heaven-going at death and the Trinity.</p> |
| <p>13:2. "The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority" (NIV).</p> | <p>The Christianised Roman dragon had by now established its headquarters in the east at Constantinople. Being the chief power in the Roman heavens it provided support for the developing power of the sea beast in the west.⁸</p> |

doctrine fell into disrepute, through the influence especially of Origen".⁹

Returning to the events of A.D. 312–3, it can be seen from the writings of Eusebius that it was a time of great rejoicing in the Roman heavens and earth by the Christians, who benefited from Constantine's favour:

"Above all for us who had fixed our hopes on the Christ of God there was unspeakable happiness and a divine joy blossomed in all hearts";

"And together, the people of every age, male and female alike, with all their powers of mind, rejoicing in heart and soul, gave glory through

prayers and thanksgiving to the Author of their happiness, God Himself".¹⁰

Another Latin Church Father, Lactantius (d. 320), commented on the peace that had come to the Christians after "ten years of persecution", and called upon the people to "celebrate the triumph of God with gladness".

-
8. See the author's series, "The mark and number of the beast" ([Jun. 2003, p. 244](#); [Jul. 2003, p. 278](#)).
 9. *Mosheim's Ecclesiastical History*, ch. 3, p. 103, Ward Lock & Co., London.
 10. *Op. cit.*, pp. 382-3.

([To be concluded](#))

Occasional series

Travel in the Bible

Roads

Tony Benson

THE WORD 'ROAD', surprisingly, occurs only once in the AV, and then as a translation of a verb (1 Sam. 27:10). However, the Hebrew word *derek*, the normal word in Israel for 'road' today, occurs frequently in the Bible, usually translated 'way'. But is there anything in the Bible to indicate a prepared road, as opposed to a convenient route which people followed? The word *mesillah*, usually translated 'highway', does seem to carry this meaning.

Making and maintaining roads

There are two passages in Isaiah which use the word and which seem clearly to speak of roads actually being made. Both are figurative passages but clearly based on what actually happened in the preparation of roads:

"Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain" (40:3,4);

"Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones" (62:10).

In addition, a passage which uses *derek* rather than *mesillah* also seems to speak figuratively of the same process: "Cast ye up, cast ye up, prepare the way, take up the stumblingblock out of the way of my people" (57:14).

Three basic procedures are involved here:

- gathering out stones to make a good surface, free of obstructions
- smoothing out ups and downs to make a level track
- straightening out bends.

All three elements are involved in road construction today. There is no indication in Scripture that these roads that ran through open country were surfaced in any way and little evidence from non-Scriptural sources either. Streets in towns were paved, however; archaeological excavations have discovered the remains of paved and cobbled streets within cities.

Roads would have required regular maintenance, especially after the winter rains, which would wash stones onto the road surface, wash away the beaten earth making up the road surface and wash soil from banks onto the road. In addition, roads would have needed to be kept clear of plants such as brambles growing onto them.