

Understanding Revelation 12

New
Series

1. Symbols and background history

David Green

This four-part series provides a detailed exposition of Revelation 12, applying it to the establishment of Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire and the consequences for true believers.

THOSE WHO BELIEVE in the existence of a personal supernatural Satan/Devil are likely to use Revelation 12 to support their point of view. However, such a standpoint fails to take into account that the vision is couched in symbolic language. Nor does it provide a consistent interpretation of the whole of chapter 12.

This study keeps fairly closely to the traditional Christadelphian understanding of the chapter, and is intended to link up with the author's study on Revelation 13, entitled, "The mark and number of the beast".¹

A prophecy of symbols

The Revelation was "sent and signified" by the angel of Jesus Christ (1:1). Here the Greek verb *sēmainō* is used, which means 'to give a sign'. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* makes the suggestion that this word is used because the Revelation is expressed by signs, that is, symbols.

It is necessary to be familiar with the signs or symbols used in the Apocalypse in order to interpret its message correctly. If the meanings of these symbols are not provided elsewhere in the same book, evidence for their explanation will be found in other parts of the Scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament.

Most of the symbols utilised in Revelation 12 are listed in [Table 1](#), together with their general Scriptural application and examples of their use elsewhere in Scripture.²

Which historical period is involved?

Several details in this prophecy help to narrow down the period of history to which the vision in Revelation 12 relates. Once this period has been determined, the rest of the prophetic detail can be fitted together to give a full interpretation of the chapter. The time parameters for Revelation 12 are as follows:

- 1 The first verse of the book informs us that it was given to show "things which must shortly [or quickly³] come to pass". These words imply that the visions given to John relate to future events that would soon commence, "things which shall be hereafter" (1:19). There is good historical evidence that John was exiled to the Isle of Patmos at the time of the Domitian persecution, and that he received the Revelation during the later years of Domitian's reign (A.D. 81–96), probably about A.D. 95.⁴ Therefore Revelation 12 must relate to a period after that date.
- 2 The prophecy relates to the Roman Empire, as can be seen from the interpretation of the seven heads and ten horns provided in Revelation 17:9–12. A full discussion of this aspect has been provided in the study on chapter 13 referred to above.
- 3 In Revelation 12 the crowns are on the heads of the dragon and not on the horns, as in 13:1. This indicates that the period relates to the time before the break-up of the Western Roman Empire in A.D. 476 to form separate horn nations. During this earlier period the dragon represented the whole empire ruled from Rome.
- 4 Verse 4 makes reference to the third part of the stars of heaven. This implies a period when the Roman Empire was divided between three different emperors. This state of affairs developed towards the end of A.D. 312.
- 5 We have a situation arising where the dragon is cast out of the ruling heavens (12:7–9), and yet by the beginning of the next chapter (13:2) it is the prime power in the political heavens.

1. [Jun. 2003, p. 244](#); [Jul. 2003, p. 278](#).

2. See the author's series, "Symbols in Bible prophecy" (Mar. 1997 to Mar. 1998 inclusive), for a detailed treatment of the subject.

3. A comparison with Habakkuk 2:3 and Isaiah 48:3 suggests the idea of the fulfilment happening *suddenly* "at the appointed time" with no delay, rather than necessarily happening *soon*.

4. See the section "Dating the Revelation" in *The Apocalypse—A Background Study*, Joseph Banta, 1985, USA.

Symbol	Interpretation	Selected examples
Woman	The church, chaste as the bride of Christ, a prostitute when apostate	Rev. 19:7,8; 21:2; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 17:1-6
Woman's seed (offspring)	The members of the church ⁵	Compare Gen. 3:15 with Rom. 16:20
Heaven	The ruling or higher strata of society	Rev 21:1; Isa. 1:2,10; 13:13
Earth	The general population, the lower strata of society	
Sun	The supreme civil and military authority, for example, the emperor invested with sovereign power and glory	Isa. 13:10; Rev. 6:12-14; Dan. 8:10; 12:3; Called "the powers of the heavens" in Mt. 24:29
Moon	The ecclesiastical or religious rulership—the priestly organisation	
Stars	Subject kings, princes, governors, officials and magistrates—the aristocracy	
Dragon	A kingdom or empire; in this context the Roman Empire	Dan. 7:17,23
Serpent	The power of sin, which opposes God and His people	Gen. 3:15; Rom. 16:20
Red	Sinful, shedding blood (warfare)	Isa. 1:18; Rev. 6:4
Multiple heads	Consecutive forms of government for the beast empire	Rev. 17:10
Crowned heads	Rulership of the empire exercised from a central government	Contrast crowned horns; Rev. 13:1
Multiple horns	Contemporary powers arising from or contributing to an empire	Dan. 7:24; 8:3,8,20,22
Wilderness	Area remote from central government's reach of power	
Day (period)	Each day represents a year	Num. 14:34; Ezek. 4:6

In identifying the correct period we must look for a time when one phase of the Roman dragon loses power only to be replaced by another in the Roman heavens. This fits in with the political changes that took place when Christianity replaced paganism as the state religion.

- 6 Finally, we must identify the period when the woman, who symbolises the Christian church, exhibits two phases. In 12:1 she is to be found as a power in the Roman heavens, and yet in verses 15-17 she suffers from persecution. This points to a time when the church split into two main sections: on the one hand the privileged Catholic party, and the excommunicated and persecuted dissenters on the other.

A careful consideration of these six points brings us to the conclusion that in Revelation 12

we are dealing with important changes that took place in the religious and political spheres of the Roman Empire around the time of Constantine in the early fourth century A.D.

In order to help match the symbolic happenings described by this prophecy to the historical events of those days, an outline history of the division of the empire between a number of rulers, and of Constantine's rise to power, is given in [Table 2](#) on page 432. [Table 3](#) (p. 433) then sets out a number of relevant events in the history of Catholics, heretics and pagans under Constantine and succeeding fourth-century emperors.

(To be continued)

5. Just as the inhabitants of Jerusalem (Zion) are her sons and daughters (Lam. 1:5).

Constantine and York

One of the most important figures in world history is the Roman Emperor Constantine, because he was instrumental in turning the Roman Empire from paganism to Christianity. Because of this he features extensively in the historical interpretation of Revelation 12. An interesting feature of Constantine's life is his association with York, or Eboracum as it was known to the Romans.

The story of how Constantine became associated with York began in the year 286 when the Roman Emperor Diocletian, notorious for instigating the persecution of Christians prophesied under the fifth seal of Revelation 6, made a radical change in how the Empire was organised by appointing Maximian as co-emperor, or augustus. In 293 he appointed Galerius and Constantius as junior emperors



PICTURES: JOHN RAMSDEN

Statue of Constantine outside York Minster.



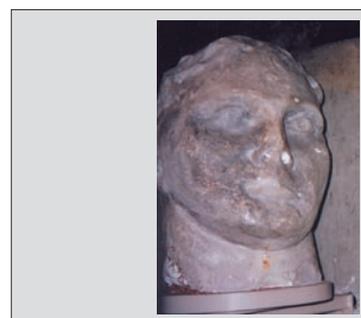
Cross outside St Cuthbert's Church, York, marking the spot where Constantine is thought to have been proclaimed emperor. The wording reads (in Latin), "In this sign conquer", referring to a story that before the crucial battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 he saw a vision of a cross in the sky with these words written against it. The image at the top is a symbol of the sun, much used by Constantine, though it was a pagan image.

or caesars. Constantius had earlier been stationed at Nis, now in Serbia, where his son Constantine was born (year unknown) to a camp follower called Helena whom he later divorced. When his father became caesar, Constantine became part of the court of Diocletian.

In 305 Diocletian and Maximian abdicated and Galerius and Constantius became senior emperors or augusti. Constantine left the court and travelled to join his father, accompanying him in an expedition against the Picts in Scotland. Constantius was ailing, however, and died at York on 25 July 306. The army immediately proclaimed Constantine as augustus, though

the surviving augustus, Galerius, would only recognise him in the junior position of caesar. In 324 Constantine became sole emperor, after much conflict, which will be referred to in more detail in subsequent articles in the series expounding Revelation 12. It was during this time that he embraced Christianity, an event which changed history.

There is a possibility that Constantine became aware of the teachings of Christianity at York. A plaque there shows that the first Bishop of York was appointed in 314, only six years after Constantine was proclaimed emperor there, implying that there must have been a sizable number of Christians in the area. In a local museum there is a rather worn head (see illustration below) said to be from a statue of



Head, thought to be from a statue of Constantine placed in the basilica at York when he was proclaimed emperor.

Constantine which was probably placed in the basilica after he had been proclaimed emperor. The caption states: "A piece of tile with the XP or Chi Rho (the Greek symbol for Christ) was found near here showing that there was some Christian activity or belief here in the Roman period".

York has made quite a lot of its Constantine connections, as the illustrations show.

Tony Benson

Table 2 The division of the Empire and Constantine's rise to power	
Date	Event
286	Diocletian raised Maximian to share rulership of the empire with him.
293	Galerius (a fanatical persecutor of Christians) and Constantius (who had a policy of tolerating Christians) raised to rank of Caesar (deputy emperors).
303	Last major persecution of Christians commenced, darkening the end of Diocletian's reign.
305	Diocletian and Maximian abdicated, being replaced by Galerius and Severus (junior emperor). Galerius proclaimed Maximinus Caesar.
306	Constantius died in Britain, and his son, Constantine , was proclaimed emperor in the west by his army. He continued his father's policy of tolerating Christians. Severus made Augustus by Galerius .
307	Severus marched on Rome against Maxentius but was deserted by his troops. He surrendered to Maximian , father of Maxentius , and was then killed.
308	Licinius replaced Severus , being proclaimed Augustus by Galerius .
309	Maximinus (Maximin) was given rank of Augustus.
310	Maximian was murdered or committed suicide. Maximinus became eastern emperor. Constantine adopted the 'Unconquered Sun' (<i>Sol Invictus</i>) as patron.
311	The chief emperor Galerius died ⁶ and was succeeded by Maximinus , who commenced an extremely violent persecution of Christians.
312 (Oct)	Constantine invaded Italy, defeated Maxentius at the battle of Milvian Bridge and entered Rome victorious. The Roman Empire now had only three rulers. Constantine controlled the western third, which included Rome. Licinius was in charge of the middle or Illyrian third and Maximinus had the eastern or Asian third.
313	Constantine and Licinius issued edicts of toleration for Christians.
313	Maximinus , the eastern emperor, invaded the dominion of Licinius but was defeated and retreated into Asia, where he died the same year. Shortly before his death he granted full toleration to Christians. When he died Licinius annexed his territory.
314	Licinius conspired against Constantine , but was defeated in the ensuing war and sued for peace. His territory was reduced from two thirds to the most eastern third, and that of Constantine increased to two thirds. The Roman dragon now had three main sections, head and body (both Christianised) and the pagan tail. Ten years of uneasy peace between the two emperors followed.
320	In the East Licinius initiated a mild persecution of Christians.
324	Constantine defeated the armies of Licinius in several battles. Licinius surrendered and was exiled, and later executed. Constantine had now become the sole emperor in the Roman heavens.
330	Constantine dedicated Constantinople in the east and made it the headquarters of the Roman Empire.
337	Constantine died and the empire was divided between his three sons, Constantine II , Constantius II and Constans .

6. Shortly before his death **Galerius** issued on 30 April 311 a grudging edict of toleration for Christians, fearing that his painful illness was perhaps due to the vengeance of the Christian God.

Table 3 The history of Catholics, dissenters (heretics) and pagans under Constantine and his successors	
313	Constantine issued the Edict of Milan extending toleration to Christians and placing the Christian priesthood on a level with the pagan priesthood.
313	Constantine granted money to the Catholic clergy in the African provinces and ordered an investigation of the heresy of Donatism.
316	Constantine decided against the Donatists.
317	The secular powers were set in motion against the Donatists. Their buildings were surrounded by troops, and mobs of heathen were incited to attack them.
321	Donatists grudgingly granted toleration by Constantine and their persecution was abandoned.
324	Promise of toleration to pagans renewed by Constantine .
326	Constantine ordered no immunity from compulsory public service for heretics and schismatics.
341	Constantius II ordered pagan sacrifices to cease, but with little, if any, effect.
342	An edict of the Emperors Constantius II and Constans to eradicate totally all superstitions (that is, pagan practices) but to spare some pagan shrines as places of long-established amusements.
347	Constans ordered a campaign of repression against the Donatists. Donatus and other leaders exiled to Gaul.
377	The first of a series of general laws proscribing Donatism. These laws were enforced only sporadically for two reasons. Provincial governors and many local magistrates were still pagan, and it was a time of growing weakness in the imperial government, when they were inclined to ignore unwelcome instructions.
384/8	Wave of pagan temple smashing in the east.
390-400	The heyday of imperial edicts against both heresy and paganism.

The conversion of the Emperor Constantine was a major turning point in the history of Christianity. In one lifetime, the Christian church moved from a position of illegality and ferocious persecution to one of favour. The church historian Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–339) had been imprisoned during the persecution of Diocletian and had seen friends, including his beloved teacher, killed. Yet in his later years he was a personal acquaintance and occasional guest of the Emperor Constantine. The church moved rapidly from being an association of outsiders to take a central position in Roman society.

Constantine's conversion was a personal matter and the majority of his subjects were still pagans. But in a military dictatorship (for that is what the late Roman Empire was) his example and patronage set in motion the rapid conversion of large numbers of people. Imperial favour was crucial to the success of Christianity. It was no accident that a great surge of converts occurred in the fourth and fifth centuries, as the privileged status of Christianity became evident to all. By 380 the situation had shifted so much that the Emperor Theodosius (379–95) declared orthodox Catholic Christianity the official religion of the Roman state. The practice of paganism and of heretical forms of Christianity was forbidden; Judaism was permitted under tight restrictions.

Joseph Lynch, The Medieval Church, pp. 10,11.