

The Real Christmas Grinch

Overview

One of the most popular modern Christmas stories is Seuss's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Published in 1957, and followed by an animated television version in 1966 and a feature film in 2000, the story centers around a misanthropic hermit who tries to disrupt the joyful Christmas season in Whoville. In the end, won over by the kindness of a little girl, the grinch repents of his meanness and joins in the joy.

Half of the story is true. There really is a grinch, and he really did try to stop Christmas—the very first Christmas. Like Seuss's character, he did not succeed. However, the story doesn't end with his redemption, but with his defeat. It's found in Rev 12:1-6.

These verses are a summary of a longer history (12:7-ch. 14) that centers around two heavenly signs, the radiant woman (12:1) and the dragon (12:3), and the conflict between them. The conflict ends with the judgment to fall on the dragon and his forces, leading to the third sign in 15:1, the angel bringing the last judgments.

These three signs in heaven are the only items so designated in the book, and show us the point of the verb "signified" in 1:1. They are graded in their importance.

- Least among them is the dragon, called simply a "sign." He is Satan (v.9), the accuser of God's people, who wishes to usurp the place of the Lord Jesus as king of creation.
- The woman, the mother of the messiah, is a "great sign." The astral symbolism takes us back to Gen. 37:9,10. The sun and moon are Jacob and Rachel; the twelve stars are the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. The first sign, the dragon, confronts her, trying to stop the birth of the messiah.
- The plague angels in 15:1 who bring the final judgment on the dragon are a "great and marvelous sign."

Here, then, is a biblical outline of history. God's enemy seeks in his wrath to destroy the Messiah and thus the people of God, but will one day himself be destroyed.

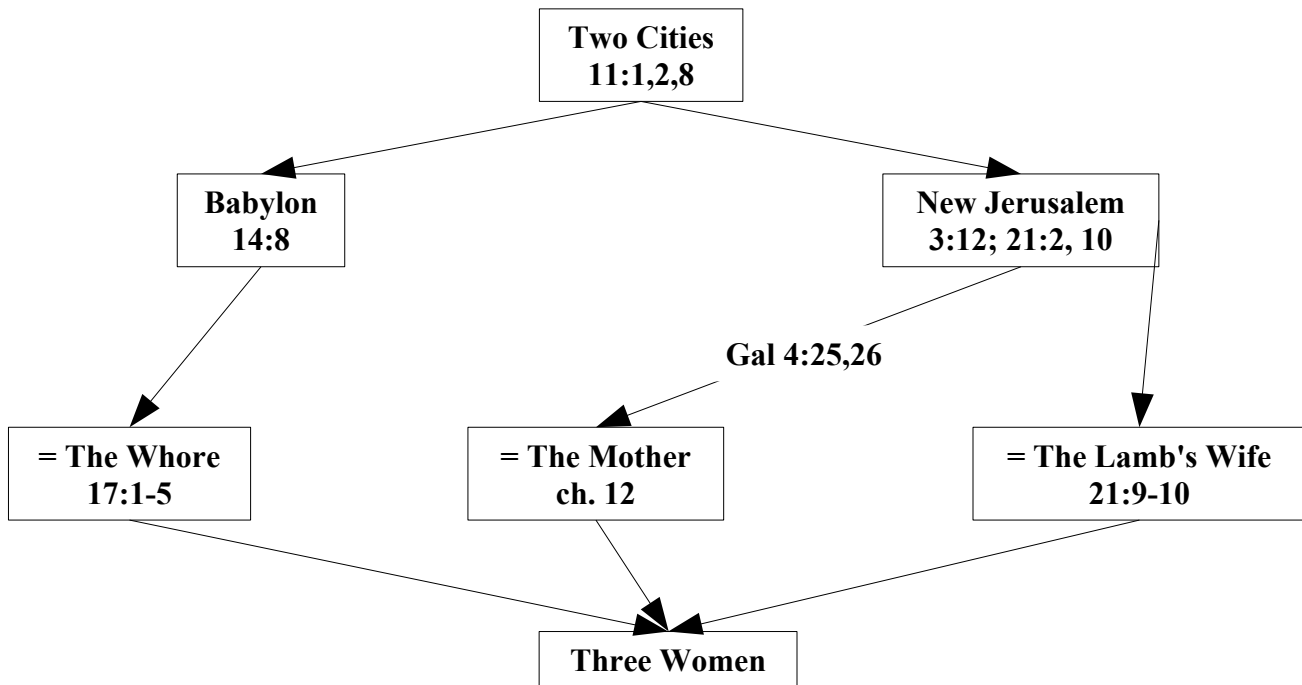
1-2, The Woman

Gen. 37:9,10 makes a strong case for identifying her in some way with Israel.

As the scene opens, she is about to bear a son. The reference in v.5 to Psalm 2 shows that this is the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. John's vision thus begins before the NT.

Later (v.17), we learn that she has other children as well. These are not just any Israelites, but those who "keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus." (NB: not only do we have the same Father as the Lord Jesus, but also the same mother! Thus "he is not ashamed to call them 'brethren'," Heb. 2:11.)

The figure shows the wider scheme of symbols in the book.



11:1,2,8 introduced the distinction between the two cities, later to be introduced as Babylon and Jerusalem. Parallel with these figures are those of the three women.

- 17:1-5 pictures Babylon as a great whore.
- 21:9,10 pictures Jerusalem as "the bride, the Lamb's wife."
- Recall Paul's imagery in Gal. 4:25,26, in which heavenly Jerusalem is contrasted with Jerusalem which now is, and is depicted as "the mother of us all." Compare v. 17, which shows that the woman in Rev has more seed than just the man-child.

Thus we take the woman as the new Jerusalem, the true Israel of God:

- the vehicle through which the Messiah came
- the mother of all true believers in every age
- the perennial target of Satan and his hosts.

Application: Christmas is family time. We are accustomed to travel to distant cities to be with those whom we love. The woman reminds us to give priority to our true family, our spiritual one. We are children of the heavenly Jerusalem, siblings of the Lord Jesus Christ. This Christmas, let us rejoice in our true home.

3-4a, The Dragon

v.9 and 20:2 identify him as Satan.

3, Heads and horns

These details recall a series of biblical images that help us to identify Satan's particular role. The

bottom line is that in contrast with the woman hiding in the wilderness, the heavenly Jerusalem, we have the political systems of this world.

The beast from the sea, 13:1, has the same features. These (at least the horns) reflect Daniel's fourth beast (Dan. 7:7, 20). Daniel sees the beast; John shows us the dragon behind the beast. The same features turn up again in the beast ridden by the scarlet woman in 17:3, which brings us back to Babylon.

17:10,11 interprets the seven heads as successive world empires, to be succeeded by the beast himself. These have plausibly been interpreted as Egypt, Nineveh, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome [concurrent with John], Christendom. Neb's vision in Dan. 2 skips over the first two and merges the last two.

17:12 interprets the ten horns as kings who rule concurrently with the beast. The horns of Daniel's beast are also explained as kings, Dan 7:23, 24.

It's important to note that these heads and horns are borne by the dragon as well as by the beast. Satan is the one behind every dominant world empire down to this present day, and in every age he has tried to destroy the people of God. The dualism is the same that we see in Dan 10:12, 13, 20 and in Ezek 28:2,12. Every nation on earth is backed by Satan and his demons, with one exception: Israel, Dan 10:20; 12:1. Satan's murderous tendency (recall John 8:44) explains why the nations of the earth perennially fight with one another, and why Israel is at the center of their animosity.

Application: The wonderful family of God, our home city of Jerusalem, is unique. All other families are dysfunctional; all other cities are under Satan's rule. We should beware of entanglements with them.

4a, Tail dragging down the stars of heaven:

At the least, depicts the size and power of the dragon. So big that he even bumps the stars out of heaven when he moves.

To what do the "stars of heaven" refer?

- May refer to the angels of Gen. 6, who acc. to Jude 6 "kept not their first estate," but cohabited with humans (perhaps via demon possession). (NB: we don't have many details of Satan's original sin and what impact it had on the other angels; most of our ideas are derived more from Milton's Paradise Lost than from the scriptures.)
- The only other reference in Rev to "stars of heaven" is in the sixth seal (6:13), where the stars of heaven fall to the earth. Mark 13:25 is the only other use in the NT, also eschatological. Since 1-6 is a preview of the following chapters, this might be the anticipation of 12:7-9, the dragon's fall from heaven with his angels at the start of Daniel's 70th week. But 6:13 seems to refer to all the stars, not just some of them.
- Most likely, the reference is to the stars in the woman's crown in v.1, the tribes of Israel. The most common use of "stars of heaven" in the OT is to describe the multitude of the people of God. The dragon brutally and carelessly seeks to destroy the people of God. Cf. Dan 8:10, in which the little horn (Antiochus Epiphanes) casts down some of the stars to the ground; cf. 11:32, his corruption of some of the Jewish leaders. Under his influence, many who were thought of as believers will be corrupted and turned aside.

So here is the scene: a beautiful but gravid woman, in the throes of childbirth, and a powerful and destructive dragon, representative of impersonal political might. One is personal, lovely, creative, but weak; the other is impersonal, ugly, destructive, and powerful. And into the midst of this contrast comes a little baby, destined to rule all nations, who against all odds is protected from the dragon.

4b-6, Summary of their Struggle

An excellent example of how prophecy foreshortens time to bring together the high points.

4b, The Dragon seeks to ambush Messiah.--This effort extends throughout the entire history of the world, ever since the promise of the seed of the woman. (See Bullinger, *The Apocalypse*, 400-402.) First he tried to destroy the woman.

- Gen. 6, sought to pollute the line with demons. Only Noah and his family survive.
- Exod. 1, Pharaoh seeks to kill off Israel
- 2 Chron. 21, 22. Jehoram kills off all his brothers, and all his sons are slain by the Arabians, except Ahaziah. Athaliah slew all his sons, but Jehoiada the priest delivered Joash.
- Esther. Haman seeks to kill off the entire nation.

Then, once Christ was born, he tried to destroy him:

- Matt. 2. Herod kills off the eligible candidates.
- Matt 4:6, Satan's temptation to cast himself down from the pinnacle of the temple
- Luke 4:29, the people of Nazareth try to throw him off the hill
- two storms on the Sea of Galilee: one on the way to the country of the Gadarenes (Mark 4:37), the other after feeding the 5000 (John 6).
- attempt in John 9 to stone him in the temple

All comes to a head on Calvary, but "God raised him from the dead."

5a, Messiah is born.--The quotation from Ps. 2 clearly identifies him; cf. 19:15, when he returns again from heaven. Time: about 2 B.C.

5b, Messiah is snatched away to heaven (to return in ch. 19).--Time: about A.D. 33.

6, Believers flee to a divinely prepared refuge.--Presumes opposition by the dragon: the sufferings that God's people have endured throughout the centuries, first from the Romans, then at the hands of the Roman Catholic institution, and under totalitarian governments of every description.

a thousand two hundred and threescore days.--This period, alternatively designated 42 months, appears repeatedly (11:2,3, the treading down of Jerusalem; 13:5, the reign of the beast from the sea). It is the second half of Daniel's 70th week, from Dan. 9:27, when the desolator breaks his covenant with the nation and sets up the abomination of desolation, and marks the peak of Satan's opposition to the woman and her seed. Daniel also calls out a period of "a time, times, and half a time" (three and a half years) of intense opposition: 7:25; 12:7, 11-12.

Summary

Remember the "sign," the Dragon. Expect opposition and persecution. He's been at it for six thousand years; don't expect him to quit now. His vehicle is the nation-state, the system of human politics controlled by his demonic princes. He is the real grinch, the one who tried to stop the coming of the Lord Jesus.

Remember the "great sign," the Woman. You are not alone. The opposition you face is not directed at you, but at your mother, the New Jerusalem, and it is shared by all your spiritual siblings, beginning with the LJC.

Remember the "great and marvelous sign," the seven angels of judgment. God will not let this go on forever. He will set the wrongs right, lock up Satan, and bring us to enjoy our heavenly inheritance.