

## A Great Sign Appeared in the Sky. Audience-Oriented Criticism of Revelation 12:1-6

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**ABSTRACT:** Revelation 12:1-6 recounts two signs that appear in heaven. The first sign is a woman and the second one is a dragon with seven heads, ten horns and seven diadems on its seven heads. The somewhat unusual description of the two signs has its grand finale in 12:4-6 which tells about the interaction between the woman and the dragon, as well as her child. The dragon, aware that its power must last for only a short period, a symbolic ten days, tries to swallow the child to whom the woman is about to give birth. In this way, the dragon wants to thwart and frustrate God's plan. The newborn child is caught up by God to his throne in heaven. The reference to the OT helps the audience to identify the newborn child as the Messiah who will shepherd all the nations. The presentation of the child's mission to shepherd all the nations assures the audience that God's plan will be realized. This vision assures the audience that God is almighty, and that he is the 'hidden actor' in the entire vision. The reader-oriented exegesis of the passage discloses how the audience respond to the author's rhetorical arguments and presentation.

**KEYWORDS:** Revelation, great sign in heaven, audience

The vision of the two signs in the sky (12:1-6) has always been an important part in the studies of Revelation. This passage has been subject to different approaches. Many different interpretations have been proposed, yet the passage continues faithfully to conceal its mysteries.<sup>1</sup> While in recent years, biblical studies have seen a tangible proliferation of articles, monographs and studies written on this most mysterious book of the New Testament, none of them seems to employ the audience-oriented approach to decode the signs of the woman and dragon that appear in Revelation 12.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the following study is wanted inasmuch as it aims to fill that lacuna and engages the audience-oriented method in order to understand the mysterious signs and their meaning.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 According to Saint Jerome (*Ep.* 53,8), "Apocalypsis Joannis tot habet sacramenta, quot verba. Parum dixi pro merito voluminis. Laus omnis inferior est: in verbis singulis multiplices latent intelligentiae."
- 2 For an overview of various methods used by modern scholars to interpret the Book of Revelation, see R.S. Morton, *Recent Research on Revelation* (RRBS 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press 2014).
- 3 The methodology of this paper employs the tools of audience-response or audience-oriented criticism, (also known as reader-response or reader-oriented criticism or theory). For examples of this method used to read the biblical texts see E.V. McKnight, *Postmodern Use of the Bible. The Emergence of Reader-Oriented Criticism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 1988); R.M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand. Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 1991); W. Carter – J.P. Hail, *Matthew's Parables*.

## 1. Revelation 12:1-6 in the Previous Biblical Studies

Revelation 12 has been at the center of scholarly debate for some time on account of its unusual form introducing the two signs, and of important questions regarding the exact meaning of these signs.<sup>4</sup> It is not surprising that many have started to call chapter 12 the heart of Revelation,<sup>5</sup> or at least a key to unlock the meaning of the entire book.<sup>6</sup> The great sign that appeared, followed by another sign, evidently differs in form from the preceding context where the visions were introduced by the simple, yet significant, construction “and I saw.” The dragon, one of the central figures in this passage, is a mythical creature and indeed not a heavenly one. It is found in fairy tales, myths and legends, not in the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have put a lot of effort into answering these questions and grasping the meaning of the two signs, especially the sign of the woman.<sup>8</sup> Ancient tradition had always interpreted the sign of the woman as a reference to the Church and its members who have to suffer persecution and are subjected to hatred and misunderstanding by the world.<sup>9</sup> This ecclesiastical interpretation was subsequently replaced, starting already by the end of the fifth century, by Marian interpretations. In this new perspective, the great sign was understood as a presentation of Mary and of the birth of the Messiah. Recently, many commentators have expressed the opinion that this sign is suited better to the former, ‘collective’ interpretation.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, there are still some commentators who prefer to follow the ‘individual’ interpretation.<sup>11</sup>

Aside from the question of correct interpretation, individual or collective, scholars have struggled with questions regarding the relationship between Revelation 12 and some

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*Audience-Oriented Perspectives* (CBQMS 30; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America 1998) 12–13; P.J. Rabinowitz, “Whirl Without End: Audience-Oriented Criticism,” *Contemporary Literary Theory* (eds. G.D. Atkins – L. Morrow) (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press 1989) 81–100; J.P. Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism. From Formalism to Post-Structuralism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University 1980); M.A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 1990).

- 4 P. Prigent, *Apocalypse 12. Histoire de l'exégèse* (BGBE 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1959); P. Farkaš, *La «donna» di Apocalisse 12. Storia, bilancio, nuove prospettive* (TGST 25; Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana 1997); D. Kotecki, “Kryteria interpretacji Apokalipsy,” *BPTb* 5 (2012) 15–34.
- 5 J.L. Kovacs – C. Rowland – R. Callow, *Revelation. The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (Malden, MA: Blackwell 2004) 134–135.
- 6 In this way Prigent, *Apocalypse 12*, 136–147; G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation. A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Paternoster 1999) 621.
- 7 In the New Testament, the noun δράκων is found exclusively in Revelation, thirteen occurrences, of which eleven are in Revelation 12–13. It is quite frequent in LXX, 36 occurrences, where it is used to designate evil and to symbolize the sea monsters that oppress Israel.
- 8 An abridged version of this long quest is found in Kovacs – Rowland – Callow, *Revelation*, 134–146.
- 9 M.C. Paczkowski, “La Lettura cristologica dell’apocalisse nella chiesa prenicena,” *SBFLA* 46 (1996) 187–222.
- 10 U. Vanni, “Dalla maternità di Maria alla maternità della Chiesa: Un’ipotesi di evoluzione da Gv 2,3–4 e 19,26–27 ad Ap 12,1–6,” *RdT* 26 (1985) 28–47.
- 11 E. Testa, “La struttura di Ap 12,1–17,” *SBFLA* 34 (1984) 225–238; B. Buby, “The Story-Tellers of Mary,” *Emmanuel* 105 (1999) 298–307.

evident similarities found in extra-biblical legends and myths.<sup>12</sup> In the twentieth century scholars proposed four different answers: 1) John used the Greek myths of Apollo, Leto and Python; 2) he was influenced as well by Egyptian sources representing the story of Isis, Osiris, Horus and Typhon; 3) he might have adopted a Babylonian myth of the battle between Damkina, Marduk and Tiamat; 4) or built upon the biblical tradition found in Gen 3:15.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, the extended attempt to answer these source-critical questions raised another one: any assumption that John used pagan legends and myths has to be confronted with his constant exhortation not to compromise with this present world (Revelation 2–3).

Scholars generally agree that Revelation 12 can be divided into three parts.<sup>14</sup> This universal agreement, however, seems to end there. In fact, many commentators disagree on the precise nature of these presupposed parts, and as a consequence end the first part in different places. Wilfred J. Harrington starts the first part in 12:1 and ends in 12:4a.<sup>15</sup> David E. Aune starts the division in 11:19 and runs through 12:6<sup>16</sup> François Martin recognizes that the story starts in 12:1 but sees it ending in 12:5. The reason for dividing in this way is the evident movement from heaven to the wilderness (the earth).<sup>17</sup> Finally, Gregory K. Beale prefers to consider chapter 12 as one vision with various parts, where verses 10–12 serve as a heavenly interpretation.<sup>18</sup> This consideration does not stop him from identifying the first part to be 12:1-6.<sup>19</sup>

12 P. Busch, *Der gefallene Drache. Mythenexegese am Beispiel von Apokalypse 12* (TANZ 19; Tübingen – Basel: Francke 1996).

13 An extended presentation of these legends and their evaluation is found in D.E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16* (WBC 52B; Nashville, KY: Nelson 1998) 665–675; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 625; F.J. Murphy, *Fallen Is Babylon. The Revelation to John* (NTC; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press 1998) 279–282.

14 J.M. Ford, *Revelation* (AB 38; Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1975) 187–188; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 624; J.L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John. A Narrative Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 2009) 169; Murphy, *Fallen Is Babylon*, 277; J.R. Yeatts, *Revelation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald 2003) 218; H. Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Regensburg: Pustet 1997) 270–271.

15 W.J. Harrington, *The Apocalypse of St. John. A Commentary* (London: Chapman 1969) 164.

16 David E. Aune (*Revelation 6–16*, 665–675) followed by many others, notes that the noun “sign” becomes a marker to distinguish a new part of the book. In fact, in chapters 4–11 this noun is never used.

17 F. Martin, *L'apocalypse. Lecture Sémiotique* (Lyon: Profac – Cadir 2004) 192.

18 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 622–624.

19 Many other scholars share this division. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John*, 169; Murphy, *Fallen Is Babylon*, 277; Yeatts, *Revelation*, 218; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung*, 271.

## 2. The Disposition of the Audience and Their Response

Revelation 12:1-6 is one of the crucial passages in the third section of the Revelation given to John on the island of Patmos.<sup>20</sup> So far, the audience<sup>21</sup> have heard the inaugural vision, which John saw on the Lord's Day (1:1-20). They have heard the series of seven symbolic oracles to the seven churches in Asia Minor (2:1-3:22).

The oracles to the seven churches (with praise, recommendations and exhortations) were followed by a vision of heaven opened, where John saw the One sitting on the throne (4:1-5a). He also saw heavenly worship (4:5b-11), and a scroll, whose seals nobody could open (5:1-5) except the Lamb that had been slain (5:6-10). The audience heard that the breaking of the seven seals of the mysterious scroll unleashed a series of horses. The riders of these horses received power to harm the earth. The prayer of the souls under the altar (6:9-11), the vision of 144,000 servants of God sealed on the forehead (7:1-8) as well as the vision of a great crowd dressed in white robes and worshiping God (7:9-17) served as an interlude between the series of the seals.

The audience then heard that the opening of the seventh and last seal (8:1-5) was followed by a great silence, after which came a vision of seven angels trumpeting their trumpets (8:6-11:19). Inside this section, the audience heard the announcement of three woes (8:6-13), the release of four angels (9:13-21), and then how a mighty angel had ordered John to devour a little scroll (10:1-11).

The immediate context preceding 12:1-6 is the description of the martyrdom and vindication of two prophetic witnesses (11:1-14), who were killed on the streets of that great city spiritually called Sodom and Egypt. The immediate context following 12:1-6 is the presentation of the heavenly battle between Michael and the dragon in 12:7-12. This battle is followed by the persecution of the woman in 12:13-18. The presentation of the two signs in the sky, the heavenly battle, and the persecution of the woman are followed by visions

20 There are certainly many different ways to divide the book of Revelation. In this paper, I have chosen to follow this division: 1) the inaugural vision and account of what John saw in 1:1-20; 2) John, 'in the Spirit,' is shown what soon must happen in 2:1-3:22; 3) John, in the Spirit, is shown what must happen after these things in 4:1-16:21; 4) John, carried in the Spirit, is shown the prostitute, and 'the bride of the Lamb' in 17:1-21:8; 5) John, carried in the Spirit, is shown the Holy City in 21:9-22:21.

21 Here and throughout the paper I take the noun "audience" as a collective noun. The plural form corresponds better to the Greek text where plural nouns are used for the audience. The audience are most likely to be understood as a group of Gentile-Christians living in Asia Minor as the letters to the seven churches may suggest (Rev 2-3). The use of many biblical and extrabiblical references suggests that the audience are well versed in the OT traditions as well as have an extensive knowledge of the pagan myths. Thus, contrary to Gregory K. Beale (*The Book of Revelation*, 81-86) who suggests that the readers of Revelation most likely came from an illiterate pagan Greek background and would have been unable to understand the OT traditions. The text of Revelation itself indicates that the implied audience of Revelation have a good knowledge of the OT, its background with all its nuances. Moreover, the implied audience of Revelation have to face all kind of difficulties and oppressions (most likely the persecution under Domitian A.D. 81 to 96) which lead them to cry out and ask for retribution (Rev 6:10). Finally, one cannot forget that the author found himself on the island of Patmos "on account of the Word of God and testimony of Jesus" (Rev 1:9). At the same time the author of Revelation assures the audience that their penitence, faithfulness and endurance will have an eternal reward (Rev 7).

of two beasts, which form a sort of diptych: the first rises from the sea (13:1-10), whereas the second comes out of the earth (13:11-18).

### 3. Chiasmus as the Rhetorical Device<sup>22</sup>

Revelation 12 has a chiastic structure A B A'. The elements A (12:1-6) and A' (12:13-18) recount the story of the woman and the dragon, while the central element B focuses on the description of the war between Michael and the dragon (12:7-12).<sup>23</sup> The first element in this chiasm, 12:1-6, the object of this study, also has its own chiastic structure, described as A B C B' A' where C is the pivot or turning point of the story. In fact, Rev 12:3c is the only place of the passage where "ten horns" (κέρατα δέκα) of the dragon are mentioned which makes it unparallel element of the whole structure.

#### A (12:1-3a)

- a) <sup>1a</sup>And a great sign appeared in the sky,
- b) <sup>1b</sup>a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet <sup>1c</sup>and on her head a crown of twelve stars,
- b') <sup>2</sup>and she is pregnant, and cries out, laboring and being tormented, to give birth.
- a') <sup>3a</sup>And there appeared another sign in the sky,

#### B (12:3b)

<sup>3b</sup>and behold, a great red dragon having seven heads

#### C (12:3c)

<sup>3c</sup>and ten horns

#### B' (12:3d)

<sup>d</sup>and on his heads seven diadems,

#### A' (12:4-6)

- a) <sup>4a</sup>and its tail swept a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. <sup>4b</sup>Then the dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth,
- b) <sup>4c</sup>so that when she gave birth, he might devour her child.
- c) <sup>5a</sup>And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is about to shepherd all the nations with an iron staff.
- b') <sup>5b</sup>And her child was caught up to God and his throne
- a') <sup>6</sup>and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that they nourish her for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

The above diagram illustrates that the first unit of chiasm A (12:1-3a) opens and closes with the appearance of a sign in the sky. Both signs are introduced with the verbal form (ὡφθη) and are called in the same way (σημείον). The detailed description of the first sign

<sup>22</sup> For the chiasm and other rhetorical devices used by the biblical authors, see J. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament. An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2005) 41–79.

<sup>23</sup> Resseguie, *The Revelation of John*, 169.

constitutes the pivot (b b') of the unit. The detailed description of the second sign is found in units B (12:3b), C (12:3c), and B' (12:3d). These units draw the attention of the audience to the abnormality of the second sign. The description starts with the dragon's seven heads in B (12:3b), passes to its ten horns in C (12:3bc) and finally ends with the seven diadems on its seven heads in B' (12:3d). The reason to divide them in this way is the parallel reference to the seven heads of the dragon in B and B' and the description of its ten horns in unit C. The passage ends with the interaction between the two signs. In this way, the initial presentation of the two signs in A (12:1-3a) finds its continuation in a short description of the dragon's hostility toward the woman and her child in A' (12:4-6). Also, this final unit has some sub-units where the description of the birth of the *child who is about to shepherd all the nations with an iron staff* is the pivot of the unit.

#### 4. Reader-Response Analysis of the Passage

##### 4.1. A Great Sign Appeared in the Sky (Rev 12:1-3a)

a) *And a great sign appeared in the sky* (12:1a). The audience note that this vision opens in a different way than all the others. John is not the only one who is able to see it. The use of the aorist passive 'appeared' (ᾤφθη) indicates that this 'great sign' (σημεῖον μέγα) is visible to all. Moreover, the sign appeared in 'the sky' and involves astral bodies. The audience are therefore aware that the sign is different, and that it has a universal meaning.

Since 'sign' in 12:1 is the first use of this noun in the whole book, it certainly draws the attention of the audience. The audience can easily anticipate the meaning of this sign, for this noun has frequently, if not exclusively, a religious connotation and may imply an intervention by God.<sup>24</sup> Normally, the noun σημεῖον is used in reference to a sign, or distinguishing mark, whereby something that is known (Gen 1:14). It can also be used as reference to an event that is an indication or confirmation of divine innervation (Isa 7:14). The audience heard in the opening vision that the time is near (1:3) and the visions pertain to what is about to happen (1:19b). In this perspective, the audience can interpret σημεῖον as a forewarning sign or portent. The sign is therefore an anticipation of what has to happen soon. The adjective 'great' makes it clear that the sign is not ordinary, but rather important, and previously unknown. The response of the audience must therefore be to prepare themselves for the content of this great sign.

b) *A woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and upon her head a crown of twelve stars* (12:1bc). The audience hear that the general introduction of the sign is followed now by its detailed description. First of all, the sign is universal, both in its visibility and its destination. It is not hidden from the sight of the audience. So far, the audience had

<sup>24</sup> Ford, *Revelation*, 195. According to Frederick J. Murphy (*Fallen Is Babylon*, 277) the noun σημεῖον points beyond itself, for it indicates heavenly power at work. Heinz Giesen (*Die Offenbarung*, 276) interprets in the same way. See also H. Gollinger, *Das «Grosse Zeichen» von Apokalypse 12* (SBM 11; Stuttgart: Echter 1971) 80–83.

heard the noun 'woman' twice (2:20 and 9:8). However, none of the previous occurrences seem to be comparable to this one. In fact, in the first case, the community in Thyatira was reproached for having tolerated the works of the woman Jezebel who called herself a prophetess. The audience were also beseeched not to follow Jezebel, for her teaching deceived God's servants. In the second case, the audience heard about women's hair. It was used to depict the locusts that came out of the abyss to harm people who did not have the seal of God on their forehead.

Based on these two occurrences the audience have a rather negative connotation of this sign. However, if well acquainted with biblical and extra-biblical parallels, the audience correct the first impression and understand the true meaning of this sign. In fact, in the biblical tradition, 'woman' is a frequent symbol for Israel, for the Holy City of Jerusalem, and for the community of the faithful.<sup>25</sup> The Prophets have frequently used the image of a woman to designate the special relationship of God with his people (Hos 2:16-17). It was used to represent people crying out to God for salvation (Isa 26:17), or to portray Zion giving birth to children, a symbol of rebirth after exile (Isa 66:7-8).<sup>26</sup>

At this point the audience are already able to identify the woman, but the description of her dress will be a further guide. The woman is dressed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and she wears a crown of twelve stars. The audience already heard about the sun previously (6:12; 7:2; 7:16 and 8:12). The most significant passages are those where the sun is associated with Christ whose face shone like the sun shining at full strength (1:16), or with the angel whose face was like the sun (10:1). Based on these two passages the audience perceive the heavenly identity and protection of the woman.<sup>27</sup>

The second element of the woman's heavenly attire is the moon. For the audience, this element is an evident allusion to her power and dominion. The moon is under her feet; hence it is subject to her power. The moon can also be a symbol of her exaltation and glory. Furthermore, according to the OT, a double interpretation is possible: the moon is both a symbol of stability (Ps 89:37 LXX 88:38) and a symbol of beauty (Cant 6:10).

The third element is a crown composed of twelve stars.<sup>28</sup> At this stage, the audience are already well acquainted with stars and crowns since they were frequently used in

25 As it has already been pointed out, some have also proposed the Marian interpretation. However, this allusion is not as evident as the former, and presumes that the audience knew the Fourth Gospel. The former interpretations are testified in the OT and are hence better known to the audience. Vanni, "Dalla maternità di Maria," 28-47; Testa, "La struttura di Ap 12,1-17," 225-230; Farkaš, *La «donna» di Apocalisse 12*, 90-100; G. Biguzzi, *Apocalisse. Nuova versione, introduzione e commento* (LB.NT 20; Milano: Paoline 2005) 250-252.

26 Murphy, *Fallen Is Babylon*, 282. Also, Diane Tracy-Cole ("Woman in the Wilderness. Rereading Revelation 12," *Wilderness. Essays in Honour of Frances Young* [eds. F.M. Young -R.S. Sugirtharajah] [Library of New Testament Studies 295; New York: Clark 2005] 45) justly argues that there is no need to look for support in extra biblical sources for the OT provides a variety of good examples.

27 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 627.

28 According to Hildegard Gollinger (*Das «Grosse Zeichen» von Apokalypse 12*, 83) "mit der Anordnung der zwölf Sterne in einem Kranz ist ihr siegreicher, überirdischer Triumph ausgesprochen." In a similar way Francisco Contreras Molina ("La mujer en Apocalipsis 12," *EphMar* 43 [1993] 373) "la corona representa una muestra de Victoria y pose un alcance escatológico".

the previous visions of the Revelation. The crown, one of the crucial elements in the presentation of the twenty-four elders (4:4), is a reward that Christ will give to those who are faithful (2:10). The crown, which is life itself, will not be taken away, for it is a synonym of triumph. The crown is also a symbol of power and authority. The rider on a white horse was given a crown in order to go and conquer, and likewise the locusts had crowns as they went to harm men (6:2; 9:7). On the other hand, the stars on the crown remind the audience of the seven stars in the hand of the one like the Son of man (1:16), which are the seven angels of the seven churches (1:20). Combining these two interpretations, the audience understand that the crown of stars on the woman's head has a positive meaning. It is a reward, a sign of protection, sign of her victory, and sign of being close to God, that no one can take from her.<sup>29</sup>

The number twelve, another frequent element in Revelation, implies the idea of completeness. This number unites the heavenly number three with the earthly number four. In the OT the image of twelve stars reminds the audience of Joseph's dream (Gen 37:9-11)<sup>30</sup> whereas in Revelation it also recalls the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve Apostles.<sup>31</sup>

b') *And she is pregnant, and cries out, laboring and being tormented, to give birth* (12:2). A detailed description of the heavenly attire worn by the woman in unit b (12:1bc) is followed by a detailed description of her and her situation in b'.

The present participle ἔχουσα and the whole expression ἐν γαστρὶ is a technical phrase for a pregnant woman in LXX (cf. Gen 16:5; Isa 7:14).<sup>32</sup> The audience, aware of the OT prophecies, especially the prophecy in Isa 7:14, identify the woman of the vision with the mother of Emmanuel.<sup>33</sup>

The shift from the aorist passive 'appeared' (ὤφθη) to the present form 'cries out' (κράζει) strikes the audience, but it is not an error that has to be corrected.<sup>34</sup> The present tense confers vividness to the story, and it serves better to capture the attention of the audience. The present form builds up the expectations of the audience and points to what is about to happen. Since the image of the woman who is about to bear a child or suffer the pains of

29 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung*, 277.

30 Some commentators have also suggested that twelve stars and the number twelve might be an allusion to the zodiac. Yeatts, *Revelation*, 219. Aune (*Revelation 6–16*, 682) gives an example of the synagogue in Bet Alpha, Israel. However, it has to be noted that this splendid mosaic representation of the zodiac comes from a later period and does not seem to give any clear support to the point.

31 Yeatts, *Revelation*, 220.

32 Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 683.

33 Although both texts, Isaiah 7 (LXX) and Revelation 12 use the same expression ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχουσα and both use σημεῖον, the Isaiah prophesy uses a different noun for woman which is παρθένος and not γυνή.

34 The 27th edition of Nestle-Aland opted for the present form κράζει. This *lectio* is well testified in P<sup>47</sup>, codex Sinaiticus, 1006, 1841, 2053 and some others manuscripts. *Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus*, the Majority text, syriac version *Harklensis* along with manuscripts 046 and 2351 have the imperfect form ἔκραζεν. The form κράζει is a historical present, therefore it might be the original reading which should be preserved. In the same way, verse 4 preserves the present form σύρει for the historical present.

labor, frequently alludes to Israel in distress (Ps 48:7; Isa 13:8; 21:3),<sup>35</sup> to the forthcoming period of salvation (Isa 26:17), and to deliverance from the Babylonian exile (Mic 4:9), the audience understand that the woman's distress is a call for God's intervention. Thus, they expect that the birth of the child will bring salvation.

The audience previously heard the verb 'cries out.' The souls under the altar cried out, asking the Sovereign Master, holy and true, how long before he will judge those who live on the earth and avenge their blood (6:10). The angel ascending from the east of the sun cried out to the four angels who had been given permission to damage the earth and the sea (7:2). The audience also remember that this verb was frequently associated with a 'great sound' (φωνή μεγάλη) or 'strong sound' (ισχυρᾶ φωνή). At this point, the audience realize that the verb 'to cry out' has here a special and important role. It not only serves to draw the attention of the audience—the passive form (ᾠφθῆ) has this function—but also to show that what follows is of great importance: it heralds a solemn proclamation just as the other occurrences of this verb will indicate (18:2; 19:17).

a') *And there appeared another sign in the sky* (12:3a). Having heard a twofold description of the woman, her attire and her situation, the audience now hear of 'another sign' that appears on the scene. The use of the same noun 'sign' (σημείον) and same passive form (ᾠφθῆ) serves as connectors, which put the two signs in relation. The sub-unit a' (12:3a) reiterates the first sub-unit a (12:1a). The audience notice that the signs share at least some characteristics, for both are in the sky and both can be interpreted as portents, forewarnings of what has to happen. Nevertheless, the audience are also aware that there is a noticeable difference between these two signs. Two adjectives accompanying the nouns help to emphasize the difference. The first sign is called 'great' (μέγα), while the second is being called 'another' (ἄλλο). Besides this, the audience do not have any more details to identify the second sign.

#### 4.2. Red Dragon Having Seven Heads (Rev 12:3b)

*And behold a great red dragon having seven heads* (12:3b). A simple and limited description of the second sign, the great dragon in B (12:3b) evidently contrasts to the long, elaborate and meticulous description of the woman's attire and her situation in A (12:1-2). Thus, the audience perceive that that there is an evident difference between the two signs.

The attention of the audience is caught by the interjection (ἰδοῦ). So far, an interjection was quite often used to draw the attention of the audience to what had been said or what had been seen. It was used to introduce something new or unusual – for example, the open door in heaven (4:1), the vision of the throne in heaven (4:2) or the black horse (6:5). Since the interjection in 12:3b is used without a finite verb, it serves as a marker of strong emphasis.<sup>36</sup>

35 C.D. Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis. Evidence from Ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and 1QH XI,1–18* (BZAW 382; Berlin – New York: De Gruyter 2008).

36 L. Thompson, *Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon 1998) 133.

The other sign is described as a dragon, a creature that until now was unknown to the audience. Although unknown, the audience are able to identify some of its characteristics. In fact, since the outer appearance should reflect some inner characteristic, red identifies the dragon as an instrument of destruction.<sup>37</sup> In fact, the audience have already heard about the red horse and its rider, who had received permission to take peace from the earth so that people would butcher one another (6:4). Since these two are the only occurrences where the color red has been mentioned, its meaning for the dragon must be seen in light of its previous, clearer occurrence.<sup>38</sup>

The audience can also understand the meaning of this sign based on the OT traditions where the dragon's image is involved. LXX makes frequent use of the noun 'dragon.' There are more than thirty places where the noun is used. Some of them translate the rare and poetic Hebrew noun 'leviathan' (Job 40:25) and the other more frequent noun 'tannin' (Job 7:12). In the poetic and prophetic books of the OT, these nouns are used to describe types of creatures evocative of the primordial chaos: the sea-monsters, the serpent that was fashioned by Moses, as well as other desert creatures. There is no need to look for support in Greek, Babylonian or Middle-Eastern legends or myths.<sup>39</sup> Based on biblical traditions, the audience can identify the dragon of the vision with the sea-monster, a destroying power and opponent of God (Isa 27:1; 51:9; Job 7:12). The dragon represents Egypt – the enemy *par excellence* of Israel at the time of Exodus (Isa 51:9). The dragon's red color makes this connection even clearer.<sup>40</sup>

The seven heads of the dragon are the first expression of this kind in Revelation. The audience once again notice that the number seven is a perfect number, a union of the heavenly and the earthly numbers. The audience heard previously the number seven. The oracles were sent to the seven churches, which represented the universal community of the believers in Christ (2:1–3:32). So far, all occurrences of the number seven give the audience the idea of universality, completeness and power (1:4; 16; 4:5; 5:1, 6). The audience can therefore imagine that the seven heads of the dragon represent the completeness and universality of its power.

#### 4.3. Ten Horns of the Dragon (Rev 12:3c)

*And ten horns.* A limited description of the dragon in B (12:3b) is further developed in the next sub-unit. The audience hear that this 'other' sign, the red dragon, has not only

37 Resseguie, *The Revelation of John*, 171–172.

38 Aune (*Revelation 6–16*, 683–684) argues that for Greeks and Egyptians the color red might have had also a positive meaning, or even some protective powers. Here however, in the present context, the color red has evidently a negative connotation.

39 It is certainly possible that the audience was familiar with the ancient legends and myths including dragons and other creatures. Since John, however, exhorts the communities not to compromise with the present world (Rev 2–3), it is rather difficult to maintain the idea that he used those legends or myths in this context, unless one assumes that he restored to it in order to make evident that the forces of evil either way, sooner or later, lose against true and only God.

40 Resseguie, *The Revelation of John*, 172; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung*, 279.

seven heads, but is also equipped with ten horns. It is certainly difficult to imagine how ten horns are distributed on the seven heads of the dragon. However, in the text there is no allusion to any kind of pause for the audience to stop and ponder this strange sign, as there was in 8:1 when the Lamb opened the scroll “there was a silence in heaven for about half an hour.” The expectations of the audience are certainly growing, for this sign is indeed ‘another’!

Although the ‘ten horns’ of the dragon is the first expression of this kind in Revelation, the audience have heard previously the number ten. In the message to the church in Smyrna, the audience were encouraged not to fear the suffering which was to come. Satan was going to throw some of the community’s members into prison, but this would last for only ten days, a rather short period of time.<sup>41</sup> Based on these occurrences, which are the only previous ones including the number ten, the audience understand that the mysterious ten horns imply something short and ephemeral that will not last long.

The audience understand that the ten horns of the dragon are also an allusion to the ten horns of the strong and powerful beast in Daniel 7:7. In Daniel’s vision the ten horns were an attribute of a very strong, fearful and terrifying beast that crushed its victims and had great teeth like iron. According to Daniel’s vision, these horns veiled the idea of the ten kings that were to come (Dan 7:24); in other words, the totality of the kingdoms that would come to oppress.

These two images help the audience to understand what they hear. The ten-horned dragon is very strong, powerful and terrifying. Although very strong and powerful, the audience do not have to fear the dragon, for its power and strength are only ephemeral and will not last longer than it will have to.

#### 4.4. Seven Diadems on His Seven Heads (Rev 12:3d)

*And on his heads seven diadems.* Having heard the description of the dragon with its seven heads and ten horns, the audience hear that the dragon also wears seven diadems. The audience realize that just as the woman was wearing a crown so also does the dragon wear a similar attribute of seven diadems. At this point the audience realize that they have already heard the number seven in the description of the dragon. In fact, the number seven reiterates the seven heads of the dragon in unit C (12:3c). Having made this connection the audience realize that the ten horns of the previous unit—indicating that the dragon’s strength was to last for only a limited time—was the pivot, the turning point in the story.

However, the seven *diadems* in the description of the monstrous dragon is a new element for the audience. So far, they had not heard of it in any context. The image is

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<sup>41</sup> There have been different attempts to uncover the meaning of the number ten. It has been proposed that the number ten refers to the ten fingers of the hand, the sum of the numbers between 1 and 4, or might be an idiomatic expression for ‘two terrible horns.’ None of these interpretations, however, have any support in the context of the book. It is better to interpret on the basis of what the audience heard so far and what they know from the OT, although some authors consider ten most likely a synonym of great power. Yeatts, *Revelation*, 221.

unknown, but the audience have some idea what the image of the diadem implies. In fact, the noun 'diadem' (διάδημα) is quite frequent in LXX, where it is part of the royal attire worn by Queen Esther (Esth 2:17) and any other person holding a royal position, for example Antiochus (1 Macc 11:54). The audience notice that a diadem is similar to a crown, which has been mentioned before. The last time, it was used in the detailed description of the woman (Rev 12,1b). The dragon wearing the diadems has royal power, but his power differs from the power of the woman. She is crowned with a crown, the reward that Christ will give to those who are faithful. The dragon wears only diadems. At this point the audience comprehend that the two nouns, although similar, have slightly different meanings.<sup>42</sup> Since a crown is the award given to the winner, the audience are clearly told who is the most important figure in this diptych.

#### 4.5 Signs Combined, Dragon Weeps a Third of Stars and Dstands in Front of the Woman (Rev 12:4-6)

a) *And its tail swept a third of the stars of the sky and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood in front of the woman who is about to give birth* (12:4ab). At this point the audience have been introduced to two signs: the two protagonists of the vision. A new unit opens with the image of the dragon throwing down a third of the stars. That the audience are introduced to a new unit is evident in the repetition of the words 'sky' and 'woman,' both echoes of unit A (12:1-3a).

The fraction of the stars that are thrown down is a sign of the limited power of the dragon. Although the dragon is great and terrifying, his ability to destroy is limited. The dragon completes this demolishing action with its tail. The audience heard previously the noun 'tail' in the context of the seven trumpets (8:9–11:19). Tails like those of scorpions or like those of snakes were part of the destroying equipment worn by the locusts (9:10) and by the horses (9:19). In their tails resided the ability and power to destroy and to inflict injuries (9:10; 9:20). Since these two are the only occurrences of the noun 'tail' in the whole previous context, the audience are invited to associate the dragon's tail with destroying power. There is no need to look for support in the OT traditions. The image is clear enough and speaks for itself.<sup>43</sup>

Hearing about the dragon that cast down those stars, the audience remember not only the seven stars in the hand of the one who is like the son of man (1:17; 1:20; 2:1; 3:1) or the morning star, but also remember the falling stars that followed the opening of the sixth seal (6:13) and the trumpeting of the third (8:10), fourth (8:12) and fifth trumpet (9:1). The audience also recollect that the stars are part of the heavenly attire worn by the woman (12:1). The following image of the dragon that 'stood' in front of the woman who is about to bear a child leaves no doubt. The audience make the connection. The dragon will surely try to destroy the child just like it destroyed a third of the stars. The suspense is growing and

<sup>42</sup> Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 686.

<sup>43</sup> Yeatts, *Revelation*, 221.

the audience listen carefully for what will happen to the mysterious yet unborn child. Will the powerful dragon destroy it or not? Will the child be kept safe (as were the majority of the stars)?

b) *so that when she gave birth, he might devour her child* (12:4c). It is the second time when the audience hear that the woman is about to give birth (12:1c and 12:4b). What the audience already anticipated; the following presentation makes clear. There is no doubt. The dragon's intention is to 'devour' her child (τὸ τέκνον αὐτῆς) 'when' – or, 'as soon as' – it is born. The audience had already heard the verb ἐσθίω four times, and three times its compound κατεσθίω. As the compound verb, the audience first heard it in the command which was given to John, when the Angel ordered John to devour the scroll (twice in 10:9-10), and then in connection to the two olive trees and two lamps-stands standing in front of the Lord of the earth (11:4), ready to devour anyone who wanted to harm them. Usage of the verb κατεσθίω along with the previous presentation of the extraordinary power of the dragon speaks for itself.<sup>44</sup> The audience can only await the unfolding of the plot and are anxious over the life of the unborn child.

c) *she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is about to shepherd all the nations with an iron staff* (12:5a). The audience already heard twice before that the woman was about to bear a child. The first time, in unit A, it was said that the woman was pregnant (12:2b), then at the beginning of the unit A' the audience heard that the woman was about to give birth (12:4c). Now in the middle of the unit A' the audience are finally told that the pregnancy of the woman came to end and she gave birth to a son (υἶὸν ἄρσεν).

The audience were expecting with anxiety this event, for the dragon was plotting and waiting to devour the child as soon as it was born. Here, however, the expectations and the questions of the audience about what will happen next have to be held. The audience hear what seems to be a grammatical error. It catches the attention of all. The neuter accusative adjective (ἄρσεν) is used in apposition to the masculine accusative noun (υἶός).<sup>45</sup> Hearing this grammatical incongruity, the audience not only pay close attention to what follows, but also recall similar constructions taken from the book of the prophet Isaiah 66:7 (ἐξέφυγεν καὶ ἔτεκεν ἄρσεν) and from the Prophet Jeremiah 20:15 (ἐτέχθη σοι ἄρσεν).<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Josephine M. Ford (*Revelation*, 200) notes that there might be an allusion to Nebuchadnezzar who tried to swallow Jerusalem (Jer 51:34). For Aune (*Revelation 6–16*, 688) the verb κατεσθίω anticipates the following vision where the earth defends itself and swallows the river spewed from the dragon's mouth (12:16). Thus, the earth's *defense* meets the dragon's *offense*.

<sup>45</sup> There are some textual variants for this construction. Usage of the accusative masculine ἄρσενα or ἄρρσενα in, codex Sinaiticus and Majority text seems to be an attempt solve the problem of the more difficult reading of the accusative neuter ἄρσεν. In the same way, the omission of the whole apposition in *Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus*, 051, 1006, 1841 and 2053 might have been another attempt to remove the difficulty completely. Based on the principle *lectio difficilior potior* the accusative neuter ἄρσεν should be preserved. Finally, the variant ἄρσενα could be an attempt to harmonize with 12:13. All these variants, each one in its different way, seem to be attempts to correct the more difficult reading.

<sup>46</sup> For Aune (*Revelation 6–16*, 688), the strange construction is intentional. Ugo Vanni (*L'apocalisse, ermeneutica, esegesi, teologia* [RivBSup 17; Bologna: Dehoniane] 245) suggests that ἄρσεν goes beyond the idea of υἶός by making it a universal synonym of strength, domination and importance. John R. Yeatts (*Revelation*, 221)

This unusual construction might be intentional since the child ‘is about to’ shepherd all the nations with an iron staff. Hearing this last expression, the audience recall Psalm 2, which they had heard in the oracle to the church in Thyatira (2:27). The only, yet striking, difference is the change ‘them’ for ‘the nations.’

Starting from the very beginning of the unit in 12:1 there have been many indications that this vision is universal. It was introduced by the aorist passive (ᾠφθη) and it included a series of cosmic elements visible to everybody. The woman and her child remain unnamed throughout the whole story, just as the identification of the venue, or place of the action, remains general. Considering these elements, the audience perceive the slight change of quotation as the universalization of the child’s mission. It is destined to shepherd all the nations and not only one ethnic group, or select group of people. At this point the audience realize that the birth of this child constitutes a pivot, or turning point of this unit. The central part of this sub-unit is a description of the newborn child’s mission. It is destined to shepherd all the nations.

b’) *And her child was caught up to God and his throne* (12:5b). That the previous sub-unit, and description of the child’s mission, was the pivot is confirmed at the beginning of this new sub-unit. The child is once again called ‘her child’ (τὸ τέκνον αὐτῆς) just as it was called in the b’ unit (12:4c).

Questions of the audience whether the child or the dragon will emerge victorious and, in the end if the child will be saved, find their answers in this sub-unit. The audience hear that the child is not only saved from the dragon but is also mysteriously caught up and taken to the throne of God. The aorist passive, ‘caught up’, understood as a form of *passivum divinum*, euphemism for God’s actions, clearly indicates that God is the ‘hidden actor’ in the whole story.<sup>47</sup> God is invisible and seems to be absent, yet he intervenes at the most significant moment and protects the child, the Messiah.<sup>48</sup>

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interprets repetition as emphasizing the child’s royalty. According to Ford (*Revelation*, 200), the redundant ἄρσεν stresses manliness in the son. For Giesen (*Die Offenbarung*, 281), the Hebrew pleonasm serves as a guide, helping the audience to easily identify the child from the prophecies in Isa 7:14 and Isa 66:7.

47 The concept is borrowed from Resseguie, *The Revelation of John*, 172.

48 Scholars suggest that the ‘catching up’ of the child may be used to depict Christ’s glorious ascension. According to K. Huber (“Jesus Christus – der Erste und der Letzte: Zur Christologie der Johannesapokalypse,” *Die Johannesapokalypse. Kontexte – Konzepte – Rezeption* [eds. J. Frey – J.A. Kelhoffer – F. Tóth] [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2012] 467), “mit der Verwendung von harpazō für die Entrückung (vgl. Apg 8,39; 2 Kor 12,2.4; 1Thess 4,17) werden wahrscheinlich Himmelfahrt und Erhöhung Jesu angedeutet.” The only problem with this interpretation is the lack of any reference to Christ’s ministry on earth or to his death. However, it is possible to propose the following solutions to this enigma: 1) John frequently shortens the content of Christ’s life (John 3:13; 8:14; 16:5); 2) Ancient Middle Eastern stories tend to focus only on the beginning and the end of the story; 3) John is interested in presenting Christ not as suffering but as glorious. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 689; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 639; A. Pataki, “A Non-Combat Myth in Revelation 12,” *NTS* 57 (2011) 258–272. If such is the case, we would have here included the entire earthly mission of Jesus, from his birth to his ascension.

The audience have heard several times the noun ‘throne,’ which almost exclusively refers to God who sits on it.<sup>49</sup> Hearing that the child was caught up and taken to God’s throne, the audience recall the promise that was directed to the church of Laodicea. Anyone victorious would be allowed to share the throne of God just as Christ conquered and would sit down on the throne (3:21). The audience also heard about the Lamb, who was slain, standing in the middle of the throne of God (5:6). Finally, the audience heard that the Lamb, who was at the heart of the throne, would be their shepherd guiding them to springs of living water (7:17). This last occurrence of the noun is more striking for the fact that the child’s mission is to shepherd all the nations. Thus, the audience identify the child with the Lamb who appeared as slain. He is the shepherd who will guide them to the springs of living water.

a) *And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that they nourish her for one thousand two hundred and sixty days* (12:6). The grand finale, the liberation of the child from the snares of the dragon that started in the previous sub-unit, finds its completeness in the final sub-unit of A.’ The repetition of the noun ‘woman’ clearly echoes the first sub-unit in 12:4a and closes the whole chiasm started in unit A (12:1-3a). At the same time the audience realize that the woman’s fleeing into the desert contrasts with her heavenly appearance and description at the beginning of the vision (12:1-3a).

The audience heard that the child was already safe. It was caught up from harm’s way and found its place at the throne of God. At this stage, all attention of the audience is focused on the fate of the woman. The woman fled into the desert. Until now the audience did not hear about the desert. At first this place seems to be an inhospitable region, far from anybody and any means of support. However, the audience must correct this first impression in light of what follows. The perfect participle ‘prepared’ clearly shows that the place has been made ready beforehand. It was prepared ‘by God’ himself, and therefore it is clearly a place of protection and security where no harm can be done to her.<sup>50</sup>

The audience recall the desert, which plays a very important role in the OT particularly as one of the central settings in the story of the Exodus. Surely it is a place of drought, famine, demonic powers and dangerous animals.<sup>51</sup> It is also a place of temptation where the Israelites started to murmur against God and his servants Moses and Aaron (Exod 16:2; Num 14:2; 21:5), as well as a place where God stipulated the Covenant with his people (Exodus 19–20). In the book of the prophet Hosea (2:16-17), the desert became a place of hope to restore the previous relationship with God. Hearing about the fleeing into the wilderness or into the desert, the audience recall also the story of the prophet Elijah

49 In Revelation 1–12 there are only two cases where the throne is not associated with God. The first is found in 2:13, where the church in Pergamum dwells where Satan has his throne. The second, in 11:16, presents twenty-four elders seated on thrones around God’s throne, and who fall down and worship him.

50 Beale (*The Book of Revelation*, 642) also suggests that although the preposition *ἀπὸ* is best taken instrumentally, it may imply the idea of derivation from God. In the same way Giesen, *Die Offenbarung*, 284 and Tracy-Cole “Woman in the Wilderness,” 49.

51 Thompson, *Revelation*, 133.

(1 Kgs 17:1-7). These images are very suggestive for the fact that both the chosen people of God and the prophet Elijah not only escaped into the wilderness, but also were nourished by God. The chosen people were nourished with quails and manna (Exod 15:22–17:7), while the other with portions of bread and water (1 Kgs 19:6-8).<sup>52</sup>

The vision of the woman fleeing into the desert, along with all the richness of the biblical traditions connected to the desert, assure the audience that the fate of the woman is as secure as the fate of her child. The predetermined period of her sojourn in the wilderness, one thousand two hundred and sixty days, is one more reason to believe that God prepares all. He not only prepared everything, but he is truly the ‘hidden actor’ and director of the whole story. Nothing occurs by chance, and everything that happens has its purpose. Just as God protected the child, now he protects the woman – and in the same way, he will also guide and protect the audience.

The audience had already heard the mysterious ‘one thousand two hundred and sixty days,’ in the context of the two witnesses who will have the power to prophesy (Rev 11). This predetermined time is similar to the twenty-two months given to the nations to trample over the Holy City of God. Since in both cases the time is predetermined, the audience are assured that the mysterious period is a time established by God.<sup>53</sup>

## 5. Summary Statement

Having reached the end of the project that was proposed at the beginning of this paper, it is time to gather the fruits of the research. It has been shown that an unusual way to introduce a vision is for the audience a clear indication that a new section starts. As the vision unfolds, the attention of the audience is caught by some returning expressions that become keywords. In this way, the audience are able to distinguish three major units.

The first, unit A, presents two signs appearing in heaven. Although the signs are two, the audience realize that the first sign – that of the woman – is the most important. In fact, a detailed, two-fold description of the first sign, her attire and her situation, constitutes the pivot of the unit. Having been introduced to the first sign the attention of the audience is caught by the abnormality of the second sign. This description starts with the dragon’s seven heads, unit B (12:3b), passes to its ten horns, unit C (12:3bc), and finally ends with

52 In this list, it is imperative to mention Hagar, slave-girl of Sarah and the mother of Ishmael (Gen 21). Since the most likely date for the composition of Revelation is the second half of the 1st century it is also possible that the audience might recall the fleeing of the Jerusalem mother-community into the wilderness of Pella. However, we cannot presume that the audience made this connection. W. Barclay, *The Revelation of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox 2004) 90; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung*, 283.

53 It has been proposed that the concept of a determined period of tribulation, presented once as *forty-two months* (11:2), twice as *one thousand two hundred sixty* (11:3; 12:6), and once as *time two times and half a time* (12:14), may be built upon Daniel’s vision of the tribulation which will come upon the People of God in the future (Dan 7:25; 9:27; 12:7): Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 642. For Giesen (*Die Offenbarung*, 284) it is clearly the time leading to the Parousia.

the seven diadems on its seven heads B' (12:3d). It has been seen that the reason to divide the description in this way is the parallel reference to the seven heads of the dragon in B and B' and the description of its ten horns in unit C. The pivot unit, the presentation of the great dragon that has ten horns, is a clear sign for the audience that the power of the dragon is great, but at the same time its dominion will be short. It will last only ten days, a short, determined period. The theme of its power constitutes the pivot of this second unit B. The audience realize that the second sign evidently contrasts with the first one.

The presentation of the signs has its grand finale in the last unit A'. In this unit, the audience are told about the hostility of the dragon towards the woman. The dragon, aware that its power lasts for only a short period, a symbolic ten days, tries to swallow the child to whom the woman is about to give birth. In this way, the dragon wants to thwart and frustrate God's plan. The dragon, God's opponent *par excellence*, tries to destroy the child, but fails. Its great strength does not serve to oppose God's will. The newborn child is caught up by God to his throne in heaven. The reference to the OT helps the audience to identify the newborn child as the Messiah who will shepherd all the nations. The presentation of the child's mission to shepherd all the nations constitutes the pivot of this last, third unit. This pivot assures the audience that God's plan will be realized. This vision assures the audience that God is almighty, and that he is the 'hidden actor' in the entire vision.

At the end of the vision the audience realize that the heavenly presentation of the woman seems to contrast with her fleeing into the wilderness. The woman, the mother of the Messiah, has to flee into the wilderness, but at the same time the audience are assured that it is a safe place. It is not a place of isolation or an inhospitable region, but is rather a place of secure protection and encounter with God. Moreover, it is a place prepared by God, who is the only one capable of providing secure protection. Just as he saved his Messiah from the dragon, he also guides the woman and protects her. Thus, the audience are encouraged not to fear, for no harm can be done to her.

Frequent allusions to the OT stories and traditions such as Joseph in Egypt, the subsequent liberation from Egypt, the wandering in the desert during the Exodus, the story of Elijah, and of Jonah, along with the prophetic visions from Isaiah and Daniel, remind the audience that God has always protected his chosen ones. At the same time, all these allusions are a guarantee that God will always protect and guide his people. Neither the dragon nor any other creature or earthly power and kingdom can harm them.

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