

## The earth helped the woman

by Douglas E. Cox

The prophecy in Revelation 12:15-16 is one of the most fascinating prophecies in the Bible. But it is also one of the most puzzling, and commentators have struggled to find the meaning of it.

“And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth.”

I suggest that here, the word *earth*, or *Ge*, which may also be translated *land*, refers to the *land of promise*, which represents the *truth*, to which Jesus said the Spirit will guide the saints.

The views of several commentators on the meaning of Revelation 12:15-16 are presented below.

In 1848, Christopher Wordsworth (1807-1885), Headmaster of Harrow, who was the author of several hymns, and who later was appointed Bishop of Lincoln, proposed that the earth helping the woman depicted the end of the persecution from pagan rulers when the Roman Empire became Christian.

Wordsworth wrote: [1]

And the red Dragon (we read) poured a flood after the Woman, to drown her; but the Earth helped her, and drank up the flood. And the Devil departed, to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandment of God.

The Power of the red Dragon here is the same as that before represented in the second seal, as riding, with a sword in his hand, on a red horse—the horse of fire and blood—the power of Rome.

But the Earth helped the Woman, and swallowed up the stream; that is, the Roman Empire became Christian, and the Church was rescued and protected by the civil power; and therefore the Devil departed, to devise some other mode of attack upon the Church.

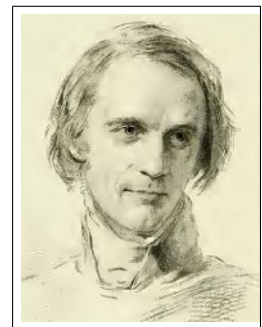


Figure 1: Christopher Wordsworth

Wordsworth's interpretation seems flawed, as Jesus said, "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets." [Luke 6:26]

Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg (1802-1869) was professor extraordinarius in theology at the University of Berlin. Alexander J. Sohrm, of New York, wrote of him: "... Professor Hengstenberg, of Berlin, a man who has had a greater influence on the recent history of German theology and the German Churches than any other theologian living." [2] Hengstenberg wrote, in his commentary on the Apocalypse: [3]

Ver. 15. And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might drown her. Ver. 16. But the earth helped the woman and opened its mouth, and swallowed up the flood, which the dragon had cast out of his mouth.

The water appears in ch. xvii. 15 as an image of the peoples. Under the figure of an overflowing the idea of an overwhelming was not rarely represented in the Old Testament; for example, in Ps. cxxiv. 4, 5, "Then the waters had overwhelmed us, the stream had gone over our soul, then the proud waters had gone over our soul." Jer. xlvi. 2, where it is said in regard to the Chaldean invasion, "Behold waters come out of the mouth, and become an overflowing flood;" Ps. xviii. 16; Isa. viii. 8; Jer. xli. 7, 8. The more exact definition appears from ver. 16. By this we learn, that the discourse here is of the hostile overflowing of the church, the commencement of which gave rise to this book—the Roman persecution. With perfect propriety the Berleb. Bible compares 1 Pet. v. 8, the rather so, as there too the Roman persecution is referred to. The serpent is named, and not the dragon, in order to point to the cunning, which is the distinguishing characteristic of the serpent—Gen. iii. 1. The poor world has been deceived by it. It gives no heed to this, that it is driven on by Satan, and conceives that it acts an independent part in the persecution of the church, and advances its own interest, while it is only working for its own destruction. The earth helped the woman and swallowed up the flood, ver. 16, "which would have swallowed up the believing Israel; so that the matter turned into the reverse." (Berleb. Bible.) Another earthly and worldly power rose against those who persecuted the church, and brought their persecutions to an end, as formerly under the Old Testament the kingdom of the Medes and Persians brought to an end that of Babylon. The further explanation is given in ch. xvii. By that we learn, that Rome was to be destroyed by the ten kings, which were themselves of the earth, and gave their power to the beast.

Rome is invoked in many interpretations. But the prophecy speaks of the *earth*, *Ge*, or the *land*, not Rome.

John N. Darby (1800-1882), founder of Dispensationalism, thought John's prophecy about the earth helping the woman applies not to the church, but to ethnic Jews. He wrote: [4]

For the dragon, cast to the earth and unable to accuse in heaven or oppose saints having a heavenly calling (and the priesthood refers to such, not to union), persecutes the Jews, and seeks to destroy their testimony; but God gave, not power of resistance the Lord must come to deliver but power to flee and escape and find refuge where she was nourished the whole half-week out of the serpent's reach. He seeks to pursue;

wings he has none: but he uses a river, the movements of people under the influence of special motive and guidance, to overwhelm the woman. But the earth, this organized system in which men live, swallowed the waters up. This influence was in vain was not met by an army, a counter-power, but was nullified. There was such a disposition or course of the earth as neutralized the effort wholly. So God ordered in His providence; and the dragon turned to persecute individually the faithful remnant of the seed the Jews who held fast by the word.

Charles D. Alexander endorsed Hengstenberg's interpretation. He wrote: [5]

"And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman . . ." (Verse 15)

Literalism and Futurism can make nothing of these words, for they would require the abandonment of their entire system of interpretation. They deny that Revelation is a symbolic and spiritual book, for to accept the spiritual interpretation would mean the dismantling of all their theories. Yet who would teach that the Woman is a literal person and not a symbolic figure? Likewise if the Woman is a symbol, so is the flood of water poured from the mouth of Satan, and so by consequence the entire edifice of literal interpretation of Revelation must fall to the ground.

Historicist interpreters have seen this flood of waters as the Goths and Huns, some the Roman armies of Vespasian sent to destroy Jerusalem, others the Arian heretics, or again, the Islamic hosts of Saracens and Turks. Futurists see the armies of Antichrist set in motion against the Jews in some coming day.

We prefer Hengstenberg's consistent and sober estimate, "The hostile overflowing of the Church, the beginning of which gave rise to this Book, namely the Roman persecution."

The flood of waters is a common and constant OT figure of the rising tide of enmity again and again in history, aimed at overwhelming and destroying the people of God. It is not one isolated episode of history, past or to come, but the constant experience of the Church in her warfare against all forms of Satanic hate, whether in terms of the flood of antichristian doctrine or of open persecution and suppression.

...

We now understand the meaning of these words, "The earth helped the woman." The earth, considered as the worldly multitudes and powers, goes its own way, but the omnipotence of God in Christ, working secretly and marvelously through all history, sets power against power and strength against strength and policy against policy (as in the Book of Daniel) to put down one and raise up another, always with the welfare of the Church in view, for the Church is the one enduring object in all history. Indeed, all history belongs to the Church, as Moses taught the Israelites in the wilderness, "When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he SET THE BOUNDS OF THE PEOPLE ACCORDING TO THE NUMBER OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL" (Deut. 32.8; see also Acts 17.26). The very geography of the earth as well as all human history, has been shaped by divine omnipotence to promote the interests of the Church, the Kingdom of God. Wars and revolutions are

disposed by the iron sceptre of Christ for the judgment and chastisement of human pride and power and the limitation of evil (which always multiplies itself with limitless arrogance when left at peace with itself). Christ exercises this sovereignty over all, as much by the control He has over the Evil One as over the kings of the earth, rulers, presidents, democracies, dictatorships, and tyrannies. But He does this in such a way as to defy all human ability to trace His pathway, "Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known". (Psalm 77:19). (See also Psalm 93:3-4, and Psalm 29:10.)

It is thus that the earth helps the Woman, and thus the purposes of God are fulfilled. "All things are ours, and we are Christ's and Christ is God's". (1 Corinthians 3:21-23)

William Milligan (1821-1892) was a Church of Scotland minister and Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism in the University of Aberdeen; he was elected Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 1882. Milligan wrote: [6]

The woman fled into the wilderness, but she was not permitted to flee thither without a final effort of Satan to overwhelm her; and in the manner in which this effort is made we again recognise the language of the Old Testament. There the assaults of the ungodly upon Israel are frequently compared to those floods of waters which, owing to the sudden risings of the streams, are in the East so common and so disastrous. Isaiah describes the enemy as coming in "like a flood." [Isa. lix. 19.]

Isaiah 59:19 says, "When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the LORD shall lift up a standard against him." Milligan, however, found a far less inspiring message in the flood from the mouth of the serpent being swallowed up by the earth. He suggested that the meaning was that worldly, "nominal members of the Church" swallowed up the flood from the serpent's mouth, directed against the church. But, that interpretation is clearly untenable. How could people of the world be deceived, by taking things in by their mouths? The prophecy would have to say, they opened their "ears," not their mouths, if that were the intended meaning!

Milligan wrote:

The most remarkable point to be noticed here is, however, not the deliverance itself, but the method by which it is accomplished. To understand this, as well as the wrath of Satan immediately afterwards described, it is necessary to bear in mind that twofold element in the Church the existence of which is the key to so many of the most intricate problems of the Apocalypse.

The Church embraces both true and false members within her pale. She is the "vine" of our Lord's last discourse to His disciples, some of the branches of which bear much fruit, while others are only fit to be cast into the fire and burned. [John xv. 5, 6.] The thought of these latter members is in the mind of St. John when he tells us, in a manner so totally unexpected, that the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the river which the dragon cast out of his mouth. He is thinking of the nominal members of the Church, of the merely nominal Christianity which she has so often exhibited to the world. That Christianity the world loves. When the Church's tone and life are lowered by her yielding to the influence of the things

of time, then the world, “the earth,” is ready to hasten to her side. It offers her its friendship, courts alliance with her, praises her for the good order which she introduces, by arguments drawn from eternity, into the things of time, and swallows up the river which the dragon casts out of his mouth against her.

Here, Milligan says that the world swallows up the river which the dragon casts out of his mouth; but was not the world already deceived? The church is “the light of the world,” and the “pillar and ground of the truth.”

Milligan related the earth helping the woman with the Roman State, which he suggested was somehow helped by the woman, in the quotation below:

The helping of the woman by the earth seems to be the Scripture parallel to the difficult words of St. Paul when he says in writing to the Thessalonians, “And now ye know that which restraineth to the end that he may be revealed in his own season. For the mystery of lawlessness doth already work: only there is one that restraineth now, until he be taken out of the way.” [2 Thess. ii. 6, 7.] This “restraining” power, generally, and in all probability correctly, understood of the Roman State, is “the earth” of St. John helping the woman because it is helped by her.

George Eldon Ladd (1911-1982), Professor of New Testament exegesis and theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, wrote: [7]

Verses 15-16. The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed up the river which the dragon had poured out of his mouth. This continues the imaginative picture of Satan’s effort to destroy God’s people. We have no known parallels in ancient literature upon which John could have drawn his vivid pictures. Nor are we to seek historical counterparts. The message conveyed is simple and clear: Satan will do everything in his power to destroy God’s people, but in vain.

Ladd’s brief comment does not address the question, how the earth swallowing the flood from the mouth of the serpent helps the woman.

If the flood from the mouth of the serpent is a flood of misinformation, flawed interpretations, false doctrine, and the like, that threatens to carry away the woman in the wilderness, where she is nourished in the place prepared by God, the remedy for it is that the woman will be established in the *truth*. The land in the promise to Abraham was a token and a shadow of a “better country, that is, an heavenly.” [Hebrews 11:16] In this heavenly country, no place can be found for Satan, or his deceptions. [Revelation 12:8] When Satan is cast out, all the deceptions are gone too. Then the saints will possess the truth which makes them free.

Psalm 85:11-13

Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven.  
Yea, the LORD shall give that which is good; and our land shall yield her increase.  
Righteousness shall go before him; and shall set us in the way of his steps.

## References

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