

The mystery of the wilderness in Revelation 12

by Douglas E. Cox

John says in Revelation 12:6 the woman fled to the wilderness where she had a place prepared by God. But in many commentaries, it is not clear what is meant by the wilderness.

Many commentators connect the prophecy to the Exodus. The eagle's wings given to the woman in Revelation 12:14 allude to the wings of eagles mentioned in Exodus 19:4: "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself." Eagles' wings are also mentioned in Deuteronomy 32:9-12.

Also, the prophet Elijah was fed by ravens in the wilderness, during part of the three years and a half of drought in the days of Ahab. [1 Kings 17:2-6] And, the Lord spent 40 days in the wilderness after his baptism, and was tempted there by the devil.

What is the wilderness?

The meaning of the wilderness of Revelation 12:6 becomes clear, when the significance of the great city in Revelation 11:8 is understood. The concept of the wilderness in Revelation 12:6, 14 contrasts with the great city called Sodom and Egypt, which were both places from which the people of God escaped. Lot and his daughters came out of Sodom, into a wilderness. And the people of Israel came out of Egypt, into a wilderness. The saints are separate from the worldly system in a spiritual sense. The woman fleeing to the wilderness does not mean that the church goes to a literal desert, but the meaning is spiritual.

Paul said the saints have been delivered from the power of darkness, and are *translated* into Christ's kingdom. No change in location is involved.

Colossians 1:12-14

Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:

Peter said the saints have escaped the corruption that is in the world. [2 Peter 1:4] James said, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." [James 1:27]

The wilderness in Revelation 12:6 is a place prepared by God for his Church. It represents the spiritual place where believers dwell when they come out of the great city, mystical Babylon, and enter into the light of the gospel and Christ's kingdom. When Jesus prayed for his Church he said,

John 17:14-16

I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.

Jesus warned against following false teachers, who lead their followers to the desert, or to secret places. [Matthew 24:26]

Why does she flee twice?

In vs. 6, the woman fled to the wilderness after her male child was caught up to the throne of God. In the wilderness there is a place for her, where she is nourished. This alludes to the exodus and to the manna which the children of Israel gathered in the wilderness.

Revelation 12:6

And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days.

In John 14:2, Jesus said, "I go and prepare a place for you."

In the wilderness the woman is nourished. Her nourishment is spiritual, and this refers to teachings from the word of God, corresponding to the manna that the Israelites received in the wilderness. Jesus said, "I am the living bread which came down from heaven." [John 6:41, 51]

In Revelation 12:13, after the war in heaven, where Satan is cast to the earth, he persecutes the woman.

In vs. 14, the woman escapes to the wilderness a second time. In this case, she is given two wings of an eagle, which enable her to fly to her place, which is prepared by God.

Revelation 12:14

And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent.

Some may infer from the woman escaping to the wilderness a second time that she had become entangled again with the world, and so needed to "earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints," but another explanation is suggested by the two wings of an eagle that she receives.

What do the wings of an eagle represent?

In Daniel's vision of the four beasts, the first beast was a lion with eagle's wings. [Daniel 7:4] This beast represented Babylon, and in Daniel we are told that Nebuchadnezzar received visions from God. In Daniel's lifetime, the wings were plucked off. The lessons Nebuchadnezzar learned were forgotten by his successor. This is consistent with the idea that the wings of eagles represent the gift of prophetic insight. The third beast also possessed wings, which were not eagle's wings, but the wings of a fowl. The third beast, a leopard, had four heads, and it represents the hellenistic kingdoms of the *diadochi*, the successors of Alexander the Great. These were characterized by superstition, and pagan philosophy, which is fitly represented by the inferior wings of a fowl.

The wings of a great eagle may represent the gift of prophetic insight. They

enable the woman to access high places in the wilderness, and the lofty heights of mountains.

The mountains represent promises and prophecies and revelations of God. This is shown in the blessings Joseph received from his father. Jacob said, "The blessings of thy father have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills." [Genesis 49:26] His blessings were high and lofty, because they were spiritual in nature. They were also eternal, and so he referred to the "everlasting hills." The land promise Jacob received had a spiritual significance.

The eagle's wings given to the woman in vs. 14 imply that she is given a new perspective, which is a divine point of view, which contrasts with the human point of view. The serpent casts a flood out of his mouth after her, intending to cause her to be carried away in the flood. But the earth opens its mouth, and swallows up the flood.

Revelation 12:15-16

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.

In Daniel 9:26, the desolation of the holy city is associated with a flood, which is explained by the flood from the serpent's mouth in Revelation 12:15.

The wilderness is church's spiritual environment, not a literal wilderness. In Ephesians 2:5-6, the saints sit together in heavenly places.

The promised land of the saints is a heavenly country. [Hebrews 11:16]

In vs. 15, the earth helps the woman and swallows up the serpent's flood. The flood represents heresies, false interpretations, and arguments tending to unbelief. The promised land or the earth represents the knowledge of God, and the word of God.

Wings of eagles are associated with prophecy in Daniel 7; Nebuchadnezzar was given prophetic insight, and the kingdom of Babylon is depicted as having wings of eagles. The wings of a fowl on the third beast are inferior to the eagle's wings, and they probably represent the pagan philosophy, religion, and superstition, which characterized those kingdoms.

Isaiah referred to the enemy coming in like a flood, and when that occurs, the Spirit will lift up a standard against him.

Isaiah 59:19

So shall they fear the name of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun. When the enemy shall come in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord shall lift up a standard against him.

When Jesus said, in Matthew 24:15-15, "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:) Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains," he was not referring to people saving their own lives, as he also taught, "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it." [Matthew 16:25]

The mountains he meant we should flee to, I suggest, are not literal ones, but the *symbolic* mountains which represent the promises of God, and understanding *prophecy* is one of those promises.

The land which opens its mouth, and swallows up the serpent's flood, is the wilderness place where the woman dwells, that is, her spiritual environment. Eagle's wings empower her to reach high places. Isaiah said,

Isaiah 40:31

But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.

The psalmist said,

Psalms 121:1

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.

Isaiah said, "O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain." [Isaiah 40:9] And, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!" [Isaiah 52:7]