

The river of water from the mouth of the serpent

by Douglas E. Cox

What is meant by the river of water, that goes forth from the mouth of the serpent in Revelation 12:15? Consider what land it is, where the river flows; it must be the same land, the wilderness, where the woman sojourns for the time, times and a half, in a place prepared for her by God. It represents the spiritual environment of Christians.

It is not a literal wilderness, but corresponds to the period of trial that Christians endure in the world. Jesus, after his baptism in the Jordan River, went into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil. This has a parallel with the time that the Israelites spent in the wilderness. The wilderness where the woman flees alludes to both.

This symbolic period of a time, times and a half in Revelation 12:14 represents the last half-week in which Christ confirms his covenant with the Church. Jesus confirms his covenant with many for one week, according to Daniel 9:27. This is the final week in the 70 weeks prophecy. After Jesus ministered for three years and a half in the flesh, another three and a half years remained, to complete the seven. But the duration of the last half-week is not determined by earth days, or earth years. When Jesus ascended to heaven, after his resurrection, earthly units no longer applied to the holy city, which was raised up, and established on the top of the mountains, and exalted above the hills, and transformed to a spiritual city, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy of Isaiah 2:1-3. The units of time for the final half of the 70th week that apply to the heavenly Jerusalem are symbolic, and

figurative, not natural. The *time, times and a half* represents the whole age of the Church.

In the wilderness the woman is nourished with biblical knowledge. The river or flood of water from the mouth of the serpent which is intended to carry her away also includes streams of biblical or theological knowledge. There are streams that come from the throne of God, and others that come from the mouth of the serpent. The streams from the mouth of the serpent mimic the streams flowing from the throne of God, which are rivers of living water. The spurious rivers seem to be streams of truth, but they are not. They cannot heal, while the river from the throne of God has healing power. John said, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world." [1 John 4:1]

There are many examples of flawed interpretations of scripture, in the history of the Church. Thus the river from the mouth of the serpent may signify paradigms or theories, by means of which, men interpret the Scriptures. Paradigms for interpreting prophecy abound. They include the preterist, historicist, and dispensational theories, for example. Each contradicts the other systems. But there are also other, more subtle ways that the serpent may threaten the church. In the temptation of Jesus, the devil offered him all the kingdoms of the world, with all their glory. Similarly the serpent tempts Christians with the prospect of wealth, power, and worldly success, seducing many. James said:

James 4:4

Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

James L. Resseguie has discussed the flood from the mouth of the serpent, that threatens the woman. He drew parallels between the prophecy and events that occurred during the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. In his most recent commentary on Revelation he wrote: [1]

The dragon, now referred to as the Eden-like "serpent," pours from his mouth a river to suffocate the woman (12:15). This deed supplements his other destructive actions: his attempt to devour the woman's child (12:4), his war in heaven (12:7), his wrath on the earth (12:12), and his war on the rest of the

woman's children (12:17). The serpent's life-destroying flood contrasts with the river of the water of life that flows from the throne of God and the Lamb (22:1). Death and destruction characterize the serpent's river while teeming life characterizes God's river. There is no need to assign a deeper significance to the river, such as a metaphor for Satan's "lies," "deceit," or "persecution." The point is that evil brings chaos and destruction, whereas God's rule is life-giving and life-sustaining (22:1). The personified earth, Ge, who is often overlooked as a feminine actor in this chapter, comes to the aid of the woman and swallows the water (12:16). This is another exodus allusion, although not as obvious as other references. As Pharaoh's armies pursued the fleeing Israelites to the shores of the Red Sea, the earth came to their aid. Moses parted the sea and the earth formed a dry channel for safe passage to the other side. The earth then swallowed the pursuing Egyptians (Exod. 15:12). In another exodus incident the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the rebellious sons of Korah (Num. 16:32). On this new exodus the earth comes to the aid of God's people as they flee the Pharaoh of this story, the dragon. Ge's intervention is thus the positive counterpart to the dragon's destructive action in this story. Whereas the dragon attempts to devour the male child in 12:4, Ge swallows the dragon's flood.

In another book, Resseguie contrasted the flood from the serpent's mouth with the sword that comes forth from the mouth of Jesus, which is the Word of God. He also contrasted the flood from the serpent's mouth with the river that flows from the throne in the New Jerusalem. He wrote: [2]

In 12:15-16, the serpent opens his mouth and pours "water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood." but the earth "opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth." The flood imagery recalls two experiences of the Israelites: Pharaoh commanded that the male Israelites be drowned in the river Nile (Ex. 1:22), and he was responsible for pursuing the Israelites to the waters of the Red Sea (Ex. 14:21ff.) In a manner similar to the Israelites' salvation in Exodus 14:16, the earth opens and swallows the water to save the woman from the dragon.

Some commentators identify the river as a river of lies that comes

out of Satan's mouth, while others see the river as the flood of persecutions upon the church. John intended his readers to compare what comes out of the serpent's mouth with what comes out of the mouth of the one-like the-Son-of-Man, a sharp two-edged sword (1:16; cf. 19:15). Whereas evil, destruction and chaos flow profusely from the serpent's mouth, The Word of God, the sharp two-edged sword, comes out of the mouth of Christ. The contrast is between the threat of evil and the promises of God. Another contrast may also be intended: the river that comes out of the serpent's mouth contrasts with the "river of the water of life" that flows from the throne in the New Jerusalem (22:1). Death and destruction are associated with the serpent's river, while God's river is characterized by teeming life. The river is truly ambiguous in the Apocalypse. Although it represents a threat in the first heaven and first earth, it is something altogether new in the new heaven and new earth. It is a life-giving, life-sustaining river.

Resseguie has also written about what he calls "spiritual landscapes" portrayed in the gospel of Luke. He claimed that the Gospel of Luke depicts the Christian's spiritual growth by a journey; "spirituality is portrayed as a journey—an exodus (cf. 9:31) to the new promised land, the kingdom of God." [3] This is an intriguing idea, and may possibly relate to the land in Revelation 12:15-16, which swallows up the serpent's flood. If the land referred to is the promised land, and if it represents the *truth* to which Jesus promised the Spirit will guide the saints (rather than literal Palestine), the prophecy of Revelation 12:15-16 suggests the Church will benefit greatly as truth is discovered, and swallows up the serpent's flood.

References

1. James L. Resseguie. *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*. Baker Academic, 2009.
2. James L. Resseguie. *Revelation unsealed: a narrative critical approach to John's Apocalypse*. Brill, 1998. p. 84-85.
3. James L. Resseguie. *Spiritual landscape: images of the spiritual life in the Gospel of Luke*. Hendrickson Publishers, 2004. p. 3.