

# TOWARDS THE MYSTICAL INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION 12

An article published in *Revue Biblique*, Vol 114–4 (2007), 594–614

## SUMMARY

Modern scholars are almost unanimous in their acceptance of the historico-mythological interpretation of Revelation 12, with the result that it has effectively replaced the mariological and spiritual interpretations. The following work critically re-examines these three forms of interpretation with the aim of developing a new approach based on insights from mystical theology. The resulting ‘mystical’ interpretation of Revelation 12 identifies the vision of the signs in heaven and the birth of the male child with a type of mystical experience, and links this to the special mission of the 144,000 males described elsewhere in the text. This approach not only comprehensively explains the details of the text within its eschatological context, but also helps to resolve some outstanding issues concerning the 144,000.

## INTRODUCTION

Revelation 12 is one of the most intensely studied passages in the entire New Testament, as judged by the volume and variety of commentary brought to light by work on the history of its exegesis.<sup>1</sup> One of the reasons for this interest may be that, “consciously or not, it has always been considered the centre and key to the whole book”.<sup>2</sup> With the growth of the historico-critical method over the last century, a scholarly consensus has formed along the lines of the historico-mythological interpretation of this chapter,<sup>3</sup> but, as noted by the author of one recent article, Revelation 12 still ‘bristles’ with unresolved problems.<sup>4</sup>

## THE HISTORICO-MYTHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

The historico-mythological interpretation was first proposed by Victorinus of Pettau in his commentary on the Apocalypse, and was subsequently adopted by Jerome. In this interpretation, the pregnant woman represents Zion, the faithful community of the Old Covenant, suffering to bring forth the Messiah; the male child represents Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah; the dragon is the devil, who threatens the Messiah but fails to prevent his exaltation to God’s throne in heaven; a war then breaks out in heaven, in which the devil and his angels are defeated. The devil is thrown down from heaven to earth and pursues the woman who gave birth, and the rest of her offspring, in a way that is said to represent the persecution of the Church of the New Covenant. For some expositors the dragon’s pursuit refers to a final eschatological period of persecution, while for others it is symbolical of the

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Pierre Prigent, *Apocalypse 12: Histoire de l'exégèse*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1959; Cf. Ugo Vanni, “Il «grande segno»: Ap 12,1–6”, in *L'Apocalisse: Ermeneutica, Esegese, Teologia*, Bologna: EDB 1988, 227.

<sup>2</sup> Prigent, *Apocalypse 12*, 1, our translation. This view is shared by many other authors, see G. Biguzzi, in ‘La Donna, Il Drago e Il Messia in Ap 12’, note 2, 17–18, in *Theotokos VIII* (2000), 17–66.

<sup>3</sup> In a survey of some of the most available commentaries and monographs published over the last century, 30 out of 33 support this view.

<sup>4</sup> Biguzzi, ‘La Donna, Il Drago e Il Messia in Ap 12’, 17–18.

entire history of the Church. This view has been termed a ‘Christian interpretation of history’,<sup>5</sup> expressed as a mythological narrative concerning the advent of the Messiah and its consequences for the faithful community from which he came.

This ‘collective’ interpretation of the woman, as the faithful community of the Old and New Testaments, has almost completely replaced the ‘individual’ interpretation of the woman as Mary the mother of Jesus, which first appears in the commentary of Oecumenius,<sup>6</sup> and later in that of Arethas of Caesarea. Even before its appearance in writing, Methodius and Andrew of Caesarea had taken a stand against this interpretation. They argue that the male child cannot be the Christ, nor the woman his mother, since the vision in Rev 12 refers to the author’s present and future, and Christ was born long before he wrote the text. They also point out that Christ was not carried off to the throne of God just after he was born, as narrated in Rev 12. Against the literal interpretation of the woman as Mary, other objections have been added: the birth takes place in heaven, not on earth (in Bethlehem); the woman suffers birth pains (Rev 12,2) and has numerous progeny (12,17), which contradict the received doctrine about Mary; the desert flight of the woman in 12,6.14–16 simply cannot be made to match the life of the Jesus’ mother.<sup>7</sup> However, despite the numerous objections to the primary identification of the woman with Mary, modern scholars allow that she can be identified with Mary in a secondary sense: “She is Mary, but only insofar as she embodies faithful Israel”.<sup>8</sup>

There is a suspicion, however, that many of the objections to the historical aspects of the mariological interpretation apply equally to the privileged historico-mythological interpretation. Though favoured by the vast majority of modern scholars and commentators, this interpretation does not convince everyone that it can explain Rev 12 in its entirety.<sup>9</sup> Crucial to the debate over this interpretation is whether the text actually speaks of Christ’s historical birth. More than 100 years ago, Hermann Gunkel published a detailed criticism of this interpretation, in a way that can still be considered relevant and challenging for today.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Prigent, *Apocalypse 12*, 145.

<sup>6</sup> This is dated to the mid 6th cent. by John Suggit, translator of *Oecumenius, Commentary on the Apocalypse*, The Fathers of the Church series, vol. 112, Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> These arguments are listed with counterarguments by B.J. Le Frois, in *The Woman Clothed with the Sun (Ap 12): Individual or Collective? An Exegetical Study*, Roma 1954, 211–216.

<sup>8</sup> J.P.M. Sweet, quoted by Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001, note 35, 378. A similar line was developed by early interpreters applying the fourth rule of Tyconius, which stated that the same image can refer simultaneously to the genus (the whole) as well as to the species (the part representing the whole). So, for example, Quodvultdeus, a disciple of Augustine, can assert that the woman stands for both an individual (Mary) and the whole (the Church). Cf. Le Frois, *The Woman*, 60–61.

<sup>9</sup> “Viene, allora, da chiedersi se l’indagine su questo tema non debba considerarsi ormai esaurita e se non rimanga—è ciò che costituisce lo scopo ultimo dell’indagine esegetica—che l’ascolto umile e l’applicazione alla vita concreta del messaggio teologico del brano. Ma proprio sulla linea applicativa si incontra uno spazio ancora relativamente vuoto. Quando si passa dal livello di studio esegetico alla sua attualizzazione nella vita, emergono perplessità, si cade nel parziale. Il passaggio dell’esegesi alla vita è necessario, al punto da costituire una verifica della validità di una linea esegetica, ma, in questo caso, paradossalmente data l’abbondanza dell’indagine già svolta che lo dovrebbe facilitare, essa si presenta difficile.” Vanni, *L’Apocalisse*, 227–28.

<sup>10</sup> This criticism appears in his book *Schöpfung und Chaos*, originally published in German in 1895, and recently appearing in English as *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*, translated by K. William Whitney Jr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

## GUNKEL'S CRITICISM

Gunkel's arguments against the historico-mythological interpretation fall into three main fields: (1) its identification of the male child with the historical ministry of Jesus Christ, (2) its explanation of the woman as the early Church and her flight to the desert as a past event, and finally (3) its unprecedented use of the apocalyptic genre in the representation of past events:

(1) The birth of the Messiah takes place 'in heaven' and there is absolutely no reference to his advent on earth. The name of Jesus, his earthly ministry, his death and resurrection are all omitted, and the context does not tolerate their inclusion: the male infant is snatched away with haste (ἤρπρόσθη) to the throne of God immediately after birth, before the dragon can open his mouth, so no time can elapse between his birth and removal. It is therefore a very inadequate representation of the Incarnation, whose doctrinal importance lies in the reality of the Messiah's birth and mission on earth. The same can be said for depicting the exaltation of the fully mature Jesus, to rule all creation from heaven, as the supernatural rescue of a helpless newborn baby from the clutches of Satan. Furthermore, the fact that the Messiah is taken up to the throne as a baby, and not as a full-grown man, is an important feature of the narrative, whose sequel is narrated in Rev 19. Here the same figure returns to effectively apply his rule 'with an iron rod'. It is thus implied that the interval between ch.12 and ch.19 is taken up with the maturation of the baby into a mighty and divine hero. So if the Christ appears as a newborn baby in Rev 12, it is to be understood as an essential feature of the narrative as a whole, and not just as a poetic way of representing the entire earthly ministry of the adult Jesus.<sup>11</sup>

(2) Because John interprets the woman who gave birth to the divine child as the Church, the undeniable conclusion is that the Church is the mother of the Messiah.<sup>12</sup> Gunkel finds this strange. Furthermore, if the woman is the Church, it is not clear to whom the 'rest of her descendants' refers in 12,17. If the woman and 'the rest of her descendants' both refer to the Church, then the dragon's attack against the 'rest of her descendants' would be a "totally overpowering repetition". Nothing in the text can explain why the Christian community is thus represented in two different ways. It is also quite impossible to understand the details of the flight of the woman as referring, in some way, to historical events affecting the Christian community: "The apocalyptic writer has in mind, perhaps, the flight to Pella, or the destruction of Jerusalem, or the persecution of Stephen, or the flight of the Christians to Lydian Asia...or almost anything else! He has, however, blended contemporary history so fully with fabricated thematic images that it is impossible to discover the historical reality again." This leads Gunkel to the observation that "the historical material appears not simply to have been appropriated, but also to have been poetically transformed." Furthermore, this poetic transformation has so corrupted any resemblance to contemporary history, that it cannot be even considered to be allegory, according to the normal definition of the term.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Gunkel, op. cit. 115–19. Many of these objections are restated by Antoninus King Wai Siew, in *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11.1–14.5*, LNTS 283; London: T & T Clark, 2005, 157–59; and also in David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson 1998, 689.

<sup>12</sup> Restated by Jürgen Roloff, in *Revelation: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 144.

<sup>13</sup> Gunkel, op. cit. 119–21.

(3) Gunkel recalls that it is uncharacteristic of apocalypses to describe past events, unless this is done from the viewpoint of a pseudonymous author who was supposedly writing before those events: “In an apocalyptic text the portrayal of the past has the goal of being an attestation of the actual prophetic saying. It fulfils this end only when it appears as a prediction from an ancient time, thus under the pseudonym of an ancient prophet.... The reader, filled with admiration that this ancient prophecy had come to fruition so very precisely, would give willing credence to the remaining words of the same person.” However, since this chapter is understood to have been written by a Christian, it would not have had this purpose. So if it really was referring to the historical birth of Jesus, it would be referring to things that both the reader and the audience already knew, and could not therefore be considered as either a revelation or a prophecy. So Gunkel asks “What reason, however, would there be to depict Jesus’ fate, which was known to everybody, so mysteriously,... what reason would there be if the author was not even pretending to prophesy about it?” “Could the author of Revelation 12 perhaps have forgotten for a moment that he actually lived *after* Jesus?” Noting that the context in which the events of chapter 12 are narrated is that of the trumpets, especially that of the seventh trumpet (11,15), which according to 10,7 concerns the final consummation, Gunkel concludes: “Indeed, in what precedes, future events are described even more clearly. Accordingly the one who incorporated chapter 12 into this context also thought the birth of Christ was an event which the future would bring.”<sup>14</sup>

## THE SPIRITUAL INTERPRETATION

These objections led Gunkel to try to refute the Christian origin of chapter 12 and to explain it as a Babylonian epic myth that had been appropriated by Judaism, before being revised by a Christian. However, many centuries before Gunkel’s study, a spiritual interpretation had prevailed, which avoids many of the pitfalls of the historico-mythological interpretation. In this spiritual interpretation, the woman is mother Church, who, through her sacraments and evangelization, continually gives birth to Christ, the eternal Word, in her members and in the world. The male child therefore represents the Church’s spiritual fruit: the Word of Christ that unites around himself, as head, the mystical body of Christ. The dragon’s pursuit represents the persecution of the Church and her members, which for some refers to a final, eschatological period of persecution, and for others represents the entire history of the Church.

Predating the historical interpretation of Victorinus, the spiritual interpretation appears for the first time in the writings of Hippolytus. In subsequent centuries, it was further elaborated by Tyconius, Primasius, Caesar of Arles, Quodvultdeus, Ambrose Autpert, Cassiodorus, Beatus, and, with a minor modification, it was the interpretation proposed by Methodius, Andrew of Caesarea and the Venerable Bede. Without doubt, this interpretation owed its popularity and persistence in the Early and Mediaeval Church to the doctrine of the ‘birth’ of God in the Church and in the soul.<sup>15</sup> In its original form, the doctrine explains the

---

<sup>14</sup> Gunkel, *op. cit.* 121–27. This final observation led Gunkel to conclude that “the organization of the chapter in the context of Revelation indicates a Jewish hand.”

<sup>15</sup> The origins and development of this doctrine up to the 14th century have been comprehensively documented by Hugo Rahner in ‘Die Gottesgeburt’, *Symbole der Kirche. Die Ekklesiologie der Väter*, Salzburg, 1964 (Italian trans. ‘La Nascita di Dio: la Dottrina dei Padri della Chiesa sulla Nascita di Cristo dal Cuore della Chiesa e dei Credenti’ *Simboli della Chiesa: L’ecclesiologia dei Padri*, Cinisello Balsamo: Edizioni San Paolo,

inhabitation of Christ in the heart of the faithful, incorporated into the Church by Baptism, as a mysterious reproduction and continuation of the eternal birth of the Logos from the Father and of his temporal birth from the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Church generates Christ in the hearts of the faithful through Baptismal grace, and under the influence of grace this 'birth' of God is fulfilled ever more profoundly in them, as their lives unfold.<sup>16</sup> There was thus no difficulty in identifying the Church, thus conceived as Virgin-Mother and mediatrix of salvation in the new creation, with the great sign of the woman in Rev 12,1. In a reciprocal way, Rev 12 became one of the more important scriptural texts quoted in support of the doctrine: "Although in this world the Church is persecuted by the infidels, she has never ceased to generate the Logos from her heart. As it is written, she has given birth to a male child, who is to reign over all the people, the virile and perfect Christ, the Son of God, God and Man...and the Church, generating him continually, instructs all the people"(Hippolytus); "The woman in labour, who is giving birth to the virile Logos in the hearts of the faithful, is our Mother, the Church" (Methodius); "Even though the serpent opposes her, the Church eternally generates Christ; in fact, the Church daily reproduces herself as the Church, ruling the world in Christ"(Bede).

In modern times, the spiritual interpretation has been revived by E.-B.Allo<sup>17</sup> and more recently by Ugo Vanni: "The church members are aware that the eschatological period has already definitively begun and that it characterizes the situation they are experiencing. However, the text of the Apocalypse they are deciphering goes further: it describes an action that generates Christ and attributes it to the church community. The image is certainly daring: the Old Testament People of God (cf. Is 66,8) continues without interruption into the New Testament, and pertains to Christ. The Old Testament people of God had to "give birth" to redemption on the historical level; the New Testament community—this is the conclusion that the church assembly gradually arrives at—also gives birth to a distinctive Christ, a Christ of historical dimensions, a Christ that is indeed her son, being generated by her, but who goes on to transcend and surpass the limits of the mother-son relationship. Above all he is a Christ whose potential will only be fully realized in the future."

"Expressed in the form in which we find them, the concept and the imagery may not be unusual in the Apocalypse, but neither are they strange to the terminology and theology of the New Testament. The Letter to the Ephesians, for example, refers to the historical growth of Christ, right up to the attainment of his full nature (cf. Eph 4,13). In the Letter to the Galatians, Paul speaks explicitly of the formation of Christ in the Church community and actually relates this with the pains of childbirth, thereby describing it with the same imagery that we find in the present context...(Gal 4,19)."

---

1995). A brief review of the same subject, and extending into later centuries, can be found in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* at 'Naissance Divine' by Aimé Solignac and in 'La Naissance de Dieu dans L'Âme', by P. Miquel, *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 35, 1961, 378–406.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism*, New York: Noontday Press, 1955, 118: "The Incarnation, which is for traditional Christianity synonymous with the historical birth and earthly life of Christ, is for mystics of a certain type, not only this but also a perpetual Cosmic and personal process. It is an everlasting bringing forth, in the universe and also in the individual ascending soul, of the divine and perfect Life, the pure character of God, of which the one historical life dramatized the essential constituents... 'The one secret, the greatest of all,' says Patmore, is 'the doctrine of the Incarnation, regarded not as an historical event which occurred two thousand years ago, but as an event which is renewed in the body of every one who is in the way to the fulfilment of his original destiny'." The work quoted in this passage is Coventry Patmore's "*The Rod, the Root and the Flower*", "Homo", xix.

<sup>17</sup> E.-B. Allo, *Apocalypse de Saint Jean*, Études Bibliques, Paris: Librairie Victor Lecoffre, 1921, 172.

“In a way analogous to the self-description of Paul’s role here, the church assembly recognizes herself in the woman and is astonished at having this mission, which is beyond every human horizon: she will, and must, give historical expression to her Christ, thus participating in the formation of that total Christ who, at the end of history, will bring redemption to completion.”

“She possesses, or more exactly ‘is pregnant with’ (...), a Christ that she needs to communicate and impart to others; the transfer of this gift is brought about through difficulties that are extreme and reach paroxysmal intensity (...); but these difficulties do not impede the desire, felt by the church community, to give historical expression to the Christ that she carries inside her and strains to bring to birth (...).”<sup>18</sup>

This spiritual interpretation overcomes many of the problems, mentioned above, arising from the historico-mythological interpretation. Firstly, since the birth of the male child does not refer to the historical birth and mission of Jesus Christ in person, but rather to his spiritual birth in the Church, leading to the creation of his mystical body, then there can be no criticism leveled at the omission of those important details that characterize the birth, mission, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Secondly, it goes some way to explain how the Church can be the mother of Christ, despite being founded by him, a point that struck Gunkel and others as very strange. In the same way, it explains the distinction between the woman who gives birth, and the ‘rest of her descendants’. The former represents the priestly and religious core, around which lay members are gathered through the dispensing of the sacraments and the preaching of the Gospel. Furthermore in this spiritual interpretation there can be no objection to the lack of correspondence between the woman’s desert flight and actual first-century historical events. Thirdly, since the spiritual interpretation refers to the present and future, it cannot be criticized for referring to past events in a way that is uncharacteristic of the apocalyptic genre. In brief, it avoids most, if not all, of the criticism leveled at the historico-mythological interpretation.

Nevertheless, other questions and doubts are raised by the spiritual interpretation, as it stands. The identity of the child, his maleness and his rapid rescue up to the throne of God in heaven are not explained convincingly by this interpretation, with the result that its proponents do not agree about the nature of the male child generated by the Church. Some propose that it refers to the spiritual produce of the Church—those Christ-centred words and deeds that she strives to express to the world.<sup>19</sup> Others maintain that it refers to both Christ in person as the head, and also to Christians as members of his mystical body, since the terminology of the text sometimes appears to be describing the historical person of Christ, and at other times the members of the Church.<sup>20</sup> Yet others, basing themselves on the promise in Rev 2,27, that those who conquer will also rule the nations with an iron rod from the throne of God, propose

---

<sup>18</sup> Ugo Vanni, *L’Apocalisse*, 247; our translation. This interpretation was the one given by the present Pope, Benedict XVI, in his Wednesday discourse on the Apostle John, the Seer of Patmos, here quoted from the 26/08/06 dispatch from [www.zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org) : “At the center of the vision that Revelation presents is the extremely significant image of the Woman, who gives birth to a male Child, and the complementary vision of the Dragon, which has fallen from the heavens, but is still very powerful. This Woman represents Mary, the Mother of the Redeemer, but she represents at the same time the whole Church, the People of God of all times, the Church that at all times, with great pain, again gives birth to Christ. And she is always threatened by the power of the Dragon. She seems defenceless, weak.”

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Vanni, in the work quoted above from *L’Apocalisse*, 247.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Allo, *Apocalypse de Saint Jean*, 172.

that the male child refers to actual members of the Church who will be ‘raptured’ to the throne of God like Jesus was.<sup>21</sup>

So although this approach overcomes many of the defects of the historico-mythological interpretation, especially its incongruent emphasis on the past, it breaks down over uncertainties concerning the identity of the male child, and the finer details of his ‘heavenly’ birth. In the clarification of these points, Christian mystical tradition has a great deal to offer.

## THE ‘HEAVENLY BIRTH’ AND THE CHRISTIAN MYSTICAL TRADITION

At the root of the problem with the spiritual interpretation is the fact that the ‘great sign’ of the woman giving birth to a male child (Rev 12,1–5) is not a completely appropriate image for the generative action of the Church with regard to its members. If the male child is Christ the Logos, then the generative action of the Church is more akin to a process of sowing or planting seed among its members; alternatively if the male child refers to new members, it is not clear why it is unique and male, or why after birth it is immediately seized up to God’s throne. In both possibilities, the birth metaphor has to be forced, with the result that this interpretation is inconsistent and unconvincing.

The birth metaphor is entirely fitting, however, if the parturating woman in heaven represents not the Church in a collective sense, but the soul of the individual believer straining spiritually to give birth to Christ from within the depths of his own soul, in what can be termed a ‘heavenly birth’. This image vividly recalls the mystical experience, known as ecstasy or rapture, which is characterized by the soul’s elevation, caused by its inward withdrawal from the senses, followed by the sudden and transient eruption of Eternal Life into consciousness. It is a metaphor that is very similar, if not completely identical, to that of the ‘eternal’ or ‘mystic’ birth used in the past by Christian mystics and theologians to refer to the realization of Christ’s presence in the soul on its path towards union with God.

The theological basis to the use of this metaphor is to be found in a mystical development of the doctrine described above, concerning the birth of God in the Church and in the soul. This development is traceable to the works of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus the Confessor, John Scotus Eriugena, Bernard of Clairvaux, Richard of St. Victor, and it reaches its fullest expression in the 14<sup>th</sup> century with Meister Eckhart and the Rhineland mystics (John Tauler, Henry Suso, Jan van Ruysbroeck and others).<sup>22</sup> In the mystical development of this doctrine, Baptism is only the start of the spiritual life of the individual believer, analagous to the onset of gestation. This gestation of the eternal Logos in the soul of the believer concludes with a mystical ‘birth’ that brings Christ’s presence to consciousness and firmly establishes the soul on the path to divine union.

With this theological background, there is no doubt that the mystics who employed the ‘birth’ metaphor to refer to their mystical experience were standing firmly in the Christian tradition. In her book on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill draws attention to this as follows: “It is of this perpetual generation of the Word that Meister Eckhart speaks, when he says in his Christmas sermon, ‘We are celebrating the feast of the Eternal Birth which God the Father has borne and *never ceases to bear* in all Eternity: whilst this birth also comes to pass in Time

---

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses*, 157–59. This interpretation clearly matches the evangelical doctrine of the eschatological ‘rapture’ of the Church’s members.

<sup>22</sup> Meister Eckhart, OP (1260-1328), was the most prominent and original proponent of this doctrine in his time.

and in human nature, Saint Augustine says this Birth is ever taking place.’ At this point with that strong practical instinct which is characteristic of the mystics, Eckhart turns abruptly from speculation to immediate experience, and continues, ‘But if it takes not place in me, what avails it? Everything lies in this, that it should take place in me.’ Here in a few words the two-fold character of this Mystic Birth is exhibited. The interest is suddenly deflected from its cosmic to its personal aspect; and the individual is reminded that in him, no less than in the Archetypal Universe, real life must be born if real life is to be lived. ‘When the soul brings forth the Son,’ says Eckhart in another place, ‘it is happier than Mary.’<sup>23</sup>

Very similar thoughts are reflected in a Christmas sermon of Johannes Tauler, a loyal disciple of Eckhart’s: “Moreover, should a going forth, an elevation beyond and above ourselves ever come about, then we must renounce our own will, desire and wordly activity, so that we can orient ourselves singlemindedly toward God, and meet Him only in complete abandonment of self. What should remain is a pure cleaving to God alone, a making room for Him, Who is the highest and the nearest, so that his work can prosper, and His birth can be accomplished without hindrance... May God help us to prepare a dwelling place for this noble birth, so that we may all attain spiritual motherhood.”<sup>24</sup>

The ‘eternal birth’ (*êwige geburt*) of the Son in the soul of the believer is an ubiquitous theme in Eckhart’s work, but the most systematic treatment of the subject is set out in a cycle of four sermons most probably delivered to his fellow Dominicans in the Christmas season, around the years 1303-1305.<sup>25</sup> He follows his predecessors closely in asserting that God continuously engenders his Son in the highest part of the soul,<sup>26</sup> but his originality lies in his description of the preparations and conditions that are needed for this birth to be consummated (i.e. to become fully conscious), and the theoretical and practical implications arising from it. “Eckhart is uncompromising in insisting on the importance of utter passivity as the only possible preparation, though he does warn that this message is only for ‘good and perfected people’ who have absorbed the essence of the virtues and follow the life and teaching of ‘our Lord Jesus Christ’.”<sup>27</sup> Although Eckhart’s horizon was the soul’s attainment of a permanent state of withdrawal and union with the divine, there is little doubt that he recognized the more transient states of mystical experience, such as ecstasy and rapture, as helpful stages on this path to a constant awareness of the ‘eternal birth’.<sup>28</sup> Quite surprisingly, however, with the passing of the Rhineland mystics, the metaphor of the ‘eternal birth’ underwent no further development, and its use rapidly and completely disappeared from the Church.<sup>29</sup> The total absence of this metaphor in the writings of the mystical saints Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross is particularly striking.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Underhill, *Mysticism*, 122.

<sup>24</sup> Sermon 1 in *Johannes Tauler, Sermons*, New York: Paulist Press, 1985, 35–40, translated by Maria Shradly.

<sup>25</sup> For an excellent review of this sermon cycle, see Bernard McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, New York: Crossroad, 2001, 53–70.

<sup>26</sup> Origen especially, in his Ninth Homily on Jeremiah, where he speaks of the continuous and unceasing birth of the eternal Logos in the heart of the believer (cf. Rahner, ‘La Nascita di Dio’, in *Simboli della Chiesa*, 135).

<sup>27</sup> McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, 57.

<sup>28</sup> As long as it was understood that these states are neither essential nor necessary for union, and were not confused with the goal of union itself; cf. McGinn, *Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, 150; also pp. 57–8, 64.

<sup>29</sup> Except for one or two later followers of Eckhart, e.g. Jacob Boehme, Angelus Silesius. In modern times, it reappears briefly in the writings of some secular authors such as Simone Weil and Maurice Blondel (cf. ‘La Naissance de Dieu dans L’Âme’, by P. Miquel, *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 35, 1961, 378–406).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, s.v. ‘Naissance Divine’, col 30 : “On sait aujourd’hui que les grands mystiques de l’école carmélitaine ont subi l’influence des maîtres rhéno-flemands (...). L’idée de la «naissance divine» s’est ainsi transmise, mais dans une perspective différente: elle est située désormais au sommet de

The radical disappearance of this theme from the Church following the Rhineland mystics must be related to the Papal condemnation of some 28 propositions taken from Eckhart's writings and sermons, and, it should be stressed, against all those who defend or support them. On the subject of the 'eternal birth', article 13 is especially relevant: "Whatever is proper to the divine nature, all that is proper to the just and divine man. Because of that, this man performs whatever God performs, and he created heaven and earth together with God, and he is the begetter of the Eternal Word, and God would not know how to do anything without such a man".<sup>31</sup> The official condemnation against the erroneous excesses of this statement of Eckhart may well have discouraged future mystics from using the metaphor of 'eternal birth' in any way whatsoever, fearing the Inquisition and excommunication.<sup>32</sup> Regrettably, the avoidance of this expression in the Church has persisted up to the present time,<sup>33</sup> and it is probably no coincidence that, at the same time that its use declined, the mystical and spiritual senses of Rev 12 were abandoned in favour of the historico-mythological interpretation of modern scholarship. This may explain why, up to this day, the profound mystical insights of the Rhineland mystics have never been applied to the exegesis of Rev 12.

The 'eternal' or 'mystic birth', then, is a metaphor that Christian mystics have used to refer to the entire process by which the soul becomes conscious of the source of eternal and divine life within itself. This often takes the form of a 'heavenly birth'—a sudden, transient and passive experience otherwise known as ecstasy or rapture, which occurs after a period of inner spiritual development (gestation) that culminates in a period of severe spiritual distress (birthpains).<sup>34</sup> Descriptions of this experience vary greatly, but the terminology of the birth of Christ in the soul is particularly apt, as the prior spiritual process is closely analogous to physical pregnancy and labour. What is born is not a real baby, of course, but a revelation of the divine reality epitomized by Jesus Christ. Even though the soul's immediate experience of this divine life is transient, it creates in the soul a fervent and enduring desire to flee from the things of this world and re-unite itself with the source of its divine life in heaven. After briefly considering the importance of the signs in 12,1 and 3, we shall return to the interpretation of chapter 12, equipped with this new understanding of the 'heavenly birth' mentioned in 12,5.

---

l'itinéraire mystique. La formule elle-même n'apparaît guère, ou apparaît avec un autre sens; on parlera plutôt de «communication», «réveil», «unité ou union», «inhabitation»."

<sup>31</sup> From the Papal Bull "*In Agro Dominico*," March 27<sup>th</sup> 1329, translated by Bernard McGinn, in E. Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart—The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, New York: Paulist Press, 1981, 77–81.

<sup>32</sup> "The terms of "*In agro dominico*," the Holy See's severe warnings, addressed through the archbishop of Cologne to the faithful in the Rhineland that they may not consider themselves good Christians or obedient children of the Church if in any way they continue to countenance or maintain Eckhart's false teachings, carefully catalogued, should have meant that he would be consigned to complete oblivion;" Colledge and McGinn, *Meister Eckhart*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> The once ubiquitous and influential theme of the 'birth' of God in the soul is not mentioned at all in the *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), except perhaps with an allusion in n. 526.

<sup>34</sup> The trials and suffering that precede ecstasy/rapture are described in chs. 1–2 of the 'Sixth Mansions' of Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*. The experience of ecstasy/rapture itself is described from ch. 4 onwards, using every available metaphor except for that of childbirth, cf. note 30 above.

## THE FUNCTION OF THE SIGNS IN REVELATION 12

We have considered how, in John's vision, the birth of the Messiah is not described as a historical event, but as a spiritual and mystical event that takes place in heaven, in a region somewhat inferior to the throne of God.<sup>35</sup> More significantly, though, it takes place immediately after the two signs—the woman and the dragon—are seen in heaven. Everything in the vision begins after these two signs were seen: “And a great sign *was seen* in heaven” (12,1); “And another sign *was seen* in heaven” (12,3). The author's use of the passive past tense of the Greek verb ‘to see’ (ὤφθη—*was seen*), here, contrasts with his use of the first person active past tense (εἶδον—I saw) everywhere else in the text. This form of the verb is, in fact, only used in the context of the three signs seen in heaven (12,1; 12,3 and 11,19, which is linked to 15,1), and it implies that these signs are not only seen by the author, but also by certain other people.<sup>36</sup>

Particular emphasis should therefore be given to the fact that the vision unfolds from the appearance of these two signs in heaven. Furthermore, there is no clear break between the appearance of the signs in heaven and the rest of the vision: after the heavenly birth, the vision continues by following the fate of the two signs, from heaven to earth. Since these two signs form the subject of the entire vision, it is essential to focus the interpretation on the purpose of these signs. This approach is strongly endorsed by the fact that, in the biblical tradition, the function of a sign is as important, if not more so, than the sign itself.<sup>37</sup> The interpretation of the vision must therefore concentrate on the function of the signs that are seen.<sup>38</sup>

In the biblical tradition, a sign has been defined as an object, an occurrence or an event through which a person is to recognize, learn, remember or perceive the credibility of something.<sup>39</sup> Directly or indirectly, the author of a sign is almost always God.<sup>40</sup> Those who witness the sign may experience one or several of the following effects: the gift of new knowledge or understanding, the increase of faith, the assurance of protection, the recollection of an agreement or covenant, or the confirmation of a divine calling or mission.

When applied to the vision in Rev 12, this definition serves to halt the rush to identify the heavenly signs and to focus attention, instead, on their effect on those who see them: the event of seeing the signs in heaven causes those who see them ‘to recognize, learn, remember or perceive the credibility’ of the thing to which the signs refer, namely to the exodus of the woman to the desert, where she will be protected from the dragon and his furious attacks on

---

<sup>35</sup> The fact that the male child is ‘seized up’ to the throne implies that his birth takes place on an inferior level, cf. Biguzzi, ‘La Donna, Il Drago e Il Messia in Ap 12’, 20–21.

<sup>36</sup> It is not possible here to discuss the link between the seeing of these signs in Rev 12 and the eschatological signs mentioned elsewhere in Christian writings (cf. Mt 24,3.30; Mk 13,4; Lk 21,11.25–28; *Didache* 16). Such a discussion can only succeed in the context of a comprehensive interpretation of all the eschatological manifestations prophesied in Revelation.

<sup>37</sup> This is the underlying theme of Helfmeyer's analysis of the word ‘Sign’ in the Old Testament, s.v. אֵימָה in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 1:170–88.

<sup>38</sup> Most scholars give insufficient attention to the fact that this vision unfolds from the seeing of the two signs in heaven. Those who give importance to the signs tend to emphasize their meaning and disregard their function (e.g. Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses*, 123–24). As noted above, the function of a sign in the biblical tradition is as important, if not more so, than the sign itself.

<sup>39</sup> This is H. Gunkel's definition, quoted by Helfmeyer in his article on ‘Signs’ in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 1:170. Subsequent information is also based on this article.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. ‘Signs and Symbols’. It should not be forgotten, though, that the devil can also be the author of signs, usually performed with the intention of deceiving (Rev 13,13–14; 16,14; 19,20; Mt 24,24; Mk 13,22; 2Thess 2,9).

‘the rest of her descendants’. This immediately leads us to ask: Who are the people who see these signs, and why should they need to be assured of the exodus and protection of the woman in the desert?

## THE MYSTICAL INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION 12

Just as the ‘heavenly’ birth represents a mystical experience in which Jesus Christ is fully and directly revealed to the soul, so the seeing of signs ‘in heaven’ can best be understood as the soul’s immediate preparation for this experience—the means by which it is raised to the heights of mystical contemplation. Understood in this way, the act of seeing the signs actually refers to an inner spiritual apprehension, rather than the sense perception of an external image in the night sky, as suggested by some commentators.<sup>41</sup>

So on the basis of this ‘mystical’ interpretation of the passage, we propose that the individuals who are inwardly given the vision of these signs rapidly ‘give birth’ to a revelation of Jesus Christ from within the depths of their own soul, just as the woman gives birth to the male child in the vision. In this way, through the personal experience of the ‘heavenly birth’, the one who sees the signs comes to identify himself with Zion, the woman in the vision. So complete is this identification that, like the woman in the vision, he then flees to a place that has been prepared in the desert (12,6.14), where he is united with all those who have had a similar experience.<sup>42</sup> There they remain for 1,260 days followed by ‘a time, two times and half-a-time’—the two consecutive periods of time that constitute a final week of years.<sup>43</sup> Since the cause of the exodus of these people is the experience of the revelation of Jesus Christ, it is this ‘heavenly birth’ that determines the start of the period of 1,260 days, at the beginning of the final week of years.

Those who come to be identified with Zion, the woman, through the ‘heavenly birth’ can be recognized as the group of 144,000 virgin followers of the Lamb,<sup>44</sup> by the fact that, later in the vision, the author sees them on a mountain called by the same name: Mount Zion (Rev 14,1–5). This identification is supported by the observation of Prigent, for example,

---

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 680, under (5).

<sup>42</sup> In this ‘eschatological exodus’, the desert corresponds to the desert the Israelites crossed in order to reach the promised land. Just as God protected the Israelites from Pharaoh’s army after their exodus from Egypt, so also those who identify with Zion are protected from the diabolical offensive of the serpent, after their exodus from worldly society. There is no doubt that the wording used in 12,14 [“And the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle in order to fly to her place in the desert”] recalls the metaphorical language of the original Exodus account (cf. Exod 19,4; Dt 32,11), but, as illustrated in the following passage by Teresa of Avila, it also has a mystical significance related to the experience of ecstasy/rapture: “But with rapture...you see and feel this cloud, or this powerful eagle, rising and bearing you up with it on its wings. You realize, I repeat, and indeed see, that you are being carried away, you know not whither” *The Life of Teresa of Avila*, translated by E. Allison Peers, ch. XX, online at <http://www.catholicfirst.com/thefaith/catholicclassics/stteresa/life/teresaofavila.cfm>.

<sup>43</sup> Following Victorinus, Hippolytus, and more recently T.F. Glasson, *The Revelation of John*, Cambridge: CUP 1965, 67–70, and Alan Johnson, ‘Revelation’ in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Gæbelein, Vol. 12, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1981, 502–504. For the arguments in favour of the interpretation of these periods as consecutive, and against the ‘synchronous’ interpretation of the two periods, see this author’s article “The Time Periods in the Central Part of the Book of Revelation” at <http://newtorah.org/The%20two%20time%20periods.html>.

<sup>44</sup> The number of this group is often said to be symbolic (144,000 = 12 x 12 x 1000; see Vanni, *L’Apocalisse*, 54), but there are good reasons for supposing it is not purely symbolic, and should also be understood literally (cf. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993, 218–19). Since the precise number of this group is divinely ordained through the granting of a spiritual experience, it should not concern us unduly.

who remarks: “Here we find, along with the Lamb, his faithful ones who are gathered together in one of the places where tradition locates the manifestation of salvation. Far from being abandoned to the domination of the beasts, the 144,000 are presented as being the object of the utmost solicitude on the part of God. That is to say that while their number leads us to consider them alongside the people of Rev 7, their preservation in a geographical location evokes the flight of the woman whom God welcomes and protects in the wilderness (Rev 12:6,14)”.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, in Rev 7, the same group of 144,000 people are encountered at an earlier stage of their vocation, as those who are chosen from among the 12 tribes of Israel and marked by the ‘seal of the living God’ (7,2–8), in a way that leaves ‘the name of the Lamb and of his Father’ inscribed on their foreheads (14,1). The precise meaning of this action has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate and has not been satisfactorily resolved.<sup>46</sup> However, a new approach is suggested by the mystical interpretation of the ‘heavenly birth’, for which the impression of the divine names by the ‘seal of the living God’ can be considered as a remote preparation. In this context, the ‘sealing’ would correspond to the start of the ‘gestation’, that is to say the beginning of a growing awareness of the inhabitation of the living God—a process that suddenly and joyfully reaches its fullness in the ‘heavenly birth’.<sup>47</sup>

The mystical interpretation of the ‘sealing’ of the 144,000, followed by their experience of the ‘heavenly birth’, receives further confirmation later in the text, where the character and mission of this group are described in ways that indicate their progress on the path to mystical union: the constant presence of the Lamb in their midst (14,1) implies their attainment of a more or less constant state of union—one which mystics often refer to as spiritual ‘union’ or ‘betrothal’.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, in the passage describing the song performed in front of God’s throne, which “no one could learn...except the 144,000” (14,3), the Greek verb for ‘learn’ (μαθησάμενοι) could refer to learning or instruction in the ordinary sense, but the context suggests it is more likely to denote “the ability to ‘understand’ a higher...type of

---

<sup>45</sup> Prigent, *The Apocalypse*, 430.

<sup>46</sup> Aune (*Revelation 6–16*, 455) argues persuasively against those who claim that the ‘sealing’ is a metaphor for baptism, or the reception of the Holy Spirit, saying that if this were true it would imply that all the rest of the group from which the 144,000 were chosen could neither be baptised, nor in possession of the Holy Spirit, nor indeed Christian on this account. However, Aune’s suggestion that “the idea of sealing people with the seal or signet ring of God is a metaphor drawn from the world of ancient magic, where sealing functions either to protect the person sealed or control the evil spirit that is sealed” (ibid. 453) is, in many ways, even more bizarre, as it implies that the divine Author of the sealing activity relies upon ancient magical practices.

<sup>47</sup> This suggestion regarding the mystical significance of the sealing of the 144,000 finds confirmation in the terminology adopted independently by Teresa of Avila to describe the soul’s first experience of union with God’s will: “That soul has now delivered itself into His hands and His great love has so completely subdued it that it neither knows nor desires anything save that God shall do with it what He wills. Never, I think, will God grant this favour save to the soul which He takes for His very own. His will is that, without understanding how, the soul shall go thence sealed with His seal. In reality, the soul in that state does no more than the wax when a seal is impressed upon it—the wax does not impress itself; it is only prepared for the impress: that is, it is soft—and it does not even soften itself so as to be prepared; it merely remains quiet and consenting. Oh, goodness of God, that all this should be done at Thy cost! Thou dost require only our wills and dost ask that Thy wax may offer no impediment. Here, then, sisters, you see what our God does to the soul in this state so that it may know itself to be His. He gives it something of His own, which is what His Son had in this life: He can grant us no favour greater than that.” From ch. 2, Fifth Mansions, *Interior Castle*, translated into English by E. Allison Peers, and accessible online at <http://www.catholicfirst.com/thefaith/catholicclassics/stteresa/castle/interiorcastle.cfm>.

<sup>48</sup> Teresa of Avila calls it the ‘spiritual union’ preceding the consummation of ‘spiritual marriage’ and places this state in the ‘Seventh Mansions’ of her *Interior Castle*.

knowledge”,<sup>49</sup> such as that acquired through mystical experience. Finally, identifying Mount Zion with the ‘beloved city’ in accordance with biblical tradition (Ps 87,1–3), the assembly of the 144,000 can be identified with the ‘camp of the saints’, which is eventually surrounded by the armies of Gog and Magog (Rev 20,8–9). It is at this moment that their mystical union with God becomes manifest to the whole world, as fire comes down from heaven and consumes their enemies (20,9b). In view of their ‘sealing’, their ‘heavenly birth’, their enjoyment of the constant presence of the Lamb, their mystical communion with the choruses in heaven, and their intimate union with the One who sends ‘fire from heaven’, there can be little doubt that the vocation and mission of the 144,000 men can best be explained as their progress on the extraordinary path to the highest level of divine union, aided by certain well-documented mystical experiences.

One important corollary to the mystical interpretation of Rev 12 is that, as a sign, the woman in the vision only partly represents Zion, the mother community which produced the Messiah. Primarily she represents the holy and blessed soul raised to the heights of contemplation and granted a revelation of Jesus Christ from within.<sup>50</sup> Confusion between these two aspects of the ‘great sign’, brought into identity through the mystical experience of ‘heavenly birth’, has fuelled the long debate between the collective and individual interpretations of this passage.<sup>51</sup> Similarly the sign of the dragon only partly represents the devil, the origin of all evil, the defeated enemy of Jesus Christ presently locked and chained in the Abyss (Rev 20,2–3).<sup>52</sup> As a sign in this vision, the dragon primarily represents the spirit of evil that opposes the revelation of Jesus Christ to the contemplative soul (the ‘heavenly birth’). The dragon’s desire to devour the male child at birth (12,4) represents its attempt to destroy the soul’s experience of Eternal Life, and eradicate her desire for union with the ‘throne of God’ in heaven. Later in the text, the same evil spirit, after being thrown down from heaven to earth, pursues the woman, now identified with the gathering of the 144,000 at a mountain in the desert, and tries to sweep her away with a river of water from his mouth (12,15).<sup>53</sup> Failing in this, he goes off to make war against the ‘rest of her descendants’ by means of his two agents: the beast from the sea and the beast from the land (Rev 13).

---

<sup>49</sup> Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 809, who adds: “there is an interesting parallel in 2Cor 12:4 (...) where Paul claims that someone (probably referring to himself) was caught up to the third heaven and that ‘he heard things that cannot be told [...], which a person may not utter’. Like the 144,000, Paul heard something in heaven that was impossible or inappropriate for others to hear or understand.”

<sup>50</sup> It should be noted that in both senses, there is a strong secondary association with the Blessed Virgin Mary: she is not only the embodiment of the faithful community, Zion, that gave birth to the Messiah, but she is also the epitome of the pure soul to whom Christ is revealed through the ‘heavenly birth’.

<sup>51</sup> See Le Frois, *The Woman Clothed with the Sun*, 3–9.

<sup>52</sup> Taking the ‘amillennial’ position that sees the Church in the present era as the millennial kingdom of Christ. For arguments on why Rev 20,4–6 should be understood as a ‘recapitulation’ of the present age, see John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple—a new approach to the Book of Revelation*, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003, 76–79.

<sup>53</sup> The waters that the serpent spews from its mouth, to sweep away the woman (Rev 12,15), are later identified with people from many ‘races and crowds and nations and tongues’ (17,15), who, even though they do not have a vocation, presume to be called to go out to the desert (cf. Mt 24,24–26). On account of their immorality, these people by no means represent ‘Zion’, but the ‘Abyss’. As a result, the earth opens up and buries them (Rev 12,16), recalling what happened to Korah and his company of Levites, when they presumed to be as holy as Moses and Aaron (Num 16).

## CONCLUSION

Our findings reveal the author of Revelation using the language of mystics to convey important parts of his message. For these parts of the text, knowledge of mystical theology is more relevant than Roman history and ancient mythology. The resulting ‘mystical’ interpretation of Rev 12 explains the details of the text more comprehensively than either of the traditional interpretations presented above. In answer to the crucial question about the identity of the male child, it is no other than Jesus Christ born spiritually from the depths of the purified and faithful soul, revealing his eternal and divine life in a way that also recalls his historical humanity. This mystical birth of Christ from within the soul explains the unhistorical language describing this birth in Rev 12 and also the celestial context in which it takes place. Furthermore, this ‘heavenly birth’ can be fully comprehended, not only in the text as it stands, but also in the eschatological context of the vision (cf. 10,7; 11,15), as an immediate consequence of seeing the signs ‘in heaven’. The people who are directly affected by this ‘heavenly birth’ can be confidently identified with a group of people described in other parts of the text—the 144,000 of Rev 7,2–8 and 14,1–5—in fact, it allusively describes their calling for a very specific mission. These people participate in what can be called an eschatological ‘exodus’ that is, in many ways, analogous to the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.<sup>54</sup> Finally, in its specific application to the 144,000 men, who come to identify themselves with the woman (Zion) through their experience of the ‘heavenly birth’, this interpretation confirms and explains the difference between this chosen group of faithful, called to seek divine protection on a mountain in the desert, and ‘the rest of her descendants’, who remain within the social order and face persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the dragon’s agents—the two beasts of Rev 13.<sup>55</sup>

John Ben-Daniel  
P.O.Box 1106,  
91010 Jerusalem.

---

<sup>54</sup> The Exodus typology in this passage has been noted and emphasized in several recent works: e.g. Prigent, *The Apocalypse*, 371–2, 377; Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge: CUP, 1993, 70–72.

<sup>55</sup> This distinction is hotly debated among scholars. There is a strong tendency to regard the 144,000 as a symbolical description of the entire community of the faithful. The present interpretation confirms the separate identity and mission of the 144,000, through their mystical identification with the woman. Just as a mother cannot be confused with her children, so the 144,000 cannot and should not be conflated with ‘the rest of her descendants’ (Rev 12,17). The distinction between these two groups in Rev 12 is already implicit in Rev 7: a) the numbered group of 144,000 men, sealed for protection on earth (7,2–8) and b) the vast multitude in heaven, whom no one was able to number, after they have been martyred in the ‘great tribulation’ (7,9–17). Although in close proximity, the two clearly distinct groups, the first on earth and the second in heaven, are seen again in subsequent visions (14,2–3 and 15,2–4).