FAR AS THE CURSE IS FOUND:  
The Point of Revelation 12:15-16

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Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. (Rev. 12:15,16 NRSV).

Not least among the puzzles of the Apocalypse is the intended thrust of these verses. In dealing with them R. H. Charles concludes: "There are no real parallels in the Old Testament or Judaism", so we are wholly in the dark as to their original meaning. The text is "a meaningless survival".¹ More recently A. Y. Collins indicates that these verses do not seem to add "any further or distinctive significance".² I want to propose a more positive understanding by following a lead suggested by J. P. M. Sweet to the effect that it is Genesis 3:15-20 that dominates the whole of Revelation 12.³ One key to understanding this prophecy is by observing the multiple ways in which God's curses, as described in Genesis 3, are executed and finally reversed in John's vision.

The overall scenario of that vision draws upon the cosmic range of Genesis, as if a new creation were being patterned after the first. The sun, moon and stars of Genesis 1:16 appear in the description of the woman. So, too, strategic roles are assigned to the heavens, the earth and the waters, as in Genesis 1:3-10. In the Apocalypse we may discern a pattern of thinking in which the first heaven and the first earth have given way to the new heaven and the new earth, comparable to the more explicit announcement in Revelation 21:1.

The first heaven is where the serpent struggles for victory over the woman and Michael; the new heaven rejoices (v. 12) over the serpent’s eviction (vv. 8, 9, 11). The first earth is vulnerable to the wrath of the evicted dragon (v. 12); the new earth has become the helper of the woman (v. 16) and therefore the place of potential victory for those who “follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4).

The two central actors here, as in Genesis 3, are the woman (whom the Septuagint calls Zoe, Life, the mother of all the living) and the ancient serpent, the source of all lies. As a result of the serpent’s success in tempting the woman, God has put an enmity between the two (Gen. 3:15); it is that primordial enmity that provides the backdrop of Revelation 12. In the saga of beginnings that temptation had centered in competing conceptions of life and death: “You will not die” (Gen. 3:4). The same effort to deceive underlies the drama of John’s vision.

In Genesis 3:15-20 several curses follow upon that first successful lie. There was a curse on the serpent and one on Adam; these two curses leave little trace in Revelation 12. Much more evident are three other curses that accompanied the enmity between the serpent and the woman. We should look at them with some care.

1) To the woman God said,

I will greatly multiply your pain in child-bearing, in pain you shall bring forth children.

As soon as John introduced the woman, he acknowledged the operation of this curse: “she cried out in the pangs of her birth, in anguish for delivery” (Rev. 12:2). This curse was as essential to her identity as the heavenly clothing. The operation of this curse was again underscored when the serpent, after having been thrown down to earth, “persecuted” the woman (v. 13; in the use of the term diōkō, the context suggests a fusion of the motifs of pursuit and persecution).

2) A second curse resulted from the serpent’s lies in Genesis: “I will put enmity between your seed and her seed”. In John’s vision this curse fell first on the male child; in fact this enmity is mentioned even before the child was born. Just as John identified the woman as a recipient of the curse in the travail of pregnancy, so, too, he identified her child by referring to the serpent’s enmity. The dragon tried “to devour the child when she brought it forth” (12:4). Although other interpretations are possible, George Caird