

The 1260 Days in the Book of Revelation

Jon Paulien
Andrews University

Some Adventists are reconsidering the church's system of prophetic interpretation, promoting a mixture of historicism and futurism. Occasionally they argue that the prophetic periods of Revelation are referring to different events and that in some cases they should be interpreted as future literal days. Jon Paulien examined the prophetic periods in Revelation in order to determine exegetically whether they are all referring to the same historical period or not. Here we share with you the results of his careful analysis of the biblical evidence.

There are five texts in the book of Revelation that include a time period covering 1260 days in one form or another. Two of these texts specifically utilize the phrase "1260 days" (Rev 11:3 and 12:6), two others the phrase "42 months" (Rev 11:2 and 13:5), and the fifth the enigmatic "time, times, and half a time" of Daniel 7:25 (Rev 12:14, cf. Dan 12:7).

Chapters 12 and 13 of Revelation contain repeated references to Daniel 7. There are also strong allusions to Daniel 12 in Revelation 10.¹ So the use of this time period in Revelation is based on Daniel 7:25 (cf. Dan 12:7) more than it is on Elijah's drought or the length of Jesus' ministry. It is exegetically appropriate, therefore, to study all seven 1260-day texts in Daniel and Revelation together, as Adventists have done in the past.

I. Revelation 11

The first two occurrences of the 1260 days are found immediately following Revelation 10:8-11. In Revelation 11 John continues to be engaged (Rev 11:1-2) and addressed (11:3ff.) by a voice in heaven (Rev 10:8). The standpoint from which John experiences chapter 11 may be his own. Since the 42 months and 1260 days are expressed in the future tense, these periods of time were future from the standpoint of John.

The two witnesses themselves are introduced in Revelation 11:3-6. The introduction includes a description of their appearance and of their characteristics and actions in the present (11:4-6) and in the future tenses (11:3). Whatever interpretation we place on the two witnesses, they had some role already in John's first century context. At some later point in history, they would "prophesy" for 1260 days, clothed in sackcloth. Then they would experience death, resurrection, and ascension (11:7-13). The response to this ascension by the "remnant" in the great city (fear and giving glory to God—Rev 11:13) is the response called for in the first angel's message of Revelation 14:7. So this response would seem to be an end-time event, just before the sounding of the seventh trumpet.

II. Character Sequences in Revelation 12

Adventists have traditionally understood Revelation 12 to offer an apocalyptic prophecy of three sequential stages of Christian history. The first stage is the Christ-event back in the first century (Rev 12:1-5). The third is the final battle between the dragon and the Remnant (12:17). The second is the vast middle period of 1260 years (Rev 12:6, 14) of papal supremacy in the Middle Ages and beyond (Rev 12:6, 13-16). Support for this view can be found in the way two of the characters in the narrative go through successive experiences over time.

First of all, a woman appears in heaven, clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head (12:1). The woman of Revelation 12 has a "pedigree" that carries back well into the time of the Old Testament prophets.² But in verse 5 she acts in the context of the vision, giving birth to a

male child who is generally recognized to be a symbol of Jesus. After she gives birth to the child (12:5) she is seen fleeing into the desert for “1260 days” (12:6). So the experience of the woman in Revelation 12:1-6 is actually depicted in three stages: (1) the time of her appearance and pregnancy; (2) the time of giving birth; and (3) the time of fleeing into the desert.

The second character to be introduced in this chapter is the dragon (Rev 12:3-4), who represents Satan (Rev 12:9). Scholars widely recognize that the dragon’s attack on the male child in Revelation 12:5 represents Herod’s attempt to destroy the Christ child (Matt 2:1-18).³ Prior to his attack on the male child, the tail of the dragon sweeps a third of the stars out of the sky and flings them to earth (Rev 12:4). After his attack on the male child, the dragon pursues the woman into the desert (12:13-16) and eventually makes war with the remnant of her seed (12:17). So the dragon in chapter 12 is actually described in terms of four successive stages: (1) his attack on a third of the stars (12:4); (2) his attack on the male child (12:4-5, 7-9); (3) his attack against the woman herself (12:13-16); and finally (4) his war against the remnant (12:17). The first of these stages is prior to the action of the vision, which begins with the dragon’s threat against the male child.

III. Three Phases of Action in Revelation 12

- (1) *The Time of the First Advent.* Stage one of the visionary sequence of Revelation 12, then, focuses on the dragon’s attack against the male child in verse 5. When the male child reaches heaven war breaks out there, with the result that the dragon and his angels lose their place in heaven and are hurled down to earth (12:7-9). When did this casting out of heaven take place? Verse 10 clearly addresses the same point in time as the war of verses 7-9. So the first phase of the visionary sequence runs from the incarnation of Jesus through the expulsion of Satan from heaven.⁴
- (2) *The Broad Sweep of Christian History.* Revelation 12, verses 6 and 12, both seem to mark a transition between the time of Jesus’ first-century mission, on earth in verse 5 and in heaven in verse 10, and the woman’s exile into the desert. Since the language of Revelation 12:6 (1260 days) and 12:14 (time, times, and half a time) is clearly parallel, and both follow events related to the first century, it is likely that they cover the same historical period.
- (3) *The Final Attack on the Remnant.* Revelation 12:17 is not only the conclusion to chapter 12, it serves as a summary introduction to Revelation’s portrayal of a great final crisis at the conclusion of earth’s history (Rev 13-14). It indicates that there are two sides in the final conflict, represented by the dragon and the remnant of the woman’s seed.

In Revelation 12, therefore, one can detect three stages of Christian history running from the time of Jesus and John to the end of all things. When we note that at least two of the main characters in the chapter were active in the time before the birth of Jesus (which we will call Stage Zero below), there are a total of four successive stages of history. These can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Stage Zero: Before the Time of the Vision (12:1-4)
 - The original war in heaven (4)
 - The dragon embodies the kingdoms of the earth (3)
 - The woman represents God’s true people (1-2)
- 2) Stage One: The Time of Jesus and John (12:5, 7-12)
 - The woman gives birth to the male child (5)
 - He is snatched up to heaven (5)
 - War in heaven (7-9)

Enthronement and victory (10-11)

Transition (12)

3) Stage Two: The Serpent Attacks the Woman (12:6, 13-16)

The dragon pursues the woman (13)

She flees into the desert and is protected 1260 days (6, 14)

The serpent spews water to sweep her away (15)

The earth helps the woman (16)

4) Stage Three: The Dragon and the Remnant, (Rev 12:17, etc.)

The dragon is angry and goes away to make war (12:17)

He calls up allies for the conflict (13:1-7, 11)

The unholy trinity deceives and persecutes (13:8-10, 12-18)

The remnant responds (14:1-13)

The return of Jesus (14:14-20)

The two 1260-day texts of Revelation 12, then, both occur in Stage Two, the central period of Christian history. They characterize something important about the history between the first-century mission of Jesus and the final battle at the end. This median location in time after the writing of Revelation parallels the situation of the two occurrences in chapter 11. This is further evidence that all five occurrences of “1260 days” are a reference to the same period of history.

IV. Revelation 13

Revelation 13 outlines in more detail the dragon’s final war against the remnant of the woman’s seed (Rev 12:17). This could suggest that the reference to “42 months” in Revelation 13:5 belongs to the final battle and is, therefore, not to be equated with the four earlier references. However, a little noticed feature of chapter 13 is the way the tenses of the main verbs shift at significant points throughout the chapter. These tenses need to be read in the context of the final attack of Revelation 12:17. Two beasts (from the sea and the earth) are first introduced using verbs in the past tense (aorist, imperfect, and perfect indicatives—Rev 13:1-7; 13:11).⁵ In New Testament Greek, aorist indicative verbs express action as a point of time in the past. The actions described in these introductions, therefore, occur prior to the dragon’s final war against the remnant (Rev 12:17; 13:8-10, 12-18).

In each of the two scenes (Rev 13:1-10 and 11-18), then, the Greek of Revelation 13 moves from an introductory description in the past tense (Rev 13:1-7; 13:11) to a mixture of present and future tenses (Rev 13:8-10; 13:12-18), describing the actions of these two beasts in the context of the final attack of Revelation 12:17. So two stages of history are clearly marked off by the Greek tenses signaling events prior to the dragon’s war (past tense) and the events of the war itself (present and future tenses).⁶

Revelation 13, therefore, does not contain all four stages of the dragon’s war, as described in Revelation 12. It offers information related to the last two stages of his activity, listed as Stage Two and Stage Three in the chart for Revelation 12. The past tense portions of Revelation 13 correspond to Stage Two, the events preceding the final battle. The present and future tenses of the main verbs in chapter 13 correspond to the final attack on the remnant, first mentioned in Revelation 12:17. Note the relationship between Revelation 12 and 13 in the following chart:

	Rev 12	Rev 13	
Stage One	Dragon vs. Male Child (5)		
	Enthronement of Christ (7-12)		
Stage Two	1260 days (13-15)	42 months (1-7)	Past tenses in chapter 13
	Earth helps woman (16)	Beast from the earth (11)	
Stage Three	Dragon vs. Remnant (17)	Worldwide worship of the Beast (8-10, 12-18)	Present and future tenses in chapter 13

The 42-month period of Revelation 13:5, therefore, is not part of the final battle (Stage Three) of Christian history. The beast from the sea “was given authority” to rule for 42 months. The sea beast’s activity does not move into the present or future tenses until verse 8. As part of Stage Two, then, the 42 months of Revelation 13:5 belong to the middle period of church history, between the events of the first advent of Jesus and the events leading up to His second coming. Note the comparison of all three chapters in Revelation where 1260-day passages occur. They are firmly entrenched at the heart of the Christian era, not at its edges.

Rev 11	Rev 12	Rev 13
10:8 - 11:1 Time of John	12:1-5, 7-12 Time of Jesus	---
11:1-13 <i>42 months</i> <i>1260 days</i>	12:6, 13-16 <i>1260 days</i> <i>Time, times and half a time</i>	13:1-7, 11 <i>42 months</i>
11:15-18 Final events: Wrath and judgment	12:17 Final events: Remnant	13:8-10, 12-18 Final events: Image and mark Present and future

V. Conclusion

The traditional Seventh-day Adventist historicist perspective is that the five 1260-day prophecies of Revelation 11-13 all refer to the same period of history, the middle period of Christian history between the time of John and the events of the end. This perspective is exegetically sound. While John gives no evidence that he is aware of 2000 years of Christian history, his prophetic message clearly marks out the three stages of that history and the central role of the 1260 days within it.

¹Compare Rev 10:5-6 with Dan 12:4-7.

²Rev 12:1-2 is based on the Old Testament image of a virtuous woman as a symbol of faithful Israel (Isa 26:16-27; 54:5; 66:7-14; Hos 2:14-20).

³Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 639; and J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 147.

⁴While the heavenly war of Rev 12:7-9 is set in the context of Jesus' ascension to heaven in AD 31, it echoes an earlier war described briefly in Rev 12:4 (the dragon's attack on the stars of heaven). That war took place before the creation of earth (Rev 13:8).

⁵I am referring to the main verbs, of course, not verbs in subordinate clauses, whose tense is not relevant to the point.

⁶Rev 13:1-7 = past tense; Rev 13:8-10 = present and future tenses; Rev 13:11 = past tense; Rev 13:12-18 = present and future tenses.

⁷I am indebted to the chart by Hans LaRondelle in "The End-Time Message in Historical Perspective," *Ministry*, December, 1996, 13.

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