

## The interpretation of the 'male child' of Revelation 12 up to the 8<sup>th</sup> century

Author: Thomas Farrar – [www.dianoigo.com](http://www.dianoigo.com) / <http://blog.dianoigo.com>

Writer	Approximate Date	Writer's explanation of Rev. 12:5 <sup>1</sup>	Comment
Hippolytus of Rome	180-230	And she brought forth,' he says, 'a man child who is to rule all the nations.' By this is meant that the church, always bringing forth Christ, the perfect manchild of God, who is declared to be God and man, becomes the instructor of all the nations. And the words 'her child was caught up unto God and to his throne' signify that he who is always born of her is a heavenly king and not an earthly; even as David also declared of old when he said, 'The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. ( <i>On the Antichrist</i> 61)	The male child is understood to be Christ. The description of the child's rule is, however, spiritualized and applied to the Church's mission. ( <i>poimainō</i> , literally 'to shepherd', has probably been understood here more in the sense of nurturing, as in Rev. 7:17, than in the harsher sense of Rev. 2:27). 'Caught up to God and to his throne' is understood to refer to Christ's exalted state in heaven.
Methodius	270-312	And Christ, who was conceived long before, was not the child who 'was taken up' to the throne of God for fear that he might be injured by the serpent; rather he descended from the throne of his Father and was begotten precisely so that he might remain and check the dragon's assault on the flesh. And so, you must admit that it is the church that is in labor, and it is those who are washed in baptism that are brought forth... I think that the church here is said to bring forth 'a male child' simply because the enlightened spiritually receive the features and image and virility of Christ. The likeness of the Word is stamped on them and is begotten within them by perfect knowledge and faith. Thus Christ is spiritually begotten in each one. And so it is that the church is with child and labors until Christ is formed and born within us, so that each of the saints by sharing in Christ is born again as Christ. ( <i>Symposium</i> 8.7-8)	Methodius denies that the child refers to the literal Christ, instead spiritualizing the figure to refer to those reborn through baptism. However, in order to justify this interpretation he argues that Christ is spiritually begotten in each convert, who is "born again as Christ." Hence, the child actually is understood to be Christ, but in a figurative rather than historical sense.
Victorinus of Petovium	270-310	'And he was caught up to the throne of God.' We read of this in the Acts of the Apostles. For as he was speaking with the disciples, he was caught up into heaven. 'And he is to rule all nations with a rod of iron,' which is the sword. For under the subterfuge of the antichrist all the nations are going to be arrayed against the saints. By the sword, it says, both will fall. ( <i>Commentary on the Apocalypse</i> 12.3)	The child is understood to be Christ. 'Caught up to the throne of God' is applied to his ascension. 'Rule all nations with a rod of iron' is applied to the future triumph of Christ and the saints over the antichrist and the nations.
Tychonius	385	"'And she brought forth a male child.' The church brings forth Christ who, although he was God, deigned to be born as man. He speaks of a 'male child,' because through his victory the devil, who had conquered a woman, ceased to be a conqueror. 'Who is to rule the nations with a rod of iron.' Indeed, [he speaks here] of his whole body. For the same Lord said of this, 'He who conquers and keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my Father.' 'And her son was caught up to God and his throne.' This means that whoever shall be resurrected in Christ will sit with him on the throne of God at the right hand of the Father. ( <i>Commentary on the Revelation</i> )	The child is understood to be Christ, and the child's birth is understood to refer to the Incarnation. However, the description of the child ruling the nations and being caught up to God and his throne is extended to the eschatological destiny of Christ's body, the Church.
Oecumenius	6 <sup>th</sup> century	Reveal to us more clearly, O John, who this is who was born, this male child! He says, 'who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.' O inspired one, you have declared clearly to us that he is our Savior and Lord, Jesus, the Christ. For his own Father promised him, 'Ask of me, and I will give you the nations as	The child is understood to be Christ. The description of the child is applied to Christ literally and is not applied to the Church.

<sup>1</sup> Quotations are taken from Weinrich, W.C. (2005). *Revelation. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Vol. XII). Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, pp. 181-183. The exception is Bede the Venerable; in this case the source is Weinrich, W.C. (2011). *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, pp. 150-151.

		your inheritance and the ends of the earth as your possession. You will shepherd them with a rod of iron, and you will dash them like a potter's vessel.' 'But her child was caught up to God and to his throne.' The poisonous dragon lay in wait and incited Herod to kill the children in Bethlehem, thinking that certainly among them he would locate the Lord. But by the providence of the Father the child escaped the plot. For Joseph heard a warning from heaven and took the child and its mother and fled into Egypt, since Herod was seeking the life of the child. ( <i>Commentary on the Apocalypse</i> 12.3-6)	
Primasius	6 <sup>th</sup> century	Rightly is Christ, the Head of the church, said to be born in each [of his] members, who is known to rule [in them]. For he himself is both the Author and the Finisher of faith in whom we shall accomplish virtue. He reigns among the good with a rod of iron, that is, with an inflexible righteousness, but he breaks the evil into pieces. What is from the head is joined also to his church as to his body, 'for all who have been baptized have put on Christ,' and 'the two shall be one flesh,' because whatever is to be understood 'in Christ,' the apostle says is also 'in the church.' 'Her child was caught up to God and to his throne.' Although Christ, when his work was completed, went on before as the Head and so ascended to the Father, this nonetheless also corresponds to the church. For this reason the apostle can speak like this: 'He who raised us up, made us to sit in the heavenly places,' and 'Our citizenship is in heaven,' and 'If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.' Should you wish to interpret [this passage] as referring especially to the person of Christ, you can appropriately gather other stories together and consider the treacheries of the red dragon to be all those persecutions that Christ had to face from the cradle because of Herod even unto death on the cross to which he willed to submit. For although the dragon sought his death, as it were, with gaping mouth, yet he was brought to naught by his resurrection. However, we must except from these agonies his birth from the blessed Mary, for we know that in conceiving she experienced no sin of sexual desire. ( <i>Commentary on the Apocalypse</i> 12.5)	The child is Christ. His 'rule' is applied spiritually to Christ's reign in the hearts of believers, but also to his prerogative to punish the wicked. Being caught up to God and his throne is understood to apply to Christ literally and to the Church spiritually. Primasius is prepared to countenance different views on whether the <i>primary</i> application of the passage is to Christ's person or his body, the Church.
Andrew of Caesarea	early 7 <sup>th</sup> century	The apostate [dragon] always arms himself against the church, desiring to make those food for himself who are being born anew from her. Rather, through the church he persecutes Christ himself, since he is the church's head, and he makes his own what belongs to the faithful. And therefore Christ said to Saul, 'Why are you persecuting me?' Through those who are baptized, the church is always giving birth to Christ, since in them he is being formed unto the fullness of spiritual maturity, as the apostle says. The 'male child' is the people of the church who are not effeminate in their desires, through whom Christ, our God, as though an iron rod has already ruled the nations by the mighty hands of the powerful Romans. However, also after the resurrection of the dead he will establish those strong in the faith as judges and will rule as with iron the nations who are crumbling and weak vessels. For by their unfaithfulness they did not possess the mystical new wine. 'But her child was caught up to God and to his throne.' The saints are caught up in the midst of temptations, lest they be subdued by difficulties beyond their powers. And 'they will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,' and they will be with God and his throne, that is, with the most excellent of the angelic powers. ( <i>Commentary on the Apocalypse</i> 12.5)	The child is understood in the immediate sense to be the saints in the Church, but indirectly refers to Christ, who is "formed in them spiritually" and who is the ultimate target when they are persecuted. The rule with an iron rod is understood in a twofold sense. (1) Christ has already ruled the nations through the [Christian] Roman authorities, but (2) he will also exercise eschatological rule through the saints. 'Caught up to God and to his throne' is understood to refer to the eschatological event described in 1 Thess. 4:17.  Andrew applies the child's rule with a rod of iron to <i>present political rule</i> . However, he still thinks this rule is ultimately Christ's, and he does not understand 'caught up to God and to his throne' to refer to the Church's rise to political power.
Bede the Venerable	Early 8 <sup>th</sup> century	The devil lies in wait for the church attempting to extinguish the faith in Christ that is in the hearts of the believers. In this way he desires to kill the person to whom the church gives birth by teaching, as though he were killing the Lord. An image of such deceit was the person of Herod, for although he was an enemy within, he feigned the desire to worship the Lord. But in fact he wished to kill him. 'And she brought forth a male child.' Although the dragon opposes her, the church always gives birth to Christ. However, he	The male child is Christ, but primarily in a spiritual sense through the agency of the Church. A typological relationship is assumed whereby the events described apply to Christ on one level and the Church on another. Christ

	<p>spoke of a male child because of him who was conqueror of the devil who had conquered the woman. For what son is not a male child? <i>Who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron.</i> He rules those who are good with an inflexible justice, and those who are evil he breaks into pieces. In fact, this was promised to the church in what was written above: 'I will give him power over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron.' For the church also gives rise each day to the church that in Christ rules the world. <i>But her son was caught up to God and to his throne.</i> To be sure, impiety is incapable of comprehending Christ, who is spiritually born in the mind of the hearer. For he reigns with the Father in heaven who has also 'raised us up and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ.' (<i>Explanatio Apocalypsis</i> 12.4-5)</p>	<p>presently rules the nations with a rod of iron, through the agency of the Church. 'Caught up to God and to his throne' seems to be applied first to Christ's exaltation "with the Father in heaven" but also to the Church which has figuratively been exalted to heaven as well. Whether the quotation from Eph. 1:20 is here understood in purely spiritual terms or as the basis for the Church's political power is unclear.</p>
--	--	---

The overall picture that emerges may be summarized as follows: the Church Fathers all understood the 'male child' to either to Christ or to the Church or to both. The application to the Church is generally arrived at via the Church's status as the body of Christ, so that Christ is in view in both interpretations. These should not be seen as two competing options so much as a reflection of the Church's tendency to see polyvalence in scriptural passages, i.e. what by the Middle Ages crystallized into the fourfold sense of Scripture (literal, allegorical, tropological and anagogical).<sup>2</sup> In Jonathan Burke's table of the Church Fathers' interpretations of the male child, he has missed the twofold application in several cases.

Most of our commentators understand the reference to the child's rule of the nations with an iron rod to refer either to present spiritual realities (Christ's rule in the Church and/or the hearts of believers; the Church's mission to the nations) or to eschatological realities (the eschatological rule to be exercised by Christ or by Christ and the saints). Only the two latest of our commentators (Andrew of Caesarea and Bede the Venerable) understand the description of the child's rule in Rev. 12:5 at least partly in terms of temporal political power exercised by Christ through the Church (or/through the Christian Empire).

Most of our commentators understand the reference to the child's being caught up to God and to his throne in terms of Christ's ascension and/or exaltation in heaven, and/or the eschatological destiny of the saints. Two of the later commentators (Primasius and Bede) think this language may or does refer to the Church's present privileged position. Of these, Bede may have the Church's rise to political power in view, although he does not explicitly say so.

There are two very important differences between the interpretations of the Church Fathers and the Christadelphian interpretation. Firstly, none of the Church Fathers identify the male child as Constantine or as any individual human ruler other than Christ. (The Constantine interpretation, according to Jonathan Burke's research, is attested for the first time in 1654.) Secondly, the Church Fathers unanimously agree that the male child is depicted positively. None of them refers to even the possibility that the male child might refer to an *apostate* ruler or *apostate* Church.

<sup>2</sup> On the fourfold sense of Scripture, see Froehlich, K. (1984). *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pp. 28-29.