

## **A Tale of Two Cities**

**Revelation 17:1-8**

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One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."

Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. This title was written on her forehead:

MYSTERY  
BABYLON THE GREAT  
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES  
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. Then the angel said to me: "Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns. The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come.

"This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.

"The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because He is Lord of lords and King of kings--and with Him will be His called, chosen and faithful followers."

Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth."

The next three chapters (17-19) in the book of Revelation describe the systematic destruction of every enemy of God. They include the enormous red dragon (Satan), the beast of the sea (the powers of this world), the beast of the earth (the false prophet, representing false spirituality), the city of Babylon and those who bear the mark of the beast. Chapter 17 is concerned with the nature of the city of Babylon whose destruction is described in chapter 19.

### **"Babylon the Great" (17:5).**

As early as Genesis 11, Babylon (Babel) emerges as to stereotypical act of rebellion on man's part. "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:3). "So that we may make a name for ourselves..." That just about sums it all up. Babylonians explained the name as *babili*, meaning "gate of God"; but *babel* is an echo of the Hebrew for "confused," recalling that God turned mankind's common language into a confusion of tongues. It is a small picture of what man has tried to do ever since: build his way to God and thereby boast of his achievements and significance before others. Just as modern cities have their grandiose towers: Paris has its Eiffel tower, Washington, D.C. has its Washington monument, New York has its Twin Towers, Toronto its Canadian National Tower, so the Fertile Crescent had its ziggurat which boasted of oversized ambition. It is pride gone to seed. It is passion of power, prestige, and pomposity all in one. It signals man apart from God and in opposition to God. It is the godless city.

Three years after the city of Rome fell to Visigoth king Aleric in 410, Augustine began his best known work, *The City of God*. He worked on it for thirteen years and it instantly became a classic. It still is. In it he attempts to convey a comprehensive philosophy of history. The first half of the book is an attempt to

answer a charge that Rome had fallen because it had embraced Christianity – the emperor Constantine had converted to Christianity following his victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312 b.c. It is in the second half of the book that Augustine begins to argue that the whole of history can be seen as one of a battle between two rival societies, one allied to the god of this world, another allied to King of Kings. There are two loves, he argued, one that is prideful and arrogant and godless; another that is "heavenly" and even contemptuous of self. The whole of history can be symbolized by these two cities, Babylon and Jerusalem.

Nor is Augustine alone in the use of the "city" to describe history. There have been many authors who have described an idealistic utopia in the form a city, Plato's *Republic* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* among them. Others have warned of the consequences of unchecked evil by representing cities in chaos, among them Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*.

John's visions are so complex that he once again cries, "This calls for a mind with wisdom" (17:9; cf. 13:18). At least a part of what John means is that without the revelation of Scripture, particularly the Old Testament, together with the illumination of the Holy Spirit on passages of Exodus and Daniel and Jeremiah, we are sure to be led astray in our interpretations! But, he might mean more than that. Given the way these visions have been understood over the ages, wisdom is a prerequisite in their interpretation.

A cursory analysis of these three chapters will reveal some interesting features that are important to grasp. Just as in the exodus stories of the Old Testament, a description of the destruction of the "great prostitute" in chapter 17 is followed in chapters 18 and 19 by a song recounting the same fact. Deliverance sets the people God free to worship. Just as Exodus 14 describes the deliverance from Egypt and chapter 15 is the song of Moses and Miriam recounting this fact, John now follows this pattern.

Babylon is described as a prostitute ("whore" in other versions). She controls and allures from a sitting position (17:1,3,9,15). "I sit as queen" (18:7). The Kings of the earth have fornicated with this harlot (17:2), they have "drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries" (18:3). The three-fold combination of the drunken stupor, the spiritual compromise and the idolatrous alliances ensures the maximum effect in the description of Babylon's degeneracy. The issue here is not sex but false worship, though the two have a connection. False worship and prostitution betray true allegiances. We were meant to worship God and the giving of ourselves to the dragon is an act of spiritual prostitution. It is a failure to maintain a loyal relationship with God. To flirt with Babylon is a to betray a disloyalty to the ways of God. It is to believe the Satanic lie that love can be purchased, that a relationship can be maintained at the purely commercial level. It is the myth of relationships with no commitment, of transaction without personal involvement. It is how so many desire religion to be, a fail-safe mechanism that operates at the visceral level without exacting demands or urging lifestyle changes. The harlotry

of false religion exacts, however, a price so great that death and disaster inevitably follow in its wake. Everything about this picture in chapter 17 is in contrast the Virgin Bride depicted in chapter 19 and the marriage supper to which believers are invited.

Isaiah 21 seems to be in the background here, especially that portrayal of the prophet in which Babylon is depicted as fallen (Isa. 21:1-2, 9). John is carried to the "desert" (17:3; elsewhere he has been "carried" to earth (1:9-10), sea and earth (10:8ff), heaven (4:1), seashore (13:1) and later, mountaintop (21:9-10). Of greater importance is that fact that in the desert John sees a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which has seven heads and ten horns (evidently, the beast of the sea as described in chapter 13).

That the woman "sits on many waters" (17:1) and is in the "desert" (17:3) suggests that John is picking up literary figures (from Isa. 21 and Jer. 51:13) rather than trying to describe a distinct physical locality. He is more interested in the association of words with certain images than the geographical pin-pointing of places on a map. Thus, the many waters of Babylon, including the great Euphrates River, symbolize the immense irrigation and fertility provided; the desert, on the other hand, is in contrast, depicting that despite these advantages, Babylon remained infertile ground. Later in this chapter, the waters will be identified as "people, multitudes, nations, and languages" (17:15).

The woman is dressed in the very same materials (clothes and jewelry) as is described in the trade products of 18:12-14. What is being described is a wealthy trading system, which in the first century was Rome (often referred to as Babylon). The entire world depended on the ability of Rome to ply her trade. Dressed in fine apparel, she remains, nevertheless, a whore. She is a persecutor (hence the red apparel) which she uses to great effect in league with the beast and the dragon. Her description is in vivid contrast to the Lamb's bride, again portrayed as a city "beautifully dressed" (21:2) and clothed "fine linen, bright and clean" (19:8).

Babylon promises economic prosperity, life that has "never been so good." It is a cup offered that is full of "abominations and unclean things" (17:4). The imagery is borrowed from Jeremiah 51.

We have seen the phenomenon of names written on foreheads before: the relationship of believers to God (7:3; 14:1; 22:4), the relationship of others to Satan (13:16; 14:9; 20:4). The woman, too, has a name written on her forehead:

MYSTERY  
BABYLON THE GREAT  
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES  
AND OF THE ABOMINATION OF THE EARTH

It is believed that prostitutes in Roman times wore name bands on their heads and this may account for the allusions here. The word 'mystery' may not be part of the title given to the woman and may be read: "the mysterious title was written on her forehead..." What is apparent is that we are to take into consideration here, not just the identity of the whore, but of her progeny also. She is the "mother" of prostitutes. Her influence, which may well refer to the economic/political system of Rome to begin with, continues to affect the entire world as we know it. The idolatry associated with the woman is still prevalent. Just as the woman in chapter 12 gives birth to the church, the bride of chapter 19, so the woman of chapter 17 seeks the church's destruction by her economic and political opposition throughout history. Such is the effect of this woman upon the saints that she makes herself drunk with their blood (17:6). The persecution of the saints is her most dreadful crime.

It is interesting that John's own astonishment at this vision (17:6) is rebuked by the angel who has shown him this vision (17:7). What follows is an explanation of the vision.

The beast is described as one who was, is not and is to come (17:8, 10), and in verse 10, the "kings" are described similarly in terms of past, present and future, thereby indicating a connection between the beast and the kings. Clearly, this is a parody of the formula, "who was, and who is and who is to come" as applied to God (1:8; 4:8; 11:16; 16:5). Despite the beast's continuing power, his doom is written and his reign is already overthrown by the victory of Christ's death. To borrow the language of chapter 20 (of Satan), the beast is on a chain and, to some extent, "is not". Nor will his existence end in triumph as will God's (or Christ's). His end will be the Abyss! The beast can never be victorious and this formula mocks his attempts at coronation. In the background lies the vision of Daniel 7 and 11 and the final destruction of the forces of evil and darkness.

Behind this mockery is a serious point. The beast (and evil generally) is forever attempting to mimic Christ by way of a reflection. The work of evil is a negative parody of the work of God. Satan attempts to rule in god-like fashion. He demands religious devotion that is unequivocal. And his failure to accomplish this sends him into a rage of warfare against Christ in a final attempt to stamp out all traces of his ancient foe (17:14).

The beast is said to have seven heads and ten horns (17:7, 9). They are now described as seven kings (17:10). The number seven is again denotative of fullness and completeness, just as the figures of the dragon with seven heads and ten horns in chapter 12 or the beast with ten horns in chapter 13 were. What is view here is something which transcends all of time and history. Though the representation of the woman sitting astride seven hills may draw to mind the allusion of the city of Rome (which began as a network of seven hill settlements along the banks of the river Tiber), to identify it wholly with Rome (or with seven particular Roman emperors) is misguided.

## Identifying the Seven Heads

Many great interpreters of Revelation have attempted to identify the seven kings (17:10) with specific emperors, including those who generally adopt an idealist view of Revelation. [It would seem strange, given the interpretation thus far, for John suddenly to identify himself so particularly with the Roman Empire of the mid-first century.] The point seems to be that five of seven heads of the beast have already been slain. He is not totally defeated, though it is true that he "once was," and "now is not" (17:8). In that sense, the beast is a defeated foe bearing fatal wounds. But a sixth and seventh head remains. The sixth living head means that "one is" (17:10), and a seventh is yet to appear. Who is (was!) this sixth head? Evidently, John's first readers knew and could readily identify him. Then, when he is gone, a seventh will appear "for a little while" (17:10). His appearance will bring to an end history as we know it. It does mean that since the seventh appears only for a little while, the sixth is to appear for a long(er) time.

Two questions arise: Does the term *king* refer to a Roman emperor? And, What is the right way to count these emperors? It certainly was common enough for Roman emperors to be called *kings*. "We have no king but Caesar," protested the chief priests to Pontius Pilate (John 19:15). If we were to identify the first emperor of Rome as Augustus (the first to call himself emperor), the sixth emperor (counting strictly) is Galba. Since his reign was brief, as were the two who followed him, Otho and Vitellius, some interpreters jump to the next most prominent emperor, Vespasian.

### Option 1 Option 2 Option 3 Option 4 Reign

1. Caesar Caesar 49-44 bc 2. Augustus 1. Augustus 1. Augustus Augustus 31-14 bc/ad 3. Tiberius 2. Tiberius 2. Tiberius Tiberius 14-37ad 4. Caligula 3. Caligula 3. Caligula 1. Caligula 37-41 ad 5. Claudius 4. Claudius 4. Claudius 2. Claudius 41-54 ad **6. Nero** 5. Nero 5. Nero 3. Nero 54-68 ad 7. Galba **6. Galba** Galba 68-69 ad 8. Otho 7. Otho Otho 69-69 ad 8. Vitellius Vitellius 69-69 ad **6. Vespasian** 4. Vespasian 69-79 ad 7. Titus 5. Titus 79-81 ad 8. Domitian **6. Domitian** 81-96 ad

If the sixth king is to be identified positively, this passage would imply that he is alive at the time of writing. Those who identify this time period prior to the destruction of the temple (the assumption is made that the temple is still standing in 11:1) opt for either Galba as the sixth king, or, by taking Julius Caesar into consideration – who was not formally identified as emperor but *imperator* —, Nero. Others, who do not identify Revelation within this time frame, opt for one of the later emperors, such as Vespasian (option 3). This necessitates leaving out some of the minor emperors such as Galba, Otho and Vitellius.

The majority of twentieth century interpreters date the book of Revelation in the mid-nineties, some twenty years after the period which identifies the sixth king as Vespasian (option 2). In this case, the sixth king is Domitian, often identified as Nero come to life again. This necessitates a different method of counting the kings, beginning with, perhaps, Caligula (option 4).

All these are fraught with complications, and it may be better to take the kings (as Hendriksen does) as representative of empires rather than emperors. These would be Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. The seventh empire is then taken to be symbolic of all world empires between Rome and the Second Coming of Christ.

### **1 2 3 4 5 6 7: Egypt Assyria Babylon Persia Greece Rome – The seventh empire**

The reference to an "eighth king" (17:11) is more than likely symbolic. Just as Christ died on the sixth day, rested in the tomb on the seventh and rose again on the eighth, calling the future empire as an eighth may well signify his attempted mimicry of Christ's resurrection.

### **The Ten Horns**

Just as the heads find their source in Daniel prophecy (Dan. 7:4-7), so also the horns of Revelation 17: 3, 12 (Dan. 7:7-8. 20. 24). The clue to the interpretation of the horns being "ten kings" (17:12), or "the kings of the earth" (17:18), is to be found in an earlier description of the Lamb's "seven horns" as descriptive of his perfect power (5:6). The ten kings are representative of the agents of the beast and Satan; they represent the power that the beast and Satan have. They represent such things as art, education, commerce, industry and government in so far as they operate according to an ungodly agenda. They help the beast in the accomplishment of his grand design to bring down the kingdom of God.

The horns are said to be "kings" who receive authority along with the beast for "one hour" (17:12). In chapter 18 as the time in which Babylon the Great is judged (18:10, 17, 19), and is taken from Daniel 4:17. The "one hour" is meant to imply a short period of time. Since the ten horns (ten kings) are yet to come as John writes, this would imply that the ten horns are to be found only on the seventh beast. (in chapters 12 and 13, the ten horns would seem to be distributed among the seven heads (12:3; 13:1). This vision again testifies to a period of intense battle against the forces of the Lamb prior to Christ' return. This is their purpose (17:13).

Once again, though the battle is intense and fierce, the Lamb, who is Lord of Lords, will be victorious (17:14). The wording is almost exactly that of Daniel

7:21, but with a glorious twist. Whereas Daniel is describing the partial and momentary victory of the beast over the saints (as is, for example, Revelation 11:7 and 13:7), the language here is of the Lamb's victory over the kings. The great question of 13:4 – "Who is able to make against [the beast]?" – is now answered. The Lamb is able!

## **The Waters**

One more feature of the vision needs explanation: the waters upon which the great harlot sits (17:1). The allusion is to Jeremiah 51:13 and there it depicts the economic wealth brought into the city of Babylon along the Euphrates and its tributaries. The beast and the ten horns combine to bring down, first, the harlot before they attempt to attack the Lamb. Evil is implicitly self-destructive. It is the lesson of the closing verses of Revelation 17. The horn-kings in league with the beast now begin to loathe the harlot and eventually "eat her flesh and burn her with fire" (17:16). Three powerful images of nakedness, of being devoured and fire combine to spell her doom. Images of Ezekiel and Jeremiah seem to be in the background (c.f. Jer. 2:20-4:30; Ezek. 16:37-41; 23:25-29).

Ezekiel 23 is the story of two sisters: Oholah and Oholibah who engage in prostitution in Egypt. It is a powerful indictment of the unfaithfulness of Israel in her liaison with foreign (pagan) deities. Revelation 17 now picks up this metaphor, describing the apostate church of New Testament times as a harlot. Apostate Israel is often referred to in Scripture as a harlot (2 Chron. 21:11; Ezek. 16:15, 17, 28, 35, 41; 23:1-21, 44; Isa. 1:21; 53:3; Jer. 2:20; 3:1; 13:27; Hos. 2:2-5; 4:12, 15, 18; 5:4; 9:1; Mic. 1:7).

## **The Woman**

The final verse of Revelation 17 identifies the woman as "the great city that rules over the kings of the earth" (17:18). She has been interpreted as the entire evil economic-religious system that operates in the world throughout the last days. She is the exact opposite of the pure bride that is the church. Whereas the woman in chapter 12, giving birth to a son, is delivered from the dragon, the harlot of Revelation is destroyed.

### **Several lessons are forthcoming:**

1. The Bible's graphic description of the sexual commerce (harlotry) as descriptive of unfaithfulness in worship. False worship is as tawdry and cheap as prostitution. It deserves the same ignominy and ejection. It is also self-destructive: bringing tawdry and fleeting pleasures, but containing a deadly sting too. The immune deficiency syndrome [Aids] of our time is a witness to that. This



is a road that leads to destruction.

2. The powers of evil are inherently self-destructive. There is a restlessness to the beast and his cohorts as witnessed to by the expression of Satan as "wandering to and fro in the earth" in the first chapter of Job. Evil has no peace. There is no resolution of the angst that is at the heart of rebellion. Finding no way to defeat the Lamb, they turn upon each other. Alliances of evil last for a only a brief time. It is only in Jesus that fullness and light are to be found (c.f. John 8:12).

3. We note again that the self-destructive powers of darkness operate according to a plan that is divine in nature. God's sovereignty operates even in these ungodly and vicious realms. They accomplish His purpose (17:17). Nothing is outside of the overruling plan of God. His providence extends to the overthrow of wickedness and sin. This, too, will be a fulfillment of prophecy.

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