

Ministry of Grace

Revelation Chapter 17

¹Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, ²with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk."

³And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. ⁵And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations." ⁶And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. When I saw her, I marveled greatly.

⁷But the angel said to me, "Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. ⁸The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

⁹This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; ¹⁰they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. ¹¹As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. ¹²And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. ¹³These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful."

¹⁵And the angel said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. ¹⁶And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, ¹⁷for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. ¹⁸And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth."

Notes

Revelation 17:1, 2

¹Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, ²with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk."

“**the great prostitute**” – This is not a reference to an actual prostitute. The spiritual unions between both God and his people (the Jews) and Christ and his church (Christians) are equated to marriage. Therefore, worshipping other gods, especially idol worship, is equated with fornication with a harlot. So, we can easily conclude that this harlot represents all false religions and specifically the false religion of the tribulation.

For a reference to Israel’s idolatry being portrayed as harlotry see Ezekiel 16 and 23.

“**sits on many waters**” – This is explained to us in verse 15 (The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues.) This is evidence that the false church of the tribulation will be a universal church followed by all people of the world.

According to verse 2, the kings of the earth will participate and worship as part of this false religion and the inhabitants of the earth will become drunken (mind dulled and unable to think for themselves) from the idolatrous practices of this religion. Compare this with what Jeremiah said about Babylon

Babylon was a golden cup in the LORD's hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine; therefore the nations went mad. (**Jeremiah 51:7**) [ESV]

“**dwellers on earth**” – (permanent earth dwellers – *hoi katoikountes tēn gēn*) – This expression is used repeatedly throughout the book of Revelation to refer to the unbelievers during the tribulation (**Revelation 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:2, 8**).

Revelation 17:3

³And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns.

The scene was previously in the throne room of God. Now that the Angel has described the harlot, John is taken (in the spirit) to a place in the wilderness (*erēmon*, meaning “lonely, deserted, wasteland”). This place could be where the city of Babylon once stood but it may just be a deserted place.

Since the description of the beast in verses 9 and 10 indicates that it is representative of world powers throughout history, it is best to see the woman as representing not just the world religious system of the end times, but false religious systems throughout history based on or incorporating portions of the original Babylonian religion.

“**beast ... and it had seven heads and ten horns**” – This is the same description given of the dragon in **Revelation 12:3** and of the beast in **Revelation 13:1**. We will get more detail on the beast later in this chapter. The image of the woman sitting on the beast is an indication

that the final world ruler will support, the false religion, but it also indicates that the religious system will, at least initially, be in the dominant position before being destroyed by the beast (see verse 16).

“full of blasphemous names” – The titles that the beast will call himself will be those which only rightfully belong to God.

Revelation 17:4

⁴The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality.

“purple and scarlet ... gold and jewels and pearls” – Purple and scarlet are colors of royalty. The false religion will have both royalty and power. It will be wealthy and beautiful in its adornments. The appearance of wealth and power will totally overshadow the fact that this religious system is spiritually bankrupt and empty. This is an apt description of the Roman Catholic church throughout its history from the time of Constantine till now, having great power, even over the rulers of the earth, and adorned in riches and fine vestments while being spiritually desolate. This has also been true of the pagan religions of all the other world powers throughout history.

“a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality” – Even the vessels used in the performance of her religious ceremonies will be splendid, while the ceremonial practices of the religion will be spiritually filthy and idolatrous. This is possibly a picture of the communion practice of the Roman Church where the cup is supposed to contain the actual blood of Christ, a practice viewed by God as abominable and vile.

Donald Grey Barnhouse in his book, *Revelation: An Expository Commentary* wrote:

It is also highly significant that the abominations and filthiness should be spoken of as coming from a golden cup. “Babylon hath been a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, that made all the earth drunken: the nations have drunken of her wine; therefore the nations are Mad” (Jer. 51:7). To those who are acquainted with the history of ancient religions this significance is heightened by comparisons with the rites of the pagan religious mysteries. A French scholar, Salverte, writing on The Occult Sciences, tells of the drinking in connection with these demon ceremonies. “To drink of mysterious beverages,” he says, “was indispensable on the part of all who sought initiation in these mysteries. These mysterious beverages were composed of wine, honey, water, and flour, with various other ingredients used locally. From the nature of the ingredients avowedly used, and from the nature of others not avowed, but certainly used, there can be no doubt that they were of an intoxicating nature; and till the aspirants had come under their power, till their understandings had been dimmed, and their passions excited by the medicated draught, they were not duly prepared for what they were either to hear or see.”

Revelation 17:5

⁵And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations."

Though some claim that the title is “Mystery Babylon the great ...” there clearly is punctuation between Mystery and Babylon in all of the best Greek texts. A more accurate translation is, “a mystery, Babylon the great, the mother of ...” Nonetheless, the description “**the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth**” is an obvious reference to the religious nature of this Babylon. There are other references to Babylon the great in Revelation which refer to the political-economic system of the final world ruler.

Revelation 17:6

⁶And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. When I saw her, I marveled greatly.

John sees this woman (religious Babylon) drunk with the blood of the saints and of the martyrs of Jesus which is a clear reference to the killing of believers sanctioned or perpetrated by this religious system. Not only has this been true of political systems persecuting and executing Jews and Christians alike, but the Roman Catholic Church, under the guise of “the true church,” has been especially guilty of this at least until the 13th or 14th centuries.

“**I marveled greatly**” – The word translated “marveled” is *thaumadzō* which means “to wonder, to marvel, or to be struck with admiration or astonishment.” The word “**greatly**” is from *thauma*, the same root, so John is saying “**I was amazed with great amazement**” or “**I was astonished with great astonishment.**” The point is that he was not simply a little surprised, but was greatly astounded!

Revelation 17:7, 8

⁷But the angel said to me, "Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. ⁸The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

The angel now reveals the mystery of the woman and of the beast. However, the description of them is so clothed in symbolism that one can not correctly clear up the obscurity without scrupulously careful observation. First we must realize that prophecy often jumps from one point in time to another. Placing these statements in the proper place in time will help reveal the truth being spoken. There are three timeframes to consider in the following analysis;

A. The time of John’s writing of the book – The latter part of the first century AD

B. The time in which the angel is telling the details to John – This is the time after the seventh bowl has been poured out. Armageddon has occurred and Satan has already been cast into the abyss.

C. The time of the end of the Millennial reign of Christ, when Satan is released from the abyss (**Revelation 20:7,8**).

“**The beast that you saw**” – This identifies the timeframe of this sentence. Since the angel has already poured out his bowl and subsequently has shown John the vision of the beast and the harlot, this is timeframe **B**, after Armageddon.

“**was, and is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition**” – This is a description of Satan. This is obviously talking about a living being since no world kingdom is ever sent to the abyss. In fact, only spirit beings (fallen angels) are sent to the abyss, so this must be a reference to a fallen angel. In **Revelation 19:20** we find that the beast (antichrist) and the false prophet are sent straight to the lake of fire (not the abyss), and in **Revelation 20:1-3** we see that Satan is cast into the abyss for 1000 years. Then, in **Revelation 20:7-10** we see that Satan is released from the abyss, once again stirs up rebellion against God, and is subsequently cast into the lake of fire. Hence, Satan **was** (during the tribulation), **and is not** (is currently incarcerated in the abyss, remember, timeframe **B**), **and will ascend out of the abyss** (at the end of the millennium) **and will go to destruction** (into the Lake of Fire at the end of the millennium).

And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. (**Revelation 19:20**) [ESV]

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while. (**Revelation 20:1-3**) [ESV]

And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. (**Revelation 20:7-10**) [ESV]

“**And those who dwell on the earth will marvel ... when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.**” – The timeframe of this is **C**, at the end of the Millennium. Notice that the angel says that those who dwell on the earth “**will marvel.**” This indicates a time after the point in time when the angel is speaking. At the end of the Millennium Satan will be released

and will gather the unsaved people of the world to war against God and they will marvel at him because **he was, and is not** (up until the time he is released) **and yet is**.

Revelation 17:9, 10

⁹This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; ¹⁰they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while.

The timeframe of verses 9 and 10 is **A**, the time of John's writing, the middle of the first century AD.

The description of the seven heads is given twice. The first time they are called seven mountains and the second time they are called seven kings. Since Rome was in ancient times called "the city of seven mountains (*septem montes*), the reference to seven mountains may be a reference to the seven hills upon which Rome is built. These were the Palatine, Capitoline, Coelian, Exquiline, Viminal, Quirinal, and Aventine hills. The reference to kings is not literal but symbolic since they represent seven kingdoms (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, and the kingdom of the Beast). If the kings are to be interpreted as symbolic then the mountains may also be symbolic (not the literal seven hills upon which Rome was built.) In Scripture, mountains are a symbol of power. If we interpret these seven mountains as seats of power then it fits completely with these seven heads being described as seven mountains (seats of political power) and seven kings (ruling kingdoms.) Given that the timeframe of these two verses is the middle of the first century AD, we can see that **five have fallen** (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece), **one is** (Rome), **and one has not yet come** (kingdom of the Beast.) When the kingdom of the Beast does come it will continue only a short time (seven years, more or less).

Revelation 17: 11

¹¹As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction.

There are two prominent interpretations of this verse. The first is that the beast was killed (see **Revelation 13:3, 12**) and has been resurrected as a new creature (the eighth king). The second is that this is a reference to Satan who is the real power behind all the previous kingdoms. The second interpretation makes more sense since as we saw in the study of chapter thirteen that the reference is to a deadly wound (a wound that could cause death), not to an actual death.

The timeframe of this verse switches back to **B**, after Armageddon. Satan is spoken of again. He is the beast that was and is not. He is the eighth because he is the real ruling power behind the antichrist, particularly during the second half of Daniel's seventieth week (the Great Tribulation). He is said to be "of the seven." Literally, this is "out of the seven" or "from the seven." This may be a reference to the fact that all the earthly kingdoms mentioned were controlled by the prince of the power of the air (**Ephesians 2:2**), the ruler of this world system (*kosmos*)

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world (*kosmos*) is coming. He has no claim on me," (**John 14:30**) [ESV]

It is possible, however, that the timeframe here is actually **C**, at the end of the Millennium, when Satan will be released from the abyss and will once again gather the unsaved of the world to make war against God.

Revelation 17:12-14

¹²And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. ¹³These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful."

The timeframe of these verses is again back to **A** The time of John's writing of the book – The middle of the first century AD. Since these ten kings are not even born yet, they have received no kingdom as yet. The ten horns will be 10 rulers who are given ruling authority by the Beast. They may not actually be kings, but political rulers. They may be rulers over ten confederate nations making up "the revived Roman empire." If such is the case it is possible that some of these will have been elected (rulers, but not kings.) This would also explain why Daniel described the ten toes of the giant image as a mixture of iron (kings) and clay (elected rulers). See **Daniel 2:41-43**. These ten kings will voluntarily give their power and authority to the beast. That is, they will submit to the authority of the beast.

These ten kings will be the ones who were gathered to Armageddon by the unclean spirits out of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet, spoken of in **Revelation 16:14**:

For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty.

These kings will gather together to do battle with the Lamb but they will be slaughtered by the word of His mouth.

Revelation 17:15

¹⁵And the angel said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages."

This is an explanation of what John saw in verse one. The world religion of the tribulation will have authority over groups of people (peoples), classes of people (multitudes), nationalities (nations), and languages (tongues). In other words, this will be a world-wide religion much as the Roman Catholic Church is today, except it will be the only authorized religion during the first half of Daniel's seventieth week, until it is destroyed by the political system.

Revelation 17:16-17

¹⁶And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, ¹⁷for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.

The timeframe is still **A**. The time of John's writing of the book – The middle of the first century AD, but this is now looking ahead to the tribulation (these **will hate the harlot** ...). The ten sub-rulers and the Beast will come to hate the final world religious system, perhaps because it becomes too powerful. They will destroy the system, plunder its riches, and kill its ruling members. This may take place just before the middle of the tribulation. In the middle of the tribulation the Beast will exalt himself in the temple in Jerusalem and have his image set-up there. From that point on he will be the object of worship for the entire world (**Revelation 13:8; Daniel 11:36-39**).

Revelation 17:18

¹⁸And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth."

Some conservative scholars identify "that great city" as Babylon. It appears, however, that this is not a reference to a specific city any more than we mean a specific street when we refer to "Wall Street" or "Madison Avenue." It is more likely that this is being used here as a metonym, referring to the world-wide religious system that becomes prominent during the tribulation period.

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