

The Beautiful Harlot
Revelation 17
By Gary R. May
First Baptist Church of Diana, July 13, 2011

The progression of Revelation begins with the seven seals of a legal document. As the seventh seal is opened, seven trumpets are introduced. Upon the sounding of the seventh trumpet seven bowls or vials containing the wrath of God are introduced. The seven trumpets serve as an expansion of the seventh seal and the seven bowls are as an extension of the seven trumpets. This literary approach serves to build anticipation and expectations of what is yet to come. This approach also allows the vision to be described from a heavenly perspective and an earthly perspective with each of the views intertwined. Interludes serve as introductions, overviews, and commentaries of the events continually unfolding on the stage of the world.

Chapters 17-22 are actually an expansion of the seventh bowl of God's judgment. Chapter 16 relates a broad overview of the destruction from a heavenly plain. Chapters 17-18 give an up close account of the destruction of the beast. It seems a bit ironic to call it an up close account when in reality it spans the entire course of human history while describing the final events all in one stroke on the canvas of the world scene.

A Great Vision

As the chapter opens, John is invited by one of the angels who held one of the seven bowls of God's wrath to come near to understand the harlot who sits on many waters and with whom the kings of the world have committed acts of immorality. The language here easily suggests an understanding that spans many centuries while applying specifically to the kings of John's day. Weirsbe points out the wisdom of John's use of symbols which allows his message to encourage believers during any period in church history. Weirsbe captures the universal historical aspects of the Revelation:

“The true church is a pure virgin (Rev. 19:7-8; see also 2 Cor. 11:2), but the false religious system is a ‘harlot’ who has abandoned the truth and prostituted herself for personal gain. In every age, there has been a ‘harlot’ who has persecuted God's people; and this will culminate in the last days in a worldwide apostate religious system.

Likewise every age has featured a ‘Babylon’ a political and economic system that has sought to control people's minds and destinies. Just as the contrast to the ‘harlot’ is the pure bride, so contrast to ‘Babylon’ the City of God, the New Jerusalem, the eternal home prepared for the Lamb's wife (Rev. 21:9ff). Each generation of believers must keep itself pure from the pollution of the ‘harlot’ and ‘Babylon’.”

The imagery used to convey historical truth, specifics of John's current situation, and an eye toward the end days is nothing short of a literary masterpiece. This harlot is no doubt an evil force that is larger than the cities and nations under consideration yet in some mysterious way she is also those cities and nations. According to verse 1, the time has come for God to judge the harlot.

This great harlot has committed abominations toward God. The fact that she sits on many waters is a clear reference to the city of Rome. The idea finds its source in the city of Babylon sitting on the great Euphrates River. Rome on the other hand, was located on many rivers which symbolizes her influence on the nations located around her. She has become intoxicated on her own power and the exercise of that power against morality and those who represent the true and living God.

In order for John to see clearly the Revelation given by the angel, it was necessary for him to be transported to the wilderness. This allowed John to gain a perspective of the whole rather than the parts. It is yet unknown whether this was merely a mental, spiritual experience or whether the angel physically escorted John to a wilderness. Regardless, his mind was as though he were completely separated from the city about to be described. The harlot is thus described as a woman sitting on a scarlet beast. With seven heads and ten horns she is seen as the fullness of deception. The use of the picture of a harlot is one familiar to Bible students and would have been familiar to the early church. God called Jerusalem a harlot in Isaiah 1:21. Tyre was called a harlot by Isaiah in the same book chapter 23:16-7 while Nahum used the same term to describe Niniveh in Nah. 3:4. Israel was described as a nation who was seduced by harlots and it usually meant they as a nation had given themselves to pagan religions which were nothing more than prostitute religions. They had been unfaithful to God.

Identifying the Woman

This beast sitting on scarlet, the color of Satan, is the mother of all harlots and she is absolutely gorgeous. John sees her in her deceptive beauty clothed in the finest and most attractive attire and adorned with great jewels, stones and precious metals. Even so, in her hand is a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality. She is the personification of alluring evil incited by the lustful passions of fallen man. She wears the name of Babylon the Great who is the mother of harlots and the abominations of the earth. According to verse 6 John was in wonder when he saw her. In addition to the allure of beauty and wealth, she had gained some kind of power by causing saints to be killed.

The angel proceeds to reveal the mystery of John's wonder concerning this woman called Babylon the Great. The use of the name of the city Babylon is a clue that John is thinking of Rome. Babylon was a code name for Rome among the early Christian community. It held the significance of the hostility between Israel and the city of Babylon which was a method of Christians speaking of their own hostility toward Rome while not allowing the Romans to understand what they were talking about. Both Babylon and Rome were full of abominations and both cities used their influence in surrounding cities to spread the filth of their abominations. Newport points out other historical nations or cities who share in this picture of harlotry. He names Nazi Germany, Idi Amin's Ugandan regime, the Soviet Union, as well as Mao's China. From a Christian perspective; we would surely include Jerusalem in respect to her identification as the Mecca or center of Islam. One would certainly have to wonder about America as did William Stringfellow in *An Ethic for Christians and Others in a Strange Land*.

The angel begins to unveil the mystery by first speaking of the beast. In this section of Revelation the beast has been identified as the anti Christ. The fact that this harlot has been

around through the ages signifies her continual activity with a growing intensity as the time of her destruction draws near. The same could be said of the beast. There have been many anti Christs according to 1 John. In the period of time spoken of here in Revelation, the beast or the Antichrist has become manifest in a person. This imagery allows John to speak of all the ages, his current era, and the coming last days with one picture. The angel says, "The beast was, and is not, and is yet about to come". While the dragon has been thought of as Satan in the last few chapters, the Antichrist appears to be his human manifestation. The unholy trinity has been identified as Satan the dragon, the beast or Antichrist, and the false prophet. When the angel speaks of the beast in verse 8, he is speaking of the Antichrist identified with Satan. The reference of a beast "that was, but was not, and yet is" refers to the image of the beast in chapter 13 with the wound on his head. More specifically, it relates to the defeat of Satan by Christ on the cross. It will amaze the world when he is given a little time to assert an extraordinary amount of power. John likely has to work hard to remember this is a vision of the destruction of the beast or the fall of the great Babylon.

The angel proceeds to show the wisdom necessary to understand the mystery. The seven heads are the mountains on which the woman sits. Historians easily recognize, along with 1st century Christians, Rome was known as a city resting on seven hills. The identification of the kings is not so easy. Theories include a correlation to past, current, and future kings or rulers in Rome. This interpretation allows Lindsay to see the rise in the European Union as a future world ruler. Others have suggested the great world powers of the past including Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and one future kingdom. This approach also allows for a future kingdom to arise under the rule of the Antichrist and is therefore favored by other dispensationalist.

The seven kings represent evil empires. The eighth is yet to come and is said to come out of the seven. John may have been using a common belief in the Roman Empire that Nero would be reincarnated and some speculated that Domitian, the likely ruler during John's writing was that ruler. In keeping with John's overall theme, it is also likely he is referring not so much to a particular ruler in the 1st century but that the eighth is really the power source for the other seven. This gives a theological rather than historical or political meaning.

Christ was resurrected on the eighth day. In order to recruit soldiers for the coming war, the Antichrist will perform great signs as we have already discussed. Newport sees here a resurrection of the Antichrist which will garner the support he needs to set the stage for his own destruction.

The angel then unravels the mystery of the ten horns in verse 12. They are kings who have yet to receive their kingdoms. Again, Lindsay sees the rise of a ten nation European confederacy to join in a league with the Antichrist as the end approaches. Although various interpretations of these ten have and will continue to emerge until they come to pass, the primary issue is that they receive their authority and power from the beast and give it to him. Their purpose is the same purpose as the beast which is to make war against Christ. It seems relevant that the Revelation first makes this truth plain lest the readers might think that God is unjust as the final assault is manifest.

The Defeat of the City

The picture has been clear. The city is a picture of the forces of evil through history. The message is also clear, her days are limited. The remaining verses of chapter 17 show the defeat of this powerful city. According to verse 14, these 10 kings wage an all out war against the Lamb but because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, the Lamb is easily victorious. And with Him in the battle are the called, chosen and faithful. Allen says all are called, some choose to be chosen, and they are faithful. On Satan's side are the called who chose to be chosen with Satan rather than serving the living God.

The angel goes further to describe the many waters introduced in verse 1. In verse 15 he says they are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. In this verse he identifies the harlot's followers throughout history. The ten horns will then turn on the harlot and expose her. This is a reminder that God's righteousness will overcome human systems which are evil. The greed that built an empire will become the very seed that destroys it. The weapons by which they conquer will in turn become the weapons by which they are destroyed.

Verse 17 reveals an amazing truth. These ten kings, who were serving the great harlot, will submit to the power of God and serve his purposes. This does not mean they will do so willingly but that they will be instruments in the hands of God.

The woman is given a final identification in verse 18. She is the great city which reigns over all the kings of the earth. Here is a clear picture that she is a city that transcends time. This same city was reigning over the kings of all the ages and will reign up until this time when God serves his final judgment. She is the root of evil that permeates every kingdom and eventually brings them to their own ruin. The verse actually sets up the next chapter which will in detail reveal her final defeat.