

18. The Woman on the Beast (Revelation 17)

The completion of God's wrath, begun in chapter 15:1, moves from the destruction of man's habitat to the destruction of the evil ones. Revelation 17 and 18 tell of the fall of the great city, Babylon, the prostitute. The text explains many of the following figures and images.

The Punishment of the Great Prostitute (Revelation 17:1-2)

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. 2 With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls of God's wrath is now escorting John through the vision, connecting these chapters clearly to completion of God's wrath and not to some new theme. The subject here is the punishment of the great prostitute who sits on many waters. The angel clearly defined the waters in verse 15, saying that the waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages. This is the same multitude over whom the beast is said to have authority in Revelation 13:7-8: "And he was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. 8 All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast – all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world." The woman sits on top of the multitude of the world. Verse 19 tells specifically that the woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.

The great city—set opposite to the holy city, the heavenly Jerusalem—is the Babylon and Nineveh founded by Nimrod (Genesis 10:12) , the Nineveh of Jonah (Jonah 1:2; 3:2), Sodom and Egypt (Revelation 11:8), and the Jerusalem of the Lord's crucifixion and Jeremiah's lament (Revelation 11:8; Jeremiah 22:8). The great city is these kings, but more, the great city is all the kings of the earth of verse 19. That all the kings of the earth had committed adultery with the prostitute and that the inhabitants were drunk with her adulteries show the degree of her influence in defiling mankind with sin.

The Prostitute and the Scarlet Beast (Revelation 17:3-6)

3 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. 4 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. 5 This title was written on her forehead:

MYSTERY

BABYLON THE GREAT

THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES

AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

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

When the angel carried John in the spirit into a desert, John saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast. The beast, met in detail in chapter 13, has the fullness and completeness of evil, represented by the heads and horns. (See notes on chapter 13). The beast, which has the

authority of the dragon, the devil, united with the woman. The beast stands to the adulterous woman, Babylon, as Christ stands to the pure bride, the church, the New Jerusalem—evil with evil and righteousness with righteousness. The scarlet of the beast contrasts to the white of the Lamb.

The woman's dress of purple and scarlet, gold, and precious stones demands two comparisons. The first is to the wonder and purity of the dress of the woman, the bride, the church in chapter 12. That woman is clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and crown of twelve stars on her head—magnificent and wondrous. The difference is between a prostitute and a pure virgin. The second contrast to this great prostitute is the description of just such a woman in Jeremiah 4:30:

30 What are you doing, O devastated one?
Why dress yourself in scarlet
and put on jewels of gold?
Why shade your eyes with paint?
You adorn yourself in vain.
Your lovers despise you;
they seek your life.

Perhaps more interesting than the woman's dress is the woman's cup filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. In contrast, Paul taught of the church that she is the pure virgin of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2). The one—the holy city, the church—is a pure bride to Christ; the other—the great city, those of the world (17:15, 18)—is the prostitute of the beast. The prostitute's cup, metaphorically standing for the contents, contains filth and abominable things. The church's cup contains Christ's blood of the new covenant in Matthew 26:28-29: "8 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom." In his comparison of the two cups, Paul made this distinction in 1 Corinthians 10:18-22:

18 Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? 19 Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. 22 Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

In verse 5, John learns from the title written on the prostitute's forehead who she is. The word, MYSTERY, places the prostitute and her meaning within the specifics of God's mystery as revelation where it means something that was once hidden but is now made known. In Revelation 10:6-7, the revelation of God's mystery was to occur at the sounding of the seventh trumpet; and it is still under the sounding of that trumpet that the mystery of the woman on the beast is made known. John had written, "7 But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets."

The mystery of God's eternal purpose included the destiny of the saints and the sinners alike. The revelation of the mystery of the great city was part of its great antithesis, the holy city.

That the prostitute's fate should be sealed in this final revelation accentuates the victory and triumph of the pure bride of Christ. The scriptures assure repeatedly that all that was hidden is revealed. Paul wrote in Romans 16:25-27:

25 Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, 26 but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him— 27 to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

The phrase *all nations* in this passage includes those identified in verse 15 as the waters upon which the prostitute sits: people multitudes, nations, and language. The revelation of the eternal God seals their fate. The revelation, including the fate of the prostitute, the great city, was put in effect "when the times will have reached their fulfillment (Ephesians 1:9-10)." In chapter 15 verse 1, John learned that with the last seven plagues, God's wrath was completed. The phrase *was completed* is past tense, and therefore, a fact accomplished. In addition, as the seventh angel poured out the last bowl of God's wrath in chapter 16:17, a loud voice from the throne said, "It is done." Among the resulting happenings were that the great city split into three parts, and that the cities of all nations collapse, and that God remembered Babylon and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath. Since the woman is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth (17:18), God now completes his revelation of that part of the mystery which was once hidden, but is now made known.

BABYLON THE GREAT is used to describe the great city that rules over the cities of the nations. Synonymously, the woman is the great city (17:18), and the great city, Babylon. Chapter 18 calls Babylon the *great city* three times in 18:2-3, 10, and 21, and implies the name many times over. The second angel announcing the impending doom had forecast in Revelation 14:8: "A second angel followed and said, 'Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.'" Chapter 18 will describe the doom of Babylon the great in detail. As the New Jerusalem, the holy city, stands for the church, so Babylon, the great city stands for the called out multitudes that followed the paganism of the Old Testament and the multitudes that followed the second beast, the false prophet of this revelation of God. The connection is to the beast out of the sea that marched across the world with his armies of Baal, from the flood, to Babel, to ancient Babylon, Nineveh, and throughout the world. This is the same beast, who was fatally wounded by Christ and his victory, but who rose again with the beast out of the earth, deceiving once again the multitude of mankind by his image and the false prophet (See notes of chapter 13). Other metaphors for the great city are in Revelation 11:8-9: "8 Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city, which is figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified."

THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH figuratively describes the iniquitous nature of the woman, in contrast to the purity of the bride of Christ, the pure virgin. In chapters 17 and 18, *adulteries* is used four times; *adultery*, three times, illustrating the immorality of the woman. Infidelity to God led to the fall at Eden, to the destruction by the flood, to the ruin of Israel by the worship of Baal and the practice of his pagan immorality, and to the rejection and crucifixion of the Christ, the lamb.

The Mystery of the Woman and the Beast (Revelation 17:6-8)

6 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. 7 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.

John saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, those set apart, and those who bore the testimony of Jesus. *Blood* here is not to be taken as literal blood, as in physical persecution, for Christ himself told us in Matthew 10:27-28, "28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." The saints and those who bear the testimony of Jesus are new creatures, born again of the water and the spirit. In John 3:5, "5 Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.'" As Christ shed his earth blood on the cross, Christians shed their blood symbolically when they are buried with Christ in baptism—the likeness of his death, burial, and resurrection. The description of this new birth to a new life is explained in detail in Romans 6:3-7:

3 Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

5 If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. 6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— 7 because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

It is these new creatures that the dragon, the beast, and the prostitute are after to kill once again spiritually. To understand the following chapters, one must understand that the battle is spiritual and the very souls of the saints are in jeopardy. In Revelation 13:6-7, John learned of the beast: "7 He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them." God's wrath is upon them and upon those who follow them according to Revelation 16:6: "6 for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets." In this spiritual battle there is a physical consequence to the saints and those who stand for the testimony of Jesus—they often lose their physical lives. Revelation 6:9 teaches: "9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained."

The angel sees that John was greatly astonished when he saw the woman and tells him that he is going to explain the mystery of woman and the beast she rides. The beast is the seven horned and ten horned beast met in chapter 13 (See notes on entire chapter). The numbers represent the fullness and completeness of the beast's capacity to accomplish his purposes. In Revelation 13:2, John learned that "the dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority." The beast stands to the dragon as Christ stands to the Lord God Almighty.

The Beast upon Whom the Woman Rides (Revelation 17:6-8)

8 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.

John has seen before this beast come up out of the abyss in Revelation 11:7, "7 Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and

overpower and kill them. The *they* of this quotation are the witnesses of chapter 11. He did not return from the abyss until they had finished their testimony. There are other references to the containment of the beast and the dragon. One regards the man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians 2:2-12:

3 Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. 4 He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

This is an apt description of the second beast, the false prophet who has the power of the first beast (see chapter 13). Paul continues:

5 Don't you remember that when I was with you I used to tell you these things? 6 And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. 7 For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. 8 And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendor of his coming.

The work and the coming of the lawless one is according to the work of Satan who is the dragon:

9 The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, 10 and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. 11 For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie 12 and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.

John finds the dragon similarly confined in Revelation 20:1-3:

20:1 And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. 2 He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. 3 He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.

Jesus described to his apostles who would do the binding and holding back of these evil forces in John 14:16-18: "16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – 17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you." The Holy Spirit – Spirit of Truth – constrained the triad of evil until the witnesses had completed their work and the revelation was complete. In context, this will happen shortly, for at the conclusion of John's writing, the revelation will be complete.

In the present context, John sees the same beast who *once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction* and whom he had seen before in Revelation 13:2-3: "The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. 3 One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed." The phrase *now is not* also follows what John saw in Revelation 13:11-13: "11 Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. 12 He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its

inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed." *And will come up out of the abyss* describes his future status to John, but his present status to us.

When the spiritual gifts were taken away releasing the man of lawlessness, the false prophet, and second beast, and when the apostles and prophets had completed the revelation, the beast would reemerge, but with power limited to the deceit of the false prophet, the second beast, and power of his image of the first beast, created by the false prophet. False religion and mammon will reign. (See notes on chapter 13).

What John sees is effectively what Jesus and Paul describe about the restraining power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit remained containing the dragon and the beast until that which is perfect had come. Jesus had taught in John 14:25-26, "25 "All this I have spoken while still with you. 26 But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." Paul taught that the spiritual gifts would cease when that which was perfect had come in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10: "But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears." James identifies God's law as that perfection in James 1:25; "25 But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does."

The force that constrains and binds the devil and the beast is God's complete Revelation of his will and word – first through the apostles and prophets and now through his written word.

When the beast comes up out of the abyss, he goes to his destruction. The followers of the beast – those whose names are not in the book of life – will be astonished when they see the beast because he once was, now is not, and yet will come. One only needs to view the present world of false religion, decadent sin, and the rampant materialism in service to mammon to understand the horror and success of the beast. However successful that the beast seems, he is on his way to destruction.

The Angel Explains the Vision of the Beast (Revelation 17:9-14)

9 "This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. 10 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. 11 The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.

This calls for a mind with wisdom signifies the difficulty of the passage. Many interpretations are given, yet one is true. Seven heads is given two metaphoric comparisons – hills and kings. The analogy is like saying that two plus two is four and one plus three is four. The commonality is four. The commonality in this passage is government. Hills as seats of power have consistently represented government, and kings are consistently those who govern.

The prophets used mountains and hills in this metaphoric sense: as in Isaiah 2:2, which uses both mountains and hills in the metaphor:

2 In the last days

the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established

as chief among the mountains;

it will be raised above the hills ,

and all nations will stream to it.

In Jeremiah 51:24-25, Babylon is addressed, "O destroying mountain." the prophecy goes on to say, "I will . . . make you a burned out mountain."

Seven represented fullness and 10 represented completeness as studied in chapter 13. The governments spoken of here are full in their power and authority. It is also upon these governments that the woman sits. There are also seven kings. Seven fully powerful kings are controlled by the wanton woman, who sits over the kingdoms. Five of the seven kings have fallen. There are only five such kingdoms, all of which fit the description given.

Micah 7:11-13 points to the places where one must look:

11 The day for building your walls will come,
the day for extending your boundaries.

12 In that day people will come to you
from Assyria and the cities of Egypt,
even from Egypt to the Euphrates
and from sea to sea
and from mountain to mountain.

13 The earth will become desolate because of its inhabitants,
as the result of their deeds.

From Egypt to the Romans, from the flood and Nimrod to John's revelation, there are only five such kingdoms: Egypt, Assyria, Persia, Babylon, and Greece. In Daniel 2, Daniel claimed four kingdoms until the kingdom of the Lord should come out of the mountains—four and not five, because Daniel began counting from his day forward:

44 "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. 45 This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands — a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. Daniel 2:44-45

Daniel also describes how the beast—the kingdoms of the world—will be destroyed by the kingdom of God that will never be destroyed.

The five kingdoms, then, have fallen, and one is. Of course, *the one which is* is the Roman kingdom—the kingdom in existence at the time that John was writing. However, there is one that is to come, and that kingdom will remain for a while. This final king represents the Holy Roman Emperors that followed the Roman Empire. The Holy Roman Empire was the last kingdom of this class of kingdoms. These kings are all of a class and all controlled by the prostitute who sits atop them.

The beast is an eighth king. The word, *an*, indicates a king but not one of the previous class. All these seven governments, from the flood until fragmentation of governments, were controlled by a king, the beast of seven heads (full in authority) and ten horns (complete in his might and power). The dragon had given "the beast his power, his throne, and great authority (Revelation 13:2)."

12 "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. 13 They have one purpose and will give their power

and authority to the beast. 14 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."

The ten horns are also ten kings, but kings and kingdoms of a different class from the seven in the preceding verses. They are complete, as the number, ten, indicates; and, therefore, apparently they will fulfill the rest of time until the end of the earth. Ten is not to be taken as literal here since there is no indication in the text as with the seven kings who are actually counted out. That they have not yet come means that they will receive kingdoms during the course of time. They give their power and authority to the beast who is now represented by the second beast, the false prophet, with his working and delusion of error (2 Thessalonians 2). They and their subjects worship the image of the first beast:

11 Then I saw another beast, coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb, but he spoke like a dragon. 12 He exercised all the authority of the first beast on his behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. 13 And he performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. 14 Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth. He ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. 15 He was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that it could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. 16 He also forced everyone, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on his right hand or on his forehead, 17 so that no one could buy or sell unless he had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of his name. Revelation 13:11-17

Even the kingdoms of the earth make war against the Lamb. The true religion of Jesus has a history of repression. The persecution of the saints, the wars of religion and greed, the pervasive immorality, the spread of communism and other atheistic influences, religious terrorism and extremism, unconstrained materialism—all of these and more make for the war of wars against the Lamb. The end of that war will be victory for the Lord of lords, the King of kings, and his called, chosen, and faithful followers. This is the very same conclusion reached by Paul in discussing the outcome of the influence of the man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians:

13 But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. 14 He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15 So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15.

The Beast and the Ten Horns Turn against the Prostitute (Revelation 17:15-18)

15 Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. 16 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. 17 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. 18 The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth."

In verse one, John saw the prostitute sitting on many waters. Here the angel tells John that the waters are people, multitudes, nations, and languages. The province of influence for this evil woman is worldwide for all time. That the beast and the ten horns hate the prostitute seems contrary to the last part of the passage where the woman—the great city, Babylon, the prostitute—rules over these very same kings of the earth. This paradox is easily resolved.

The beast and the ten horns hate the prostitute so badly they bring her to ruin. They figuratively eat her flesh and burn her with fire. The crux of the matter is that God put this in their hearts, but in so doing they allowed the beast to rule with their power. Since the woman rides the beast, they both wage the war against the Lamb and his followers but to their destruction and according to the purpose of God. A few illustrating points are in order. Communistic governments, in theory and practice, fight immorality, a province of the prostitute. Yet, religion is discouraged or even outlawed, immorality is pervasive, and sin prevails. In our country, government activity exudes a religious air, maintaining a public appearance that is against sin and evil. Yet, prostitution thrives, gambling is government supported, media is overwhelming in its mindless violence, unbridled materialism, and permissive sex. Advertisements depend on the attractions of the lust of the flesh and eye, and the vainglory of life—power, ambition, and earthly wisdom. Religious extremists who reject immorality in eating, drinking, and dressing wage their religious wars around the world. The beast rules, and the prostitute that great city rides atop him.

Chapter 17 forecasts the end of the beast and of this prostitute, the great city, Babylon. Chapter 18 will see the fall of Babylon and chapter 19 will see the beast and the false prophet captured and thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur.