

"The Judgment of the Great Harlot"

Revelation 17:1-18

Interlude #4: (17:1-18:24)

At this point in our study we have our fourth and final interlude, which is a break in the chronological flow of Revelation. The seventh bowl judgment (16:17) is chronologically followed by the Second Coming of Christ in Revelation 19. We now enter into an explanatory interlude, which serves the purpose of describing the final destruction of Babylon in both its ecclesiastical and political forms.

The Judgment of the Great Harlot:

Chapter 17 specifically deals with the ecclesiastical or spiritual entity of Babylon. Verses 1-6 describe the vision that John sees, while verses 7-18 provide its interpretation.

The Appearance of the Harlot: (17:1) It is at this point that one of the angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with John. This angel shows John a vision of the judgment of the great harlot. "The great harlot that will be judged is not an actual prostitute. The term harlot is a metaphor for false religion, spiritual defection, idolatry, and religious apostasy."⁴⁶³ Other cities that have been referred to as harlots include: Ninevah (Nah. 3:1, 4), Tyre (Isa. 23:15-17), and Jerusalem (Isa. 1:21). This harlot is pictured as sitting on many waters. "Many waters" is explained for us in verse 15 as peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. This emphasizes the unbelieving world to which she has authority or control over.

The Alliances of the Harlot: (17:2-3) This harlot is said to have committed acts of immorality with the kings of the earth. These kings of the earth are leaders in the world and could likely be the ten kings who will be in charge of the Antichrist's kingdom. This false religion pictured as a great harlot has lined itself up with the state. Not only are world leaders attached to this false religious system, but those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality. "The angel is not describing people who are physically drunk with literal wine committing sexual immorality with an actual prostitute, though that may be happening. Instead, he is talking about those who are passionately intoxicated with Antichrist's illicit false world religion."⁴⁶⁴ At this point John receives a second vision or picture of this harlot. This time John sees this woman sitting on a scarlet beast. As the beast is described with blasphemous names, seven heads and ten horns, we come to understand that this is the same beast as appears in Revelation 13:1-10. This scarlet beast is the beast from the sea. The seven heads represent seven past, present and future kings, while the ten horns represent ten kings who are subject to Antichrist himself. This is a similar description to the beast from the sea in Revelation 13. It is ultimately a reference to the Antichrist the ruler of the revived Roman Empire. This harlot has not only lined herself up with the kings of the earth and those who dwell on the earth, but also has an alliance with the Antichrist himself.

The Apparel of the Harlot: (17:4-5) John goes on to give a fuller picture of this harlot in his vision. She is described as being clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold, precious stones and pearls. "These are the colors of royalty, prosperity, nobility and wealth (cf. Judg. 8:26; Est. 8:15; Lam. 4:5; Ezek. 23:6; Dan. 5:7, 16, 29)."⁴⁶⁵

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Precious stones and pearls provide a look of ostentatious extravagance. Today, such an array of ecclesiastical pomp is seen in many religions. What a sharp contrast to the appearance of the bride of the Lamb, whose apparel consists of fine linen, clean and white (19:8). This vile woman is pictured having a golden cup in her hand, full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication (v. 4). The word *abomination* is often used in Scripture to express idolatrous worship and the immoral practices associated with it. In this passage, it expresses the woman's polluted character and idolatrous practices."⁴⁶⁶ It is a picture of the vile and abominable spiritual idolatry that is associated with this false religious system. John also sees a name written on the forehead of this great harlot. John MacArthur comments in his commentary: "As was customary for prostitutes to identify themselves in the Roman world, the harlot Babylon also had a name written on her forehead (cf. Jer. 3:3). The name John saw was 'a mystery Babylon The Great, The Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth.' The word mystery should be rendered as part of the title. The harlot is called mystery Babylon to indicate that Babylon in this context does not refer to a geographical location. This is not ancient Babylon, the Babylon of John's day, or the rebuilt city of Babylon in the end times. The details of this vision can't be applied to any actual city... This Babylon is the symbol of all worldly resistance to God; it is described as The Great because of its far-reaching influence. In fact, so great will be its influence that it is called The Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth. Babylon will be the source of all the false, idolatrous, blasphemous worship in the end times."⁴⁶⁷

The Attack of the Harlot: (17:6) John moves on to explain that he saw this great harlot drunk, not with alcohol, but with the blood of the saints. The saints and witnesses of Jesus are one in the same. They are best understood as the Tribulation Saints martyred for their faith in Christ. This false religious system will not tolerate any other beliefs, especially belief in the truth. John wondered greatly at this point. "John was expressing that he was confused, shocked, astonished, and frightened by the ghastly vision of such a contrastingly magnificent figure of the woman and such a deadly intent."⁴⁶⁸

The Explanation of the Harlot: (17:7-14) After John's comment of wondering greatly, the angel asks John a rhetorical question, "Why do you wonder?" The angel then proceeds to announce to John that he will tell him about the woman and the beast that carries her. The angel is interpreting the previous vision for John.

First the angel describes the beast. The description of the beast here is similar to the other descriptions of the beast (cf. Revelation 13:1-10). John was probably not confused as to the identity of the beast since the beast had previously been revealed. His confusion was likely due to the fact that in a previous vision he had understood the world to worship the Antichrist. The connection of this woman with the beast puzzled John. The angel first digresses however to provide further information about the beast. "In verses 8-14 the angel gives John a lengthy description of the beast. He is explaining to John the relationship between the harlot and the beast, which had mystified the apostle (vv. 6-7). But for John to grasp that connection, the angel needed first to give him further details about the beast."⁴⁶⁹ Remember that in descriptions such as these in the book of Revelation that this beast is referred to as both the king and his kingdom.

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The statement that the beast was, and is not, and is about to come is usually taken to refer to the supposed death and resurrection of the Antichrist. It is after this death and resurrection, whether real or faked that he will be possessed by Satan. The phrase "out of the abyss" is a figurative phrase that describes the satanic origin of this beast. Remember back in chapter 13 that after the death and resurrection of the beast all the world worshipped the beast and all the world worshipped the dragon. Worshipping the beast was tantamount to worshipping the dragon likely because Satan (the dragon) had possessed the beast at that point (cf. Revelation 13:4). The phrase go to destruction is a reference to the eternal damnation of the Antichrist in the lake of fire (cf. Revelation 19:20; 20:10).

As verse 8 closes out it references the wonderment of all those who dwell on the earth, whose name was not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world. This is a reference to the unbelieving world. Those who dwell on the earth describes unbelievers throughout Revelation (cf. 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:2). Believers names are found written in the book of life, while unbelievers names are not found in the book of life (cf. 3:5; 20:15; 21:27; Phil. 4:3). It is so encouraging to the believer when you notice that your name has been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world (v. 8). Our names are not placed there at the point of our salvation. They are already there! They are not only there before we are saved, but they are there before we are born! They are not only there before we are born, but they are there from the foundation of the world. God has chosen whom He will save and He has placed our names in the Lamb's book of life. What an encouragement for the believer! Back to the main point of the end of verse 8. The unbelieving people of the world will be amazed when they see the beast that he was and is not and will come. The world will be in utter amazement at the resurrection of the Antichrist.

After describing the events of the mid-point of the Tribulation with the death and resurrection of the Antichrist and the world-wide worship of him, the angel moves on to give a further description of this beast. A description that will take much wisdom and calls for careful attention to what the angel says. The angel announces that the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits. These seven mountains in the vision are none other than seven kings. "Mountains are sometimes used metaphorically in the Old Testament to represent rule, or power (e.g. Ps. 30:7; Isa. 2:2; Jer. 51:25; Dan. 2:35). Here they represent seven world empires embodied in their rulers. The angel tells John that five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come. The five Gentile world empires that had fallen by the time of John's vision are Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. The one that existed at the time was obviously Rome. The other one that has not yet come is Antichrist's final world empire."⁴⁷⁰ The next statement is rather confusing. The beast which was and is not, is himself also an eighth and is one of the seven. This statement is made clear by the phrase, "was and is not." The Antichrist's kingdom will be the seventh world power in this vision, but when he dies and is resurrected (was and is not), then he becomes also the eighth and it is at that point that he is on his way to destruction as mentioned earlier.

After describing the seven heads the angel moves on to describe the ten horns. He explains that the ten horns are ten kings. They are kings without real kingdoms. They simply receive authority as kings under the power and authority of the beast (Antichrist). They are ten world leaders who rule a section of the Antichrist's world kingdom, but are truly in subjection to him. "For one hour" is just an idiom referring to a short period of time. It simply emphasizes the brevity of their reign. "During their brief reign, they will be unanimously devoted to Antichrist; they will have one purpose, and will give their power and authority to the beast.

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They will do his will and his alone."⁴⁷¹ The sole agenda of these kings is to wage war against the Lamb. It is these kings who will converge upon the land of Israel for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty (Rev. 16:14). The angel then gives John a foreshadowing of things to come. This great war known as Armageddon will end when the Lamb will overcome them. They will be unable to defeat the Lamb because He is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. Those whom he brings with Him are the called and chosen and faithful. Jesus Christ the Lamb will come back to the earth and will utterly defeat these kings and their vast armies. He will bring His saints with Him at His Second Coming in Glory (cf. Revelation 19:11-21).

This explanation ends with a description of the waters where the harlot sits. These waters as mentioned earlier are none other than peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. This is a reference to the population of the world.

The Extermination of the Harlot: (17:16-18) It is at this point that the angel goes on to describe the decimation of the evil religious system depicted by the harlot. John MacArthur in his commentary gives a good understanding of verses 16-17: "Antichrist's alliance with the false religious system will not last. Eventually the ten horns (the ten kings who rule under Antichrist) and the beast (Antichrist himself) will come to hate the harlot. Having used the false religious system to help him gain control of the world, Antichrist will discard it. In his rampant megalomania, he will want the world to worship only him. He will also no doubt covet the vast wealth of the false religious system. Thus, he will turn on the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire. That graphic language of extreme violence is used to make clear that Antichrist and his henchmen will utterly and completely obliterate all vestiges of the false religious system. Antichrist's self-serving, satanically inspired actions are, however, precisely in the scope of God's sovereign plan. In fact, it is God who will put it in the hearts of Antichrist's followers to execute His purpose by having a common purpose, and by giving their kingdom to the beast. God's power is behind the destruction and consolidation of the evil empire; as always, Satan is the instrument of God's purposes. The one-world unification government so long sought by the humanists will have finally arrived, only to be destroyed in one great act of divine judgment."⁴⁷² This extermination of the false religious system will likely take place at the mid-point of the Tribulation period. It is at this point through the supposed death and resurrection of the Antichrist that the world's attention is focused completely upon him. The destruction of Antichrist's kingdom will take place at the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the Tribulation period. The chapter ends with one last identification of this woman. The angel explains that she is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth. This false religious system is here identified with the rebuilt city of Babylon. It is a rebuilt Babylon along the Euphrates River that will serve not only as the center of this false religious system, but also as the political and commercial center of the world. It is this newly rebuilt Babylon that will be the center of Antichrist's kingdom. Chapter 17 has provided us with the judgment and destruction of religious Babylon. Chapter 18 will explain the judgment and destruction of the political and economic aspects of Babylon.