

Revelation Bible Study #42

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Revelation 17

1 Then 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, **2** with 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.” **3** And 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. **4** The 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. **5** And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.” **6** And 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. **7** But 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. **8** The 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. **9** This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; **10** they 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. **11** As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. **12** And 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. **13** These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. **14** They 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.”

15 And the angel said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. **16** And 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, **17** for 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. **18** And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”

Introduction

The seventeenth chapter of Revelation is so dense and interconnected that it makes little sense to break it down to smaller pieces. From the first verse to the eighteenth, the Apostle is given a fever-pitch prophecy concerning an entity that *would* arise after his day, one which he could not identify but assumes that his future readers would. Here one must be careful to identify the exact nature of the woman before giving a firm declaration as to what she *is*, lest the exegete be proven a fool. The clear witness of Scripture is that she is a *religious* figure, but one which exists as a mockery of the true Church. Accordingly, St. John is given an antitype which prefigures all successive false churches and heretical movements. It is correct for Luther to call the Papist church the whore of Babylon;¹ it is *also*

¹ https://godrules.net/library/luther/NEW1luther_b5.htm

correct for Christians today to recognize *other* sects which fit the mold, such as the mormon “church,” the liberal bodies, and so forth.

Vs.1-2

1 Then 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, 2 with 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.”

Now that the wrath of God has been poured out with the bowl plagues, it is time to show St. John one of the main targets of said wrath. He shows him a prostitute, someone who fornicates for financial compensation; in other words, she is someone who makes a living by performing the *marital act* without actually being married. Though she acts like a bride for a night, she has no covenant nor blessing from God for what she does. She is mercenary and scheming in her function. Like any skilled or pretty prostitute, she has high-end customers (both political and among the Church), but here she is shown to be lucrative with “wine” as well. This is to say, the figure which St. John sees has ugly dealings with high ranking political figures, but at the same time is – with those same figures – passing something along to the common man, like a prostitute who sells wine.

The prostitute is seated on *many waters*. This, along with the beast she rides, is a clear indication that she engages in a relationship to the world. The thirteenth chapter of Revelation shows two beasts: one from the water and one from the earth. The waters represent the world, and the beast which arises from it the world system – the second enemy of the Church. The earth represents the Christians, and the beast which comes from it is a false prophet who represents *all* false teachers who attempt to subvert Christianity.² By saying that the “dwellers on earth” get drunk by this prostitute, St. John is telling us that the Church will be deeply corrupted even to her theologians and bishops – but still stand. It was not very different in his own day, as the “Jezebel” figure from the church in Thyatira was doing all of these things!³

Vs3-6a

3 And 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. 4 The 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. 5 And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.” 6 And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

The woman is in the wilderness, which is the same place the Church (represented by Mary, but not identified *as* Mary) was taken to deliver her from the dragon. This leaves us with one of two possibilities. First, we may believe that this is more or less the same figure.⁴ Whereas she was placed in the wilderness for safety and sanctification, something has inspired the woman, the Church, to follow after earthly lusts and materialism, all the expensive clothing and riches that show an institution becoming opulent. Her cup full of abominations would mean being a distributor of false teachings and heretical practices, namely practices common among pagans. Though the gates of hell shall not prevail against the Church,⁵ this does not mean that the gates of hell shall not be present with her. In this conception, the woman represents a Church that is under the authority of these gates but not defeated

2 Revelation 16:13

3 Revelation 2:18-23

4 Revelation 12:1-5

5 Matthew 16:16-18

by them.

Another perspective would be that this is a *false* figure, or a pretender. The prostitute wants people to *think* that she is the true Church and so resides in the wilderness. Perhaps she is a particular group of churches whose lampstands have been removed,⁶ yet still saw themselves as being in full communion with our Lord and thus continued on in growing their doctrines the way the Nicolaitans did. Such an imagination of this figure is plausible, though unlikely, so long as the origin point of the wilderness points to the *apostasy* of the prostitute being her state before dining on the blood of the saints.

The prostitute is called Babylon, denoting a relation to the city which was prophesied in the previous chapter to be split in three.⁷ Here, however, we are restricted from associating the woman with the pagan city of Rome, which most modern historicist exegetes believe to be the true meaning. They point to a false goddess called “Roma” whose statues adorned many Roman cities and provinces, even marking the cities of Asia Minor,⁸ but this does not comport with the description of Babylon being in the *wilderness*, along with the clear connection St. John makes to the Israelite wandering in the wilderness in the twelfth chapter.

The modern exegete may point to the pagan character of Rome which was in the forefront of many Christians' minds, but such a point is invalid. It is most certainly true that the Roman empire was full of idolatry, sorcery, fornication, greed, and persecution; but on the other hand, the same is true about *everywhere else* in St. John's day. St. Thomas was martyred in Tamil Nadu, India by militant hindus; St. Matthew was murdered by African pagans; Philip and Bartholomew were martyred by Greeks. Everywhere outside of Roman territory, and even outside of Roman influence had the same problems with sin, albeit perhaps with differing levels of openness. The typifying mark of the harlot is that she is drunk on the blood of saints, meaning that she gains profit and pleasure from their death; one must remember that when the true Church grows, so does the false and corrupted church.

Vs.6b-8

When I saw her, I marveled greatly. **7** But 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. **8** The 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.

St. John *marvels* at this figure. If the woman represented Rome, he would not be surprised in the slightest given the wickedness of Rome in his day. But to see a figure which *should be* holy dwelling in the wilderness and dining on the blood of saints – that is, joining in the persecution of believers – is the source of his consternation. The angel asks why he marvels, expecting that he should *know* about this dynamic. Indeed, if the Church is Israel, then the Church is expected to *act* like Israel, a nation described in terms of harlotry all over the Old Testament, with only a remnant that stay faithful.⁹¹⁰

The beast which St. John sees, the reconstituted world system, at one point existed and shall exist again, but does not currently in St. John's day. In a time when Rome was very much in power, this could not possibly apply to that empire; if it were, the angel would say that the beast was, is and shall be. It is rather a united nonbelieving humanity, which at one point was so under the rulership of nimrod

6 Revelation 2:4-5

7 Revelation 16:19

8 <https://www.bestephesustours.com/blog/the-temple-of-dea-roma-and-divus-julius-caesar-in-ephesus.html>

9 Ezekiel 16, Isaiah 1:21-23, Jeremiah 2:20-25

10 1 Kings 19:18

the founder of Babel;¹¹ once the Church is established, the devil calls forth a new dynamic in the world system so as to bring about violent persecution against the Church. But St. John already saw that in his previous vision, when he saw the beast arise from the sea; the implication here is that the harlot arises *with* the beast, having a symbiotic relationship of sorts. In the first century, the harlot was not though she was previously, and she would arise again. Before Christ's first Advent, the harlot was Israel; in the early years of the Church – the new Israel – believers did not have to contend with nearly as much corruption, especially as the current Babylon (Jerusalem) fell; but then, as the world “beast” system arises, so does the harlot nature of the Church.

Historically this has taken many forms. Christians hiding from persecution found themselves isolated in desert communities with gnostic cultists who slowly influenced orthodox doctrine – introducing asceticism, iconodulism,¹² and doctrines which forbade marriage. St. Paul warned believers against it,¹³ but the persecution of the beast against Christians led to all sorts of syncretistic additions to the faith. The influence of hermeticism added doctrines of theosis, the cult of the saints, the “treasury of merit,” and so forth. The pagan veneration of Caesar as Pontifex was transplanted onto the papacy. This is also to say nothing of the effect that later judaizers like the author of the Shepherd of Hermas had on the Church's soteriology. Simply put, the Church has never defeated false teachings so much as she has absorbed and accommodated them; as the beast rises, the harlot rises with it.

This means that unfortunately the harlot is well-represented by the Roman and Eastern churches – but lest any denomination get a large head over it, it does not *stop* there. Protestant churches are not immune to this matter, from the crass Enlightenment rationalism that took over much of the Church of England to the deism and judaizing influence which plague American churches, or the extreme leftism that besets Methodism today. All of these groups have sought favor with and “fornicated” with the ruling authorities, even as recently as the current year.¹⁴ A historicist is likely to see the harlot as a single institution which fulfills prophecy by virtue of existing: The Roman church is an easy target. But in the modern era, with as many denominations being taken over by non-Christian syncretism, it is plain to see that the fulfillment of the harlot prophecy is one of *typology*, with various corrupted bodies matching the harlot as antitype. It is for this reason she is called the mother of harlots, not the sole harlot to which the Christian may look for a vision of “bad church.” Those whose names are written in the Book of Life do better in regards to diligence than merely thinking “rome bad!”

Vs.9-14

9 This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; **10** they 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. **11** As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. **12** And 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. **13** These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. **14** They 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.”

“This calls for a mind with wisdom.” By this, the Apostle invites us to think deeply about what he is saying, for it is not obvious what his riddle means. It was well known by the time St. John wrote Revelation that the city of Rome stood amid seven hills, and had a series of emperors (or “kings”) replacing one another in rapid succession. The *easy* interpretation, which requires no wisdom whatsoever, would be that St. John was afraid to say the word “Rome” for some inexplicable reason,

11 Genesis 10:6-14, 11:1-9

12 Yes, the practice of venerating icons comes from gnosticism, per Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*, 1.25.6

13 Colossians 2:18-25

14 <https://apnews.com/article/usaaid-christian-nonprofits-funding-freeze-bbb000ea0e232765db1280c093301a8a>

and that he used a pitifully easily decoded description to avoid being executed....while in exile on Patmos. This cannot be correct, especially as the angel informs St. John that it “was and is not,” meaning that the beast is not a present reality for the Apostle.

While this passage is difficult to understand by design, it is not insurmountable. St. John has already told us this is a sign vision,¹⁵ so this is not a mere game of name-swapping or geographical reference. Rome had seven hills, but so does Jerusalem, so does New York, and a whole host of other locations.¹⁶ So many locales all over the world have “seven mountains” that the beast on which the harlot rides is *everywhere*. The number of kings as well is instructive: seven kings for seven heads, an eighth king representing the beast itself, and ten kings for ten horns; this adds up to eighteen, or 6+6+6, an oblique reference to the number of the beast. All eighteen receive authority for an hour to rule together, and they all have one mind, namely to oppose Christ.

The Lamb shall conquer all of these figures, hence their short rule, harlot and beast and kings alike. Despite their wars against Him and their near-endless attempts at snuffing out the light of the Gospel, Christ *shall* return, and all of these shall fall forevermore, never to rise again. Those who belong to Him, refusing to go along with the wicked doctrines of the world or to cooperate with the harlot who befriends the world, they are called and chosen and faithful, meaning that their endurance receives praise from our Lord, who chooses them on account of their faith.

Vs.15-18

15 And the angel said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. **16** And 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, **17** for 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. **18** And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”

The waters are the world from which the beast arises, a secular creation from a secular people. For this reason, and the expansive list of “seven hills” and 6/6/6 motif, the harlot as a city, or capitol, is a *shifting* reality. There may be an individual location on which the harlot rests – in St. John's day that was Jerusalem, discussed in the previous chapter – but it does not stay there on account of the destruction which inevitably follows. The harlot city Babylon is destroyed multiple times in history, and always shifts locations after each time this passage is typologically fulfilled. Wherever Christians congregate, there are rulers over them or “kings of the earth.” Most of them will be captive to the harlot and her political machinations, for the harlot is the apostate Church masquerading as a faithful one.

Constantinople was sacked and destroyed multiple times, despite being the ostensible head of eastern Christianity. So was the city of Rome. So was London, so was Washington D.C., and so many others. The reason for this is that the harlot fornicates with kings and spreads wine to normal believer (having dealings with corrupt political rulers and passing false teachings to the laity), but she suffers from the same thing that she wants: appearing Christian. The beast from the sea was designed by the devil to hate Christians and persecute them. Christ said that the world would always hate Christians after all,¹⁷ so the harlot looking Christian to deceive believers means that she deceives the world system as well – and ends up being persecuted and attacked over it. This is the cycle which has been observed over the centuries: a church body starts, expands, becomes corrupt, has dealings with the state, and gets persecuted. So it has been, so it shall be until Christ returns.

¹⁵ Revelation 15:1

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_cities_claimed_to_be_built_on_seven_hills

¹⁷ John 15:18-25