

*It is essential for Christians to have an accurate view of the world in which they live and for American Christians to understand that their government, country, and society is nothing less than the Babylon whose destruction is foretold in Revelation.*

## **“An Unflattering Portrait of the World”**

**Revelation 17:1-18**

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Chapter 17 is full of complications and so I am going to make substantial comment on the text as we read it through. I fully realize such commentary can interrupt the flow of thought. But the thought is so difficult for a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader that comment is required, I believe, if we are to make any sense of this at all. The painful fact is that commentators treat the statements of this chapter in dramatically different ways.

### **Text Comment**

v. 1 Always remember that the chapter divisions of biblical books are not original to the books themselves. For the sake of time we will read just our chapter 17, but the section introduced in v. 1 is in fact our chapters 17 and 18. The “punishment of the great prostitute” is briefly described at the end of our chapter 17 and chapter 18 is a dirge or lament over the fall of the prostitute, Babylon the Great. The identification of the harlot as Babylon is made explicit in 18:2. These two chapters are a review, in greater detail, of the sixth and seventh bowls which foretold the judgment of Babylon. [Beale, 847]

The identification of this angel who is to show John the punishment of the prostitute is the same as that of the angel in 21:9 who is to show him the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down to earth from heaven. When the City of Man, the great harlot, is exposed and destroyed, what will be left will be the City of God with all her beauty and glory. [Mounce, 307]

In the OT Jerusalem is sometimes portrayed as a harlot or prostitute on account of her religious apostasy; so are Nineveh and Tyre. And it is said of Babylon in Jeremiah 51:13 that she lived by many waters. As the “many waters” are later, in v. 15, understood as a reference to “peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages,” a first century reader would naturally think of Rome as exercising her rule over the peoples of the world. In v. 18 the woman is expressly identified as the city that rules over the kings of the earth.

v.2 Babylon or Rome found her support among those who were willing to embrace her program of worldly prosperity, pleasure, and power laced with idolatry. These are all those, as we read in v. 8, whose names have not been written in the book of life.

v.3 Four times in the book John is said to have been “in the spirit” (1:10; 4:2) or “carried away by the Spirit” (17:3; 21:10). The idea is that John was brought into a state of ecstasy in which he experienced the vision that he described in his book. Here he saw the woman sitting on a scarlet beast not, as in v. 1, sitting on many waters. As we have seen a

number of times in the book so far, in apocalyptic literature scenes and symbols shift rapidly with no concern for consistency. The imagination is able to flit from scene to scene where a more literal approach would have to step more carefully. The beast is the same creature that rose out of the sea in 13:1 as is confirmed by the fact that it had ten horns and seven heads. That beast, you remember, was Satan's chief agent both to enlist the loyalty of the world and to make war upon the kingdom and people of God.

The blasphemous names, for John's original readers, would have recalled the claims made to deity by Roman emperors.

- v.4 Purple and scarlet dyes were very expensive to extract and so such clothing only the wealthy could afford. The entire description is of luxury and splendor joined to moral corruption. This is typical of Revelation's depiction of the world under Satanic control. What Satan offers is alluring but it defiles and contaminates a person. [Osborne, 609] He buys the world's loyalty with the promise of pleasures but those same pleasures must eventually turn to dust. Here the cup is gold, beautiful on the outside; but it contains abominable things. As we read in v. 2 the world is intoxicated with her adulteries, but is utterly corrupted by them. Satan has no interest in the happiness of human beings except to use the longing for it to gain followers.
- v.6 As so often before in Revelation Satan is not content simply to gain the loyalty of the great host of unbelievers. He must also rid the world of Christians. Revelation from the beginning has described history as a no-quarter battle to the death between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of Jesus Christ.
- v.7 John now receives an explanation of the vision of the woman that he just saw. Mystery refers to the otherwise hidden outcome of events and the unexpected way in which they will unfold.
- v.8 I take the sense of v. 8 in this way. The "who was, now is not, and yet will come" is a parody of the description of Christ, given several times in the book, as the one who died and came to life again. Christ rose to live forever; the beast, however, rises to be destroyed! "In the broadest sense the beast is that satanically inspired power that, although having received the stroke of death, returns to hurl himself with renewed fury against the [people] of God." This is the beast of chapter 13 who received a death stroke in one of his heads yet survived to continue to wage war against the kingdom of God. The sense of the "now is not" seems to be that at the moment the beast was not raging against the people of God – John wrote under the shadow of *impending* persecution – but he is about to resume his attacks on the church. It is the counterfeit resurrection of the beast, mentioned three times in chapter 13, that amazes the world and is the critical event in the final ascension of the beast, or the Antichrist to power. [Osborne, 617]

Insofar as these two chapters describe the final destruction of Babylon, it appears that what is in view is the beast's final sortie against the kingdom of God, as becomes even clearer in the following verses. He is about to put in one final appearance in the world.

This is the meaning of the statement in v. 8 that the beast will arise from the Abyss to go to his destruction.

- v.11 The last time we read something like the opening statement of v. 9 was in 13:18 in regard to the numerical symbol 666. There we read: “This calls for wisdom and insight...” Once again we have a riddle to solve. The need for wisdom suggests that while the solution is not immediately obvious, the spiritually discerning reader will understand. Most commentators take the seven hills to be a reference to Rome because it was widely known in the ancient world as the city built on seven hills. Indeed, in Domitian’s time there was a festival celebrating Rome’s seven hills, the *Septimontium*. The woman sits on these seven hills, as she sat upon many waters – which we will read are peoples and nations – and sat upon the beast. This is Rome and her empire.

But what then of the seven kings? Those commentators who take 666 to refer to Nero Caesar – an identification, we said, that is not nearly as likely as they make it out to be – take the kings to refer to the five emperors who had already reigned, the one who was presently reigning, and the one who would reign next. The late David Chilton, for example, who wrote a commentary popular among the Reformed post-millennial folks, sees the five who had come and gone as Julius Caesar, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius; Nero was the emperor who was presently reigning, and Galba was the one who was to come, who would reign for a short time, indeed as it happened, about seven months. It all sounds straightforward, though it does require an interpretation of the chapter in which Babylon is understood to be Jerusalem, not Rome, and her fall the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In this view chapters 17 and 18 are all about Jerusalem and her destruction in A.D. 70. But there are greater problems with this view of the seven kings than may at first appear. For example, it requires Julius Caesar to be the first emperor, though generally in the Roman world of the first century Augustus was regarded as the first of the emperors insofar as the Roman government was established as an empire with an emperor only under Augustus. Further, Galba was followed by several other emperors before A.D. 70.

It is entirely possible, I would think probable, that given that we are talking about *seven* kings and that seven is an important symbolic number in Revelation we ought not to think of specific individual kings but rather the completion of the world’s kingdoms. The 5, 1, and 1, with the last reigning only a short time, is an apocalyptic device to indicate that the end is drawing near. There are other such schemes in apocalyptic literature from the period and in each case the point is to accent the imminent end of the age. [Mounce, 315-316] In one the history of the world is divided into 12 parts of which 10 ½ have been completed; in another history is divided into ten periods of which seven are already completed. This symbolic interpretation of the seven kings is further supported by the use of the same imagery in Daniel 7, where four beasts again have seven heads, and represent world empires succeeding one another in time. [Beale, 868]

In John’s scheme the beast represents the eighth king and final world power. This is a great problem, of course, for any view that takes the seven kings to be the actual first seven Roman emperors. The “little while” at the end of v. 10 seems clearly to represent

the final stage of world history. Galba's seven months, in A.D. 68 weren't the end of anything and no one in early Christianity imagined that they were! The beast belongs to the seven in that he continues their program of opposition to God, but he will be destroyed.

- v.12 The ten kings, again a figurative number suggesting great power, are client kings of the beast who will rule over a great empire. Rome in the first century appointed client kings over its conquered territories and provinces so the image would be a familiar one. The "one hour" suggests that they will rule for a brief period only. In a later sermon we will consider the question of immanence in Revelation. How can the End, how can Christ's Second Coming be something that we are to expect soon?
  
- v.14 At the last the opposition of the beast to the kingdom of God will be laid bare and the final conflict will ensue. Much of the opposition of Satan's kingdom to the kingdom of God in the course of history is hidden or indirect. But at the end it will be clear to all the nature of the battle to be waged and who belongs to which side. It seems very likely that we have here described what elsewhere is called the great tribulation, the terrible persecution that the Satanic kingdom will visit upon the saints of God at the end of history. But the beast will not succeed because, in fact, no matter his pretensions, he is *not* the Lord of Lords; Christ is. And Christ will then have made his appearance: that final appearance described in greater detail in chapter 19. The King of Kings will make short work of the beast and his kingdom.
  
- v.18 John concludes his explanation of the woman sitting on the beast with the fascinating disclosure that even before the return of Christ and the last battle the kingdom of the Evil one will have begun to come apart as a result of internal animosities, jealousies, and mistrust. In the Roman world there was always a fear that client kings would unite against the empire. Everyone understood that these lesser kings served Rome because they had to, not because they wanted to. This is John's way of speaking of the self-destructive nature of evil. There is no love lost between Satan, the beast, and his followers, even the followers who have willingly joined his cause and done his will. Such an eschatological scene of civil war is depicted also in Ezekiel where we read in 38:21 that "every man's sword will be against his brother."

In the course of these studies of Revelation I have said a good deal in criticism of futurist interpretations of the book, in particular interpretations that claim to discover in John's account of his vision the unfolding of modern history and references to contemporary events. I've said that there is little to commend such interpretations, popular as they may be, and that they have always been falsified by the progress of events. But there is another interpretation of Revelation popular in some quarters of our evangelical, Reformed world. This is a form of the preterist interpretation – from the Latin word *praeter*, meaning "past" – that takes John's account to be a description of the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. According to this interpretation of chapter 17, the events described all happened *in the past* and were concluded by the year 70. In this account chapter 17 is not about the destruction of Rome; it is not about the destruction of Rome as a symbol for ungodly worldly power through the ages; it is about the

historical event of the destruction of Jerusalem. It is Jerusalem that is the great city in 17:18. It is Jerusalem that is Babylon in 18:2.

I will simply say that I have read the details of this interpretation and find them unconvincing. I won't go into those details, but let me say this much. This interpretation of Revelation absolutely requires the book to have been written before A.D. 70, which I don't think is likely. It is prophecy in Revelation, so if it is about events that occurred in A.D. 70 it must have been written before A.D. 70. What is more, I find chapter 17 an almost insurmountable problem for this interpretation of Revelation. Jerusalem is *not* the great city of Revelation 17, a fact that will become clearer still as we venture into chapter 18. The woman, that is the great city, sits on seven hills we read in v. 9. She is Rome, not Jerusalem. She is the entire unbelieving world, not specifically the apostate Jewish church.

In the first century Babylon was Rome. But the fact that Rome is here called Babylon – is here given the name of an ancient imperial power that long before had persecuted the people of God – is itself an indication that Babylon is world power wherever and whenever it flourishes to the detriment of the spiritual life of human beings, to their spiritual deception, and to the persecution of the saints. Babylon is the expression of self-worship, arrogance, idolatry, extravagance, luxury, and evil desire raised up to political and economic power with the Devil's help. Babylon is Vanity Fair in every age. [Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, 230] As one commentator puts it, "Babylon is the prevailing economic-religious system in alliance with the state and its related authorities and existing throughout the ages." [Beale, 850] There was a Babylon, in other words, in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C., there was a Babylon in the first century A.D. and there is a Babylon today.

Babylon is, of course, present in our world today and is, for us, especially the United States of America, the modern western world's ancient Rome. For Chinese Christians Babylon is the government of China, hostile as it has been to Christian belief for many years. You cannot read chapter 17 and not realize it is so! The USA is the great power in the world. It may not be fifty or one hundred years from now, but it has been for some time and will be at least for a while longer. We Americans tend to think of our country as a benign power, a force for good in the world. And, no doubt, in many ways we have been and are. *So was Rome*. It brought economic development and prosperity to many places and peoples. It built roads that facilitated trade. Indeed, when Revelation was written,

"Rome was at the height of her powers. There was no serious threat to her frontiers, nor any sign of major uprising from her own subject peoples. Pirates had been cleared from the seas and brigands from the countryside. Elegant cities dotted the shores of the Mediterranean and were to be found in many inland regions as well. Soon the tyrant Domitian would fall, and the empire would enter its golden years." [P. Barnett in Stott, 227]

We still today marvel at the accomplishments of Rome. Many of you, I know, have toured Europe and seen the aqueducts – at once brilliant marvels of engineering and masterpieces of architecture – some of which still today carry water many miles from source to city. You've seen the great arenas that were long ago filled with thousands of spectators; and the magnificent

public buildings, still imitated by architects today. Then there was the art and the literature, a high culture that was in full flower in John's day. The glory that was Rome! All of that is the purple and scarlet, the glittering gold, the precious stones and pearls, and the golden cup. John has no interest in denying Rome's accomplishments. But, in the worldview of Revelation, all that glitter serves only to hide the moral and spiritual rot and a virulent antagonism toward the kingdom of God. For there was much more to Rome than aqueducts and epic poems.

There were also the grinding suppression of subject peoples, the cruel slavery of uncounted multitudes, the regular mistreatment of the weak by the strong, the pandemic sexual corruption of the society, the brutalizing entertainments, and the pervasive idolatry with all of its dehumanizing features. Rome was no encouragement to that manhood and womanhood for which God created men and women! It was, in fact, a vast protest against the will of the living and true God!

In what way is this *not* the United States of America in our time? We now glibly refer to the sexual mores of this society as the porn culture. It is no surprise that the Bible so often refers to sexual mores as an index of the moral quality of a people or uses sexual terms to describe a people's religious outlook. Sex, in its largest sense, is so fundamental to human life that its corruption must infect the entire mass. John uses sex as a formative moral dimension of life here when he speaks of the world being intoxicated by the wine of Babylon's *adulteries*! Our sexual life in America today is now deeply and disgustingly similar to that of Rome in John's day and is a pandemic insult to the Living God! Abortion and euthanasia, common practices of Roman life, have returned with a vengeance in our time. We are as materialistic as any culture in the history of mankind. We are as oriented to entertainment as Rome was in the first century and as no people has been between that time and this. Our entertainments are not always but are very often and widely debasing, disgusting, and dehumanizing for their vulgarity, their indecency and their violence. If American television was famously described as a "wasteland" in the 1950s and 60s, today, I suppose, the apt comparison would be to a "sewer." The exposure of children to our toxic modern culture is everywhere poisoning both their minds and their bodies and evidence piles up on every hand that this is a fact that bodes ill for our future.

And, as in ancient Rome, so long as one keeps one's mouth shut and fits in, one is likely to be left alone. But, increasingly in our day, as soon as one stands up to be counted for the Lordship of Christ and the authority of *his* law, the offense and hatred of the elite society is very likely to be expressed. It would take a brave man to predict either that the best days of the United States are still ahead of her or that things are not going to get much worse and especially much worse for Christians – intolerant as they must be of the public mores and of the government's support for them – before they get better. You have read in yesterday's newspaper of the plan of the present government to coerce medical and health care professionals to support abortion.

On the other hand, who can say whether centuries from now, the situation will not be similar or worse under some other government, ruling the world from some other location as some other incarnation of the Babylon? Western civilization and its combination of economic, political, and religious power may not last that much longer as the beast of this world. Perhaps the great nations of Asia will soon take its place. But Babylon it will be, whether headquartered in Washington, in Beijing, or in Delhi. As I said for Chinese Christians Babylon is today and has

been their own political/economic system and so for Indian Christians. The beast may take many forms in the same world at the same time.

What we can say for a certainty is that there is a pattern to all of this: to Babylon's rise and to her fall. It is this pattern that we discern in history and that explains the description in Revelation 17 of the woman astride the beast, the waters, and the seven hills. It is in this pattern that we are to locate ourselves, we who have no idea whether the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is near at hand or still at a distance, whether we are witnessing Babylon's chapter or whether there are many more still to be written.

There is *first* the intoxicating effect of the blandishments of sin. States and societies and cultures do not acquire their influence in the world apart from pandering to sinful desire. Magnificent accomplishments, the glory of mankind, throughout history have often been achieved for the glory of man and not at all for the glory of God. They have, in that way, served to wean human beings away from God and make them man-worshippers and, unbeknownst to them, Devil worshippers. In Rome great buildings were built and art commissioned to the credit and glory of the sponsor. We sent men to the moon for similar reasons. Modern communication technology – utter marvels of human invention – disseminates more pornography than anything else. When we read here that the kings of the earth “committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries” we are being reminded that the great embodiments of Satanic power and influence in the world – political, economic, and religious – have invariably bought that influence by seducing unbelieving human beings with the fulfillment of sinful desire. The woman is called a prostitute precisely because she sells herself to mankind to get what she wants.

This is why, alas, you cannot today look back on any political establishment in the history of the world without seeing a great deal that must turn a Christian's stomach. Whether we are thinking of Rome or the modern West, the brutal suppression of slave uprisings in the first century or the African slave trade of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the sexual libertinism of the ancient empire or that of our own time, the reduction of man to a loaf of bread then or now.

And always standing behind a system built upon the blandishments of sin are some religious impulse and practice to give it moral authority and the appearance of goodness. Whether paganism or a corrupted Christianity makes no difference. People are made to feel right about what they are doing. People want what they want and the beast makes sure that they feel justified in getting it. The first part of the pattern then is this moral and spiritual intoxication. People don't really know what they are doing but they are made to feel good.

*But following upon this moral and spiritual intoxication is the inevitable self-destruction and self-disintegration.* The intoxicated begin to stagger, get sick, and fall. In the Devil's world things always fall apart. Empires fall and they collapse inward. As Arnold Toynbee, the famous historian, put it: “Most great nations die by suicide.” Things are always better at the beginning. The Devil could never attract a sufficient number of people to his cause unless he began with something high-minded and high-sounding. Human beings made in the image of God are drawn to the high-minded, at least at first. That was Rome. The ideals of the Republic were nobler than those of the empire and the empire gradually rotted away until the rude but determined Goths

had only to kick in the door. And is that not the modern West? Satan is not interested in high-mindedness and so that does not last. Over time the human desires he has pandered to begin to poison human life as they will and must. Who, reading the Federalist Papers of the early history of our country could envision a state in which the supreme freedom is that to copulate with anyone of your choice and to be spared, by government fiat, any consequences, much less any moral condemnation. Commentators in Europe and the United States are now often found commenting on the moral and spiritual listlessness of their populations, inured to high purpose, interested and galvanized only by the hope of pleasure. The sort of entertainment that became the *raison d'être* of the Roman citizen eventually reduced the population to a company of people so sated, jaded, and self-absorbed, that they were useless in defense of the state. They were, at last, nothing but consumers and wanted nothing but to consume.

The presbyter Salvian, describing the fall of Trier in the last days of the empire, tells us that men did not defend the city because they were too interested in the games at the arena. After the rape, looting, and burning of their city the survivors petitioned the emperor to rebuild their arena so that the games could go on and their morale be improved. Salvian said of Rome, "It is dying, but continues to laugh." In a variety of ways the Roman world came apart before it was destroyed from the outside. Moral disintegration, civil war, economic collapse, and political rebellions of various kinds. All of this did Rome in before the invasion of the barbarians. So it has been and so it will be to the end.

But, along the way, Christians must pay the price of their loyalty. As the world becomes hardened to its sin and falls further under the rule of the beast, the more rebuke and reproach it feels from Christians and their way of life. Satan provokes them to refuse to tolerate Christian conviction. It is the peculiar burden of the saints that they are, in the nature of the case, as those who live for Christ and subject to his commandments, the objects of Satan's hatred and so the world's reproach. They are always in the cross hairs, no matter that they are everyone's friend, the most law abiding of citizens, faithful tax-payers, people of peace and love. No matter: they become over and over again the enemy of the world. It cannot be otherwise so long as the woman sits upon the beast; so long as Babylon is the Devil's city. "Drunk with the blood of the saints;" that has always been Babylon; it always will be Babylon.

Now, here is the point. John's vision is not about the individual Christian life and its varied experience of good and bad. It is not about a government that may be valuable to human welfare in some way. It is not about the mixture of good and evil in any human situation. There are certainly other ways of looking at the Christian life than the one we are given in Revelation, other ways that are also biblical and true to reality. But John's way is also both true and important. John's is a big-picture account. It is about the warfare that is underway between two kingdoms in this world and about the way in which the Devil employs the political, economic, and religious dimensions of life to hold sway over the unbelieving world. It is about the unassailable fact that, however much good Babylon might do, it invariably and ultimately proves itself the chief enemy of the kingdom of God. There may be many things that are still good about the United States, many privileges that its citizens enjoy. The Devil would never be as influential as he is if he didn't mix good in with the bad! But at last, we must see our lives as part of this larger story of the world. We must not miss the plot! And in this story we are not Americans. We are not even American Christians, if by that we mean that being an American is some important

part of our self-identity. We are Christians, full-stop. Our party, our side, our kingdom is that of Jesus Christ. Take us out of the United States and put us somewhere else and nothing important changes. We remain the same people, with the same calling, the same convictions, and the same loyalties as before.

It makes all the difference to how you and I live our lives that we look around ourselves and see not people who seem in most respects like ourselves, but a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, drunk with the blood of the saints; a woman soon to go to her destruction along with the beast she rode and the peoples she ruled.