

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
Revelation #30

The Great Prostitute, the Scarlet Beast, and the Conquering Lamb! **Revelation 17:1-18**

Today I want to help you make sense of the world in which we live. In particular, I have in mind the multiple ways in which our society and every society on earth conspires to oppose and oppress the kingdom of Jesus Christ. I imagine there are any number of ways in which people try to make sense of what is happening around the globe, but I want to do my best to account for it in terms derived from the book of Revelation.

In Revelation we are given a *highly symbolic but very real* portrayal of the forces that stand in opposition to Jesus Christ and his kingdom. We have already been told repeatedly that standing behind the anti-Christian sentiment that we so often see is Satan himself. He is described symbolically in Revelation 12:3 as a “great red dragon” and in Revelation 20:2 as “that ancient serpent.” But Satan does not work alone. He is responsible for orchestrating, energizing, and supporting a vast political, social, religious, immoral, idolatrous, and economic network of anti-Christian forces. In Revelation this conspiracy of opposition to Jesus Christ is called the *Beast*.

Yet another word that is used to identify the Beast is the name *Babylon*. As you will recall, Babylon first appears in history as the name for the ancient kingdom that took Israel into captivity. Babylon was guilty of all manner of wickedness and oppression and idolatry. Thus, the name “Babylon” came to be used not simply for the historical kingdom in the 6th century but also for any earthly city or nation or ruler who stands opposed to Jesus. Babylon in Revelation refers to any nation, such as North Korea, any social organization, such as Planned Parenthood, any political movement such as communism under Lenin and Stalin, or the pornography film industry, or false religions such as Islam that denies that Jesus Christ is God incarnate and opposes the teachings of God’s Word as revealed in the Bible.

Babylon cannot be limited to any one individual or institution or nation or city. You can’t point to any one location or country on a globe and say, “That alone is Babylon.” You can’t confine Babylon within any particular geographical or territorial boundaries. *Babylon is found wherever and whenever there is Satanically inspired deception and idolatry. Babylon is the symbol of all worldly entrenched opposition to Jesus Christ.* In ancient times Babylon was Sodom and Gomorrah, Egypt, Nineveh, and Rome. More recently, Babylon is Nazi Germany, China under Mao Tse Tung, Soviet Russia under Stalin, North Korea and Iran and even the United States to the degree that our own country resists the kingdom of Christ. As one author put it, *“Babylon represents the total culture of the world apart from God”* (Alan Johnson, 158).

Earlier in our study of Revelation I summarized it all by saying that,

Babylon is the symbol of human civilization with all its pomp and circumstance organized in opposition to God. It is the sum total of pagan culture: social, intellectual, commercial, political, and religious. It is the essence of evil and pagan opposition to Jesus as Lord and Savior. It is the symbol for collective rebellion against God in any and every form. It is the universal or world system of unbelief, idolatry, and apostasy that opposes and persecutes the people of God.

Babylon is every organization or institution that promotes racial supremacy. Babylon is political corruption and economic exploitation. Babylon is Boko Haram and ISIS. Babylon is religious liberalism. Babylon is the self-centered sensual world of Hollywood. Babylon is the symbol for any and all rebellion against Jesus Christ, his revealed Word, and his people, the Church.

Babylon has a variety of features and expressions, but the two that are most prominent are its political and religious embodiments. ***The woman or prostitute of Revelation 17 is a symbol for the religious expression of Babylon while the scarlet beast on which she rides is the political embodiment.*** And although they appear at first to be aligned, they eventually turn on each other.

We know that the “great prostitute” or “whore” or “harlot” (depending on which translation you are reading) described here is a symbol for Babylon because we are told this explicitly in v. 5 – “And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: ‘Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations.’” And we know that it is primarily the religious dimension of Babylon that is in view because this “prostitute” is said to commit “sexual immorality” and to have caused those who dwell on the earth to get drunk “with the wine” of her “sexual immorality.” As you may recall, in Revelation ***“sexual immorality” is a metaphorical way of describing religious apostasy and idolatry.*** That doesn’t exclude literal or physical sexual immorality. But the primary point is that to be guilty of sexual immorality means that one has abandoned the one true God and replaced him with an idol or false god.

The Great Prostitute (vv. 1-6)

Here in the opening verses of Revelation 17 John personifies the apostate world culture as a prostitute, an image designed to emphasize the sensual and seductive appeal by which she seeks to lure people away from Jesus. Four times in this chapter she is portrayed as “sitting” (vv. 1,3,9,15), all of which point to enthronement, sovereignty, and influence over the people and the beast (in 18:7 she says, “I sit as a queen”).

The “many waters” (v. 1) on which the harlot sits are explicitly identified in v. 15 as “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.” In other words, this is John’s way of describing ***the global and cross-cultural influence of false religion and all forms of idolatry in which the world is engulfed.***

One reason for the harlot’s judgment is that the kings of the earth “committed sexual immorality” (v. 2) with her, or more literally, they “fornicated” with her (see almost identical language in

18:3,9; 19:2). Again, this is not primarily a reference to literal sexual immorality (although the “harlot” undoubtedly encourages it!) but a figurative portrayal of the acceptance of the religious and idolatrous demands of the ungodly earthly order.

As noted earlier, in the OT “fornication” is often used in a figurative sense of Israel’s *spiritual unfaithfulness and her lapses into idolatry* (see Lev. 17:7; 20:5-6; Num. 14:33; 15:39; Deut. 31:16; Judges 2:17; 8:27; 1 Chron. 5:25; 2 Chron. 21:11; Ps. 73:27; see also Hosea 1:2; 2:4; 4:15; 9:1; Jer. 2:20; 3:2,9,13; 5:7,11; 13:27). This “sexual immorality” and “intoxication with the wine of her immorality” (see Rev. 14:8; 18:3; 19:2) thus points primarily to the prostitute as an image of all false world religions, and especially the apostate or false “church” that claims to be Christian but has abandoned the faith.

According to v. 3, John is “carried . . . away in the Spirit into a wilderness.” This is very similar to what Ezekiel experienced (2:2; 3:12,14,24; 11:1; 43:5). If the presence of “many waters” (v. 1) in the “desert” (v. 3) seems contradictory, remember that this is *symbolic geography*. We have already seen an overflowing river in the desert (12:15-16), so this should come as no surprise. But why the “wilderness” or more literally the “desert”? You may recall that back in Revelation 12 the wilderness/desert was the place where God took his people to protect them from Satan’s destructive plans. “Thus the angel carries John to the wilderness to place him out of reach of the allure of the harlot’s deceptive appearance, so that he can see accurately and testify truthfully against her immorality and violence” (Dennis Johnson, 244).

The description of the “beast” here in v. 3 is almost verbatim that of Revelation 13:1. The beast’s scarlet or red color links it with the dragon (12:3) who is also red and may point to the bloody nature of the persecution it inflicts on the people of God.

That the woman (i.e., the harlot of v. 1) rides the beast indicates some form of *alliance between the apostate religious world system and the tyranny of the state*.

Several things are said of the woman/harlot/prostitute in vv. 4-6 that point to her identity and nature:

(1) She is clothed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, all of which is identical with what we read of Babylon in Revelation 18:16. On the one hand this points to her worldly beauty and seductive appeal, but on the other it emphasizes the economic prosperity on the strength of which she lures unbelievers into participation in her religious fornications. There is an obvious contrast between the harlot and the Bride of the Lamb, the latter portrayed as a city adorned with precious stones, pearls, and gold, and clothed in bright, pure linen (21:2,9-23).

(2) In her hand she holds a golden cup full of “abominations” and the “impurities of her sexual immorality” (v. 4b), both of which are references to the various forms of idolatry in which she and her “lovers” are engaged. Her clothing (v. 4a) and the contents of her cup (v. 4b) provide an interesting contrast: *beauty and gross wickedness* (Johnson, 160).

(3) A name is written on her forehead (cf. 7:3; 13:16; 14:1,9; 20:4; 22:4). The specific part of the name that is a mystery is that this harlot is the “mother” of all prostitutes and the “mother” of the abominations of the earth. That is to say, “she is the fountainhead, the reservoir, the womb” that in a sense gives birth to all the individual cases of historical resistance to God’s will on earth.

(4) The woman is guilty of persecuting those who believe in and witness to Jesus (cf. 18:24; 19:2). She is “drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (v. 6).

This stunning and disturbing image overwhelms John. In v. 6 he confesses that he “marveled greatly” at the sight of this harlot.” There is in his response a mixture of fear, perplexity, and perhaps a measure of admiration for her beauty and power. John is both temporarily captivated and awestruck. But more than anything, he is fundamentally repulsed.

The Scarlet Beast (vv. 7-8)

The description of the beast (see 13:1ff.) and the book of life (see 13:8) have been dealt with elsewhere (see the exposition of those texts). Here we take note of the beast as one who “was and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction” (v. 8). This is clearly a Satanic parody or idolatrous imitation of God who on several occasions has been described as the one “who was and who is and who is to come” (4:8; cf. 1:4,8).

Note first of all that the negative middle term “is not” and the third term “is about to rise” are probably a parody of Christ’s death and resurrection. That the beast “is not” points to the continuing effects of his having been decisively defeated at the cross of Christ. That the beast yet “lives” to persecute the people of God is why the earth-dwellers wonder and follow after him/it. Also observe that “whereas Christ’s resurrection results in his being ‘alive forever’ (1:18), the beast’s resurrection results in his ‘destruction’” (Beale, 865).

On the other hand, some believe that the reference to the beast’s “coming up” or “rising up” is a parody not of the resurrection of Christ but of his second coming. We noted earlier that God’s “coming” refers to his coming at the end of the age in the person of Christ to judge the world and consummate the kingdom. The description of the beast’s “coming” thus is a demonic rip-off of the final return of Christ. The beast comes up from the “the bottomless pit” while Jesus comes down from “heaven” (19:11).

The Seven Heads and Ten Horns (vv. 9-14)

There are two primary interpretive approaches to this difficult passage: the historical view (within which are two options) and the symbolic view.

The Historical Interpretation

The first approach believes that the city and empire of Rome are principally in view. The “seven mountains” (v. 9) are a reference to the seven hills on which Rome sat (Palatine, Capitol, Aventine, Caelian, Esquiline, Viminal, and Quirinal). These seven mountains or hills are further identified with seven kings, five of whom are in the past, one presently rules, and the last has not yet come. The debate concerns which seven of the many Roman emperors are in view. I’m not going to explain the many options, but you can read of this in the Addendum at the close of these notes.

The second option is to interpret the seven mountains of v. 9 as a reference not to Rome or any of its emperors but to seven *world empires* that oppressed the people of God (cf. Dan. 2:25; 7:17; Jer. 51:25; Isa. 2:2; 41:15; Ps. 30:7; 68:15-16; Hab. 3:6). Five of these pagan empires belong to past history from John’s perspective: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece. A sixth kingdom, Rome, ruled the world when John wrote (hence, Rome is the one who “is”). The seventh, i.e., “the other [who] has not yet come”, is the emergence of a world empire at the close of history.

Many futurist interpreters of the book take this view and believe the seventh empire will be a revival of ancient Rome. They appeal to Revelation 13:3 and argue that the “mortal head wound” suffered by the Beast was the fall of ancient Rome and the miraculous recovery (or resurrection) that astounds the world is the modern-day revival of Rome in all its power and glory. According to Revelation 17:11, the Beast not only *has* seven heads; he also somehow *is* himself an eighth head. The Beast is an eighth empire and is somehow related to (“of”) the first seven. That is to say, out of revived Rome will emerge yet another pagan power related to the previous seven, but nevertheless distinct in its own right. This, then, would be the final manifestation of pagan opposition to the kingdom of God.

One major problem with this view is that in order to make the five + one + one scheme of empires work it unjustifiably omits the devastating persecution of the people of God by the Seleucids of Syria and the evil Antiochus Epiphanes. Also, if the seventh world empire in this list has yet to appear, what does one do with the many major world empires that have come and gone in the past 1,600 years, especially those that sorely persecuted and oppressed the church?

The Symbolic Interpretation

I believe there is a better solution, one that is more consistent with John’s use of *numerical symbolism*. On this view “seven” is not numerically precise, as if he had in mind seven and not six or eight, but points figuratively to the idea, as it often does, of *fullness or completeness* (see Rev. 1:4, 20; 4:5; 5:6). As in Revelation 12:3 and 13:1-2, notes Beale, “fullness [or totality] of oppressive power is the emphasis here. Therefore, rather than seven particular kings or kingdoms of the first century or any other, ***the seven mountains and kings represent the oppressive power of world government throughout the ages***, which arrogates to itself divine prerogatives and persecutes God’s people when they do not submit to the evil state’s false claims” (869; emphasis mine).

The seven heads of the Beast, therefore, signify totality of blasphemy and evil. “It is much like our English idiom ‘the seven seas,’ i.e., all the seas of the world” (Johnson, 163). In sum, *seven does not point to quantitative number but to qualitative fullness*. In John’s day the particular manifestation of the Beast was, of course, Rome. This may well have been what influenced him to use the figurative number “seven” (with reference to its hills), although he would have insisted that the Beast is far more than Rome.

Here is the simplest way I know to explain John’s symbolic imagery. Seven is the number of totality or completeness. It is John’s way of saying that the Beast rules or holds sway over the entire history of fallen, rebellious humanity. But the good news for us is that the Beast’s tyrannical reign is coming to an end. Of the Beast’s seven heads or kings or mountains, five “have fallen” or come to an end. But the Beast, in the form of one of its seven heads, is still in power, or as John says in v. 10, it “is”. And yet one more expression of the Beast’s power, the seventh head, “has not yet come” but it will. However, when this final expression of the Beast’s tyranny over the earth has appeared, it will rule “only a little while” (v. 10b). And just when you might think the Beast is dead and gone, it will come to life yet one more time in the form of an eighth head. But soon it will altogether go into destruction.

This “eighth” head or manifestation of the Beast’s power will lead to an unprecedented persecution of the Church as Satan makes one final attempt to destroy Christ’s kingdom and his Church. For a very brief time (John calls it “one hour” in v. 12) the “ten kings” or the totality of pagan rulers throughout the earth will align themselves with the Beast in one last ditch effort to “make war on the Lamb”, that is, to destroy Jesus Christ and his people, but all to no avail. Jesus will return from heaven and “conquer them, for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings” (v. 14).

So, in summary, the first six “heads” or kingdoms last a long time, throughout the course of history, in contrast with the seventh, and penultimate earthly incarnation of evil, which will fail to sustain a lengthy tenure. It will remain only a short time.

Likewise, the “eighth” head, like the other “seven,” has a figurative meaning. The number “eight” in the early church was a symbolic reference to the day of Christ’s resurrection, and even of Christ himself (recall that, using the method called *Gematria*, the sum of the Greek letters in the name “Jesus” = 888). Therefore, calling the Beast an “eighth” may be another way of referring to his future attempted imitation of Jesus who in his resurrection inaugurated the new creation.

The Ten Horns

We also need to determine who or what constitutes the “ten horns”. Those who embrace the historical view above usually find here ten literal rulers of the ten Roman provinces or perhaps ten specific nations in what they believe will be a revived Roman empire (hence the wild

speculation and jubilation of some futurists when it was announced in January, 1981, that the European Common Market had just admitted its tenth member nation).

In 1950 the six original nations were Italy, France, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. On January 1, 1973, the number of member nations increased to nine when the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Ireland joined. People began to sense the impending end of the age when Greece became the tenth(!) member in 1981. This excitement (or nervousness!) was short-lived. Spain and Portugal joined in 1986, and Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined in 1995. An additional ten countries joined in 2004 (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia), and in 2007 Romania and Bulgaria got on board. The EU had twenty-seven member nations in 2010. As you know, England recently announced it was withdrawing from the European Union.

But as we have seen, the number “ten”, like “seven”, is figurative. It likely symbolizes the variety and multiplicity of earthly nations and their rulers that join hands with the beast to enhance its power. These “kings” embody the fullness of Satan’s attack against the Lamb in the great eschatological showdown. These “ten kings” are most likely identical with the “kings from the east” (16:12-14, 16). They are also identical with the “kings of the earth” described in Revelation 19:19-21 who align themselves with the beast in the final battle with the Lord Jesus Christ at his return.

Therefore, I’m inclined to see the ten horns as representing any and all kings, i.e., the totality of the powers of all nations on the earth, which align themselves with the Beast in a final attempt to crush the Church. Their unified purpose in giving their power and authority to the Beast (v. 13) is the result of God’s providential control (v. 17) pursuant to the fulfillment of God’s eternal prophetic purpose.

Verses 14-15 answer the question raised in 13:4, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” The answer is that the Lamb is able! Together with his “called and chosen and faithful” people he will conquer the one who to all outward appearances had himself conquered.

The Sovereign Purpose of God

The scenario portrayed in Revelation 17:16-17 is stunning. Evidently at the end of the age the nations of the earth (i.e., the “ten horns = ten kings”) will conspire with the Beast for the purpose of destroying the harlot. Many take this to mean that “the political side of the ungodly world system will turn against the heart of the social-economic-religious side and destroy it” (Beale, 883). I agree. The harlot, i.e., the apostate church together with every false religious institution and/or system, will be destroyed by a coalition of political and/or military powers. The OT language behind the demise of the harlot comes from Ezekiel 23:25-29, 47. Four metaphors are used to describe this event: they make her “desolate” and “naked” and “devour her flesh” and “burn her up with fire” (v. 16).

The amazing thing is that ***the ten kings are inspired and energized to do this by God*** (v. 17)! This incredible internecine conflict between the religious and political spheres of the ungodly world system is so foolish, short-sighted, and ultimately self-destructive that only the hand of God could account for it. This is a theologically fascinating assertion. Clearly, it is against God's *will* for anyone to assist or align with the beast, for the beast's ultimate aim is to wage war with the Lamb. Nevertheless, the angel says (literally), "God gave into their [the ten kings] hearts to do his will, and to perform one will, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled" (v. 17). *Therefore, God willed (in one sense) to influence the hearts of the ten kings so that they would do what is against God's will (in another sense).*

Conclusion

In the midst of this horrific and ugly portrayal of Satan and the Beast and the Great Prostitute whose aim collectively is to seduce and destroy the people of God and thus to undermine the kingdom of King Jesus, we should be encouraged by the reminder that our Lord is the "Lord of lords" and that our King is the "King of kings" and that he "will conquer" (v. 14) and "his purpose" (v. 17) will be fulfilled.

But more than that, we will participate with Jesus in his defeat of the Beast. Look again closely at v. 14. Jesus isn't alone when he conquers. "***With him***" are his people, those whom he has "called." We who are the "chosen" of God, we who by God's grace are "faithful" are there to share in Christ's victory! Thus we see that in the midst of all this ugliness and idolatry and immorality the people of God stand firmly in their identity. No matter what the Beast may do, he cannot reverse our calling. He cannot negate our being chosen. He cannot undermine our faithfulness to Jesus. No matter how bad conditions may get, no matter how ugly and idolatrous and immoral our society may become, never lose sight of who you are! You are "called and chosen and faithful."

Addendum

The "historical" interpretation of vv. 9-11 seeks to identify the seven heads / mountains with a series of Roman emperors. Here is the list of Roman emperors, and the duration of their reigns, beginning with Julius Caesar.

Julius Caesar (101-44 b.c.) / Augustus (27 b.c. - 14 a.d.) / Tiberius (a.d. 14-37) / Caligula (a.d. 37-41) / Claudius (a.d. 41-54) / Nero (a.d. 54-68) / Galba (a.d. 68) / Otho (a.d. 69) / Vitellius (a.d. 69) / Vespasian (a.d. 69-79) / Titus (a.d. 79-81) / Domitian (a.d. 81-96) / Nerva (a.d. 96-98)

(A) According to one scheme, the list begins with Julius Caesar (101-44 b.c.) and proceeds through Augustus (27 b.c. - 14 a.d.), Tiberius (a.d. 14-37), Caligula (a.d. 37-41), Claudius (a.d. 41-54), Nero (a.d. 54-68), and finally Galba (a.d. 68).

(B) Another scheme believes the first six are the same as above. But the seventh is Vespasian (a.d. 69-79), skipping Galba, Otho, and Vitellius.

(C) In yet another scenario, Julius Caesar is skipped and the series begins with Augustus (27 b.c. – 14 a.d.) and runs consecutively through Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba, and concludes with Otho (a.d. 69).

(D) Finally, others believe the series begins with Augustus and runs through Nero. Galba, Otho, and Vitellius are omitted, making Vespasian (a.d. 69-79) the sixth and Titus (a.d. 79-81) the seventh.

One key is the statement in v. 10 that “one is”, i.e., the sixth king is ruling at the actual time of John’s writing of Revelation. If we adopt scheme “A” and begin the series with Julius Caesar, the sixth king is Nero and the seventh is Galba, who according to v. 10 remains only “a little while” (which would be historically true, for Galba ruled only from October 68 to January 69). But this would require a date of composition for Revelation in Nero’s reign, a view that is possible, but not likely.

View “B” arbitrarily omits Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. This is justified by appealing to the brevity of their reigns. However, brief though they were, they were still legitimate Roman emperors. As a matter of historical note, Galba was stabbed to death, decapitated, and his corpse mutilated; Otho committed suicide with a dagger (similar to Nero); and Vitellius was beaten to death. On view “B” Vespasian would be the seventh, but his rule was almost 11 years (is that consistent with “a little while”?).

If one begins counting the seven with Augustus, schemes “C” and “D” are possible. On view “C” John would be writing Revelation during Galba’s reign (late 68 – early 69), making Otho the seventh (whose time in office lasted from January 5th 69 to April 16th 69, which would certainly qualify as “a little while”). View “D” chooses to omit Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, making Vespasian the sixth (during whose reign John wrote Revelation) and his son Titus the seventh (whose reign lasted little more than two years).

The simple fact is, no scheme satisfactorily leads to Domitian as the sixth king who “is” reigning when John wrote Revelation (early 90’s a.d.). Be it also noted that if the seven hills point to Rome one would hardly need special divine wisdom to figure it out (as v. 9 asserts). In other words, “any Roman soldier who knew Greek could figure out that the seven hills referred to Rome. But whenever divine wisdom is called for, the description requires theological and symbolical discernment, not mere geographical or numerical insight” (Johnson, 162).