

## INTRODUCTION to REVELATION chapter 17

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## 1 THE THEME

### *THE SEDUCTIVE INSTRUMENT OF SATAN EMPLOYED IN HIS WAR AGAINST CHRISTIANS*

## 2 THE STRUCTURE

### a. Unity of Revelation chapter 17 and 18

The announcement of the punishment of the great prostitute, Babylon, is made in Revelation 17:1, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute”. The prostitute Babylon and the city Babylon are one and the same reality.

The execution of this punishment is described in Revelation 18:1-24.

The interim passage, Revelation 17:7-18, is an explanation of the ‘mystery’ concerning the relationship between the prostitute and the beast she rides.

### b. The relationship between the prostitute and the scarlet beast

The prostitute and the beast are not identical, but very closely bound to one another throughout history. The beast represents Satan’s antichristian government throughout the history of the world. It represents Satan’s political instrument employed in his war against Christians. The seven heads represent the various forms this power takes throughout the history of the world (cf. 13:1). The prostitute represents Satan’s antichristian culture throughout the history of the world. This includes the religions of the world as instruments of Satan employed in his war against Christians. The prostitute rides on the beast in all its historical manifestations (17:3).

The beast has several historical manifestations.

The beast represents Satan’s antichristian government *during* the time of the apostle John embodied in the Roman Empire – the seven hills on which the woman sits (17:9).

Then the beast represents Satan’s antichristian government *before and after* the time of the apostle John, manifested in the various world empires that in one or another way oppressed God’s people – the seven kings or kingdoms (17:10-11).

Finally the beast represents Satan’s final antichristian government *at the end of history* embodied in the final antichrist – the eighth king (17:11b-18).

Likewise, the prostitute has several historical manifestations.

The prostitute represents Satan's antichristian culture embodied in the great Babylon, the city with its immoral people and culture *during the Old Testament period* (17:5).

Then the prostitute represents Satan's antichristian culture *during* the time of the apostle John manifested in Rome, the city with seven hills and its immoral people and culture (17:9,18).

Finally the prostitute represents Satan's antichristian culture *at the end of history* in connection with the final antichrist (17:15-17).

### **3 THE CONTENTS**

#### **a. Babylon is working throughout history**

The purpose of Revelation chapters 17 and 18 is to reveal to John and to Christians throughout the history of the world the enormous seductive power (Babylon) that is operating within history and to reveal the end of this seductive power.

#### **b. Babylon and the beast work together (17:3)**

Babylon (the seductive culture) and the beast (the oppressive government) work together. The great prostitute called Babylon the great represents Satan's *antichristian world and its seductions*, especially in industry and commerce, business and finance, education and justice, luxuries and pleasures, art and sports, and certainly also in every kind of worldly religion. In short, it represents Satan's *antichristian culture* connected to the world empires throughout the period from Christ's first coming to Christ's second coming. By means of all these seductions, the prostitute seeks to entice and seduce people to turn away from the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. It represents the world viewed as the centre of luxury, glamour and vice, as the embodiment of "the cravings of sinful man, the lust of the eyes and the boasting of what he has and does", "the world and its desires that pass away" (1 John 2:16-17).

The fact that she sits on the scarlet beast can mean one of two things. Either Satan's antichristian governments and its persecution carry Satan's antichristian world and its seductive culture forward! Or Satan's antichristian world and its seductive culture determine how Satan's antichristian governments and its persecutions function and live.

#### **c. The continual reappearance of Babylon and the beast is no longer a mystery (17:7)**

The mystery of the woman and the beast she rides is something astonishing that needs a heavenly explanation. The mystery is the fact that the beast seems to possess indestructibility and eternity, thus divinity. Every time it is destroyed, it seems to appear again in another form! And because the prostitute rides on the beast, the mystery includes the fact that the prostitute also has many forms that reappear again and again.

#### **d. The beast has many forms (17:8-11)**

The beast (the oppressive governments in the world) has many forms (17:8-11). The scarlet beast represents *Satan's antichristian governments and its persecutions*, especially in the great world empires with their kings that follow one another throughout the period from Christ's first coming to Christ's second coming. It represents all the world empires with their powerful rulers taken together as one whole beast (cf. Daniel 7:2-8,17).

On the one hand, the city sitting on seven hills is a particular manifestation of the prostitute sitting on the scarlet beast and represents the city of Rome as the centre and seat of the Roman Empire of John's day (17:18).

On the other hand, its seven heads as seven kings represent all the embodiments of the beast throughout history, that is, the totality of the world empires as represented by their rulers or kings.

"Five kings that have fallen" (17:10). They are an example of how the beast "was and is not" (that is: "is no more"). For example: in John's day, the five *world* empires that had already fallen could be the Old

Babylonian Empire, the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire and the Greek-Seleucid Empire.

“One is” (17:10). He is the sixth king and represents an example of how the beast “was and is not and yet shall be present” (17:8). In John’s day this would be the Roman Empire with its many Caesars.

“The other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while” (17:10). He is the seventh king and is probably a collective title for all the antichristian governments between the fall of Rome and the final empire of the final antichrist just before Christ’s second coming. This is symbolic, because the entire period between Christ’s first coming and Christ’s second coming is “but a little while” in the eyes of God (cf. forty-two months in Revelation 13:5).

“The beast who was, and is not, even he is an eighth king. He is out of the seven and goes to destruction”. This eighth king is the final manifestation of the beast, the final antichristian empire under the final antichrist towards the close of history (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:3-4,9-12). His being out of the seven probably means the re-establishment of an empire with conditions that also existed in those seven empires.

Thus, again and again throughout the centuries of history this beast appears in a new embodiment. The forms change, but the essence remains the same throughout history.

Its ten horns as ten kings symbolise the totality of the mighty ones of this earth in every realm: government, industry, commerce, banking, military, education, police, justice, mass-communication, art, sports, etc., *insofar they serve the central authority* (cf. 17:12-17).

#### **e. The beast and his allies are united in making war against Christians (17:12-14)**

Throughout history, and especially throughout the New Testament period until the end of history, the beast and his allies, the mighty people in every realm on earth will again and again make war against Christ and his Church. They are the enemies of Christ and Christians. Their purpose is to exterminate the Church as an institute that proclaims the gospel and to eradicate every reference to Jesus Christ. Their real stumbling block is Jesus Christ (cf. Matthew 21:42-44; Luke 2:34).

In every area of life they have and will have great successes and for a while will seem to have and actually have the upper hand (cf. 11:7-10; 13:7,15-18). Their antichristian dominion may happen in institutions like schools, universities, banks and law firms, but also in geographical areas like cities or countries. But again and again Christ defeats and destroys every form of antichristian dominion! After a short while of power, they are defeated. Every kingdom of antichrist perishes! This is apparent from past history, but will especially be true at Christ’s second coming (cf. 11:11-12; 16:14-21; 19:11-21; 20:7-10; 2 Thessalonians 2:8). This fact is a great encouragement for Christians!

#### **f. God allows the beast and his allies to destroy one another enemies (17:15-18)**

God’s sovereign purpose is to allow the enemies of Christ and Christians to destroy one another. Throughout the whole New Testament period the antichristian political powers had initially promoted and supported the antichristian culture with its pleasures and seductions. Some examples are: governments making unjust laws, city councils giving licences to brothels and gambling houses, directors of companies giving and taking bribes and newspapers and magazines promoting immorality. But throughout the whole New Testament period God had purposed to allow the enemies of Christ and his Church to destroy one another. The antichristian political powers destroy the antichristian religious, philosophical, scientific, economic, financial, judicial and agricultural cultures it initially supported. These governments destroy their own cultures because they always discover too late that the antichristian cultures they had fostered inevitably destroy their own governments! What the antichristian political governments sow, they inescapably reap (Galatians 6:7-8)! In the end the pleasures of sin always disappoint!

In the beginning the empire of the world looks strong and invincible. They co-operate to attack the beliefs, values, practices and life-styles of Christians.

But then the empire of the world begins to crack at his seams. It appears that there are unbridgeable and insurmountable differences that lead to competition, mutual distrust, deep-rooted jealousy, fear and hatred. This erupts into opposition, rebellion, strikes, street fights, killing and finally in outright revolution and civil wars! People of the same nation or the same religion will betray, hate and kill one another (Matthew 24:10). This ultimately leads to the complete destruction of both parties within the empire of the world!

#### **g. The message of Revelation 17**

Throughout history and especially throughout the New Testament period until the end of history, Christ again and again defeats and will defeat every form of *antichristian* dominion in governments, in religion, in culture and in commerce. Every kingdom of antichrist perishes (17:14). In a sense, every antichristian government destroys its own world (17:16-17), but realises it too late. This fact is a great encouragement for Christians! Therefore Christians must refuse to yield to the temptations of this world and make sure that they do not miss God's grace. There comes a time when repentance and remorse will be too late (Hebrews 12:14-17)!

### **4 THE BACKGROUND**

#### **a. The prostitute (17:1)**

The Bible speaks besides physical prostitution (sexual immorality)(Leviticus 18:6,20,22,23; Romans 1:24,26,27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:9-11) also of spiritual prostitution (spiritual immorality, idolatry). Israel and Judah committed gross idolatry with the gods of other nations (Jeremiah 1:25-27; Ezekiel 16:15-26).

#### **b. The waters (17:1)**

The waters symbolise or represent the peoples, multitudes, nations and languages of the world, that is, humanity as it lives on earth in her divisions and groups (17:15) and as it opposes and persecutes the Christian Church (cf. Isaiah 8:7; 17:12-13; Jeremiah 47:2; Psalm 93:3-4).

#### **c. The desert (17:3)**

The desert is the place of loneliness, emptiness, dryness and extreme difficulties. It symbolises the place where God protects and educates his Old Testament people (Deuteronomy 1:29-33) and his New Testament people (12:6,13-16).

It also symbolises the place of God's curse for unbelievers, where there can be no prosperity and fruitfulness (Jeremiah 17:5-6). Compare this with the springs of water for Christians in Revelation 7:17, which is a symbol of God's blessing.

#### **d. The beast (17:3)**

The beast is a composite of Daniel's beasts, which refer to kingdoms or world empires (Daniel 7:2-8,17).

#### **e. Babylon (17:5)**

The ancient city of Babylon had already been destroyed and was lying under a layer of desert sand by the time Christ revealed this vision to John. But the city that Christ referred to in Revelation 17 is Rome, the city lying on seven hills (17:9; cf. 1 Peter 5:13). The world empire of Rome stretched from India to Britain. The city of Rome in the first century A.D. functions as a symbol for the centre and heart of the antichristian empires.

Babylon was the place where people defied God and his command (Genesis 11:1-9). Babylon was the centre of evil, arrogance, pride, ruthlessness, relentless aggression and opposition to God (Isaiah 13:11; 14:6,12-14). She lived by many waters, had a flourishing agriculture, and was rich in treasures (Jeremiah 51:13). Babylon was the centre of false religion: idolatry, sorceries and astrology (Isaiah 46:1,6,7; 47:9,12,13). She made the nations of the whole earth drunk with her wine: she attracted, seduced and then conquered them

(Jeremiah 51:7). The antichristian Babylon culture is without exception present in every country and every city of the world.

**f. The book of life (17:8)**

The book of life is mentioned in Old and New Testament (Exodus 32:32-33; Daniel 12:1; Luke 10:20; Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12,15; 21:27).

**g. The horns (17:12)**

Horns symbolise strength, might and power of the wicked and the righteous (1 Samuel 2:10; Psalm 75:10). God will make the horn (power) of king David grow (Psalm 132:17). Horns are used in prophetic actions to scatter people (Zechariah 1:18-19) or to destroy the enemy (1 Kings 22:11). The seven horns of the Lamb indicate Christ's absolute divine power and authority in heaven and on earth (5:6; cf. Matthew 28:18). The ten horns of the dragon indicate Satan's complete destructive power, but only on the earth (12:3,9). The ten crowned horns of the beast indicate the beast's arrogant and cruel exercise of destructive power all over the earth (13:1,7-8), especially exercised through the kings or rulers in various areas of life (17:12).