

"THE GREAT PROSTITUTE AND THE BEAST"

I. Introduction

- A. The British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge once told of something that took place when he was living in India as a young man, prior to his conversion to Christianity.
1. One day when he went down to a river for a swim, he saw a figure on the opposite side.
 2. While the figure was some ways off, he was able to tell that it was a woman and that she was not wearing any clothes.
 3. Incited by lust, he swam across the river.
 4. When he was only a few feet away from the woman, he lifted his head from the water and saw that she was an old woman with leprosy.
 5. He immediately recoiled in disgust.
 6. Muggeridge would later see this episode as a picture of temptation, especially sexual temptation.
 7. What at first appears to be so alluring is in reality foul and noxious.
- B. This illustrates what is taking place in Revelation 17.
1. John is given a vision in which Babylon is depicted as a great prostitute.
 2. This begins a section that sets forth an interpretive review of the sixth and seventh bowls.

3. This is not to be understood as something that chronologically follows the bowls.
4. It is describing same thing, but in greater detail.
5. Here we are shown Babylon as a symbol of worldly seduction toward idolatry.
6. Also, just as the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet were an attempt to counterfeit the Trinity, the prostitute is an attempt to counterfeit the church as the bride of Christ.

II. Seducer of the Dwellers on Earth

- A. The chapter opens with several Old Testament allusions.
 1. The reference to many waters points to Jeremiah 51:12-13, where the Lord says, "Set up a standard against the walls of Babylon; make the watch strong; set up watchmen; prepare the ambushes; for the LORD has both planned and done what he spoke concerning the inhabitants of Babylon. O you who dwell by many waters, rich in treasures, your end has come; the thread of your life is cut."
 2. The reference to the wilderness points to Isaiah 21:1-2, where the Lord foretells Babylon's fall by saying, "As whirlwinds in the Negeb sweep on, it comes from the wilderness, from a terrible land. A stern vision is told to me; the traitor betrays, and the destroyer destroys. Go up, O Elam; lay siege, O Media; all the sighing she has caused I bring to an end."
 3. These Old Testament prophecies of the fall of historic Babylon are being drawn upon to prepare for what is about to be said about the fall of spiritual Babylon.
- B. Babylon is depicted as a great prostitute.

1. The symbol of prostitution is used because Babylon allures and seduces people into evil, especially idolatry.
 2. The woman represents the evil economic-religious cultures of the world.
 3. She is the world as the center of anti-christian seduction.
 4. In John's first century context, one of the clearest examples of this would have been the pagan trade guilds, which often involved sexual immorality.
 5. These guilds gained participants by promising pleasure and prosperity.
 6. Those who refused to participate would face economic hardship.
 7. Our culture makes the same kinds of offers to people.
 8. It is a world that revolves around pleasure, focused as it is on entertainment, indulgence, and sexual depravity.
 9. The great prostitute continues to get people drunk with the wine of her immorality, preparing them for destruction.
- C. When John sees the woman in the wilderness, he notices that she is sitting on a scarlet beast.
1. This is the same beast that rose out of the sea back in chapter 13, which was a composite of the four beasts that Daniel saw in his vision in Daniel 7.
 2. As we noted in our study of that chapter, the beast is a symbol of the state as it persecutes the church.
 3. The close association between the beast and the woman is a symbol for how the state provides a platform for Babylon's immoral economic-religious culture.

4. Despite all of her allure, John makes it clear that this woman is out for blood.
5. She is drunk with the blood of the saints.
6. The world is seeking to destroy the church, whether by outright persecution or by the more subtle strategy of seduction.

III. **Marveled at by the Dwellers on Earth**

- A. John tells us that after seeing this woman, he marveled greatly.
 1. There are two different ways of taking this.
 2. It could mean that John was in awe of the woman and was perhaps even drawn to her, as is the case with the dwellers on earth when they marvel at the beast in verse 8.
 3. However, it seems more likely that John's marveling is simply a response of fear in the face of this influential entity.
 4. This is further supported by the parallel in Daniel 4:19, where the prophet says that he is dismayed and alarmed by what he has seen in a vision.
- B. The angel responds to John's marveling by explaining the meaning of what he has been shown.
 1. The angel says that the beast upon which the woman is seated "was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction."
 2. We have seen this kind of description before in Revelation.
 3. The Lord has repeatedly been referred to as the one who was, and is, and is to come.

4. Once again we see how the forces of evil try to counterfeit the one true and living God.
 5. The term “was” points to all of the past world empires that persecuted God’s people, such as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon.
 6. The term “is not” points to the fall of those empires.
 7. And the term “is about to rise” points to the rising of new empires in their place.
 8. All throughout history the beast continues to appear in new embodiments, but their end is always the same: destruction.
 9. This pattern is seen in the history of Satan himself, as we see in chapters 12 and 20 of Revelation.
- C. The dwellers on earth marvel at the beast’s apparent ability to resurrect itself again and again.
1. They admire worldly power because their names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world.
 2. While the elect are sealed and spiritually protected from the awe-inspiring and fear-inducing power of the state, the remainder of mankind is given over to it.
 3. Nevertheless, God’s people still need wisdom as we reckon with the beast, lest we succumb to the pressure to bow down to it.
 4. The angel explains to John that the seven heads of the beast simultaneously stand for seven mountains and seven kings.
 5. This symbolism has multiple layers of fulfillment.
 6. In the Old Testament, mountains are often symbols for kingdoms.
 7. For example, in Jeremiah 51:25 the Lord says to Babylon, “Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, declares the LORD, which

destroys the whole earth; I will stretch out my hand against you, and roll you down from the crags, and make you a burnt mountain.”

8. In light of this, we can say that in a general sense, the seven heads represent the complete set of world kingdoms throughout history that persecute the church.
 9. At the same time, Rome was built on seven hills.
 10. It was so noted for this that it was known as the seven-hilled city, similar to the way Chicago is known as the Windy City.
 11. This tells us that Rome was the world empire in view when John was writing this.
- D. In light of this, some have contended that the seven kings are seven successive first century Roman emperors.
1. The problem with this interpretation is that it requires an arbitrary manipulation of the emperors, leaving some out in order to arrive at the correct one when Revelation was written.
 2. Others see the seven kings as symbols for specific kingdoms, such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, Rome, and then one more empire after Rome.
 3. The problem with this is that it requires us to lump all the world empires after Rome together into a seventh kingdom.
 4. In other words, it treats the first six empires as historical but the seventh as symbolic.
 5. It makes better sense to say that it is not a literal seven but a symbolic seven, representing all of the antichrist empires throughout history.
 6. The seven-headed beast stands for world power whenever it flourishes and spreads deception and immorality and persecutes

the church.

- E. The beast itself is numbered with the seven kings, being counted as an eighth.
 - 1. But then John is told that this eighth belongs to the seven.
 - 2. What does this mean?
 - 3. It means the beast is the satanic power behind these world empires.
 - 4. And once again we see the forces of evil described in a manner that reminds us of how it apes the one true God.
 - 5. The beast is described in verse 11 as “the beast that was and is not... and it goes to destruction.”
 - 6. This recalls the descriptions of God and Christ as the one who was and is and is to come.
 - 7. Further, the fact that the beast is associated with the number eight points to his attempts to imitate Christ’s resurrection, since Christ was raised from the dead on the first day of the week, which could also be seen as the eighth day.

- F. As for the beast’s ten horns, John is told that they are kings who will receive authority for one hour, together with the beast.
 - 1. In John’s immediate context, this points to the client kings that Rome set up throughout its empire, which was divided into ten provinces.
 - 2. At the same time, the symbolism extends beyond the first century.
 - 3. The point is that the beast will have many allies throughout the church age.

4. Verse 14 says that the beast and its allies will make war on the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them.
5. This is describing the last battle that was depicted in the sixth and seventh bowls.

IV. The Self-Destructive Nature of Evil

- A. This brings us to the last paragraph in the chapter, which begins in verse 15.
 1. Here we are told that the waters upon which the prostitute was seated are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.
 2. These are the people who fall prey to the woman's seductions.
 3. Yet in spite of her pervasive influence throughout the world, she will end up being destroyed by the beast and its horns.
 4. This is a picture of how powerful states end up turning on themselves and devouring their own culture.
 5. It is what happened with Rome, and it continues to happen up to this day.
 6. Evil is self-destructive.
 7. And note how verse 17 makes it clear that this is according to the plan of God.
 8. He puts it into the hearts of the beast and the horns to fulfill his purpose.
 9. Though God himself does not commit the evil, he rules over the forces of evil and works through their own plots to ensure their downfall.
- B. One last thing to note is how the woman is described in verse 18.

1. She is called “the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”
2. This is another detail that makes the preterist interpretation of Revelation highly unlikely.
3. You will recall that preterists contend that Revelation was written prior to AD 70 and is almost entirely about the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans.
4. Because of this, they identify the great prostitute as Jerusalem.
5. The problem is that there never was a time when Jerusalem could in any sense be described as “the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”

V. Conclusion

- A. This chapter’s depiction of Babylon stands in contrast to Revelation’s descriptions of the city of God.
 1. The former is a filthy prostitute, while the latter is a pure bride.
 2. The former is dressed in outward finery that only hides her foul nature, while the latter is dressed in splendid attire that reflects her glorious nature.
 3. The former is destroyed, while the latter is delivered.
 4. The former has her security with the kings of the earth, who ultimately turn against her, while the latter has her security in heaven.
- B. We need to have this contrast in mind as we live as God’s people in this world.
 1. We need to look at the world and see her as a filthy whore, riding a scarlet beast and drunk with the blood of the saints.

2. And we need to look at the church and see her as Christ's radiant bride.