

## UNDERSTANDING THAT WEIRD BOOK OF REVELATION - Part twenty

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### THE MYSTERY AND DESTRUCTION OF BABYLON

**Revelation 17:1-18** - "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 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."

With the pouring out of the seven bowls of the wrath of God John has taken us through the events of the great tribulation that is yet to come over the earth. All that is left in the book of Revelation is a more detailed vision of the *conclusion* of the tribulation. The remainder of the book deals with that conclusion from two vantage points: First, the *negative side* - the destruction of Babylon and the powers of the antichrist (**chapters 17-18**). Then, secondly, from the *positive side* - the establishment of God's new order in the new heavens and the new earth (**chapters 19-22**).

In a very perceptive way John compares these two aspects of the end in two contrasting pictures. We see the events at the close of the tribulation set out in terms of *two cities* (negatively *Babylon*, and positively the *New Jerusalem*), and also in terms of *two women* (negatively the *great harlot*, and positively, the *bride and the marriage supper of the Lamb*).

Now let's look at the mystery and destruction of Babylon:

#### 1) THE GREAT INIQUITY OF BABYLON

**Revelation 17:1-5** - "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."

It's quite amazing that one of the seven angels - those pouring out the bowls of God's final wrath at the close of the tribulation - would actually stop and take the time to speak with John about what was going on. But such is the case.

The placing of the woman John sees is very significant. He tells us two different things about her. First, she is pictured sitting on **“many waters”**(1). Then she is pictured seated on a **“scarlet beast”**(3). Both of these details are of great importance:

The **many waters** are explained to be **“peoples and multitudes, and nations and languages”**(15). In other words, however we end up identifying Babylon, it is not one mere city. It represents the influence of godlessness and immorality that sweeps over the whole earth.

Then, the **scarlet beast** is mentioned. But, in a very important explanation, John repeats some details about this beast that we’ve already seen - **“...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”**(17:3)

This immediately takes us back to the description of the same beast in **Revelation 13:1** - **“And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads.”**In other words, what John is seeing in this picture of the woman sitting on the beast is the **reason** for the power and influence she holds over the peoples and nations and tongues of the earth. She is empowered by the antichrist, who is, in turn, empowered by the dragon, Satan himself.

These are two important details. This woman is shown on the waters to show her relationship to the **nations of the earth**. She is then pictured on the beast to show her **relationship to antichrist** and the Devil.

What we are learning here is that there will be a varied approach to the apostasy of the last days. Much of it will involve direct persecution of the saints. Direct pressure will be applied to conform to the empire of antichrist. But it will not **all** be achieved by persecution. This picture of Babylon as the great harlot illustrates the power of the world to **entice** people away from God into carelessness, the love of pleasure, unrestrained immorality and idolatry.

Again, as I said earlier in this series, I believe what you will have in the last days is this alliance of the powers in an **unholy trinity**. The **antichrist** will find his ultimate expression heading up the **empire** - the **political power structure** - of this world as it aligns itself against Christ. Then, the **false prophet** represents the **corrupt religious system - religion gone bad**. This end time faith will embrace **unity** over **truth**. It’s already happening. This false prophet will orchestrate the religious alliance that will devote itself to the worship of the beast.

This is a **description** of the religious system of the last days. John is putting in **picture form** what end-time faith will be like in this world. Religion will not cease to exist. It will be **tolerated** and even **encouraged** as long as it conforms to a certain pattern. Religion will even **thrive** numerically as long as it lines up and serves the **political** and **economic** systems of antichrist’s end time empire.

Then, the third power we come to is this picture of **Babylon** which represents the **seductive powers of this world** to draw people away from a pure love for Jesus Christ. These three all come under the direct control of the **great dragon, Satan himself**. They are the agencies he uses to fight against Christ and His coming kingdom.

Back to the picture of Babylon:

## 2) **THE WOMAN AND THE BEAST THAT CARRIES HER**

**Revelation 17:6-8** - **“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.”**

The main feature of the woman in these verses is certainly her **drunkenness**. She is out of control. There is a recklessness in her wantonness. Again her aggressive attitude against the saints is highlighted. She isn’t drunk on **wine**. She is drunk with the **blood of the saints**. True, at first she seduces, but in her allegiance with antichrist, persecution isn’t far behind.

There is a point we shouldn’t miss here. We see these two contrasting sides to this woman - Babylon. True, she is pleasing and alluring to those who are of the earth and follow in her ways. But, at the very same time, she is absolutely intolerant of those who reject her enticements and follow Christ. She will allow anything but devotion to Jesus Christ. Sound like the

spirit of our age?

There is something in her appearance that fills John with wonder. So much so that the angel notices and questions him about it - 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."**

While the text doesn't specifically say so, probably what made John wonder was the fact that he had been told by the angel at the beginning of this vision that he was about to see the **destruction** of Babylon (17:1). And, thus far, she looks rich and successful and fat on her victory over the saints. And, as the angel explains, that destruction **will** come, but only through the unfolding of the events of the **seven heads and ten horns (7)**. This is the part of the vision the angel goes on to explain.

The first thing to notice is that **so tightly linked** are the woman and the beast that John, in explaining the nature of Babylon (the woman), actually begins by explaining the beast. So we learn that John is not now explaining **two** mysteries - Babylon **and** the beast - but **one** mystery - how Babylon and the beast are really one in purpose and function (at least for now).

**Revelation 17:8** - **"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."**

The big detail in this verse is obviously the repetition of the phrase concerning the beast, that he **"...was and is not and is to come."** Clearly John is repeating what he has already been shown about the beast in **Revelation 13:3,12,14** - **"One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast....13:12....It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed....13:14....and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast *that was wounded by the sword and yet lived.*"**

Something repeated this frequently by John is meant to be seen as a key interpretive element. Somehow the beast (antichrist) experiences these three stages: It **was** (meaning it already had an existence in the past), it **is not** (meaning that history will pass through a time when this beast does not exist), and it **is to come** (meaning there will yet be a future manifestation of this satanic incarnation of evil on the earth).