

WRESTLING WITH REVELATION

THE REIGN AND RUIN OF BABYLON (17:1--18:24)

After describing the seven final plagues, John introduces a new figure, an elaborately dressed prostitute call Babylon the Great. While the imagery of Babylon has been alluded to previously (14:8, 20; 16:19), John has as yet made no comment upon what the image means except that in each allusion he makes clear that the “great city” would be destroyed under God’s holy wrath. Now, he gives an extended description, not only of the meaning of the city but of its destruction by God. His description is only partly enlightening, for while it provides more information by which to identify the figure, it still is highly symbolic and a good deal less than a simple explanation.

Babylon, the Prostitute (17:1-6)

In order to properly assess the figure of the prostitute, it will be well at this point to call attention to some overriding contrasts which John draws within the larger scope of the book, contrasts that must not be lost in the maze of visions and symbols. John has been developing the theme of a great polarization in the world. He begins this polarization in his letters to the seven churches as he sets the true church over against false Jews, synagogues of Satan, the Nicolaitans, Jezebel, Balaam, the throne of Satan, the deep secrets of Satan, and the spirit of apathy. As the book progresses, he introduces images which, although similar, depict striking opposites. Major antitheses are:

The Two Peoples

Those for God

The people of God are variously represented as the 144,000, the multitude in white robes, the two witnesses, the woman and her offspring, the saints, those who hold to the testimony of Jesus, and the souls who had been slain for the Word of God.

Those against God

The people rebelling against God are represented as kings, princes, generals, the rich, the mighty, slaves and free persons, people without the seal of God, mankind, peoples, tribes, languages, nations, inhabitants of the earth, and followers of the beast.

The Two Seals

The Beast’s Mark

The mark of the Beast (the name and number 666)

God’s Seal

The seal of the living God (God’s name)

The Two Kinds of Animals

Evil Beasts

The powers of evil are represented by the dragon, the beast from the sea, the beast from the earth, locusts from the abyss, frogs from the mouth of the dragon, and horses with heads like lions and tails like snakes.

Good Animals

The forces of righteousness are represented by the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, the four living creatures, and the lion of Judah.

The Two Drinks

The Grapes of Wrath

The wine of adultery and the cup of God's wrath

The River of Life

The river of the water of life

The Two Cities (or countries)

The City of Evil

The city of evil is represented as Babylon, Egypt, Sodom, Jerusalem, Rome, the kingdom of the beast, and the kingdoms of the world.

The City of God

The city of God is represented as the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ, Mt. Zion, and the New Jerusalem.

The Two Women

The Whore

The great prostitute

The Bride

The woman clothed with the sun and the bride, the Lamb's wife

This extensive polarization sets before the reader a parting of the ways, and John leaves little doubt that he expects his readers to identify with one or the other. The call is made for God's people to "come out" from Babylon (18:4), a clear allusion to the ancient return from exile in the post-exilic period (Jer. 51:45). The message is clear that in the conflict between these two great opposing forces, there will be casualties, even though ultimate victory is assured to the people of God.

ST. AUGUSTINE AND THE CITY OF GOD

In the 5th century, when the empire of Rome was collapsing, the Bishop of Hippo wrote one of his most important works, "On the City of God Against the Pagans." Against the allegations that Christianity was the cause of Rome's decline, Augustine argued that even if the earthly rule of the Roman Empire was disintegrating, the City of God would endure and ultimately triumph. The focus of Christians was spiritual, not political, and Christians should primarily be concerned with the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. History is characterized by a great metaphysical conflict between the Earthly City (which is temporary) and the City of God (which is eternal). The City of God is marked by people who forego earthly pleasure in order to commit themselves to the eternal truths of the Christian faith.

THE METAPHOR OF WHOREDOM

In the Old Testament, the metaphor of sexual promiscuity is frequently employed to describe Israel as God's unfaithful wife (cf. Is. 1:21; Je. 2:20; 3:1, 6-10; Eze. 16:15, 32-35; 23:1-21; Ho. 2:5; 3:1). Sacred prostitution seems to have been a constituent part of the fertility cults in Canaan and Mesopotamia. Even the Roman empress Messalina, the wife of Claudius, left the imperial palace at night to work incognito in a Roman brothel as a prostitute (Juvenal, Satire 6: 114-132). John uses this metaphor of whoredom to depict Babylon as the worldly system arrayed against God.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Our contemporary world seems fascinated with utopianism, the belief that through*

technology, social engineering, political idealism, and the like we can “build a better world.” How does the Book of Revelation speak to this modern vision?

- *How are the striking polarities in the Book of Revelation similar to the teaching of Jesus?*
- *Why is the metaphor of prostitution so applicable to world culture?*

John employs several images to describe the prostitute. While the images may at times conflict (such as her seat upon many waters and her seat upon the beast), the reader is not expected to press for harmony but for the deeper significance of the images.

THE FALL OF NEO-BABYLON

In the Old Testament world, neo-Babylon was the power that destroyed the Assyrian Empire, but in less than a century was itself destroyed by the Medo-Persian army under Cyrus the Great. The fall of the capital city of Babylon, recorded both in the Bible and also by Herodotus, is justly famous due to the story in the Book of Daniel, when the fingers of a man’s hand wrote on the plaster wall that Babylon was doomed (Dan.5).

The fall of neo-Babylon, predicted by the prophets (Isa. 13; 14:3-23; Jer. 50-51), becomes a prototype that John uses to describe the fall of worldly powers at the end of the age. Indeed, the call for God’s people to “come out” of Babylon (18:4) is directly taken from Jer. 51:45.

As a prostitute, the woman represents the incessant pursuit of pleasure and luxury (18:3, 7, 9, 11-15, 19). As one who sits upon many waters, John has taken the Old Testament fall of the city of Babylon, through which the Euphrates River passed, and reused it to refer to the eschatological Babylon, which sits upon many waters (Is. 51:11-13). The waters of eschatological Babylon represent the nations of the world (17:15).

Changing the metaphor, John views the woman in the desert, sitting upon the back of a scarlet beast. This beast is clearly identified with the red dragon and the beast from the sea by the multiple horns and heads and reddish color. The beast is covered with blasphemous names (cf. 13:1b, 5), a description that may allude to the titles of deity conferred upon Roman emperors, such as “divine,” “savior” and “lord,” titles that only properly belong to Jesus Christ. Paul similarly describes an end-time figure of lawlessness who, as a blasphemer, will “exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped...proclaiming himself to be God,” and

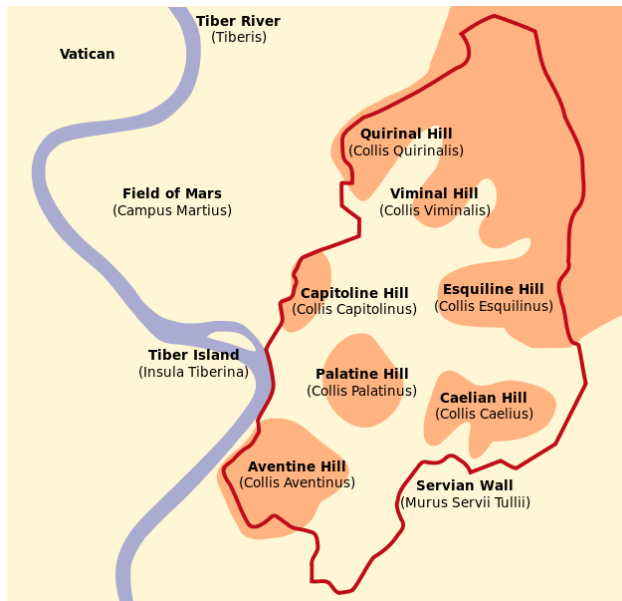
many interpreters conclude he is describing in direct language what John describes in the Revelation in symbolic language (2 Th. 2:4). The woman riding on the beast is arrayed in rich and glamorous clothing that glitters with ornamentation, a deliberate contrast with the clothing of God’s people, which is plain white linen. Like Babylon of old, she is associated with a cup that makes the nations drunk with carnal satisfaction (cf. Jer. 51:7-8). Like the prostitutes in Rome, who wore headbands with their names, this prostitute also displays her name, a title of mystery indicating that what old Babylon was to the ancient world, this woman is to the modern world. She was drunken with the blood of the martyrs.

The Explanation of the Beast (17:6b-18)

Following his description of Babylon, John embarks on a rather lengthy explanation, not only of the scarlet-gowned prostitute, but also of the beast from the sea. While his explanation was no doubt the key to the riddle for his first readers, in modern times it has become one of the most debated passages in the entire book. John’s explanation falls into four parts: an explanation of the demise and reappearance of the beast, an explanation of the seven heads, an explanation of the ten horns,

and an explanation of the worldly system turning against itself. John offers several important identifying clues in his description of Babylon. Babylon is...

- ...the city that made all nations drink of the maddening wine of her adulteries (17:2; 18:3)
- ...the city that sits on seven hills (17:9)
- ...the city that rules over the kings of the earth (17:18)
- ...the city that is home to demons and every evil spirit (18:2)
- ...the city drunken with the blood of Christian martyrs (17:6; 18:20, 24)



The description of the city on seven hills (17:9), referring to Rome, is also found in the works of Virgil, Martial, and Cicero, well-known Roman authors in John's era.

Given John's identifying marks, it is hard to escape the conclusion that all these descriptions point directly to Imperial Rome. As a commercial enterprise, Rome linked the nations of the Mediterranean into a single economic complex. Seven hills formed the geographical heart of the city on the Tiber. With her legions, Rome had conquered all the nations in the Mediterranean world and many nations beyond it. As the religious center for the pantheon of deities, Rome was the center of false religion and emperor worship. Finally, assuming a date in the 90s for the composition of the book, Christianity was now an illegal religion, its adherents persecuted, tortured, and martyred, and not the least of which were its two most important leaders, Peter and Paul.

The Demise and Reappearance of the Beast

John describes the beast by the cryptic phrases, "which once was, now is not, and will come up

out of the abyss" (17:8). In poetic terms, this description is a parody of the Lamb who was slain but who lives forever. In mythological terms, the description recalls the *Nero redivivus* myth (see comments on 13:1-10). Intense persecution against God's people had been seen from Antiochus Epiphanes, Titus, and the imperial Caesars. It would rise again from the eschatological anti-Christ. Though from time to time there was respite from persecution, the church should not assume that persecution was over. At the end of the age, the arch-enemy of God's people would arise from the abyss and make war with the saints, though he would ultimately be destroyed by God.

It is possible that in the deadly wound of one of the beast's heads and its revival there is an allusion to the victory of Christ over Satan at the cross (Jn. 12:31-33; 14:30; 16:11). Such an allusion might help explain the beast that reappears to menace God's people.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- *Given the persecution of Christians over the centuries, how likely is it that God will evacuate the last generation of Christians so they need not suffer like their brothers and sisters?*