

Title: The Woman in the Wilderness

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Who is the Mother of Harlots, also described as the woman in the wilderness?

The focus of this paper and presentation is the unique identity and nature of the woman in Revelation 17. This woman is called:

...MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. Revelation 17:5

Who is this mother of harlots? Who is Babylon the Great? To understand just exactly who this woman is we will need to explore the prophetic symbolic vocabulary that is used throughout Revelation and the rest of the Bible.

The term Babylon has its roots in the biblical story of Babel. Following the flood the inhabitants of the earth congregated together on the plains of Shin'ar to form a one-world government. Their efforts continued in the building of the great tower that demonstrated their desire to be independent from God. As a result of this rebellion God came down and confused their language so that a dispersal took place. This confusion of languages has become inexorably linked with Babylon to this day. Babylon then has become associated with confusion.

As the centuries went on Babylon acquired additional characteristics in that the empire of Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar took many of the inhabitants of Judea into what has become known as the exile. The exilic period became associated with syncretism and oppression. Babylon then in a symbolic sense has come to be associated with a religious rebellion that

contains confusion and that oppresses God's people. Babylon represents all human attempts to provide the way of salvation, all those plans and programs that, because they are built alone on human reason and devices, attempt to frustrate the divine plan for the world.¹

In the last days God has called His people out of this religious matrix saying:

4...Come out of her, my people,

That ye be not partakers of her sins,

And that ye receive not of her plagues.

5 For her sins have reached unto heaven,

And God hath remembered her iniquities. Revelation 18:4,5

God then wants to extricate His people from what symbolically has become known as the dominating false religious system of the world. But while there is certainly a sense that Babylon is general in her application to false religion there is a more specific biblical application of her identity. In Revelation 17 Babylon is identified as a mother and thus woman. In biblical prophecy a woman is symbol of a church. The bible says in Jeremiah 6:2:

I have likened the daughter of Zion to a comely and delicate woman. Jeremiah 6:2

¹ William G. Johnsson, ["The Saints' End-Time Victory over the Forces of Evil,"](#) in *Symposium on Revelation: Exegetical and General Studies, Book 2*, ed. Frank B. Holbrook, vol. 7, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1992), 35.

And then in the New Testament we read:

25 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;
26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, 27 That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. Ephesians 5:25,26

And in Revelation:

Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. Revelation 19:7

Clearly then God's church is associated symbolically with a woman. But this symbolism also extends to the identification of false churches. Notice in Revelation 2 how God speaks symbolically to a fallen church saying:

20 Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. 21 And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Revelation 2:20,21

Clearly this does not refer to the literal Jezebel who passed away violently hundreds of year prior to the writing of this text but rather to the embodiment of a false church. This then means that in

Revelation 17 Babylon, and the mother of harlots, is in fact a wayward and false church. With this context we can begin to unravel more about the role and identity of Babylon in the context of Revelation 17.

As we look at the introduction of Babylon in this chapter we see that the angel says to John:

1...Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the great whore that sitteth upon many waters: 2 With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been made drunk with the wine of her fornication. Revelation 17:1-3

Babylon, this false religious system of churches, is said to be judged. We are also told that she sits upon many waters. In the same chapter in verse 15 waters are explained to be peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues. Therefore, this is a church that sits and controls many people throughout the world. Now notice how she is introduced to John. The bible says:

So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. Revelation 17:3

John is carried away in the spirit to the wilderness to see a woman. Is this significant? It is, because the last time that John was shown a woman in a wilderness setting she was in a very different state. In Revelation 12 we can read about the first time John saw a woman in the wilderness. The bible says:

6 And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days. Revelation 12:6

And...

14 And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent. Revelation 12:14

These parallel passages speak to the time that the woman or the Christian church would be hiding from the 1260 years of papal persecution. At the beginning of Revelation 12 this woman is described saying:

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: Revelation 12:1

In this context this woman is described as being clothed with the sun. See Malachi 4:2. This a reference to the righteousness of Christ. She is also said to be standing on the moon which is a reference to God's law. See Genesis 1:16 and John 8:12. Finally she is said to have a crown of 12 stars which depict the 12 tribes of Israel and later by extension the 12 apostles in reconstituted Christian church. Her appearance is one of godliness.

This is in stark contrast to the woman in Revelation 17 and so there seems to be discontinuity in identity. However, remember that in both instances of their appearance they are seen in the wilderness. And notice John's reaction to seeing the woman in Revelation 17. The bible says in the New American Standard Version:

And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. When I saw her, I wondered greatly. Revelation 17:6 NASB

To this the angel says:

...Why do you wonder? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns. Revelation 17:7 NASB

John wonders because of the dramatic difference between the appearance of the harlot in her drunkenness and jewels with the former appearance of the woman in the wilderness that was clothed with the sun. At this point we can choose to either believe that the two descriptions refer to entirely different women or that they refer to the same woman at different times. The proposal of this paper and presentation is that this is the same woman only at different times. And that amongst other things this is why the apostle John is apparently shocked to see the state of Babylon, the mother of harlots.

She would be in his eyes a fallen woman, a fallen church. Is this biblical? Let's look at more evidence from the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy. Notice in Revelation 12:17 that the dragon

turns his attention from directly persecuting the woman or the church in the wilderness to her offspring the remnant. The bible says:

And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ. Revelation 12:17

In Revelation 12:17 we can clearly see that the dragon turns his direct attention from the woman in the wilderness to focus on the remnant of her seed. His anger is directed specifically at the remnant. This is important. Just as the devil turned his attention back to the woman when the child or Jesus was caught up to the throne in Revelation 12:6 he then turns his attention away from the woman to the remnant in Revelation 12:17. It seems that the dragon views the remnant as a greater threat than the woman at this point in time. Why is that? The answer seems to lie in the fact that the remnant possesses the testimony of Jesus, and that the remnant keeps the commandments of God. This implies then that the woman in the wilderness was no longer keeping the commandments in the same way and did not have the testimony of Jesus. We find support for this idea in the biblical description of the church of Sardis. Here God says to this church in Revelation 3:1:

...I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead. Revelation 3:1

The church of Sardis is the fifth church out of seven described in Revelation 2,3. These churches are symbols of periods of Christian history. Ellen White explains saying:

The names of the seven churches are symbolic of the church in different periods of the Christian Era. The number 7 indicates completeness, and is symbolic of the fact that the messages extend to the end of time, while the symbols used reveal the condition of the church at different periods in the history of the world.²

The message then to the church of Sardis is a message to the protestant church during the reformation. And so while the protestant church certainly introduced reforms according to the word of God it did not go far enough. It was alive but then we are told it is dead. The Harlot described in Revelation 17 isn't just the Roman Catholic Church it is also the protestant church. Ellen White writes in the Great Controversy:

Babylon is said to be “the *mother* of harlots.” By her *daughters* must be symbolized churches that cling to her doctrines and traditions, and follow her example of sacrificing the truth and the approval of God, in order to form an unlawful alliance with the world. The message of Revelation 14, announcing the *fall* of Babylon must apply to religious bodies that were once pure and have become corrupt. Since this message follows the warning of the judgment, it must be given in the last days; therefore it cannot refer to the Roman Church alone, for that church has been in a fallen condition for many centuries. Furthermore, in the eighteenth chapter of the Revelation the people of God are called upon to come out of Babylon. According to this scripture, many of God's people must still be in Babylon. And in what religious bodies are the

² Ellen Gould White, [*The Acts of the Apostles in the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*](#), vol. 4, Conflict of the Ages Series (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), 585.

greater part of the followers of Christ now to be found? Without doubt, in the various churches professing the Protestant faith³

The Protestant churches are also Babylon. Ellen White continues saying:

“the message of the second angel did not reach its complete fulfillment in 1844. The churches then experienced a moral fall, in consequence of their refusal of the light of the advent message; but that fall was not complete. As they have continued to reject the special truths for this time they have fallen lower and lower. Not yet, however, can it be said that “Babylon is fallen, ... because she made *all nations* drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.” She has not yet made all nations do this. The spirit of world conforming and indifference to the testing truths for our time exists and has been gaining ground in churches of the Protestant faith in all the countries of Christendom; and these churches are included in the solemn and terrible denunciation of the second angel.⁴

Here Ellen White clearly identifies Babylon with the Protestant churches in addition to the Catholic Church. Notice that Ellen White says that the work of apostasy in the Protestant churches has not yet reached its culmination. However the implication is that it is not a matter of when but if. This would mean then that the Protestant Churches will completely fall. Right now then at the time of the writing of this presentation Protestant apostasy is on a spectrum of degeneracy. That degeneracy began in earnest in 1844 and will be complete when the combined

³ Ellen Gould White, [*The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*](#), vol. 5, Conflict of the Ages Series (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), 382–383.

⁴ Ellen Gould White, [*The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*](#), vol. 5, Conflict of the Ages Series (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), 389.

Protestant churches make all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication. When this happens the Protestant churches will be changed from the church of the wilderness described in Revelation 12 to the harlot riding the beast in Revelation 17.

This striking change is perhaps analogous to meeting a former innocent girl next door type who has become a worldly and immoral woman. It is no wonder then that John marvels at the woman in Revelation 17. From his perspective the last time that she appeared in the wilderness she was clothed with the sun and being persecuted by the dragon.

In Revelation 17 the woman or Babylon is decked out in jewels and is wearing purple and scarlet. These colors are associated with the priestly robes as explained in Exodus 28:6 which says:

And they shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, and of purple, of scarlet, and fine twined linen, with cunning work. Exodus 28:6

Notice that the priestly robe contained in addition to purple and scarlet the colors of gold and blue. Gold is associated with faith in the Bible. In 1 Peter 1:7, Peter concludes saying:

That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:

1 Peter 1:7

The lack of gold in the Harlot's dress implies a lack of faith in God. But the Harlot is also missing the color blue which is present in the priestly robes. The blue color is associated with God's law. Notice In Exodus 24:9,10 the Bible tells us:

9 Then went up Moses, and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel:

10 And they saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness. Exodus 24:9,10

Just a few verses later we read:

12 And the Lord said unto Moses, Come up to me into the mount, and be there: and I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that thou mayest teach them. Exodus 24:12

The tables of stone that are referenced here in the original language include the definitive Hebrew article - ה translated in English as the definite article "the." This implies then that God made the tables of (the) stone from the sapphire stone under His feet. This then would mean that the original commandments were fashioned from blue sapphire stone.

The relevance of this information implies that the Harlot of Revelation 17 is missing the colors that symbolically represent faith in God and the law of God. In contrast to this Harlot we find in Revelation 14 the counterpart in the 144,000 that are said to:

.... keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus. Revelation 14:12

God's people then, at the end of time, stand in contrast to the false church of Babylon. Babylon is also said to:

.... sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. Revelation 17:3

The significance of her association with the scarlet-colored beast is very important. Often this symbolism has been diluted in attempt to neatly connect the Harlot with the sea beast of Revelation 13. Both share a similar description. The sea beast is said to:

...rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. Revelation 13:1

Comparing this with the description of the scarlet colored beast in Revelation 17:3:

...a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.
Revelation 17:3

The parallels are clear. Both have seven heads and ten horns. Both have names or at the name of blasphemy. It would seem then that Revelation 13 and 17 are describing the same beast.

Historically Seventh-day Adventists have identified the beast that comes up out of the sea in

Revelation 13 with the papacy. The reasons for this are many but include the fact that the sea beast gains its power from the dragon or pagan Rome. In Volume 7 of the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary we read:

“Out of the ruins of political Rome, arose the great moral Empire in the ‘giant form’ of the Roman Church”⁵

With this in mind it stands to reason that the scarlet-colored beast is also associated with the papacy. However the complication to this is in the fact that in Revelation 17 we have the added imagery of the Harlot riding the beast. And as we have seen the Harlot is associated with the church or false church of Babylon which includes both Catholicism and apostate Protestantism.

What then are we to make of associating both the scarlet colored beast and the woman that sits atop the beast with the papacy; especially when the sea beast of Revelation 13 does not include the imagery of a woman? I believe that the inclusion of the Harlot that sits on top of the scarlet colored beast is intended to contain additional prophetic information about the nature of church state relations at the end of time.

In the Bible sitting on something implies authority and the use of judgement. Jesus explained:

⁵ Francis D. Nichol, ed., [*The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*](#), vol. 7 (Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 817.

2...The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses 'seat: 3 All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. Matthew 23:2,3

The inclusion of the woman sitting on the beast in Revelation 17 is meant to convey a different relationship than what was present during the Middle Ages and the period of papal oppression throughout the 1260 years. During the 1260 years the papacy included the papal estates, armies and direct political power that has not continued in modern times. The Vatican does not have the direct political power that it once did. In a similar fashion Protestantism in the west influences from outside of the political sphere. As a result the combined power of Catholicism and apostate Protestantism will take a different form than during the Middle Ages. The church will sit on top of the political world as it directs the powers that be through influence as opposed to direct manipulation.

The description then of the two distinct symbols of the Harlot (Church) with the beast (political power) implies that the church, itself an amalgamation of Catholic and Protestant forces, will be guiding the political powers of the world rather than simply unleashing political power internally. In this way the Harlot will guide the kingdoms of the earth to make an image to the beast as described in Revelation 13. This important nuance explains the inclusion of two symbols with related purposes in Revelation 17 as well as the striking change of the once pure church in the wilderness.

Whereas in Revelation 12 the dragon persecuted the woman in the wilderness, in Revelation 17 the woman is guiding the beast that gained its power from the dragon. The juxtaposition is incredible and shocking and explains the confusion implied by John's "marveling" or "wondering" about the woman.

In conclusion the identification of the harlot as the degeneration of the woman in the wilderness has stark implications for our prophetic understanding. When we apply this view to the modern Christian landscape it is clear that the synthesis of the Catholic and Protestant worlds is almost complete. The statement of Revelation 13:3,4 is almost fulfilled which reads:

And I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast. And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? Revelation 13:3,4

What's more we find that unlike former iterations of the sea beast/papal power of Relation 13 the harlot influences the worldly powers from outside the political complex. This nuance in understanding will be important in identifying the unique approach that takes place during the modern iteration of papal oppression. As Catholicism and apostate Protestantism form a confederacy there will be efforts to conjointly influence the political powers of the world with specific emphasis on the levers of the United States government and the western world's military apparatus. In this sense the woman in the wilderness will become the harlot that sits atop the beast.