

Lesson Five

(17:1-18)

THE LAMB AND THE SPIRITUAL CONFLICT

Such great importance is attached to the city of Rome as the center of forces opposing God and profaning all of that civilization, three chapters (17-18-19) are given to portray her doom. Rome's seduction of mankind into paganism and her declared intention to obliterate the kingdom of God made it appropriate for her to be symbolized as "Babylon." In connection with this lesson the student should read Isaiah, chapters 13 and 14, Jeremiah, chapters 50 and 51, and Daniel, chapters 1 through 5. It would be well, too, to read Habakkuk's prophecy against Babylon in the Old Testament.

It is a well established fact of history that a nation, civilization or empire will be as godly or ungodly as its leadership. The Old Testament prophet Micah (Micah 1:5) said the sin of Israel (ten northern tribes) was Samaria (Israel's capitol city) and the sin of Judah was Jerusalem (Judah's capitol). The wickedness of national leaders inevitably infects those who look to them for guidance. Revelation 17, 18 and 19 portrays the evil throughout the Roman empire as having issued from the capitol—from the throne of the emperor.

The seventeenth chapter focuses on identifying the great harlot (or, "Babylon"). A number of symbols are given in detail for the benefit of the early

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church (the church of the first four centuries). They were *expected* to understand the “mystery of the woman” (Rev. 17:7). As the Roman empire’s disintegration began to unfold in history there could be no doubt in the minds of those living through it that John’s Revelation had foreseen it. In fact, John’s symbolism is so clear, the immediate readers of the Revelation would have had no problem identifying the “woman” as Rome.

Prostitute “Babylon” (17:1-18)

17 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 harlot who is seated upon many waters, ²with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the dwellers on earth have become drunk.” ³And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; ⁵and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth’s abominations.” ⁶And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

When I saw her I marveled greatly. ⁷But the angel said to me, “Why marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. ⁸The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to perdition; 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 behold the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. ⁹This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; ¹⁰they are also seven kings five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a little while. ¹¹As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to perdition. ¹²And 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. ¹³These are of one mind and give over their power and authority to the beast; ¹⁴they 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 he said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the harlot is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. ¹⁶And the

ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the harlot; they will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, ¹⁷for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and giving over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled. ¹⁸And the woman that you saw is the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth."

vv. 1-2 . . . I will show you the judgment of the great harlot . . . — It is appropriate that one of the seven angels having the seven bowls should explain the judgment on "Babylon." That ties the seven "last" plagues (or bowls) directly to the city to be identified in chapters 17 and 18. The seven "last" plagues are not, therefore, for the end of the world. The Greek word *porne* (from which we get the English word, *pornography*) means prostitute, harlot, or whore. The awful judgment of God predicted and portrayed to fall upon the "beast" is the same judgment to fall upon the "harlot" because they are one and the same entity. The beast, the false prophet, and the harlot are all the Roman empire, seen from the perspective of Rome's three-sided attack upon Christ's church. Rome attempted to destroy the church by militant, political persecution, by idolatrous emperor worship and pagan cultism, and by carnal, hedonistic worldliness. Rome is portrayed as a "harlot" because of the seductive attractiveness of her appeal to the whole world to consort with her in promiscuous carnality. While Rome's worldliness may have been appealing, it was a prostitution, a perversion, of everything Almighty God had created for good. In the Old Testament three cities are symbolized as harlots: (a) Nineveh (Nahum 3:1, 4); (b) Tyre (Isa. 23:15-17); (c) Jerusalem (Isa. 1:21; Jer. 2:20); and (d) Babylon portrayed as a great "mistress" of pleasure (Isa. 45:5-15). John is probably characterizing Rome as a composite of all these: the cruelty of Nineveh, the riches of Tyre, the religious whoredom of Jerusalem, and the arrogance and indulgence of Babylon.

The great harlot, Rome, is seated upon many waters, which we are told are "peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues" (17:15). Rome ruled over a *sea* of humanity. This "sea" protected her, enriched her and entertained her. It should be noted that the "woman" is *sitting* (Gr. *kathemenes*, present participle) indicating she *was sitting* when John wrote the Revelation and not that she would sit in the future. Rome is the one with whom the kings of the earth fornicated. "Fornication" is used here, of course, metaphorically to picture all kinds of intercourse other rulers of the world carried on with Rome perverting and exploiting God's creation especially as they joined Rome in attempting to seduce the Bride of Christ, the church. Not only had the kings of the earth consorted with Rome's debauchery, the ones then dwelling on the earth (Gr. *katoikountes*, present participle)

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had intoxicated themselves with the heady "wine" of the woman's depravity. Arrogant rebellion against Almighty God and his redemptive kingdom in the world has always "intoxicated" unbelievers. Rebellion inebriates, but it also stupifies—just like wine. Rebellion is the cup of deception Satan offered Eve and Adam in Eden. Sin distorts the spiritual brain and those who imbibe make themselves incapable of seeing or understanding spiritual truth realistically (cf. Lk. 11:33-36; 12:54-56).

v. 3 . . . I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast . . . — In visionary form, under the divine power and direction of the Holy Spirit, John was transported into wilderness circumstances. The definite article is missing before "wilderness" so there is no specific wilderness intended—just wilderness in general. Wilderness symbolizes the Gentile, pagan world of depravity, contrasted over against the heavenly place (Judaism) (see comments on Rev. 12:6, 14). John was transported spiritually, by the Spirit, from Patmos and given a vision of the whole depraved, debauched Roman world—and especially a vision of the harlot herself, the city of Rome.

The harlot was sitting on a *scarlet beast* (Gr. *kokkinon therion*). The *scarlet* color allies the beast to the *red* dragon (the devil) of Rev. 12. They are not the same person but they are affiliated. Scarlet may also symbolize the blood of the martyrs upon which the beast fed itself.

The beast is Rome, seen from her political and military aspect, already described (see our comments, chapter 13). This identification is also clearly symbolized in Rev. 17:7-14. The depraved carnality of Rome (the harlot) is represented as being supported and carried along ("sitting upon") the political power (the beast). The beast was full of blasphemous names picturing the many divine titles the Roman emperors had arrogated to themselves (e.g. *Kurios*, Lord; *Theos*, God; *Soter*, Savior). It would also symbolize the blasphemous decrees of the emperors that they should be worshiped. The seven heads and ten horns are interpreted in 17:7-14.

vv. 4-6 The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet . . . — The harlot is dressed royally (purple) and alluringly (scarlet). She intices with riches (gold and jewels and pearls) and mesmerizes by offering others a drink from the golden cup in her hand (full of abominations and impurities of her carnality). On her forehead was written *Musterion, Babulon He Megale, He Meter Ton Pornon kai Ton Bdelugmaton Tes Ges*. Translated, it reads, "Mystery, Babylon The Great, The Mother of The Harlots and of The Abominations of The Earth." *Mystery*, as used in New Testament Greek, is not something that *cannot* be known at all. It means something which may be known to the initiated. In the New Testament it denotes information outside the range of human knowledge but which *is made known by divine revelation* (apostolic preaching and writing) (cf. Eph. 1:9; 5:32; 6:19; Rom. 16:25; Col. 1:27, etc.). Rome's identity as the seductress of the world was a reality that most of the world, because of sin, was unable to know.

Rome's beastliness and rottenness was as clear to Christians as if she had a written sign across her forehead because the Holy Spirit was revealing it to them through John's Revelation. Rome's alliance with the devil and God's imminent wrath upon her was a reality to those who believed John's message. Those who did not believe John would scoff at the very idea that Rome was headed for destruction. Those who believed would understand by faith, not by human calculation, and they would be wise (17:9). Daniel said the same of those who would believe his prophecies of the holocaust upon the Jewish people for their rejection of the Messiah (Dan. ch. 7-12).

This is not the geographical Babylon situated on the Euphrates River to be restored once more; Isaiah 13:19-22 predicts that ancient Babylon would be destroyed by the Medes and never exist again as a powerful empire. The "Babylon" John sees is the city of Rome, mother of a world-wide brood of harlotrous capitols and countries. Rome is also the mother of all the *abominations* (Gr. *bdelugmaton*, disgusting, loathsome, vile, perverted things) in that world.

Rome gorged itself on pride, arrogance, and opposition to the kingdom of God. She sated herself on the blood of the saints and witnesses (martyrs) of Jesus until she was "drunk." Intoxicated with what she thought was absolute power and eternal perpetuity, she lost all ability to function realistically and became as Paul described her in Romans 1:18-32. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Suetonius quotes an anonymous satirist in his *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, regarding the emperor Tiberius:

He is not thirsty for neat wine
As he was thirsty then,
But warm him up a tastier cup—
The blood of murdered men.

When John saw this vision he " marvelled with a great marvel." Apparently he was not prepared for what he saw. The statement of the angel (17:7) indicates John was having difficulty identifying the "harlot." Perhaps John was even trying to identify the harlot with *ancient* Babylon. Whatever the problem, the angel set him straight. The "harlot," or "Babylon" was Rome. It certainly cannot be Jerusalem. The "woman" is the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth (17:18). That has to be Rome.

vv. 7-8 The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to perdition . . . — The woman and the beast are one. John will identify them both as one. This symbolic identification of the beast coincides with that of Rev. 13:3ff. (see comments there). It adapts the Nero redivivus (reincarnation) myth just as chapter 13 did. It is a warning that imperial Rome's power in Domitian, and those to follow him, is to become Nero incarnate. The beast John saw is the reincarnation, symbolically

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speaking, of an emperor who was, is not, is to ascend from the abyss, and then go to perdition.

The earth-dwellers whose names are not in the book of life are amazed and seduced into following the beast because of the invincibility the beast appears to have. The beast appears to be able to perpetuate itself and its absolute power from one emperor to another. But the saints know better—they know the beast is not divine and not invincible for Christ has revealed the beast's "number" to John and it is a human number (see comments 13:4, 18).

vv. 9-11 . . . the seven heads are seven hills . . . also seven kings . . . — The fact that the city of Rome was built on the seven hills bordering the Tiber River was an ever recurring theme of Roman poets and historians. John's readers would immediately think of the imperial city and its occupant—the emperor. But even the seven hills (mountains) symbolized seven heads of the empire. We think seven specific emperors are symbolized. We begin with *Tiberius* (14-37 A.D.), the emperor when Christ died, rose from the dead, and established the church so viciously opposed by the empire; the six following "kings" (emperors) were: *Caligula* (37-41 A.D.), *Claudius* (41-54 A.D.), *Nero* (54-68 A.D.), *Vespasian* (69-79 A.D.), *Titus* (79-81 A.D.), and *Domitian* (81-96 A.D.) who was ruling when John wrote Revelation. Five of these had fallen when John wrote this: Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Vespasian and Titus. Nero, although one of the seven, is *not* one of the five because he is regarded as "coming alive" in the adaptation of the redivivus (re-incarnation) myth and thus he is *not* "fallen." "One is," refers to Domitian who was the only one of the seven then living. "The other has not yet come" is the symbolic personality of Nero revived in Domitian (which Domitian did display in his last years). The "Nero personality" that came in Domitian lasted only a "little while." There were three "barracks emperors" (military generals hailed into the office by their troops, but not really of the "royal" line of Caesars). They are not to be considered in the conglomerate of seven kings. Their combined rule lasted less than 18 months. Their names were Galba, Otho and Vitellius. They were never fully recognized by the whole empire as emperors.

The beast that was and is not is an *eighth*. He *belongs* to the seven and goes to perdition with all the rest. The reincarnated personality of *Nero* in Domitian was "an eighth" while being, at the same time, belonging to the original "seven." He was not one of the five "fallen" because he was to live as an "eighth" in Domitian; see below:

1. Tiberius — fallen
2. Caligula — fallen
3. Claudius — fallen
4. Nero — one who was, is not, is to come for a little while, is an eighth, is of the seven

5. Vespasian — fallen
6. Titus - fallen
7. Domitian - One *is* ————— Nero, an eighth,
8. *NERO* - - - - - symbolically reincarnated in Domitian.

There is another possibility. Perhaps the number seven is simply symbolic of completeness and symbolizes all the "kings" (emperors) of Rome who opposed the kingdom of God. Each would be a part of the seven. Each continued for a little while and then went to perdition.

vv. 12-14 And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings . . . — There are two possibilities here also. The number ten probably symbolizes fullness of power. The ten kings may be symbolizing a totality of future puppet "kings" throughout the empire (such as the Herods were) who would at first swear allegiance to Rome ("be of one mind") but would later cannibalize the empire (17:16ff.). Or, the ten kings may be symbolizing a totality of future Roman emperors who would yet receive royal power and, aligning themselves with the beastliness of other elements of the empire, cannibalize it themselves. We prefer the first possibility.

These future "kings" will be united in purpose with the beast (Rome) and surrender their sovereignty to Rome. Their appointment as "kings" will probably be conditioned upon their complete subservience to Rome's imperial opposition to any rivalry. That opposition will include the church of Christ. Thus, these "kings" will join the beast (Roman empire) in making war on the Lamb and those with the Lamb. Rome allowed absolutely no competition to her sovereignty or glory. She demanded her emperors be worshiped as gods by all peoples. She demanded all her subjects to be ready to die in battle against any form of sedition or revolution. Rome considered the kingdom of Christ seditious.

But the Lamb and those with him will conquer the beast and its "kings." The Lamb's conquest of the beast has been predicted from the beginning of John's Revelation. It will be vividly symbolized in chapter 19. The Lamb is Lord of lords and King of kings. He is the absolute Sovereign—not the beast!

Those with the Lamb will conquer with Him. They have been called into His kingdom by the proclamation of the gospel (Mt. 22:1-13; II Thess. 2:14); they have been chosen by God because they have aligned themselves with Christ and that is where God has chosen to make men citizens of His kingdom (Eph. 1:4); they are loyal and faithful, not perfect, but faithful to Christ following Him wherever He leads (Rev. 12:11; 14:4ff.).

vv. 15-18 . . . And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the harlot . . . — In the Old Testament "waters" is used as a symbol for "people" (cf. Isa. 8:7; Jer. 47:2). Here the whole Roman empire is symbolized which would comprise many ethnic groups, cultures and languages. The harlot sits upon this world, seducing it and exploiting it for

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her own profit. But just as in real life, many a person who has seduced others and exploited them for profit and has paid for it with his/her life, at the hands of complicitors, so Rome will be devoured by her former lovers. Wickedness inevitably leads to self-destruction. The Old Testament rulers cannibalized their own nation (Micah 3:2-3; Ezek. 22:27; Ezek. 34:1-6; Micah 7:2).

Rome's cannibalism of itself is well attested in history. Will Durant writes in *Caesar and Christ, The Story of Civilization, Vol. III*, pg. 669:

The armies of Rome were no longer Roman armies; they were composed chiefly of provincials, largely of barbarians; they fought not for their altars and their homes, but for their wages, their donatives, and their loot. They attacked and plundered the cities of the Empire with more relish than they showed in facing the enemy; most of them were the sons of peasants who hated the rich and the cities as exploiters of the poor and the countryside; and as civil strife provided opportunity, they sacked such towns with a thoroughness that left little for alien barbarism to destroy. . . . In this awful drama of a great state breaking into pieces, the internal causes were the unseen protagonists; the invading barbarians merely entered where weakness had opened the door, and where the failure of biological, moral, economic, and political statesmanship had left the stage to chaos, despondency, and decay.

This very picture of self-destruction, incredible as it may have seemed in John's day (the glory days of Rome), was revealed by God 150 years before it began.

That is because God is Sovereign of all history. All of history is subject to God's eternal purpose. This does not mean that God is responsible for the wickedness and cannibalism of Rome, but it does mean that in all the wicked and rebellious acts of men and nations he is able to use them to serve his purposes. These evil powers thought they were serving and working out their own goals, but they were, in fact, serving the purposes of God. Even the wrath of men is made to praise God. God never loses control of human affairs. Even those who are rebelling against him are ultimately working out his purposes as they work out their own destruction.

Precisely how God did this we are at a loss to even know, let alone to understand. The Greek text says: God gave (*edoken*) into the hearts of them to do the *mind* or *purpose* (*gnomen*) of him, and to do one *mind* or *purpose* (*gnomen*) and to give (*dounai*) the kingdom of them to the beast, until shall be *completed* (*telesthe*) the words of God. The Greek verb *telesthe* means fulfillment, completion, finish. This self-destruction, this cannibalism, would bring to *completion* the prophecies of John's Revelation concerning the destruction of the beast. This process of self-destruction would take another 200 years (until about 450 A.D.), but it came, inexorably and irrevocably. God has built this moral judgment of self-destruction into his

moral creation. It is an undeniable doctrine of revelation and an unimpeachable fact of history (cf. Judges 7:22; I Sam. 14:20; II Chron. 20:23).

The angel has identified the beast. It is Rome. Now, in one terse sentence he identifies the woman. She is Rome. Babylon, the harlot, the woman is that great city which had dominion over the kings of the earth. It *cannot* an apostate Roman Catholic Church—it is Rome, the mistress of nations.

Although the devil was severely bound when Rome fell, and his accomplices (the beast, the false prophet, and the harlot) were destroyed, he still tries to deceive those who refuse to come to the glorious light of the gospel through the same three agencies. The beastliness of ungodly political power still persecutes; the masquerading of the false prophet in the religion of humanism still subtly leads astray; the attractiveness of worldliness and carnality still seduces millions into spiritual prostitution. Thanks be to God life and immortality has been brought to light through the gospel. Christ destroyed the power of the devil, the fear of death, and the devil's power to deceive has been forever broken. Though there may be the pressures of persecution, false teaching and carnality, through the gospel men may now know beyond any reasonable doubt that this slight momentary affliction is preparing for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. The hope of a better life in heaven forever is no longer a thing unseen; it has now been demonstrated in time and in history by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. By his precious and very great promises men may now escape the corruption that is in the world and become partakers of the divine nature. Now we know that the things of earth which are seen are transitory; but the things of Christ, by his absolutely faithful word, are eternal. Do not be deceived!

APPREHENSION AND APPLICATION:

1. Why are three chapters devoted to the judgment upon the city of Rome itself? Why would capitol cities of nations and empires be responsible for national depravity? Could they produce national righteousness?
2. Why is Rome portrayed as a "harlot"? Could any modern capitol city become a "harlot"? How?
3. What made the "harlot" drunk? Do you see how rebellion intoxicates? What else does the incarnation of sin do?
4. Why is the beast scarlet colored? What relationship does the beast have to the "harlot"? Is this true of most political structures?
5. Does the name "Mystery" mean the identity of the "harlot" was not to be known? What are Bible "mysteries"? How are they to be known?
6. How do we know John is not referring to a revival of ancient Babylon? or could John's "Babylon" be Jerusalem?

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7. Why does John identify the beast as the one who “was, is not, and is to ascend from the bottomless pit”? Who is he? Who are the seven “kings”?
8. Who were the 10 horns? Why did they hate the harlot? How did they make her desolate? Is this a recurring principle of history?
9. How could God put this into their hearts? How could their wicked deeds fulfill the purpose of God? Does men’s wickedness still serve God?