

Study 19: Revelation Chapter 17

Introduction

“...Glittering, power-obsessed, worshipping ‘everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does’ (1 John 2:16), this is the great harlot of Revelation; this is the wicked city of Babylon...”

Body of the Study

Introduction

The Description of the Woman

The Woman and the Beast

Further Description of the Woman

Homework and preparation for next week:

Re-read chapter 17

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 18 in preparation for the next study

If Rome fell (at least partly) because of its internal corruption, then what is the hope for our society? Is the message of Revelation relevant to us? (Re-read the chapter – but this time make the application to our society, rather than Rome. What is the message of hope? Who are the aggressors?)

What is the message for our society?

Notes for study 19: Revelation Chapter 17

“...Glittering, power-obsessed, worshipping ‘everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does’ (1 John 2:16), this is the great harlot of Revelation; this is the wicked city of Babylon¹...”

Introduction

A woman was introduced in chapter 12, who was revealed as the church. In chapter 17, another woman is introduced who stands in direct contrast and opposition to the first.

| Chapter 12 | Chapter 17 |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Clothed with the sun | The great harlot |
| Moon under her feet | Sits over many nations |
| Twelve stars on her head | Commits fornication with the Kings of the earth |
| With child and birth pains | Makes men drunk with the wine of her fornication |
| Bore a male child | Sits on a scarlet beast in the wilderness |
| Fled to wilderness for refuge | Is adorned with gold and precious stones |
| Persecuted by the dragon | Has a golden cup full of abominations |
| Given eagles wings to flee for refuge | Drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs |
| Nourished by God in the wilderness | |

These two women are opposites in their character (God and Satan), in the cities that they represent (Rome and the New Jerusalem), and in their destinies (heaven and hell). Hailey notes²:

Satan has three approaches by which he seeks to destroy the work and people of God: (1) Political or brute force, symbolized by the beast out of the sea; (2) false religion, whether paganism or perverted revealed religion – apostates who hold and teach false doctrines – symbolized by the beast out of the earth; and (3) the world of lust, all that appeals to the flesh or mind (Eph. 2:3); 1 John 2:15-17), represented by the harlot. Against these three the early church waged relentless war; and against these the saint of today must stand immovable and uncompromising.

The NIV Bible Commentary adds:

From internal evidence in Revelation, the identity of Babylon the woman (ch. 17) with Babylon the great city (ch. 18) is so unmistakable that it would be inappropriate to make them different entities. These two chapters form an extended appendix to the seventh bowl, where the judgment on Babylon was mentioned (16:19). They also expand the earlier references to this city (11:8; 14:8) and look forward by way of contrast to the eternal Holy City (chs. 21-22). (NIVBC).

¹ Bewes, p. 118

² Hailey, p. 342

The Description of the Woman

John is shown the vision of the woman and her destiny by one of the seven angels, "...One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits on many waters..." (17:1 NIV). Many waters are later revealed to be different groups of people (nations and tongues 17:15). This "woman" has led many in leadership positions astray "...With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."..." (17:2 NIV).

Intoxication with the wine of adultery flows through these particular visions (14:8, 10; 16:19; 17:2; 18:3). Satan had tempted men into submission and under his control in the same way that men come under the control of alcohol. However, God will bring about justice, and see to it that those who *love this kind of wine* are given the justice that they deserve (16:19).

"...Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns..." (17:3 NIV). The blasphemous name and nature of the beast is revealed, and it is the same beast that was described in 13:1 as rising up out of the sea, with the *seven heads* and the *ten horns*. Her dress was that of a dignitary "...The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls..." (17:4 NIV). She clearly does not deserve the adoration, but she is perceived to have this respect by men. They had regard for the physical things – the gold – the precious stones – and the pearls, but they were really all a sham! By her *nature*, she did not deserve the respect, and God could see right through the sham.

She ought to have displayed appropriate respect for God and his children. The golden cup is a symbol of wealth and prosperity, which God had given her "...She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries..." (17:4 NIV), however, the cup was polluted with filth and abominations. The Christians in first century Asia Minor would clearly understand this woman to be the Roman Empire. We should first try to understand the image the way the first century recipients of the letter would have understood the visions. Bewes notes³:

You can get too clever with the book of Revelation. The vision was intended to comfort and prepare us, not to test our ingenuity. As we come to chapters 17 and 18, we are introduced to a new figure, that of a woman. But she stands in strong contrast to the woman of chapter 12, already identified as the Church. There is a mystery about her, and it is proclaimed by her title. ... Let's not get too clever. It is possible to plunge into the extravagant imagery of these chapters, to come up with an impressive display of nimble and even convincing explanations and to think that you have then 'solved' the mystery of the woman astride the scarlet beast, together with the seven heads, seven hills, seven kings, Babylon and the rest.

The character of the woman is revealed "...This title was written on her forehead:

MYSTERY
BABYLON THE GREAT
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

(17:5 NIV)

Is "MYSTERY" part of her name, or part of her character? The answer is not clear from the text, however we can clearly see that a mystery conceals its true meaning, and Satan conceals his true meaning by disguising himself in the various forms that he uses to deceive men. "BABYLON THE GREAT" is a description that embraces ungodliness and immorality. John's readers would have understood this to be a description of Rome, but this in itself is a description of worldliness,

³ Bewes, p. 115

corruption, and immorality. The description is apt for all worldly powers that embrace the immoral practices and deny the power, authority, and sovereignty of God.

John was amazed by what he saw – which probably indicates that it was more complex and more deeply rooted than he had expected to see. “...*I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished...*” (17:6 NIV). The woman had been feasting on the slaughter and sacrifice of the Christians. Hailey notes⁴:

While the earth dwellers were drunk with the wine of her fornication, intoxicated with the enticements of lust, she herself was drunk with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus.

These Christians had been murdered, slaughtered and sacrificed for the entertainment of the Romans, who regarded such actions as “sport”.

No doubt the specific mystery is that this prostitute is the mother of all earth's idolatrous prostitutes. She is the reservoir or the womb that bears all individual cases of historical resistance to God's will on earth; she is the unholy antithesis to the woman who weds the Lamb (19:7-8) and to the New Jerusalem (21:2-3). That is in part why she cannot be any particular historical city. (NIVBC)

The Woman and the Beast

Things going on behind the scene are revealed clearly to John, and it comes back to Satan! “...*Then the angel said to me: "Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns..."*” (17:7 NIV). The woman is inseparable from the beast. Hailey notes⁵:

The woman and the beast are indivisible, for lust rides upon, controls, and governs any ravenous, persecuting, and self-seeking political beast. At the same time the beast supports such a harlot.

John is given an explanation as to who the beast and the woman are “...*The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because he once was, now is not, and yet will come...*” (17:8 NIV). Many commentators believe this part of this chapter are the most difficult part of the book to interpret. As noted by Bewes in the introduction, “*You can get too clever with the book of Revelation*” and this is particularly the case when we try to ascribe specific people against the vision. Satan was overcome at the cross by Christ's death and resurrection, and he is the one who *once was* powerful, but now has had his power taken away (*is not*), and *will come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction*. He had been sent into the Abyss when his power was thwarted at the cross (9:1-11). Hailey notes⁶:

In the place of one persecutor “who was, and is not,” another arises from Satan's domain to take his place. But whoever he might be, however long he might abide, and whatever evil he might do, he is to go into perdition.

The world (but not God's people) will be surprised at what happens, that Satan really is the one who is behind what seems to be “the good life”, and at his ability to revive and come back to life to continue his destructive work.

John is explicit about our need to discern what he is saying “...*This calls for a mind with wisdom...*” (17:9 NIV). The explanation continues “... *The seven heads are seven hills on which*

⁴ Hailey, p. 348

⁵ Hailey, p. 349

⁶ Hailey, p. 350

the woman sits...” (17:9 NIV). The readers would immediately think of Rome – the city which is set on seven hills around the Tiber River. However the hills also have a symbolic meaning “...*They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while...*” (17:10 NIV). Many attempts have been made to ascribe the description and position to each one of the kings. The references are symbolic of a system of power which is against God and christianity. Hailey notes⁷:

Probably the best solution to the problem is to adhere to the symbolic character of the book. Repeatedly John has used seven as the symbol for completeness or perfection, and ten for the fullness of power. ... When the book was read to the churches the members would have thought of Rome as they were told of the harlot, and of the empire when they heard of the beast on whom the harlot sat; in this their understanding would be correct. But the symbolism extends beyond this. The beast represented the total of forceful anti-Christian or anti-theistic opposition, and the harlot represented that which is lustful, enticing, and seductive – all that appeals to the flesh. The seven kings, therefore, were a symbolic number, representing all kings or kingdoms, past, present, and future that would oppose the kingdom of God.

The same thought is true of the continuing line of earthly kings “...*The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction "The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast..."*” (17:11-12 NIV). Ten is the number for power, and so these kings are all-powerful, but it will be of limited duration – *for one hour*.

These are messengers and envoys of Satan “...*They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings--and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers."*...” (17:13-14 NIV). The verse summarises the book of Revelation. Satan is at war with God. Satan uses his powers and envoys to try to destroy God’s people. But the victory belongs to Christ!

Further Description of the Woman

The beast was *sitting on many waters* (17:1), and the angel explains what this part of the vision means “...*Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages..."*” (17:15 NIV). The beast exercises his rule over multitudes of peoples, over various nations, and different language groups. To John’s readers, this would be a clear description of the Roman Empire, although there are many “entities” who could also fit the description. “...*The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire...*” (17:16 NIV). The Romans ruled with a rod of iron, but whilst they had beaten the nations into submission, they had difficulty in getting them to accept and be in submission to their authority. The description of the Roman Empire in Daniel 2 was *one with legs of iron, and feet of clay. The iron will not mix with the clay, and the kingdom will be partly strong and partly weak* (Dan 2:40-43). Rome’s difficulty, and one of the factors that led to its downfall was its inability to merge all of the different nations they had conquered into one.

Despite all of these things, God is in control “...*For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled...*” (17:17 NIV). There were many occasions in the Old Testament where God used the enemies of Israel to bring them to repentance and to accomplish His will. In the same way, God now uses *the beast* for the same purposes. The identity of the great harlot is revealed without doubt “...*The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth."*...” (17:18 NIV). She is not the apostate church, but Rome and the immorality that Rome stands for.

⁷ Hailey, p. 352

The Fall of Rome

The following is taken from the I.S.B.E.*

... Diocletian, an able ruler, established absolute monarchy of pure oriental type. He inaugurated the system of division and subdivision of imperial power, with new courts presided over by two joint emperors and a "Caesar" under each. The inevitable separation of West and East, with the growing predominance of the East, was apparent. Rome and Italy were reduced to the rank of provinces. The division of power led to civil strife until Constantine again united the whole empire under his sway. Constantinople in the East became the capital. The empire was once again parcelled out under the sons of Constantine, but was re-united by Constantius in A.D. 350. In 364 it was again divided, Valentinian receiving the West and Valens the East.

On the death of the great ruler Theodosius I (395), the West fell to his son Honorius and the East to Arcadius. The empire was never united again. The western portion rapidly degenerated before barbaric hordes and under weak rulers. Independent barbaric kingdoms were erected in the West. Burgundians settled in Gaul, Visigoths in Gaul and Spain. Under Genseric the Vandals settled first in southern Spain and then in North Africa. The barbarians came into the empire like a flood. Although Alaric and his Goths spared Rome in 408 for a ransom, he finally captured and sacked the city in 410. It was again sacked by Genseric and the Vandals in 462, and fell finally before Odoacer, leader of the Herculians and other Germans, in 476. The rule of Rome, "the mistress of the world," had ceased. The empire of the East continued with checkered experiences and losses until its final capture by the Turks in 1453, when its spiritual and intellectual treasures were scattered about in the West and helped to promote the Renaissance in the 16th century. The East conquered the West intellectually and spiritually.

* International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, Michigan.
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