

The Book of Revelation

Week #16 – The Great Whore and the Beast

I. REVIEW: REVELATION 15 – THE FINAL PLAGUES

A. The Seven Last Plagues

Chapter 15 ushers in the sequence of the last seven plagues [bowl judgments] in which the wrath of God reaches its climax.

- The bowl judgments are the final and most devastating.
- The final plagues will bring God's wrath to an end.
- The wrath of God is what humans experience when they reject God's infinite love – it is a severe mercy!
- It is experienced in various trials or afflictions including disease, death and destruction.

B. The Third Sign

The third portent heralds the final outcome of the battle between the beasts and the followers of the Lamb, between the powers of evil and the Church of Jesus Christ.

C. The Song of the Victors of Christ

As in Chapter 5, the saints sing a “new song” beside a “sea of glass” just as Moses sang a “new song” with Israel on the shores of the Red Sea, after Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh and his army.

- They are singing a “new song” because they have conquered the beast and his followers.
- This hymn of praise, part of the heavenly liturgy, initiates divine justice on earth.

Here, again, we see how the heavenly liturgy initiates events on earth in response to the prayers of the saints.

The seven plagues recall the plagues sent on Egypt in the Exodus.

D. Revelation 16 – The Bowls of God's Wrath

- One by one, the seven angels are summoned to pour out the seven bowls of wrath upon the world.
- The main difference now is that everything is affected, whereas previously only a third was affected.
- This signifies that sin and divine intervention are on the increase up to the very end.
- Jerusalem has now become the new Egypt

As history advances, the signs are that sin is on the increase; sin is the ultimate cause on the new plagues [cancer, AIDS, abortion, poverty, famine] which can be seen in the world today.

E. The Bowls

The bowls symbolize both the prayers of the saints, which have caused God to intervene, and the effects of those prayers.

Their content is not the plagues as such but the outcome of prayer - action on God's part to console the righteous and punish the wicked.

F. First Plague – Sores

Those who once bore the mark of the beast now bear the mark of ulcerous sores and boils.

G. Plagues 2 and 3 – Water Turns to Blood

Nature turns against man to protest his sin and threatens him with total destruction.

The wicked have shed the blood of the martyrs; now the sea and the rivers turn into blood.

H. Fourth Plague – Scorched by the Sun

The fourth plague is one of intense heat – made all the more unbearable since all the water has turned to blood. With no fresh water, the people have no way to refresh themselves.

Despite the plague, the wicked do not repent; instead “they curse the name of God.”

I. Fifth Plague – Darkness

As the fifth bowl is poured out on the throne of the beast, his kingdom is plunged into darkness.

- Darkness was the ninth plague to fall on Egypt.
- It was the last plague before the final judgment – the death of the firstborns.
- Similarly, darkness appears here as one of the last bowl judgments before the final destruction of the city.
- Not even this brings about repentance. Instead, the beast and his followers blaspheme against God and curse him.

J. Sixth Plague

The prophets Isaiah and Daniel referred to judgment as coming from the east.

- The Babylonian army had to cross the Euphrates when it advanced toward Jerusalem to destroy it in the sixth century BC.
- In AD 70 the Roman armies also crossed over the Euphrates from the east, on their way to destroy Jerusalem.

K. The Battle of Armageddon

The armies of the world gather near the plain of Megiddo for the famous and final battle of Armageddon.

The name Armageddon means “Mount of Megiddo” in Hebrew.

The plain of Megiddo was the site of one of Israel’s most tragic battles – the defeat and death of King Josiah.

Revelation envisions another conflict, staged near Megiddo, one destined to end with the devastation of the harlot city [chaps 17-18], along with the defeat of the beast and the false prophet [19:11-21].

II. THE SEVENTH PLAGUE

Read: Revelation 16:17-21

[17] The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!"

[18] And there were flashes of lightning, voices, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as had never been since men were on the earth, so great was that earthquake.

[19] The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered great Babylon, to make her drain the cup of the fury of his wrath.

[20] And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found;

[21] and great hailstones, heavy as a hundred-weight, dropped on men from heaven, till men cursed God for the plague of the hail, so fearful was that plague.

A. Overview

It is done! The seventh bowl brings the final crushing blow upon wicked Babylon [Jerusalem]. Forced to swallow every last drop of God's wrath [16:19], it is shaken apart by an earthquake and pounded to the ground by huge hailstones.

B. Babylon is Split

The great Babylon, that is Jerusalem, is split into three by a tremendous earthquake the like of which has never been seen before.

- The prophet Zechariah had predicted that an earthquake would split the city of Jerusalem apart [Zech 14:4-5].
- Ezekiel also prophesied that Jerusalem would be divided into thirds for its unfaithfulness [Ezek. 5:7-10; 12].

The mills of God may grind slowly, but in the end there is no escape for sin.

C. The Islands Flee

The earthquake sank the islands and leveled the mountains.

The image of islands fleeing and mountains disappearing may call to mind Old Testament passages that speak of the coming of the Lord.

It may also mean “There is no where to run and hide.” The collapse of the city is total!

D. Defiance and Rejection

Once again, the people curse God instead of repenting. They reject his mercy.

E. Reflection/Application on Revelation 16

What is the message for us today?

John shows us that the future is in God’s hands; that the prayers of the saints are a key factor in moving His kingdom towards fulfillment.

God loves us. His judgments are meant to bring us to our knees in penance. In this, God’s judgments are revealed as mercy. The Book of Hebrews says:

*My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor lose courage when you are punished by him.
For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives." [Heb 12:5-6].*

The perversity of those who use their free will to resist God’s plan of redeeming love make the unfolding of his plan bitter and at times destructive.

For them it is experienced as God’s wrath because they have chosen it to be so.

Today, those who choose to live in the kingdom of death and destruction bring misery upon the saints on earth as well as on themselves.

One cannot promote death and destruction [abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, assisted suicide and same-sex “marriage”] and escape what one promotes.

The faithful too may have to pass through a sea of fire, but they will ultimately be unharmed [at least spiritually], while the kingdom of this world, to the extent that it is the kingdom of Satan, will be consumed.

III. THE GREAT HARLOT AND THE BEAST

Read: Revelation 17:1-18

A. Overview

The visions that follow are directly related to the seventh bowl [16:17-21], giving a more in-depth look at this final calamity.

In Revelation 17, the wicked city is described as a harlot. This is not a new city or a different city than the one judged throughout Revelation. This is the same “great city” where the Lord was crucified.

The punishment of Jerusalem is described as a past event – very much in the way the Old Testament prophets foretell a future event as having already happened [for in God’s plan it has and the outcome is certain].

Revelation 17 is a difficult and complex chapter, but one of great importance and much popular speculation as to the identity of the woman [the whore of Babylon] riding the beast.

Certain fundamentalist Christians claim that the “Whore of Babylon” is the Roman Catholic Church, which will be ruled over by the Antichrist, a future Pope from Rome.

So let us see if this is what the *Book of Revelation* really says. Let us listen to John in his own words.

Read: Revelation 17:1-6

[1] 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,

[2] with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication 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 which was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns.

[4] The 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;

[5] and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations."

[6] And 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.

B. Overview

John sees a seductive harlot riding atop a scarlet beast. The woman, popularly known as the whore of Babylon, is said to be “the great city” [17:18] a title earlier given to the city where Jesus was crucified, that is, Jerusalem [11:8].

The beast having seven heads and ten horns, was earlier described as the beast from the sea [13:1], and appears to be the Roman Empire with its capital city Rome represented by seven hills [17:9].

Sinful cities are sometimes described as harlots in the Bible.

On two occasions this is said of a pagan city, one being Tyre [Is. 23:17], and the other Nineveh [Nahum 3:4].

However, the charge is frequently made against Jerusalem for her spiritual promiscuity with pagan nations [Is 1:21; Jer 2:20; Ezek 16:1-25; 23:1-4, 11, 30].

C. The City which Became a Harlot

“Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who is seated upon many waters . . .”

The woman, “*the great harlot*,” is Jerusalem, although many scholars maintain that she is Rome.

Harlotry [prostitution] was chosen as a symbol of infidelity not only because the covenant relationship of Israel with the Lord was portrayed as an inviolable marriage, but also because ritual prostitution was often practiced in the pagan cults.

One of the strange features of ancient pagan temples was the “sacred prostitute.” To have intercourse with them was an act of worship which paid homage to the life force.

“*Seated on many waters*” is a reference to Babylon [Jer 51:13]. John is describing Jerusalem, the New Babylon, in terms identical to the old.

The fact that the harlot is “*seated*” symbolizes the unholy alliance between the harlot city [Jerusalem] and the pagan power [Rome] with whom she is united in opposition to the Gospel.

D. Fornication

“with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the dwellers on earth have become drunk.”

The language of sexual immorality is symbolic of spiritual immorality. In the Bible, acts of prostitution point to transgressions of the covenant, such as idolatry and alliances with godless nations.

E. Wine

Sins of violence have filled the harlot's cup with the innocent blood of Christians.

F. The Harlot Riding the Beast

“And 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”.

The harlot announced in 17:1 is not seen by John until he is led into the desert by the Spirit [17:3].

The wilderness or desert is a place of refuge and discernment. Blinded and confused by the surrounding culture, it is difficult for the Church to see clearly with the eyes of God.

Therefore, she must be led periodically, as Jesus was, and as we must be, into the desert to be purified so that we can see clearly.

The woman is sitting on a scarlet beast. The beast is the first beast that arises out of the sea in *Revelation 13* which we saw was Rome. It has seven heads and ten horns, and has “*blasphemous names,*” all of which are insults to God.

The scarlet beast resembles the Satanic dragon in colour [red], and appearance [seven heads and ten horns].

G. The Apparel of the Harlot

“The 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 . . .”

The harlot is extravagantly dressed in purple and scarlet and decked with all kinds of ornaments which are symbolic of luxury and seduction – a wealthy prostitute.

Jeremiah once described Judah and Jerusalem as a harlot [Jer. 2:20] dressed in scarlet and decked in gold finery [Jer. 4:30].

“Yea, upon every high hill and under every green tree you bowed down as a harlot” [Jer 2:20].

“And you, O desolate one, what do you mean that you dress in scarlet, that you deck yourself with ornaments of gold . . .” [Jer. 4:30].

Ezekiel likewise pictured Jerusalem as a young woman clothed in gold and fine linen [Ez. 16:13] who became a harlot [Ez.16:2, 15].

H. A Golden Cup

The woman holds in her hand a “golden cup” full of abominations. Some scholars have seen temple imagery in the “golden cup” or chalice.

Cups were used in the temple for sacrifice. However, the blood poured out in the harlot’s cup is not from animals, but from the martyrs.

In a sense, then, Jerusalem has “sacrificed” the saints. She has become drunk on their blood.

I. Babylon the Great

[5] And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations."

Scholars have connected the inscription on the harlots forehead to the high priest, whose mitre also had words written across the forehead [Ex. 28:36-37].

Once more the woman riding the beast is clearly identified as a city “Babylon the great” which represents Jerusalem – the new Babylon.

Some Christian fundamentalists have identified the woman – popularly know as “the whore of Babylon” - as the Roman Catholic Church led by the Pope who, like the harlot, wears a mitre.

However, as we have seen, *Revelation* makes it abundantly clear that the harlot is a city, not the Church. The question is

which city, Rome or Jerusalem in John's time, and in the future???

John marvelled greatly at the magnificent, but seductive harlot. Her beautiful appearance, which shares so much in common with the Bride of the Lamb, is truly compelling [See Rev .21:10-23].

IV. THE BEAST

Read: Revelation 17:7-11

[7] But 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.

[8] The 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.

[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 comes 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 perdition.

A. Overview

The angel explains the meaning of the beast [v. 8], its seven heads [v.9], and its ten horns [v. 12], and then reveals the identity of the great harlot [v. 18].

B. The Beast

The description of the beast who "*was, and is not, and is,*" is a parody of the Lord's name, "*who is and who was and who is to come*" [Rev 1:4, 8, and 4:8]. It identifies the antichrist who is headed for perdition. St. Paul calls him the "son of perdition" [2 Thess 2:3].

The Beast that existed once, is not now living, but will return is probably an allusion to the Nero *redivivus* legend, a popular belief in the first century that Nero, despite reports of his death, had secretly escaped to Parthia and would return with an army to reclaim the Roman Empire.

The beast carries or supports the harlot, who is dependent on his power to corrupt the world and to lead the rulers of the earth into fornication.

Rome supported Jerusalem in the beginning, but later destroyed her in 70 AD.

Ultimately, the return of the beast seems to refer to the coming of the Antichrist and his empire at the end of time, and will in some sense resemble the Roman Empire under the rule of Nero [or Domitian].

The ideas of Nero resurrected and of the Antichrist have become inseparately connected.

C. Seven Heads; Seven Hills

The Beast has seven heads which stand for two different things as explained in the text.

In verse 9 the seven heads are seven hills. This points to Rome which is built on or sprawls over seven hills, according to the writers of classical antiquity [e.g., Virgil, Cicero, etc.].

Jerusalem, too, was said to rest on seven hills according to one rabbinic tradition.

D. Seven Kings

[10] they 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.

[11] As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to perdition.

In verses 10 and 11 the seven heads stand for 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...*”

The seven kings represent the first seven emperors of the Roman Empire.

If we begin counting with Julius Caesar, as the historians of John's day did, Nero is the sixth king – the one who is reigning at the time John writes Revelation. This is who John is referring to by the phrase “*the one who is.*”

Galba was the seventh king, but he reigned only six months as prophesied by John.

E. An Eighth King - Antichrist

[11] As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to perdition

But who is “an eighth” king? The eighth will be the Beast, Nero *redivivus* – Nero returned [or Domitian, who some say was the reincarnation of the demonic Nero].

This suggests that John identified the demonic Nero with the eschatological adversary [the Antichrist]; the one who would seize power in the last days is one who formerly ruled as an emperor. He will go to perdition – eternal death.

Nero and Domitian are types of the Beast/Antichrist.
