

"THE BOOK OF REVELATION"

Chapter Seventeen

This is a key chapter, for the mystery of the great harlot and the beast is explained, and one's understanding of this chapter will affect their interpretation of the rest of the book.

John is carried away into the wilderness where he is shown **the great harlot "Babylon"**, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication and the inhabitants of the earth were drunk with the wine of her fornication. She is seen sitting on **a scarlet beast** with seven heads and ten horns. She is dressed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, precious stones and pearls. In her hand is a gold cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. On her forehead is written:

**MYSTERY,
BABYLON THE GREAT,
THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH**

Seeing the woman drunk with the blood of the saints (Old Testament saints?) and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus, John marvels with great amazement (1-6).

The angel then proceeds to tell John the mystery of the woman and the beast that carries her. He begins with the beast first, described as one who **"was, is not, and is to come"** (ESV). This beast will ascend out of the bottomless pit (cf. [Re 11:7](#)) and go to perdition (cf. [Re 19:20](#)). The **seven heads** of the beast represent seven mountains upon which the woman sits. There are **seven kings**, five of whom have fallen, one is, and the other has yet to come. The beast is then described as the **eighth king**, though of the seven. The **ten horns** represent ten kings who give their power and authority to the beast, make war against the Lamb, and eventually turn on the harlot herself. The **harlot** is finally described as that "great city" (cf. [Re 14:8](#); [16:19](#)) which reigns over the kings of the earth (7-18).

As indicated in the introductory material, my understanding of this book focuses on the fact that John is given this revelation at a time when the beast **"is not"** ([Re 17:8,11](#)). Whatever explanation one gives for the beast, it did not exist at the time of the Revelation! It had existed, and was to come, but at the time John was shown the vision, it **"is not"**.

One plausible explanation is that the seven (actually eight) kings represent Roman emperors, starting with Augustus. This would make Nero the fifth king, whose death in 68 A.D. left the empire in an uproar and may be the "deadly wound" referred to [Re 13:3,12,14](#). Discounting Galba, Otho, and Vitellius whose insignificant reigns were short-lived during the turmoil, the sixth king (**"one is"**) would be Vespasian who restored order to the empire. This would make Titus the seventh emperor and Domitian the eighth. The beast that **"was, and is not, and will ascend"** (NKJV) therefore depicts the persecuting Roman emperor, seen first in the person of Nero (the beast who **"was"**) and later in the person of Domitian (the beast who **"will ascend"**). The ten kings who gave their power and authority to the beast appear to be vassal kings that supported the

emperor in times of persecution.

The identity of the harlot is still an open question in my own mind. I used to lean toward the view that the harlot represents **Jerusalem**, often supported in her persecution of the church by the Roman empire but then destroyed herself by Rome in A.D. 70. It is interesting to compare such verses as **Re 17:6; 18:20,24; 19:2** with Jesus' statements in **Mt 23:31-39**. As foretold by Jesus in both Matthew and Revelation, God was about to avenge His apostles and prophets on this city *"who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her"* (**Re 18:20; Mt 23:37**). I still believe that Jerusalem is the focus of **chapters 6-11**.

Many understand the harlot to represent the commercial and immoral spirit of **Rome** (not the literal city itself, for she was never destroyed as described in later chapters) which was instrumental in opposing the people of God. There is much to be said for this view. **Re 17:2,18; 18:3,9,11** certainly seem to fit Rome. I now lean toward this view in keeping with the main idea of Rome as the focus of **chapters 13-19**.

While the identity of the beast, the kings, and the harlot might be unclear in the minds of some, the outcome of the conflict described in this chapter is certain. In what may be described as the theme of this book, we are told that:

"These will make war with Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful." (Re 17:14)

Comforting words indeed to those early Christians who were persecuted by both the Roman emperor and unbelieving Jerusalem!

POINTS TO PONDER

- * The importance of this chapter in interpreting the book of Revelation
- * That the beast "is not" when the Revelation was given to John
- * The identity of the great harlot and the scarlet beast

OUTLINE

I. THE SCARLET WOMAN AND THE SCARLET BEAST (1-6)

A. JOHN IS APPROACHED BY AN ANGEL (1-2)

1. One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls
2. Who offers to show him the judgment of the great harlot
 - a. Which sits on many waters
 - b. With whom kings of the earth have committed fornication
 - c. With whom inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication

B. JOHN IS SHOWN THE SCARLET WOMAN ON THE SCARLET BEAST (3-6)

1. He is carried away by the angel in the Spirit into the wilderness
2. There he sees a woman sitting on a scarlet beast
 - a. The scarlet beast
 - 1) Full of names of blasphemy

- 2) Having seven heads and ten horns
- b. The woman
 - 1) Arrayed in purple and scarlet
 - 2) Adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls
 - 3) In her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication
 - 4) On her forehead the name written:
 - a) MYSTERY
 - b) BABYLON THE GREAT
 - c) THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH
 - 5) Drunk with:
 - a) The blood of the saints
 - b) The blood of the martyrs of Jesus
- 3. He marveled with great amazement when he saw her

II. THE MYSTERY OF THE WOMAN AND BEAST EXPLAINED (7-18)

A. THE ANGEL OFFERS TO EXPLAIN THE MYSTERY (7)

- 1. Asking John why he marveled
- 2. Saying that he will tell him the mystery
 - a. Of the woman
 - b. Of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her

B. THE BEAST EXPLAINED (8-14)

- 1. The beast that John saw:
 - a. Was, is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition
 - b. Will be marveled by those whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world when they see it
- 2. The mind which has wisdom:
 - a. The seven heads are seven mountains upon which the woman sits
 - b. There are also seven kings
 - 1) Five have fallen, one is, the other has yet to come
 - 2) When the seventh comes, he must continue a short time
 - c. The beast that was, and is not, is himself the eighth
 - 1) He is of the seven
 - 2) He is going to perdition (destruction)
 - d. The ten horns are ten kings
 - 1) Who have received no kingdom as yet
 - 2) But receive authority for one hour with the beast
 - 3) Who are of one mind, and give their power and authority to the beast
 - e. These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them
 - 1) For He is Lord of lords and King of kings
 - 2) Those with Him are called, chosen, and faithful

C. THE WOMAN EXPLAINED (15-18)

- 1. The waters upon which she sits are peoples, multitudes, nations and tongues
- 2. The ten horns (ten kings) on the beast
 - a. Will hate the harlot
 - 1) Make her desolate
 - 2) Eat her flesh and burn her with fire
 - b. For God has put it into their hearts to fulfill His purpose

- 1) For them to be of one mind
- 2) To give their kingdom to the beast
- Until the words of God are fulfilled
3. The woman John saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth

REVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the main points of this chapter?**
 - The scarlet woman and the scarlet beast (1-6)
 - The mystery of the woman and the beast explained (7-18)
- 2) What did the angel tell John he would be shown? (1)**
 - The judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters
- 3) How does the angel describe this woman? (2)**
 - With whom the kings of the earth committed fornication
 - The inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication
- 4) List the description of the woman as seen by John (3-6)**
 - Sitting on a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns, full of names of blasphemy
 - Arrayed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, precious stones and pearls
 - A golden cup in her hand, full of abominations the filthiness of her fornication
 - Written on her forehead: "Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the Earth"
 - Drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus
- 5) What was John's reaction to seeing the woman? (6)**
 - Marveled with great amazement
- 6) What does the angel offer to tell John? (7)**
 - The mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her
- 7) How is the beast described? (8)**
 - He was, is not, and is to come
 - He will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition
 - Those whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world will marvel
- 8) What does the seven heads of the beast represent? (9-10)**
 - Seven mountains on which the woman sits
- 9) What is said of the seven kings? (10)**
 - Five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come
 - When the seventh king comes, he must continue a short time
- 10) What is said of the beast that was and is not? (11)**
 - He will be the eighth king
 - He is of the seven
 - He is going to perdition
- 11) What do the ten horns represent? (12)**

- Ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet
- Who receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast

12) What else is said of the ten kings and the beast? (13-14)

- The kings of are of one mind and will give their power and authority to the beast
- They will make war with the Lamb

13) Why will the Lamb overcome the beast and the ten kings? (14)

- He is Lord of lords and King of kings
- Those with Him are called, chosen, and faithful

14) What do the waters upon which the harlot sits represent? (15)

- Peoples, multitudes, nations, tongues

15) What will the ten horns (kings) do to the harlot? (16)

- Hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire

16) Why will they do this? (17)

- For God has put it into their hearts to fulfill His purpose and fulfill His words

17) How is the woman finally described? (18)

- That great city which reigns over the kings of the earth