**Revelation 17**

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, June 17, 2020

In previous weeks we have shown that Revelation is all about the coming of Christ’s Kingdom to the earth as in the Lord’s Prayer, “thy kingdom come.” We also proposed, along with the ancient church, that Babylon is representative of all earthly kingdoms because Babylon was the head of gold in the four kingdom vision interpreted by Daniel. What happens to Babylon in these chapters is what happens to the sum of the earthly kingdoms which it represents.

The opening verse of this chapter tells us what we are going to be seeing throughout the chapter. The kingdoms of this world are being finally judged. In this chapter they are shown to be receiving the punishment their rebellion deserves. This eventual punishment comes as an encouragement to the Christians of the first century and all centuries that justice will be served where evil is condemned and good is rewarded. Let’s consider the specifics of the description while keeping in mind the big picture.

**The Great Prostitute’s Punishment**

*1 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. 2 With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."*

For the first time, Babylon is called a harlot. Branding idolatrous people in this way had a long history in the Old Testament. Tyre was spoken of in this way.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nineveh was also called a harlot. Nineveh’s punishment is described in the same kinds of terms that John would use of Mystery Babylon in Revelation.

*Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims! The crack of whips, the clatter of wheels, galloping horses and jolting chariots! Charging cavalry, flashing swords and glittering spears! Many casualties, piles of dead, bodies without number, people stumbling over the corpses--all because of the wanton lust of a harlot, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft. "I am against you," declares the LORD Almighty. "I will lift your skirts over your face. I will show the nations your nakedness and the kingdoms your shame. I will pelt you with filth, I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle. All who see you will flee from you and say, 'Nineveh is in ruins-- who will mourn for her?' Where can I find anyone to comfort you?"[[2]](#footnote-2)*

The description of Babylon uses terminology that we have seen before. In Jeremiah 51:12-13, the connection of Babylon with the waters is stated.

*Lift up a banner against the walls of Babylon! Reinforce the guard, station the watchmen, prepare an ambush! The LORD will carry out his purpose, his decree against the people of Babylon. You who live by many waters and are rich in treasures, your end has come, the time for you to be cut off*.

Even though we will soon get a different interpretation of the meaning of the waters, the connection is made by the reference itself.

**The Prostitute Described**

*3 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. 4 The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. 5 This title was written on her forehead: MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. 6 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.*

The desert was traditionally the dwelling place of demons, its very desolation the picture of a land without God. The woman is sitting on a scarlet beast. Those who think of Rome as the fulfillment of this prophecy see the scarlet as representing the color of Rome. The woman herself wears scarlet and purple, a color that could only be worn by royalty in ancient times.[[3]](#footnote-3) She is very rich in gold, precious stones and pearls.

The beast is covered with blasphemous names. The woman holds a golden cup of abominable things and adulteries. The cup may be golden but it hides terrible sin. She has been responsible for the deaths of many of God’s saints.

For first century Christians, this would have reminded them of the persecutions that began with Nero and were now ongoing under Domitian.[[4]](#footnote-4) John writes these words in exile while Christians are dying in his home city of Ephesus and other cities of Asia Minor. In the first centuries, they would have associated the blood of the saints with people they knew to have died. This was not ancient history for them. It was current events.

Reformation Christians who were feeling the sting of the Roman Catholic Church would have easily transitioned into a belief that the killers of the saints had returned.

The use of the term “Mystery Babylon” offers some separation from a literal Babylon. The reference is sufficiently mysterious to avoid too close a connection with literal Babylon. It could be applied to any spiritual force that opposed the true saints of God. In our understanding it is the sum of those four kingdoms of man particularly those that oppose Christ’s kingdom.

**Clues to the Woman and the Beast**

*7 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. 8 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*.

In previous chapters, we spent time with “the beast.” It is not necessary to suppose that this is the same beast. All the sevens and tens are not necessarily connected either. In the verses that follow we will learn that the beast is actually a king. John also learns that the beast is a place. Within a single sentence, it has multiple applications. We are given a few clues about the beast. It has seven heads and ten horns. This is a strange creature indeed. Some of the heads would have to have two horns while the other heads must be unicorn-like with only a single horn.

We are given a time-related description of the beast. He existed once but did not exist at the moment that John is seeing. Yet even unbelievers will be surprised to see him again. He will arrive from the Abyss and return to it, to his destruction.

The moment that John is describing could not have been his day with Rome being the beast. There is no sense in which Rome did not exist at that moment. It was very much present. Yet it is true that some of the ancient writers used this very terminology. For example, Hermas, who may have known people who knew the Apostle John himself, talks like John as he comforts those who were suffering Roman persecution in his day.

“On this account the Lord has sent His angel, who has rule over the beasts, and whose name in Thegri, and has shut up its mouth, so that it cannot tear you. You have escaped from great tribulation on account of your faith, and because you did not doubt in the presence of such a beast.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Having offered the explanation of Hermas, we must offer the counter-balance as well. Tertullian, writing around 200 AD, does not agree that life has been so difficult since Nero and that Christians were not then being attacked by Rome. Tertullian is the one who talks about the blood of the martyr being the seed of the church. However, he is much more conciliatory toward the Roman leaders when he writes to them, He even notes that Marcus Aurelius was grateful for the prayers of Christians in lifting a drought.

Consult your histories; you will there find that Nero was the first who assailed with the imperial sword the Christian sect, making progress then especially at Rome. . . . But among so many princes from that time to the present day, with anything of divine and human wisdom in them, point out a single persecutor of the Christian name. So far from that, we, on the contrary, bring before you one who was their protector, as you will see by examining the letters of Marcus Aurelius, that most grave of emperors, in which he bears his testimony that that Germanic drought was removed by the rains obtained through the prayers of the Christians who chanced to be fighting under him. And as he did not by public law remove from Christians their legal disabilities, yet in another way he put them openly aside, even adding a sentence of condemnation, and that of greater severity, against their accusers. [[6]](#footnote-6)

Rather than following an interpretation that uses the first couple of centuries, it might possibly be that Rome is envisioned as the beast of the last days. If so, we are troubled by the notion that Rome has ceased to exist. This does not agree with our understanding of Daniel 2 and the continuation of the figure seen by Nebuchadnezzar. Nor do we think that Rome came from the abyss and will return to it. There must be some broader explanation of this vision.

**The Clues Interpreted to be Kings**

*9 "This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. 10 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. 11 The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction. 12 "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. 13 They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. 14 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*."

Here we learn something important about the beast which is not speculation. The clue is interpreted right in the text. The seven heads of the beast are seven hills as well as seven kings. It has a double meaning.

The clue of seven hills seems to be the one focused on by Reformation-era interpreters. For example, Matthew Henry said, “Her principal seat and residence-- upon the beast that had seven heads and ten horns; that is to say, Rome, the city on seven hills, infamous for idolatry, tyranny, and blasphemy.” Protestants in his era of time were pretty sure they had this all figured out.

The text seems to place more emphasis upon the seven kings, followed by an eighth. These eight kings are unrelated to the ten who will exist for only a short time. With these ten kings, we might have a connection with the ten kings of the Nebuchadnezzar’s vision. At least they appear in consistent sequence in both places. Those who try to give this section a first century explanation are forced to see the Caesars in this context. However, it does not seem to fit with what we know of the first century. They try to say that seven represents a symbolically complete number, including all the emperors. The specific details that follow, “five have fallen,” would suggest otherwise.

John places the kings in relation to the moment under consideration. Five have already passed from the scene. They have “fallen.” The sixth one is apparently ruling at the moment under consideration. The seventh one, obviously, has not yet come. When his time arrives, he will have a brief rule followed by the beast, who will be the eighth. Verse 11 suggests some connection between the first seven and the beast. He “belongs to the seven.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

If the ten kings are the final ten kings that we saw in Daniel, then we have come to the moment just before the stone cut from the mountain strikes down the statue. At the moment of verse 12, they have not yet received their kingdom. They will rule for the briefest of time, here called “one hour.” It is simply a reference to a very short time. We are told two things about the sequence of their administrations. They will both follow the eighth king and end up giving their power to him. At the moment of verse 12, they have not yet been empowered as kings. At the moment of verse 13, they will give their power to the beast. They will apparently be the political creation of the beast and will serve his objectives. They will join the eighth king, the beast, in his battle against God’s people. They will not succeed in their war, but they will wage it none-the-less.

Frankly I don’t feel terribly confident in each detail other than in a couple of simple ideas from this portion of the chapter. A series of kings are described. Those kings are connected to the “kingdoms of this world” who are awaiting punishment pending the arrival of God’s Kingdom on the earth.

**Forces Against the Prostitute**

*15 Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. 16 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 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. 18 The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth."* (NIV)

In these final verses of the chapter, the vision is further explained. In verse one, the woman was sitting upon the waters. Here in verse 15 we learn that this represents “peoples, multitudes, nations[[8]](#footnote-8) and languages[[9]](#footnote-9).” Collectively, this is virtually the world. It is no longer local.

What John describes here is a spiritual civil war. The eighth king and his ten puppet kings, turn on the beast. Verse 18 tells us the beast is this dominant city. So the eighth king is some kind of provincial power, away from the dominant city, who creates his own alliance of ten kings, and briefly starts a civil war. If we are to think of this literally, then the upstart alliance is successful and brings the “Great City” down. They literally set fire to the city.

Our enemies’ enemies are not our friends, but God does not mind letting the upstarts be instruments of his vengeance. Just as he allowed evil spirits to wreck their havoc, so here God lets these evildoers go at it. This is like Kissinger’s observation about the war between Iran and Iraq in the 1980’s: It’s too bad there has to be a winner.

Chapter 17 can be described as the final death convulsions of the kingdoms of man described using apocalyptic language summarized best in Rev 11:15 "***The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever."***

1. Isaiah 23:15-17 “*At that time Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the span of a king's life. But at the end of these seventy years, it will happen to Tyre as in the song of the prostitute: "Take up a harp, walk through the city, O prostitute forgotten; play the harp well, sing many a song, so that you will be remembered." At the end of seventy years, the LORD will deal with Tyre. She will return to her hire as a prostitute and will ply her trade with all the kingdoms on the face of the earth*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nahum 3:1-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. At some times, if an ordinary person wore the royal purple they could be put to death. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Domitian governed from 81-96 AD. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, eds., “The Pastor of Hermas,” Ante-Nicene Fathers; vol. 2 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994) 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., “Apology,” Ante-Nicene Fathers; Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian; vol 3 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994) 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Those who follow a first century interpretation see it like this. The five fallen are Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero. Passing over the three weak personalities of Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, the sixth emperor should be Vespasian (69-79 AD). Titus, struggling with sickness, only lasted from 79 to 81. The eighth would be Domitian, the one who persecuted John. Why they can “pass over” some but must include others is unknown. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ethnos (eth'-nos); a race, i.e. a tribe; specially, a foreign one (usually by implication, pagan): KJV-- Gentile, heathen, nation, people. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. glossa (gloce-sah'); of uncertain affinity; the tongue; by implication, a language (specially, one naturally unacquired): KJV-- tongue. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)