

A Scarlet Woman Sits on a Scarlet Beast

Revelation 17

One of the things happening amid the chaos of the seventh plague is the punishment of Babylon. “Great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath” (Revelation 16:19). Chapter 17 follows up with an account of Babylon’s illicit relationship with the political powers of earth in their combined opposition to God.

Babylon, the Great Oppressor of God’s People

Throughout Scripture Babylon represents the oppressor of God’s people. It is the citadel of error, the center of apostasy. It stands for rebellion against God and disobedience to the divine commands. God’s judgments on Old Testament Babylon represent His final judgments upon the world. The story of Babylon’s fall is instructive to an end-time people. You will recall that Babylon attacked Jerusalem and took away many of the leading young Israelite men into captivity, including Daniel. Cyrus, the Persian king of the East, eventually attacked Babylon and freed the Jewish captives and allowed them to return to Jerusalem and worship the true God.

Once again at the time of the end, God’s people will be oppressed and persecuted by a religious oppressor called Babylon the Great (Revelation 17:5). The book of Revelation predicts that at a time of social chaos, political crisis, natural disasters, and economic collapse, Jesus will return to triumph over the oppressive powers of the world and liberate His people. He will reign forever. He will establish His throne securely in the universe forever. In the battle for the throne He will be the victor. His people will journey with Him through the corridors of time and limitless space to worship in the New Jerusalem.

A Scarlet Woman on a Scarlet Beast

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and talked with me, saying to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication.” So

he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement (Revelation 17:1-6).

The descriptions given in these verses point us back to chapter 12 where John saw another woman and a fiery red dragon. Notice the marked contrast between this woman and the woman John saw in chapter 12:

- The pure woman in chapter 12 is clothed with the sun.
This woman is dressed in purple and scarlet garments.
- The pure woman has a garland of stars on her head.
This woman is adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls.
- The pure woman stands on the moon.
This woman sits on a scarlet beast.

The scarlet woman is identified as Babylon by the name written on her forehead. Her followers also have a mark on their foreheads—the mark of the beast on which she sits, while the followers of God bear His seal on their foreheads. The contrast between the pure woman of Revelation 12 (God’s true church) and the scarlet woman of Revelation 17 (Babylon, the oppressor of God’s church) could not be more distinct.

The scarlet woman sits on a scarlet-colored beast which has seven heads and ten horns (verse 3). In Revelation 12 the fiery, red dragon that stands before the pure woman also has seven heads and ten horns. That dragon represents Satan. The beast rises from the sea in Revelation 13 has seven heads and ten horns also. That beast represents the medieval church of apostate Christianity.

So what does this scarlet beast in Revelation 17 represent?

The fact that Satan, the apostate church, and this scarlet beast all share similar characteristics suggests that this is a composite symbol of the forces arrayed against God at the end of time. The emphasis here in Revelation 17 is on the combined aspects of the religious and political components of that power all intertwined with Satan himself. The scarlet woman symbolizes the religious component; the scarlet beast represents the political component; and the whole is motivated and empowered by Satan and his hatred of God and God's people.

The woman is drunk with the blood of the saints. This is a vivid picture of Babylon's persecution of God's people. She has shed so much blood she is drunk with slaughter and revels in it like a drunkard revels in his drink.

The Scarlet Beast

The angel told John,

The beast that you saw was, and is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition. And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is (verse 8).

We said previously that the scarlet beast on which the woman sits represents the political, or secular, component of the religious/political power which is Babylon in the last days. It is difficult to identify all the details the angel gives in this chapter concerning the beast, but the main thrust seems clear. Let's look at some of the details the angel points out about the scarlet beast.

- The beast ascends "out of the bottomless pit." When we looked at Revelation 9 and 11, we identified Satan as the beast that ascends from the bottomless pit. So the beast here in Revelation 17 is associated with Satan.
- Everyone whose name is not written in the Lamb's Book of Life will marvel at the scarlet beast. The same is said of the beast that rises out of the sea in Revelation 13

(verses 3-8). So the scarlet beast is also associated with the first beast of Revelation 13.

- The scarlet beast has seven heads and ten horns. So does the first beast of Revelation 13.

The scarlet beast exhibits characteristics of all the components representing the powers fighting against God and His people at the end of time. Again, the main thrust of the picture being given of Babylon in Revelation 17 is that it is an all-inclusive combination of religious and secular authority teaming up to fight against God and His people—motivated by Satan. The scarlet woman sitting on a scarlet beast combines all the end-time activities of Satan, apostate religion, and the secular/political authority of the nations. All these will “make war with the Lamb” (verse 14).

The angel says that “all those who dwell on the earth will marvel . . . when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is” (verse 8). This seems to be a reference to Revelation 13:3 and the beast from the sea. “I saw one of his heads as if it had been mortally wounded, and his deadly wound was healed. And all the world marveled and followed the beast.” Again, the scarlet beast is associated with the first beast of Revelation 13.

The Great City

The angel concludes his explanation to John. “The woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth” (verse 18). Note that Babylon “reigns over the kings of the earth.” The secular, political authority of the nations at the end of time will be subservient to the agenda of the religious oppressor of God’s people. The kings of the earth will enforce her religious decrees regarding worship.

The angel continues, “The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues” (verse 15). Just like ancient Babylon sat on the waters of the River Euphrates, spiritual Babylon sits on and is supported by the multitudes of earth who have given their allegiance to the beast and have received its mark. The waters supporting ancient Babylon dried up and the city was overthrown. So at the end-time, spiritual Babylon’s support will dry up, and she will fall. The fall of Babylon is the subject of chapter 18.

We should not leave Revelation 17, however, without taking note of verse 14. “These will make war with the 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.” The great combination of forces arrayed against truth at the end of time may seem unstoppable. Babylon may be drunk on the blood of the saints. But “the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings.” God’s purposes will triumph, and those who are faithful to Him will triumph with Him.