

Revelation 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Revelation chapter 17 Blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns.

The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. And on her forehead was written a name of mystery, Babylon the Great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations. And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

When I saw her, I marveled greatly. But the angel said to me, Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her.

The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. 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 see the beast, because it was, and is not, and is to come.

[1 : 31] This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated. They are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen.

One is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth, but belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power. But they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast.

These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. They will make war on the lamb, and the lamb will conquer them, for he is lord of lords and king of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.

And the angel said to me, The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute.

[2 : 36] They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose, by being of one mind, and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.

And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth. Babylon the Great has been explicitly mentioned at a few points in the book of Revelation already, In chapter 14 verse 8, and chapter 16 verse 19.

In neither place did we have an extended description or discussion of the city. Now, in chapter 17, Babylon the Great and its fall, already mentioned in chapters 14 and 16, is described in more detail. The identity of Babylon the Great is a matter to which we should give some careful thought. To many commentators, that Babylon the Great is a depiction of Rome is fairly obvious. Austin Pharoah writes, It can scarcely be a riddle to any of St. John's readers, either that Babylon means Rome, or that Rome may be symbolised in such a figure.

There are certainly elements of the imagery of the woman and the beast that seem to make clear that some reference to Rome is intended. However, some have questioned the identification of the woman as Rome, suggesting that it is apostate Jerusalem that is actually in view in this figure.

[3 : 57] The harlot city is, of course, juxtaposed with the new Jerusalem, the bride of the concluding chapters of the book. We might see further juxtapositions between the harlot and the scarlet beast, and the rider on the white horse.

As usual, to understand the meaning of John's prophecies in this book, it is important that we pay very close attention, both to the literary structures and connections within the book of Revelation itself, and also to the Old Testament texts that lie in the background.

Without a deep familiarity with such Old Testament scriptures, especially in prophetic books such as Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah, we would stand little chance of understanding Revelation. The background provided by these prophetic books will definitely prove illuminating for our understanding of this chapter. Peter Lighthouse observes the way that Revelation alludes to, or connects with, Ezekiel at many points in his earlier chapters, but tracks with Ezekiel ever more closely in its concluding chapters.

He writes, Revelation follows Ezekiel in order. John first sees God on his heavenly throne surrounded by living creatures. Revelation chapter 4, a scene that resembles the appearance of the glory to Ezekiel at the river Kibar in Ezekiel chapter 1.

[5 : 12] Both prophets are in exile, both receive visions of God surrounded by cherubim. The marking of the 144,000, Revelation 7-8, is similar to the marking of those who mourn over Jerusalem, Ezekiel 9-10.

The interaction of Ezekiel and Revelation becomes even stronger after chapter 17, and the two books run in close parallel to their respective ends. Overthrow of the harlot, Ezekiel 16-23, Revelation 17.

Lament over fallen city, Ezekiel 26-27, Revelation 18. Establishment of New Jerusalem, Ezekiel 37-48, Revelation 20-22.

The Valley of Dry Bones, Ezekiel 37, links to the first resurrection, Revelation chapter 20 verse 5. Battle of Gog and Magog, Ezekiel 38-39, Revelation 20 verse 8.

Birds gorging on corpses, Ezekiel 39, Revelation 19 verse 21. A high mountain, Ezekiel 40 verse 2, Revelation 21 verse 10.

[6 : 19] Measurement of temple and city, Ezekiel 40 verse 5, Revelation 21 verse 15. A temple is full of Yahweh's glory, Ezekiel 43 verse 2, Revelation 21, 11 and 23.

A river of life flowing from a sanctuary, Ezekiel 47 verse 12, Revelation 22 verse 2. Revelation chapter 17 offers the hearer a closer view of the events connected with the seventh bowl, the fall of Babylon the Great.

To see the harlot, John will be relocated to the wilderness by one of the seven bowl angels. Behind the image of the wicked woman in the wilderness, connected with Babylon, some hearers might hear Zechariah chapter 5 verses 5 to 11.

Then the angel who talked with me came forward and said to me, Lift your eyes and see what this is that is going out. And I said, What is it? He said, This is the basket that is going out.

And he said, This is their iniquity in all the land. And behold, the leaden cover was lifted, and there was a woman sitting in the basket. And he said, This is wickedness.

[7 : 25] And he thrust her back into the basket, and thrust down the leaden weight on its opening. And I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, two women coming forward. The wind was in their wings.

They had wings like the wings of a stalk, and they lifted up the basket between earth and heaven. Then I said to the angel who talked with me, Where are they taking the basket? He said to me, To the land of Shinar to build a house for it.

And when this is prepared, they will set the basket down there on its base. The woman called Wickedness, which moves out of Israel to the land of Shinar, the land of Babylonia, sits in a basket carried by two women with stalk wings.

There it waits until a house or temple will be built for it. Thinking about this visually, we might see here a parodic arc, with women with the wings of unclean birds playing the role of cherubim, a basket with a leaden cover playing the role of the golden ark of the covenant, over which the cherubim were placed, and the woman Wickedness sitting in the sight corresponding to the sight of greatest holiness in the very holy of holies.

One might notice resemblances between this and the image of the woman here in Revelation chapter 17. The woman here is depicted as possessing a perverse form of priestly characteristics.

[8 : 38] Her clothing, with purple and scarlet adorned with gold and jewels, has characteristics most associated with the clothing of the high priest in the book of Exodus. On the high priest's forehead was a plate of pure gold, with the engraving, Holy to the Lord.

The harlot in Revelation also has a name written on her forehead, Babylon the Great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations. Where the high priest was supposed to be characterized by extreme cleanness and holiness, the harlot is characterized by blasphemy, abomination and impurity.

The priests were never to drink alcohol prior to or in the context of their duties, but the harlot is intoxicated with the blood of the saints. The woman is clearly incredibly important, so important that the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality with her.

As we see in this and the following chapter, she stands at the heart of an entire world system, as it were. She is the mother of prostitutes and of the earth's abominations. Such grand statements present a challenge for those who would claim that the woman is Jerusalem, as Jerusalem, while doubtless not unimportant, seems to be a relatively small city in the east, in comparison with the might and centrality of the great city of Rome.

The harlot is seated on many waters, riding upon a scarlet beast, described as full of blasphemous names, with seven heads and ten horns. The description of the beast resembles the sea beast of Revelation chapter 13 verse 1.

[10:07] And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns, and blasphemous names on its heads. In chapter 17, the beast is described as being scarlet, much as the dragon was described as being scarlet in Revelation chapter 12.

The woman is associated with the beast. However, as we move further in the chapter, it becomes clearer that the two figures are distinct from each other. The beast and the ten horns will later turn upon the woman and destroy her.

As we try to identify the harlot, this distinction is important to consider. Taking this distinction seriously gives some support to the identification of the woman as Jerusalem.

When the beast and the ten horns, which seem more clearly to be associated with Rome, hate the harlot and turn upon her in verse 16, rendering her desolate and naked, devouring her flesh and burning her up with fire, understanding the harlot to be the polity represented by unfaithful Jerusalem, destroyed by Rome, upon whom she had once rested, makes quite a lot more sense of that particular verse, even if we are still left with many other questions about other parts of the passage.

Further evidence in favour of identifying the harlot as Jerusalem comes from other considerations. Of all cities, it is Jerusalem that is uniquely situated to be an adulterous harlot, as she is the city that is supposed to be holy to the Lord.

[11:31] She is the city that can be the most perverse, as she is the city that has been especially sanctified. Jerusalem is described as a harlot on several occasions in the Old Testament.

For instance, in Isaiah chapter 1 verse 21, However, by far the most illuminating background is found in Ezekiel chapter 16, which is an extended prophetic condemnation of Jerusalem for its unfaithfulness and its whorings.

Within this passage, many of the features of the picture of Revelation 17-18 are evident. It describes the ways in which the Lord adorned and glorified Jerusalem, setting it apart, and then how Jerusalem perverted these gifts, the marks of its covenant bond with the Lord, using them for adulterous relations.

Ezekiel chapter 16, verses 10-15 I clothed you also with embroidered cloth, and charred you with fine leather. I wrapped you in fine linen, and covered you with silk.

And I adorned you with ornaments, and put bracelets on your wrists, and a chain on your neck. And I put a ring on your nose, and earrings in your ears, and a beautiful crown on your head.

[12:46] Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen and silk, and embroidered cloth. You ate fine flour and honey and oil. You grew exceedingly beautiful and advanced to royalty, and your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendour that I had bestowed on you, declares the Lord God.

But you trusted in your beauty, and played the whore because of your renown, and lavished your whorings on any passerby. Your beauty became his. Ezekiel lists the various foreign nations with which Israel played the harlot, the Egyptians, the Philistines, the Assyrians, Chaldea, and others. Jerusalem, as depicted in Ezekiel 16 and 23, definitely fits the description of the harlot in Revelation chapter 17, who committed sexual immorality with the kings of the earth.

The judgment that Ezekiel declares upon Jerusalem also resembles the judgment faced by the harlot city in Revelation chapter 17 and 18. Ezekiel chapter 16, verses 35 to 39.

Therefore, O prostitute, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God, because your lust was poured out, and your nakedness uncovered in your whorings with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them.

[14:07] Therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved, and all those you hated. I will gather them against you from every side, and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness.

And I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy. And I will give you into their hands, and they shall throw down your vaulted chamber, and break down your lofty places.

They shall strip you of your clothes, and take your beautiful jewels, and leave you naked and bare. The description here really fits the description at the end of Revelation 17. However, no matter how strong such connections might appear, there are clearly problems and challenges for those who would identify the city as Jerusalem.

The city is consistently described in Revelation 17-18 in ways that seem much too grand for Jerusalem, a second-tier city in the east of the empire. Perhaps the most pronounced example of this in chapter 17 is the description with which the chapter concludes, the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.

Lighthart suggests that the kings in question refer to rulers and priests in the land of Israel. There is also the way that she is described as Babylon, which might seem to suggest that the city in question is a Gentile city, rather than Jerusalem.

[15:29] This claim is not as strong as it initially appears, when you consider the way that Jerusalem is addressed as the rulers of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah in Isaiah chapter 1 verse 10.

Furthermore, the way that Jesus describes the downfall of the city of Jerusalem in the Olivet Discourse clearly draws upon language used concerning the downfall of Babylon in the book of Isaiah.

The point being made in such statements is that, in its unfaithfulness, Jerusalem has become its antithesis. Considering the designation of the city as Babylon, we might also recall the woman of Zechariah chapter 5, which represented the perversion of Israel removed to the land of Babylon. The harlot city is seated on many waters, later identified as peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. While the city is Jerusalem, she should not be narrowly identified with the city. Like Rome, Jerusalem is much more than a single city. She is at the heart of a great world or network that reaches to all corners of the empire. There were millions of Jews throughout the Roman Empire.

[16:33] Indeed, there were far more outside of the land than within it. And Jerusalem was the great city to which they all looked. It was like Mecca, but more so. It was a city whose influence was felt everywhere throughout the empire.

It was the capital that set the pattern for everywhere else. The immense diaspora population, greatly exceeding the number of Jews within the land itself, were all under Jerusalem's influence and sway.

The perverted priestess, Babylon the Great, is drinking, which is bad enough. However, she is drinking the blood of the saints, which is much, much worse. Drinking blood was a gross abomination, prohibited at several points in scripture.

Babylon the Great also, as Revelation chapter 14 verse 8 claims, made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality. In her bloodthirstiness, she instigated violent persecution of Christians throughout the empire and exported her unfaithfulness throughout the diaspora. Jerusalem's thirst for the blood of the saints and prophets is apparent throughout the New Testament. Jesus speaks of it in Matthew chapter 23 verses 34 to 38.

[17:41] Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel, to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!

How often would I have gathered your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate!

It was from Jerusalem that missions of violent persecution, such as that which Saul of Tarsus undertook prior to his conversion, set out. Jesus taught that the blood of all the righteous would

come upon Jerusalem in that generation, which is much as Revelation describes.

We might also recognize the way in which the harlot is characterized by abomination, when Daniel and Jesus both spoke of the abomination of desolation that would herald the end.

[18 : 51] Lighthouse makes the case for a connection between the woman of chapter 12, who fled into the wilderness, and the harlot in the wilderness of chapter 17. The beast was brought up from the sea by the dragon, and he seduces Mother Israel who fled from him, perverting her into the harlot.

The beast in this chapter has the characteristics of the sea beast, but seems to be a more developed form of it, not least in his being scarlet. He has become more like the satanic dragon behind him.

The harlot is also turned scarlet, like the beast that she rides, and the dragon that called him up from the abyss. The beast was and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction.

There is a sort of a twisted parody, both of the way that God is described as the one who was, who is, and who is to come, and of Christ's death and resurrection here. There might perhaps be a reference here to the seeming death of the beast with the suicide of Nero, and the civil war that followed, and its later revival.

Alternatively, it might be pointing back to the seeming death and revival of the Roman Empire at the beginning, after the assassination of Julius Caesar. The beast receives worship from those whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world.

[20 : 10] The book in question is the book of the righteous, likely best thought of not as a book completed in the far distant past, but as a book of life whose contents stretched back to time immemorial, containing, as if in a vast record of continuing ancestry, the names of all of the righteous.

The beast has seven heads, interpreted here as seven mountains, which, given the identification of Rome with its seven hills in antiquity, seems to make the identification of the beast fairly straightforward.

The seven heads are also identified as kings, or possibly kingdoms, as kings can stand for the kingdoms that they rule, albeit in a yet uncompleted line of succession.

We might recall that the sea beast of Revelation is a composite or monstrous hybrid of the four beasts of Daniel. Its heads, then, might relate to the heads of the preceding beasts.

Lighthouse argues for this reading, seeing that the current head is that of the Hellenistic kingdom established by Alexander, with the final head or kingdom being the final, nightmarish form of Rome, which will only last for a brief period.

[21 : 18] The sea beast described earlier is the beast with the seventh head. The eighth, the beast that was and is not, is the short-lasting form of Rome under Nero, which ends, albeit, without destroying the beast itself.

Others have tried to count the heads in order, identifying them not with kingdoms, but with specific Roman kings or emperors. Given the background in Daniel, Lighthouse's suggestion makes more sense to me.

However, if they aren't associated with the heads, the specific kings or emperors might be associated with the horns. These kings are viewed as acting simultaneously, even though the preceding emperors had died by the time that the beast enjoyed its brief hour of granted authority. Another possibility, however, is that the ten horns are the ten provinces of Rome. To that point, they had been restrained. They will make war upon the Lamb, but will be conquered by him.

When they are granted authority, they destroy the harlot, in much the way that the destruction of Jerusalem is described in Ezekiel chapters 16 and 23. The harlot will be burned with fire, like the adulterous woman of a priestly house.

[22 : 27] It is important that we recognize the significance of the downfall of Jerusalem. The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple is the tearing down of the old covenant, for which Israel, no matter how she was viewed by the other nations, really was the center of the world.

Now she is the great queen of the nations no longer, and in her place will rise a new Jerusalem. A question to consider, how might we fill out the meaning of the image of the prostitute from elsewhere in Scripture?

