

THE IDENTITY OF THE WOMAN AND THE BEAST IN REVELATION 17

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Introduction

The Apostle John tells us he “saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast” (Rev 17:3). The identity of the woman and the beast are important to our understanding of the end times. Will there be a world religion? Will the great city Babylon rise again? Will the Roman Empire, once again, rule? Will a ten-nation European confederacy signal the end? The answers to these questions, and more, are found in the identity of the woman and the beast. The woman and the beast are described in Rev 17. From these descriptions, their context, and their relations to other parts of scripture, the identity of the woman and the beast can be seen. From this, we will see that the woman represents false religion, which began in ancient Babylon, and will centre, once again, in a rebuilt Babylon. The beast represents the Antichrist, who will come out of a revived Roman Empire. The Antichrist will use false religion, and its influence over the world, to gain power, and then dispose of it.

The Identity of the Woman (Rev 17:1-6, 15, 18)

The identity of the woman is found in Rev 17:1-6, 15, and 18. The identity of the woman is seen in her authority, appearance, and association. This identity is directly tied to the historical city of Babylon, and its religious influence on the world.

The Authority of the Woman (Rev 17:1-3, 15)

The woman has authority over the people of the world. Rev 17:1 says, “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.’ ” Rev 17:15 tells us the waters that the woman sits on

are “peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages”. The woman has authority over the world’s population. Her influence affects all people groups, all languages, and all countries. Historically, Babylon’s influence – religious and political – was worldwide (Dan 4:1).

The woman has authority over the kings of the earth. Rev 17:2 says, “With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.” When people are intoxicated, they are controlled by the intoxicant. The world leaders, as well as those they are leading, are under the authority of the woman’s adulterous intoxication. Historically, Babylon’s false religion intoxicated the world (Jer 51:8). “In OT prophetic discourse, the imagery of the harlot is commonly used to denote religious apostasy.”¹ Jerusalem turned from God, and was called a harlot (Is 1:21). Israel is accused of adultery, for accepting false religions (Jer 3:47). The picture of a harlot, representing false religion, stands in contrast to the church, pictured as a pure virgin (Rev 19:7-8).² “Just as the contrast to the ‘harlot’ is the pure bride, so the contrast to ‘Babylon’ is the City of God, the New Jerusalem, the eternal home prepared for the Lamb’s wife (Rev 21:9ff).”³

The beast has authority over the woman. Rev 17:3 says, “Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into the desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names, and had seven heads and ten horns.” The woman is seen as sitting on the beast. Sitting implies the beast does as it wishes, while the woman simply rides. “The fact that the woman is riding the beast, and is not the beast itself, signifies that she represents ecclesiastical power, as distinct from the beast, which is political power.”⁴

The Appearance of the Woman (Rev 17:4)

The appearance of the woman is seen in her apparel, her adornment, and her abominations. Rev 17:4 says, “The woman was dressed in purple and

¹ Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1977, p. 370.

² Warren Wiersbe, *Revelation*, in *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2 vols, Wheaton IL: Victor Books, 1989, p. 2:611

³ *Ibid.*, p. 2:612.

⁴ John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1966, p. 245.

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.” “Her apparel is purple and scarlet. The garments of royalty and prosperity are displayed on her.”⁵ Babylon, under King Nebuchadnezzar, ruled the world in royalty and prosperity (Dan 4:28-30). She is adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls. Babylon is also described as “glittering with gold, precious stones, and pearls” (Rev 18:16). The golden cup she holds in her hand is filled with abomination. Babylon is also described as a “golden cup in the Lord’s hand . . . that made all the earth drunk” (Jer 51:7).

Babylon was founded by Nimrod (Gen 10:8-11). *Bab-el* means “city of God”.⁶ The tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) was man’s attempt to defy God. God’s judgment on tower builders was confusion. Confusion caused by the inability of builders to communicate. Just as the builders were confused, false religious systems confuse those who need to hear the truth. The tower of Babel could be seen as a forerunner of later towers built honouring false deities.⁷

Another connection between Babylon’s religious system, and false religion throughout history, is found in the wife of Nimrod. She “became the head of the so-called Babylonian mysteries, which consisted of secret religious rites, which were developed as a part of the worship of idols in Babylon.”⁸ Extra-biblical records state she claimed to have son, conceived miraculously. This son was considered to be the promised messiah (albeit, a false messiah). Pictures of her, as queen of heaven, cradling her son, are found in various forms, in many false religions.

Walvoord argues “the description of the woman, as arrayed in purple and scarlet, and decked with gold, precious stones, and pearls is all too familiar with the trappings of ecclesiastical pomp today, and, especially, of high officials in the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches”.⁹ This may be true, but we must be careful, and not draw too much

⁵ David Hocking, *The Coming World Leader: Understanding the Book of Revelation*, Portland OR: Multnomah Press, 1988, p. 246.

⁶ Wiersbe, *Revelation*, p.2:612.

⁷ Walvoord, *Revelation*, p. 246.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

correlation with the Catholic and Orthodox churches. If we interpret scripture by experience, then we are doing an injustice. It is sufficient to say that it is a possibility, but only time will tell.

The Association of the Woman with Babylon (Rev 17:5-6,18)

The relationship between the woman and historical Babylon is evident in Rev 17:5: “This title was written on her forehead: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES, AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.” Babylon is a **μυστήριον**, a “mystery.” “**Μυστήριον**, in the NT, is usually a mystery to be revealed. . . . The word implies a new revelation, not something to be kept hidden. In this case, it is the exposing of what is evil about Babylon.”¹⁰

Babylon is a mother. Much evil and spiritual adultery has flowed from her bosom. This has influenced false religions throughout history. The religious apostasy, began by Babylon, has meant martyrdom for saints, down through the ages. Rev 17:6 says, “I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus.” If “saints” and “witnesses” indicate separate peoples, then perhaps they represent believers before Christ and after Christ.¹¹ In this case, all false religious systems since Babylon could be in view.

Rev 17:18 states, “And the woman, whom you saw, is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth.” Dyer argues that “the great city” must be taken literally, despite any evidence of a worldwide ecclesiastical system.¹² He has a point. Scripture seems clear. However, how can the evidence of Babylon, as a literal city, be reconciled with evidence of Babylon as a religious system? Thomas puts forth a strong argument that this refers to both Babylon, the city, and Babylon, the religious system. Part of his lengthy, rich with scripture, argument is worth repeating here.

¹⁰ Robert Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An Exegetical Commentary*, Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1995, p. 289.

¹¹ Hocking, *The Coming World Leader*, p. 248.

¹² Charles Dyer, “The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18”, in *BSac* 144 (1987), p. 436.

The many OT allusions to Babylon in Rev 17-18 indicate her tie to a certain geographical city, yet her primary function is not political, but religious. She stands for an ideology, associated with the political institution of the beast. Of the many connections between Rev 17-18 and OT passages on Babylon, the following are typical: Jer 51:13 with Rev 17:1; Jer 51:7 with Rev 17:2, 4; Jer 51:29 with Rev 17:16 and 18:8; Is 47:5, 7 with Rev 17:17 and 18:7, 8; Jer 51:8 [Is 21:9] and Is 13:21 with Rev 18:2; Jer 50:8 and 51:6, 45 with Rev 18:4; Jer 51:9 with Rev 18:5; Jer 50:15 and 51:24-49 with Rev 18:6; Jer 51:25 with Rev 18:8; Jer 51:63, 64 with Rev 18:21. John's angel-guide quite clearly alludes repeatedly to Babylon on the Euphrates throughout Rev 17-18. Therefore, the woman will be a religious system connected with that city. The OT prophecies of Babylon's destruction in Is 13 and Jer 51 are yet unfulfilled, and are awaiting the future day of the Lord for that fulfilment.¹³

The Identity of the Beast (Rev 17:7-14, 16-17)

In Rev 17:7, the angel transitions from identifying the woman to identifying the beast. In Rev 17:8, the angel starts to identify the beast. "The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss, and to go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth will wonder, whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast, that he was and is not, and will not come" (Rev 17:8). "Was and is not, and is about to . . ." is "an obvious parody of the Lamb, who was put to death, yet came back to life and now is alive forevermore (Rev 1:18, 2:8). The description is also an intentional antithesis to the One 'who is, and who was, and who is to come' (Rev 1:4, 8; 4:8)."¹⁴ The beast "was", in that the spirit of the Antichrist was evident in the Roman Empire during the first century. The beast "is not", because the Roman Empire currently does not exist. The beast "is about to", because the Roman Empire will be revived as the seventh kingdom.

The beast is released from the bottomless pit. In Rev 9, the bottomless pit was opened, and smoke, with locusts, came out. The bottomless pit can be no other than hell itself. Rev 13:4 shows the dragon giving the

¹³ Thomas, *Revelation*, p. 307.

¹⁴ Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 312.

beast his authority. Satan gives the Antichrist his power. Unbelievers, on the earth during the tribulation, will be amazed at the quick rise, and all-encompassing power, of the Antichrist.

The Meaning of the Seven Heads (Rev 17:9-10)

Rev 17:9-10 states, “Here is the mind, which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sits, and they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while.” Several interpretations of the seven heads exist.

Firstly, the seven hills could refer to the city of Rome. “There is little doubt that a first-century reader would understand this reference in any way other than as a reference to Rome, the city built upon seven hills. Rome began as a network of seven hill-settlements on the left bank of the Tiber.”¹⁵ But is this an inconsistent interpretation, because the seven hills are also seven kings.

Secondly, the seven hills could refer to Roman rulers, during the first century. The “five have fallen” could refer to five Roman rulers, preceding the exile of the Apostle John. These could be “Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero”.¹⁶ The “other has not yet come” would then refer to some unknown ruler that ruled in John’s day, or a yet-future day. But this view does not explain the seventh head with ten horns in Rev 17:10, since the ten horns are identified as ten kings in Rev 17:12. In addition, Mounce argues there are at least two problems with this view. One problem is “it regards Augustus as the first emperor, although his predecessor, Julius Caesar, took the title Imperator, and was reckoned by many writers (both Roman and Jewish) as the first emperor”.¹⁷ Another problem is that the three emperors, who ruled briefly between Nero and Vespasian are omitted.

Thirdly, the seven heads represent kingdoms throughout history. Seven hills symbolically mean seven important kingdoms in history. Based on Is 2:2; 41:15, Jer 51:25; and Dan 2:35, Dyer states that, in the OT, “the

¹⁵ Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 314.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

word ‘mountain’ was often a symbolic reference to a kingdom, or national power”.¹⁸ Five of these kingdoms have fallen up to the point in history that John was writing. These were Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece.¹⁹ The sixth kingdom was the Roman kingdom during John’s day. It has since fallen, but another kingdom is yet to come, and will exist for a short time. This upcoming kingdom consists of ten kings. Hocking²⁰ summarises the flow of these verses well.

1. The beast with seven heads represents world government at seven moments of history.
2. The five empires that have controlled the world before John’s day are Egypt, Assyria, Bablyon, Medo-Persia, and Greece.
3. The world government existing in John’s day was the Roman Empire, and there has not been a true world empire since. This sixth head, or empire, is the one that received the fatal wound, but will be brought back to life as the seventh empire of the world.
4. The seventh empire will not last long, and will develop from a ten-nation confederacy around the Mediterranean Sea. It will be a revived Roman Empire.
5. Out of this seventh empire of ten nations, will arise a world leader (Antichrist), who will, in himself, become the eighth empire of the world.

Adversely, Mounce argues that the Greek word βασιλεύς is used, and not βασιλεία, and, throughout the NT, βασιλεύς is translated as “king”, not “kingdom”.²¹ Hence, the “most satisfactory explanation of the seven kings is that the number seven is primarily symbolic, and stands for the power of the Roman Empire, as a historic whole”.²² But the

¹⁸ Dyer, “The Identity of Babylon in Revelation 17-18”, p. 439.

¹⁹ Walvoord, *Revelation*, p. 613.

²⁰ Hocking, *The Coming World Leader*, p. 250.

²¹ Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 315.

²² Ibid.

argument for interpreting these as kingdoms stems from Dan 7:17, where the four beasts are four kings. These four kings are actually kingdoms, though. In addition, one must not pursue symbolism too much, when interpretations, which are more literal, are available.

The Meaning of the Eighth Head (Rev 17:11)

Rev 17:11 states, “And the beast, which was, and is not, is, himself, also an eighth, and is one of the seven, and he goes to destruction.” How can the beast have seven heads (Rev 17:7), be one of the seven, and yet be an eighth? The best interpretation is that the beast is a coming ruler (the Antichrist). The Antichrist will rule the eighth kingdom. But the spirit of the Antichrist was present in the five kingdoms that have fallen. The spirit of the Antichrist was present in the sixth kingdom. The spirit of the Antichrist will be present in the seventh kingdom. In fact, the Antichrist himself may personally be part of the seventh kingdom. Dan 7:8 tells us of a little horn that arises out of the ten horns of the fourth beast. This mirrors well with Rev 17. The fourth beast in Daniel is the Roman Empire. A little horn, the Antichrist, arises from ten horns. The ten horns are a ten-nation confederacy, comprising the revived Roman Empire. “The beast is world government, and has seven periods of history, in which to be manifested. The beast is also revealed, in all of its characteristics and policies, in one future world leader – the Antichrist!”²³

The Meaning of the Ten Horns (Rev 17:12-13)

Rev 17:12-13 states, “And the ten horns, which you saw, are ten kings, who have not yet received a kingdom, but they receive authority as kings, with the beast, for one hour. These have one purpose, and they give their power and authority to the beast.” The ten horns are ten future kings that are part of the seventh head (revived Roman Empire). These ten kings could represent specific leaders of nations, or a nation, itself. Will this be a ten-nation confederacy in Europe? It seems plausible. The ten nations will be part of the revived Roman Empire, and Rome is in Europe. However, time will tell. It is interesting to note that the rise to power of the Antichrist will initially be at the expense of three of the nations (Dan 7:8). Once the Antichrist has accomplished this, he will move on to rule

²³ Hocking, *The Coming World Leader*, p. 250.

all the nations. Hence, the ten kings “give their power and authority to the beast”. The “one hour” indicates a short time.

Adversely, Mounce argues that the number ten is symbolic. It indicates completeness. “It does not point to ten specific kings, nor to ten European kingdoms of a revived Roman Empire.”²⁴ But, as was stated earlier about Mounce’s predisposition to symbolic interpretations, one must not pursue symbolism too much, when interpretations, which are more literal, are available.

The Defeat of the Woman and the Beast (Rev 17:14, 16-17)

Rev 17:14 states, “These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them.” The Lamb is Jesus Christ. The war is Armageddon. The Lamb will be victorious. But, before Christ defeats the Antichrist, the Antichrist will destroy the woman. “And the ten horns, which you saw, and the beast, these will hate the harlot, and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh, and will burn her up with fire” (Rev 17:16). The Antichrist will rise to world power by using false religion. Once the false religion has accomplished its purpose for him, the Antichrist will destroy the false religion. The beast “will make her desolate and naked”. This represents the woman’s large accumulation of wealth.²⁵ It will be taken away by the Antichrist. The beast “will eat her flesh, and burn her with fire”. This represents the completeness, in which the Antichrist will destroy all forms of religion in the world.²⁶

When will the woman be destroyed? Walvoord argues that “it is probable that the events of Rev 17 occur at the beginning of the great tribulation”.²⁷ But, Rev 13 indicates this will come at the mid-point of the tribulation, when the Antichrist rises to power. Chronologically, Rev 13 begins the second half of the tribulation. Religious freedom will abound in the first half of the tribulation. On the positive side, the 144,000 Jews of Rev 7 will evangelise the earth, along with the two witnesses of Rev 11. On the negative side, the woman (false religion)

²⁴ Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 317.

²⁵ Hocking, *The Coming World Leader*, p. 252.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Walvoord, *Revelation*, p. 243.