

THE NOTORIOUS PROSTITUTE

Revelation 17

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In Revelation 17 we are introduced to a new character – the great whore. As we will see, it is not a new character, but the same old character described in a new way. I will argue that the great whore is Jerusalem.
2. Then we will see a scarlet beast, who we have already studied in Revelation 13 and know as the Sea Beast, or the Roman Empire.

II. RECAP

1. The theme of Revelation is Christ's judgment against first century Israel.
 - i. **Revelation 1:7** Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. And all the tribes of the earth, will mourn over him. So it is to be. Amen.
 - ii. As we have seen, this verse is not about Christ's second coming at the end of history, but His metaphorical coming in judgment in the first century. This was fulfilled in AD 70, just a few years after Rev was written, when the Romans entered Israel and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.
2. The theme of Revelation is also expressed as God's divorce of Israel, and remarriage to the church.
 - i. In the OT, Israel is called God's wife (Is 54:5).
 - ii. But she continually chases other gods, and is called an adulteress, a prostitute, a harlot (Is 1:21).
 - iii. The prophets repeatedly call her back to faithfulness, but she kills the prophets and eventually murders her own Messiah (Mt 23:37).
 - iv. Revelation portrays God's divorce and punishment against Israel.
 - v. In Rev 4, God is seated on His judicial throne, ready to cast judgment.
 - vi. In Rev 5, God holds a seven sealed scroll. God's law required the presenting of a divorce certificate in cases of divorce. This seven

sealed scroll is God's divorce certificate. The seven seals reflect the seven-fold judgment God threatens upon Israel in Lev 26.

- vii. Most of Revelation 6-19 is a description of God's divorce and judgment against unfaithful Israel.
- viii. The punishment for adultery in the OT is death by stoning (Dt 22:22-24). In Rev 16:21 John sees giant hailstones, 100 pounds each, raining down against Jerusalem. When Rome attacked Jerusalem in 70 AD, they used catapults to hurl giant white boulders, 100 pounds each, at the city.
- ix. At the end of Revelation, in Rev 21-22, after the condemnation and destruction of God's old bride, John sees a vision of the new bride, the church. It is described as the new Jerusalem, and we know from Gal 4:24-30 and Hebrews 12:22-23 that the New Jerusalem is the church.

- 3. So far in Revelation we have seen visions of judgment prophesied against first century Jerusalem. This was symbolized through the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls. Now, in Revelation 17, we are going to get a more detailed picture of God's unfaithful bride, the great whore.

III. TEXT: Revelation 17:1-6

1 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me: "Come, I will show you the judgment of the notorious prostitute, who is seated on many waters. 2 The kings of the earth committed sexual immorality with her, and those who live on the earth became drunk on the wine of her sexual immorality." 3 Then he carried me away in the Spirit, to a wilderness. 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, adorned with gold, jewels, and pearls. She had a golden cup in her hand filled with everything detestable and with the impurities of her prostitution. 5 On her forehead was written a name, a mystery: Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes and of the Detestable Things of the Earth. 6 Then I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished.

IV. WHO IS THE GREAT WHORE?

1. Her unfaithfulness.

- i. The great whore is Jerusalem, or covenant breaking Israel in the first century. I will give you eight reasons for this view.
- ii. In verse 1 she is called “the notorious prostitute,” the “great prostitute,” or the “great whore.”
- iii. In the OT, Israel is God’s wife, but when she abandons God to chase false gods, she is called a prostitute.
- iv. **Isaiah 1:21** “The faithful town— what an adulteress (or *prostitute*) she has become! She was once full of justice. Righteousness once dwelt in her, but now, murderers!”
- v. **Revelation 17:2** “The kings of the earth committed sexual immorality with her, and those who live on the earth became drunk on the wine of her sexual immorality.”
- vi. Remember that the word “earth” can be translated land, as in the land of Israel, not necessarily the entire earth. So, this verse is talking about the kings of Israel, and those who live in Israel, and how they all were unfaithful to God.
- vii. This all fits first century Israel, who was unfaithful because she rejected Christ.

2. Her population.

- i. **Revelation 17:1** “...the notorious prostitute who is seated on many waters.”
- ii. Verse 15 explains the meaning of the many waters.
- iii. **Revelation 17:15** He also said to me, “The waters you saw, where the prostitute was seated, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages.”
- iv. This fits the description of first century Israel, which had Jews living all over the Roman empire. They lived in many nations and spoke many languages. According to some estimates, the Jews amounted to as much as ten percent of the entire Roman empire.

3. Her benefactor.

- i. **Revelation 17:3** “Then he carried me away in the Spirit, to a wilderness. I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.”
- ii. The woman is sitting on a scarlet beast.

- iii. Who is the beast? It is the Roman empire. We were introduced to this character in Revelation 13, known as the sea beast. The only difference is that Revelation 17 tells us the color of the beast is scarlet red. But in both chapters, the beast has seven heads and ten horns. In just a moment you will see clearly that the beast is the Roman empire.
- iv. The prostitute sits upon the beast, which means she is not the beast. Some have assumed that the prostitute is Rome, but she can't be Rome because she is sitting on Rome.
- v. This fits first century Israel, who by the time of the writing of Revelation had been under Roman rule and protection for a hundred years.

4. Her attire.

- i. **Revelation 17:4-5** "4 The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, jewels, and pearls. She had a golden cup in her hand filled with everything detestable and with the impurities of her prostitution. 5 On her forehead was written a name, a mystery: Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes and of the Detestable Things of the Earth."
- ii. The attire of the prostitute fits the description both of the Jewish priestly garments, and the temple.
- iii. **Larry Ball** "John was describing the priesthood of Jerusalem as represented by the high priest... The dress of the harlot resembles the dress of the Jewish high priests as he entered the temple's holy of holies once a year. He wore purple and scarlet clothing, and there were precious stones and pearls on his breastplate."
- iv. Likewise, the temple curtain was embroidered with blue, and linen, and scarlet, and purple.
- v. The woman was adorned with gold. The temple was filled with gold. The walls of the Holy of Holies were overlaid with gold. The two main rooms were divided by golden doors behind the curtain. The outward face of the temple was covered with gold plates.
- vi. The harlot held a gold cup. The high priest held a gold cup on the Day of Atonement.

- vii. Note also that the prostitute had something written on her forehead: “Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes and of the Detestable Things of the Earth.” The Jewish high priest wore a hat with a gold medallion on the forehead that was engraved with the words, “Holy to the Lord.”
- viii. The attire of the harlot shows that God’s bride, Israel, has become a prostitute.

5. Her violence.

- i. **Revelation 17:6** “Then I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. When I saw her, I was greatly astonished.”
- ii. This is a perfect description of Israel. Not only did the Jews kill Jesus, but they persecuted His followers. Note what Jesus said.
- iii. **Matthew 23:37** “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her.”

6. Her destruction.

- i. **Revelation 17:16** “The ten horns you saw, and the beast, will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, devour her flesh, and burn her up with fire.”
- ii. As we’ll see shortly, the ten horns represent all of the leaders around the Roman Empire. Together with the beast, attacked and destroyed Israel in AD 70.
- iii. John uses three important words here:
 1. “They will make her desolate.” The same word is used by Jesus in Mt 24:15, Mk 13:14, and Lk 21:20 to describe the destruction of Jerusalem.
 2. “And naked.” According to OT law, one of the punishments for a convicted adulteress was to humiliate her by stripping her naked in public.
 3. “and burn her up with fire.” Remember that Israel was a priestly nation. They are called a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:6). In the OT law, if a priest’s daughter is a prostitute, she must be burned to death (Lev 21:9). When Rome finally destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, they burned it all to the ground.

7. Her name.

- i. **Revelation 17:18** “And the woman you saw is the great city that has royal power over the kings of the earth.”
- ii. Here the prostitute is called “the great city.” We have already been given the identity of the great city. Revelation 11:8 describes a great city “called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified.” We know Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem.

8. Her power.

- i. **Revelation 17:18** “And the woman you saw is the great city that has royal power over the kings of the earth.”
- ii. How did the prostitute have “royal power over the kings of the earth?”
- iii. Remember the word “earth” can be translated land.
- iv. Ever since it came under Roman rule, the land of Israel was led by a number of Roman leaders such as King Herod and Pontius Pilate. They were all subservient to Caesar. However, the Jewish priesthood actually ruled them.
- v. Larry Ball “The priesthood used their rulers to further their own purposes. In actuality, the priesthood ruled over the rulers; the best example being the manipulation of Pontius Pilate in the death of Christ.”
- vi. Later Herod Agrippa killed the apostle James and arrested Peter. Why? To please the Jews (Acts 1:1-3).
- vii. In a sense, the Jewish leaders had royal power over the kings of the land.
- viii. The notorious prostitute is first century Jerusalem, or the first century Jews represented by Jerusalem, the priesthood, and the temple.
- ix. Next we are given more information about the relationship between the prostitute and the beast.

V. **TEXT: Revelation 17:7-18**

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, with the seven heads and the ten horns, that carries her. 8 The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up from the abyss and go to destruction. Those who live on the earth

whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast that was, and is not, and is to come. 9 This calls for a mind that has wisdom.

“The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated. They are also seven kings: 10 Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes, he must remain for only a little while. 11 The beast that was and is not, is itself an eighth king, but it belongs to the seven and is going to destruction. 12 The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they will receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour. 13 These have one purpose, and they give their power and authority to the beast. 14 These will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings. Those with him are called, chosen, and faithful.”

15 He also said to me, “The waters you saw, where the prostitute was seated, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages. 16 The ten horns you saw, and the beast, will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, devour her flesh, and burn her up with fire. 17 For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his plan by having one purpose and to give their kingdom to the beast until the words of God are fulfilled. 18 And the woman you saw is the great city that has royal power over the kings of the earth.”

VI. WHO IS THE SCARLET BEAST?

1. It is the sea beast.
 - i. The scarlet beat is none other than the Roman empire in the first century, as I will argue with the following points.
 - ii. Verse 7 (and verse 3) describe it as having seven heads and ten horns. This is the same description given to the sea beast in Revelation 13:1.
 - iii. The heads and horns describe a great political power.
2. It is resurrected.
 - i. Twice the beast is described as “was, and is not, and is to come (Rev 17:8).”
 - ii. This is a description of the Roman empire during the time of the Jewish War in AD 66-70. The war began under Nero in AD 66, but then Nero committed suicide in AD 68. Civil war then broke out, which almost led to the downfall of the Roman empire. The next

year AD 69 is described as the year of the four emperors. After Nero, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius each rose to power and were quickly killed. It looked like the empire was dead. But then Vespasian came to power, order was restored, and the empire was resurrected.

iii. **Revelation 17:11** “The beast that was and is not, is itself an eighth king, but it belongs to the seven and is going to destruction.”

1. This eighth king has confused many? Who or what is it?
2. Notice that it is not “the” eighth, but an eighth king.
3. As well, it belongs to the seven. As we’ll see shortly, the seven refers to the first seven Roman Emperors, beginning with Julius.
4. In the Bible, the number eight is associated with resurrection. Jesus was resurrected on the eighth day.
5. This is another way of talking about the empire’s resurrection with Vespasian.
6. Vespasian wasn’t “the” eighth, which would have been Otho; but he was “an” eighth, because he resurrected the empire.
7. Vespasian “belongs to the seven” because he was a Roman of standing. He wasn’t an outsider, such as a Parthian ruler invading and taking over. Vespasian was first made consul in AD 51, and then governor of Africa, and then he was appointed by Nero to be commander and chief of the Roman army against Israel.

3. It is seven mountains.

- i. Verse 9 says that the beast’s seven heads represent seven mountains.
- ii. The city of Rome was known as the City of Seven Hills, or Septimontium, because it was situated on seven hills: Palatine, Capitoline, Quirinal, Viminal, Esquiline, Caelian, and Aventine.

4. It is seven kings.

- i. Verses 9-10 say that the beast’s seven heads represent seven kings: five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes, he must remain for only a little while.

- ii. This is a perfect description of the first seven Roman emperors at the time of Revelation's writing. The first five had already died – Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, and Claudius. The sixth is, or was currently reigning. That was Nero. And the seventh was still to come, and would only remain for a little while. That was Galba, who came to power after Nero, but who only reigned for seven months.
- 5. It is going to destruction.
 - i. Verses 8 and 11 say that the beast is going to destruction.
 - ii. This is talking about the eventual fall of the Roman empire. Roman would go on to fall in 410 AD.
 - iii. This was a word of encouragement to the Christians that although Rome was might and terrible, it too would fall one day.
- 6. It is ten horns.
 - i. The beast has ten horns (Rev 17:7). Verse 12 tells us that the ten horns are...
 - 1. Ten kings
 - 2. Who have not yet received a kingdom
 - 3. But they will receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour.
 - 4. They give their power and authority to the beast.
 - 5. Together they go to war with the Lamb (the church), but fail.
 - 6. Then they join the beast in the destruction of the woman (Jerusalem).
 - ii. The Roman empire in the first century was divided into ten provinces. The ten kings represent the rulers of those provinces. They were kings in a sense, but still under the authority of the Roman emperor, and they worked with the emperor to both persecute Christians, and then to destroy Jerusalem.
- 7. It is at war with the Lamb.
 - i. Verse 14 says the ten horns and the beast make war against the Lamb, but He conquers them.
 - ii. This represents the Neronian Persecution. From the time of Christ's resurrection onward, the Jews were the persecutors of

the Christians, not the Romans. In fact, at times the Romans protected the Christians from the Jews. But in AD 64, there was a great fire in Rome, and Nero blamed it on the Christians, and so for the next 42 months, or three and a half years, or 1,260 days, the Romans persecuted Christians. But Nero died in AD 68, and the faith continued to spread.

8. It is at war with the prostitute.
 - i. After losing the war with the Lamb, the verses 16-17 say that the beast and the ten horns then turn their attention against the prostitute – Jerusalem. They “make her desolate and naked, devour her flesh, and burn her up with fire.”
 - ii. This is a description of the Romans completely destroying Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70.

VII. CONCLUSION

1. Who is the notorious prostitute? It is Jerusalem in the first century.
2. Who is the scarlet beast? It is the Roman empire.
3. This chapter has an encouraging word in it.
4. Revelation 17:14 “These will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings. Those with him are called, chosen, and faithful.”
5. In the end, Jesus wins. And if you are in Christ, then you win. In the battle against sin, the world, the devil, sickness, persecution, financial hardship, in the end, Jesus wins, and we will sin. Make sure that you are in Christ.