

Daily View

June 12, 2021

Notes on Revelation 17-18

This issue of the Daily View is for those of you who wish to keep up with the “commentary” on Revelation that serves as background for the sermons I’m preaching. As I’ve mentioned several times, the sermons are not designed to cover the book in detail – that would take a couple of years – but to draw some lessons from the book that we can apply to our lives or, at least, broaden our perspectives on the issues Revelation covers. With that said, here you go:

Chapter 17: The Judgment of the Harlot

John has seen the vision of the bowls of wrath (chapter 16), a vision which symbolizes God’s wrath poured out on those who have persecuted the saints and blasphemed His name. Chapter 17 seems to be a continuation of the vision, only in more detail. The object of God’s wrath is symbolized by a “great harlot” who sits on a scarlet beast, on “many waters.” There are details in this chapter that are difficult to interpret. However, the basic message is clear: John is describing the fall of the offending government (in his time, Rome), a destruction which comes from within.

The difficulties in interpreting certain terms in this chapter are compounded when we attempt to construe them literally. Failure to remember that the language in Revelation is primarily symbolic causes us to get hopelessly hung up trying to figure out details about heads, horns and mountains. That’s not to say that these figures are not important — they are, especially to the original readers of the document. But we must be careful because finding the literal meaning of these figures requires a degree of speculation and that’s always dangerous. We are limited by the fact that we do not know for sure exactly when John received the revelation and, therefore, we must settle for making general application. (Perhaps, that is exactly what God wants us to do).

John is told that he will see the judgment of a “great prostitute” (v. 1), also called a “woman,” in v. 18 and described as the “great city.” We have previously identified the great city with Rome or, more generally, with any civil power organized against God (the “empire”). She is pictured as a prostitute, probably because of her seductive practices toward other nations (v. 2). She has formed immoral alliances and connections and has thus reigned “over the kings of the earth” (v. 18). The vision takes place in the “wilderness” (v. 3) where the woman is sitting on a scarlet beast which has seven heads and ten horns.

She is described as wearing the garments of royalty, power and seduction (v.4). The focus of her life is abominations (NIV – “abominable things”) and adulteries. She is further described by her name, “Babylon the great,” written on her forehead (v. 5) and she is drunk with the blood of the saints (v. 6).

John was astonished when he saw her, but an angel tells him that he will learn the mystery of the woman (v. 7). That’s when it gets interesting — trying to figure out who is who and when “who” was and who is. Don’t get bogged down! Use wisdom (v. 9). Here’s my view:

The beast, we’ve already learned, represents imperial power, or any ungodly “empire” that seeks to control people. According to chapter 13, his authority comes from the dragon (Satan). He “was, and is not and is about to rise (or “is to come,” v. 8”).

This is an obvious play on words, comparing the beast with Christ and God (1:4, 8; 4:8). The beast has had power that was taken away but will arise again, only to go to destruction. Christ, on the other hand, lives forever at the right hand of God. Those who dwell on the earth marvel at the beast. Verse 9 refers to seven mountains. It was common in the literature of the time (e.g., Virgil, Cicero) to describe Rome as having begun as a network of

seven hill settlements on the left bank of the Tiber River. There may well be significance in that literal detail, or the seven mountains may be another way of symbolically describing its prominence among the nations.

In v. 10, John is told about seven kings (v. 10). It appears, on first glance, that this statement could solve the problem of the date of Revelation — just figure out who “one is” refers to and start counting. But with which king do you start? Julius Caesar? If so, then the five who have fallen would be Julius Caesar, Augustus (27 BC - 14 AD), Tiberius (14 -37), Caligula (37-41) and Claudius (41-54). That would make the one who is Nero (54 - 68). But there is also another who has not yet come and must remain for a little while (v. 10). Could it be insignificant Galba? And the eighth, the equally undistinguished Otho? Or do we ignore the three rival emperors who reigned only during 69 AD and murdered each other? If so, then the one who has not yet come would be Vespasian (69-79) and the eighth would be Titus (79-81). But those two were not notorious persecutors of Christians.

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There are problems inherent in any approach, but if you start with Augustus (technically, the first Caesar), you end up with the same set of dilemmas. The same is true if you start with Caligula (the first emperor to demand the worship of himself) or with Nero (the first emperor to systematically persecute Christians). There is simply no acceptable solution, at least historically.

It is possible that “seven kings” represents the kingdom of the “great city” (historically Rome) from its beginning. Some of the rule has passed, some is present, some future. The beast (v. 11), then, is not a literal eighth king although it “belongs to the seven” (of the kingdom of Rome), but stands distinct from the other emperors. Calling him the “eighth” may be another way of stating where and how the beast fits in with the royalty of Rome. Perhaps part of the message is that the worst of the persecution of Christians is to come, yet the beast, who appears so invincible, is on his way to destruction.

Verse 12 says there are “ten kings” that have no kingdom yet and that they gave their kingdom to the beast (v. 17). Verse 13 says “These are of one mind and they hand over their power and authority to the beast.” The ten kings are also the subject of much speculation, with no satisfying solution. But if one insists on taking the seven kings literally, then he must, to be consistent, do the same with the ten. However, we should remember that the number ten is, like the number seven, significant in Revelation, representing “completeness.” I think it makes sense to see these ten kings as provincial governors (men such as Pilate). This serves to round out the description of Roman rule and, as we’ll see, complete the picture as to the reason Rome fell. Notice that they are of one mind in giving their allegiance to the beast and they are the ones who make war with the Lamb (v. 14). Yet all this serves God’s overall purpose (v. 17) and His words will be fulfilled.

It is predicted that these ten horns *will* (note future tense) hate the harlot, with certain results (v. 16). I’m guessing that this is describing the decline and fall of Rome from the inside. Internal decay and destruction will be the main reason for the fall of Rome, proving the self-defeating power of evil. Chapter 18 will record the prophecy of the actual fall of “Babylon” and the result the fall had on the rest of the world.

Chapter 18: The Destruction of “Babylon”

An angel with great authority comes to announce the fall of “Babylon.” Babylon has always been symbolic of civilization opposed to God. This passage undoubtedly refers to Rome (cf. I Pet. 5:13; Rev. 14:8; 16:19), but we must be careful not to restrict the symbol: when men collectively oppose the God of heaven, they must expect severe judgment. And more to the point for the saints, when men, in their opposition to God, persecute the people of God, the latter must know that God will judge their persecutors (cf. 6:9-10). Their physical suffering at the hands of evil will be avenged. Such is the general message of this chapter. It uses language that is very similar to that used regarding Tyre (Ezekiel 26-28) and literal Babylon (Isa. 13, 14, 21; Jeremiah 50-51). Reading these passages will help you get a feel for the kind of language employed by John to predict the fall of contemporary “Babylon” (Rome and future ungodly “empires” that wage war on God).

In Chapter 19 we’ll notice that it is the “great harlot” who is judged (v. 2) and that “her smoke rises up forever and ever” (v. 3).

This seems to indicate that the harlot, the beast and Babylon all refer to the same thing – the “great city.” The various figures are used to create different pictures of the destruction of, in this case, Rome (but, again, including any world-order opposed to God – represented by the number 666 of 13:18). The reason given for the judgment of Babylon is identical to that given for judgment of the prostitute because she has been the cause of the sin of others: “the nations... kings have committed fornication with her” (v. 3). The world has depended upon her and has been affected by her evil. God’s people have been harmed in the process. The message to them is clear: “Come out of her my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues” (v. 4; cf. II Corinthians 6:17-7:1). The road to heaven is, among other things, a road that rejects wickedness and the pleasures of the culture in which we live. The constant message of the prophets in the Old Testament was to “come out” and return to God.

The judgment of Babylon will be complete. There will be no quarter given, for she will suffer according to the measure that she glorified herself and lived luxuriously (v. 7). In her heart, she saw herself as indestructible and indestructible, but she fails to consider the strength of the God who judges her (v. 8). It will be when she least expects it that judgment will come – in “a single hour” (v. 10). The term has nothing to do with time, but is instead a symbol of suddenness. Four plagues are mentioned here – death, mourning, famine and judgment by fire. The smoke of a burning city was the signal of its collapse, and the Holy Spirit uses the figure to describe the fall of Rome under God’s hand.

After the collapse, the nations of the world will mourn. The kings will stand at a distance, so they can avoid the plagues (v. 10), but they will mourn the fall because the source of their great riches will be cut off. The merchants will also weep and mourn over her (v. 11). They too will be deprived of the major source of financial gain, since trade will cease. Rome’s resources and wealth was beyond compare. In the Talmud it is written, “Ten measures of wealth came down into the world; Rome received nine, and all the world one.” Robert Mounce, (*New International Commentary on the New Testament, Revelation*, page 329), quoting William Barclay, supplies the following stunning facts: At one of Nero’s banquets, the Egyptian roses alone cost nearly \$100,000. Vitellius had a penchant for delicacies like peacock’s brains and nightingale’s tongues. In his reign of less than a year, he spent \$20,000,000, mostly on food. Another prominent Roman citizen, after squandering an immense fortune, committed suicide because he could not live on what remained – about \$300,000. “Small wonder that the suppliers of such gross extravagance mourned the passing of their market!” (Mounce). But it may be the sailors who will be most upset at the passing of the great city. They will throw dust on their heads, the symbol of deep mourning (vv. 17-19).

Meanwhile, heaven and the saints can rejoice because the latter have been avenged (v. 20). It was in her that the blood of prophets and saints and all who were slain on the earth (v. 24). Therefore, her judgment will be sudden and complete (vv. 21-23) and all evidence of her as a world power will pass away.