



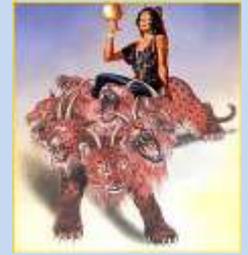
# THE BOOK OF REVELATION

## 7: HEROES and VILLAINS -

### THE WOMAN CLOTHED WITH THE SUN

### THE WOMAN CLOTHED IN SCARLET

### PART TWO



### THE WOMAN CLOTHED IN SCARLET - WHO IS SHE?

The woman, or 'Babylon', appears on five occasions in the Book of Revelation (ch.14,16-19). At the beginning of ch.17 a great angel shows to John '*the great prostitute*' and more specifically, '*the punishment of the great prostitute*' (17v1). This is the same angel who will later reveal to John the pure and holy Bride of the Lamb (21v9). We have already seen the Woman clothed with the sun of ch.12. The contrast is there for all to see.

That it is the prostitute's punishment which is specifically emphasised will be important, because as ch.17 unfolds, it seems to reveal someone at the height of all their powers. Her outward appearance could not appear more alluring and glamorous – a prostitute dressed in the most expensive and luxurious of clothes and adorned in the richest and finest of jewels (17v4) and nor more powerful, both over the Church (17v6) but indeed over the whole world (17v18). And to cap it all, she is *Satanically* empowered (17v3)! But the one with eyes of faith sees beneath the gaudy trumpery and through the outward show to the real truth, a truth which only comes through revelation – a '*mystery*' (17v5). The truth is that this woman dressed in scarlet is no glamorous and alluring siren but is '**BABYLON THE GREAT. THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.**' And her universal power will prove to be an illusion (18v10).

### 'BABYLON'

In John's day, the Babylon of his vision would easily and instantaneously be recognised as Rome. The woman is seated upon seven hills and Rome was famous for being so situated – an *urbs septicollis* (17v9). Hence Peter will write about the Church in Rome in these words: '*She who is in Babylon...*' (1 Ptr.5v13). The Woman also sits on '*many waters*', which are later identified as many nations and peoples, i.e. at the centre of a global empire (17v1,15). '*The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.*' (17v18).

### WHY 'BABYLON'?:

In both Old and New Testaments Babylon had become the short-hand way of identifying and representing the supreme persecutor and oppressor of the people of God, first Israel and then later of the Church.

John draws much of his imagery in describing the fall of his 'Babylon', from Isaiah and Jeremiah speaking about the fall of the first Babylon (Isa. Ch.14; 46-48; Jer.ch.50-51). And even the metaphor of the woman sitting on many waters which represent nations and peoples is derived from Jer.51v13, where Babylon, which was located by the Euphrates river and irrigated by a multitude of canals, is described as '*You who live by many waters...*'

Babylon also features in the early chapters of Genesis and in the attempt to build the Tower of Babel (Gn.10v10;11v1-9). In the city of Babylon, stepped pyramids (ziggurats) were a feature of their temples and the very name 'Bab-ili' (cf 'Babylon') means 'The Gate of God'. And so Babylon is any and every godless and immoral state which is the enemy of Christ and of His Church, and of which Rome at the time of John was a perfect example.

## FROM WHENCE DOES BABYLON DERIVE ITS POWER?

The woman is described as being seated not just on seven hills or upon many waters but first and foremost upon a 'scarlet beast' (17v3). This is the same 'Beast from the Sea' who first made his appearance in ch.13 and who is revealed there as the Antichrist. Prostitute-'Babylon' rides to power on the back of the Antichrist and what sustains and directs her is thus ultimately Satan, from whom the Antichrist derived his power.

## SEVEN HEADS AND TEN HORNS (17v3,9-18).

This is a poser! – 'this calls for a mind with wisdom' (17v9).

The seven heads are revealed as being not just hills but seven kings, five of whom have come and gone, one of whom is currently reigning and one of whom is yet to come.

Some commentators take this to mean seven Roman Emperors, namely Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero (past); Vespasian (present); Titus (future) who reigned briefly from 79-81 AD (cf 17v10). Domitian then becomes the eighth ruler, the 'beast' of 17v11. Yet Vespasian ruled from 69-79 AD and Domitian from 81-96 AD and we have already seen that the evidence points to the fact that Revelation was written *during* not before Domitian's reign, so he cannot be the eighth, nor Vespasian the present sixth ruler, the 'one who is'.

The theory also requires the omission of three Emperors who ruled albeit for only a few months, between the death of Nero and the accession of Vespasian. Some Roman writers disputed the validity of their reigns but others not and however briefly they ruled, they did call themselves 'Emperors'. The list also requires us to begin with Augustus and not with Julius Caesar, who although not technically an Emperor was regarded by many as being so and called himself 'Imperator'.

## Another King

And then we are introduced to a further ruler. 'The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction' (17v8,11).

That the beast upon whom the prostitute sits is the Antichrist and is the eighth king, is clear from ch.13. And it is to this eighth king (the beast / Antichrist) that ten future rulers, 'ten horns...ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom...' will pledge allegiance and give him their power (17v12-13). So what is clear is that the final eighth ruler, like the seventh, is still to come. However, mysteriously he also 'once was' and 'belongs to the seven' but 'now is not' (cf 13v3). If he 'once was' but also 'now is not', this surely tells us that he cannot be Domitian, who was living at the time of the writing of Revelation; nor if he is yet to come, can he be Domitian. In which case the identification of the heads with Roman Emperors seems to be weak. However it also suggests that the final reign of the Antichrist will arise out of the past rule / kingdom of the seventh.

Whatever the symbolism means, all the heads derive from the beast (17v3), so we are presented with seven rules or rulers, all mini versions of the Antichrist, with the actual Antichrist appearing at in the last days.

Alternatively the heads – kings may represent kingdoms, for example Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece (past); Rome (present); the reign of the Christian Emperor Constantine (future); the Anti-Christ as described in ch.13 (the eighth).

Or is the number 'seven' meant to symbolise completeness i.e. these are not individual rulers or empires but the totality of all and every ungodly kingdom of the world from the beginning of time until the Lord comes again?

The ten horns are also identified as being rulers but all as future rulers, not ones already in existence. However their identity is less important than their function and their role. They willingly yield their power to the Antichrist but this is to fulfil their God-ordained purpose (17v17). They will wage war against the Lamb and the Church but

how can mere kings defeat the One who is Lord of lords and King of kings (17v13-14,17)? But they will also turn in savage and unexpected fury upon the Prostitute-Babylon. (cf Jer.50v9-10). Her destruction will be complete, stripped of all her finery, torn to pieces (after all she *was* sitting on a beast!) and burned to ashes, so that nothing remains (17v16). Only in Christ's kingdom is true and lasting unity found, the one-ness of the Father and Son reflected in His Church (cf Jn.17). In Satan's Kingdom, the Kingdom of the Self, there can exist only mutual distrust and hatred.

## WHY IS BABYLON JUDGED SO COMPLETELY?

*'The great city of Babylon will be thrown down, never to be found again'* (18v21).

**Because of her great sin:** *'Her sins are piled up to Heaven...'* (18v5) and in particular:-

- **Persecution of the Church** (17v6; 18v20,24; 19v2).

She has revelled in her cruelty and delighted in persecuting the people of God. This is no 'collateral damage', the unintended fallout from imperial ambitions but a settled and deliberate policy. It is no coincidence that 'saint' and 'martyr' have now become coterminous. 17v6 reads literally, *'with the blood of the saints and from the blood of the witnesses/martyrs of Jesus'*. For from the Greek word for 'witness' comes the word 'martyr'.

- **Pride** (18v7)

*'In her heart she boasts, "I sit as a queen...and I will never mourn".'* In other words this is the heart of who Babylon is, a true reflection of its Satanic overlord (Isa.14v4f). This is not an aspiration or an ambition but her settled opinion of herself. The fact is that she is the mistress of the world. It is simply inconceivable even to think that her rule and reign will ever come to an end. And God has been replaced by 'Babylon'.

- **Hedonism and Greed** (17v4; 18v3,11-14,16-17)

There was a Jewish saying recorded in the Talmud that, *'Ten measures of wealth came down to the world: Rome received nine and all the world, one.'*

- **Inhumanity** (18v7,13)

She has treated the *'bodies and souls of men'* as simply another thing to be traded and disposed of at her pleasure. So indifferent is she that human beings come last in a whole list of commodities! Once again this is a literal truth, to which the slave markets of the Roman Empire would bear testimony, as well as being a description of sex without love ('prostitute'). But it is also a way of describing how people treat people when their only object is personal advancement or gain. Remember the runaway slave Onesimus, who found his way to Rome and to Paul and to Christ? The name 'Onesimus' means 'useful', the name you give to an object and not to a person. Yet in 'Babylon's' world, everyone is rated and valued by how profitable they might be – the useful business or political connection; the member of an influential family; the potential political ally; the possible threat to be removed...

- All this is summed up in the phrase that first described her – **BABYLON THE GREAT. THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.'**

*'...the great prostitute who corrupted the earth by her adulteries.'* (19v2)

That Rome was a city and an Empire like this was a fact known to many and not least to the Romans themselves. Rome called be called a 'sewer' and Tacitus describes it as the place: *'where all the horrible and shameful things in the world congregate and find a home.'*

The immorality is all too literal but it also contains a spiritual dimension. Israel at times was chastised for her unfaithfulness to her 'husband' who was God, when she turned to other gods. And the prophet Nahum uses the same metaphor to describe Nineveh, *'Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!'*

... all because of the wanton lust of a prostitute, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution and peoples by her witchcraft.' (Nah.3v1,4). This new 'Babylon' has similarly 'bewitched' the nations, literally or metaphorically (18v23), to turn away from the living God to the worship of everything and of nothing.

In fact sexual immorality and 'unfaithfulness' to God often do go hand in hand as witnessed by 'Jezebel' in ch.2 or by the events surrounding the creation of the Golden Calf in Ex.32. And sexual immorality and witchcraft are also often linked, being two ways in which women can exercise illegitimate power over others.

The golden cup by which the rulers of the world became drunk on her immorality, both literally and metaphorically – the '*maddening wine of her adulteries*' (14v8; 18v3 cf Jer.51v7), is turned against her and she will drink to the dregs the wine of God's wrath, as will all the ungodly (16v19; 14v10)). Drinking the 'cup' of God's wrath is a common metaphor in the Old Testament (Ps.75v8; Isa.51v17,21-22; Jer.25v15ff; Ezek.23v32-34; Habb.2v16). It is this 'cup' to which Jesus refers in Mt.20v22-23 *passim*.

And so the judgement, already mentioned in 17v1, will be sudden (or unexpected) and total. Politically, economically and culturally, she will cease to exist (18v1-24). Instead, in words derived from Isa.13v19-22, regarding the fall of the first Babylon, she will become the habitation of everything strange and unclean (18v2).

But there are still the righteous living in Rome and they are enjoined to '*come out of her*' (18v4) cf '*flee from Babylon!*' (Jer.51v6), to avoid sharing in her punishment. In Isa.48v20, the people of God are also commanded to depart but a different reason for flight is adduced. The exiles are called to leave Babylon because, '*The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob*' (cf Rev.19v6-7).

There may be an actual appeal to flee to avoid the catastrophic judgement about to fall- '*so that you will not receive any of her plagues*' but there is perhaps a deeper significance. The eternal temptation and danger for the people of God is to compromise and to come to terms with the ungodly society in which they find themselves. Hence, '*...so that you will not share in her sins*'. (cf 2 Cor.6v14-18).

## DOES ANYONE GRIEVE AND CARE ABOUT BABYLON'S DESTRUCTION?

Three sections of society are portrayed as being shocked and dismayed by the catastrophe that has overtaken Babylon. These are Rulers (18v9-10), Merchants (18v11-17) and Workers (18v17-19). But note that they are all portrayed as staying at a safe distance from her – they are not hurrying to ride to her rescue! '*Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry: "Woe! Woe to you, great city, you mighty city of Babylon! In one hour your doom has come!"*' (18v10).

But their grief is not for her loss but for their loss – the loss of their wealth, property and trade. '*shared her luxury...The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more... Woe! Woe to you, great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through her wealth!*' (18v9,11,19).

## REJOICE OVER HER O HEAVEN! (18v20)

Whilst others cry '*Woe*', all Heaven cries, '*Hallelujah!*' (19v1,3,4,6.) and the saints '*Rejoice*' (18v20). This is no vindictive gloating over a defeated and humiliated foe. The judgements of God, however annihilating they may be, are always '*true and just*' (19v2). No, this is joy over the final overthrow of sin and of all its accompanying cruelty and misery: joy over the vindication and deliverance of the faithful, of the Church: joy over (at last!) the uniting of Bride and Groom, the Church and the Lamb: joy at the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth as in Heaven. All the wonder of that that will mean, to be revealed in the closing chapters of John's great book.

And so the vision, which began with a prostitute, now begins to give way to a vision of the holy Bride of the Lamb and gaudy scarlet is replaced by '*fine linen, bright and clean*' (19v7-8).