



Square Halo Books

Selections from *The End: A Reader's Guide to Revelation*

REVELATION 17:1-19:10

THE GREAT PROSTITUTE, THE SCARLET BEAST AND THE FALL OF BABYLON

Revelation 17 begins a new section in which a **prostitute** is introduced whose punishment is to be shown to John. She bears the title, **Babylon** the Great on her forehead and all of chapter 18 and part of chapter 19 are devoted to a celebration of her destruction. The **prostitute** is in sharp contrast to the **woman clothed with the sun** from Revelation 12. The **woman clothed with the sun** represented the church throughout the ages. Likewise, the **prostitute** represents a people. The **prostitute** is drunk with the blood of the saints (Rev. 17:6) and so must be a persecuting power. At the time John is writing, Roman persecution has been limited, while a great persecution in Jerusalem has scattered Christians out into Judea and Samaria and eventually into the whole world (Acts 8:1-4.) She is called the **great city** which combined with the fact that she sits on a beast having **seven** heads representing **seven** hills (Rev. 17:9) has led some to believe that she is Rome. However, she is not Rome. In Revelation 11:8 the **great city** is defined as the place where the Lord was crucified. So when the woman who is repeatedly called **Babylon** the great is also defined as the **great city** in Revelation 17:18, it becomes clear that both the **great city** and **Babylon** are Jerusalem.

It should be noted that the woman is sitting on the **scarlet beast** not on its heads. This beast has **seven heads** which are seven hills. The woman, sitting on a beast having seven heads representing seven hills, is seen by some as a city sitting on seven hills, (i.e., Rome.) However, she is not sitting on the heads meaning that she is not sitting on the seven hills.

There are a number of features that require that the woman be Jerusalem in addition to her being identified as the great city, which was previously defined as Jerusalem. First, she is a prostitute. God repeatedly calls unfaithful Israel a prostitute in the Old Testament. God warns Israel not to prostitute themselves through idolatry and disobedience in Numbers 15:39. He predicts that Israel will prostitute herself to foreign gods in Deuteronomy 31:16. Israel prostituted themselves in idolatry at the high places in II Chronicles 21:11,13. Israel is compared to a prostitute, acting unfaithfully with the gods of other nations in Jeremiah chapters 2 and 3, Ezekiel 16 and 23 and in Hosea 4:12,15 and 9:1. God would not be inclined to call Rome a prostitute for being unfaithful in the same way that he would tend to call unfaithful Israel a prostitute.

The clothing the woman wears is another clue to her identity. She is wearing purple, scarlet, gold, precious stones, and pearls. A comparison of her dress with the ephod of Aaron in Exodus 39:8-14 reveals a remarkable similarity. The ephod is made of gold, blue, purple and scarlet yarn, and of finely twisted linen. On it are mounted gold and precious stones. The tabernacle in Exodus 26:1 also is made of the same colors and materials. There are some differences, but these are for a purpose.

The prostitute does not wear linen. In Revelation 19:8, fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints. Since the prostitute behaves wickedly, she has no right to wear linen.

The prostitute does not have any blue in her clothes. In Numbers 4, the most holy things from the tabernacle including the ark of the covenant were covered with blue cloths. In Numbers 15:38-40 the significance of the color blue appears to be that of consecration and holiness:

Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'Throughout the generations to come you are to make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at and so you will remember all the commands of the Lord, that you may obey them and not prostitute yourselves by going after the lusts of your own hearts and eyes. Then you will remember to obey all my commands and will be consecrated to your God.'

The **prostitute** is wearing pearls which do not appear on the ephod or the tabernacle. This is a sign of the wealth that the prostitute has received for her unfaithfulness.

Another reason that it would be difficult to hold that the great city is Rome is that the blood of the prophets is found in "**Babylon**". While it could be asserted that the blood of saints would be found in Rome, there is no biblical or historical evidence that any Old Testament prophets died in Rome. It could be proposed that New Testament prophets died in Rome and they are the prophets mentioned in the text. However, Israel was known for killing the prophets (Matthew 23:37.) Revelation 18:24 says that in this city was found the blood of all who have been killed on the earth. Rome as a recent persecutor does not fit this description.



All of the arguments above could be persuasive by themselves, but the most compelling argument is that the **prostitute** dressed in scarlet is found in Jeremiah 4 and is identified as unfaithful Jerusalem. In Jeremiah 3, Jeremiah prophecies against faithless Israel and unfaithful Judah. Israel is compared to an adulterous wife and a prostitute.

Jeremiah 3:1-3 "If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him and marries another man, should he return to her again? Would not the land be completely defiled? But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers - would you now return to me?" declares the Lord. "Look up to the barren heights and see. Is there any place where you have not been ravished? By the roadside you sat waiting for lovers, sat like a nomad in the desert. You have defiled the land with your prostitution and wickedness. Therefore the showers have been withheld, and no spring rains have fallen. Yet you have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame. Israel and Judah are like two sisters who are married to God. Both act unfaithfully and their idolatry is like adultery against God.

Jeremiah 3:8,9 I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. Yet I saw that her unfaithful sister Judah had no fear; she also went out and committed adultery. Because Israel's immorality mattered so little to her, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood.

Jeremiah 3:20 "But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel," declares the Lord.

God promises Israel that if she returns and puts away the idols that he will bless her. Judah faces condemnation and destruction because she makes a pretense of returning to God but remains unfaithful. The warning to Judah begins in Jeremiah 4:3. A powerful army will come against her from the north. The Lord proclaims judgment against Jerusalem in this prophecy in Jeremiah 4:11,14, and 16. The symbol of Jerusalem as a prostitute in a scarlet dress appears at the end of Jeremiah 4.

Jeremiah 4:30-5:1 What are you doing, O devastated one? Why dress yourself in scarlet and put on jewels of gold? Why shade your eyes with paint? You adorn yourself in vain. Your lovers despise you; they seek your life. I hear a cry as of a woman in labor, a groan as of one bearing her first child - the cry of the Daughter of Zion gasping for breath, stretching out her hands and saying, "Alas! I am fainting; my life is given over to murderers." "Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but

one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city.

The use of a prostitute dressed in scarlet in Jeremiah as a symbol of Jerusalem gives final verification that the **prostitute** in Revelation 17 is Jerusalem.

The **prostitute** is sitting on the beast having seven heads representing seven hills because she has exchanged faithfulness to God for accommodation with Rome and the wealth that cooperation with Rome will bring. The **prostitute** sits on many waters which are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages. This refers to her commercial endeavors throughout the world. Support for this is found in Revelation 18 where many people express sorrow at losing "**Babylon**" as a trading partner.

The **scarlet beast** is similar to the **beast out of the sea** in chapter 13 which also had **ten horns** and **seven heads**. He is evil both because of his similarity to the **beast out of the sea** and by his **scarlet** color. This beast once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss. This description requires that the beast be Satan. He once was, before he was bound and cast into the Abyss by Jesus (Rev. 20:1-3.) He now is not, indicating that he is not present on earth at the time John writes because he remains in the Abyss until he is released. He will come up out of the Abyss (Rev. 11:7) when he is released by Jesus for a short time (Rev. 20:3) and go to his destruction (Rev. 17:11, 20:9,10.)

The beast has **seven heads** which are seven hills (representing Rome) and seven kings. The seven kings, because they come from the same symbol (**seven heads**), must be from the city indicated by the seven hills (Rome.) The seven kings are Roman kings or emperors who persecute first Old Testament Israel and later the New Testament church. (For the identity of the seven kings, see the discussion of Revelation 13.) The beast is called an eighth king in verse 11, patterned after the seven kings. While Satan cannot directly act as an eighth king, his representative, the **Man of Lawlessness**, can do the things that are attributed to Satan. The **Man of Lawlessness** derives his power and authority from Satan, so his actions can be ascribed to Satan. If he is like the seven Roman emperors, he must have authority similar to a Roman emperor and must be a world ruler.

The **ten horns** represent ten kings who have not yet taken power who will reign and make war against the **lamb**. These are kings who reign after the Roman empire has been destroyed. They make war against the **lamb** (and his church) but are overcome. These kings not only persecute the church, they also persecute the **prostitute** (Jerusalem), bringing her to ruin, leaving her naked, eating her flesh, and burning her with fire. The attacks directed against the **prostitute** are more descriptive of how Jerusalem and the Jewish people have been treated than a description of Rome. These kings are significant world leaders or empires who act both as persecutors of the church and persecutors of Israel (anti-semites.)

By their anti-semitism, which is sometimes attached to Christian celebrations or justified by using inaccurate Christian theology, these leaders have acted to drive a wedge between Judaism and Christianity.



Historic examples of this include Russian programs that were sometimes initiated during the Easter season and efforts by Hitler and others to gain popular support for destroying the Jews by characterizing them as Christ killers. These leaders and empires have stood in opposition to Christianity and have persecuted true Christians. Their actions have contributed to the temporary hardening of Israel (Rom 11:25f.) At the end of history there will be no division between faithful Israel and Gentile Christians. All will honor Jesus together as the Messiah who saves us from our sins.

In Revelation 18, the church celebrates the fall of unfaithful Jerusalem (vs. 20) because of her crimes and because in her was found the blood of the prophets and the saints (vs. 24.) This is not anti-semitic because it is written by a faithful Israelite against that portion of Israel that has repudiated the Messiah of God. The text addresses this destruction as a future event. For the destruction of Jerusalem to be a future event, Revelation must have been written before 70 AD. The destruction of the city will be sudden, occurring in one day (Rev. 18:8) and in one hour (Rev. 18:10,17,19.) The burning of the city (Rev. 18:9,18) and the suddenness of its destruction matches Jerusalem's destruction but not Rome's.

Revelation 19 begins with praise to the Lord for avenging the blood of his servants on Jerusalem. This is followed by a song of praise to God and celebration at the wedding supper of the **lamb**. As in the wedding supper in Matthew 22, wedding clothes are provided. The wedding clothes at the wedding supper of the **lamb** are **fine linen** which represents the righteous acts of the saints. This **fine linen** was given to the bride rather than belonging to the bride. This reinforces the teaching of Philippians 2:13 that the righteousness of the saints is from God who works in them to will and to act according to his good purpose.