

THE DRAGON LADY

by Ray C. Stedman

One of the frequent questions asked about the end times is: "Will the church go through the great tribulation?" I am not going to deal at length with that question now, but we have seen in many passages of Scripture, and especially in the seven letters to the churches of Revelation, several reasons to say, "No, the true church of Jesus Christ will not go through the great tribulation." Those who truly know the Lord and who are alive when this period comes, will be caught up to be with him before the tribulation begins.

Yet all the church today is not necessarily included in that promise. All of Christendom is not the true church, in other words. There is a church that goes through the great tribulation, and we come to that matter in our studies in Revelation now. We had a hint of this in the letter to Thyatira in the 2nd chapter of this book, where the Lord describes a woman there named Jezebel who taught the people to commit immorality, and of whom the Lord said, "I will cast her and her children into great tribulation," {cf, Rev 2:22 KJV}. We get the full account of that here in Chapters 17 and 18. It is introduced in the first six verses of Chapter 17:

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. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries." Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a 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 was dressed in purple and 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. This title was written on her forehead:

MYSTERY BABYLON THE GREAT THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. {Rev 17:1-5 NIV}

We have already learned that the beast represents a western coalition of nations, headed by a great political leader who will dominate world economics in the last days. (We will see more of this beast later in this chapter). But now the apostle is called to focus on this woman who sat upon the beast. There are several clues, in fact ten of them, which are given to help us identify the woman. What does this symbol mean? Two full chapters are devoted to this. No symbol in the book of Revelation is given more identifying marks than this woman, therefore she must represent a very important factor.

Here are the clues:

First, we are told that this woman is a "prostitute." She is a harlot, or, to put it bluntly, a whore. The use of a sexual symbol indicates that physical wrongdoing, which is bad in itself in the sight of God, is a picture of an even greater evil, that is, worship of God gone wrong! It pictures unfaithfulness to God by someone who claims to honor him. A harlot is one who offers sexual satisfaction, as a wife would, but does not otherwise fulfill that role. This clue points to some organization or group that claims to worship God but is actually unfaithful to him.

The second clue given is that this woman has universal influence. She is described as "the great prostitute, who sits on many waters." We do not have to guess what that means for in Verse 15 of this same chapter John says,

Then the angel said to me, "The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples,

multitudes, nations and languages." {Rev 17:15 NIV}

Many peoples all over the earth are affected by the teachings of this harlot organization. In Verses 1 and 2 we read, "With her the kings of the earth committed adultery." She will have power over the leaders of nations -- "the kings of the earth" -- and she makes the common people "intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries." In other words, they are misled by the heady wine of religious illusion which results from the teaching of the woman.

The third clue is that she is seated upon the beast. That pictures a relationship between them. It is clear that the woman dominates the beast for a period of time. She exercises tremendous power over the political leader of these last days, but eventually Verses 16 and 17 will be fulfilled.

"The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God's words are fulfilled." {Rev 17:15-17 NIV}

All through these sections, we see constant reminders that God is in overall control. He allows things to happen, and they will actually accomplish his ultimate purposes.

The fourth clue is that the woman is obviously very wealthy and expensively adorned. She was "dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls." These are symbols, figures of divine and spiritual truths, but which are only outwardly held. They are not actually possessed, but outwardly adorn, thus making the woman very attractive to many people.

She also holds, we are told as the fifth clue, "a golden cup in her hand." Outwardly it is of gold, which is a symbol of divine activity -- it looks to be divinely given -- but it is filled with false religious concepts, "with abominable things," with spiritual adulteries, filthiness of teaching. As many commentators point out, this is intended to be a contrast with the communion cup of the New Testament, "the cup of the Lord," which is associated with the truth of God. This is a counterfeit of the cup of the Lord. It looks like it is the true thing but is not.

Then the sixth clue is given: she is called "Mystery, Babylon the Great." The word "Mystery" indicates there is something deeper here than appears on the surface. Babylon, of course, was the great city on the Euphrates River, the empire which dominated the ancient world. We see the founding of this city in the book of Genesis. It was begun as the city of Babel, founded by Nimrod, the great hunter of human souls. It became a source of idolatry for all of the ancient world. But this is not a reference to Babylon by the Euphrates because the title "Mystery" indicates something deeper. It is that which is spiritually identified with Babylon, i.e., with idolatry or spiritual adultery. Similarly, in Verse 8 of Chapter 11 we were told that Jerusalem is called "Sodom" and "Egypt" because it had become a source of wrongful teaching and corrupt practice.

The seventh clue is that she is called "The mother of prostitutes." Other religious organizations and groups follow the same errors and fall into the same idolatries and false religious teachings. She spreads wide the seeds of false doctrine throughout the world, and many groups will follow her.

Then, the eighth clue is that she is a persecutor of the true believers in Christ: "I saw the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus." She cannot tolerate any opposition that reveals the falsehood she is perpetrating. She opposes with violence and death all those who preach the truth contrary to the lie she promulgates.

Two other clues appear elsewhere in this chapter which we will consider along with these to be sure we have properly identified this woman. One is found in Verse 9, and the other in Verse 18, the last verse of the chapter. These add further confirmation to the woman's identity. Verse 9:

"This calls for a mind with wisdom [i.e. it is not something easily identifiable. One must think about it.]. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits." {Rev 17:9}

NIV}

More than dozen ancient writers describe Rome as the city built on seven hills. This was familiar terminology in the 1st century. And that identification is further confirmed by what John is told in Verse 18:

**"The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." {Rev 17:18
NIV}**

In John's day that could only be one city -- Rome. "The great city," which was the capital of the Roman Empire that dominated the whole known world of that day, literally ruled over the kings of the earth. But at that time the church in Rome was not a counterfeit church; it was a genuine Christian assembly. At the end of the 1st century when John is writing this, it was the church of the catacombs. It was persecuted and hounded and had to hide in the caves of the earth underneath the city. That probably explains the last part of Verse 6 where John tells us that when he saw the woman seated upon the beast, "I was greatly astonished." Why? Doubtless it is a great surprise to him to see that the church he knew in Rome would become a great harlot church, dominating the kings of the earth.

When we put all these clues together it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that this pictures the Roman Catholic Church. It is a church that arises during the present church age, but comes to its greatest power in the last seven years of this age, after the true church has been raptured. When we say that, we must remember that we are not talking about Roman Catholic people. We think of the church as people, but the Roman church itself teaches that the church is the clergy -- the papacy and the hierarchy -- not the people. It is interesting that Catholic scholars themselves admit as they study this section of Revelation that it is Rome which is described here, but they say it is pagan Rome. The only problem with that is that John would not have been a bit surprised that pagan Rome persecuted the saints of God. He expected that for this was common by his time. But to see the church itself persecuting the saints of God is what astonished him so.

It would be simplistic to say this describes the Roman Catholic Church and that church alone. We must remember, first of all, that there are many true saints within the Roman Catholic Church. There have been godly popes, bishops, priests and nuns through the centuries. I have met some of them; so, perhaps, have you. What we need to understand is that it is the teaching of the Roman church that is described here -- the extra-biblical teachings from pagan sources that have been brought in under the name of Christendom. They involve a seeking of earthly power or status gained by religious authority. That is Babylonianism. That is what first arose in the city by the Euphrates -- a search for earthly power and glory by religious means. The Tower of Babel was built unto heaven, and the people said, "We will make a name for ourselves." That is Babylonianism.

There are many religious groups and churches today that are afflicted by this taint. Not only the Roman Catholic Church, but also Orthodox churches, Anglican churches, Eastern churches, Western churches, Protestant churches, Independent churches, Charismatic churches, and Evangelical churches -- many of them reflect this same error. Our good friend, Eugene Peterson, who has such a gift for putting things powerfully, says it well:

Whoredom is sex connected with money. Worship under the aspect of the Great Whore is the commercialization of our great need and deep desire for meaning, love and salvation. The promise of success, ecstasy and meaning that we can get for a price is Whore-worship. It is the diabolical inversion of "You are bought with a price," to, "I can get it for you wholesale."

Verses 8 through 14 are given to an interpretation of the beast. I will not read them because we already covered this in Chapter 13. There we saw that it describes a revived form of the Roman Empire: ten European nations who give their power to one man to rule. The startling fact that I promised you when we came to this section is that the Imperial form, the emperors or Caesars of Rome, did not pass away until 1917 (the year of my birth) when the German Kaiser and the Russian Czar were both overthrown in one year. Each of these titles are ways of spelling Caesar: Kaiser is the German form; Czar is the Russian. So the imperial form, which is described in this section as the sixth form of the beast, passed away only as late as 1917. A seventh would appear for only a short time, John is told, and then the eighth, which is the beast, will come into being.

The end of that eighth form is described in verses 13-14:

"They have one purpose [i.e., the ten kingdoms, the ten nations] and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings -- and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers." {Rev 17:13-14 NIV}

When the Lamb appears, the church will be with him. Several Scriptures predict that when Jesus appears in power and great glory, the church is already with him, for, as it says here, accompanying him will be "his called, chosen and faithful followers." That is a brief anticipation of what we come to in Chapter 19, which we will look at next week.

Chapter 18 now adds further details of the judgment of the great whore. It is self-explanatory, needing little interpretation. I shall merely read it and make a few comments as we go along:

First, a great angel announces the fall of Babylon and gives reasons for it:

**After this [John says] I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. With a mighty voice he shouted:
"Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!
She has become a home for demons
and a haunt for every evil spirit,
a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird.
For all the nations have drunk
the maddening wine of her adulteries.
The kings of the earth
committed adultery with her,
and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries." {Rev 18:1-3 NIV}**

Three reasons are given for the overthrow of the great harlot. She is demonic: "She has become the haunt of every evil spirit and every unclean and detestable bird." That is doubtless a reference to our Lord's parable of the mustard seed, found in Matthew 13. There he speaks of this tiny seed, which is the church planted in the world, which grows to be a great tree and becomes a nesting place for evil birds. It pictures demonic ideas and teachings finding a place in the church. Also Mystery Babylon is said to be, as we have seen before, spiritually unfaithful (kings commit adultery with her) and materially seductive (merchants grow rich from her excessive luxuries), and for these reasons she is overthrown.

Then, in Verses 4-5, an appeal is made to the true saints that are still within this false church in the last days to come out of her.

**Then I heard another voice from heaven say:
"Come out of her, my people,
so that you will not share in her sins,
so that you will not receive any of her plagues;
for her sins are piled up to heaven,
and God has remembered her crimes." {Rev 18:4-5 NIV}**

This great religious system still retains much saving truth. One can become a true believer in the church though much error is found as well. There is enough truth there that, by the Spirit of God, someone can become saved, and some do even in that day. But now the appeal is made to come out of her, and further reasons are given for judgment:

**"Give back to her as she has given;
pay her back double for what she has done.
Mix her a double portion from her own cup." {Rev 18:6 NIV}**

This is simply the law of retribution. What you do to others will come back to you. "What goes around comes around." In this case it is doubled because of the length of time that error is promulgated.

Another reason is given in Verses 7 and 8:

**"Give her as much torture and grief
as the glory and luxury she gave herself.
In her heart she boasts,
'I sit as queen; I am not a widow,
and I will never mourn.'
Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her:
death, mourning and famine.
She will be consumed by fire,
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her." {Rev 18:7-8 NIV}**

The second reason for judgment is her arrogant, self-indulgent pride. She lavishes luxuries upon herself and takes pride in the fact that she is a queen; she does not need help from anyone.

There is something we must notice carefully here. We saw in Chapter 17 that the beast and the false prophet will turn against her and destroy her with fire. But beyond that hatred and destruction of the beast there seems to be a further judgment from God which is described in Verses 9-10:

**"When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see
the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. Terrified at her torment,
they will stand far off and cry:
'Woe! Woe, O great city,
O Babylon, city of power!
In one hour your doom has come!'" {Rev 18:9-10 NIV}**

There seems to be a sudden judgment from God at the end here. In Chapter 16, this was announced as coming at the time of the great earthquake described there. The kings who destroyed her are now terrified at a sudden and total end that comes to this great city.

They are mourning, of course, as the account goes on to tell us, not for the Whore but for their own loss.

**"The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their
cargoes any more -- cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen,
purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made
of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of
incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle
and sheep, horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men." {Rev 18:11-13 NIV}**

Their business is ruined by the destruction of this city. False religion has been good for business, but now it is all gone. It included costly ornaments, fine clothes, ornate building materials, expensive perfumes, incense, fine foods, expensive vehicles, and even slaves -- fine young men and women who are bound to serve without pay and who give up every human right and liberty out of mistaken devotion to a false system.

Verses 14-19 continues the lament of the peoples of earth:

**"They will say, 'The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your riches and splendor
have vanished, never to be recovered.' The merchants who sold these things and gained
their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and
mourn and cry out:
'Woe! Woe, O great city,
dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet,
and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls!
In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!'**

"Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, 'Was there ever a city like this great city?' They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out:

**'Woe! Woe, O great city,
where all who had ships on the sea
became rich through her wealth!
In one hour she has been brought to ruin!'" {Rev 18:14-19 NIV}**

The merchants and seamen seem terrified and amazed at this sudden judgment that comes upon this great city. Notice how many times "one hour" is mentioned. This destruction is very rapid. It seems to be a judgment by fire from God. It suggests enormous volcanic activity. Geologists have long known that almost all of southern Italy, from Rome down through the city of Naples, is volcanic in nature. Vesuvius, the great volcano behind Naples, has destroyed parts of that city in times past. So there may well be a tremendous volcanic destruction of Rome in the final days of Daniel's 70th week.

Now, in contrast to the reaction on earth, heaven rejoices. Verse 20:

**""Rejoice over her, O heaven!
Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets!
God has judged her for the way she treated you." {Rev 18:20 NIV}**

Note that the cruel treatment by Mystery Babylon goes back to the time of the apostles. Religious error has come in that has created opposition to the truth, and unleashed attack upon prophets and apostles and the saints of God.

Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said:

**"With such violence
the great city of Babylon will be thrown down,
never to be found again.
The music of harpists and musicians, flute players and trumpeters,
will never be heard in you again.
No workman of any trade
will ever be found in you again.
The sound of a millstone
will never be heard in you again.
The light of a lamp
will never shine in you again.
The voice of bridegroom and bride
will never be heard in you again.
Your merchants were the world's great men.
By your magic spell all the nations were led astray.
In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints,
and of all who have been killed on the earth." {Rev 18:21-24 NIV}**

We do not need to add anything to the solemnness of that final word. But we must not stop there. There are five more verses from Chapter 19 that belong with this:

After this [John says] I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting:

**"Hallelujah!
Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,
for true and just are his judgments.
He has condemned the great prostitute
who corrupted the earth by her adulteries.
He has avenged on her the blood of his servants."**

And again they shouted:

**"Hallelujah!
The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever."**

The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God, who was seated on the throne. And they cried:

"Amen, Hallelujah!"

Then a voice came from the throne, saying:

**"Praise our God,
all you his servants,
you who fear him,
both small and great!" {Rev 19:1-5 NIV}**

This is the first time the word "Hallelujah" appears in Revelation. There is a great Hallelujah Chorus in heaven that rejoices over the final removal of this terribly destructive church that insinuates error into the midst of truth and, in the name of God, leads people astray. Verse 3 confirms that the final judgment of Babylon is from God for it says, "The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever." That is not an earthly scene; it is eternity that is in view.

Let us now leave that solemn and sobering picture. The quarrel God has with Babylonianism wherever it may be found, not only in the Roman church but in many churches which fall prey to this error, is that "she glorifies herself" in the name of God. She teaches in the name of Christ, mingling truth with error. Saints are called to separate themselves from that root error: the hunger for earthly glory and position obtained by religious devotion. Whenever a church seeks influence by impressing people with outward splendor you have the seeds of Babylonianism present. Whenever individual Christians try to appear pious and devout while the heart runs after material gain or status, there is the silken allurements of Babylon.

In the New Testament the occasion where this begins in the church is the judgment that came upon Ananias and Sapphira. That couple seemed to be godly and devout, but what they were after was not the glory of God but self-glory. They were using an apparent act of devotion on their part in selling their land and giving only a part of the proceeds to the apostles to gain a false status in the midst of the people.

We must ask ourselves, "Why does God show us all this?" All through Revelation we are seeing the end of things that are present with us now. We are shown this because, if we see how things will end we can turn away from them now. That is the reason this book is sent to the seven churches of Asia -- that they might learn from the judgments God will bring on Babylon what is wrong with the practices they see around them throughout the church age.

Prayer

Father, how grateful we are for the wisdom of your Word. We remember that wisdom invites us to come and drink of her wine and we will be blessed, strengthened and helped. We pray therefore that we may choose not to drink from the false wine of religious error but to come and drink from the fountain of truth itself, the word of the living God, and be drawn close to the One who loves us and gave himself for us that we may be changed, sanctified, and made whole. In the name of Jesus we ask it. Amen.

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