

Revelation as Trilogy
The Return of the King
Chapters 17: The Enemy Unmasked

Introduction: Chapter 17 is one of the pivotal chapters of the Revelation and its interpretation will control the interpretation of the rest of the book. Historically, most commentators have interpreted the whore/Babylon as Rome. The seven mountains (vs. 9) are the Seven Hills of Rome. The seven kings (vs. 9) are the emperors from Agustin to Domitian. The ten kings (vs. 12) are client states that desire freedom. The difficulty with this interpretation, meaning linking this chapter directly to Rome, is that it limits God's judgment to only the Roman Empire. It once again makes Revelation a time limited book...only good for historical information. However, regardless of how one tries to tie Rome to this and the following chapter there are issues that are not easily resolved. One must strain credulity to make it all work as referring only to Rome.

The other way to view this chapter is to allow it to refer to the battle between good and evil which is always around us. This would mean that this vision connects Revelation not only with the Old Testament prophetic visions of an evil city which can be found in Jeremiah 50-51, Ezekiel 16, Nahum and Isaiah 14, with Rome in the first century, but also with the common characteristics of evil cities/civilizations across the centuries. These characteristics include royal splendor combined with prosperity, overabundance and luxury; self-trust, boastfulness, power and violence against God's people leading to oppression, injustice and idolatry. These evil cities then become the archetype for evil besetting the world.

The Story: In some ways this chapter is a digression in the story line. At the end of the last chapter we read of the destruction of Babylon. Yet, we are now given an inside look at the evil empire/city. The city is referred to as a "whore", meaning one who leads people away from wisdom/God/life and toward folly/evil/death. This concept can be found in Ezekiel 16:15 ff, Nahum 3:4, Isaiah 23:16-17 and Proverbs. The woman is seated on many waters, meaning her foundation is chaos.

John is then carried into the wilderness where he sees another woman on a scarlet beast which has seven heads and ten horns and is covered with blasphemous names. The woman is obviously wealthy and powerful because she is clothed in scarlet and crimson and holds a golden cup. The cup, unfortunately, is filled with abominations and on her forehead was "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations." The woman is also drunk with the blood of the saints. In other words, the evil city/empire is built on the oppression of God's people, and it is drunk with its own power.

The angel then offers John an explanation of the beast. First John writes that the beast "was, is now and will ultimately be sent to the pit." This simply means it once had power, no longer does because it has been defeated and then will ultimately be judged. The mountains and kings are smaller powers who are willing to ally themselves with the evil city/empire. Some of these kings are already present, while others are still to come. These kings will war with the Lamb, but as we read at the end of Chapter 16, the kings will be defeated.

This leads to one of the most interesting and yet predictable portions of the chapter, which is that evil, when it finds itself losing, will turn on itself. "And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire." This is the way of evil. There is no loyalty or real friendship. There is only a lust for victory and power.

Reflection: Evil is ultimately a self-defeating proposition. Throughout history, evil, repressive empires have always fallen to those desiring freedom, or have been destroyed from within by individuals unwilling to share power. The leaders of these empires believed that they were all powerful and that their own cunning and ability would sustain their empires. Ultimately though God always won out. Those empires fell onto the ash heap of history, while God's people survived and continued. It is never easy for the saints to remain faithful in the face of evil, yet God's faithfulness across time has allowed the story of the Lamb to continue to be told even in the most difficult of times.

Questions:

1. Where have you seen the lust for power in the world around you?
2. Where have you seen people in power who become drunk with its benefits?
3. Where have you seen evil turn on itself as it is cornered by those who would defeat it?