

The Vision of the Prostitute on the Scarlet Beast

(Revelation 17:1-6)

The restoration of the righteous rule of God over this world will take place at the return of Jesus Christ. This transfer of power from the godless world's systems to the reign of the Messiah will necessarily involve cataclysmic judgments. The series of twenty-one judgments categorized in Revelation as seven Seal Judgments, seven Trumpet Judgments, and seven Bowl Judgments will serve to break evil's grip on the world. The wicked world's corrupt systems—political, religious, and commercial—can be summarized by the name "Babylon." Ancient Babylon began as a center of oppressive political power (Genesis 10:8-9) with idolatrous, anti-God intentions (Genesis 11:9). This city and all it stood for became representative of all anti-God, humanistic hubris that continues today and will continue until Jesus returns. Revelation 17-18 describes the nature and fall of Babylon, likening Babylon to a power maddened prostitute. Revelation 17:1-6 reminds us that we live in an increasingly sinful world system, but there is hope in Jesus Christ.

The influence of the prostitute—apostate religion, though doomed, pervades the world's imagination (17:1-2).

Following John's description of the final judgments on earth the book of Revelation presents a graphic image of what the future world will hold in those brief years leading up to Jesus Christ's return. Babylon, the spiritual prostitute, will run rampant but will ultimately fall.

An angel invited John to witness the judgment of the great prostitute (17:1).

John received a message from one of the angels responsible for one of the Bowl Judgments previously described in Revelation. This angel offered to show John the judgment that would fall on "the great prostitute." It's essential to recognize that Babylon will be judged—her fall is certain. The Old Testament often referred to spiritual unfaithfulness in terms of adultery or prostitution. God considered His people to be His wife, but due to idolatry they became unfaithful and worthy of judgment (Isaiah 1:21; Jeremiah 3:6-9; Hosea 4:12). The "great prostitute," therefore, refers to spiritual unfaithfulness to God—idolatrous, apostate religion in any of its multitudinous forms. The great prostitute "sits on many waters," a phrase that the angel interprets in verse 15 as nations and people groups. The ancient city of Babylon sat astride "many waters" as physical waterways for trade and the spread of its idolatrous ideas (Jeremiah 51:13). The great prostitute, spiritual Babylon, likewise spreads her idolatrous notions throughout every nation of the world. Apostate religion pervades the world's imagination. Why the world continually rejects the truth of God and the love of Jesus Christ can only be attributed to the spiritual conflict between good and evil. For this reason, apostate religion has influenced the world since the fall of humankind and will continue to do so until Jesus returns.

The angel stated that the kings and inhabitants of the earth had engaged in adultery with the great prostitute (17:2).

The global influence of the great prostitute is evident in apostate religion's sway over both kings and people at large. The angel declared that the earth's rulers had committed adultery with the great prostitute. The earth's inhabitants had become intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries. In other words, idolatrous, apostate religion captivates the world's thinking. Our sinful hearts are all too eager to seek spiritual answers wherever they may be found apart from the truth that's in Jesus Christ. Idolatry, whether worshiping idols or self, whether embracing religion or materialism, entices the human heart. We'll accept anything instead of God Himself! The great prostitute prevails for the time being, but her doom is certain.

**The description of the prostitute—apostate religion,
though attractive, is characterized by power and persecution (17:3-6).**

Certainly apostate religion has its appeal. Otherwise the world would reject it. But like a prostitute, apostate religion entices people to fall to its charms. The great prostitute has power and, in the spiritual arena, employs persecution against God's people as one expression of that power.

John saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that had seven heads and ten horns (17:3).

What John experienced next was an enhanced prophetic state—the angel carried him away “in the Spirit” to a desert. The “Spirit” is a reference to the Holy Spirit in union with John’s own human spirit (compare Revelation 1:10; 4:12; 21:10). Desert places are frequently associated with times of testing, judgment, and the presence of evil. In that desert place John saw a woman, the great prostitute that the angel promised to show him. This woman was sitting on a scarlet beast that had seven heads and ten horns. Revelation 13:1 first introduces this beast. In that passage the beast represents a world-dominating leader, the Antichrist. The color scarlet links the beast with its bloodthirsty attacks on God’s people. This future tyrant will be characterized by blasphemy against God, being filled with blasphemous names. He will also personify the worst of seven oppressive empires symbolized by the seven heads. These empires possibly refer to Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and the Antichrist’s future global empire, all of which have posed as enemies of God’s people. The beast also has ten horns representing ten kings who will reign under the authority of the Antichrist. The fact that the great prostitute sits on the beast implies that she controls the beast. The future Antichrist will be driven by apostate religion.

The woman was clothed luxuriously and held a cup full of abominations (17:4).

The woman riding the beast was clothed in purple and scarlet, colorful garments that symbolize royalty and luxury. She was “gilded with gold” and adorned with precious stones and pearls. In other words, the great prostitute is attractive in her display of wealth and power. She also had a golden cup in her hand, a cup filled with abominable and unclean things related to her spiritual fornication. The world’s apostate religions have at times and places engaged in temple prostitution, child sacrifice, consumptive greed, and a host of other evils. The great prostitute, it appears, is the guardian of all that’s godless in the world.

The woman had the name “Babylon” written on her forehead (17:5).

At this point the great prostitute is identified with Babylon. She has a name written on her forehead. This name is described as a “mystery,” something unknown apart from divine revelation. That name is “Babylon the Great,” along with the descriptive phrase “the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth.” Babylon historically referred to a city on the Euphrates River. It almost certainly came to be known symbolically among Christians in the first century as the city of Rome (1 Peter 5:13). The fact that Revelation 17:5 refers to Babylon as a mystery makes a symbolic meaning likely. Babylon, therefore, refers to an idolatrous system, apostate religion, that could be identified with any number of cities down through history and will pervade the world until Jesus returns. Babylon the Great is the “mother,” the source of life for everything that can be designated as spiritual prostitution and earth’s abominations. This would include false world religions, perversions of the true gospel of Jesus Christ, humanism, secularism, materialism, and every other ideology and philosophy that takes the place of subservience to Jesus Christ as Lord.

The woman was drunk with the blood of the martyrs (17:6).

John took note that the woman riding on the beast was intoxicated, drunk from the blood of the saints and from the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. She was responsible for their martyrdom and was insatiable when it came to the persecution of God’s people. Apostate religion is never content with toleration. It demands control and violently opposes the truth that’s found in Jesus Christ. Given free reign, apostate religion will always seek to eliminate true faith. It’s hard for Christians today to understand why our faith is so hated, but even John marveled at the great prostitute. Babylon the Great was a stunning revelation. Her power, wealth, attractive qualities, and deadly designs stun the spiritually minded. Apostate religion makes no sense to those who have found forgiveness in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. However, we must understand that we live in an increasingly sinful world system. Nevertheless, there’s hope in Jesus Christ.