

BITTER HONEY: THE REVELATION

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CHAPTER 17: THE GREAT HARLOT BABYLON

Verses 1-2

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls of wrath came to John and said, "Come her. I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters." The topic of Revelation 17 and 18 would be the destruction of the great harlot Babylon. This vision was shown to John by one of the angels with the bowls of wrath because this judgment was the first Woe described by five of the seven bowls of wrath. The Bible described nations as harlots when they turn to other nations instead of turning to God. Israel was often described with this symbol because of her alliances and her idolatry (Ezekiel 16:15); Hosea 4:15). Gentiles could also be described as harlots. Tyre was called this in Isaiah 23:15-18. Nahum 3:4 also noted that Ninevah would be destroyed because of her many harlotries. She was the mistress of sorceries who had sold nations by her harlotries. Calling Babylon a harlot may come out of Zechariah and Isaiah. In Zechariah 5:8-11, a woman who was named wickedness was given a temple in Babylon. In Isaiah 47, Babylon was described as a sensuous woman.

The great harlot sat on many waters. These waters were gentile nations over whom she apparently exercised some control. Scripture often used water and the sea as symbols for gentile nations (Daniel 7:2; Revelation 13:1). The kings of the earth committed acts of immorality with the great harlot, and men were made drunk with the wine of her immorality. Rebellion against God took away peoples' ability to understand in the same way that wine dulled the senses. The Bible often used wine to describe both rebellion and the wrath of God. Wine was used both ways partly because people blinded themselves with sin at the same time that God blinded them in judgment. Jeremiah used the symbol of wine both ways in Jeremiah 51:7 where he commented, "Babylon has been a golden cup in the hand of the Lord intoxicating all of the earth. The nations have drunk of her wine. So the nations are going mad." The picture John painted in Revelation 17:1-2 was of a nation that caused people to rely on her instead of relying on God. By doing so, she took away their ability to know God.

Verses 3-6

John was carried away in the Spirit, and he saw a vision. Being carried by the Spirit was reminiscent of Ezekiel who was transported by the Spirit in Ezekiel 11:1 and 37:1. John and Ezekiel were both probably dreaming. John was carried by the Spirit into a wilderness. This wilderness represented the gentile nations (Ezekiel 20:35), and it was a symbol similar to the sea. John saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast full of blasphemous names. They had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet. She was adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls. She had in her hand a cup full of abominations. The woman had on her head a name which was written, "Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth." She was drunk with the blood of the saints. When John saw her, he wondered greatly. The scarlet beast with seven heads was Rome. Babylon may sit on Rome because she exercised some control over it. Babylon's cup of abominations was a symbol parallel to the cup of God's fierce wrath. The descriptions of Babylon's clothing would be picked up again in Revelation 18:12. Babylon wore articles which she purchased from all over the world. Babylon was extremely rich and powerful. Babylon's cup of abominations could be paralleled to Isaiah 51:22-23. This verse promised Israel that their cup of drunken reeling would be taken out of her hands and would be placed in the hands of her tormentors as God judged them.

Verses 7-14

Revelation 17:7-14 gave a divine commentary on the vision that John had seen. The vision was explained by one of the angels who had the bowls of wrath. Revelation 17:8 noted that the beast was, is not, and was about to come up out of the abyss to go to destruction. This was a reference to Satan who was bound in the abyss during the mixed nations. He would be released when Babylon was destroyed (Revelation 9:1; 20:1-3). The beast was also the Rome which was at the time of Christ, was not during the mixed nations, and returned as the Antichrist's empire. Revelation 17:9 identified the beast's seven heads as the seven hills and seven heads of Rome. Five kings had fallen. One was, and one was still to come. The sixth head was probably the new Babylon. This head was seen slain in Revelation 13:3. The head yet to come was the Antichrist's empire. Revelation 17:12 claimed that the beast's ten horns were ten kings who ruled with the beast for one hour. None of the kings ruled over the beast or defined its character. All collectively made up part of the beast and existed with him until the Antichrist came to re-establish Rome's power. These kings had one purpose, to give their power and authority to the beast. The mixed nations all tried to rule in place of God and in rebellion against Him. These waged war against the Lamb. Christ overcame them because He was Lord. He also overcame them because He because those with Him were the called, chosen, and faithful. Satan must be defeated because of God's elective decrees. Christ finally judged and destroyed the period of mixed nations by burning the great harlot Babylon. Then the exile of God's people came to an end.

Verses 15-18

Revelation 17:18 claimed that Babylon was the great city that reigned over the kings of the earth. Babylon was the strongest military and economic power in the world of her day. She held influence over many smaller nations. The last four verses of Revelation 17 described how God would judge this great nation. Revelation 17:15 noted that the waters where the harlot sat were gentile nations during the period of mixed nations. Revelation 17:16 said that these nations hated Babylon. They made her desolate, ate her flesh, and burned her with fire. It is hard to say why these nations hated Babylon. Whatever the reasons, verse 17 assured God's people that He was in control of their hatred. God had placed it in their hearts to unite against Babylon. The nations would continue to give their kingdom to the beast until God's Word should be fulfilled. Revelation 17:16-18 provided one possible reason why Babylon was destroyed. The ten horns and the beast hated Babylon and burned her with fire. The mixed nations and the Antichrist hated Babylon and destroyed her. Revelation 17:17 added that the nations destroyed Babylon so that they could give their kingdoms to the beast. If the nations wanted to form a united world government, Babylon would refuse. Why should the new Babylon give up her great power? Revelation 17:18 claimed that she had ruled over the kings of the earth. The nations may have destroyed Babylon to accomplish their purpose of uniting the whole world under the Antichrist.