

Notes on Revelation 17

Intro: The proper understanding of this chapter is integral to a correct understanding of the whole book. Unfortunately it is one of the most controversial chapters. Clearly John is giving clues that are intended to reveal the identity of the characters developed in the book. Just as he sought to reveal the name of the sea beast in chapter 13 by gematria, so now he seeks to identify in the beast who comes from the sea, both in its larger sense as a kingdom with seven heads and ten horns; and in its more specific sense as a single ruler who comes from the abyss. In the same way he also reveals the identity of the harlot who is destroyed by the beast and its horns.

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The judgment of the great harlot introduced

The great harlot

Does this woman stand in contrast to the glorious woman of chapter 12? Is she Rome or Jerusalem?

Other cities that have been charged with harlotry include:

Jerusalem (Is. 1:21; Jer. 2:20; 3:1,2,6,8; 5:7; 13:27; Eze. 16: (many); Eze. 20:30; 23:3, et al.; Hos. 2:5; 4:14-15; 5:3; 6:10; 9:1; Mic. 1:7; 1 Chron 5:25; Ps. 106:39).

Her harlotry lies in her marriage to God and her prostitution of herself with the kings of the earth (v. 2).

Ninevah (Nah. 3:4)

Tyre (Is. 23:16-18)

Babylon (Jer. 51:

Sits on many waters (Is this a physical feature or a reference to international influence? Cf. v. 17:15. This

harlot exercises sway over many peoples, multitudes, nations and tongues.

With whom kings of the earth commit acts of immorality

Those who dwell on the earth are made drunk the the wine of her immorality (fornication).

Sits on a scarlet beast full of blasphemous names, seven head and ten horns

Does this mean she is not a part of the beast but exercises some control over the beast? Does it mean the beast "carries" her in the sense that she is in league with him against the saints? Without the beast she could go nowhere.

Scarlet--the color of royalty and earthly splendor

Blasphemous names

7 heads--Explained later

10 horns--Explained later

Clothed in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, precious stones and pearls

Holds a cup full of abominations and the unclean things of her fornication

Written on her forehead

Babylon the great

Mother of harlots and abominations of the earth

Drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses of Jesus

The mystery explained

Is it explained with symbolic language or literal language? It would seem literal since its purpose is to explain the figurative ("I will tell you.."). How would God's people be any better off if the explanation was just another symbolic substitution?

The beast

"Was, is not, is to come". What feature of the beast evokes this description? It seems the answer lies in chapter 13. The seven-headed beast received a deadly wound on one of its heads. (Which one is not mentioned explicitly). The wound to this head was of such a nature as to destroy the whole beast. Yet, the beast did not die! He only appeared to be dead. In that sense, at the time of writing, John says of the beast he "is not".

However, this beast will appear again; he "is to come".

Comes up out of the abyss--John prophesies that the "beast" is about to come up out of the abyss in the near future. The fact that he comes up out of the abyss seems to suggest the Satanic origin of the beast's work. It is the "abyss" into which the unclean spirits asked not to be cast (Lk. 8:31). It is into the "abyss" that Jesus'

descended in his death (Rom. 10:7). It is from the abyss that the evil locusts arise to persecute the wicked in Rev. 9:1. And there the dragon is finally cast (20:1,3). Thus, coming from the "abyss" would indicate the Satanic origin of the beasts work and may also suggest "resurrection".

Goes to destruction--This suggests immediately the temporary nature of the beasts efforts. He will be destroyed.

Those who dwell on the earth will wonder--The phrase "was, is not, is to come" is said to create wonder in those who are not written in the book of life. Why? Because it suggests "resurrection". This in and of itself would be cause for "wonder" on the part of all men. One might expect that all men would worship this beast because of its resurrection. In fact, this is the basis upon which the "false prophet" sought to urge men to worship the beast (13:3-4, 14). But those written in the Lamb's book of life have come to the knowledge of the truth. They know that Christ himself is the only "resurrected" one. He is the one who was "dead but is alive forevermore" (Rev. 1:17). Thus, they will not wonder at the idea of a beast who "was, is not, and is to come". They know that the "resurrection" is not real but a deceptive wonder designed to deceived the unbelieving. His seven heads are seven mountains upon which the woman sits

Suetonius records that during the time of Domitian there was a celebration called "Septimontium", the feast of the seven-hilled city was held annually.

Roman poets often spoke of the seven hills of Rome

An ancient coin from Vespasian's day shows the goddess Roma sitting on seven hills This points seems to be one almost all commentators grant, viz., the seven mountains symbolize the hills of Rome upon which the woman sits. But is the woman Rome?

They are seven kings: (past world powers?, individual rulers?)

The context favors seven "kings" of the Roman empire, which stand for all of its rulers.

How do we establish a starting point? There are three views:

Staring with Julius Caesar

Five have fallen--Where do we start counting? Gentry affirms that most ancient writers began with Julias; but some start with Augustus. Suetonius and Dio Cassius give lists beginning with Julias. Josephus calls Augustus the "second" and Tiberius the "third", and "Gaius" the fourth emperors in "Antiquities". Writings like "2 Esdras" and "the epistle of Barnabas" seem to include Julias in their calcalations involving emperors. If we start with Julius, five have fallen (Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula (Gaius), and Claudius).

One is (Nero) This dates the book in the reign of Nero. Before A.D. 68. and the destruction of Jerusalem. This suggests the possibility that Revelation could deal at least in part with the cloud coming pronounced by Jesus numerous times in the gospels against Jerusalem. This also fits very well the nearness of Jesus' coming.

One is to come--Should we at this point omit the barracks emperors or the usurpers? Though ruling "a little while" they were recognized as Caesars by Seutonius. Galba was the successor of Nero and reigned only a few months. If we omit them, the next king would be Vespasian who ruled for almost ten years, 69-79 (hardly a little while?).

An eighth--Here John identifies the exact identity of the beast who was, is not, and is to come. He is not necessarily "the" eighth indicating succession, but "an" eighth ruler, indicating another head or Caesar yet to come indicating that the beast is by no means dead. This is the beast who "comes from the abyss and goes to destruction (17:8), the one who "wages war with the two prophets and overpower them in the streets of Jerusalem" (11:8). This is the beast whose appearance suggests a "resurrection" of the beast from the dead. His appearance revives the beast's destructive efforts against the saints.

He is of the seven--What does this mean? He properly belongs to those seven heads mentioned before, one of which was slain? That he is one of them in character or power?

He goes to destruction--He, as was pointed out earlier, is not as Jesus, "alive forevermore".

If we start with Augustus:

Five have fallen--Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero

One is--Either Galba, or Vespasian

One is to come--Titus

An eighth--Domitian

If we start with Tiberius: The basis for this terminus is the historical frame of reference found in chapter 12 and 13. The seven-horned beast obviously has an existence prior to the coming of the man-child; yet it does not have a part in Satan's purpose until after the ascension of the man child. The heads of the beast perhaps should be put in that historical frame. The church was established during the reign of Tiberius.

Five have fallen--Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero (the head who received the wound of the sword), Galba.

One is--Otho

One is to come--Vitellius

An eighth--Vespasian renews the work of Nero in destroying the Jewish nation. He is the beast from the abyss. He was (in the person of Nero), is not, is to come (He comes to finish the work started by Nero of destroying the holy city; he completes the desolation of the city).

The ten horns are ten kings

Kings who have not yet received a kingdom (thus those destined to be kings in the future). They received authority "as kings with the beast" for one hour. These must be the "kings of the earth" mentioned in Ps. 2 and Ac. 4, men like Herod and Pontius Pilate who were subordinate rulers of the empire.

These have one purpose. They give their authority to the beast. They cooperate with its purposes. Thus, they will join the beast in waging war with the Lamb and will be

defeated. Cf. again Ps. 2:1ff "the kings of the earth take their stand against the Lord and his Christ".

These are not future Ceasars but kings who rule contemporaneously with the beast in its destructive purposes.

The ten kings and the beast

Here the beast cannot be the empire, for the empire itself was constituted by other potential kings who cooperated with it; thus the beast here is the one who "comes from the abyss" "an eighth" which is "of the seven". John is identifying those who worked together to destroy the harlot!

They hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her up with fire. Here is a graphic description of complete desolation of some city.

They execute the purpose of God by having a common purpose and by giving their kingdom to the beast until the words of God should be fulfilled. I.e. they will cooperate with the beast until the harlot is destroyed. This is a matter of prophecy; thus they unintentionally fulfill the words of God.

The woman

The great city which reigns over the kings of the earth.

Surely, the city that ruled the kings of the earth is in one sense obviously Rome.

However, in a spiritual sense it was Jerusalem that reigned over the kings of the earth in exercising their will to kill the Christ and his followers. It is also Jerusalem which is identified in 11:8 as the great city where also, in addition to God's prophets, their Lord was crucified.

Because of this she is deserving of punishment from God.