



“The Lamb Will Conquer Them”

Revelation 17:1-18

The Book of Revelation is full of challenging passages, and none more so than chapter 17. In this portion of the vision, what John *hears* becomes progressively more prominent than what he *sees*. The section is dominated by an accompanying angel who explains to John what he is seeing. This pattern will continue through the first part of chapter 19. In chapter 17, John describes the nature of Babylon, chapter 18 depicts its destruction, and chapter 19:1-10 gives heaven’s response to Babylon’s destruction.

In chapter 17, John is returning to the final two bowls of God’s wrath for the purpose of providing greater detail. There he saw the destruction of Babylon (symbolic of all the world’s wicked kingdoms). Once again, John’s first readers would have immediately thought of Rome. And, as previously seen, the vision is communicated in such a way as to allow future generations to apply these words to their own situation. Like so many Christians throughout the world, John’s original readers felt small and threatened before the power of mighty Rome. And thus the vision of the Lamb’s triumph was the hope to which they would cling, the same hope for every generation of Christians until the Lord returns.

The conclusions I present here are not new or novel but, rather, stand in line with the Reformed consensus and beyond that to the era of the Church Fathers of the first four centuries (though there was a variety of views among them). Though some of the details are contested, the heart of this passage is a statement that is gloriously clear and comforting for every generation of Christians: “They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful” (vs. 14). The Lamb wins! That is the core word of encouragement throughout the Book of Revelation.

I. The Vision of the Great Prostitute and the Scarlet Beast (Vv. 1-6b)

Vs. 1 – An angel comes to John and tells him that he is going to show him the destruction of Babylon. Remember that Babylon is symbolic for all the world’s corrupt and wicked kingdoms. Already, John has seen the destruction of Babylon but, in keeping with the pattern of recapitulation in Revelation, he is shown her destruction once again in greater detail. That she is “seated on many waters,” indicates her dominion over “peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues” (vs. 15).

Vs. 2 – Once again, idolatry is portrayed as sexual immorality and adultery. The nations have joined themselves to the great prostitute who corrupts them with all manner of wickedness.

Vs. 3 – John is taken to the wilderness from where he sees Babylon the Harlot sitting upon a scarlet beast. This corresponds to Isaiah’s vision concerning “the wilderness of the sea” (Isaiah 21:1) in which he saw horsemen, one of whom declared “Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the images of her gods are shattered to the ground” (Isaiah 21:9). The beast upon whom the Harlot rides is “full of blasphemous names with seven heads and ten horns.” This is clearly the first beast which John saw emerging from the sea which represents the corruption of human government (Revelation 13:1-6). The beast’s scarlet coloring, along with his seven heads and ten horns, shows it as corresponding to the “great red dragon” (Revelation 12:3). Satan is the animating power behind all the wickedness of the nations and their opposition to God’s people.

Vs. 4 – Babylon the prostitute is beautiful in outward appearance. She is depicted as being adorned with great wealth. In this way she is irresistible to those who seek wealth and power and status. But it is a wicked illusion for she is ultimately filled with blasphemies. These details “provide a preview of the precious imports by which Rome enriches the merchants of the ancient world (Revelation 18:12). Her appetite for the finer things of life is voracious, so her fall will plunge the world’s entrepreneurs into mourning for a once-thriving and insatiable consumer economy, now crashing all around them (Revelation 18:11-17).”¹

- Satan is a counterfeiter. He offers the world wicked parodies of God and God’s blessings. There is a remarkable and ironic contrast between the prostitute and the bride of the Lamb whose true beauty John beholds in chapter 21. She too is adorned with gold and precious stones and fine linen. But her purity (dazzling white linen) is set against the scarlet of the beast.

¹ Dennis Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001) p. 245

- “The strongest connections here are formed by the powerful binary contrast between the city-woman Babylon and the city-woman New Jerusalem, both of which are shown to John by ‘one of the seven angels’ of the bowls (17:1; 21:9). The first sits in the desert, depends upon the ultimately destructive power of the beast, is adorned with luxury gained from oppression and will meet an untimely end. The second rests on a high mountain, is sustained by the live-giving power of God, is adorned by the gifts of grace and will endure forever (21:9ff).”²

Vs. 5 – Now the prostitute is defined more fully as the name on her forehead is revealed. Four times the name of the beast is found upon its follower’s foreheads (Revelation 13:6; 14:9; 17:5; 20:4). Likewise, the followers of the Lamb are depicted four times as having his name upon their foreheads (Revelation 7:3; 9:4; 14:1; 22:4). This is a picture of the loyalty which each person offers either to the beast or to the Lamb. Here, the prostitute’s name is a window into her identity. Though there is some disagreement, it is best to take “mystery” as a modifier helping to describe the title.³ So, the ESV’s rendering is likely the best option. The mystery in this instance should not be taken as referring only to end-times events but also to the “ironic manner” or “unexpected way in which the kingdom of evil will begin to be defeated: that kingdom will turn against itself and start to self-destruct even before Christ returns (vv. 8-18).”⁴

“Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations” – Here the prostitute is revealed as Babylon, the symbolic name for all wicked kingdoms on Earth. She is drunk on the blood of the saints (**vs. 6**). Again, these are kingdoms which have persecuted God’s people. “Babylon the great” echoes Daniel 4:30 where the title is used to illustrate the arrogance of Nebuchadnezzar against God.⁵ It was also a title used for Rome (1 Peter 5:13). Indeed, John’s original readers would have immediately thought of Rome under whose power they had suffered so much.

- “mother...of the earth’s abominations” – As a “mother,” Babylon the great reproduces her wickedness in others. Both Babylon (168 BC) and Rome (AD 70) destroyed Jerusalem and desecrated the temple. This act became symbolic for the totality of the world’s opposition to the Lord.
- “drunk with the blood of the saints” – God allows the beast to “make war against the saints and conquer them” (Revelation 13:7). As we will see however, the agents of Satan will ultimately be kept from wiping out God’s people and will instead turn on each other. The cry of the martyred followers of Jesus will be answered (Revelation 6:9ff).

II. The Vision Interpreted (Vv. 6c-18)

Vs. 6c – John marvels at what he sees (literally, “I marveled a great marvel”). His wonder is likely a mixture of fear and confusion – “What a frightful enemy! How will the church survive such wicked opposition?”

Vs. 7 – The angel calms John’s fears by explaining the “mystery” of the prostitute and the beast that carries her.

a. The Scarlet Beast (Vs. 8)

Vs. 8 – The angel first explains the beast which he describes as “was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit.” The beast is a counterfeit of the true God “who is and who was and who is to come” (Revelation 1:4). It is also a wicked parody of the Son who is “the living One,” who died but is now “alive forevermore” (Revelation 1:18). The beast has not yet risen from the abyss though its influence is felt throughout the world. “Its oppressing power is still restrained in contrast to the coming day when the beast will come out of the pit with power not only to attack but also to ‘overcome’ the saints 13:7).”⁶ John has already been shown that final conflict (Revelation 16:13-16). Unlike the Lord’s death which was followed by glorious resurrection, the beast’s rising from the pit will be followed by destruction rather than victory.

Tragically, the beast will be joined in destruction by all those who chose loyalty to this world and its kingdoms, those whose names were not written in the Lamb’s book of life. Notice the acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty in the salvation of his people as the angel specifies that the Lamb’s book of life was composed “from the foundation of the world.” They will marvel that the beast is destroyed, so enamored were they with its power and wealth.

² Ian Paul, *Revelation*, TCNT (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018) p. 278

³ Beale, Osborne, Ladd, Michaels, Chilton, Mounce, etc.

⁴ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) p. 858

⁵ Grant Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) p. 612

⁶ Dennis Johnson, p. 248

b. The Seven Heads (Vv. 9-11)

Vs. 9 – Wisdom is needed to understand the symbolism of the beast’s seven heads and ten horns. The seven heads are symbolic for “the seven mountains on which the woman is seated.” John’s original readers would certainly have thought of Rome which was known as the city of seven hills. In prophetic imagery, mountains were often associated with power (Daniel 2:35, 44-45; cf. Revelation 14:1). Through Jeremiah, God called Babylon a “destroying mountain” (Jeremiah 51:24-25). The number seven was symbolic of completeness. So, authority was given to the beast to rule temporarily over “every tribe and people and tongue and nation” (Revelation 13:7).

Vs. 10 – Not only are the seven heads symbolic for seven mountains, but they also symbolize seven kings. This sort of flexibility is common in prophetic symbolism. The seven mountains now become seven kings, five of whom have already fallen with another one yet to come. Many attempts have been made to draw correspondence between the seven kings with seven Roman emperors. But given the actual numbers and the ambiguity of some of their titles, such attempts have yielded a rather long list of options.

Vs. 11 – These interpretive challenges only increase when the angel tells John that “one of the seven” (or one “descended from” the seven) along with an eighth king will succeed the seventh. All of these kings (mountains) will go down to destruction. With all of this we are left feeling the need for an interpretation of the interpretation!

Contemporary attempts to locate John’s symbolism as being fulfilled in 20th or 21st century events (often centering on the United States and the current state of Israel) have been met with frustration, confusion, and the constant need for readjustments. It is a reminder that we do not interpret Scripture with newspapers. We interpret Scripture with Scripture.

But the solution may be rather simple if we understand that the message of the seven or eight kings is not dependent upon fixing it to singular events or persons in a time yet to come, but as patterns experienced repeatedly. As we’ve already seen, the beast’s influence over the nations is temporary. This is illustrated in the angel’s mention that five of these “kings” have already fallen. The beast’s time in the sun is drawing to an end. The Lamb is ready to lower his iron scepter.

“The one king who ‘has not yet come’ and must ‘remain a little while’ shows that, though the dragon has been decisively defeated by the blood of the Lamb and therefore ‘has only a short time’ (Rev. 12:11-12), nevertheless the church must be prepared to endure further suffering... This last battle is pictured in the future coming of the beast out of the abyss as an eighth king, who belongs to the seven, at least as the climactic expression of their arrogance toward God and hostility toward his people.”⁷

c. The Ten Horns (Vv. 12-14a)

Vv. 12-13 – Again, we see the flexibility of biblical prophetic imagery as the ten kings are now depicted as ten horns. Horns, like mountains, were a common symbol of power. Their limited reign is depicted as a span lasting only an hour. These wicked kings and kingdoms derive their power and malice from the beast to whom they have abdicated whatever authority they had (vs. 13).

Vs 14a – “They will make war on the Lamb” – While the vantage point has changed in various ways throughout John’s vision, the story remains the same. The followers of the Lamb must persevere under trials and persecutions. The wicked forces once restrained will be released near the end of the age, and the dragon and his servants (the beast and the prostitute) will work their evil against the church. But, in the end, the enemy’s destruction and the Lamb’s victory (and that of the church) is sure.

d. The Destruction of the Prostitute (vv. 15-18)

Vs. 15 – That the prostitute sits upon many waters is symbolic of its world-wide influence.

Vs. 16 – In a dramatic turn of fortune, the ten horns (mountains, kings) will turn on the prostitute. They will end up hating the prostitute and focus their malice upon it.

Vs. 17 – It is the Lord himself who, in his sovereign power over all things, will turn the hearts of these wicked forces against the prostitute to whom they were once so loyal. Even the wicked will end up doing the Lord’s bidding! The destruction visited upon the prostitute and beast echoes the covenant curses God visited upon Israel due to her idolatry and immorality (Ezekiel 16:37-41).

⁷ Dennis Johnson, p. 251

Vs. 18 – In the end “the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth” will be plundered and put to ruin by the very ones it once intoxicated with its immorality, luxury, and pride. Satan’s kingdom will be divided against itself and will collapse entirely.

III. The Conquering Lamb

Vs. 14 – “They will make war on the Lamb and he will conquer them...” – This is the center of the passage. Whatever we make of some of the interpretive particulars, this much remains abundantly clear: The Lamb wins! He conquers Satan and all his allies. They will crash down in total defeat for the Lamb is “Lord and lords and King of kings.” There are no contenders for the throne. Even those who sought to destroy the Lamb and his church will only end up doing his sovereign bidding to bring about their own demise. Notice how the church is swept up into the Lamb’s victory as he is joined by those who are “called and chosen and faithful.” The beast’s efforts to destroy the church will meet with utter failure. God’s chosen people whom he has called to himself will remain faithful through the storm of persecution and be brought all the way home to that everlasting city, the great bride of the Lamb.

“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away’” (Revelation 21:2-4).