

Sermon 50: Revelation 17:7-18: Satan's Divided House Cannot Stand: Part 1

OUTLINE

The mount of the prostitute
The downfall of the prostitute

INTRODUCTION

It was Jesus who said that a house divided against itself cannot stand, Matt. 12:25, and then, 'And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand?' Revelation chapter 17 which records the future fall of Babylon, the city of humanity who revolts against God and follows after Satan's seductions. This city which is an instrument of Satan will itself be destroyed by Satan, v16, 'And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire.' The prostitute bride of the beast who was used to seduce the nations into solidarity with the beast will itself be destroyed by the beast. This is the opposite to Christ who redeems, cherishes and dies for His bride, not sells, uses and kills her. Satan's house will be divided against itself and it will fall. The church is shown this picture in order to remind the saints who are being tempted and torn of the sovereignty of God. Woven into this graphic picture are two very important truths. Firstly, the saints are safe by the election of God and have their names written in the Lamb's book of life, v8. This is a truth that comes with assurance and responsibilities. And secondly, it is God who puts it into the hearts of the 10 kings to destroy the harlot, v17. Once again this gives assurance and responsibilities. There are lots of different views on the beast and the harlot, but no matter your view, these are the take away truths.

The mount of the prostitute

We begin with John's rebuke for ogling at this scene, v7, 'But the angel said to me, "Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her.' There are several reasons why John may have been marvelling. He may have been shocked. That is, that when he was shown the truth behind the mask of first century culture, it was more beautiful and more vile, more insidious and more satanic than he had realised. He could have been fearful. We see that the prostitute was drunk on the blood of the saints and this has severe ramifications for the church. This is a picture of power and intimidation. He might have been seduced by the sexuality and extravagance of the picture. He may have been impressed and fixated. The word marvel is the same word used to describe the effect of the beast upon the unbeliever, v8. All of these responses are understandable and all of them are inappropriate for Christians.

The angel is going to explain the mystery, but even after the explanation there is no consensus about the meaning. Who is the beast, when will the beast arise, who are the ten kings, there are many different answers to these questions. Let us review some of the different views.

There are those views that see the beast devouring the prostitute as a past event of the first century. Firstly, there are those who see Babylon as Jerusalem and the beast as Rome. This view points out that the cup the prostitute is drunk upon is the blood of the saints, and tied to 16:6 this is the blood of prophets and saints, i.e. OT saints and this could only have been done by Jerusalem. Her being seated on many waters and making the whole world drunk relates to her proselytizing from all nations. Her mount is Rome and it is Rome who

finally destroys Israel and Jerusalem in 70 A.D. This view has some interesting points but is not convincing because Revelation was written in the 90s not 60s, and the descriptions of her influence over the kings of the whole earth, V18 most certainly do not fit with Jerusalem.

Then we have the Historicist view that sees the Roman Catholic Church as the main enemy of the book of Revelation. Roman Catholicism is identified as riding the state of Rome. Her robes are scarlet and she is responsible for about 50 million martyrs. She is the mother of cults and heresies and has a worldwide influence. The beast who was, is not and is to come is past pagan Rome, soon to be Christian Rome, and finally papal Rome. And the 7 kings are the 7 forms of rulers in Roman history Kings, consuls, decimvirs, dictators, caesars, Christian emperors and finally popes. The 10 kings who rise to kill her are thought to be either the 10 barbarian states who overthrew the Roman Empire or a future overcoming of the papacy. This view always impresses for creativity and specificity but we hope to demonstrate that the premises on how to read these visions are wrong.

Then there are views which see this vision as indicating something future.

The Dispensational view believes that these visions are describing what happens on earth after the Rapture. That there will be a revived Roman Empire that will rule for the first half of the Tribulation. And that this will result in a single church/religion. But half way through the tribulation the political and military powers will overthrow the single world religion and the antichrist will arise and exalt himself as God. The 10 kings are the 10 toes of Daniel's statue which enact this subjugation of religion.

I however am persuaded of the symbolic reading.

As we continue looking at this vision the lens of counterfeiting is still going to serve us best as we proceed. V8, 'The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.' John is revealing a mystery and makes a threefold description of the beast being the one who was, is not and is to come. This obscure reference has excited much speculation and been used to try and work out where things are on a timeline as if it were code. So options such as pagan, Christian and papal Rome have been put forward, but counterfeiting is our best help here. These details are not being given to help us decipher the beast's identity, in the first century context there would have been no doubt to this being Rome, instead we should read these details as continuing the blasphemous counterfeiting of Christ. God is revealed as the one who was, is and is to come and this appellation mocks it. Some have said that it seems to be mocking Christ who was living, died and yet lives again. The thought is that because the beast sustains a mortal wound, this is indicated in 13:3, and is what is communicated in the words 'is not', as in not presently risen and trampling the saints. The idea of 'is to come' refers to the rising from the bottomless pit, but this will be a short lived rising which will be followed by destruction. The beast is being revealed as the one who Christ conquered at His death and resurrection who is presently restrained until that final time he arises and goes to destruction. However, because we believe Revelation reveals repetitive patterns that typify life until Christ we allow for a first century fulfilment of uprising which anticipates a final and climactic fulfilment. John is preparing the first century church for what is about to break out upon them, but he is also pointing to events that bring in the end. In v14 we can clearly see that the rising of the beast is joined to the final battle, but we can also see from the words 'and is about to

rise' speak of an impending rising. John's observation that many antichrists will come is help to us here.

When the beast rises people will marvel. In the first century context it may be that after Nero, the last blood heir to the Roman throne died and we see a period of deep uncertainty that the rising of Vespasian and the reign of his sons Titus and Domitian bring a settling time to Rome and re-instil confidence in Rome as the saviour of the people. Domitian himself insisted on being acknowledged as divine and well fits the idea of the beast. But more important than who the beast is, is who marvels and follows and accepts the number of the beast. John reveals that there is a divine reason why some follow the beast and others do not, because the names of the saints are written in the Lamb's book of life.

V8 gives us 3 descriptions of the unbeliever. Firstly, they are described as the dwellers upon earth. This description is used in contrast to those who are in heaven e.g. 144 000, 14:3. Those on the earth refer to the unbeliever, those who align themselves with the beast and persecute the church.

6:10, 'They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"'

8:13, 'Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!"'

11:10, 'and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth.'

13:8, 'and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.'

13:14, 'and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived.'

They are those whose home is here, whose citizenship is here, those whose goal is not the creation but this world and its fallen ways.

Secondly, we are told that their names are not written in the Lamb's book. This book we are told is the book of life indicating who will receive life; and that this book exists from the foundation of the world. When faced with an all-powerful symbiotic power of seduction and oppression this is the sort of security you need to know about. God has set His love upon you in Christ from eternity past, Eph. 1:4-5. He is a God who does not change His mind or weak so that He can be forced to readjust His plan. As Paul puts it those whom God predestines He calls, justifies and will glorify. Based on Rev. 13:14, those whose names are in the book of life are also those who are not deceived and do not follow the beast but follow Christ. Believing the truth is a proof of whose names is in the book of life, and another is perseverance. We cannot take a false sense of security and do nothing, no the book of Revelation is written not for us to sit back and do nothing but to strive to endure and be holy with the confidence that God is in control. His sovereignty does not negate our responsibility but enables, sustains and ensures its effectiveness. God uses the means of our endurance to bring about His eternal plans.

Thirdly, they are those who marvel, they are the ones whom God sends strong delusion that they should believe the lies they want to believe, 2 Thess. 2:11.

V9, 'This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated.' The traditional reading is to say that the 7 mountains are the 7 hills upon

which Rome was built. Minority views have suggested the 7 hills of Jerusalem or other cities. However, since John is pointing to something that is soon to be fulfilled and something that will occur towards the end what begins with Rome may not necessarily continue in the form of Rome but shift in form. It is for this reason that the spiritual approach tends to downplay any literal aspect to seven and rather see it as symbolic. So just as the 7 churches were representative of the whole church in Asia Minor in the first century and yet still of all time, so too these 7 mountains are seen to be representative of all kingdoms and to picture the beast's aeonic despotism. I adopt the symbolic approach but recognise that revelation is framing future realities in familiar forms so that the beast has echoes of Nero and the Beast of Rome. We would highlight these as echoes so that we would not limit the meaning to a first century fulfilment.

V10-11, 'they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction.' Here the symbolism of the book of revelation bunches up; the 7 heads of the beast are the 7 mountains which are 7 kings. This in the first instance should warn us against a single detail for separate meaning approach which typically characterises the literal where possible approach. The interpretations for these 7 kings are legion. The most common approach is to try and line up the 5 heads who have fallen with dead Caesars, the 6th is the present one during the time of writing, and the 7th will arise. This is the idea but there is no consensus on how this should be done. For example, do you include Julius Caesar who was not technically an Emperor, do you include the three emperors who reigned for short periods between Nero and Vespasian?

Another view is to view the 7 kings because they are mountains as 7 kingdoms. The 6th would have to be Rome, and the fifth to the second must correspond with the four beasts of Daniel. So you would have to guess at the first which could be Egypt or Assyria; and the 7th and eighth. Given that the eighth appears to be in keeping with the 7th it is either a resurrected 7th or one very similar to the 7th for this reason some have put Christian Rome and then Papal Rome as the 7th and 8th.

These views leave you with a first century interpretation or a Catholic one, but have no relevance to the end of the age which the text is intended to speak to.

The symbolic interpretation seeing that the beast when it arises in chapter 13 is an eclectic mix of all the beasts of Daniel indicating a transcultural influence of the devil, sees the 7 heads as the collective heads of Daniel's beasts. Babylon, Medo-Persia and Rome had one each, but Greece had 4. 7 is always used symbolically in the book of Revelation. There may have been a clear link to Rome apparent to first century readers that we can no longer state with certainty but that need not worry us. Just as the heads of Daniel's beasts would have spanned many centuries so with these heads.

In verse 11 we have another shift in reality as the beast with 7 heads becomes an eighth head who is the beast, 'As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven.' It is the 8th head which is what we call the man of lawlessness and the end time antichrist. The final antichrist will be an embodiment of the godless kingdoms of the earth all rolled into one.

V12-13, 'And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. 13 These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast.' Once again many have sought out the exact identity of these ten kings seeing them as representing 10 nations. However, if we look back when the beast first arose and we see

that God gave authority to the beast 13:5-7, even to oppress the saints, we take the number 10 as a number of fullness, a number that indicates what is put in another place where the devil is loosed and able to deceive all the nations to wage war on the church, 20:8. We see in v14 that these are the nations which will wage war on the lamb in the final battle, v14.

V14, '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.'" Once again God the author of Revelation gives us a spoiler. We are given a picture of the great composite beast and all the nations of the world coming in war against the Church and God gives away the ending. He tells us who wins. The Lamb conquers, for He is the king of all kings and there is none stronger than Him. We are also told of those who will return with Him, those who have already died as martyrs, these are described as called, chosen and faithful. What wonderful descriptions.

We are called, this means that we have been drawn by God's power to salvation. our salvation is not something that we have designed by our own hands and done by our own doing but God sought us when we were not seeking Him and in His grace He drew us to faith in Christ.

The notion of chosen goes with the notion of election and having our names written in the Lamb's book, v8. This designation speaks of God's sovereignty in saving us, but it also reminds us of Israel who was chosen by God to declare His glory to the nations. We are chosen and with the purpose of glorifying God.

Faithful reminds us that these who come with Christ are those who have died in faithful martyrdom. They have been reigning in the intermediate state and now they come with Christ to witness His final victory against all evil.

These descriptions are deliberate and not merely incidental they remind us of our security, the fact that God is in control and of what is expected of us when we meet this enemy, trust in God and be faithful witnesses.