

Mystery: A Prostitute's Murder (Part One)

Revelation 17:1-18

Have you noticed the great divide that is growing not only in our country, but also among the peoples of the world? On the one hand, there are those who believe there is great evil in this world and this evil finds its root in the hearts of mankind. This, of course, makes the other side angry, for they are far more optimistic. They believe man is born good with an unlimited potential for saving our planet. Here are a few examples. Michael Jackson sang, "We are the world. We are the children. We are the ones to make a brighter day." The Dalai Lama added, "My true religion is kindness." Mahatma Gandhi advised, "You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean. If a few drops become dirty, the ocean does not become dirty."

What is behind these great hopes for the future? One powerful factor is the New Age Movement, which is a vast smorgasbord of beliefs and practices from which each New Ager can fill his tray with whatever he finds appealing. As such, it is inherently self-centered—a "Have It Your Way Religion" perfectly suited to the tastes of modern man. Most of its beliefs find their roots in Eastern religion such as the belief that God is in everything (pantheism), that all is one (monism), that each person is his own god (idolatry), that each person's experience is the test for truth (not an outdated book like the Bible), and that there is no evil in the world (only spiritual immature acts that are paid for through the process of karma and reincarnation.)

Among its promoters are Stuart Rose, Deepak Chopra, and Oprah Winfrey who was raised a Baptist, but no longer believes Jesus is the only way to God. This is the great weakness of the movement—their denial of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. We ourselves have had many blasphemous comments posted on our website recently cursing God and His people. Why? Because of the evil spirits that have turned so many hearts against the Lord and His Christ, promoting in their place a new age religions and practices.

All of this makes it clear that the New Age Movement is nothing new. It is ancient Babylonian occultism in modern dress—the false religion which has controlled the world since the beginning, and is now fighting for a foothold in the Church and hearts of Christians, while at the same time paving the way for Antichrist. So, do not be taken in! No matter how convincing the lies, remember: There will never be a brotherhood of man without the Fatherhood of God, and we will never enjoy the Fatherhood of God apart from the love of His Son, Jesus Christ.

How does God feel about this movement? In Revelation 17, He condemns it calling it "Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes." Let us look at four reasons for this judgment.

1. THE MYSTERY OF THE PROSTITUTE

In keeping with his assignment to "prophesy again about many people, nations, tongues, and kings," John flashes back to another dynamic behind the Beast's kingdom. One of the angels with charge over the bowl judgments urges him to see "the great prostitute who sits on many waters." From this we immediately know that it is no mere woman John is describing,

for no woman could sit on many waters. Normally, the rule of interpretation is “When the plain sense of Scripture makes good sense, seek no other sense.” But in this case, the plain sense of Scripture does not make good sense, leading us to look for another explanation. When we do, comparing Scripture with Scripture, it is clear that God is using this woman to symbolize false religion. That is not unusual. In the Old Testament, Israel was pictured as the wife of Jehovah. In the New Testament, the Church is called the Bride of Christ. Therefore, it should not surprise us to find a prostitute masquerading as false religion. This is a common metaphor for both idolatry and witchcraft in the Bible. To appreciate her wickedness, notice four facts about her.

A. Her Influence

How powerful is false religion? One thinks of headhunters in the Amazon jungle, animists in Papua New Guinea, and the spiritually naïve in our own country who sell their souls to cult leaders like Jim Jones. But the picture John paints is far more pernicious. He emphasizes that in every age and every place “the great prostitute” has reigned supreme, controlling the worship of everyone who rejects Christ. Three details make this clear.

She sits on many waters. What does this mean? John explains in verse 15, “The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages.” In other words, whether they realize it or not, everyone has been affected by false religion. Unbelievers often take pride in the fact that they have made it through life without leaning on the “crutch of religion.” But they are deceiving themselves. As Freud said, “Man is incurably religious.” We may reject the God of the Bible. But when we do, we invariably open our heart to something else—humanism, materialism, scientism, etc. The hold that false religion has over the unbelieving world is absolute. She “sits” on everyone who rejects Jesus as Savior.

She seduces many kings. Verse 2 adds, “With her the kings of the earth committed adultery.” Pharaoh did so. Every time God displayed His glory through miracle after miracle, Pharaoh hardened his heart. Why? Because of the Satanic miracles of Jannes and Jambres, his court magicians. Nebuchadnezzar did the same. He filled his court with astrologers and erected a mammoth idol in his own image. The Caesars took it a step farther, calling themselves gods and forcing everyone to burn incense in their honor. But the most flagrant example will be Antichrist whose very kingdom will be built on false religion. More on that in a moment.

She intoxicates the people of the earth. All of us seek comfort for the heartaches of life. But when Jesus, the Wonderful Counselor and Great Physician is rejected, the only thing left to turn to is drugs and false religion. One example is the beautiful actress, Linda Evans. Hurt by two broken marriages and deprived of the child she always wanted, she spent more than 15 years searching for inner peace. She explained in an interview, “I’ve tried a lot of things along the way—psychotherapy, Transcendental Meditation, Science of the Mind. I don’t know where the answer is.” So finally, in an attempt to find it, she moved to the Pacific Northwest where she now lives near her dear friend and New Age psychic, J. Z. Knight. How sad!

Another graphic example is the false religion of Hinduism. Thousands of children lie starving in the streets of India, while half a billion cows (That's half the cows on earth!) gobble up and trample their crops. Why not simply butcher them and feed everybody hamburgers? Because that's against their religion! In the Hindu thinking, cows are even more sacred than children! You say, "A person would have to be drunk to think like that!" You are right. But that is what false religion does. It intoxicates the people of the earth.

B. Her Appearance

Verse 4 continues, "The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones, and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries."

Two facts are emphasized by her appearance. The precious jewels show the economic wealth enjoyed by false religion. Hindu temples, Buddhist shrines, and Islamic mosques never lack for gold or jewels. (Nor do the multiple homes of many modern televangelists.) But their worshipers are often forced to beg for their daily bread. That was one thing that turned Martin Luther away from the Roman church. When he saw the opulence of the Vatican, he knew it was something that Jesus would not commend. (See Revelation 3:17-18.) The woman's clothing, on the other hand, symbolizes her immorality. In Rome, no common person wore purple or scarlet. Only two groups could afford such a thing—aristocrats and prostitutes. Paul made this contrast in 1 Timothy 2:9 where he said that godly women should dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not like immoral women with "braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes."

C. Her Origin

Where does this prostitute come from? Three clues are found in her name.

She is a mystery. This doesn't mean she is mysterious. When you see the word "mystery" in the Bible, it refers to a divine secret which only God can explain. For example, in Ephesians 3, Paul says this about the Church. In the Old Testament, it was a "mystery" in that its future creation hadn't been revealed. The same is true of "Mystery Babylon." Until now, the Bible hasn't said much about her. So, rather than speculating about her, let us pay close attention to John's explanation. Here he points out two important details about her.

First, she is a city. The angel explains in verse 18, "The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." To what city is he referring? Two explanations are often given. Verse 5 says that her forehead reads, "Babylon the Great." In the early church, this was a codeword for Rome. You can see this in 1 Peter 5:14 where speaking of the Church, the great apostle says, "She who is Babylon, chosen together with you, sends her greetings." The literal city of Babylon did not exist in Peter's day. So, he was likely sending greetings from the Church in Rome, where he served and was eventually martyred. To support this view, many point to the "seven hills" in verse 9, reminding us that Rome was built on seven hills.

The second view is that it refers to the literal city of Babylon, which no longer exists, but will be rebuilt during the Tribulation. Some object to this based on Jeremiah 50 to 51, which say that once destroyed, Babylon will never be rebuilt. But the question is: Have Jeremiah 50 and 51 seen their final fulfillment? The answer is “No!” When Babylon fell to Persia in 539 B.C., it wasn’t utterly destroyed, as Jeremiah prophesied, but continued to be populated and productive for centuries. Nor is it without inhabitants today. Speaking about Babylon, L. Glynn Dairros, the assistant secretary of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, said, “There are three modern settlements situated inside the walls of ancient Babylon. The government of Iraq does indeed plan to restore much of Babylon and has made a start on certain buildings.”

So, which view is correct? I think it is foolish to be dogmatic about either position. Daniel describes Antichrist as the Roman prince yet to come (Daniel 9:26), which means he may set up his capital in the ancient city of Rome. However, Zechariah 5:11 hints that there may be a second Tower of Babel built in the final days in the literal city of Babylon. Consequently, like so many prophecies, we need to take a “wait and see” attitude, knowing that wherever the Beast erects his headquarters, God will have the final say and burn this evil city to the ground.

She is a mother. Verse 5 adds, “The Mother of Prostitutes and of the Abominations of the Earth.” She is the mother of all that is spiritually depraved. Her history began in Genesis 10 when the world’s first dictator erected the world’s first center of false religion. His name was Nimrod (meaning “we will revolt!”) and is described as a “mighty hunter in defiance of the Lord.” Under his leadership in the days following the Flood, mankind rejected God’s command to “multiply and fill the earth.” They gathered instead in the plain of Shinar to build a tower “whose top would reach into the heavens.” These people weren’t so naïve as to think that they could build a stairway to Heaven. This was quite likely the world’s first astrological observatory, for centuries later, when God pronounced judgment on Babylon, He said “she had labored with sorceries and astrology from her youth.” (Isaiah 47:12, 13) So, God confused their language and scattered them across the face of the earth, where they took their false religion with them.

Dr. David Hocking describes how false religion even affected the Roman Church. He writes, “The wife of Nimrod (who himself was a son of Noah’s grandson Cush) was Semiramis the First, the first high priestess of the Babylonian mystery religion. It was claimed that she had a son, Tammuz, born in a miraculous fashion, who supposedly was the promised deliverer. This was the beginning of the ‘mother and child’ religion of Babylon that eventually found its way to Rome. There it flourished under priests who wore head mitres in the shape of a fish (honoring the fish-god Dagon), and eventually took on the title ‘Pontifex Maximus.’ This title was adopted by Julius Caesar and passed down through the succession of emperors including Constantine, who assumed the role as head of the church at Rome. From there, the title was conferred on the bishops of the church at Rome, and is still borne by the Pope today. . . Other mystery motifs include purgatorial purification after death; salvation by sacraments; sprinkling of holy water; offering round cakes to the queen of heaven; and celibacy (of the priesthood).”

Babylon's influence on the Roman church is undeniable. But, of course, it didn't end there. Her "children" have spread her influence wherever false religion is found, even trying to worm its way into today's Bible-based churches. Furthermore, one day this mother herself will come alive again in the plain of Shinar, where mankind will make one last effort to "reach into the heavens" apart from God. Only this time Babel will not merely be scattered. Verse 16 says she will be brought "to ruin," left "naked" and burned "with fire."

D. Her Guilt

Verse 6 explains why she will be judged. Not only is she the source of false religion, she is the motivating force behind the persecution of the saints. John says, "I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus."

Today, we think of radical Islamic terrorism and the hundreds of thousands who have died because of that false religion. But false religion has also been at work within Christianity as well. One example is the Inquisition. Instituted by Pope Innocent III, it was the Papacy's weapon for fighting the Reformation for almost 500 years. Those suspected of heresy were subject to torture without even being told the names of their accusers. If convicted, they were turned over to civil authorities for imprisonment or burning. Imagine! Priests and monks directing with heartless cruelty the torture of innocent men and women, all by order of the "Vicar of Christ!" In France, between 1540 and 1570, 900 thousand Protestants were killed. Things were worse in Bohemia. In 1600, the population was 4 million (80% Protestant). But by the time the Jesuits and Hapsburgs were finished, only 800 thousand were left—all Roman Catholics.

But her bloodthirstiness isn't confined to history. If statistics are correct, more believers are being martyred today than in all previous centuries combined—by communists, Islamists, Hindus, animists, and every other false religion. But then, what has happened in the past and is happening today will seem mild once the Tribulation begins. For at that time, the Prostitute will inspire a bloodbath extending to believers from every tribe, tongue, and people. No wonder God will burn her with fire! What she has done to others will finally be done to her.