

The Beast And Babylon (Part Five): The Great Harlot

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An element critical to interpreting prophecy is whether or not we are living in the end time. This is not to say that I do not believe we are in the end time, but timing certainly affects how one interprets prophecy because prophetic interpretation is the combination of what the Bible describes in its symbols plus what is currently happening in the world. The interpreter attempts to match them accurately—not always an easy task—which is why all interpretations, including mine, are speculative by their very nature.

Over time, a different understanding of the Bible's symbols may arise, or changes in the world scene may alter our understanding. This is precisely why this series of articles is necessary: Things have changed, especially in the world, since most of us were first taught, and it is time for a fresh look at some of the prophecies in Revelation.

Above all people on earth, we members of the church of God should more accurately understand the tense relationships of the world's nations, their institutions, and where events are headed. Jesus commands us in His Olivet sermon to be alert and aware of our spiritual well being during these tumultuous times (Matthew 24:43-44). Being aware of what is happening in prophecy can aid this endeavor greatly.

Herbert Armstrong said, "The keys to biblical prophecy are found within the pages of the Bible, not by reading extra-biblical interpretations." Thus, we are taking a hard look at the symbols used in Revelation and comparing them with their use in other locations in the Bible.

In the last article in this series, we saw clear evidence that Israel is not ignored in the book of Revelation. Besides being mentioned in Revelation 2:14; 7:4; and 21:12, it appears symbolically in most of chapter 12. Looking beyond these references, we began to explore the characteristics of the Woman named "Mystery, Babylon the Great" of chapters 17 and 18.

In the past, we have been taught that this refers to the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, does this truly refer only to a church, or is it something more politically, economically, and militarily powerful and influential? Notice her identification contains the name "Mystery."

I Corinthians 2:7-9 also uses this term:

But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew, for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him."

A biblical mystery is something that God must reveal for one to understand. It is not something right on the surface that anybody looking into Revelation can stumble across and quickly understand. This Woman's identification is not something easily seen. Of "mystery," William Barclay's *The Letters to the Corinthians* says: "The Greek word *musterion* means something whose meaning is hidden from

those who have not been initiated, but crystal clear to those who have" (p. 26). Thus, commentaries are of virtually no help in identifying the Woman of these chapters.

Protestant biblical commentators pay little or no attention to the end-time twelve tribes of Israel. To them, that Israel does not exist! Conversely, evangelical writers and a few mainstream groups focus exclusively on the tiny nation of Israel in the Middle East. However, the Mystery Woman of Revelation 17 and 18 is much more than what that nation displays.

Commentators wholly disregard God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to make Israel into a populous, powerhouse nation both physically and spiritually—promises that affect both race and grace. Ignoring the race aspect altogether, they teach that the promises of grace were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

However, God, as a blessing to His church, revealed the knowledge of the end-time location of Israel to Herbert Armstrong through other men who were seeking to find the "lost ten tribes." God did this so the church can make better sense of what is happening regarding the fulfillment of prophecy as the return of Christ approaches. In Daniel 12:10, God promises that the wise would understand, and the wise are those who keep the ways of the Lord (Hosea 14:9).

Only one Protestant source proved helpful in this, and it was not because it pointed me toward end-time Israel. Almost all Protestants claim, as Herbert Armstrong did, that the Woman is the Roman Catholic Church, against which they have a prejudice. But Revelation 17 and 18 are a continued revelation of the same Woman, Israel, who appears in chapter 12!

A Review

Before proceeding into new material that helps identify the Woman, a review of what has been covered previously is in order. Is it really wild, unjust, and perhaps outright wrong that God could refer to Israel as a great prostitute, Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of harlots? Notice, however, Revelation 11:8: "And their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified." In the same book, He calls Jerusalem "Sodom and Egypt"! Both were despicable places. God is providing evidence to solve the identity of the prostitute by comparing Jerusalem—representing all Israel—to Sodom, noted in history for its sexual sins, and Egypt, known to biblical students for its harsh slavery of the Israelites and as a type of the anti-God world we must come out of.

These are two stunning and dramatic comparisons of Israel's immoral characteristics! Why should God not also compare her to Babylon? God reserves His harshest judgments for those who should know better but waste their gifts on prideful self-indulgence. Jesus says, "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more" (Luke 12:48; see Amos 3:1-2).

In Ezekiel 16:46-51, 56, God not only compares Jerusalem to both Samaria and Sodom, but He judges it to be more immorally vile than even those two well-publicized examples of ancient sin run wild! God portrays them as sisters under the skin! We all know the perversity of Sodom's sins. God goes so far as to say that Samaria had not committed half the sins that Jerusalem had. These verses put Israel's conduct into a perspective that we find difficult to accept, but it is true nonetheless—it is God's own judgment and testimony! That God calls Israel "Babylon" gives evidence of the magnitude of Israel's unfaithfulness to her Husband and Benefactor, God.

In Revelation 11:8, Jerusalem is referred to as "the *great* city." At first thought, Jerusalem is not a great city as New York City is great; it does not occupy as much territory nor does it have the population base. It is not of that sort of magnitude. However, we must not forget that Jerusalem, as a capital city, represents the entire nation of Israel and its greatness lies in what was given to it and what was expected of it considering those gifts.

The apostle John writes in Revelation 14:8, "And another angel followed, saying, 'Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.'" He adds in Revelation 16:19, "Now the great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. And great Babylon was remembered before God, to give her the cup of the wine of the fierceness of His wrath."

Babylon is great too. When "great" is so used in this kind of context, it is not complimentary. "Great" is *megálee* in Greek, and it literally means "big." It can mean big or great in size, magnitude, and intensity or rank in a good or bad sense. How it is to be understood depends on what is being compared.

When God symbolically dwelt in the Holy of Holies, Jerusalem was known by its citizens as "the holy city." Tradition tells us that God departed His residence in the Temple shortly before AD 70. Jerusalem's title as "the holy city" does not come back into the story flow until Revelation 21:2, when New Jerusalem comes down from God out of heaven—long after the time covered in these prophecies. Revelation 21:3 specifically says that God again dwells there. However, at the time of the prophecies in Revelation 14 and 16, Revelation calls both Jerusalem and Babylon "great." This is not a positive comparison. Israel is great as Babylon is great, and at that time, neither of them is great in holiness.

Babylon is great in its anti-God, sinful influence and in economic, political, and military power, but it is most certainly not great in righteousness. Israel's conduct places it next to Sodom, Egypt, and Babylon in great defiance of God, His message, and His servants, and thus it loses its identification as "the holy city."

Revelation 18:7 provides us with three of Babylon's important characteristics: that she glorified herself; that she lived extravagantly; and that she proclaimed herself a queen, not a widow, and would see no sorrow. We are looking for an end-time city/nation that is exceedingly wealthy, influential, disdainful, contemptuous, and mocking. She is portrayed as proud to the point of arrogance, self-confident in her security, thinking she has produced the power by her own means. She lives extravagantly relative to the levels of other nations, seeking further gratification while simultaneously compromising with known standards.

We see three remarkable characteristics: arrogant pride; satiety ("fullness of bread," as God calls it elsewhere, a super-abundance of all the good things in life); and avoidance of suffering, a compromising, self-absorbed, self-indulgence.

The previous article also explored whether the Woman of Revelation 17 and 18 is a church and found evidence that it is not. Old Testament evidence shows overwhelmingly that God uses a woman to symbolize a city/nation, not a church. Most of the time, that city is Jerusalem, which, in turn, represents the entire nation of Israel. Having a nation's capital represent the nation is not uncommon

even in today's world. Media personnel often use Washington, DC, the American city that is the seat of government, to represent the entire United States (or London for Britain, Paris for France, Moscow for Russia, etc.).

Though the female imagery in Lamentations 1 shifts from widow to princess to wife to daughter or to harlot, the imagery for a city or nation is always female. This is partly because there was no church in Old Covenant times. Only briefly in the New Testament does a woman symbolize a church, and in that one case, it is the true church, not a harlot church represented as such. Even so, the symbolism does not lose its sense of city/nation because "Jerusalem above," a city, is the mother of us all (Galatians 4:26), and the church is becoming a holy nation (I Peter 2:9).

We also saw that the phrase "mother of harlots" in Revelation 17:5 might be misleading and therefore misinterpreted because of the Bible's peculiar practice of frequently using terms such as daughters, sons, harlots, thieves, adulterers, and idolaters collectively, fully intending both genders. In other words, sin is not limited to one gender.

In collective usage, the term "daughters" includes males; the word "sons" includes females; and words like "harlots," "adulterers," "idolaters," and "thieves" include both males and females. This practice is what the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* calls a "double metaphor": one word, which may have a specific gender because the context demands it take that gender, but which actually includes both genders. Thus in Revelation 17:5, "harlots" is to be understood as including men involved in what the Bible specifies as harlotry.

Therefore, "mother of harlots," in Revelation 17:5 specifically refers to unfaithfulness within a covenant relationship with God, not a specific, human, sexual sin. The Protestant churches that revolted from the Catholic Church were certainly not unfaithful to God as His churches. They never made the Old Covenant with God, entering into a figurative marriage; they, as an entire nation, had never vowed to keep His laws. Nor were the Protestant and Catholic churches unfaithful to God as a church because neither ever had a New Covenant relationship with God as churches. However, the citizens of the nations of Israel were certainly unfaithful to God within a covenant relationship. Revelation 17 and 18 are describing a city/nation, not a church.

Revelation 18 Symbols Examined

Revelation 18 is a continuing description of the Woman who is shown riding the Beast in Revelation 17:

After these things I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was illuminated with his glory. And he cried mightily with a loud voice, saying, "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a habitation of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird! For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury." . . . "And the kings of the earth . . . standing at a distance for fear of her torment, [say], 'Alas, alas, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come.' And the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her, for no one buys their merchandise anymore: merchandise of gold and silver, precious stones and pearls, fine linen and purple, silk and scarlet, every kind of citron wood, every kind of object of ivory, every kind of object of most

precious wood, bronze, iron, and marble; and cinnamon and incense, fragrant oil and frankincense, wine and oil, fine flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and bodies and souls of men. . . . The merchants of these things, who became rich by her, will stand at a distance for fear of her torment, weeping and wailing, and saying, 'Alas, alas, that great city that was clothed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls! For in one hour such great riches came to nothing.' Every shipmaster, all who travel by ship, sailors, and as many as trade on the sea, stood at a distance and cried out when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, 'What is like this great city?'" (verses 1-3, 9-13, 15-18)

Revelation 18 is not describing a church, but a city/nation involved in massive, worldwide merchandising, shipping, and manufacturing. It is a prophetic picture of globalism. What church has sufficient economic power that, when it ceases to exist, worldwide trade quickly comes to a grinding halt, throwing hardheaded businessmen into a panic? Except possibly as an investor, the Catholic Church has never been involved in manufacturing. Revelation 18 provides no information whatsoever tying the Woman riding the Beast to religion.

A male religious personage is, however, mentioned in Revelation 13:11-13, 15:

Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon. And he exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes the earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed. He performs great signs, so that he even makes fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men. . . . He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed.

This male (not female) religious personage actively promotes worship of the Beast and does miracles in the context of religion to deceive people. Nothing in Revelation 17 and 18 shows the Woman doing miracles of any kind. In fact, these chapters contain no religious context at all, with the exception that she is revealed to be responsible for killing the saints.

In Revelation 17, the Woman is controlling the Beast, not bringing about its worship. She and the Beast are, in fact, antagonists competing against each other. Furthermore, she is heavily involved in politics (influencing kings), manufacturing, shipping, craftsmanship, and merchandising. There is no mention of anything similar in reference to the two-horned lamb.

The Woman indeed has a relationship with the Beast, but she is not part of the politics, economics, religion, or military of the Beast. She and the Beast are separate entities, even though both are part of the overall Babylonish system. The Catholic Church has always been part of the Beast, influencing it from *within*. Conversely, the Woman is portrayed as an external influence, competing with, riding, and at some point exercising control of the Beast.

The ancient Babylonian Empire, whose beginning Genesis 10 and 11 records, is the foundational model for what appears in Revelation 17-18. Babylon was anciently both a city and a nation brought to the peak of its power under Nebuchadnezzar. "Babylon" became the biblical code name and model for the *cosmos*, the world John warns us not to love (I John 2:15-17). All nations on earth have adapted this anti-God, Satan-ruled system of government, religion, politics, business, and education into their peculiar ethnic cultures.

Babylon is this system, portrayed in Revelation 17 and 18, brought to its very peak of worldwide influence in the end time and personified in the Woman, a city/nation of exceeding great power, and in the Beast, a group of strong nations. Both are competing, vying for control of the entire system.

The Beast is a major player within that worldly, anti-Christ system. Everybody agrees that the Beast is a political, military, and economic powerhouse, but some insist on the Woman being a church. However, the internal evidence even within Revelation 17 and 18 reveals that the Woman is a separate city/nation—a political, economic, religious, and military unit—that exemplifies the epitome of the Babylonish system in all its worldwide influence. At the time of this prophecy, she is powerful and influential enough to control and direct the Beast externally.

What Nation Is the Harlot?

What one nation fits the biblical description of this harlot? In Ezekiel 16:8, God is speaking:

"When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine," says the Lord God.

God is describing His relationship with a specific woman, Jerusalem, which stands for all Israel. In this context, "You became mine" is the language of marriage, a covenant relationship to One to whom she was to be faithful.

Verses 13-14 reveals things He did for her as her figurative Husband:

"Thus you were adorned with gold and silver, and your clothing was of fine linen, silk, and embroidered cloth. You ate pastry of fine flour, honey, and oil. You were exceedingly beautiful, and succeeded to royalty. Your fame went out among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through My splendor which I had bestowed on you," says the Lord God.

Notice that, though described as a woman, she is in reality a nation that other nations admire. Israel's marriage to God bound her to keep His laws (Exodus 19:8), but she was not faithful. Harlotry entered the relationship. From this point on in the relationship, her harlotry—the fornication and adultery of the woman—is either implied or directly stated in virtually every remaining verse in Ezekiel 16.

The liberal *Interpreter's Bible Commentary* says that Israel is portrayed as a wife who became a pagan temple-prostitute. That is a possibility, but the conservative commentaries seem to be more correct. She is portrayed as an unfaithful wife whose faithlessness is displayed in a far wider range of activities than just worship. Israel, the nation and wife, is unfaithful in *every* area and activity of life in which a faithful wife/nation would normally be involved.

Her sins are described in sexual terms because sexual sins are the most common way infidelity in marriage is shown to the public. Everybody can relate to it. Despite the commands of her Husband, Israel simply did whatever she wanted to do, when she wanted to do it, and how she wanted to do it. Amidst the business of daily life, she simply ignored or completely forgot the vows of faithfulness given in former years to God.

The harlotry implied is clearly the breaking of the terms of the marriage covenant. Her harlotry is unfaithfulness, disloyalty, and is primarily spiritual in nature. The most ruinous spiritual sin behind these sexual terms is gross idolatry, but all other sins are included. Israel was unfaithful in managing God's green earth and in conducting business both domestically and internationally. She revealed her infidelity in the wreckage of millions of her citizen's marriages and child-training practices. She showed herself faithless when her people lied to, stole from, lusted after, and murdered each other. She proved herself to be disloyal and ungrateful by forgetting from whom came her great blessings and worshipping things made rather than the Creator who made them.

What God proposed to Israel—and to us in the New Covenant—is an entire way of life. Deuteronomy 7:2-11 states the circumstances of their marriage and God's requirements:

You shall make no covenant with [the people of the land] nor show mercy to them. Nor shall you make marriages with them. You shall not give your daughter to their son, nor take their daughter for your son. For they will turn your sons away from following Me, to serve other gods; so the anger of the Lord will be aroused against you and destroy you suddenly. But thus you shall deal with them: you shall destroy their altars, and break down their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images, and burn their carved images with fire. For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments; and He repays those who hate Him to their face, to destroy them. He will not be slack with him who hates Him; He will repay him to his face. Therefore you shall keep the commandment, the statutes, and the judgments which I command you today, to observe them.

This is a sample of what Israel was to do in being faithful to the covenant. The terms of the covenant to which Israel was not faithful consisted of the laws of God, which contain principles that cover every important aspect of life.

Now notice God's record of Israel's conduct before He sent them into captivity:

Yet the Lord testified against Israel and against Judah, by all of His prophets, namely every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways, and keep My commandments and My statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by My servants the prophets." Nevertheless they would not hear, but stiffened their necks, like the necks of their fathers, who did not believe in the Lord their God. And they rejected His statutes and His covenant that He had made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He had testified against them; they followed idols, became idolaters, and went after the nations who were all around them, concerning whom the Lord had charged them that they should not do like them." (II Kings 17:13-15)

Jesus Himself adds in Matthew 17:17, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?" Right into Jesus' day and on to ours, the faithlessness continues.

Showing how exclusive God's relationship with Israel intensifies Israel's faithlessness:

Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." Can two walk together, unless they are agreed? (Amos 3:1-3)

God entered into no similar relationship with any other nation in all the history of mankind. A person may have many friends, many family members, many business, fraternal, and professional relationships, but the biblical standard for marriage is one spouse until death. For His part, God shows that He perceived His and Israel's relationship as involving an intimacy normally associated only within marriage. Yes, God had relationships with other nations, but none were even close to what He covenanted with Israel. Because of that intimacy, He favored her with gifts greater than any other nation. Perhaps the greatest gift of all was the revelation of Himself, knowledge of His purpose, and how to live life to its fullest. However, because of these gifts, Israel's responsibility and ultimately her deviance were also the greatest on earth. In fact, the extent of her departure from God is clearly stated in I Samuel 8:7-8:

And the Lord said to Samuel, "Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt, even to this day—with which they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also."

We all know that shortly after the marriage, even while still in the wilderness, Israel was already deviating from faithfulness. Recorded here is an especially significant event following the marriage: Israel formally rejects God as her Ruler, thus making plain what was in fact already taking place in her conduct. It constitutes a major step in affirming Israel's desire to be a worldly nation.

This occurred between 1100 and 1000 BC, roughly 350 years after the original making of the covenant. Except for brief periods when Israel had a judge or king who did right in the eyes of God, the spiritual harlotry continued unabated until God divorced her and sent Israel and Judah into captivity.

Jeremiah 3:1-5 confirms that Israel's whoredoms persisted after rejecting God as King, yet He still mercifully desired to take her back:

"They say, 'If a man divorces his wife, and she goes from him and becomes another man's, may he return to her again?' Would not that land be greatly polluted? But you have played the harlot with many lovers; yet return to Me," says the Lord. "Lift up your eyes to the desolate heights and see: Where have you not lain with men? By the road you have sat for them like an Arabian in the wilderness; and you have polluted the land with your harlotries and your wickedness. Therefore the showers have been withheld, and there has been no latter rain. You have had a harlot's forehead; you refuse to be ashamed.

Will you not from this time cry to Me, 'My Father, You are the guide of my youth? Will He remain angry forever? Will He keep it to the end?' Behold, you have spoken and done evil things, as you were able."

Jeremiah wrote about another 350 years after her rejection of God as King. God divorced the great harlot Israel, but He continued to have a fractious relationship with her so as to continue the outworking of His purpose and to fulfill His promises to Abraham, as well as all the end-time prophecies. Can anyone deny that Israel is the preeminent harlot of all the Bible?

The Great Harlot

Recall from the previous article God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to make their descendants great in number and powerful economically, greater than any other nation or group of nations ever on earth. As a group, the Israelitish people, the descendants of the patriarchs, control around 65% of the world's wealth! No one else on earth is in the position to influence, persuade, and guide as Israel is. It was through the misuse of God's gifts that Israel rose to worldly greatness.

God acknowledges that Jerusalem, representing all Israel, is great. She is truly great in political, economic, and military power. So great is her influence that in all the world only she is able to hold the Beast in check and make it pretty much do her bidding—until God's time comes for Israel to be humbled. Israel, primarily represented by the Joseph tribes, has brushed the world aside in recent history. Unfortunately, her power is not pure because she is also great in whoredoms, in religious confusion, and in deviance from her responsibility to God.

Revelation 17:1, 3, 9, 15 contain a final thought:

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and talked with me, saying to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters. . . ." So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. . . . "Here is the mind which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits." . . . And he said to me, "The waters which you saw, where the harlots sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues."

These verses show the Woman, the harlot, sitting upon many waters, the Beast, and seven mountains (a mountain is a biblical symbol of a nation), and in verse 15 the waters of which the Beast consists are defined as peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues. In such a context, sitting is the Bible's symbol of authority, having power over. It is as though she gives orders and is served.

This description conveys two characteristics: First, the scope of her influence is wide-ranging, over many nations. Second, the Beast consists of peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues. The Woman, however, is not described in that manner; she is depicted as one unit. Therefore, a distinct possibility is that God sees the Woman in this end-time prophecy as one powerful and influential people, as contrasted to the Beast, which consists of many diverse peoples who cannot combine and coordinate their strengths to counterbalance and perhaps overcome the more united Woman.