

The Beast And Babylon (Part Three): Who Is The Woman?

by John W. Ritenbaugh

***Forerunner*, "Personal," June 2004**

A sermon given in the spring of 2003 emphasized strongly that Jesus Christ said we would not know the day or the hour of His return because it is completely in the Father's hand (Matthew 24:36). In plain words, the specific date of His return is simply not going to be known to us. This means that any day, including the Feast of Trumpets—which most use as the end-point of their calculations—would be a speculation.

How many people have attempted to determine when that day is in spite of Jesus' plain statement? At the very least that shows a certain amount of skepticism and perhaps even outright disbelief in those researching. It is almost as if He is not taken seriously. Not long ago, a man not in the church of God commented that he believes anyone searching into this is guilty of blasphemy! Notice this episode from Acts 1:6-7:

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority."

Like us, the apostles were curious and excited about these things. Their question is not even specifically about a certain day because they thought the time had already come.

Christ's answer is every bit as general as their question. He tells them clearly that they are not going to know. His statement coordinates with what He says in the Olivet Prophecy, but it expands the thought to "times" or "seasons." "Times" implies periods of time, whereas "seasons" indicates a length of time characterized by certain events, such as a winter "season" contains events such as snow and cold temperatures. Therefore, He suggests that His return will be characterized by a span of time in which certain events occur.

The phrase "it is not for you to know" is a strong recommendation for them to avoid probing into these things because it would be a waste of time—they had more important things to do. His answer does not include even a hint as to the general period of the establishment of God's Kingdom.

Judging by Jesus' rather terse reply here, compared to the zealous efforts some in the church today are making, it suggests that over the years we have been making a too-determined effort to know every prophecy's precise fulfillment. Our curiosity seems to demand to know all of the *whos*, *whats*, *whys*, *whens* and *wheres* of these events. It is easy for me to understand this desire, but it is not something that appeals to me. Nevertheless, I want you to understand my approach. I look upon everyone's end-time ideas, including Herbert Armstrong's and my own, as theory, speculation. Here is why.

Educated Guesses?

Just from the standpoint of recent church history, I sometimes wonder if we have gotten anything involving prophecy right! This is an exaggeration, of course, but we have gotten some things wrong, especially in the area of timing. Even though the Bible shows it is not wrong to attempt to decipher prophecy, experience clearly shows interpreting it is not an open book.

The angel says in Daniel 12:4, "But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase." This verse refers to the entire prophecy, which begins two chapters earlier. Although the wording is somewhat confusing, it means that Daniel understood part of it but certainly not all of it. Even though we are coming along later in time, and we will eventually know more precisely than Daniel did, what we know will nonetheless have to be revealed. The prophecy is given but not explained. This is God's pattern.

The phrase "knowledge will be increased" is a direct reference to the prophecy itself; that is, knowledge of the prophecy will be increased. Many would seek to understand it between Daniel's time and its fulfillment, but its message must be revealed. However, its revelation will not occur until the people of God need to understand it for their well-being and God's glory. What are the chances it will be revealed in its fullness to any of us? My guess is: extremely small!

Not only must its message be revealed, but it will also not be revealed until the time comes that God is good and ready. God adds in verse 10 that only "the wise shall understand." The "wise" are described elsewhere as those who keep the commandments of God (Hosea 14:9).

Moses writes in Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." God, for His purposes, chooses to keep certain things to Himself. On the other hand, He reveals a great deal about Himself in nature, revelation that is available to anyone.

In Scripture, He reveals more specific details about His purpose, character, and way. This revelation is more closed than the revelation in nature, but even so, much of man's difficulty at grasping Scripture is not because God deliberately cloaks it, but because of man's enmity against Him. Jesus charges in Matthew 13:15:

For the heart of this people has grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their heart and turn, so that I should heal them.

Other scriptures reveal that there is a measure of deliberateness in doing so.

Micah 5:2 is a clear example of God's withholding some specifics contained in prophecies surrounding the birth of Christ: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." Notice how God reveals and yet withholds until the precise time is right. In this verse, He clearly reveals that the Christ will be born in Bethlehem, the city of David's birth, but He did not reveal the precise spot until He led the magi to Him by means of the "star."

Much of what He chooses to keep secret has nothing to do with prophecy, such as why He does not intervene more quickly to provide what we think we need as He tests our faith through a long trial.

Yet, He clearly hides many of the specifics of future events. Why? We saw the general answer in Deuteronomy 29:29: He wants us to set our priorities according to what we have already been given. In other words, He wants us to submit to the things He has already revealed.

Amos 3:7 gives us hope toward understanding the times we are living through, "Surely the Lord God does nothing, unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets." Putting these last two scriptures together with examples like Daniel 12, we can deduce that He promises to reveal the understanding of prophecy on a "need to know" basis.

This does not mean we should not look into them, though, because we never know for sure whether the "need to know" time has arrived. However, until that time arrives, precise understanding is impossible. Therefore, we should receive anyone's interpretation as theory until evidence arises to prove it.

I heard Herbert Armstrong twice proclaim that he was not a prophet. Additionally, he understood that there are no New Testament prophets in the classic, Old Testament sense of one who has direct communication from God foretelling the future. In the June 1972 *Tomorrow's World* magazine he wrote, "Emphatically I am NOT a prophet, in the sense of one to whom God speaks directly, revealing personally a future event to happen or new truth, or new or special instruction from God—separate from, and apart from what is contained in the Bible. And I never have claimed to be." Throughout Herbert Armstrong's ministry as a broadcaster and writer, he was interpreting and speculating. Like us, this left him free to make predictions, but they are not infallible. They are educated guesses, speculations based upon Scripture and the latest news events, and therefore they occasionally need updating.

Mr. Armstrong never received information in visions, dreams, or in face-to-face meetings with God. His writings on prophetic subjects are frequently peppered with words like "could," "might," and "may." Contrast that with the Bible's prophecies, which use words like "shall," "will," "most certainly," "surely," and "truly, truly." Herbert Armstrong's "prophecies" were clearly speculations partly based on what he perceived from the news of the time.

This should in no way diminish our respect for him as an apostle because he had to speculate within the same constraints as everyone else. He frequently made changes in what he anticipated would happen. I believe God used him to raise up the end-time church. He was not lying to us in his writings on prophecy, but his interpretations of them were liberally salted with speculations.

Notice what God says through the apostle John about time: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servant—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John" (Revelation 1:1). Add to this Revelation 3:11, where Jesus is directly quoted: "Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold that fast what you have, that no one may take your crown." He says "shortly" in one place and "I come quickly" in another, and already 2,000 years have passed! Was Jesus lying?

Besides John's writings, the prophecies in the epistles of Paul and Peter are very general, especially regarding the time things would occur.

In addition, since looking into this subject more carefully than ever before, I have noticed the proclivity of people to use prophetic scriptures in a loose manner. For instance, every reference in Old Testament prophecies to things like Israel, Judah, Zion, daughters of Zion, etc., automatically becomes an end-time prophecy of the church as well.

On what authority do they do this? There is no doubt that there *are* some parallels—but *every* time? In the same manner, certain symbols are *always* believed to indicate the same real entity. However, the Bible itself is not always consistent in this regard. For example, the term "Zion," which some almost automatically interpret to mean the church, is actually used by God in seven different ways in Scripture.

The same loose usage is sometimes true of the "woman" symbol. Some will automatically interpret it as "church." However, in the Bible, in context, "woman" overwhelmingly symbolizes a physical city or nation, not a church. This is not to say a church can never be a true interpretation of "woman," but only that we must be careful and honest in context.

Europe, a Fearsome Beast?

In the first two articles on this subject, the foundation was laid to show that, as conditions are today, events are not producing a Europe that has any resemblance to the frighteningly powerful Beast revealed in Revelation 13. This does not mean that things will not change. Yet, if Europe is the location of the Beast, it is very slow to form.

Right now, Europe is in political turmoil and thus divided. Many individual nations within the European Union are moribund economically, and just recently, the EU took its first real step toward a common military—a force of only 2,000 personnel that will eventually grow to 60,000. Considering the planners' dreams for a union powerful enough to counterbalance the United States, those are very modest figures. However, at this time that is all they can afford. Germany's air force is so pitifully small that, when they had to send a small force of personnel to a peacekeeping commitment they volunteered for in Macedonia, they had to lease transport planes from Ukraine to get their people there!

In late April 2003, Germany, France, Belgium, and Luxembourg held a summit attempting to create a military alliance. Notice, however, that Italy, Spain, and Britain were not included. *BBC News* reported even before it began that the Italians objected, saying that "any attempt to forge closer military ties would be 'viewed by them with a very critical eye.'" A couple of days following that jibe, British Prime Minister Tony Blair castigated the four nations just as the Italians did, saying, "Such a move is destructive of NATO." Of the remaining 21 nations that are now part of the EU, only one has reacted favorably to the summit's proposal.

The European nations as a whole are envious of and resent America, but at this point in time, they are so dependent on it economically and militarily that all they can do is make a lot of bluster. They cannot completely back away. Germany is considered Europe's economic engine, but things are still not going well economically for Germany and for that matter all of the European Union. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reported on May 7, 2004, in an article titled "Poor Economic Report: Germany falls in global economy ranking":

Germany's competitive position in the global economy slipped again last year. The euro zone's largest economy fell to 21 among 60 industrialized countries in the "World Competitiveness Yearbook 2004" of the International Institute for Management Development (IMD).

Germany ranked 20th last year and 15th in 2002 in the Lausanne organization's ranking, which compares the 60 most important countries and regions in the global economy, using 323 criteria. IMD calculates the index based on four main criteria, covering economic performance, government efficiency, business efficiency and infrastructure.

Government efficiency was particularly weak. Here, Germany dropped to 34th from 30th. Germany's overall business efficiency also drew a worse grade, falling seven places to rank 34. IMD said high wages, short working time and a lack of entrepreneurial spirit were problems negatively affecting Germany's competitiveness. In terms of infrastructure, however, Germany ranked No. 10.

As in past years, the Lausanne researchers put the United States in first place in their overall ranking.

In this world, the economy is power. The EU is not yet showing signs that it is a union of power.

From Nebuchadnezzar to the End Times

Relative to Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2, the previous article showed that, through history, as the properties of the metal changed, so did the nation or empire represented by the metal, as well as the geographical location of the world-dominating power. Thus, its center of power shifts from time to time. In addition, Israel is likewise not geographically located where it was anciently. Therefore, we should not be surprised if the final Beast power is not wholly located within the geographical boundaries of the ancient Roman Empire.

We cannot assume that God looks at national boundaries as we do. From its location between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, Babylon once flourished as a city and then as a powerful nation dominating other nations. Then, hundreds of years after reaching the peak of its power, it disappeared from the world scene. However, it has not disappeared completely because it resurfaces in the book of Revelation as an end-time entity, besides having become the biblical codename for the worldwide, anti-God system.

The Roman Empire was just one world-dominating empire within that Babylonish system. Many Semitic peoples, including the Israelites, have lived for much of the past 2000 years strongly influenced by the Roman system.

Is Israel of No Consequence in the Last Days?

Since "Babylon" makes an appearance in Revelation, where is Israel in that book? The nation of Israel is the entity upon which virtually the entire Bible focuses. It begins in Genesis 12:1-3:

Now the Lord had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will

bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

From this beginning with Abraham, Israel stands at the fore of nearly all biblical prophecy, yet the name "Israel" appears only three inconsequential times in Revelation: Once each in chapters 2, 7, and 21.

Notice the clear implications of a series of subsequent promises appearing in Genesis:

And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: "Lift up your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered" (Genesis 13:14-16)

Genesis 27:27-29 is a blessing spoken by Isaac to Jacob, adding to the promises already given to Abraham:

And he came near and kissed him; and he smelled the smell of his clothing, and blessed him and said: "Surely, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed. Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be master over your brethren, and let your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be those who bless you!"

In Genesis 28:14, God further expands upon the previous promises: "Also your [Jacob's] descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

These promises either imply or clearly state large populations, large land surfaces spread to the four corners of earth, good geographical locations, pleasant weather patterns, rich soil, abundant mineral wealth, and Abraham's descendants being a blessing both physically and spiritually to all nations. Do these promises not indicate that Israel is to become a major force in the world?

In Old Testament prophecies pertaining to the end times and beyond, Israel is almost always the subject. Other nations, regardless of how populous and powerful, are mentioned only as they come into contact with Israel.

An interesting contrast is that in Revelation, a book devoted almost exclusively to the end, direct evidence of Israel's existence is sparse and vague. In it, Israel is clearly mentioned, but these instances are not expanded upon. However, as the time of the end has approached, God has revealed where Israel is, and it is indeed large and important. Its combined populations, in nations spread over much of the globe, total somewhere around 500 million people. Its combined economic, military, educational, cultural, religious, and political influence is unrivaled in the entire world. Does God just write Israel off in the most significant end-time book? No, it is there but prophetically hidden.

Beginning the Search

Most biblical commentators believe that both the physical nation of Israel and the spiritual Israel of God, the church, are identified in Revelation 12:

Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. . . . And she bore a male Child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her Child was caught up to God and His throne. Then the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, that they should feed her there one thousand two hundred and sixty days.
(Revelation 12:1, 5-6)

The physical nation of Israel is correctly identified as symbolized by the woman by comparing the symbols in Revelation 12:1 with Joseph's dream in Genesis 37:9-10. This is almost certain when combined with the fact that in Revelation 12:5 the same woman (Israel) gives birth to the "Child who was to rule all nations." Israel gives birth to the Christ, whom the Dragon, Satan, attempts to kill.

Then, however, we are told the woman, who up through verse five is Israel, abruptly morphs in verse six into the Israel of God, the church, which flees to the wilderness. How can we be sure it means the church here when no change of context indicates an abrupt transformation? Could this interpretation be incorrect? We will see more about this in a later article. Nevertheless, this at least establishes that Israel, up until the time shortly after Christ's resurrection, appears historically in Revelation. It will be very helpful, though, not to forget the original woman.

Now notice Revelation 16:17-21

Then the seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" And there were noises and thunderings and lightnings; and there was a great earthquake as had not occurred since men were on the earth. 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. Then every island fled away, and the mountains were not found. And great hail from heaven fell upon men, every hailstone about the weight of a talent. Men blasphemed God because of the plague of the hail, since that plague was exceedingly great.

These verses are necessary at this point because they function as the introduction to Revelation 17 and 18, which feature the description of Babylon, first referred to as "the great city" in Revelation 16:19. It is then specified as "great Babylon," and then in Revelation 17:1, it is identified as "the great harlot." Babylon does not stand alone in this vision, as John sees other cities of the nations fall during the great earthquake.

Revelation 17:1-7 continues the description of one of the central characters of the end time:

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, with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication." 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. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her

hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement. But the angel said to me, "Why did you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns."

Notice also that this Beast has seven heads and ten horns. This is the same beast as shown in Revelation 13:1-2, but what is added is the woman, the great harlot riding the Beast, shown in a position of control much like the rider of a horse. She is identified in verse 5 as Mystery, Babylon the Great.

For her to be riding the Beast, there must be some relationship between the two. In fact, each, the woman and the Beast, are part of the same general system, the Babylonish system. However, right up front—because one is depicted as a woman and the other as a beast—God is indicating two distinctly different sets of characteristics, personalities, or approaches within the system.

As depicted in Revelation 13:2, the Beast consists of the strongest parts of a leopard, bear, and lion. Unarguably, these three animals are vicious, wild beasts, and each is a very powerful animal that a woman on her own would ordinarily be no match for.

Obviously, a human woman would approach life and its events differently than an animal. Yet, the woman is riding the seemingly super-powerful beast. She, at this juncture in the prophecy, is the one in the position of strength and therefore is superior, greater, more powerful, and more influential than the Beast.

The angels says in Revelation 17:9-11:

Here is the mind which has wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits. There are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. And when he comes, he must continue a short time. The beast that was, and is not, is himself also the eighth, and is of the seven, and is going to perdition.

These verses set the beginning of the time element of this prophecy. The woman sits on seven mountains. A mountain symbolizes a larger nation, as Isaiah 2:2 shows: "Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills [smaller nations]; and all nations shall flow to it." The number seven, combined with the symbol "mountains"—signifying "kings" or "kingdoms" as verses 9 and 10 show—indicates a perfect or complete sequence of seven kings.

We understand that the seven mountains are the last seven revivals of the Roman Empire. The woman is shown riding the Beast during the days of the sixth revival in the sequence of seven (verse 10). Did she begin her ride during the sixth revival or has she been riding the entire time? Nothing in the prophecy directly suggests she was riding them any time before the prophecy itself indicates.

The prophecy is only showing the end-time Beast has seven forebears, the seven revivals of the Roman Empire. Verse 11 states, "The beast that was, and is not, is himself also the eight, and is of the seven." This indicates the end-time Beast stands on its own but has its roots in the previous seven. The woman will clearly ride the eighth Beast that is of the seven for a time.

Herbert Armstrong appears to have been correct in teaching that the sixth revival and king began with Garibaldi in Italy and continued through the rise and fall of Mussolini and Hitler. That revival ended with the defeat of the Axis powers in Europe in 1945. We are living in the very weak and brief period of the seventh revival of the Beast. More to come.