

**“Boom or Bust?”***Revelation 17-18***Introduction – BLANK1**

On our journey through Revelation we have seen its most powerful feature at work, that of pulling back the curtain, exposing and opening our eyes to more reality than we are used to. Of course there is more to future reality than can be perceived with our unaided senses. But there is also far more to the reality of the present moment than we can know with our eyes and ears.

In the experience that John conveys in Revelation, Jesus lifts the cover, pulls back the curtain and lets John in on the most important unseen reality of the present & future. The visible reality that everyone could clearly see and hear and touch (or be touched by) was the power of the Roman Empire (e.g. British Empire, American Empire). The Emperor at the time of John’s writing was Domitian (A.D. 81-96), a profoundly insecure man who lived in morbid horror of being overthrown. To compensate for his insecurity, Domitian demanded that all his subjects throughout the Empire prove their allegiance to him by going to the temple of Domitian (e.g. in Ephesus), taking a pinch of incense, throwing it on the altar and saying the words *Caesar Kurios* (i.e. “Caesar is Lord”). Honoring Caesar as *Domine et Deus* (“Lord and God”) was the way that local kings like Herod in Judea gained and kept their power. **SLIDE2<sup>1</sup>** Worship of Caesar was the glue that held the Empire together. Refusal to do was punishable by death.

It is in this context that Jesus gave John a great expose of the world in which he lived. As I have mentioned earlier, in the book of Revelation we are dealing primarily with symbolic representations, not with descriptions of the reality conveyed by the symbols (e.g. “Lord of the Rings”). A number of scholars suggest that the closest modern parallel to apocalyptic literature is the modern political cartoon with its stock images. **SLIDE3-5** In a highly figurative way, a cartoon & Revelation exposes a larger, deeper reality. **Read Revelation 17**

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. the temple to Caesar built by Herod the Great at Caesarea Maritima that was the first building sea travelers encountered when they arrived at Judea. See Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse & Allegiance*, p. 148.

John sees a woman, very different than the woman we met in Revelation 12 who was “clothed in the sun” and gave birth to the messiah. John will tell us that the great prostitute we meet in chapter 17, this “woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names” has a very different perception of herself than Jesus does. Skip ahead for a moment to chapter 18 verse 7 and you will see that “In her heart she boasts, ‘I sit enthroned as queen...I will never mourn.’”

## **Structural Contact**

**A) A Great Queen Prostitute & Beast** (17<sup>1-6</sup>) – It is as if the great city who envisions herself as a great “queen” is sitting down to get her royal portrait for her diamond Jubilee celebration. But when the curtain of her portrait rises what we see is not a great & glorious queen but a gaudy drunken prostitute seated upon a scarlet beast. Her description will be followed up with a guiding interpretation of the symbols beginning in v. 7.

The distinctive features of the harlot are clearly that of Rome (seated on seven hills<sup>2</sup> = as distinctive as the “boot” of Italy, adorned in excessive luxury, and intoxicated with the blood of the saints = prominent features). She represents a present dominant world system<sup>3</sup> based on seduction for personal gain over against the righteous demands of a persecuted minority.<sup>Mounce,307</sup> John’s images are also archetypal and timeless, a synthesis of all the great godless cities (from the tower of Babel<sup>Gen.11</sup>, to Ninevah,<sup>Nahum3:4</sup> to Tyre,<sup>Is.23:16</sup> to Samaria<sup>Ezek.23:1-4</sup>, to Rome<sup>17:4</sup> all described using the stock image of a prostitute). “At the close of history the great harlot stands as the final and intensified expression of worldly power.”<sup>Mounce,308</sup> (specific & representative)

John had been taken to the wilderness, probably expecting to be shown “the punishment of the great prostitute,” (v.1) but up to this point she appears triumphant, her influence unsurpassed (“sits by many waters”—v.1; “the waters you saw, where the prostitute sits are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages.”—v.15). Ostentatiously dressed<sup>4</sup> and decked out in colours & jewelry associated with the luxury and splendor of ancient Rome, the “spectacular garb of the harlot” will “be contrasted

<sup>2</sup> The designation of Rome as the city on seven hills is commonplace among Roman writers (e.g. Virgil, Cicero).

<sup>3</sup> According to verse 15, the “many waters” by which she sits are “peoples, multitudes, nations and languages”. The reference to the numerous canals which distribute the waters of the Euphrates to the surrounding territory symbolize the influence of Rome as it flows out throughout the entire world. (Mounce, Revelation, 308)

<sup>4</sup> As Mounce notes, “Purple and scarlet signify the luxury and splendor of ancient Rome.” Both dyes were expensive to extract and were often used for royal garments. Revelation, p. 309.

with the ‘fine linen, bright and clean’ worn by the Bride of the Lamb”<sup>5</sup> in 19<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, in chapter 21<sup>9</sup> the same angel guide will reappear to show John that truly great and glorious Bride of the Lamb. Though the Empire sees herself as a glorious “queen” all the gaudy and gory details of her true nature (she has tried to mask) are at last fully exposed and her influence brought to an end.

## B) An Angelic Exposé (17<sup>7-18</sup>) **SLIDE8**

The angel responds to John’s jaw dropping astonishment<sup>thaumazō</sup> by offering to explain the mystery of the woman and the beast which carries her. While the remainder of chapter 17 is primarily concerned with the interpretation of the beast, 18<sup>1-19</sup><sup>5</sup> will detail the judgment of “the great prostitute” herself.

- **The beast** – recall the beast from the sea (vv.1-10) and the beast from the land (vv.11-18) in chapter 13 (explain). So this seven headed ten horned beast “is the great persecuting power which rules by brute force and is the supreme enemy of Christ and the church.”<sup>Mounce,309</sup>
- **The description of the beast** in verse 8 is an obvious parody of the Lamb, who was put to death yet came back to life and now is alive forever and ever (1<sup>18</sup>; 2<sup>8</sup>). The beastly emperor Nero, who had instigated a horrible persecution of Christians in his day, died in A.D. 68. But the satanic power that animated him would return in John’s day with renewed fury against God’s people by the hand of emperor Domitian (a “reign of terror” in the 90’s). Down through history and into our day the beast repeatedly “comes up from the abyss”. The reference to the “ten horns” as “ten kings” likely represents all earthly powers who also share and exercise this beastly power (ten = a symbol, not a statistic—seven and ten are numbers of completeness/fullness).<sup>6</sup>
- The main points being made here are their brevity (“for one hour”—v.12; cf. 18<sup>10,17,19</sup>) and their destiny which is stated in principle in verse 11 (“is going to his destruction”) and described in verse 16 in the images and language of utter

<sup>5</sup> Mounce, Revelation, p. 309.

<sup>6</sup> “It does not point to ten specific kings nor to ten European kingdoms of a revived Roman empire.” (Mounce, p. 317)

humiliation and destruction (stock images: for utter humiliation = stripped naked, killed & eaten by scavengers<sup>7</sup>; for utter destruction = burned with fire<sup>8</sup>). God is in the process of using their mutual hatreds to bring about their mutual destruction (gives the evil enough rope to hang themselves).

Chapter 18 = a detailed account of the destruction of Rome (the centre of power, luxury, and fierce hostility against the Christian faith), beginning in verse 1 with an

### C) Announcing Her Fall / Collapse (18<sup>1-3</sup>; cf. Isa. 21<sup>9</sup>) **SLIDE9**

Chapter 18 begins with an angelic messenger announcing the complete collapse of “Babylon” (representative of every evil city & idolatrous civilization).

- <sup>8</sup> “Day after day, my lord, I stand on the watchtower; every night I stay at my post.  
<sup>9</sup> Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses.  
 And he gives back the answer: ‘Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!’” (Isaiah 21<sup>8-9</sup>) (Modern “idols” & idolatries)
- V.2 = Images of complete collapse & desolation (cf. “ghost town” images)
  - From boom town to ghost town: home to demons & evil spirits (“ghost” town), unclean birds (buzzards, vultures), detestable animals (scavengers like hyenas and jackals—Isa. 13<sup>21-22</sup>).
  - V.3 & v.5 = The cause of her collapse (a global orgy, “excessive luxuries”—on the backs of AND to the neglect of the have-nots, **CARTOON10** a mountain of crimes against humanity—v.5...think of the Third Reich)

**D) Advance Warning** (18<sup>4-8</sup>) – This so called “great city” (v.10, 16, 19, 21), with her booming global economy, is doomed. She who thinks of herself as “queen”<sup>v.7</sup> and believes her good times will never end,<sup>v.7b</sup> (e.g. “let the good times roll”) will be overtaken and utterly destroyed “in one day”<sup>v.8</sup> (**N.B.** “double portion”<sup>v.6</sup> = conventional expression for complete justice<sup>v.7</sup>). So it is with good reason that God issues his advance warning in verse 4, “*Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.*”

**What is “the good life” in your community (or peer group):**

<sup>7</sup> No proper burial. One is reminded of the bloody scene when Jezebel, who was thrown from the window, trampled to death by horses and then eaten by scavengers—2 Kgs 9<sup>30-37</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Lev. 21:9 – “If a priest’s daughter defiles herself by becoming a prostitute, she disgraces her father; she must be burned in the fire.” Cf. Lev. 20<sup>14</sup>

- The most desirable places to live
- The most prestigious jobs
- The places to shop
- The brands to wear
- The vehicles to drive (or technology to use)
- The places to vacation
- Premiere schools for kids (post-secondary)

**To what extent is your life shaped by contemporary ideas of “the good life”?**

- We still tend to buy into the world’s ideas of “the good life” **SLIDE12** (largely economic and consumer oriented...e.g. “Shopping Malls” as cathedrals to consumerism and the “ad man” as the prophet<sup>9</sup>, a bad case of affluenza...)
- **“Come out”** = Not buying into the same bottom line (e.g. conversation with a dentist...lots of money to be made on cosmetic dentistry...Focusing instead on the special needs and issues of the disabled = a different aim/purpose)
- = Getting goals vs. Giving goals (e.g. Coming home from my Colombia trip...Saw this Ad **SLIDE13** “Does Your Marketing Mix Stink?”...) **SLIDE14-15**

**E) Three Laments & A Celebration Over Babylon’s Fall (18<sup>9-20</sup>) **SLIDE16****

- Three “laments”, bemoaning the collapse of Babylon & her economy that Jesus’ reveals will go from boom to bust (3 country & western songs??)

e.g. “Her booming economy created a rush...but now she fallen and gone with one flush.”

- Kings, merchants, and all seafaring people wail over her economic collapse & destruction (e.g. Titanic). She who sailed the high seas gathering wealth and luxury goods<sup>10</sup> from around the world, goes bust.
- Echoes from the prophetic songs of derision (of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) reverberate throughout the entire chapter (check out Ezek. 27<sup>Tyre</sup> which includes the same three groups of mourners: mariners,<sup>v.29</sup> kings,<sup>v.35</sup>, and merchants<sup>v.36</sup>).
- V.20 = one song of celebration from those crushed & oppressed by her
- God’s people take centre stage with their songs of celebration and praise in chapter 19.

<sup>9</sup> “Advertising is a type of curriculum—the most pervasive in America today...They teach that the solutions to life’s problems lie not in good values, hard work, or education, but in materialism and the purchasing of more and more things.” Gary Ruskin, “Why They Whine: How Corporations Prey on Children,” *Mothering Magazine*, November/December 1999, p.43. Quoted in *Living On Purpose*, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Expensive dyes like purple were extracted a drop at a time from the murex shellfish, citron wood was an expensive dark wood from north Africa used for inlay work in costly furniture. (*TNIV Study Bible*)

**F) Deathly Silent** (18<sup>21-24</sup>) – **SLIDE17** In verses 9-19 we saw how the Empire's political and economic allies mourned her collapse (external perspective). The chapter closes in verses 21-24 with an internal perspective of her fall. The arts, crafts, commerce, and customs of the great city have all been permanently silenced. Not glorious silence, but deadly silence (*cf.* the strange silence of the skies in the days following 911). It comes complete with audio visual (i.e. a symbolic action and song...a rerun of Jeremiah's final words—51<sup>60-64</sup>).

- <sup>60</sup> Jeremiah had written on a scroll about all the disasters that would come upon Babylon—all that had been recorded concerning Babylon. <sup>61</sup> He said to Seraiah, “When you get to Babylon, see that you read all these words aloud. <sup>62</sup> Then say, ‘*LORD, you have said you will destroy this place, so that neither people nor animals will live in it; it will be desolate forever.*’ <sup>63</sup> When you finish reading this scroll, tie a stone to it and throw it into the Euphrates. <sup>64</sup> Then say, ‘*So will Babylon sink to rise no more because of the disaster I will bring on her. And her people will fall.*’”

**Implications** – “Come out of...” & “Enter into...” **SLIDE18**

“We haven’t just moved into Boom City; Boom City has moved into us. Boom City has branded us and defined, even for people of vital faith, what is important and what is of value. We have unwittingly allowed Boom City to write the mission statement for our lives and families.”<sup>11</sup>

“We will only find God’s best when we refuse to conform any longer to the aspirations and values of Boom City and when we invite God to transform our innermost sense of what is important (Rom. 12<sup>1-2</sup>). This will, in turn, change the direction and tempo of our lives.”<sup>12</sup>

- Mt. 6<sup>19-21</sup> “*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...*”

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<sup>11</sup> Christine & Tom Sine, Living on Purpose, p. 36.

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