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## ***Into Thy Word Bible Study in Revelation***

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### **Revelation 17:1-5: “The Great Prostitute”**

**General idea:** Then, one of the seven angels goes to John and shows him some more details of these judgments, particularly the great prostitute whose evils have influenced so many. Many rulers and governments have succumbed to evil manipulations and refused to heed godly ways. They have sought immorality rather than Christ, and have given themselves to the prostitute of evil as one would do to a regular prostitute while being drunk—a total disregard for responsibility or morality. The result is that godly people are being tricked and prevented from knowing the One True God—Christ as Savior and Lord.

Then, the angel takes John to the wilderness to see all this in action—the ways of evil being seductive, attracting, and ever so alluring to so many people. This great harlot blasphemes God and puts her trust in materialism and immorality and leads others to do so, too. And, in so doing, she is not ashamed, but rather boisterous and proud of sin.

**Vs. 1-18, Contexts:** The prostitute/harlot represents evil and the manipulations of forcing and tricking people to compromise—forsaking faith to embrace the devil. Such groups in the early church and throughout history sought to hide God and prevent people from knowing about true salvation. It is paganism, godlessness, false religions, and manipulating religion for personal gain and false teachings which are all extreme corruption and hiding of the real God in the shadow of man’s pride and corruption. Governments will seek this harlot so they can manipulate and dominate their people, such as totalitarian regimes and corruption. Corruption destroys everything as it prevents goodness, cooperation, and growth. It tears down rather than build up. People try to use it as an easy way to their goals, but it never works; rather, it causes breakdowns of self and society whereas Christ cleanses us with His blood and equips us with His Word to help build up the world. Thus, “building” is a primary theme of Christianity that creates community and cooperation with the goal of faith and the building of the Church. The devil destroys and tricks people to think that self destruction, the poverty of personal faith, and the breakdown of societal development are good things!

This passage is also referring to how the Emperor-worship cults were strangling the Church, tricking Christians away from Christ to its evils, saying it was OK and compatible with compromise, and not taking real, effectual faith seriously (1 Cor. 6:12-20; 1 Pet. 2:12; 4:3-4).

**Word and Phrase Meanings:**

- *One of the seven angels*, meaning a “tour guide.” This is a common image in apocalyptic writing—someone who guides the seer or reader to what these events mean (Rev. 1:4, 10; 14:8; 16:19; see Revelation 1:9-20 Study).
- *Prostitute/harlot/whore* is from the Greek word, “porne,” from whence comes the English word “pornography.” It means promoting and/or partaking in the grievous sin of fornication that hurts, steals, and destroys. This is an image used in the Old Testament to mean the abandonment of one’s covenant to God or the unfaithfulness and faithlessness of Israel. Also, this means the seductions of the world and that we have to be on guard as Christians. It is people being allured into sin, yet knowing it is sin and being able to resist—as people seeking to disobey God and/or to serve evil. To choose sin is a deliberate choice, one that God hates passionately. This was also a term used by the early church for Rome (Lev. 17:7; Is. 1:21; 26:16-18; 57:3; Jer. 3:1-14; Ezek. Chaps 16 & 23; Hos. 4:15).
- *Who sits on many waters* means confusion; this was also an early church “code word” for Rome, as Rome was a vast, Mediterranean empire mostly on the coast or near many bodies of water (Psalm 65:7; 137:1; Jer. 51:13).
- *Kings of the earth*. This was an early church term that referred to the various states of Rome, such as Syria; each one had their own king, like Herod, who was over the Judea-Jerusalem province. This word also refers to “mortal men” and was a derogatory term for fornication and idolatry; it did not refer to angels or demons.
- *Committed adultery/sexual immorality* means betraying God by committing acts of immorality. These people had no reservations or protests to following an evil empire and being used by them. Their belief was that one has a license to sin; thus, one does not need to be obedient to God, His precepts, civil law, or any moral standards, nor have a need to bear fruit. God says this is evil as it portrays evil as being good. This can also be a reference to the “Emperor cult” and the governors practicing and promoting it, using it as an excuse for extreme immorality and wickedness (Judges 17:6; Jer. 2:31-37; Rom. 6:1-2; 14-15; 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14; 6:2; Gal. 5:22-25; James 2: 14-26; Jude 4; Rev. 2:20).
- *Were intoxicated with the wine/Babylon’s wine* refers to the evils of sin and how it corrupts and destroys, even for the people who use them thinking they are tools to get what they want (Jer. 51:7).
- *Carried me away/in the spirit*. Usually means “spiritual ecstasy,” that is, to be caught up in a vision (not necessarily teleportation, although it can be). The term is not referring to the Holy Spirit, but can mean being influenced by Him (Ezek. 8:3; 11:1-24; Rev. 1:10; 4:2; 21:10).
- *Desert/wilderness* refers to the Exodus, but this time, a new exodus. This can also mean demonic—what is evil and foreboding or barren and desolate (Rev. 12:14).

- *Scarlet*. Perhaps referring to blood that was spilt from the killing---the martyrs of God's people. This can also be a retort on the seduction of the shrine prostitutes and their wealth and impiety, and also sinful conduct. (This is the passage for the theme of Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic work, "The Scarlet Letter" of 1850!) This has nothing to do with a "red heifer" (holy cow) or a 'scapegoat." Such a view shows the necessity to read the Bible and not the daily newspaper or depend on our presumptions for our views on eschatology. Because Christ's sacrifice is complete, we can add nothing to it now or in the future (Num. 19; Lev. 16; Jer. 4:30; Matt. 27:28; Heb. 9:19; Rev.13:1; 18:12).
- *Beast* is probably the same beast mentioned in chapter 13, a possible reference to the Roman goddess "Roma" and the legend of the "she-wolf." Also, it could be an image for Rome and its corruption. Ironically, in Rome's quest and lust for luxury, they ended up destroying themselves into the dark ages of extreme poverty (Dan. 8).
- *Blasphemous names* infers that God's name is not worthy; whereas, in reality, He is worthy. (See Revelation 13:1-4 study.)
- *Seven heads* refers to supernatural manipulation or the appearance of it, as in tricking people (Rev. 13:1).
- *Dressed in purple and scarlet* refers to the "royal colors" of priests; here, it is perverted and used for idolatry. This also refers to the excess and "over the top" luxury at the expense of others. Such colors and clothing dyes were very rare and expensive. It may also refer to Jezebel and her wickedness and idolatry as adultery. Martin Luther was convinced this referred to the papacy he called "popery." Thus, a contrast of goodness and evil (Ex. 20:1-3; Rev. 12:1; 18:7).
- *Glittering with gold...* a symbol of contempt, slander, and/or a disrespect for authority, as pious women had head covering and prostitutes adorned their hair (1 Cor. 11:3-16).
- *Cup* refers to indulgences and what one dishes out, promotes, and uses.
- *Forehead* refers to being unashamed of sin!
- *Mystery* means a "secret symbol" used in *Gnosticism* and the false religions at that time that demanded its people go through ridiculous rituals and initiation rites. This is what is referred to as *apostasy* (2 Thess. 2:3-7).
- *Babylon the Great*. Here it refers to great confusion when associated with the key words in verse 1, *waters* and *mystery*. Babylon was also an early church code word for Rome and also for false worship and oppression which will be addressed in the next two chapters of Revelation (Jer. 51:12-13; Psalm 137:1; Rev. 14:8; 17:15).

- *The mother of prostitutes/the great whore.* A Jewish saying meaning “abomination,” “terrible,” and “confusion rests on the people.” This is an image of extreme evils, oppression, sexual exploitations, and the seductions of the world, referring to the evils of paganism and immorality and rationalizing it as OK (Lev 18:23; Jer. 3:3; Ezek-. 27; Hos. 2:2; Rev. 2:23; 7:3; 13:6).

### **Thoughts and Applications:**

Got Apostasy in your life and church? Did you know that the term “antichrist” means anyone or anything that hides or hinders Christ, and/or prevents people from knowing and worshiping Him, even by Christians? This can be from a misplaced word that attacks someone so deeply they leave and never return to a church, to full-blown apostasy. Read 1 John!

Revelation, as most evangelicals understand it, is about the last days and the judgment of evil, and, for the most part it is. “However,” (a BIG “however,” and a “however” most of us do not like to hear and will rarely study or teach on is this: Revelation is also about how we are called to lead and manage HIS CHURCH! The question we need to ask is, are we being a “harlot” with His Church? Consider that prostitution is a form of adultery—not just in the sexual sense, but being disloyal to God so we are committing adultery to Him. It is unfaithfulness, and thus corruption and disintegration of our life, faith, and then the family because of the breakdown of the Church resulting in the breakdown of society (Is. 57:3; Jer. 3:8-9; Hos. 2:4). This is about who you pledge your life to. Is it to your own pride? Or, is it to His Church and the glorification of Christ? Or, do you chase bad trends, sins, and the ways of the world? Are you so concerned with your way of doing things that His Way is pushed aside or skewed? If so, perhaps you are the “harlot,” or at least acting like it. Consider the struggles of these seven churches and the struggles in your life and church. You may have some prayer and repenting to do! I know I have had to do so!

Another question we need to ask is what are we loyal too? Fades, trends, ideas, or the precepts of Scripture and the glorification of Christ? Why are Christians so interested in chasing fads? Did you know every theory and prediction of Christ’s return and the patterns of the day leading to His return have all been wrong? Another fad we tend to chase is trends on how to lead and manage His Church. Most of these are like chasing the harlot while ignoring the beckoning of Christ and His Way. We seek to water down His Holy Word to attract people—just as the devil manipulates people to trick them to his ways while we are called to disciple, teach, and worship Christ as Lord...His Way.

Being a harlot means we are engaged in and promoting apostasy! What about factions, gossip, and pride? These are the things that God hates the most and cause the greatest destruction to any given church, something even Satan himself could never do. Point? WE are the real enemy of enmity, our sin building and conniving and converging upon one another, while we ignore Christ and His supremacy, precepts, and call!

God is calling you and me—those who lead and pastor churches, who influence people in the church, who sit on committees, teach, or like to flee from manipulating and gossiping behind the scenes—to wake up and SEEK HIM, not ourselves or ideas or plans or trends!

## The Four Prevailing Views

**The Preterist view:** They see this passage as referring to first century Rome; the harlot is Rome, representing its sin, and the consequences of its sin leading to its judgment and downfall. This passage gives greater details that have taken place in chapter 16. They see the *scarlet beast* as the same beast of the sea in Chapter 13, namely Rome. The scarlet is the blood that was spilt by the devastation upon Jerusalem. A few in this camp see this as Jerusalem, and the giving of the events when Rome destroyed it in 70 A.D. Of all the key words in this passage that allude to Rome, one is also used for Jerusalem, the “great city.” Thus, others in this camp see Rome depicted as destroying and not being the one judged. Also, *harlot* is sometimes used for apostasy of the priests and kings of Israel (Is. 1:21; 57:8; Jer. 2:20). The usage of terms in this chapter is a good argument for this position in general.

**The Futurist view:** They see this passage as the Catholic Church or the rise of an “antichrist” figure causing apostasy in the Church. Many see that Babylon will be rebuilt or the Roman Empire rising up again, the sacrificial system restored, and the need for the “red heifer” to atone for peoples sins. All this is happening at the close of the tribulation as the wicked rise up for one last volley against God, setting up the world for Christ’s return. Because Revelation is not necessarily in a chronological order, many in this camp have a hard time with this passage. Most say it is describing events prior to the judgment Bowls, and many see the seventh bowl as Christ’s second coming. There is a lot of discussion of at what point in the tribulation this all takes place. Most see *Babylon* as The Roman Catholic Church, a new Roman empire rising up, or a new, corrupt, religious system. Some see this as the reprising of the Vatican or it becoming more corrupted than ever before, mostly due to the description of *dress* of the harlot seen as priestly garments. Some have said the *harlot* could be apostate Christians who say they are serving Christ but are really serving other gods, or the decay of society as people “pimp” themselves to immorality and false gods. Others say that this harlot is the sum total of the pagan influences upon the world that the “antichrist” uses or develops for his purposes. The *beast* is seen the same as in chapter thirteen, but now showing her support, or else the political power behind the “antichrist.” *Drunk* is seen as the cruelty and bloodshed from the “antichrist.”

**The Idealist view:** They see this passage as the evils of the world, its corruption, and its consequential influences upon the Church. *Babylon* is anything that causes people to seek sin, be seduced by evil, or fight against God. Ancient Babylon is seen as the template for evil governments, their wickedness, and their oppression. *Adultery* is seen as the ruins of Roman providences, seeking the favor of Rome by evil acts. Others see it as the vices of Rome that led to its downfall. *Wilderness* is seen as the “detachment” of Christianity from civilization such as the monastic movements, or the lack of Christian influence in the governments. The *scarlet beast*, as the same beast of the sea in

Chapter 13, is seen as Satan. The *dressed in purple* is the prostitution of Rome and how it led the men to further wickedness and apathy. The *harlot* is Rome and its depravity that led to its self destruction. Others see it as anything that distracts one from God—the lust of the world. *Drunk* is seen as the indulgences of Rome and/or how they persecuted the Church, and the blood that was on their hands because of it, such as Nero.

**The Historicist view:** They see this passage as the fall of the Catholic Church and the corrupt papal system, as the true Church gains victory. They see this chapter as giving extra insights of the events of chapter 16 and of the Turks and Muslim invaders too. Each of these key words is seen as descriptions of the Roman Catholic Church. Wilderness is seen as “Campagna,” the desert area that surrounds the city of Rome where the Vatican is. *Ten horn* and *beast* are the persecutions to the faithful by the papacy. *Scarlet* refers to the priests—their vestments and their pompousness. *The Mother Harlot* is seen as Pope Benedict the 13<sup>th</sup>. Others see this as the apostate churches that have spouted since the Reformation, such as *liberalism*. *Cup* and *forehead* refer to the papal indulgences prior to the Reformation, and causing the faithful to worship what is false or hidden from their sight, and languages, as the Mass was behind a veil in being spoken in Latin. *Drunk* is seen as bloody persecutions of the Medieval Period and the martyrs who tried to reform the Church, such as Wycliffe. (Some accounts have reported the slaughter of millions—up to 50 million faithful Christians by the papacy during the period of the fall of Rome and the Reformation.)

***The Essential Inductive Questions*** (for more Inductive questions see [Inductive Bible Study](#)):

1. What does this passage say?
2. What does this passage mean?
3. What is God telling me?
4. How am I encouraged and strengthened?
5. Is there sin in my life for which confession and repentance is needed?
6. How can I be changed, so I can learn and grow?
7. What is in the way of these precepts affecting me? What is in the way of my listening to God?
8. How does this apply to me? What will I do about it?
9. What can I model and teach?
10. What does God want me to share with someone?

***Additional Questions:***

1. Why are some Christians so greatly interested in chasing fads and so little interested in effectual truth?
2. In the course of human history, every evil and totalitarian government regime has utterly failed and has left its country bankrupted, destitute, and its people helpless and in extreme poverty! Why would such rulers and governments use evils and

manipulations instead of helping and empowering their people to succeed—something that ultimately would benefit them and the society?

3. Why would a worldly person refuse to heed to godly ways? What about a Christian? How have you seen one person's immorality lead another to do so too?
4. What are some rationales people have used to seek immorality and not Christ? What causes some Christians, such as young people, to give themselves over to evil, such as drugs, when people who use drugs and drunkenness always destroy themselves and others around them? People who engage in such behavior never succeed at anything, only at devastation and despair! Why would one want that?
5. How does responsibility help morality? What are some results of not taking personal responsibility in one's life? How does this behavior give an opening for being prevented from growing in maturity and faith, or being tricked from knowing the One, True God?
6. What do you think blasphemy against God will look like? What does it look like now? Why would people put their trust in such materialism?
7. How have you seen people not only unashamed, but rather boisterous, and proud of their sin?
8. How do the evils of sin corrupt and destroy? How do they destroy the people who use them, thinking they are a tool to get what one wants?
9. How and why should your church be judged for the failure to *repent* and for *apostasy*? What would Christ consider to be apostasy, but that you or your church leadership might rationalize as being OK?
10. How have you seen evil influencing many people? How have you been influenced? What are some things Christians can do to prevent themselves from being negatively influenced? How can your church help?
11. How does chasing trends affect how a pastor or church leader may lead and manage "His Church?" How can one discern between good trends and bad? Have you ever considered that most of them are like chasing the harlot while ignoring the beckoning of Christ and His Way?
12. Who has command of you and your church? Is it pride, trends, and agendas, or is it God and His preeminence? What about factions, gossip, and pride? What are you going to do about it? What does Christ want you and your church to do?