Revelation 17

Babylon and the Beast

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Two Forms of Evil: The Harlot and the Beast

There are two forms of evil and rebellion against God which the Holy Spirit brings before us in this chapter, two figures more prominent than the rest, instruments of iniquity in the world since redemption, which the enemy has used and will yet use against God and His Christ. The first, as we clearly see, is the harlot or "great whore that sitteth upon many waters"; the second is what is called "the beast." Now there need not be any uncertainty as to either in the mind of a true-hearted believer. God has been pleased to give us distinct marks by which we may discern and be sure of His mind.

It is not to be admitted that the intimations of prophecy are equivocal until they are accomplished. On the other hand there is a moral fitness in their being apprehended only by those who have the Spirit of God. It is true that the unspiritual do not receive the things of the Spirit of God; but this is only a confirmation of the truth. Those who are of the world will always find fault with whatever is not of the world. If God's word and its testimony were such that the world's wisdom could appreciate and own it, I should distrust the book. It is one of the strongest marks of the divine character that those who are spiritually in a wrong state cannot receive it. This is a reason for humility, not discouragement.

She courts and lavishes her guilty favors on the kings of the earth. She is the channel neither of blessing nor of glory for the dwellers on the earth, but only makes them drunk with the wine of her fornication. Can any traits be conceived more aptly descriptive of her who claims to be the representative of Christ, not in grace and suffering, but for her own pride and advantage on earth? We shall see other features less obvious but equally characteristic. What I am now stating lies on the surface of the scripture; and any one who reads the word of God as it is intended to be read -- not merely a verse here or there and now or again -- will not be disappointed.

The Identity of Babylon

The woman is arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: and upon her forehead was a name written, "Mystery, Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth."

God Almighty, infinitely wise in all He says, and as good as He is wise. Such a blazon on her forehead from the Spirit teaches us that here it is in no way a question of a heathen city with any amount of political influence. Its real heathenism, or rather its ungodly antagonism to God's people now fallen, may very well be couched under "Babylon the great"; for such was Babylon of old to the ancient people. But "Mystery" goes deeper, and shows the need of spiritual discernment according to the divine revelation vouchsafed to us, in order to detect the true character of this gigantic yet subtle imposture. Neither pagan Rome nor modern commerce nor a future city rising on the Euphrates, can satisfy the description. It is apostate Christendom, the ecclesiastical system that has taken the name of Christ while serving the world and the devil.

Further, there is what may be called the political mark added in the end of the chapter. "The woman which thou sawest is the great city which reigneth (or hath kingdom) over the kings of the earth." There was only one city which had reigned over kings. There can be no question therefore that Rome exclusively is the city intended here by the Spirit of God. This is so true that a great many learned persons of the Roman Catholic communion have acknowledged the fact, even some of their most celebrated controversialists. Probably there are many here who have heard of the famous Bishop of Meaux, J. B. Bossuet, as others have heard of Cardinals Baronius and Bellarmin. These officials, of high distinction in the Romish system, acknowledge Rome to be intended. They have their own way of endeavoring to conciliate the fact admitted with their tenacious

maintenance of Rome as the holy church of God; but the admission of the fact leaves its mark.

The Beast: The Roman Empire Revived

Now, what is the Beast? The Beast in this chapter is the revived Roman Empire in its final and most terrible form. The empires of the world are represented in prophecy as beasts; they are characterized by that which is the spirit of beastly pride and selfishness, the spirit of the world which is utterly contrary to God. The Roman beast is the fourth great world-empire of Daniel's vision, the "terrible and dreadful" beast of Dan. 7.

The great fact about the Roman empire that is predicted here and elsewhere is this: that it is to come to an end, and then to be revived again in a still more terrible form. The history of the world since the fall of Rome is the story of that interregnum between the first existence and the revival of the fourth empire. "The beast that was, is not, and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit." It was -- the Roman empire existed; it is not -- the Roman empire has ceased to exist as such; it shall ascend out of the bottomless pit -- it will be revived by Satanic power in the last days.

There is to be a novel unity unexampled in Europe or elsewhere. "They will have one mind, and give their power and strength unto the beast." And what use does he make of it?

These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them (for He is Lord of lords, and King of kings; and they that are with Him, called, and chosen, and faithful {Rev. 17:14}.

In the midst of such a dreary future, what a comfort that we shall be with Him then! You, if you love the Lord, will be with Him. Whoever you may be, if you are Christ's, you will come with Christ in that day. He will appear from

heaven, and so will you in glory. It will not then be a question of gathering His people to Himself. Not a hint of such a removal is given in this context. The faithful are already with Him. They had been caught up to heaven before these solemn events begin.

The Destruction of Babylon by the Beast

The remarkable thing predicted in this chapter is that the same power which had used and fostered Babylon will at the last turn against her and destroy her utterly. "And the ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire. For God hath put in their hearts to fulfil His will" {Rev. 17:16, 17}.

This is the overruling providence of God. The beast and his vassal kings, though acting from their own motives of greed and jealousy, are nevertheless instruments in God's hand for the judgment of the apostate church. On the other hand it cannot be denied to be perfectly intelligible that the Roman empire with all the ten subject kingdoms in its sphere will burn with implacable fury against ecclesiastical Rome, the old object of their deepest, superstitious, and passionate devotion; as I believe they will.

We see that the power which has possessed itself of the papal temporalities is naturally by no means palatable to the Pope; as it also has shown but little scruple in taking his goods. When the day comes for the beast and the ten horns the spoliation of Babylon will be complete. The beast will first enrich himself and his followers, and then destroy her. All that ecclesiastical Rome has accumulated over the ages will be swept away in a moment.

But this is God's doing. "For God hath put in their hearts to fulfil His will." The destruction of Babylon the harlot is an act of divine judgment, executed by human hands, but ordered and determined by God. It is the answer of God to all the centuries of blood shed, of souls corrupted, of truth suppressed, of Christ

dishonored, that lie at the door of apostate Christendom.

The Seven Heads and Ten Horns Explained

The seven heads are doubly interpreted. They are seven mountains (or hills), whereon the woman sits (cp. v. 18). Rome is the seat geographically. But they are also seven kings, or differing forms of ruling power. The Beast is thus distinguished. There had been, (1) kings; (2) consuls; (3) dictators; (4) decemvirs; (5) military tribunes; who held successively and constitutionally the imperium. And these five were fallen. The sixth was actually then in power -- emperors. The seventh had not yet come; and it was to be transient.

"And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven." Thus there was to be a most curious compound character in the eighth head. He would be, on the one hand, of the seven; on the other, he would be an eighth. This seems, to my thinking, to be explained by what we find in another part of the book: the wounded head of the beast which is healed. The last holder of that power, the last head, will display the resurrection of the empire without and against God, by Satanic energy, and in this condition it is doomed to perish for ever under the judgment of God.

"And the ten horns which thou sawest are ten kings." These are the ten contemporaneous kingdoms of the revived empire, answering to the ten toes of the great image in Daniel 2. They receive their kingdom one hour with the beast -- a brief period of united action -- and they have one mind, and give their power and strength unto the beast. They make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them. Such is the end of the beast and his allies: overcome by the Lamb, Who is Lord of lords and King of kings.

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