



Catalog No. 1528
 Revelation 17:1-7, 18
 28th Message
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 November 19th, 2006

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

SERIES: THE SEEN AND THE UNSEEN

During the recent election campaign I have enjoyed looking at the political cartoons, cartoons in which donkeys and elephants feature prominently. To an uninitiated foreigner these cartoons must seem very strange; they are incomprehensible. But most of us are able to read these cartoons. We know the symbolism: we know that the elephants are Republicans and the donkeys are Democrats.

For the past few years there has been much talk of red states and blue states. This, too, makes sense only if you know the code. You have to know this code to understand the cover of this week's issue of *Time*. But I still have to think about this, because the UK follows a different code: red represents the party on the left, blue the party on the right. Here it is the other way around. Donkeys and elephants, red and blue: symbolic animals and symbolic colors. You have to know the code if you are to understand them.

The same is true of the Book of Revelation. It is full of symbolic animals and symbolic colors. Those who don't know the code to these symbols will completely miss the meaning, making a mockery of the text. G. K. Chesterton remarked that "though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators."¹

Today we enter a major new section of the book of Revelation. Here we encounter two symbolic creatures each with a symbolic color: a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns, and a prostitute dressed in purple and scarlet. We've seen the beast before in chapter 13, but the woman is new. We'll spend the next three weeks looking at the beast and the woman, then turn in the fourth week to their opposites, the Lamb and the bride.

Hear the word of the Lord:

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."

Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. This title was written on her forehead:

MYSTERY

BABYLON THE GREAT

THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES

AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God's people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. Then the angel said to me: "Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns..."

The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." (Rev 17:1-7, 18 TNIV)

This angel's invitation to John to witness the punishment of the great prostitute marks a major new section in the book. The previous section had begun with the invitation, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this" (4:1). It ended with the collapse of the great city, Babylon the Great, accomplished by the pouring out of the seventh bowl (16:19). This is what had to take place: the fall of the great city. John will now be shown her punishment. Carried away in the Spirit to a wilderness location John sees a woman sitting upon a scarlet beast.

Since John is astonished at what he sees, the angel undertakes to explain his vision, both the woman and the beast. He explains the two in reverse order, first the beast in considerable detail (17:8-17), then the woman in a single sentence (17:18). We'll look at the explanation of the beast next week; this week we'll look at the explanation of the woman. As for the woman, the angel's brief explanation is that she is the great city. That doesn't seem like much help: we need an explanation of the explanation! The prostitute has been identified as many different things: Rome, Jerusalem, the apostate church in general, the Catholic church in particular. The key given by the angel to understanding the prostitute is that she is the great city. What then is the key to understanding the great city? The code is given us in the rest of the Bible, especially in the Old Testament and the rest of Revelation.

The Bible is a tale of two cities. It was not Charles Dickens who first wrote a tale of two cities, in his case about London and Paris. Nor was it Augustine, who contrasted the City of God with the earthly city. The tale of two cities is embedded within the Bible from beginning to end: the great city and the holy city, the earthly city and the heavenly city, the city of man and the city of God, the prostitute and the bride, Babylon and Jerusalem.

A. The Great City: The City of Man

The great city has its origin near the very beginning, in the story of Cain. After Cain had killed his brother and rejected God's word, he "went out from the Lord's presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden" (Gen 4:16). Here he had a son, Enoch, whose occupation was that of city-builder. He named his city after his son, for this was the city of his own making, the city of man. Cain's line developed a sophisticated culture with metal-working and music (Gen 4:20-22), but in the Bible's analysis all this was accomplished by humanity living away from the Lord's presence. God's name is completely absent from the account of Cain's descendents (Gen 4:17-24).

The next city-builder was Nimrod: “The first centers of his kingdom were Babylon, Uruk, Akkad and Kalneh, in Shinar. From that land he went to Assyria, where he built Nineveh, Rehoboth Ir, Calah and Resen, which is between Nineveh and Calah—which is the great city” (Gen 10:10-12). These were the mighty cities of Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization. Mesopotamian society took pride in these cities and their founders. Their accounts exalted the mighty rulers of these cities: men such as Gilgamesh in Uruk, and Hammurabi in Babylon. But in the Bible’s eyes these cities are all built by Nimrod, whose name means “we shall rebel.” Here we have the first mention of the great city, the city built by the rebel.

This rebellion is more fully depicted in the next chapter where humanity gathers together, saying, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves” (Gen 11:4). This plan that was good in the eyes of man was evil in the eyes of the Lord. He intervened to halt this spread of evil. The Babylonians knew their city as *Bab-ili*, “the gate of god”; the Bible knows it as Babel, the city of confusion.

Here in the first eleven chapters of the Bible we have three accounts of the city of man. The cities that Mesopotamian society took pride in are viewed as the product of human society wandering east of Eden outside the presence of the Lord. The Genesis account has deconstructed the stories of the surrounding cultures.

And so the story continues throughout the Old Testament. Three cities in particular share the characteristics of the great city: Nineveh, Babylon and Tyre. Nineveh, located beside the Tigris River, and capital of the Assyrian Empire that was renowned in the ancient world for its brutality. Babylon, straddling the Euphrates River, and capital of the Babylonian Empire. Tyre, located on a small island just off the Phoenician coast, and center of a vast trading empire that sent its ships the length of the Mediterranean. The great city, as typified by these three cities, has several characteristic features. It lives in autonomy from God; it is proud and arrogant; and it thinks itself invincible, secure behind walls of its own making. It is the city of man, the city of human accomplishment. This city is opposed to God and to his people; it therefore oppresses his people and takes them captive, swallowing them up in its empire. It was Nineveh that took captive the northern kingdom of Israel. It was Babylon that took captive the southern kingdom of Judah. The great city is often portrayed in the Old Testament as a harlot, a prostitute whose crimes are two-fold. She is herself idolatrous, worshiping myriad false gods rather than the one true God, and she has seduced the whole world with her abominations, intoxicating the world with her wares.

It is this Old Testament imagery of Nineveh, Babylon and Tyre that lies behind John’s vision of the great prostitute. She is dressed in purple and scarlet, colors representative of fabulous wealth and luxury, and also of royalty. The color purple was highly prized and very expensive in the ancient world. The production of this color was the mainstay of Tyre’s economy. Indeed, the name Phoenicia comes from the Greek word for the color purple. The prostitute glittered with gold, precious stones and pearls. She is luxurious, dazzling, enticing, alluring. From the cup in her hand she has drunk deeply of her abominations and adulteries. This idolatrous woman is opposed to God and everything he stands for. She is seductive, sharing her cup all around. The kings of the earth and the inhabitants of the earth have drunk her cup; they too have become drunk on her wine, the adulterous wine of idolatry, of living apart from God. “The inhabitants of the earth” is a phrase used repeatedly in Revelation for those who live in autonomy from God. These are the earth-dwellers

whose horizon is only the earth, who have no eye for God, no eye for heaven. They live entirely by sight, and are therefore easily seduced by the next alluring thing that passes before their eyes.

Shockingly, John sees that the prostitute has been drinking not only the wine of her adulteries, but also the blood of the saints. She has consumed so much of this blood that she is drunk. The saints are those who bear testimony to Jesus. With the eyes of faith they see beyond the earthly horizon to heaven. They are resistant to her seductions, and pay the price of her fury.

To the readers of Revelation at the end of the first century, the great prostitute was in the first instance Rome. She was Nineveh, Babylon and Tyre all rolled up into one. She was the great city par excellence, the greatest city yet seen on earth. She called herself *urbs aeterna*, the eternal city; by this time she was almost 900 years old. She sat at the center of the largest empire the world had ever seen, an empire that existed to serve her insatiable appetites. This empire, built on the backs of slaves, made many fabulously wealthy. And just like Nineveh and Babylon, she had shed the blood of God’s people.

But the prostitute was much more than just Rome. Rome was only her current manifestation. Rome would fall but the great city would arise like a phoenix from the ashes. Nineveh, Babylon, Tyre and Rome are all long-gone. But Babylon the great city is alive and well. Wherever humanity lives outside the presence of God, proud of its own accomplishments, secure behind walls of its own making, intoxicated on its own idolatries and intoxicating others, there is the great city. Babylon is alive and well today, not least here in Silicon Valley.

Such then is Babylon, the great city, the city of man, the earthly city, the prostitute.

B. The Holy City: The City of God

There is another city, a city that is in every respect the exact opposite of the great city.

In Genesis 4–11 we saw that humanity, left to its own devices, removed itself from God’s presence and became a race of city-builders. But God is not content to let his world go this way. He did not create mankind to live away from his presence. He did not create mankind to build its own cities.

So, after the human attempt to reach the heavens with a man-built city, God intervened in the life of one man, an idolatrous moon-worshiper living among the cities of Mesopotamia. He called Abram to leave these idolatrous cities and journey to another land, a land that he would show him (Gen 12:1). By faith Abram went.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and

welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:8-16)

There is another city whose architect and builder is God. And there is a people whom God is calling to live in this city. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called the God of this people!

But where is this city? Abraham and his descendents remained nomads in the land. They then spent four centuries in Egypt, sinking into slavery and hard labor. But God delivered them from that and brought them to the land that he had promised Abraham. Along the way he told them repeatedly that he would choose a place to put his Name (e.g. Deut 12). When David captured Jerusalem it became the City of David, the capital of the kingdom of Israel. It was here that God chose to put his Name, here that he instructed that a temple be built for his holy presence. This holy presence made the city also the City of God, the Holy City. Here God dwelt with his people, the people he had redeemed from bondage. This was Zion, the mount where God had enthroned his king and gathered his people. Pilgrimage to Zion, to the city where God is, is a major motif of the Old Testament, especially of the Psalms.

All should have been well, but the king and people proved fickle, easily led astray, easily seduced by the cities of man. It started with Solomon, the temple-builder himself, who built other cities upon the backs of slave labor. It was downhill from there. The kings led the people astray into idolatry. Finally Jerusalem became indistinguishable from the great city, from Babylon. In her was found the blood of the saints, for she put to death the prophets whom God sent to call her to her senses. Like Babylon, this rebellious, idolatrous city of Jerusalem considered herself invulnerable, for she had the Lord's temple in her midst. Finally the Lord removed his presence from the temple and the city (Ezek 10), whereupon she ceased to be the holy city. Since she desired to be like Babylon, God handed her over to Babylon.

By the time of Jesus, Jerusalem had been rebuilt. But again she was a vipers' nest of rebels. Again the blood of the saints was found in her. She killed God's final prophet, Jesus the Messiah, killing him in place of Barabbas the rebel. When Jew and Roman entered into unholy alliance to kill the king, Jerusalem had become indistinguishable from the new Babylon, Rome. Once again God removed his presence—not now the glory cloud that filled the Holy of Holies, but Jesus in whom God had been present among his people. Bereft of God's holy presence, Jerusalem again ceased to be the holy city, becoming instead the city of man. Since she desired to be like Rome, God handed her over to Rome, the new Babylon, the great city.

C. The Holy City Today

Twice the holy city has become indistinguishable from the great city. Twice God has removed his holy presence and handed the city over to the great city. Where then is the Holy City today?

In Hebrews we read,

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn,

whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:22-24)

The holy city is the heavenly city, of which Jerusalem was an earthly outpost. Now it is the Church that is the earthly outpost, the Church made up of Jew and Gentile alike, all redeemed by God's grace to be a people for his presence. This Church had its genesis on the day of Pentecost, when God reversed the confusion of Babel. Then a most remarkable thing happened: God scattered his people throughout the Roman empire. In the Old Testament the scattering of God's people was a mark of his judgment. But the Book of Acts shows this scattering as a positive thing. By scattering his people from Jerusalem, God began to infiltrate his holy city deep into the heart of the great city. By the end of the book of Acts God's people had reached Rome itself, bringing news of another city, bringing the gospel of grace, of God's great acts in Christ. This holy city reached even into Caesar's household.

Now a generation later, John is writing to seven churches embedded within the cities of the province of Asia. God wants his cities there, for they are lampstands, serving as witnesses to the Lord Jesus Christ. To the church in Pergamum Jesus says, "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is" (2:12). He doesn't tell the church to move; no, he wants it right there, right in the heart of Satan's territory, right in the heart of the great city. Surely it would be much easier if the church picked up and moved to the desert, far from the great city. Or if it erected a huge wall to keep the great city out of sight. But God doesn't want his church removed from society. He wants his church in the midst of society, functioning as a lampstand.

God's design is that the church influence society. But the danger is that society influence the church, that the great city permeate the earthly colonies of the holy city. The seven churches of Revelation show considerable variation in resisting or embracing the mindset of the great city. Only two of the churches have remained pure: Smyrna and Philadelphia. It is not coincidental that these are the two that are facing active opposition. Two of the churches have compromised out of fear: Pergamum and Thyatira. The great city in Pergamum has already drunk of the blood of the saints: it has killed Antipas, the faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ (2:13). The churches in these two cities are fearful lest more blood be shed. But it is one of the characteristics of the great city that in her is found the blood of the saints.

To the church in Laodicea Jesus issued a stern rebuke: "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing'" (3:17). This is Babylon's mentality. The Laodicean church had been so permeated by the world that she was indistinguishable from the great city. It is to this church that Jesus says, "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me" (3:20). This is not Jesus meekly knocking on the door of an unbeliever's heart. This is Jesus pounding on the door of a church that has become part of the great city, a church that has shut Jesus out, a church that has forgotten that she is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

D. Resisting Seduction

How do we remain true to the holy city while yet being embedded within the great city? The great city is seductive, alluring, enticing. It would be so much easier if it were not so. But it has been this

way since the beginning: the fruit upon which the serpent focused the woman's gaze was good for food and pleasing to the eye (Gen 3:6). The serpent wanted the woman to live by sight not by faith, to be driven merely by the alluring things that passed before her eyes, to be driven by her earthly appetites.

To resist seduction we have to be mindful of the chief characteristics of the holy city and the great city. The great city is the city built by humanity away from the Lord's presence; its horizon is earth-bound. The holy city is the city built by God. It is the city where God is. It is this and this alone that makes it the holy city.

After Ezekiel had seen God's holy presence depart from Jerusalem, he was shown a vision of the temple and city rebuilt. The climax of this vision is the naming of the city: *Yahweh Shammah*, "The Lord is there" (Ezek 48:35).

The big question is, "Does that delight us?" Is it enough that the defining characteristic of the holy city is that God is there? Is it God himself that we long for? Or are we after his benefits: a successful life, a home in the right neighborhood and the right school district, a good job, kids who "are above average," life free from pain, angst and regret?

In his sermon "The Weight of Glory" C. S. Lewis states,

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.²

We allow ourselves to be satisfied with the wares of the great city when God offers us something so much greater, he offers us himself. Earlier we sang, "I have no longings for another, I'm satisfied in him alone."³ Could you sing that with meaning? As John Piper is fond of saying, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him." Do you believe that? Are you satisfied in God? Do you even want to be satisfied in God?

In the first paragraph of his *Confessions*, Augustine wrote,

Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you...The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.⁴

Does the thought of God stir you deeply?

A recent *Time* cover story asked "Does God want you to be rich?"⁵ What are you looking to God to do in your life? How do you want God to touch you? To give you money? To take away your pain? To fulfil your desires? Or do you want God to touch you with himself? To break your appetite for earth-bound things, replacing it with an appetite for himself? To so satisfy you with himself that you want nothing else?

In *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, Jeremiah Burroughs writes of a paradox in the life of the Christian:

he is the most contented man in the world, and yet the most unsatisfied man in the world...A little in the world will content a Christian for his passage, but all the world, and ten thousand

times more, will not content a Christian for his portion...A soul that is capable of God can be filled with nothing else but God.⁶

Are you looking to be satisfied with something other than God himself? Seeking satisfaction in something other than God is characteristic of the great city, not the holy city.

Revelation ends with a vision of the Holy City, the new Jerusalem:

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." (21:2-3)

Here we have it again: the chief characteristic of the Holy City is that God is there. Here we have the fulfilment of the heart of God's promise, oft-repeated throughout Scripture: "I will be your God, you will be my people and I will dwell with you." That fundamentally is what God is up to. But is that what you want? Do you want God himself?

The last six chapters of Revelation present us these two cities: the great city, Babylon, the prostitute; and the holy city, New Jerusalem, the bride. God wants us to experience the rapture of a bride for her husband, not the intoxication of a client for a prostitute.

It is by having our eyes fixed upon the holy city, and realizing that the chief characteristic of the holy city is that God is there, that we can resist the seductions of the earthly city, the great city. But if it is not God that you desire, you'll be open to all the seductions of the earthly city. The great city has much to offer that will satisfy for a moment. But the great city cannot satisfy the deepest places of the human heart, because humanity was not created to be a race of city-builders, humanity was not created to live apart from God. God created people to live with himself in the city which he builds. We also sang, "When he calls me it will be paradise: his face forever to behold."⁷ Is that how you define paradise: to behold the face of God?

May God break us of our earthly appetites, intensify our appetite for himself, and then deeply satisfy us with himself. Amen.

1. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908).

2. C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996 [1949]), 26.

3. Steve & Vicki Cook, "I Will Glory in My Redeemer" (2001).

4. Augustine, *Confessions* 1.1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 21.

5. David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, "Does God want you to be Rich?" *Time* 168:12 (Sept 18, 2006), 48-56.

6. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964 [1648]), 42-43.

7. Cook, "I Will Glory."