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“Harlot” and “Fornication”

Revelation 17:18 states plainly, “*The woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth.*” (See [Footnote about the meaning of “great city”](#).) This lets us know that the “woman... the great harlot” is symbolic language for a government system. We are not to think in literal terms of a prostitution racket or some such thing.

So in case there should be any question about it, let us clarify what is meant by the various sexual terms used in Revelation 17-18 (also in 14:8, 19:2): “*great harlot*”, “*commit fornication*”. Each of these terms is based on the root word *porne*, whose literal meaning has to do with sexual/romantic infidelity. But in these chapters the word “*fornication*” is applied symbolically to a person or nation who has turned away and fallen in love with some god other than God the Creator of Heaven and Earth.

In the days of ancient Greek culture, prostitution was often associated with pagan worship. For example, in the port city of Corinth every night prostitutes were known to practice their trade on behalf of their temple goddess. The ancient city of Babylon also had a reputation for indulging in sacred prostitution.

Thus, to engage in prostitution often meant indulging in some form or another of devil worship. It was more than just a matter of granting sexual

favors for gain; the profession had this dark spiritual side to it.

In ancient Roman society, sexual slavery was a common practice.

Buying, selling, and renting slaves for sex was legal, and not even frowned upon - including that of children - and was therefore done on an industrial scale, in a [Roman] society with permanently skewed sex ratios due to gender-selective infanticide... (from “[The Maligning of Early Christianity](#)” by Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry, June 12, 2018)

Early Christianity fought hard against the sexual slavery practices common in ancient Roman society. No wonder then that the *harlot* symbolism became a favorite label in those days for this future empire - to mark both its infidelity to God and its downward spiral into depravity and tyranny.

(Just to clarify: The sexual-sin symbolism was used a lot in Early Church writings because of the pervasive influence in Greek and Roman culture of harmful sexual mores and activities. However, this doesn't mean that sex *per se* is wrong or sinful. Sex is, after all, a God-created aspect of human nature; just as our body was created, needing to eat and breathe, so it also needs to enjoy sexual release.)

Besides the dark spiritual side, the harlot sub-culture includes other unsavory aspects: prostitutes lure and tempt men away from their wives; and the men, for their part, are doing it on the sly behind the backs of their wives. And since the prostitution trade is also associated with activities and vices like gambling, drug and alcohol addictions, thievery, blackmail, and so on, we can go even further with these terms (*fornication, harlot*) to see them as symbolizing the downward drift of a nation or people into decadence and depravity.

So for this future city system to be called, not just a “*harlot*”, but “*the mother of harlots*” (17:5), meant a lot; she enslaves nations, leads the world into a downward spiral of corruption, misery, and departure from the ways of God.

The strange thing is, although having departed from the ways of God herself, she still claims to belong to God. That is the meaning of the *Harlot*

symbolism; the once loyal *Bride* has left her First Love in all but name and has become a harlot - devoted, not to God, but to Materialism and the oppression required to maintain her wealth and position. The modern situation resembles what was described once about ancient Israel: “these people draw near with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me.” (Isaiah 29:13)

When the Israeli nation turned its back on God, the people would succumb to the worship of whatever demonic entities were prevalent in their time or region; and within their own society, their conduct deteriorated into oppression and tyranny over the poor of their own land. At such times the Lord referred to His people as a “harlot”.

In ancient times, it was obvious - visible in the form of engaging in the worship of idols. And in the Early Church, perhaps because of their struggles against sexual slavery, their favorite metaphors for departure from the faith changed from “idolatry” to “fornication” or “harlotry” - comparing it to lack of faithfulness in marriage.

***Porneia* [Fornication:] In accordance with a form of speech common in the O. T. and among the Jews which represents the close relationship existing between Jehovah and his people under the figure of a marriage... [*porneia*] is used metaphorically of the worship of idols: Rev. xiv.8; xvii.2,4; xviii.3; xiv.2...**

***Porneuo* [Commit fornication]... by a Hebraism... metaphorically, *to be given to idolatry*... *to permit one's self to be drawn away by another into idolatry*...**

***Porne* [Harlot]... by a Hebraism... metaphorically, *an idolatress*... the chief seat of idolatry.**

[from *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1889, pg 532]

So these words - *harlot*, *fornication* - were used symbolically in the Revelation Book as metaphors for idolatry, and in a more general sense, for infidelity to God: apostasy in its various forms, out and out demon worship, ungodliness.

Fast forward to the Modern Age and its secular, scientifically-minded culture, and we see that religious attitudes differ from what existed in the

superstitious world of ancient times. A modern person may have turned his back on God, but that doesn't mean they will start worshiping idols. They may even maintain a veneer of Christianity.

We might say, “Oh, that person worships money”. But we would never see them in a temple somewhere burning incense before an altar to Mammon. So, without officially acknowledging any worship of the heathen god Mammon, in effect that's what it boils down to; a person who turns away from God can end up serving the god of Materialism. The apostle Paul referred to it as “*covetousness, which is idolatry*” in an exhortation to one of the early churches to “*set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.*” (Colossians 3:5,2 - KJV)

Long ago Christ made it clear that there were only two “religions” that grab our time and energy when He stated (in the Sermon on the Mount),

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” (Matthew 6:24)

Here was the real enemy, the “religion” that becomes a “master” and draws its adherents away from faith in and service to God.

It doesn't matter what religion or non-religion one professes; a person is devoted in spirit, either to the pursuit of wealth and material abundance, or to the pursuit of God and godly activities. Materialism is the religion of all religions and of all ages - the one that so many people devote too much of themselves to, spend all their time and resources pursuing... regardless of their religious affiliation or political persuasion.

So the term “*fornication*”, which denoted, symbolically, an attachment to the forces of Darkness, nowadays, in a non-superstitious age, could be understood as adherence to worldviews that sideline the reality of God's presence and draw their adherents into Materialism: secular materialism, humanism, scientific naturalism, or any other of a number of philosophies which rationalize the belief that God should mind His own business and have nothing to do with human affairs or formation of the natural realm. This is the modern day version of the ancient practice of fornication/idolatry. Materialism in its many forms is the “religion” of the

Modern Age - meaning over-attraction to earthly reality and failure to appreciate the reality of God. ([Colossians 3:2](#))

The prophet Samuel summed it up nicely when he told King Saul, “*For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.*” (1Samuel 15:23) Even though Saul was a believer in the true God, he was, because of his willfulness and disobedience to God’s voice, on the same level as those who practiced witchcraft and idolatry.

The symbolic picture of a “*harlot*” fits the modern situation well - a society that has a veneer of Christianity but, because of its evil practices, denies the teachings of Christ. Like King Saul of old, Christian civilization has turned from “*bride*” into “*harlot*”.

In particular, the visions of Revelation 17-18 abound with references to the *Great Harlot’s* wealth and to the fact that her material prosperity has led her astray. “*She glorified herself and lived luxuriously.*” (18:7)

And so, we might ask, where, nowadays, is the center of this brand of spiritual Darkness - this wealth and promotion of Materialism? Although Materialism is practiced worldwide, it is not difficult to see that the rich nation of America dominates the world in the financial domain. She is the center around which the rest of the world has been forced to serve and bow down to in modern times - the trading center on which many other nations depend for their survival and prosperity. Ensuing posts will elaborate on this subject of America’s financial empire.

Comparison to Ancient Tyre

In the 6th century B.C., the prophet Ezekiel wrote a “*lamentation for Tyre*” - a prophetic message in which the Lord describes the city of Tyre’s great trading empire that was destined to suffer collapse at the hands of the rising *Beast* power (the Babylonian empire, and later the Greek empire). (Ezekiel 27-28) And the description resembles several features found also in Revelation 17-18: all kinds of merchandise, extravagance and wealth, the devilish wisdom and deception, the pride of riches, the merchants.

No doubt, John the apostle knew this Old Testament passage. In

addition to Israel's example sometimes as a *Harlot*, related to that is the example of Tyre's behavior and fall. And this acted as a sort of lens through which the Lord could help his apostle to see and describe the final manifestation of the *Harlot*.

Symbolism of Babylon

In addition to the *Harlot* symbolism and the example of Tyre, there is also the *Babylon* symbolism. So what does that stand for? First of all, it links the Revelation passages with Jeremiah 51-52 about the fall of ancient Babylon - a sort of lens through which we can view and get God's perspective on modern *Babylon*. For several of the prophetic messages in the Old Testament, the ancient events had acted as a sort of telescope through which the prophets could view distant future events.

In this case, the Lord used the message about what would happen to ancient Babylon as a "learning aid" or "springboard" to help John the apostle, 600 years later, to see into the future and to understand and describe what would befall a future "*Babylon*". The similarity of John's revelation with Jeremiah's prophetic message for ancient Babylon draws attention to the stark reality of modern *Babylon*'s fate; it will be drastic.

History repeats itself; and being reminded of what happened in ancient times reinforces the certainty that it could happen again. As ancient Babylon was a warmongering tyrant, so also is the modern *Babylon*. Her tendency to default to armed solutions to get her way, along with modern weapons technology, have molded America into the greatest warmonger ever to come in the history of the world. (See [here in Appendix 3](#).)

The fate of modern Babylon will repeat much of what happened in ancient times. (See [Appendix 1](#) for details.) Of course, technology has changed immensely, which is one reason why the destruction described in Revelation 17-18 sounds dreadful compared to what happened to ancient Babylon.

Conclusion:

What we have in Revelation 17-18 is a two-sided portrayal, from God's viewpoint, of a world power who is both "*harlot*" and "*babylon*" - that is,

- 1) as a *Harlot*, she has departed from her original loyalty to the Almighty and is caught in a downward spiral of worship of Materialism and economic and social depravity. And besides controlling the world's wealth (so she can live luxuriously), she also,**
- 2) as *Babylon*, has turned into an oppressive, warmongering tyrant, serving her own interests in subjugating the rest of the world. To maintain her wealth and superpower status, she has unleashed her military forces worldwide.**

A vast commercial trading empire (*Harlot*) and a vast military complex (*Babylon*). These are the same power dynamics found in the *Beast* empire, which is actually a combination of two *Beasts*: a warlike *Beast* from the sea and an economic-religious *Beast* from the earth.

FOOTNOTE:

“Great city” does not mean one city only. Describing the very end of “great Babylon”, Revelation 16:19 states, “*The great city was divided into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell* [in a great earthquake].” “Great city”, as used here, is a collective term for a group of cities - in other words, a nation or nations.

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