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The Two Women Of Revelation: The Harlot And The Bride



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† Revelation presents two women and two cities in deliberate contrast. One is the harlot, called Babylon the Great, and the other is the bride, the New Jerusalem.

† These aren't two unrelated visions. Revelation uses the two women to portray two opposing covenant realities. The harlot represents the unfaithful city under judgment, while the bride represents the covenant people of God revealed in glory.

† The contrast becomes especially clear when Revelation identifies the

guilty city as the place where the Lord was crucified (Revelation 11:8), charges her with the blood of prophets and saints (Revelation 18:24), and then describes the bride as the holy city coming down from God (Revelation 21:2).

† Jesus had already placed responsibility for the blood of the prophets upon first-century Jerusalem and declared that judgment would come upon that generation (Matthew 23:34-38).

† Revelation isn't describing the destruction of the physical universe. It's showing the judgment of the unfaithful covenant city and the unveiling of the faithful covenant city, the bride of Christ.

Revelation 17:1-2

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who sits on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth committed acts of sexual immorality, and those who live on the earth became drunk with the wine of her sexual immorality."

† The vision begins by announcing the judgment of the great harlot. In prophetic language, harlotry repeatedly described covenant unfaithfulness, especially when God's covenant people abandoned Him for political alliances and idolatry (Isaiah 1:21; Ezekiel 16:15-26).

† This is covenant language. A woman could be charged with spiritual adultery because she had first been joined to God in covenant.

† Revelation's harlot therefore isn't merely a wicked political power. Her sin is portrayed as betrayal of a covenant relationship.

Revelation 17:4-6

The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls, holding in her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her sexual immorality, and on her forehead a name was written, a mystery: "BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH." And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. When I saw her, I wondered greatly.

† The identifying characteristic is bloodguilt. The woman is drunk with the blood of the saints and the witnesses of Jesus.

† Jesus had already accused Jerusalem of killing the prophets and

those sent to her. He said, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her (Matthew 23:37).

† Jesus didn't leave the timing open. He declared, Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation (Matthew 23:36).

Revelation 17:18

The woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth.

† Revelation identifies the woman as the great city. Earlier in the book, John had already given his readers a decisive identification of the great city.

† Revelation 11:8 says the great city was spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. Jesus was crucified at Jerusalem.

† This connection is important because Revelation isn't asking its original readers to guess the city's identity thousands of years later. The book supplies its own covenant and geographical markers.

Revelation 18:20-21

Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, because God has pronounced judgment for you against her. Then a strong angel picked up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, So will Babylon, the great city, be thrown down with violence, and will never be found again.

† The judgment answers the cries of the saints, apostles, and prophets. The city that persecuted God's messengers receives the judgment announced against her.

† Jesus had warned Jerusalem that He was sending prophets, wise men, and scribes, and that some would be killed, crucified, scourged, and persecuted from city to city (Matthew 23:34).

† Revelation describes the covenant lawsuit reaching its conclusion. The city responsible for persecuting God's messengers is brought under judgment.

Revelation 18:24

And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on the earth.

† This is one of Revelation's strongest identifying statements. The blood of prophets and saints is found in Babylon.

† Jesus used remarkably similar language concerning Jerusalem. He said that upon them would fall all the righteous blood shed on earth, and He placed that judgment upon His generation (Matthew 23:35-36).

† Revelation's bloodguilt language and Jesus' judgment language point to the same covenant crisis. The prophets had been rejected, Christ had been crucified, His messengers had been persecuted, and judgment was approaching.

Revelation 19:1-2

After these things I heard something like a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, "Hallelujah! Salvation, glory, and power belong to our God, because His judgments are true and righteous; for He has judged the great prostitute who was corrupting the earth with her sexual immorality, and He has avenged the blood of His bond-servants on her."

† Heaven celebrates because God's judgment against the harlot is righteous. The blood of His servants has been avenged.

† This corresponds with Jesus' warning that the first-century generation would be held accountable for the righteous blood associated with Jerusalem's long history of rejecting God's messengers (Matthew 23:35-36).

† The fall of the harlot clears the stage for Revelation's next woman, the bride.

Revelation 19:7-8

Let's rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His bride has prepared herself. It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

† The contrast couldn't be stronger. The harlot is judged, while the bride is prepared for marriage.

† Revelation moves from an unfaithful woman to a faithful woman, from judgment to marriage, and from Babylon to the New Jerusalem.

† This is covenant transition imagery. What belonged to the old covenant order was passing away, while the completed new covenant

reality was being revealed (Hebrews 8:13).

Revelation 21:1-2

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

† John now sees the bride as a city. Just as the harlot was a woman representing a city, the bride is a woman representing the holy city, New Jerusalem.

† The contrast is intentional. Revelation isn't moving from one literal woman to another literal woman. These women symbolize two covenant cities.

† Paul had already contrasted the Jerusalem of his day with the Jerusalem above. The present Jerusalem was associated with slavery, while the Jerusalem above was free and was the mother of believers (Galatians 4:24-26).

Revelation 21:9-10

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls, full of the seven last plagues, came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,

† John doesn't leave the bride unidentified. The angel says he will show John the bride, and then shows him the holy city Jerusalem.

† Notice the deliberate parallel with Revelation 17:1. One of the bowl angels says he will show John the harlot, and another bowl angel says he will show John the bride.

† Revelation intentionally places these women opposite each other. One city is characterized by covenant unfaithfulness and bloodguilt. The other is characterized by covenant faithfulness, holiness, and the presence of God.

Revelation 21:22-23

I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine

on it, for the glory of God has illuminated it, and its lamp is the Lamb.

† The New Jerusalem doesn't contain a physical temple because God and the Lamb are its temple.

† This agrees with the New Testament teaching that God's people are His dwelling place. Believers are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

† The story has moved beyond a geographical sanctuary. God's covenant presence isn't centered in a stone building in earthly Jerusalem.

Revelation 21:24-27

The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it; and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

† The gates remain open, and the nations walk by the city's light. This describes the continuing mission and blessing of God's kingdom among the nations.

† The New Jerusalem isn't presented as a city waiting for believers to reach it after the physical universe disappears. Hebrews told first-century believers that they had already come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22-24).

† Revelation shows that covenant city fully revealed after the judgment of the old order.

Historical References

† Josephus described the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, including famine, internal violence, slaughter, fire, and the final Roman conquest. His account provides an important first-century historical background for understanding the judgment setting surrounding Revelation's imagery.

† Tacitus also recorded the Roman siege of Jerusalem under Titus and described the enormous population gathered in the city during the conflict.

† Eusebius later recorded the tradition that believers in Jerusalem were warned to leave the city before the war and settled at Pella. This

corresponds with Jesus' warning that His disciples should flee when they saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies (Luke 21:20-22).

† These historical witnesses don't establish the interpretation by themselves. Scripture establishes the interpretation, while history demonstrates that the first-century judgment Jesus announced actually occurred.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We aren't waiting for the harlot to fall. The covenant judgment announced against Jerusalem belonged to the generation Jesus addressed (Matthew 23:36; Matthew 24:34).

† We aren't waiting for God to establish His dwelling among His people. In Christ, believers are God's temple and His dwelling in the Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:21-22).

† We don't belong to the city of slavery. Paul said the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother (Galatians 4:26).

† We don't need a rebuilt temple, restored animal sacrifices, or another earthly covenant capital. God and the Lamb are the temple of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:22).

† The message of Revelation moves from harlot to bride, from judgment to marriage, from the condemned city to the holy city, and from the old covenant order to the completed new covenant reality.

† The bride isn't waiting to become God's city someday. In Christ, God's people belong to the heavenly Jerusalem and live in His covenant presence now (Hebrews 12:22-24).

Q & A Appendix

Q: Who is the harlot of Revelation?

A: Revelation identifies her as the great city and describes her as guilty of the blood of prophets and saints. Those descriptions correspond with Jerusalem, where the Lord was crucified and which Jesus held accountable for the blood of the prophets (Revelation 11:8; Revelation 17:18; Revelation 18:24; Matthew 23:34-37).

Q: Why is she called a harlot?

A: Harlotry is covenant unfaithfulness imagery. The prophets had previously described unfaithful Jerusalem in this way when she

abandoned her covenant relationship with God (Isaiah 1:21; Ezekiel 16:15-26).

Q: Who is the bride?

A: John explicitly identifies the bride as the holy city, the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:9-10). She represents God's new covenant people in union with Christ.

Q: Are the harlot and the bride intended to be contrasted?

A: Yes. Revelation 17:1 introduces the harlot through one of the seven bowl angels, while Revelation 21:9 introduces the bride through one of those same seven bowl angels. The literary structure deliberately contrasts the two women and the two cities.

Q: Does the New Jerusalem require a future physical temple?

A: No. John specifically says he saw no temple in the city because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (Revelation 21:22). The New Testament identifies God's people as His dwelling place (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Q: Are believers still waiting to come to the heavenly Jerusalem?

A: Hebrews told believers, "you have come" to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, and the assembly of God's people (Hebrews 12:22-24). Revelation portrays the completed covenant reality of that city.

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †

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Source Index

† Revelation 17:1-2; Revelation 17:4-6; Revelation 17:18; Revelation 18:20-21; Revelation 18:24; Revelation 19:1-2; Revelation 19:7-8; Revelation 21:1-2; Revelation 21:9-10; Revelation 21:22-23;

Revelation 21:24-27

† Historical writers: Josephus, The Wars of the Jews; Tacitus, Histories; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History

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