

## INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION - PART SEVENTEEN

A new character was introduced into John's vision at the beginning of this chapter who will dominate the next two chapters. Whereas John did not seem to have any difficulty recognising the 'cartoon' characters of the dragon, the beast and the false prophet, presumably because they were easily identifiable with people and events in his time, the description of the harlot caused him to 'wonder greatly'. This suggests that she was not readily recognisable. Perhaps for the first time in Revelation, John was being shown something that was largely in the future so far as earth was concerned. Many guesses have been made as to who the harlot was. What clues do we have in the Bible rather than our own prejudices as to the answer?

A woman was used as a picture in two opposite ways in scripture. On the one hand there was the bride who was spotless, giving herself to her husband and remaining for ever faithful to him as in Eph.5:22-32 and later in Rev.21:2. This clearly was the church, we Christians, when we trust ourselves to the Lord and remain faithful to Him. The opposite picture was vividly portrayed in the book of Hosea. The prophet was commanded by God to marry Gomer being warned beforehand that she would later be unfaithful to him and become a harlot.(Hos.1:2). They had one child, Jezreel; Gomer then became an adulteress, produced two more children and finally as a harlot became a slave up for sale in the slave market. Hosea suffered the terrible humiliation of being sent there by God, to redeem her and take her home to love her as his wife again.(Hos.3:1-3) The story powerfully described what Christ did for us, first in creation, and then in redemption. The rest of the book of Hosea applied Hosea's personal story to the spiritual condition of Israel and Judah as the two countries tried to have it both ways, as professed believers in God on the one hand, and followers of other gods on the other.

The harlot then represented compromise between trusting Christ and accommodating the attitudes of the world that denied Him. For a church under persecution it would always seem a very attractive way out. Could we be faithful to the Lord and fit comfortably into our society? The answer according to Rev.17 is absolutely no.

Compromise with Rome and the pagan worship of its emperors was uncommon in John's time and so persecution of Christians continued with varying degrees of severity for nearly 300 years. In 312AD the Emperor Constantine professed conversion to Christ and began the process, continued by his successors, of 'christianising' the empire. Suddenly it became not only respectable but a considerable advantage to be a Christian. Within 50 years those who opposed the official view of the church were being executed. All kinds of pagan beliefs and practices were being quietly absorbed into the Christian church to make the new religion more widely acceptable to the public.

This one major event would be a fulfilment of John's prophecy with enormous historical consequences but it would not be the only time such things would happen. Right down through history whenever the church has allied itself with the State, either politically or philosophically, the same compromise has occurred. It seems best therefore to regard the harlot riding on the scarlet beast as illustrating a recurring temptation rather than just one event whether in the 4th century or still in the future.

Compromise with the State would be a route to great power,(17:1) but it would be utterly unacceptable to God. Leaders and ordinary people would easily be taken in.(17:2) The uniting of church and State would in reality be no better than a godless State.(17:3) The leaders of such a church would have a lot to gain materially but at terrible cost spiritually.(17:4) It had happened first at Babel in Genesis 11.(17:5) Daniel chapter one described the attempt by the king of Babylon

to recruit young Jewish men to be his agents in ruling their own people. Daniel and his three friends were wise enough to refuse this temptation and came eventually to be respected for their choice. It would result in just as much suffering as before on the part of Christians who remained faithful.(17:6) In John's time the compromise would be with Rome as already described in chapter 13.(17:7) Rome would come to an end (as largely happened in the 5th century) but other empires and states would follow which would be similar in their attitude to a compromising church (as happened throughout the Middle Ages in Europe).(17:8-13) Perhaps it will happen one last time before history comes to an end. Supreme though such systems may seem at the time, the Truth will always overcome them.(17:14) The problem will be a world-wide one.(17:15) At times political leaders will turn against their church allies because at heart they despise them.(17:16) God will let it happen.(17:17)

18:1-3 Q.1 What will be the ultimate fate of a compromising church? Who is really in charge of the world? What happened to Babel in the Old Testament? What are the two attractions to church leaders of being allied to the State?

18:4,5 Q.2 What is our response as Christians to be if we believe that our church is compromising with society? In what sense are we to "come out"? Is it a matter of leaving physically, resigning membership or what? What is the danger of being part of what is going on?

18:6,7 Q.3 What will be the eventual outcome of church compromise? Why was Jesus so tough on the religious leaders of His day? What three attitudes are typical of an unfaithful church according to verse 7?

18:8-10 Q.4 When God deals with His unfaithful church what will be the attitude of political leaders who formerly used the church when it suited them? Give present day examples.

18:11-19 Q.5 And what will be the position of the businessmen who once found it very profitable to work closely with the church? Why will they be so disappointed at the church's fate? What 5 groups of objects for trade were once sought by the church? How have such things actually happened in history and still today?

18:20 Q.6 If we refuse as a matter of conscience to be part of such unfaithful practices how will we eventually be vindicated?

18:21-24 Q.7 Babel was deserted, Babylon was defeated, Rome was overrun. What will eventually happen to every other compromise between church and State? But what will we suffer at their hands before that time?

18:1-24 Q.8 What possible significance does all this have for us as Christians in the twenty-first century? How can we be blessed by heeding these words?(Rev.1:3)