

December 26

Scriptures: Read Revelation 17

Key Verse: “For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish His purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God’s words are fulfilled.” (Revelation 17:17)

Overview

I think it should be pretty clear to you by now that apocalyptic literature with its “picture language” is not too concerned about logic, consistency, and precision. This shouldn’t trouble us — rather, it should challenge us. Literally thousands of authors have taken up the challenge, and no two agree totally on every point of interpretation.

This chapter, however, begins a section dealing with the fall of “Babylon the Great” (concluding in 19:10). There are seven visions, and each refers to the fall of the cult of Roma, the deified personification of Rome (v. 18). “Babylon” is the proto-type for Rome, an empire that, in John’s day, had extended to Asia and the East. The “worship” of Roma was introduced to these areas so that the Empire became, in fact, a state cult. The Roman ruler Octavian, for example, built temples to “Dea Roma” and “Dios Julius” at Ephesus and Nicea, and to Roma and himself in Pergamum and Nicomedia. The belief in “Roma aeterna” (eternal Rome) was cultivated, so that “Roma” became a living, breathing deity in the eyes of the world at that time.

John’s vision reaches far beyond the historical realities of his day, however, and chapter 17 is the first chapter where we see a clear attempt on the part of the angelic guide to “explain” what is going on (v. 7). Even though a lot of room is still left for interpretation, we at least see beyond the physical incongruities of multi-headed beasts, horns, bowls, and cups.

John sees a “great prostitute” sitting “on many waters” (v. 1), “on seven hills” (v. 9), and on a “scarlet beast” (v. 3). So, she “sits” on three things at the same time, is dressed elegantly (v. 4a), but is full of “abominable things” and “adulteries” (v. 4c). She is guilty of martyring “the saints” (v. 6).

The beast on which she sits “once was, and now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss” (v. 8), and has seven heads, one of which is himself (v. 11). These heads are all “kings” (who are at the same time “hills” — v. 9). Five of them have already “fallen” (10a), one is “presently” alive (in John’s time) and the remaining king is to come at some future day but will reign only “for a little while” (v. 10c). The beast also has ten horns, and these are future kings “who have not yet received a kingdom” (v. 12a) but eventually will reign “for an hour” (v. 12b). They work in conjunction with the beast and will do so at the very end of history, when they will “make war against the Lamb” (v. 14a). After losing to the Lamb, their final act will be to “ruin” the prostitute and “leave her naked” (v. 16).

There are two encouraging things to notice: 1. Those whose names are “written in the book of life” (v. 8) will not be “astonished” nor will they be conquered by the beast (v. 14c); and 2. Even while these last-day, evil forces do their foul deeds, they will be accomplishing God’s purposes (v. 17a). God is Sovereign. Everything is under His control.

Prayer

Thank You, O Lord God, that as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ our names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. Be in control of my life. I surrender to Your great sovereign will.