

## ***Armageddon at the Door***

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### **Chapter Eight**

#### **The Axis of Evil**

In the wake of September 11, 2001, President Bush came to perceive that the greatest danger to the United States was not al Qaeda, but rogue nation states with the potential to develop weapons of mass destruction. As he approached his State of the Union address in January of 2002, he asked his speechwriters to help him articulate a case for removing Saddam Hussein from power in just a few sentences. One of those speechwriters, David Frum, decided to study the famous “day of infamy” speech given by President Roosevelt on the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan on December 7, 1941.

Roosevelt believed that the greatest danger to the United States at that time was not Japan but Nazi Germany. For Roosevelt, Pearl Harbor was not just a reckless attack by a relatively weak foe, it was a warning of future, more powerful attacks from an even more dangerous enemy. He knew that Americans were ready to go to war with Japan on December 8, 1941, but he needed to persuade them to declare war on the entire “Axis” of Japan, Germany and Italy. While Germany might not be as reckless as Japan had been, its Axis alliance with

Japan made the United States much more vulnerable in the future than it would have been with only Japan to worry about (Japan's industrial capacity was only a tenth of the U.S. at the time, Germany's was about a third). So Roosevelt introduced a subtle line into his radio speech on December 8, 1941: "We will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost but will make very certain that this form of treachery shall never endanger us again."

As Frum compared the Axis powers of World War II with modern "terror states" he saw many similarities. Like the Axis powers of World War II, Iran, Iraq and al Qaeda distrusted each other greatly, but were united in their resentment of the West and Israel. So they formed an "axis of hatred" against the United States. President Bush liked the analogy but made two changes in the actual speech to Congress on January 29, 2002. He added North Korea to the "Axis" because of its attempts to develop nuclear weapons and because, like Japan and Saddam Hussein, it had a history of reckless aggression.

In the speech itself President Bush stated that a goal of the war on terror was "to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening America or our friends and allies with weapons of mass destruction. Some of these regimes have been pretty quiet since September the 11<sup>th</sup>. But we know their true nature." After briefly describing his perception of the threat capacities of North Korea, Iran and Iraq, Bush said, "States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an ***axis of evil***, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be

catastrophic.”

Right or wrong in this particular case, the phrase had the desired effect, leading to the invasion of Iraq about a year later. It became part of the American public consciousness and spawned many caricatures. Countries that did not support the invasion of Iraq were called an “axis of weasels.” Sport utility vehicles were called “axles of evil” for their poor fuel efficiency. The perceived breakup of the close relationship between George Bush and Tony Blair in 2006 was dubbed by the *Economist* “Axis of Feeble.” And a group of Middle Eastern comedians called their act the “Axis of Evil Comedy Tour.”<sup>1</sup>

While President Bush’s comparison of North Korea, Iran and Iraq with the Axis powers of World War II has been widely questioned, the Book of Revelation projects a similar situation in the last days of earth’s history. An unexpected worldwide “axis of evil” will arise when the religious institutions of the world find a common cause with each other and succeed in persuading the political and economic powers of the world to support their cause. The consequences of this alliance for the people of God will be serious. This end-time “axis of evil” is the main focus of Revelation 17 and of the verses that follow Revelation 16:12.

In the previous chapter of this book we made an extensive study of Revelation 16:12. We examined this verse in light of three extended strategies for understanding Revelation: how it fits into the structure of the book, what could be learned from its Old Testament background, and the impact on the text from the gospel orientation of the New Testament. We learned, as a result, that “the kings from the rising of the sun” represent Christ and His people in the final battle of earth’s history.

While Babylon is not mentioned in this pivotal verse (Rev 16:12), it is brought to our attention through the mention of the Euphrates River in the text. The Euphrates River represents world-wide secular, economic and political power united to serve end-time Babylon. Babylon and the Euphrates together represent the end-time “axis of evil.” This chapter is about the rise and fall of these enemies of God and His people.

### **A Battle for the Mind**

But before we get deeply engrossed in the sordid details of the end-time, I want to remind you that the warfare language of the New Testament the language is used in a spiritual sense rather than as a description of literal warfare. Christians are called to battle at the end of time, not to take up the weapons of this world, but to utilize spiritual weapons in service of spiritual goals. The Battle of Armageddon is a battle for the mind:

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretention that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

2 Cor 10:4-5 (NIV)

But is it appropriate to apply a text from the writings of Paul to the gory battle scenes of the Apocalypse? I think so. There is a clear indication of the nature of Armageddon right in the heart of Revelation 16 itself. Notice how smoothly verses 14 and 16 fit together:

They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.

Rev 16:14 (NIV)

Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

Rev 16:16 (NIV)

Verse 16 seems to flow quite naturally out of verse 14. Both of these verses are talking about the demonic powers of the world trying to gather the kings of the world to the location of the final battle at the end of time. It sounds like military language. But there is an abrupt change of pace right in the middle of all military preparation.

“Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.”

Rev 16:15 (NIV)

Here in the middle of the Battle of Armageddon, right in the one part where the battle is actually named, we find a call to the reader to be faithful in the midst of the troubles of the end-time. In one single verse John brings together a variety of New Testament appeals in light of the end. Both “I come like a thief” and “Blessed is he who stays awake” echo statements of Jesus which are further echoed by Paul.

42 Therefore, **stay awake**, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night **the thief** was coming, he would have **stayed awake** and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Matt 24:42-44 (ESV)

37 It will be good for those servants whose master finds them **watching** when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. 38 It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night. 39 But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour **the thief** was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into.

Luke 12:37-39 (NIV)

1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers, you have no need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves are fully aware that the day of the Lord will come **like a thief in the night**. 3 While people are saying, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. 4 But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you **like a thief**. 5 For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness. 6 So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us **keep awake** and be sober.

1 Thess 5:1-6 (ESV)

All three of these texts are about readiness for the coming of Jesus. By echoing these concepts in the middle of the Battle of Armageddon, the Book of Revelation makes it clear that the military language of Revelation is not to be taken in a military way. Early Christians reading or hearing the Book of Revelation would not interpret it as some sort of end-time, physical warfare. The Battle of Armageddon is a battle for the mind. The role of the righteous in the final battle is to keep spiritually awake and to be always ready, because they do not know when their Lord will come. Armageddon is about the final proclamation of the gospel in the context of great deceptions and persecutions at the end.

Revelation 16:15 also contains an allusion to Jesus' message to the church at Laodicea (Revelation 3:14-22). "I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white **garments** so that you may clothe yourself and the **shame** of your **nakedness** may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may **see**." The highlighted words are all found in Rev 16:15. In fact, Rev 3:18 and 16:15 are the only two texts in the entire Bible that contain all four of these words. The call to faithfulness in the middle of the Battle of Armageddon echos the call to Laodicea to allow Christ into the life and the heart. There is a

strong spiritual component to the Battle of Armageddon. It is a battle for the mind!

So as the end of the world approaches, there is a renewed call to readiness for the Second Coming. In Rev 16:15 core spiritual messages from Matthew, Luke, Paul and Revelation's letters to the seven churches are brought together. In terms of its background and context, the call of Rev 16:15 is directed to God's end-time confederacy of the saints.

In the final battle of earth's history, it is our spiritual task to keep watch over our attitudes, thoughts, and behavior, and to remain faithful no matter the deception or the coercion we may face. There is a need for both faithful endurance and discernment, fortified with the words of Jesus, Paul and to Laodicea. In other words, the battle of Armageddon is a battle for the mind! When we choose to be faithful today in the midst of various temptations, we are being prepared for even greater battles at the end of time. The Book of Revelation is not given to satisfy our curiosity about the future, it is given to teach us how to live today in the light of the things that are coming upon the world.

Based on what we have learned so far, we can conclude that there will be a worldwide confederacy of the "saints" (Rev 14:12) at the end of time. They are named by many names in Revelation. They are scattered throughout the earth. In the terrible trials at the end, these saints will not necessarily be organized in institutional terms. The legal and corporate structures in which the people of God have organized themselves will be the first thing targeted by the forces of evil at the End.

But the destruction of the saints' spiritual institutions will not hinder the movement in

the final crisis. They are truly a remnant drawn from every nation, tribe and religious tradition (Rev 14:6). They will recognize each other when they meet on account of a common walk with God. They will develop deep and meaningful relationships with each other, because they share a common battle to maintain a relationship with Jesus and to be ready for the events of the end. And they will be the object of much negative attention from an end-time “axis of evil.” Let’s take a closer look at how that axis of evil is described in chapters 16 and 17 of Revelation.

### **Some Challenging Texts**

But before we begin this study, let me point out that we are dealing with seriously challenging texts in these chapters. Commentators have struggled for centuries to understand the woman and the beast, the seven heads and the ten horns, the five who are fallen and the one yet to come. But as we approach the last days of earth’s history, we should expect greater clarity in those prophecies which speak about the end of time.

Revelation 17 has been a greater puzzle than most texts, even in the Book of Revelation. More than a decade ago I decided to teach a doctoral seminar on Revelation 17. Five PhD students signed up. We focused specifically on Rev 17:7-11. We spent about thirty hours as a group, poring over the Greek text and comparing it with the Old Testament and the New (following the method presented in my book *The Deep Things of God*). Each of the five students wrote a research paper on some aspect of Revelation 17:7-11 and carefully examined what commentators in the past have said about the chapter. The whole group read and discussed



each paper and drew the conclusion at the end of the class that we had raised more questions than we had answered! Revelation 17 is one of those texts where it is much easier to see the flaws in other people's work than it is to make coherent sense of what the text is saying.

Why are there texts like this in the Bible? If the Bible is God's revelation of Himself to us, should it not be perfectly clear throughout? What spiritual purpose could a text like this serve? I was once on the radio with a fellow student of Revelation, Mervyn Maxwell. The topic of discussion was the seven trumpets of Revelation. As we wrestled together with the complexities of Revelation 8 and 9, Dr. Maxwell suddenly turned to me (on the air) and asked, "Why has God placed such difficult texts in the Bible? Is there anything we should learn from that?"

I had never tried to answer that question before. Since Dr. Maxwell had been one of my teachers at Andrews University a decade before, I marveled at his openness to ask such a question of his former student on the air. I felt that the Holy Spirit was with us as I shared the following with him and with our listeners.

"It seems to me that study of the Bible is our daily need. If we don't constantly feed on God's word, we will go backwards spiritually. But if we could understand every detail of the Bible there is danger that we would grow complacent, we wouldn't feel the need to keep studying what we think we already understand. So God has placed deep and challenging things in His Word, this keeps us coming back day after day. This keeps us trying to understand. Because of these difficult texts, our curiosity grows rather than diminishes as we wrestle with

Revelation. As we come back to the Word each day, as we seek God in study and prayer, our hearts are nourished in its spiritual authority. So that's why I think the seven trumpets are in the Bible."

Perhaps that answer isn't completely satisfying to you, but it does make some sense to me as I continue to reflect on the issue. God cares so much about us that He does what is best for us, even if it makes us puzzled and upset. He sometimes leaves us with questions and doubts, knowing that the struggle to understand will have positive outcomes in our lives that might not happen any other way. Raising open questions may seem a risky proposition on God's part, but I have learned to trust His judgment, even when I don't understand.

Having said this, let me remind you of something I shared in some detail in the fourth chapter of *The Deep Things of God* ("Safeguards for Biblical Study"). While the difficult things of the Bible whet our appetite for Scriptural study, we should spend the majority of our Bible study on the parts of the Bible that are reasonably clear. It is the clear texts of Scripture that provide a solid foundation for our spiritual lives. If you don't ground yourself in the clear teachings of the Bible, challenging texts like Revelation 17 can easily be twisted in a way that undermines the central things of God's Word. So while wrestling with Revelation 17 is part of God's plan for us, it should never become the center of our confidence in the will and the ways of God.

## **The Forces of Evil**

With that in mind let's begin our study of the forces arrayed against the saints at the end of time. As we have seen, the Battle of Armageddon is introduced in a nutshell through the vision of the bowl plagues (Revelation 16:1-21) and then elaborated in the vision of Revelation 17. The prophet hears one of the bowl angels describing a prostitute who has relations with the kings of the earth (Rev 17:1-2). He then is given a short vision of a woman named Babylon, who is sitting on a scarlet beast (Rev 17:3-6a). John's reaction to the vision is given in the middle of verse six (Revelation 17:6b). Then John's interpreting angel discusses the vision, offering a number of explanations which leave us more confused than when we began (Revelation 17:7-18). That's what makes this chapter as difficult as any passage in the Book of Revelation.

Let's begin at the beginning of Revelation 17: "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 on many waters.'" Rev 17:1. According to this verse, the chapter that follows will offer further information about the sixth plague, where the angel's bowl is poured out on the great River Euphrates. This verse introduces both of the great end-time powers that work against God and His people. One is represented by the great prostitute and the other is represented by the waters (the Euphrates River) upon which she sits.

As we have seen, the "many waters" symbolize the civil and secular powers of the world arrayed against God and His people in the end-time crisis. This is a civil, secular, military and political union that dominates the world at the end of earth's history. It is truly a united nations.

There is also a second worldwide union represented by a great prostitute, but we have not yet explored that in detail. As we go through the chapter, we will discover that both unions are given a number of different names in the chapter. This is a very important insight for a correct understanding of this difficult chapter.

You see, the variety of symbols in Revelation 16 and 17 do not point us to a vast array of end-time players. One could go through this part of the book and assign a nation, religion or region of the world for each symbol. But such scenarios make this section of the book much more complicated than it already is. If we do this we will miss the clarity underlying the complex symbolism of the narrative. In chapter 17 the symbols flow together and continue to focus on these same two specific powers that are introduced in 17:1. The key to the passage seems to be the fluidity with which the same historical entities can be described in a variety of different images. This becomes clear as we work our way through Rev 17:1-9. We'll look first at verses 1 to 3.

1 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 on many waters. 2 With **her** the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries." 3 Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw **a woman** sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.

Revelation 17:1-3 (NIV)

In Rev 17:1-3 mention is made of a "great prostitute," of "her," and of "a woman." Are these three one and the same or do they represent different entities? "Her" in verse 2 is clearly a reference to "the great prostitute." But are "the great prostitute" of verse one and the

“woman” of verse three the same character or are they different? Here is where potential confusion can be cleared up. In verse 5 the “woman” of verse 3 is called the “mother of prostitutes.” So it seems evident that the prostitute of verse 1 and the woman of verse 3 are not different, they are one and the same in the story and they represent the same power or confederacy in the course of human history.

### **End-Time Babylon**

But what does this woman/prostitute represent at the end of time? Is she a grouping of political nations like those represented by the Euphrates River? Or does she represent something else? Several elements of the chapter indicate the great prostitute represents worldwide religious authority in opposition to God and to His End-time people. For starters, John sees this “woman” sitting on a scarlet beast out in the desert (Rev 17:3). This is not the first time in the book that he sees a woman in the desert. The previous time was in Rev 12:14-16. There we notice the following description:

***The woman*** was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her ***in the desert***, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, ***out of the serpent’s reach***.

Rev 12:14, NIV

Since the woman of chapter 12 is in opposition to the serpent/dragon, she represents the faithful church of God in the middle period of Christian history (usually dated from 538-1798 AD). In Revelation 17, on the other hand, the woman in the desert seems to have a very negative role in the last events of earth’s history. So there is both similarity and contrast

between these two women. In fact, scholarship has noted that there are four prominent women in the Book of Revelation: Jezebel (Rev 2:18-29), the woman of chapter 12, the woman of chapter 17 and the bride of the Lamb (Rev 19:7-8; 21:9-10). Two of these images are positive and two are negative.

Jezebel is, in one sense, the forerunner of Babylon the prostitute. She represents forces within the church that compromise and challenge the faith. This was particularly true in the middle period of Christian history. The woman of Revelation 12, on the other hand, is the forerunner of the bride of the Lamb. She represents the scattered, faithful few in the middle period of church history. But there is also a cross-reference between these good and evil manifestations of womanhood. While Babylon the prostitute is parallel to Jezebel, corrupt leader of the church at Thyatira, she is also in contrast to the end-time bride of Christ and the faithful woman of chapter 12. So like the other three women, she is a spiritual leader. She is associated in the context of Revelation with images of true, Christian faith. Babylon represents an end-time, worldwide confederacy of false religion.

Are the two women the same? Does this image mean that even formerly faithful people of God will join the end-time religious opposition to God and His people? Perhaps. It would certainly explain why John is so astonished at the sight of this woman (Rev 17:6). But what is clear is that the end-time religious opposition to God has a Christian face at an institutional level! Mere membership in a Christian church or institution does not guarantee faithfulness to God at the end of time. Entities that have served God and responded to his leading in the past

will place their power and influence into the service of evil at the end of time. Whether or not John perceived the woman of Revelation 17 as the same woman we saw in chapter 12 (after all, the end-time people of God is called the remnant of the woman's seed, not the woman [Rev 12:17]), the imagery of the great prostitute indicates that there is a Christian twist in the end-time opposition to God.

This Christian twist is further underlined by a couple of other observations in the text of Revelation 17. First, the prostitute's attire in verse 4 seems modeled on that of Israel's High Priest in the Old Testament sanctuary. Notice the language of verse 4 (NIV):

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.

The High Priest wore an ephod that included the colors purple, scarlet, and gold (Exodus 28:5-6). The ephod and breast plate of the High Priest also contained precious stones (Exodus 28:9-13 and 17-21). The cup in the woman's hands may represent the drink offerings of the sanctuary (Exodus 29:40-41 and 30:9; Leviticus 23:13, 18, and 37), and the forehead inscription (Rev 17:4-5) resembles the title HOLY TO THE LORD written on the High Priest's miter (Exodus 28:36-38).

Second, in the story of Revelation the prostitute's fate is to be burned with fire (Rev 17:16). This is rather strange at first glance, since the regular punishment for promiscuity or prostitution in the Old Testament was stoning (Deut 22:20-24; cf. John 8:1-11). But there was an exception to the rule. If the prostitute was found to be the daughter of a priest, she was to

be burned with fire rather than stoned (Lev 21:9). While the distinction is not significant in terms of its results, the imagery of Revelation 17 is carefully chosen to highlight the idea that the woman of Rev 17:1-5 is a religious power more than a secular or political one.

Prostitute Babylon, therefore, represents a world-wide religious confederacy in opposition to God and to His faithful people at the End of time. People and religious institutions who were once faithful to God now join those who are in opposition to Him and His people. While such a worldwide, ecumenical religious confederacy will likely include the major institutions of non-Christian religion, the end-time religious confederacy has a particularly Christian face.

Babylon represents God's people "gone to seed," there is an undertone of apostasy in the imagery. And this is not surprising. All apostasy goes back to the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), where the rebellious people were scattered and given different languages to keep them apart. These scattered peoples have become today's nations, so in the biblical view all nations that have ever opposed God go back to the Tower of Babel. Just as ancient Babel (Babylon) was the source of everything that opposed God, Babylon in Revelation 17 is the mother of prostitutes and the source of everything that opposes God.

We have learned that a major end-time tool in the arsenal of Satan is deception. And a major piece of that deception is the degree to which historic Christianity has become co-opted in service of the designs of Satan. Those who have prided themselves in fidelity to the religious institutions of the world will one day find themselves in opposition to the very God they



thought they were worshiping! In the End, Babylon masquerades before the world as the institutional representative of the true church of God. Everything is turned on its head.

It is no wonder that John expresses astonishment at his vision of the woman (Rev 17:6). Instead of pure and untarnished faithfulness to Christ, the woman of Revelation 17 is a prostitute who is drunk with the blood of the saints, the very people who in their deaths bear testimony to their faithfulness to Jesus. Although the prostitute resembles the true woman of Revelation 12 and dresses like the High Priest of Israel's sanctuary, she clearly represents a power that opposes the true people of God. She is the enemy of the saints and seeks to destroy those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus (Rev 12:17). Those who do not worship her eventually face a death decree and an economic boycott (Rev 13:15-17).

### **An Evil United Nations**

There is, however, a second enemy power in view in Rev 17:1-3 (NIV), which I highlight below:

1 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 on **many waters**. 2 With her the **kings of the earth** committed adultery and the **inhabitants of the earth** were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries." 3 Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a **scarlet beast** that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.

Are the "many waters," the "kings of the earth," the "inhabitants of the earth" and the "scarlet beast" symbols of very different powers or are they different ways of speaking about

the same thing? This is a very important question for interpretation here. Much confusion results if we make the text more complicated than it already is.

We have already seen that the “many waters” of Rev 17:1 are the Euphrates River (Rev 16:12), which represents the civil, military and secular powers of the world. So the “kings of the earth” and the “inhabitants of the earth” represent essentially the same thing as the “many waters.” All three descriptors represent a worldwide confederacy of political and military power at the end of time. “Kings of the earth” represents leadership of the confederacy, “inhabitants of the earth” is a more general way of describing the same thing.

But what about the scarlet beast? Is that also a symbol of political and military power or does it represent something else? The blasphemous names with which the beast is covered certainly remind us of the sea beast of Revelation 13, a counterfeit of the work of Jesus Christ. But while the scarlet beast wears the names of blasphemy, it primarily represents another way of describing the worldwide political confederacy. This becomes clear from the explanation of the vision offered in Rev 17:7-18. The scarlet beast has seven heads and ten horns. The seven heads represent seven kings (Rev 17:9-10). The ten horns represent ten kings (Rev 17:12). So the beast itself is the sum total of political and military power in the world (Rev 17:12-13). The Euphrates River and the scarlet beast are two different ways of describing the same thing. The blasphemy in which the beast engages occurs as part of its union with the aims and activities of Babylon.

The relationship between the prostitute and the political confederacy is the central

feature of Rev 17:2 (NIV): “With her the kings of the earth ***committed adultery*** and the inhabitants of the earth were ***intoxicated*** with the wine of her adulteries.” The kings of the earth do not commit adultery with the prostitute in a literal sense. This relationship represents some sort of union between the worldwide religious and political confederacies at the end of time. Peace among the nations can be a good thing but it can also be a bad thing. One example of an evil peace is the treaty signed between Hitler and Stalin in 1939. The purpose of this “peace treaty” was to prepare the way for a war in which each sought to dominate the world.

In the Old Testament, the language of fornication and adultery was used for unhealthy alliances between Israel and the pagan nations around her. In Ezekiel 16 Jerusalem is a rejected infant that God dresses, nourishes and raises as His own daughter. When she reaches the appropriate age, He marries her but she scorns the marriage covenant and unites with anyone who comes by. Her lovers symbolize the pagan nations with which Israel sought political alliance. Her eagerness to trust political alliances more than God cause Him to describe her as the opposite of a typical prostitute:

Every prostitute receives a fee, but you give gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from everywhere for your illicit favors. So in your prostitution you are the opposite of others; no one runs after you for your favors. You are the very opposite, for you give payment and none is given to you.

Ezekiel 16:33-34 (NIV)

Adultery in Revelation 17, therefore, not only represents the union between Babylon and the kings of the earth, it describes the political rewards the kings of the earth receive for accepting Babylon’s rule (Rev 17:2). Through the attention that Babylon lavishes on them, she

gains control of the kings of the earth. These rewards include the economic benefits which the kings of the earth lose when Babylon falls (Rev 18:9-10, 19).

The “inhabitants of the earth” represent the opponents of God in general, not just the leadership. While the leaders of the political confederacy commit adultery with the prostitute, the inhabitants of the earth go along because they are intoxicated. In other words, the end-time attacks on the people of God are committed knowingly by the leadership, but the people in general are deceived. Their condition is more one of drunkenness and confusion than it is one of conscious yielding to temptation. Everyday people can commit criminal acts when it seems socially acceptable to do so (witness how easily we all blow past the speed limit when everyone else is doing it). So the people of earth will seek to harm the saints of God, even though they don’t understand the issues involved.

Lust and drunkenness, therefore, are metaphors Revelation uses to describe the people of the world at the end of time. The two metaphors are also placed together in Rev 14:8 (NIV): “A second angel followed and said, ‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great, which made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.’” When it comes to lust and drunkenness, people don’t think clearly. They make bad decisions that don’t lead to lasting relationships. When the lust is over or when the alcoholic high is past, people usually regret what they have done. So while alcohol can be the explanation for criminal behavior, it is never an excuse for it. When a person chooses to drink, they also choose to accept the consequences of the actions performed while under the influence of alcohol.

The confederacy of the saints makes no appearance in Rev 17:1-3. The only times the saints appear in Revelation 17 are in verses 6 and 14. In verse 6 reference is made to the blood of the saints and of those who “bore testimony to Jesus (NIV).” In verse 14 you find the Lamb and those who are with Him; His called, chosen and faithful followers. So the saints are present in chapter 17, but their presence is more in the background of the story than at the forefront.

Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns.

Rev 17:3

The woman sitting on a scarlet beast represents Babylon’s end-time domination of the political and secular powers of the world. Why do the nations allow themselves to be controlled by end-time Babylon? People who commit adultery think that their lives will somehow be better off for it. People who drink do so because they feel better for a while. So the union of the nations with the prostitute happens because the leaders of the nations think they or their nations will somehow be better off as a result. Most of the people in those nations go along with what is happening, even if they don’t understand the motives of their leaders. But the account in Revelation makes it clear that this axis of evil has a very short life span.

The two evil confederacies are each named by a variety of names in Rev 17:1-5. The variety of symbols for the same thing helps us gain deeper insight into each of them. But the relationships between them remain essentially the same throughout the passage. In verse 1 you have a prostitute sitting on many waters, these waters are the Euphrates River of the sixth

plague. In verse 2 the same prostitute is described as being in union with the kings of the earth and with the inhabitants that those kings represent. And in verse 3 you have prostitute Babylon sitting on a scarlet beast.

So Rev 17:1-5 describes a pair of confederacies united in their opposition to God and His people. There are symbols of Babylon (always female) associated with symbols of secular, military and political power (beast, kings of the earth, and Euphrates river). The woman, for a short time anyway, is in a dominant position, using the rulers of the earth and their resources to achieve her own ends of destroying the Lamb and those who are with Him (Rev 17:14). This is why the beast has no crowns, unlike the dragon of chapter 12 and the sea beast of chapter 13. At the point of the vision, the beast has given its authority to Babylon for a short time. The political and military powers of the world have surrendered their authority to the worldwide institutions of religion.

### **Three Worldwide Confederacies**

In Rev 17:6 the brief vision of the woman and the beast ends and a confusing series of interpretations begins. But that is a subject for another chapter. Before we move into that difficult territory (Rev 17:7-18), let me sum up what we have learned so far about the major players in the Battle of Armageddon. Combining what we have learned in this chapter with the previous one, we conclude that there will be three worldwide confederacies at the end of time. There will be (1) a confederacy of the saints, (2) a confederacy of the institutions of

religion in opposition to God and the saints, and (3) a confederacy of civil, secular, political, economic and military power.

(1) The confederacy of the saints will probably not be organized in institutional terms. It is likely that any religious institutions which are faithful to God will be destroyed by this point in earth's history. Any religious institutions that survive will do so on account of being co-opted into the aims of Babylon. The confederacy of the saints will be made up of kindred spirits that find each other out of every nation, tribe, language and religious institution (they will all have "come out of Babylon"; Rev 18:4). The confederacy of the saints will be distinguished by its unlikeness to all other confederacies on earth. Its "kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36-37). It will not fight as the institutions of the world fight (2 Cor 10:3-5). It is known by many names in Revelation, such as the remnant, the 144,000 and the "saints" (Rev 14:12).

(2) The confederacy of religion is a worldwide alliance of religious authority. While the pope is the logical one to head such a confederacy, Babylon will in fact be much bigger than any one of them, as we will see (Rev 16:13, 19). The union of religious institutions will occur out of a need to co-ordinate spiritual effort in the face of significant challenges. These challenges may include environmental issues (Rev 16:1-11) and the breakdown of law and order (terrorism and crime, cf. Rev 6:3-4), as well as spiritual opposition on the part of the true people of God. While not detailed in Revelation, these challenges must be considerable for the fractious institutions of religion to lay aside long-standing differences (just think of the barrier between the papacy and Islam on account of the Crusades!). This confederacy is called

Babylon, the woman, the great prostitute and the great city.

(3) The confederacy of secular and political power will be as great a surprise as the confederacy of religious institutions. For millennia, human beings have exercised corporate selfishness through their political institutions. Such institutions would rather experience the loss of great numbers of people, including women and children, than give up political leverage over against other political entities. This has been massively underlined in the recent events in Iraq. Yet God will so orchestrate events (Rev 17:17) that the political powers of the world will find greater reason to work together than to fight one another. This would be a most encouraging development were it not for the opposition to God and His people that results when this political unity is placed in the service of Babylon. This political confederacy is also known by many names in Revelation, among them we have already seen the Euphrates River, the kings of the earth and the scarlet beast.

Saints	Political	Babylon
Remnant 144,000 Great Crowd Kings of East Watchful Clothed Called Chosen Faithful	Euphrates Kings of World Many Waters Kings of Earth Earth Dwellers Beast 10 Horns Cities of the Nations 7 Mountains 7 Kings	Babylon  The Great City  The Great Prostitute  The Unholy Trinity  Woman



All three of these confederacies are shocking, in light of history as we know it. The idea that individual Protestants, Catholics, Jews and Muslims might all join together in an end-time spiritual “remnant” has few examples in today’s world (details of this exciting prospect await another book in this series). The idea that the religious institutions of this world might somehow put aside their differences and pursue a common cause seems ludicrous in the light of recent events in Iraq. The idea of a worldwide political unity seems equally strange in the face of the New World Disorder we are experiencing as I write. Can you imagine Iran, the United States, North Korea, Pakistan, India and Cuba all transcending their differences at the same time?

The three worldwide confederacies will be a clear indication that we have entered into the final events of earth’s history. They will be so out of character with previous history that they cannot be mistaken when they arrive. And we are clearly not there yet.

The war on terror, however, offers a glimpse of the future. For the first time in world history there is essential agreement among the nations of the world that terrorism threatens them all. Nations may differ on the definition of terrorism. One man’s freedom fighter is the next man’s terrorist. But all agree that terrorism threatens order and prosperity. And all religious institutions generally agree that they have more in common with each other than they do with the radicals in their own tradition.

So the war on terror has brought us to a new phase of things. For the first time in human history the religious and political institutions of the entire world are generally united

against a small, scattered, but international group of people united by a spiritual purpose. Don't get me wrong. I am absolutely not suggesting that al Qaeda is the remnant of Revelation. But the war on terror is like a dress rehearsal for Revelation's scenario of the end. It wakes us up with the realization of how close we could be. September 11 shows us how quickly the political and religious landscape in the world can change. One day, no one knows how soon, the spotlights of the world will move from al Qaeda and other issues to the remnant. And when that time comes, the end is at hand.

When the three worldwide confederacies are in place, things will move rapidly to the end of history as we know it. Like a sports fan desperately searching for scores first thing in the morning, we all would like to know how things will turn out in the end. Who won and who lost. Revelation will not disappoint us.

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1. Many details in the above narrative are based on the "Axis of Evil" article in *Wikipedia*, the online encyclopedia. Referenced on August 3, 2007 at <http://en.wikipedia.org>.