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Revelation 17:1-14

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MUCH OF REVELATION IS “LITERALLY SYMBOLIC.” The question is what the symbolism means—and meant, from literary, political, and religious standpoints. Meaningful interpretation of Rev 17 today hinges upon grasping a sense of what it meant for its original audiences in late first-century Asia Minor. As these apocalyptic messages were read among the churches, how did their original audiences understand the imagery of the woman who rides on the beast, the beast with seven heads and ten horns, and the seven kings and then the eighth? How might they have understood themselves called to receive the text’s message then, and how might we best understand this text today?

The vision is described in the first six verses, and the interpretation follows. The overall message is clear: God wins! More specifically, the beast and its rider will be judged; their reign even now is ending, and will meet its doom; those who yield authority to the beast and make war against the Lamb will themselves be finally conquered by the Lamb (Rev 17:1,8,13–14). This is a message of hope, calling for faithfulness to God in the face of opposing powers—in every generation and situation.

The history of interpretation is fascinating along these lines. The great city on seven hills refers literally to Rome (17:9), and the writer also states that “[t]he woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (17:18). She is drunk with the blood of the saints and the witnesses to Jesus (17:6), and the worst of moral images—whoredom, adultery, murder—are used to refer to her power and to those who conduct business with her (17:4–6). By contrast, the New Jerusalem is presented as the spotless bride of Christ (19:7–8; 21:2), likewise adorned with jewels, but she is conversely presented in righteous ways as the pure and exemplary model of faithfulness.

Resistance to imperial Rome’s domination across the Mediterranean world in the late first century C.E. would find echoes among later interpretations of the city with seven hills. Echoes of Rome on the Tiber abounded among German and Swiss Protestants of the sixteenth century as they struggled against the power structure of the Roman Catholic Church, and among the allies of the Second World War in defiance of Mussolini. Literally and historically, however, the references to empire in Revelation refer pointedly to the Roman Empire, flexing its muscle throughout the regions in which the early Christian movement was expanding. That being the case, the seven heads and the ten horns refer to nations and leaders in the Mediterranean world that had acquiesced to Rome’s rule, and are not references to contemporary institutions or events.

The most likely meaning of the seven kings, and then the eighth, is a reference to the Roman administrations beginning with Augustus and ending with Domitian. Divine honors in
Rome began with Augustus (31 B.C.E.–14 C.E.), and Nero (54–68 C.E.) persecuted Christians in Rome. As Domitian (81–96 C.E.) is the eighth major ruler since Augustus, and as he both emphasized imperial honors and persecuted Christians, he fits the bill well (cf. Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 1998, 312–21; M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, 1989, 178–85). Domitian is said to have required even his lieutenants to address him as “Lord and God,” and those who refused such displays of honor found themselves in trouble.

While the programmatic persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire did not begin until the reign of Diocletian (especially 303–311 C.E.), this does not mean that Christians in Asia Minor did not suffer persecution under Domitian and Trajan. Trajan’s response to Pliny’s letter (Pliny, *Letters*, 96–97) in 112 C.E. advising him not to seek out Christians to punish them indicates otherwise:

> Christians should not be sought out. But if they are accused and handed over, they are to be punished, but only if they do not deny being Christians and demonstrate it by the appropriate act, i.e., the worship of our gods. Even if one is suspect because of past conduct, he or she is to be acquitted in view of repentance (*paenitentia*) (trans. Boring, 15).

The context of Pliny’s inquiry is that he has just put to death two young Christian women who were suspected of the offense of being Christians. Tellingly, Pliny also describes those who were found “innocent” of the charge of being a Christian. In their trial, Pliny had introduced a statue of the emperor for them to worship as “Lord” and had offered them several ways of proving their innocence, all of which involved some form of denunciation of Christ and an act of worship or allegiance to Roman gods and goddesses or to Caesar.

Imagine what would have happened among the churches of Asia Minor if members of the same congregation had responded in each of these two ways. Those who may have paid the ultimate price in faithfulness to Christ and his community would have been regarded as “saints and martyrs” indeed! But how would faithful believers have regarded those who had denied Christ (and his community), or who had worshipped Caesar or the pagan deities? Could they be worthy of authentic Christian fellowship?

Rome’s interest in securing loyalty was seen by many as a generous pluralism; subjects could worship their own gods, but they simply had to include loyalty to the gods and goddess of Rome and to Rome’s rulers. Jewish and Christian communities, however, saw the matter quite differently. For them, generous pluralism failed the test of fidelity to the one true God.

Rather than predicting a mysterious crisis in the distant future, Rev 17 calls for faithfulness to Christ and his way in every generation and setting. The words of nineteen-year-old Quaker martyr James Parnell come to mind (from his 1655 prison letter from Colchester Castle to Friends in Essex): “And be willing that self shall suffer for the Truth, and not the Truth for self.” Despite imposing powers and appealing enticements of the age, the God of eternity alone is worthy of our allegiance and worship.