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The seven heads of the beast in Revelation 17

In past months, the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI and the election of his successor, Pope Francis, preoccupied the news media and Internet. The news sparked a renewed interest in the enigmatic prophecy of Revelation 17:9–11 among students of Bible prophecy, resulting in some creative interpretive proposals.

Revelation 17 vividly describes a beast with seven heads (v. 3). Subsequently, an interpreting angel explains to John the revelator that these heads represent seven consecutive kings: five have fallen, the sixth is, and the seventh king is yet to come (v. 10). When he comes, he will remain only for a short time. Along with an eighth king, the whole beast will go to destruction (v. 11).

During the last several decades, some Adventist interpreters have associated these seven heads/kings with the seven successive popes since 1929—the year in which the Lateran Treaty recognized Vatican City as an independent sovereign state. For some time, John Paul II, pontiff from 1978 to 2005, had been regarded as the last pope. However, his death prompted a reinterpretation of this prophecy. The fact that Benedict XVI is the seventh elected pope since 1929 and his pontificate lasted for only a relatively short period of time (some eight years), has led some to associate him with the seventh king; thus, the newly elected Pope Francis is viewed as the last pope in the office before the end comes.

Where have such ideas come from? Unfortunately, they have not been derived from careful study of the biblical text, but rather from past and current news headlines that have been twisted into fictitious and sensational biblical predictions. Historical facts and biblical texts were creatively intertwined in order to fit an established interpretation, which is unfortunately not supported by textual evidence.

In reality, the view that the healing of the papal deadly wound occurred in 1929 is only an assumption rather than a historical fact. The act of granting the papacy a small, independently sovereign state can hardly be viewed as the fulfillment of this prophecy, whose scope is worldwide, as described in Revelation 13:11–18. While the year 1929 may have marked the beginning of the healing of the deadly wound, the fact that 84 years have passed since the Lateran Treaty contradicts any evidence that supports the view that the papal deadly wound has been healed.

Furthermore, the application of the “short time” of the rule of the seventh king to the eight-year rule of Benedict XVI ignores the even shorter pontificate of John Paul I, who ruled for only 34 days before he died in 1978 (Rev. 17:10, NKJV). Many other such inconsistencies render this adaptation of the biblical prophecy as spurious and inconclusive.

Therefore, I invite you to join me in a closer look at Revelation 17:9–11 in an effort to discover the meaning that God intended for this enigmatic passage.

The prostitute riding the beast

Revelation 17 is delineated into two parts: (1) the vision (17:1–6a), in which John the revelator observes a woman who is depicted as a prostitute riding the beast; and (2) the audition (17:6b–18), in which the interpreting angel explains to John the meaning of the vision of the prostitute and the beast that carries her.

In the vision, John is invited to witness the judgment of the great prostitute who sits on many waters, seductively deceiving the inhabitants of the earth (vv. 1, 2). This woman is subsequently identified as “Babylon the great, the mother of harlots” (v. 5).¹ In the Hebrew Scriptures, a prostitute symbolically refers to God’s people in their apostasy (Isa. 1:21; Jer. 3:1; Ezek. 16; 23; Hosea 3; 4). The portrayal of the prostitute in Revelation 17 shows that she represents an entity that was once faithful to God before aligning herself with the end-time opponent of God and His faithful remnant. Babylon is thus a corporate name for an end-time apostate entity.

Note that the prostitute is first referenced to as sitting on “many waters” (v. 1); however, when John actually sees her, she is seen as sitting on a scarlet beast (v. 3). This should not come as a surprise due to such a literary feature occurring regularly in the book (see Rev. 5:5, 6). Therefore, the waters and the beast are two symbols that represent the same reality. According to

Revelation 17:5, the waters upon which the prostitute was seen symbolize the civil, secular, and political powers of the world. Jeremiah 51:13 shows that “many waters” refers to the Euphrates River. Just as the ancient Babylon depended on the Euphrates River for its existence, so will the end-time Babylon depend on the civil, secular, and political powers of the world to enforce its plans and purposes.

Furthermore, the beast stands as a symbol of a political power or system. That the prostitute Babylon sits (or rides) on the beast shows that this religious system will have control over these worldwide political powers at the end of time. Thus, the prophecy shows us that at the end of time, there will be a religious-political union when the political powers of the earth will unite with the end-time apostate religious system named Babylon.

The three phases of the beast

In the second part of the chapter, John is described as greatly astonished when he sees the prostitute. He recognizes in her the woman that had fled into the wilderness in order to escape the persecution of the dragon during the prophetic 1,260-day period of the Middle Ages (Rev. 12:13, 14). In response to John’s astonishment, the interpreting angel promises to disclose the “‘mystery’” of the prostitute and of the scarlet beast that carries her as well as their function at the time of the end (Rev. 17:7).

John describes the beast as the one that “‘was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss’” (v. 8). This identification of the beast brings to mind the divine title “‘who was and who is and who is to come’” (Rev. 4:8). Thus, this title identifies the beast as a parody of God. However, this tripartite formula also shows that the beast has passed through three phases of existence. This, in turn, links the scarlet beast of Revelation 17 with the sea beast of Revelation 13 (cf. Rev. 13:1 with 17:3).²

First, the beast “was.” In other words, this beast existed in the past.

The “was” phase of the beast refers to its activities during the prophetic period of 1,260 days or years (Rev. 13:5). The year A.D. 538 marked the beginning of this prophetic period when the church of western Europe, led by the Roman papacy, established itself as an ecclesiastical power and dominated the Western world throughout the Middle Ages. In our time characterized by religious tolerance, such statements can be regarded as harsh and unfair; but the present reality cannot erase the historical facts.

Furthermore, the beast came into its “is not” phase of existence in 1798 when, as a result of the events of the French Revolution, it sustained its deadly wound (Rev. 13:3). This brought an end to the church’s oppressive political power. The beast disappeared for some time from the world’s scene, yet it survived.

Third, with the healing of the deadly wound, the beast will resurrect to life in full satanic rage against God’s faithful people. The prophecy thus shows that the religious-political oppressive system that dominated the world during the Middle Ages will be revived at the time of the end and will dominate the world as it did in the past. This revival of the beast will fill the inhabitants of the world with awe and admiration (Rev. 13:8; 17:8b).

Therefore, Revelation 17 clearly describes the sea beast of Revelation 13 at the time when its deadly wound has been healed. Upon this resurrected beast, John sees the end-time prostitute Babylon sitting. Thus, the end-time religious system that will play a key role in the final conflict is a continuation of the religious-political power that harmed and oppressed God’s people during the prophetic 1,260-day period of the Middle Ages.

Revelation thus tells us that religion will once again dominate and control politics as it did in the past, albeit for a short time. However, there is a noticeable difference between its power during the medieval period and the time of the end. While the sea beast, representing the medieval

church, was a religious-political power, the scarlet beast is exclusively a political power. These two are distinct at the end of time.

The seven heads of the beast

This brings us to our key passage of Revelation 17:9–11: “‘Here is the mind which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits, and they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while. The beast which was and is not, is himself also an eighth and is one of the seven, and he goes to destruction.’”

The text opens with a call for “wisdom” as a prerequisite to understanding the meaning of the heads of the beast. The wisdom that John calls for here is the same wisdom that was spoken of in connection with the number of the beast (Rev. 13:18). This wisdom refers to spiritual discernment that can only be imparted by the Holy Spirit, rather than through brilliant mental and intellectual ability (James 1:5). Only through this divinely imparted wisdom will the faithful be able to discern the true character of this end-time satanic power.

Moving forward, we may see that the beast has seven heads like the red dragon (or Satan) of Revelation 12:3. The existence of the beast remains inseparable from its heads. Throughout history, the beast has solely ruled and been active through the agency of its heads. When one of the heads receives a deadly blow, the whole beast dies (cf. Rev. 13:12–14). This brings us to a need for a closer look as to what these heads represent.

“‘The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits’” (Rev. 17:9). We see a new symbol added here. At first, we were told that the woman sat on “‘many waters’” (v. 1), and then, on the scarlet beast (v. 3); now, the angel explains that she actually sits on seven mountains. The waters, the beast, and the mountains are different symbols for the civic,

secular, and political powers (cf. v. 15) that will provide popular support to Babylon as the end-time apostate religious system. We must keep in mind that Revelation does not deal with individual personalities, whether past or present, but rather with systems and world powers—whether political or religious.

The Greek word *oros* means “mountain,” not “hill,” as some translators suggest in order to show that the city of Rome, situated on seven hills, is in view here. However, since the seven mountains in Revelation 17 are successive, they cannot be interpreted in a literal manner. In the Old Testament, mountains often represent world powers or empires (Jer. 51:25; Ezek. 35:2–5; Dan. 2:35). For instance, the kingdom of Judah in the Old Testament is often referred to as Mount Zion (Ps. 48:1–3; Isa. 29:8).

The angel clearly does not refer to literal mountains since he immediately explains to John that these seven mountains actually represent “seven kings” (Rev. 17:10). However, these cannot be interpreted as individual kings, for at least three reasons. First of all, we have established that Revelation does not deal with individual personalities but systems. Second, these seven kings are equated with the seven mountains—a symbol of kingdoms or empires. Third, in the Old Testament, “kings” is another expression for kingdoms or empires (Dan. 2:37–39; 7:17).

The seven heads as successive empires

Based on biblical evidence, the interpretation that makes the most sense is that the seven mountains, upon which the prostitute Babylon sits, stand for the seven successive empires that dominated the world throughout history and through which Satan worked to oppose God.³ These empires possessed common traits of religious-political governance and coercion, which they used to cause harm and persecute God’s people.

As the angel further explains to John from his time’s perspective,

five of these kingdoms have fallen, one is, and the seventh one would appear sometime in the future. As previously explained, this cryptic text has generated numerous speculative interpretations, primarily due to the interpreters’ failure to note that the meaning of these successive kingdoms was explained to John in the context of his own time—not ours. Nowhere in the text does it indicate that John was transported to another time; the angel simply explains to him what he had already seen previously in the vision.

Therefore, the key to decoding the meaning of these seven heads lies in the sixth kingdom, which is described as “is.” This “is” refers to John’s time. John lived in the time of the sixth head—the Roman Empire. The five that had fallen were thus the empires that ruled the world and caused harm to God’s people prior to the time of John: (1) Egypt was the world power that enslaved and oppressed Israel, seeking to destroy her; (2) Assyria destroyed and scattered the ten tribes of Israel; (3) Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and exiled Judah; (4) Persia almost annihilated the Jews at the time of Esther; (5) Greece oppressed and tried to destroy the Jews through Antiochus Epiphanes. The seventh kingdom that “has not yet come” refers to the medieval papacy that, from John’s time perspective, would be manifested in the future from John’s time—after the fall of the Roman Empire.

The angel further explained that the scarlet beast itself is a part of the phase of the eighth head, the world power that is to come at the time of the end. Yet, it is one of the previously noted seven heads. Although this eighth head is one of the previous seven, it is considered a new power. Which of the seven? Most likely the seventh head, which previously experienced the deadly wound but comes back to life after its wound has healed.

This seventh power will reappear as the eighth head at the end of time and will exercise the same authority as it did during the Middle Ages. During the time of the eighth head, the scarlet

beast carries the prostitute Babylon. We now live in the era of the seventh head, for the eighth head has not yet gained its power. However, it will appear on the world scene at the time of the end and will impose its rule on the inhabitants of the earth.

“He must remain a short time”

Current misinterpretations of this phrase have construed the phrase to mean that the seventh pope will rule for a short amount of time. The Greek adjectival word for the temporal phrase “a short time” used here is *oligon*, which means “a short time” or “a little while.” This word is different from *micron*, used in Revelation to indicate shortness of time (see Rev. 6:11; 20:3). In contrast, *oligon* does not indicate a length of time but is rather used in a qualitative sense. For instance, Revelation 12:12 states that having been cast out of heaven, Satan realizes that he has only “‘a short time [*oligon kairon*].’” This “short time” does not refer to a length of time for it has been thousands of years since Satan’s expulsion from heaven—another way of saying that Satan’s time is limited, just as a person sentenced to death realizes that he or she only has “a short time” despite the fact that the execution may take place many years later.

This same meaning for the Greek word *oligon* is also found in Revelation 17:10. That the seventh power must remain for a short time does not point to the length of time—a short period of existence; rather, it is a different way of stating that the existence of this power is determined by God (“it must remain”) and that it will come to its end, as is in the case of Satan in Revelation 12:12. The seventh power will receive a deadly wound: an event that took place with the events of the French Revolution in 1798.

Conclusion


This brief analysis shows that the seven successive heads of the beast of Revelation 17 represent the seven kingdoms or empires that existed in

history rather than individual kings: five were in existence prior to the time of John, the sixth was Rome (according to John's time), and the seventh was the medieval papacy that was to come in the future from John's perspective. Such an understanding is based on careful textual analysis, founded upon the principles of biblical hermeneutics. The idea that the seven heads refer to individual kings, which are to represent the seven popes since 1929, is not in agreement with the text. Such an interpretation is speculative and superimposed upon the biblical text.

Revelation itself gives a warning against adding or removing from the words of the prophecy of the book (Rev. 22:18, 19). The book of Revelation is the word of God given by Christ (Rev. 1:2). Tampering with the prophecies of Revelation carries far-reaching

consequences—eternal loss. To those who add to the prophetic words of the book, God will add to them the plagues described in the book. This warning does not refer to a tampering with the actual words of Revelation—as if some concept of verbal inspiration was at stake. Adding to the words of Revelation's prophecies has to do with distorting and misinterpreting the prophecies of Revelation to suit one's own purposes. This also has to do with enforcing speculative ideas and views not warranted by the text. We must stay with what John clearly states in the text and shun any speculations not warranted by the text.

In dealing with the prophecies of Revelation, we must let the Bible interpret itself. We must be careful not to speculate beyond what the prophecy has revealed to us. Any interpretation

based on headline news or current events for the purpose of date setting and popular excitement is speculative and subjective. Such interpretations never result in the strengthening of our faith in prophecy; in actuality, they weaken our confidence in it. When understood properly, the prophecies of Revelation have practical purposes: to teach us how to live today and prepare us for the future. A right understanding of prophecy will also inspire and motivate us to try to reach others with the gospel message. 

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, scripture references are from the NASB.
- 2 For a different view, see Ekkehardt Mueller, "The Beast of Revelation 17: A Suggestion (Part I)," *Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary* 10, no. 1 (2007): 38–40.
- 3 William Johnson, "The Saints' End-Time Victory Over the Forces of Evil," in *Symposium on Revelation—Book 2, Daniel and Revelation Committee Series 7* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 17.

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