

A Brief Note on Revelation 12:1 and 17:3-6

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Within the literary model adopted by C. Mervyn Maxwell in *God Cares*, vol. 2, the book of Revelation divides into two parts and within these each main section has a counterpart in the other half of the book. Responsible exegesis demands that in any given case the two sections be studied together.¹ One such pair of sections involves chaps. 12 and 17. It is important that we compare these two chapters, not only because of the overall structure of Revelation, but because they are linked by a very clear example of parallel symbolism.

In Rev 12 and again in Rev 17 John sees a woman. A woman is commonly used as a symbol for God's people, or in this case the church.² The one woman, described in Rev 12:1, is pure:

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. (Rev 12:1)

The other woman, described in Rev 17:3-6a, is corrupt:

(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. (4) 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. (5) This title was written on her forehead:

MYSTERY
BABYLON THE GREAT
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

(6) I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. (Rev 17:3-6a)

It is clear from the passages quoted that John is showing a contrast between the two women in question. But it may be that, having grasped this point, we have missed another one which is equally important.

The second point--the one that I suspect has been generally missed--is illustrated by John's response when he sees the fallen woman in the second passage: "When I saw her, I was greatly astonished" (Rev 17:6b). There is a very real question why John should be astonished. John lived and worked in Ephesus and every day in that city he would have seen young prostitutes on the street, some advertising their services by displaying their names on headbands worn across their foreheads, just as the woman in the prophecy does.³ The fact that a woman could be so completely fallen would not in itself surprise him. Nor would the symbolism of a corrupt woman representing some aspect of the church. John was well aware

that the church would have to deal with both corrupt teaching and corrupt practice during the years ahead. He himself faithfully warns the church that, "Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world" (2 John 7).

If neither of the above points accounts for John's astonishment when he sees this particular woman, symbolizing a fallen and corrupt church, there is a question what does. And notice that he is not just astonished. He is taken totally off guard. "When I saw her, I was *greatly* astonished." I suggest that John's response can be accounted for only on the assumption that he has seen the woman before under widely different circumstances. There is only one other place in Revelation where he could have seen her and that is chap. 12. I suggest therefore that the two women John sees in chaps. 12 and 17 are not different but the same.⁴ In chap. 12 he sees a pure woman being pursued by a scarlet "dragon" (*drakōn*), while in chap. 17 he sees the same woman riding on a scarlet "beast" (*thērion*). It must be clarified that the beast is not identical with the dragon,⁵ but the contrast between the two scenes and the irony of what has happened should be clear.

If the above interpretation is correct, there is much to learn from it. In particular, if the woman in Rev 12 is the same as the woman found in Rev 17, then the two glimpses that we see of her cannot represent the same period of time. A change has occurred. If Rev 12 shows us how the church began, Rev 17 shows us the unfortunate condition that much of it will be in when Christ comes. The picture John attempts to create in the later chapter is one of complete abandonment to evil, i.e., one of total corruption. It takes time to fall that far.⁶

The present note supports the historicist position by showing that the book of Revelation deals with large amounts of time. This is characteristic of apocalyptic writing. And it supports Maxwell's contention, discussed in another paper,⁷ that Rev 17 must be interpreted from the perspective of the end time and not from that of John's own lifetime in the first century A.D.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹C. Mervyn Maxwell, *God Cares*, 2 vols. (Mountain View, CA/Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1981/85), vol. 2: *The Message of Revelation for You and Your Family*, pp. 60-61.

²Woman symbolism in the Old and New Testaments is a topic in its own right and one which I hope to discuss in a later paper.

³"It was faddish in John's day for harlots to wear their names on headbands" (*ibid.*, p. 459).

⁴Every symbol has its limits. The woman in Rev 12 represents a large part of the early church, while the woman in Rev 17 represents a large part of that same body at a later time (Rev 17:18). So if we were to press the symbol, it would be necessary to claim that the first woman becomes the harlot and also becomes the remnant which is forced to hide from the harlot and the beast she rides for "1,260 days" (Rev 12:6) or "a time, times and half a time" (Rev 12:14). But the church takes in a lot of diversity. With time much of it would indeed become corrupt, as Paul clearly indicates in 2 Thes 2:3-4. There is no new doctrine here. So the symbol, though limited, is appropriate.

⁵In Rev 13:4, for example, the dragon gives "authority" to the beast. The one supports the other.

⁶To speak of falling is to introduce the idea of change over time. In this case for example there is a condition that the woman falls from and a condition that the woman falls to. This is

one way to account for the differences between chaps. 12 and 17. But time is not the only factor involved. Christ's parable of the sheep and the goats in Matt 25:31-46 shows that there is more than one class of people in the church when He comes. Not all are pure and not all are impure, though all are either one or the other. So if the question is how to represent a full range of diversity within the church by using only one symbol, the answer appears to be that one uses it twice. One woman appears successively in two guises. The contrast between the point being made in the one case and that being made in the other is based in part on the passing of time between the two chapters and in part on differences that would exist among Christians at the same time just before their Lord returns for His pure remnant, which He will surely do: "'For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.' (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints)" (Rev 19:7-8).

⁷See Hardy, "The Four-Part World Empire Motif in Daniel and the Corresponding Seven-Part Motif in Revelation," in this issue of *Historicism*.