

Monday Evening Bible Study Group: Revelation Chapter 17: Some Notes

It would be rather odd to write at length about the wicked world being brought to a violent and well deserved end, and then add a lengthy section about what happened to Penge. But of course Rome was the heart of the Empire, the seat of power, the spider at the centre of the web, the exxploier of and beneficiary from the conquered Roman world. London was not alone in benefiting from the British Empire: Bristol and Liverpool did pretty well. But London was the capital of the Empire, for good (however defined) and for ill (however defined); and and an English writer called London “The great Wen” (a running sore). So it really isn’t odd that John dwells on Rome. If you think his account is perhaps a bit over-coloured, rest assured that Roman writers, with no Christian axe to grind, described it in much the same way – for example as “An open sewer”.

Of course, we always need to remember that Rome being wicked doesn’t mean that everyone living in Rome (many of them slaves)was wicked. After all, the Roman critics of Rome lived in Rome!

Get some of the code language out of the way fiest. The Scarlet Woman is Rome. Te Beast is the Roman Empire, though sometimes Woman and Beast get a bit mixed up. Rome was built on seven hills, and this gets a special mention – just in case you hadn’r got the message. The various Emperors are listed, anonymously, with “the one who was, wasn’t and was again” probably being Domitian – so ghastly that he was seen by a number of writers as Nero revived. (There is a maybe a twisted parallel with Jesus: who was and is and is to come, John was fond of portraying evil trinities etc to show that there was a black counterpart of Christian white,

The Great Whore is a particularly distasteful picture; and sounds suspiciously like another man attempt to blame women for everything. (The same language is used in the Old Testament to describe the original Babylon, Nineveh, Tyre, and even Jerusalem at its worst. P.S. Why, in English, andclearly in many other languages, are cities, like ships, female?) Remember that the Empress Messalina, wife of Emperor Claudius, was a prostitute in her spare time; that the pagan cults had prostitution as a selling point; and that the brothels of Rome were notorious. (Yes, there male prostitutes too.) Prostitutes had headbands with their names on them – hence this one with her mysterious name on a headband. But, to balance things, most prostitutes, then as now, were not well-to-do, had limited options, and were literally slaves. Also note that, as against the Scarlet Woman, John has two female heroines: a sort of combination of Mary Queen of Heaven and the Church. The Ten Kings? Maybe the Parthian leaders, always feared by Rome. The Bible writers recognise that women can attract for good as well as for evil.... and remember that Adam and Eve were both there when Eve was tempted by Satan: Adam was equally responsible!

Yet again the Desert is a vantage point for prophets to get the wider perspective and to encounter the Spirit of God (from Moses to John the Baptist and Jesus.) Can we find a desert place, and does it have to be physical or just mental/spiritual?

Some issues to discuss: “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”? Any form of Government (and every ruler) is vulnerable to becoming exploiter rather than saviour, master rather than servant. Look at Europe, at Russia, at Africa, at South America. Look at the French and American Revolutions. Any examples of powerful people who stayed humble, honest, and servant rulers: Julius Nyerere? Pope Francis? Elizabeth of Hungary? William of Orange? Nelson Mandela? Gandhi? Jesus? “Even the wrath of man is made to praise God”? Does wealth, like power, always corrupt; or does poverty provide just as great a threat? (Bill Gates is perhaps an example of great wealth = great responsibility = great results.

And a final thought: Does personifying collective evil help or hinder hanging on to personal responsibility and accountability? Does it (as with some religious groups) tend to make folk think they can do without Government, and refuse to get involved in collective effort. (Our JW friends are terrific in terms of personal accountability and serving others, but don't vote or engage in civil society in conventional ways.)

