The Beast and the ‘Whore’  
Revelation 17

Right at the outset, we do well to note the hazards of reading an ancient text within the modern context. The obvious case-in-point: the use of ‘whore’ or ‘prostitute’ as an insult. In recently years, we have realized that a sizeable percentage of prostitutes in the U.S. were primed for that life by childhood sexual abuse. Others, especially immigrants from poorer countries, are virtual (or actual) sex slaves. Either way, they are often more sinned against, than sinners. In such cases, pejorative is inappropriate. That acknowledged, Revelation is clearly not speaking of literal sex workers. Both terms are metaphorical, pejoratives intended to disparage opponents.

These insults were particularly, though not uniquely, Jewish. Greek and Roman society legalized and licensed sex trade. Men frequented either female or male prostitutes without social disapproval. In fact, prostitution was a common element of the ‘entertainment’ at feasts hosted by the wealthy. For the women (or pubescent boys), the role was typically demeaning, though there was a minority of courtesans with function and status akin to geisha. Guided by the Bible, Jews saw all this differently. As they looked at the gentile world, they saw two disgusting depravities above all others: sexual immorality and idolatry. Here John uses the imagery of sexual immorality to capture the depravity of idolatry, and to motivate his readers to persist in devotion to God, even at the cost of their lives.

Day 1: Revelation 17:1-6 The beast and the ‘whore’

John calls the emperor an animal, a brute. We may miss the sting of this insult, given our fondness toward pets, our tendency to humanize cartoon animals (consider Mickey, Goofy, and Donald Duck), and our fascination with wild animals at a safe distance (deer, bears, and the like). But a moment’s reflection captures the idea, even if not the emotional undertones: the most powerful political figure in the world, who purports to be the son of God, is actually a brute beast, an animal.

There is no missing the insult, though, in calling the patron goddess of Rome (‘Roma’) a whore. The NIV tries to take a bit of the sting off with the more polite ‘prostitute’, but no ancient devotee would consider that any improvement. Besides, John’s purpose is to be insulting. He achieves that goal in spades: “Your ‘god’ is a whore.”

This is political satire and irony at its sharpest. Both insults, ‘beast’ and ‘whore’, are actually suggested by Roman accounts of the founding of the city. According to ancient legend, Rome was founded by twin brothers,
Romulus and Remus, offspring of a union between a god and a princess. Victims of political intrigue, they were abandoned to die, but rescued and suckled by a she-wolf. Ironically, the old Latin term for she-wolf (‘lupa’) was derogatory slang for ‘whore’, and a brothel was known as ‘a den of wolves’. So, in biting satire, John turns its own legend back on the emperor cult: this professed ‘son of the gods’ is a brute animal, and his patron deity, a whore.

Is such vitriol justifiable?

It is certainly understandable, and from two perspectives. From a purely human perspective, John is imprisoned, and his readers’ lives threatened by a ruthless, violent, oppressive, and corrupt political regime. Some resentment is perfectly understandable: anyone who thinks otherwise should consider how they treat their own enemies under much less provocation. More importantly, though, from a divine perspective, any preening, egomaniacal emperor who claims divinity, demands worship and challenges God, deserves to be taken down a notch or two.

Day 2: Revelation 17:7-8 “‘Why are you astonished?’”

God speaks to us through his word to the ancient church. So before we ask what the passage says to us, we rightly ask what it said to them. John’s — and God’s — fundamental message to them is that these figures who seem so compelling — the most powerful ruler in the world and his patron deity — are neither noble nor enviable. Instead, they are lower than humans (bestial), and the lowest of humans (the most whorish of all whores). Mighty Rome has no glamour, nor does its emperor, or its namesake deity. There is one God, and his bride, the Church. Even faced with persecution and death, the decision is easy: remain loyal to him.

This is sound advice for us also. In our day, power poses less challenge to God and faith, than does money or intellectual pride. Perhaps because our country is a superpower, we have little regard for either political or military power. Unlike the ancient inhabitants of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), typically we are not impressed by the office of President, or by the prowess of our military. It is more often extreme wealth, or unusual brilliance which impress us, and their pursuit which can threaten our faith. Whichever form of prowess we most value, none holds a candle to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer God, or to the glory and privilege of being his people.

Day 3: Revelation 17:9-13 Seven heads and ten horns

This chapter provides the clearest explanation of the symbolism of Revelation, and underscores the silliness of much contemporary
application. Today, best-selling populist treatments apply Revelation to events yet future, but anticipated to occur soon. It is all very exciting to contemplate how the earth might end, but totally misreads the point.

While this book is applicable to us, it is not primarily about our times. It is about the Roman persecution of the church of Asia Minor in the first-century AD. The seven heads on which the whore sits are the seven hills on which Rome was built, and the seven historic kings during the Roman monarchy. The ten horns are ten regional kings, who serve at the discretion of the emperor, and do his bidding, persecuting the church.

So the primary application of this chapter to our day is that this book does not apply primarily to our day. Let us beware of exciting and easy-reading interpretations which make the book all about us. Let us first hear what God is saying to them, before we apply these words to ourselves.

**Day 4: Revelation 17:14-18 The Lord who rules**

The key point of this chapter, unsurprisingly, is the same as the central thrust of the entire book. These few verses bring that point to a point: Who is the true Lord of this world? The Roman emperor, who proclaims himself Pontifex Maximus (‘Greatest Priest’), Tribunicia Potestas (‘Tribunal Power’), Pater Patriae (‘Father of the Fatherland’), ruler of the world? He whose armies sweep the world, whose capital outshines all other cities, and whose citizens reign over the various subject nations? No. Despite appearances, it is the Lamb of God who is the Lord of lords and the King of kings, and his people who are the called, the chosen, the faithful, the elite.

Given that our nation is a superpower, and that the American church wields considerable influence both domestically and internationally, it is hard for us to appreciate the assurance that these verses provide a small, struggling, and oppressed church. Still, we join with them in proclaiming Jesus Lord of lords, King of kings, who appoints the (temporary) rulers of this world for so long as he wishes.

**Day 5: Revelation 17:1-2,15-18 The waters, and the peoples, multitudes, nations and languages.** In a common first-century literary device, the author signals the end of a thought unit by returning to its beginning. The chapter begins with reference to the ‘whore of all whores’ who sits enthroned alongside many ‘waters’, engaged in drunken orgy with a great many kings and the inhabitants of their countries. The chapter ends with an explanation of the ‘waters’: these are “peoples, multitudes, nations and languages” (17:15).

Notably, this catchphrase (and its variants) appears throughout
Revelation. It signifies the earth’s entire population, whether characterized by clan, ethnicity, nationality or language. The phrase appears in two ways: (1) negative, the worshippers of the whore and the beast (13:7; 17:15), and (2) positive, the worshippers of God and the Lamb (5:9; 7:9; 14:6).

That is to say, the whore and the beast are in competition with God and the Lamb, for the devotion and loyalty of the peoples of this world. Whom will the nations worship and serve: the powers of this world or God above? This is the battle we join in evangelism and missions. A battle for the affections and devotion of the world.

Day 6: Revelation 17 and the church today

The persecuted church around the world today – and at least 50 countries in the world today engage in significant repression of the church – finds itself in the same position as the churches of Revelation. God’s word to them is that same as his word: your oppressors are neither noble nor glamorous; they are bestial and whore-ish. Let their power and prestige be no attraction; let their threats and violence be no deterrent. How can the church be confident of this reversal of outward appearance, that the noble class is ignoble, and the powerful, weak? The Roman empire has long faded from the annals of world history, but the church of God remains still. Earthly powers rise and fall, but God and his church remain forever.

Even though in America there is no sign that we face imminent persecution, this chapter applies to us in at least two ways. For one, Revelation as a whole, and this chapter as well, remind us that in much of the world, the people of God face grave peril. At the very least, this serves as a reminder to us to pray for the suffering church. For a list of churches where persecution is especially virulent: www.worldwatchlist.us/

This chapter also drives home the desperate urgency of missions to the unreached. Our culture irrationally insists that all religions are essentially the same, that the diverse religions are different paths to the same goal. Not for a moment, insists John (and the rest of Scripture). The goddess Roma and the worship of emperor are not paths to God: she is a whore who seduces the drunken nations, and he is a blasphemous beast.

There is no way around this reality, except by denying Scripture. There is only one proper response to this reality, sacrificial engagement in missions until all peoples, multitudes, nations, languages have heard of the one true God, creator of the universe, sovereign over all the world, and savior of all who call upon him.