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**Revelation 17d - The Seven Heads**

We have already seen that some prophetic symbols may be understood in two different ways, viewed from different angles. The dragon primarily represents Satan, but in a secondary sense it means imperial Rome, or pagan Rome, which was the ruling world power when the visions of the Revelation were given. The same principle of a twofold meaning will be helpful in understanding the symbol of the seven heads mentioned several times in the prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation. The number seven usually indicates completeness or finality; and as the seven heads are said to be successive in Revelation 17:9, 10, they evidently represent all the various successive nations through which Satan has tried more or less successfully to control national affairs to oppose or hinder the work of God. In other words, the seven heads would mean all the oppressive, tyrannical civil governments during all human history from the days of Nimrod to the very end of time.

This would be the larger view of the subject, what theologians call the apotelesmatic meaning of the prophecy, *sub specie aeternitatis*—the way the heavenly intelligences see it. But there must also be a proleptic view, one which would apply to seven specific cases. The statement, “Five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come” (verse 10), obviously indicates seven specific world powers in a series. Hence we need to study with much care to see what successive nations are meant. Until recently the seventeenth chapter of Revelation was the most mysterious of all this book, if not of the entire Bible. Our pioneer prophetic expositor, Uriah Smith, had very little to say about it. Protestants realized that in a general way this chapter depicts the unholy alliance of church and state—that general meaning is as plain as A B C. But its numbers and other details have been a complete enigma for even Seventh-day Adventists. Even the last part of the chapter, about the ten kings coming to one mind and agreeing to give their power to the beast, has been misunderstood as referring to the Middle Ages, in spite of the plain statement of Ellen G. White assigning this to the confederacy of the very last hours of time, which is its obvious meaning.

But the reason for this continuous misunderstanding may not be so obscure. Perchance the time was not ripe for it to be understood. This chapter is intimately connected with the Loud Cry of Revelation 18:4, “Come out of her, my people”; and like much of the Book of Daniel that was closed up and sealed till the time of the end, this chapter 17 may not have been designed by divine Providence to be understood until this message of the Loud Cry would be ready for proclamation to the world. But that message is now due. The ban would therefore have been lifted, and every detail of this chapter made plain.

For many centuries the Catholic Church has had her own interpretation of this chapter, as will be found in her notes in her Douay Bible. Her theologians, followed closely by the Modernistic critics, have always assumed that the time viewpoint from which the angel’s explanation was given to John was the time of the Roman emperors. Accordingly they have always thought they had to bring in Egypt and Assyria to lead off the list of Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece, in

order to have five “kings,” or empires, which at that time had “fallen,” as stated in verse 10. Pagan, or imperial, Rome was then reigning, and would be No. 6 of the series. Of course the next one, No. 7, which at that time had not yet come, would be the horrible antichrist. This was also the teaching of the early church fathers.

A number of years ago, before the paradoxical language of this chapter was well understood, even some Adventist writers were deceived by this part of the wine of Babylon. They adopted this Catholic interpretation of this most vital of all the prophecies, probably because they thought they had a clear case for making No. 7 of this series a symbol of the great antichrist. They overlooked the fact that Egypt and Assyria are never once referred to in any of the serial prophecies of Daniel. They also forgot the well-known historical fact that the Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel is often called the Neo-Babylonian empire, or the second Babylonian empire; because the first career of Babylon antedated both Egypt and Assyria, going back to the time of Nimrod, soon after the Flood.

As we shall see in later chapters, the religious factor is vastly more important to the conflict of the ages than is the political, and it is always more the concern of Bible prophecy. This was the case in ancient times. Neither Egypt nor Assyria, though cruel and oppressive, ever exerted anything like the bewitching, seductive, and deceptive influence which, during all the centuries from Nimrod to Belshazzar and long after, the cults and priesthoods centered in “holy” Babylon exercised over the surrounding nations. A. H. Sayce tells us that from the days of Hammurabi’s empire onward Babylon “continued to be the capital of Babylonia and the holy city of Western Asia..”—*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Eleventh ed., Vol. III, p. 98. In fact, both Egypt and Assyria were relatively insignificant in their religious and cultural influence on the rest of the world.

The advocates of Egypt and Assyria disregarded the plain statement of the prophecy that No. 7 of the series would have only a very brief career—“and when he cometh, he must continue a short space” (verse 10), or “must remain only a little while” (R.S.V. ), or “his stay must be brief” (Goodspeed).<sup>\*</sup> \*Smith and Goodspeed, *The Complete Bible: An American Translation*. Used by permission of the University of Chicago Press.

But everybody knows that the Catholic Church has lasted almost as long as all the others put together. These are serious objections and indicate that this cannot be the correct interpretation. The true view will not involve any denial of facts. We need a sensible, self-consistent interpretation of this chapter, so that we can give intelligently the last gospel message, “Come out of her, my people.” Revelation 18:4.

The red dragon of chapter 12, the leopard beast of chapter 13, and the scarlet beast of chapter 17 are all described as having seven heads. We must find a meaning that will fit them all. This we may do if we look upon the series as beginning with the Babylon of Nimrod, and as representing successively the more or less successful attempts of Satan to assume control of mankind and compel them to do his bidding, in opposition to the work of God and the people

of God. The first and the second Babylonian empires should be regarded as a unit. Then Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and imperial Rome would make the first four, as in all the prophecies of Daniel; Papal Rome thus becomes the fifth of the series, receiving its deadly wound, or death stroke, in 1798. These are the five that “are fallen” at the time spoken of by the angel in verse 10. And the period since then, “the time of the end,” which has already lasted a century and a half and may last we know not how much longer, is obviously the point regarded as the present in this prophecy, the point from which the interpretation is given by the angel. At this period, says the angel, the satanic beast of intolerance “was, and is not” (verse 8), meaning the same as the period of the deadly wound; yet the angel immediately goes on to state that one of the heads “is” (verse 10), or “is reigning” (Goodspeed). This must be No. 6 of the series. In other words, No. 6 must be in existence or be reigning during our day, from 1798 onward. This much seems to be certain. Accordingly, we need to look around in our modern world in order to identify, if possible, the world power meant by this profoundly important prophecy.

Two candidates have been suggested. The two-horned beast, or false prophet, in all probability must have a place somewhere in this series of world powers. In the thirteenth chapter it follows next in succession after the infliction of the deadly wound upon the leopard beast. But it was very youthful and lamblike in 1798. At that time it could not possibly be looked upon as a dominant world power. In several other prophecies mention is made beforehand of a power in anticipation of what it would later become; such seems to be the case here. It can well be argued that this two-horned beast does not qualify as one of the heads in this series until it begins to speak like a dragon, for all the heads are pictured as antagonistic to God and His truth; but in its lamblike early stage it is kindly and harmless.

I am writing for those already familiar with these subjects. Everyone familiar with the prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation knows that, in any extended series, the next one following is always pictured as the *cause* of the downfall of its predecessor. Accordingly, in the case before us, we need to consider what it was that caused the deadly wound in 1798, and perhaps also still keeps this deadly wound from healing. It was not the historic monarchy of France, the eldest son of the Church, which brought about the downfall of the Papacy in 1798. It was what *The Great Controversy*, page 269, calls “a new manifestation of satanic power,” what Revelation calls the beast from the bottomless pit, or the abyss. The Directory is the name given to the group of five men who ruled from 1795 to 1799; it was they who sent Berthier to take the pope prisoner and bring him to France. And it was the fanatical, organized atheism which they represented that brought about the overthrow of every Catholic government throughout the world at that time or soon afterward. In our day it is *this same beast from the bottomless pit*, outwardly toned down and more polite and showing less outward fanaticism, that still keeps the deadly wound from being healed.

Please do not misunderstand me. The complete separation of church and state is a wise, good policy. Civil and religious liberty are both good. But the French

Revolutionists stole these heavenly ideas from the Americans of a previous generation, and used them to camouflage their propaganda of anti-God and anti-Bible which spread so universally at that time. And the Biblical higher criticism, or the liberalism of our day, the evolution philosophy, or the modern anti-Genesis apostasy now so universal throughout the Occidental world, are just the same manifestation of satanic power, though in the style of the twentieth century. It was new in 1798, but today we have grown so accustomed to it that we take it for granted.

And this, in my opinion, is what is meant by No. 6 of the seven heads. Without doubt this is what brought about the deadly wound in 1798. At that time it could correctly be described as a new manifestation of satanic power, for nothing like it had been known before in the history of the nations. But from that day to this, under various changes and disguises, it has become the dominant intellectual power throughout the Occidental world. It is this anti-Genesis apostasy which still keeps the deadly wound from being healed, which indicates that it is the prophetic successor of No. 5 of the series of the seven heads, and hence must qualify as No. 6. But what about the two-horned beast, or false prophet, which we Adventists for a hundred years have been teaching means the United States, making it No. 7 of the series? The prophecy describes it as having “two horns like a lamb,” which *The Great Controversy* says “fitly” represents the character of this country in its early days, “when presented to the prophet as ‘coming up’ in 1798.” (P. 441). Certainly this character of gentleness and harmlessness is still a truthful characterization of America in the matter of civil and religious liberty. This would seem to indicate that at this stage of its career America cannot qualify as one of the seven heads, for they all are the opponents of God and the people of God.

Yet after this first statement about having two horns like a lamb, every single statement about this two-horned beast is bad, terribly bad. It is pictured as a clever but tricky deceiver, the most accomplished and dangerous deceiver of all human history. At the climax of its evil career it will speak “as a dragon”; but the detailed charge against it gives a list of some of the spectacular deceptions with which it induces the people into making an image to the leopard beast (No. 5 of the series), and then gets everybody to pay homage to this first beast, in this way bringing it back to life again—healing its deadly wound. This, of course, is in effect bringing the beast of intolerance, or religious persecution, back from the bottomless pit, the state of death, as foretold in Revelation 17:8. When God deals with the situation, this two-horned beast is “cast alive” into the first lake of fire at the second coming of Christ.

This astonishing transformation in character and conduct from the lamblike horns to the dragon voice will be considered later. Here we are merely concerned with correctly understanding and identifying the series of the seven heads. A recent translation of Revelation 17:11 clears up some features of the problem. “The beast which was and is no more is an eighth by count, though actually one of the seven previous to him—he it is that goes away to destruction.”—John Wick Bowman, *The Drama of the Book of Revelation*, p. 114. This makes it clear that the rejuvenated Papacy would be No. 8 of the series, and strongly suggests

that the image of the beast (the dragon phase of the two-horned beast) must be No. 7, with the anti-Genesis apostasy of our time as No. 6. This does not rule out the possibility that the personal appearance of Satan impersonating Christ may be what is meant by No. 8 of this series. From this brief sketch it is clear that the prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation consistently use various kinds of ravenous beasts as symbols of human organizations which work against God and His people. In the early days, when God had a political group or nation as His representative on earth, the beasts opposing it were also nations. But God and all the inhabitants of heaven are always more interested in the spread of ideas or doctrines than in the shifting of national or political boundaries. Therefore in the course of centuries, when God's work became international in extent, Satan's organized opposition also became more universal. Hence the symbolic beasts which represent Satan's work during our day, the time of the end, must necessarily represent more universal or ideological influences, rather than mere national or political groups. We can see this on a worldwide basis today.

Primarily, of course, it is always the devil himself in the form of his human puppets that is being shown in all these prophetic symbols. These symbolic animals are given as kindergarten pieces for our instruction. And we need to remember this twofold meaning which is usually behind them, for most of them are easily capable of a double application. We can apply them wherever they fit; and wherever they fit, they were meant to apply. We have been told, "While the dragon, primarily, represents Satan, it is, in a secondary sense, a symbol of pagan Rome."—*The Great Controversy*, p. 438. The on-looking heavenly angels realize that the great rebel is being portrayed in all these symbols; but we here on earth understand them as representing the human organizations through which Satan carries on his work. Just three symbols together comprise all the work of the evil one during the last hours of time. The dragon, the leopard beast, and the two-horned beast, or false prophet, are spoken of in Revelation 16:13, 14 as representing all the powers of humanity which band together against God and His people at the very last. Hence it seems fair to conclude (Apostate Protestantism) that these three symbols should in their widest meanings be understood as representing three global ideologies which in these last days control the thinking and acting of great masses of mankind. For instance, we might think of the dragon as symbolic of organized infidelity, such as Marxian communism. The leopard beast would represent Roman Catholicism in its universal aspects, which is certainly not a nation in any proper sense of the term, but a global religion, equally as effective in New Zealand or America as in Italy. Similarly, the false prophet is not confined to the United States. It represents the modernistic aspects of apostate Protestantism, which has been termed the Americanization of religion; but it may be seen in Australia or South Africa or Germany as well as in North America.

All this emphasizes that national boundary lines count little in these days. These three apostate powers blend and intermingle with each other. But together the divine prophecies use them to represent all the powers of earth which in the last remnant of the time of the end combine to war against God and His church, the latter also being scattered all around the globe. We need

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to remember that the serial prophecies of Daniel present the dominant nations which successively ruled the people of God after Israel and Judah had apostatized and lost their independence. This line of dominant nations represents the temporarily successful attempts of Satan to shape human affairs according to his will. The three leading symbols of the Revelation—the dragon, the leopard beast, and the woman-ridden scarlet beast—all recapitulate what had already been given by Daniel, but enlarge on the conditions which are to prevail in the very last days. The seven successive stages of Satan’s partial control of the world are symbolized by the seven heads, which appear on all three of the beasts just mentioned, as given in Revelation 12, 13, and 17. All three of these symbolic beasts repeat briefly the previous history, but concentrate on the events of the last days of time.

Lastly, these symbolic beasts are all pictured in antithetical contrast to the innocent, harmless, nondefensive lamb, which throughout the entire Bible is used as a symbol of the methods and character of Christ and His style of organization. The glorious chorus at the end of chapter 5 of the Revelation, given by the literary figure of prolepsis (anticipation), is a splendid picture of the final complete victory of the Lamb of God over all opposition and all the deceptions of the enemy.