

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AS  
REVELATION'S "BABYLON":  
AN ANALYSIS OF THREE ARGUMENTS

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Adventists identify the Roman Catholic Church with "Babylon," the prostitute figure of Rev 17-18. Unfortunately, the arguments supporting this identification are tenuous. This survey will analyze the flaws of three such claims, to demonstrate the weakness of the entire Adventist position.

1. Woman as Church

Adventists argue that since Revelation depicts "Babylon" as a woman, one should consider her a depiction of a "church," rather than a political entity:

In Revelation 17 Babylon is represented as a woman—a figure which is used in the Bible as the symbol of a church, a virtuous woman representing a pure church, a vile woman an apostate church.<sup>1</sup>

This argument assumes that a female figure is appropriate only for entities existing in a covenant relationship with God (e.g., Israel, or by extension, any body of Christians). Upon these grounds, Adventists feel confident identifying this figure with the Catholic Church, which they consider an apostate church.

However, several Old Testaments prophets depict the ancient Babylonian empire, a non-Israelite political entity, as a "mother" (Jer 50:12), a "daughter" (Jer 50:42;), or a "virgin daughter" (Is 47:1,5). She has "children" and a husband (Is 47:9). These passages, which apply female imagery to a political entity, directly inspire the imagery and language of Rev 17-18 (cf. Is 21:9; Jer 51:7-8). Nahum also depicts the city of Thebes as a woman and mother (Nahum 3:10). Furthermore, Isaiah condemns the ancient city of Tyre for her "harlotry" (Is 23:15-17), and Nahum Nineveh (Nahum 3:4), demonstrating that the Old Testament im-

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1. White, Ellen G., *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Nampa ID: Pacific Press, 1950), 381.

age of national prostitution does not exclusively apply to Israel. As a universal God, Yahweh relates not only to Israel (with whom he has contracted a unique covenant), but also to all nations. Any people may prove unfaithful to their basic obligations to God.

In this light, one could as easily equate the female figure of Rev 17 with a political entity outside a unique covenant relationship with God. This undermines the certainty with which Adventists identify this figure with an apostate church.

## 2. “Mother of Whores” and “Mother Church”:

Secondly, Adventists consistently note that the “prostitute” of Rev 17 bears the title “the mother of whores and of earth’s abominations” on her forehead (17:5). They subsequently relate this title to one of the familiar invocations of the Catholic Church: “Mother Church,” implicitly suggesting that the concept of a “Mother Church” evokes the imagery of Rev 17.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, Adventists identify the “woman” of Rev 12, the foil of the “prostitute” of Rev 17, as a symbol of the true church. But this woman is also, and preeminently, a mother. She gives birth to Christ (Rev 12:1-6); she is also the mother of those who “keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 12:17). When Catholics speak of the Church as their “mother,” they are invoking Rev 12, among other passages (cf. Gal 4:24-26).<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Adventists so easily misapply the invocation “mother” betrays a limited appreciation of the ecclesiology of the apocalypse. Adventists rarely dwell on the “motherhood” of the Church, nor do any invoke the Church as their “mother” with the ease characteristic of Catholics. A deeper study of Revelation would lead them to better understand this, and other, aspects of the faith embraced by their brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church.

## 3. “Purple and Scarlet” and the Catholic Garments

Furthermore, many Adventists will identify the color of “Babylon’s” clothing with those purportedly prominent among Catholics. Uriah Smith frames this classic argument as follows:

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2. Maxwell, C. Mervyn, *God Cares*, vol. 2, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1985), 460.

3. Memory and Reconciliation, 3.4. Redemptoris Mater, 44. Of note, the II Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* 6 cites Gal 4:26; Rev 12:17 when introducing the motherhood of the Church.

The vesture and decorations of this woman, as brought to view in verse 4, are in striking harmony with the application made of this symbol. Purple and scarlet are the chief colors in the robes of popes and cardinals.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, “Babylon’s” use of the color scarlet suggests her relation to the “scarlet beast” “about to ascend from the bottomless pit” (17:8). Isaiah associates wht colors with Israel’s spiritual harlotry, sin, and bloodguilt (Isa. 1:15-22). The colors also evoke Jeremiah’s taunt against a devastated Israel (Jer 4:30). In that oracle, Israel wears scarlet, gold, jewels, and cosmetics in an attempt to seduce her “lovers” (i.e., neighboring nations) and gain their protection. Instead, they betray her, and “seek her life.” In Revelation, those who fornicated with “Babylon” at last destroy her as well (Rev 17:16). In both cases, scarlet and purple garments are associated with seduction, since many perceived the use of the colors as a reflection of wealth and beauty (cf. Judg. 8:26). Garments of like colors were costly to obtain.

a. Neutrality of the Colors

Of course, insofar as those colors that embody wealth and beauty, they were also appropriate for the literal garments of the righteous. Proverbs, for instance, depicts purple as the most appropriate color for the garments of the “wife of good character” (Prov. 31:22). Furthermore, several righteous biblical figures wore purple garments as a sign of honor and power (Esther 8:15; Dan 5:29). One cannot view the mere use of purple garments negatively.

Most importantly, purple and scarlet were among the most prominent colors on the curtains of the Israelite tabernacle (Ex 26:1,36; 27:16), and items used in sacrificial ritual (Num 14:3; 19:6). The same colors are prominent in the Israelite temple as well (2 Chr. 2:7). Most intriguingly, “the LXX usually describes the high priest’s garments as also adorned with ‘gold, purple, scarlet, linen, and [precious] stones,’ [Ex. 25:3-7; 28:5-9; 28:15-20; 35:6; 36:9-12; 36:15-21] the identical combination of word’s used to describe the Babylonian harlot’s attire in Rev 17:4 and 18:16.”<sup>5</sup> Yahweh Himself elected that those colors should be prominent in His cult, precisely because of their cost and beauty. Accordingly, there is nothing

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4. Smith, Uriah. *The Prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald), 708.

5. Beale, G. K., *The Book of Revelation*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 857.

wrong with using them on the vestments of religious leaders and in places of worship.

b. Catholic Uses of the Colors

No doubt, colors akin to purple and scarlet are prominent in Catholic vesture. Roman Catholics use purple as a liturgical color only ten weeks of the year, during the fasting seasons of advent and lent (as a symbol of mourning and repentance).<sup>6</sup> However, green is the most common Catholic liturgical color. It, along with white, are used the other 42 weeks of the year, with rose, blue, red, and black appearing on occasion.<sup>7</sup> Eastern Catholics use a similar, but distinct palette of colors, placing greater emphasis on gold. As for daily attire, popes wear white today, cardinals wear liturgical purple (a red color, used by Roman and Byzantine royalty), bishops wear violet, Monsignors wear purple and black, and priests typically wear black.<sup>8</sup> Members of religious order may variously wear white, brown, grey, or black, according to the rule they observe.

Since Catholics use and wear a whole spectrum of colors, it is disingenuous to point to only two colors among them, and identify them with the prophecy. Nothing about these colors is distinctive of, or universal in, Catholicism; attempts to make this identification fit are necessarily selective.

c. Inconsistent Application

One may also ask: are Adventist ministers careful to avoid the use of purple or scarlet in their own clothes or churches? If the prophecy of Rev 17 fulfilled in the colors literally worn by church leaders, it seems they should be. Also, should Adventists literally wear white as their chief color, since it is the color of the garments of the righteous (Rev 3:4)?<sup>9</sup> Why do Adventists interpret some garments in Revelation more literally than others, except to fit their preconceived ideas?

Adventists interpret elements of this prophecy selectively, to their discredit. In many ways, this mode of interpretation presupposes that the Catholic Church is the woman of Rev 17, and does not actually prove the

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6. Johnson, Kevin Orlin, *Why Do Catholics Do That?* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 182.

7. Johnson, 183.

8. Johnson, 178-83.

9. Or, most ridiculously, should Adventists literally wear the sun, moon, and stars, like the pure church (Rev 12:1), following the contrast between the women of Rev 12 and 17?

same. It draws what connections it *can* between elements of Catholicism and Rev 17, establishing no consistent rules of interpretation.

### Conclusion

The flaws of these three arguments are particularly striking. Their refutation undermines the Adventist identification of “Babylon” with the Catholic Church. Hopefully, the interpreter will reconsider the entire identification, and be prepared to entertain others instead.

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