

THE BODY POLITIC OF GOD, PART II

WHO IS THE WHORE OF BABYLON?

By John Bennison

Note: this is Part II of a 2-Part Commentary that draws on the Book of *Revelation* in the canonical New Testament, and assumes the reader has some familiarity with the text, available here.

Right: *Whore of Babylon & the Seven-headed Beast*,
19th century Russian engraving



PREFACE

When a recent record-breaking twister ripped a large swath of death and destruction through the town of Moore, Oklahoma, some of the survivor's comments in the face of such a catastrophe were utterly predictable. In a region where conservative religious types predominate, when the capricious and indiscriminate acts of nature do their thing, the unshakeable religious belief system of many could be summed up in one man's stoic reply as he emerged from his storm shelter to find all his earthly belongings wiped off the face of the earth.

"The Lord giveth," he quoted from the Jewish scriptures, "and the Lord taketh away." (Job 1:21) Apparently for him – and a whole lot of other viewers of his Youtube phenom that popped up in the wake of the storm -- the fourth person of the Trinity is Mother Nature. Either that, or at least the common assumption – without rational explanation – is that whoever or whatever God is, He's powerful enough to create and disburse deadly tornadoes at will.

For others who may be reluctant to equate anomalous weather phenomena with deliberate (and ultimately inexplicable) providential design or some inscrutable mystery we're not to question for some reason, the devastation wrought by the tornado might still have appeared to the locals to resemble something akin to the end of the world. Add this disaster to earthquake, fire, pestilence, plague and flood, and one could readily think they were witnessing the end of the world and apocalyptic struggle depicted in the biblical book of *Revelation*; seeking to make sense out of that which seems to make no sense, but with the assurance the righteous will somehow triumph in the end.

But again, how exactly will God, once and for all, set things right? When will the "sorrow and weeping be no more," and the "tear wiped from every eye?" (Rev.21:4)

"In God's own good time," is the usual cop out. After reinterpreting over and over again the signs of the times in *Revelation's* spectacular tale, the imminent end which that writer's fantastic dream foretold has been repeatedly put on indefinite hold. But then it merely begs the question, why the postponement?

How exactly will God, once and for all, set things right? When will the "sorrow and weeping be no more," and the "tear wiped from every eye?" After reinterpreting over and over again the imminent end that has been repeatedly put on indefinite hold, it merely begs the question, why the postponement?

In Part I of this two-part commentary it was noted how often succeeding generations in human history have turned to this allegorical tale, in order to interpret the signs of the times and reassign the player's parts; all in an effort to find hope and meaning nonetheless in such difficulties. But as a piece of *political* commentary, John's thinly-veiled critique of the Empire's evil ways and their eventual doom at the hand of divine judgment and vindication for God's righteous ones, it leaves one to ask in each successive age who is the "Whore of Babylon?" (Rev. 17:1-2) Who is the anti-Christ? Who is the one who tramples on the innocent ones and perverts God's ways?

FIRST, THE NATURE OF “REVELATION,”
VERSUS THE *BOOK OF REVELATION*

What is a “revelation?” What do we mean by the term? Try this out for a working definition: It is an *encounter* that may occur when the *search* for meaning and understanding is *met* by the gift of a sense of meaning and new understanding.

What is it that is revealed? Whatever it is, is it something new that jolts us out of where we are, and propels us forward? Or is it only a convenient reinterpretation of the same old story; with nothing more than a change of names, times and places?

Presumably, a revelatory moment is something that comes to someone from outside one’s own conjuring. More so, it results from an encounter that alters the way in which one subsequently views the world. Consequently it can challenge us, and threaten to change our way of thinking. It can upturn one’s conventional way of seeing things and subvert our predispositions, prejudices and inclinations. More important, it may even lead to a change of heart. And its *authority* is precisely in the fact that it is not simply a self-propelled reaffirmation of how we have conveniently arranged our understanding of our world. That isn’t such a bad thing, since our limited understanding of things – let’s be honest here – hasn’t really worked out as well as we might have hoped.

So, each revelatory experience requires us to move out of our settled convictions of -- or even resignations to -- the way things are, to a less comfortable acknowledgment that something new, something else, something more profound may be required of us. And furthermore, it is something that is equally true when it comes to both our *political* perspectives and *religious* points of view. In a word, one might say such a revelatory event is an encounter with the “body politic of God.”

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But this is not the way revelatory authority is often claimed. As was pointed out in the first part of this two-part commentary, John’s *Revelation* was not only one of any number of such writings that claimed to have gotten *the* truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth directly from God. It was also his reassertion of his thinly veiled critique and indictment of what he clearly regarded to be the political foe of God’s holy people. It was the Roman Empire, disguised as the whore of Babylon (Rev. 17-18).

As such, the *Book of Revelation* as *political rhetoric* can certainly be understood to be a thinly-veiled allegorical tale in which the cast of characters can readily be assigned roles; based on John’s reading into his own particular chapter of human history who the good guys are, who are the bad guys, who will be judged and condemned, and who will be vindicated and saved in the end.

The story in John’s *Revelation* is in many ways simply a repeat of the Jewish prophetic tradition; where the oppressed but righteous people of God prevail when God’s redeemed ultimately triumph in some future time beyond time over the forces of evil and enemies of God; whoever those evil enemies are understood to be at any given time. But for ancient Israel in each successive epoch it was tribal warfare *redux*; from the Canaanites, to the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and finally the Romans in John’s time.

One might then ask how simply placing a risen Jesus figure on a white horse with a sword in his hand -- as John’s dream envisions his own remake of this cosmic drama -- reveals anything *new*? Except, of course, the subsequent claim that it’s *Jesus* this time, once and for all. And not only Jesus, but the “orthodox” Jesus whom the institutionalized Church would subsequently reformulate through creedal doctrine, in order to expeditiously assume the task of judging who would be saved or cast out.

In the process, much of the life and teachings of the Galilean sage would be cast with those “left behind;” as imperial rule and ecclesiastical hierarchy were joined at the hip for their mutual benefit. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves.

John’s *Revelation* clearly expresses his belief that evil powers have taken over the world; and that such evil powers must be confronted by someone, or something more powerful. Such an assessment comes first in the form of judgment; deciding who is guilty of such evil, and corruption, and wanton disregard for what others still hope for in terms of what should instead order our common (political) life: justice with mercy, charity and compassion. But more often than not, such justice has more to do with judgment and the endless cycle of retribution and retaliation, under the guise of vindication.

John’s fantastic dream (or nightmare) is a spectacle to behold, with a cast of literally thousands. One can scarcely keep track of all the characters, let alone the complex plotline. Let’s see, there are: *seven churches, four horsemen, seven seals, seven angels with seven trumpets, two witnesses, one dragon, two beasts, one lamb, 144,000 redeemed (12 tribes with 12,000 MEN per tribe), seven pages, seven bowls, one seductive whore, seven kings, one messiah on a white horse, one guy named 666 just to make it even more confusing, one doomed Satan, one old heaven & earth, one new heaven & earth, one river of life, one tree of life, one book of life, one list of the dead who are damned to one lake of fire, one multitude of the redeemed, a 1,000 years that are supposed to feel like forever ... and a partridge in a pear tree.*

All in all, his remake of the ancient battle of good and evil wages war on two fronts, in heaven and on earth, and with countless characters. But again, what exactly is so *revelatory* about John’s *Revelation*?

TRIBAL WARFARE

*So now as I'm leavin' I 'm weary as Hell
The confusion I'm feelin' Ain't no tongue can tell
The words fill my head And fall to the floor
If God's on our side He'll stop the next war.*

Bob Dylan, *With God on Our Side*, 1963

When I was a boarding school student in the sixties I was learning to imitate our generation’s troubadours singing their political protest songs. Along with Dylan’s *The Times They Are a’Changin* was *With God on Our Side*. The full lyrics to that song chronicled the armed conflicts of our relatively young nation. In each instance, the songwriter’s refrain returned to our claim we had God on our side. While it has been a part of America’s self-perception of its manifest destiny from the start – and Dylan’s song was written a half century ago -- I’d suggest our armed conflicts with the same underlying religious claims have continued unabated.

The year is now 2013 CE, and as I wrote the first draft of this commentary a few days ago it was Memorial Day weekend. The holiday observance goes back to the years following America’s own civil war, when the moral questions over the evils of slavery versus its presumed economic necessity divided a nation; and countrymen turned on each other to kill in battles as horrific as any in recorded human history.

Since then, our own nation has engaged in wars waged upon -- and in response to -- other alleged or legitimate manifestations of evil opponents in succeeding generations; including the Spanish American war, two “world wars,” the Korean and Vietnam conflicts, Desert Storm, Iraq and Afghanistan, and that euphemism simply dubbed the War on Terror against a constantly shifting “axis of evil.”

We’ve learned to live in a world of endless, continuous conflict; to the extent our society simultaneously suffers from battle fatigue and PTSD. The antidote seems to be to not only worry instead about maintaining our military superiority at all cost, but salvaging our economic place at the top of the heap as well. Now the latest moral challenge to the American empire’s use of military and economic force in the world is telling in its own play on words. Our unceasing conflicts that merely racks up more memorials to dead soldiers simply seems to *drone* on and on.

Like Israel's prophets before him, John of Patmos had interpreted the forces of evil to be embodied in foreign oppressors and economic oppression. As a result, messianic hope for him would come in the form of a warrior king who would come and defeat such evil forces, and lead those faithful followers who bore their allegiance – despite such great and obvious suffering – to ultimate victory. How would this be possible?

Despite the historical fact the foreign oppressor (Rome) had executed Jesus, John envisions Jesus has somehow escaped death in some form or fashion, to return victorious. For John, his coded political language against the empire and his theological assertion of the Jesus' messiahship are inseparable.

John doesn't use such language as *Body of Christ*. But equally for him, to be numbered among those who have "washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb," is to be a part of the *body politic of God*. (Rev.7:14)

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Consider an extended quote from Pagel's book, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecies & Politics in the Book of Revelation*:

"John's Book of Revelation, then, vividly evokes the horror of the Jewish war against Rome. John's visions and monsters are meant to embody actual beings and events. Why does he cloak the actual situations and persons in such elaborate and elusive images? John wants to do more than tell what happens; he wants to show what such events mean. He wants to speak to the urgent question people have asked throughout human history, wherever they first imagined divine justice: how long will evil prevail, and when will justice be done?"

Because John offers his Revelation in the language of dreams and nightmares, language that is "multivalent," countless people for thousands of years have been able to see their own conflicts, hopes and fears reflected in his prophecies. ... But to John's dismay, the majority of Jews, and later Jesus' Gentile followers as well, would continue to "follow the beast" and to flirt with "the whore" of Babylon, that is, with Rome and its culture. Realizing this, John decided that he had to fight on two fronts at once: not only against the Romans but also against members of God's people who accommodated them."

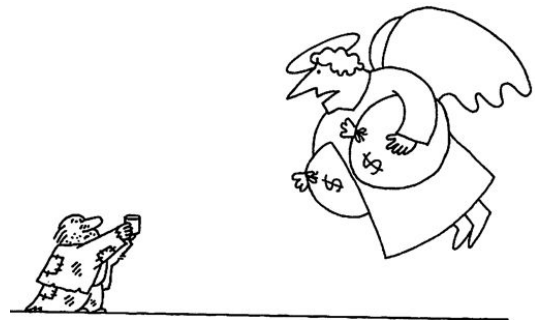
WHO THEN IS THE WHORE OF BABYLON? (AT LEAST FOR US?)

Pagels sums up her work by reasserting how people "have adapted John's visions to changing times, reading their own social, political and religious conflict into the cosmic war he so powerfully evokes."

She adds however, "We need not rehearse the history of religious violence ... to realize how often those who wield power and see themselves standing on God's side against Satan's have sought to force "God's enemies" to submit or be killed. Such apocalyptic fervor, whether engaged in by Christians or Muslims, (for instance) allows no neutral ground between God's kingdom and the lake of fire, and no room for compromise, much less for human – or humane – interaction."

Pagels also provides some telling examples of how throughout religious history the anti-Christ has been enlisted to serve different agendas. Constantine used it to envision his own victory, enlisting the power of his own kind of conversion to Christianity. A thousand years later, the first Lutheran Bible pictured the pope as the whore of Babylon; then a Catholic biographer depicted Luther on the frontispiece as the seven-headed beast. During the American Civil War, Lincoln was portrayed being strangled by the great dragon that was the Union; while the Union's marching song became the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, with "the trampling out the vintage, where the grapes of wrath are stored."

In his book, *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus*, Robin Meyers reiterates the view of two biblical scholars, Wes Howard Brook and Anthony Gwyther, who've remarked the "whore of Babylon" represents God's judgment on "all human attempts to displace god from the center of reality in favor of human power arrangements." Meyers then invites us to meet who he considers the real Whore of Babylon in our age.



O'Byrne
"Sorry, I'm meeting a guy, but you're not the guy."

Having himself heard others describe the anti-Christ in his own age as just about everything from the Catholic Church, to the Soviet Union, to secular humanism and now radical Islam, Meyers has determined the true whore of Babylon for *us* is *greed*. "She is not merely someone's chosen enemy of the moment," he says, "but the eternal enemy of the human race in this and every age. Greed is the destroyer of worlds."

Does he have a point? Is what he calls a "society based on private ambition and the myth of rational markets," and a "capitalist system that is by nature immoral," made hypocrites out of any of us who would presume to follow the Galilean peasant sage who *dispossesses himself of all to give all to all*; and then have the audacity to claim that *that* is the only way to find (or *save*, or *fulfill*) one's life? The gross disparity between the have's and the have-nots has become so great a chasm it is as if the redeemed beggar Lazarus cannot reach far enough across the gulch that separates us from our better selves. (Luke 16:14-31)

Who would presume to follow the Galilean who dispossesses himself of all to give all to all; and then have the audacity to claim that that is the only way to find one's self? The gross disparity between the haves and the have-nots has become so great a chasm it is as if the redeemed beggar Lazarus cannot reach far enough across the gulch that separates us from our better selves.

Millions of children live in poverty in the richest country in the world; while well-to-do moms try to do their part by hiring the disabled to pose as family members to shorten the waiting time for their kids standing in line at Disneyland (true story).

Politicians who are hell bent on reducing the deficit by cutting assistance programs, fund our military ventures without hesitation. Then they insist private business will be *dis-incentivized* to hire more people if they are oppressed with increased taxes, collective bargaining, or regulations and restrictions on those who have bankrupted our economy and tossed its citizens into a deep recession. Why is that? What is that "incentive" that is so much a part of our very human inclinations, but that no politician would dare utter by its other name?

Meyers may have a point. One might say it is certainly a political opinion. But is there an ethical – and even religious -- imperative there, as well? If one doesn't care for a term like *the body politic of God*, one could simply reconsider one of the central biblical narratives, or the heart of the gospel, or its derivative sometimes loosely referred to as the Christian faith tradition at its best.

If the anti-Christ, that whore of Babylon, is human greed, who is the anti-Whore? What constitutes a Jesus ethic that might save us all?

We know the Church's own self-interest would soon find itself ill equipped to resist the beguiling allure of Babylon. In John's own vision he points the sharp finger of judgment against those who had already succumbed to her seductive powers. Then a few centuries later -- once Constantine took the rag-tag band of persecuted subversives who willingly faced death rather than bow before imperial authority and made them a state-sanctioned, state regulated and subservient religion that solidified his earthly kingdom -- the church's hierarchy would have the claim of authority to define and enforce orthodox belief.

Athanasius would select John's Revelation to be the last word in what became the New Testament canon. Further claims to any new or contrary "revelations" were unnecessary. There was now the authority of the established Church, and the Empire had its back. The Emperor would quell unrest among his unruly subjects by ordering the quarreling bishops to unite behind a standardized statement of Christian belief. Jesus would be elevated to the status of a dying-and-rising savior god who was also a pre-existent co-creator of all that was, is and shall be. But the din of reciting the Nicene Creed in unison would drown out the tongue lashing against church and state that was once so much a part of the life and teachings of the peasant rabbi from Nazareth.

What is the sober lesson to be learned for those who would presume to follow in "the Way?" Certainly politics do indeed make strange bedfellows. But sleep with the whore, and you may find yourself robed in the same finest scarlet silk as well.

For John with his *Revelation*, only those who are washed in the blood of the lamb will end up with robes of dazzling white. But in his own interpretive vision that offers hope for "the healing of the nations," (Rev.22:2) even John seems to not only forget the ragged garment of the peasant rabbi, but his disarming and inclusive ways, his conciliatory words, and stories of grace-filled compassion, as well.

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