

Reprinted from *The Journal: News of the Churches of God*, March 31, 2008. Subscribe for \$28 for one year or \$49 for two years by writing P.O. Box 1020, Big Sandy, Texas 75755.

Ancient events reveal pagan tradition God bitterly opposed

*Mr. Knight is a historian and author residing in Idaho, where his daughter, Jessica, attends a Sabbatarian private school. This article is the first in a series based on his latest book, **Spirit of Antichrist**. His first book was *Primitive Christianity in Crisis*, which THE JOURNAL ran serially in 2004.*

By Alan Knight

CALDWELL, Idaho--The first volume in the *Primitive Christianity in Crisis* series detailed the story of gnostic Christianity.

This was the first great religious apostasy in the church era, and many readers were astounded by how it is mentioned so often in the New Testament.

But now, in the just-released second volume of our series, *Spirit of Antichrist*, we propose another surprising idea, and that is that gnostic Christianity is only part of a much larger story.

In fact, we claim that gnostic Christianity is only a comparatively small part of that larger story, most of which has yet to be told.

A key to prophecy

Two key prophetic passages appear in the New Testament that focus on religious apostasy. Together they form the foundation of our new book, *Spirit of Antichrist*.

In this article in *THE JOURNAL* we look at one of those two passages, Revelation 17.

This chapter is especially significant because it appears to span virtually all of human history. In the process of describing events both past and future, it consistently uses the image of kings and harlots.

At one end of the historical spectrum, Revelation 17 connects harlots and kings with ancient Babylonia (verse 5). This was the first great civilization in human history, shortly after the Genesis creation.

But John, writer of Revelation, also connects the same figures of harlot and king with events in the future, even up to the return of Christ (verses 13-18).

Continuous thread?

This raises an interesting question. Is the apostle John saying a single, continuous thread of religious apostasy runs from the beginning of human history to the time Christ returns? Is it all connected?

If so, that presents us with a special opportunity.

In *Primitive Christianity* we gained a wealth of understanding by examining the historical background to gnostic apostasy in the early church.

Can we do the same thing with Revelation 17 and its repeated references to harlots and kings? What is the historical background that can help us interpret what John means when he refers to harlots and kings? Is John speaking loosely, or are there huge historical implications behind his use of those terms?

The possible existence of one connected story of religious apostasy is significant. If it is true, then understanding exactly what John is talking about affects not only our understanding of apostasy in the present but it becomes a key for understanding prophecy in the end time.

If it's all one connected story, then what happens in the future is a continuation of what has already happened.

Beginning in Babylonia

As we look back to ancient Babylonia, our historical approach immediately begins to pay off.

The primary feature of Babylonian religion is a cult of kingship combined with the cult of a great harlot goddess.

The Babylonians called their most important goddess Inanna. One of her titles was "Sacred Harlot." She also happened to be the patron deity of the city of Babylon.

Could John have been any more accurate in his description of her: the great Babylonian harlot?

In verse 2 John says the kings of that time were sexually involved with the harlot, "with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication."

Not just symbolism

This has led biblical interpreters to all kinds of symbolic explanations. Nevertheless we see a very literal significance to this.

The great harlot Inanna was the personal deity of the king. To qualify to become king, for certain religious reasons too complicated to explain here, he had to marry the harlot.

Today historians have documented the existence of a religious ritual in ancient Babylonia called the "divine marriage."

Sometimes it was performed annually, other times only once at the initial coronation of the king.

The centerpiece of this ritual was a literal act of sexual union between the human king and a priestess playing the role of the harlot Inanna.

During much of its early history, multiple kings governed Babylonia, each ruling over his own local city-state. So, *exactly* as John described in Revelation 17:2, in these early times the kings of the earth (plural) were committing fornication, quite literally, with the harlot goddess Inanna.

Again, could John have been any more accurate in his description?

But why does John single this out as the source of a great apostasy with which we should be concerned? It certainly was immoral. But immorality is everywhere.

What made this so special?

Same but not the same

Scholars often laugh at the Bible, especially its description of events in the ancient Near East after creation.

Much of their scorn springs from the belief that many stories in Genesis were copied from Babylonian mythology.

To be sure, we can find many similarities. Babylonian mythology includes accounts of a great flood amazingly similar to the Genesis story about Noah, and Babylonian mythology even mentions the Garden of Eden.

But the scholars almost universally neglect to mention the stark differences. As it turns out, the Babylonians interpreted these stories exactly opposite from the way the Bible sees them.

For example, the Bible says God brought the Flood because of man's sin. But in many of the Babylonian versions it was not man's fault at all. Instead, those versions blamed the supreme God!

In Babylonian religion the supreme deity is a troubled and selfish entity who does not have man's best interests at heart.

Worst of all, he wants to suppress man by preventing the development of technology and civilization.

So, according to the Babylonians, we must seek refuge in a secondary savior deity who protects us from the abuse and selfishness of the supreme god.

Supreme abuse

That is how they interpreted the Garden of Eden. For them it was a place of peace and harmony, much as depicted in Genesis.

But for the Babylonians that was bad. Specifically they complained that man had no free will, and his lack of free will was just another example of the supreme deity's abuse.

One Babylonian myth portrays how the harlot Inanna overcame the Garden of Eden by insisting on her right to engage in any conduct she chose, whether good or evil.

We could go on and on about how the Babylonians talked about the Tower of Babel and many other biblical stories.

But our space in this article is limited, and they all boil down to the same theme. What Genesis described as bad, the Babylonians portrayed as good, and vice versa.

Babylonian religion was more than just an unbiblical, pagan religion. Scholars universally fail to mention that, in spite of the similarity in their stories, Babylonian religion was consciously and bitterly opposed to the Hebrew God of creation.

Do we begin to see why John singles this situation out as the beginning of a great tradition of opposition to biblical religion?

Genesis 6

From where did all this come? The answer is fascinating.

The short answer is it came from a people called the Sumerians who invaded what today is southern Iraq around 3400 B.C., some five to six centuries after the Genesis creation. The Sumerians came from central Asia, where a primitive tribal religion, called shamanism, was practiced.

Spirit of Antichrist devotes chapters to many of the ideas we present here in just a few sentences because space is limited.

But, again, the short answer is that the Sumerian invaders brought many shaman religious practices and ideas with them. Once installed in ancient Iraq, shaman religion evolved into the Babylonian religious tradition we have just been describing.

Near Eastern legends

For example, shamanism frequently insisted that its tribal priests had to marry a female spirit being as part of their process of becoming shamans. The theology surrounding this explains why the Babylonian king had to marry the harlot goddess in order to rule as king, the very thing John describes in Revelation 17.

But here is the big surprise. The Sumerian invasion of southern Iraq is what Genesis 6 is describing.

This is especially important because scholars love to laugh at Genesis 6. Many of them claim Genesis 6 is based on superstitious Near Eastern legends that somehow got copied into the Bible.

But, to the contrary, historical evidence long pushed aside by scholars proves exactly the opposite.

For example, Genesis 6 talks about the "sons of God" who took "wives for themselves of all that they chose" (verse 2).

The offspring from this were the leaders of that time, "the heroes that were of old, warriors of renown" (verse 4). These were the first line of kings in ancient Iraq.

Babylonian mythology describes exactly the same thing, depicting the early Sumerian kings in ancient Iraq as wantonly grabbing women for themselves. Babylonian mythology also describes these early kings as larger than life, physically huge and powerful men, the same great heroes and warriors described in Genesis 6.

Based on the historical evidence, we can know what happened. After the Genesis creation, early Iraq was populated by simple farmers. When the Sumerians invaded, they quickly dominated the native people and crudely exploited them.

Genesis 6 thus describes the interbreeding of Sumerian invaders with native women and abuse of the native inhabitants.

Why were the invading Sumerians called "sons of God"? Does that phrase mean the sons of God were angels, or does it refer to outrageous, false claims of divinity made by shaman priests who came with the Sumerians?

Born again and again

The role of shamanism in shaping ancient Babylonian religion explains much about what was happening in those ancient times, as well as much of the religious apostasy that survives.

Shamanism, for example, promoted a primitive form of the doctrine of the immortal soul. According to shamanism, humans and animals alike possess a soul composed of spirit. At death the soul goes to live in the spirit world. There it remains until it is reborn back in our world as an infant human or baby animal.

Shaman societies are based on hunting, and hunting, in their view, depends on the passage of animal souls back and forth between our world and the spirit world.

If not enough animal souls are being reborn on our side, then hunting will fail.

So shamanism promoted all kinds of rituals for contacting the other world. By this means they believed they could directly contact the gods in the other world and fix any problems in the interaction between the two worlds.

We find this also reflected in Babylonian religion, and it is mentioned even in the Bible. Remember the story of the Tower of Babel, which the Babylonians claimed reached into the heavens? (Genesis 11:4).

Sons of gods

They did not believe their tower physically reached the heavens. It was all symbolic. Shamanism taught that there is a great spiritual mountain at the center of the earth that connects to the heavens. The Babylonians built pyramids, including the Tower of Babel, as copies of that great mountain.

So Babylonian pyramids are what Genesis 11 is talking about in the story of the Tower of Babel. The Babylonians used them for the same purpose as in ancient shamanism, for contacting the spirit world.

Babylonian priestesses, for example, often spent the night in temples atop these pyramids, where they supposedly engaged the gods in sexual relationships. Certain children born to those priestesses were believed to be fathered by the gods. In other words, they were literally "sons of God."

All of this is important because it directly impacts the practice of religion today.

Is it possible that primitive shaman priests and their teachings about the survival of the soul and its passage back and forth between the material and spirit worlds are the origin of the modern Christian doctrine of the immortal soul?

We will return to that question in a future installment in this series.

A global future

Why does Genesis spend so much time describing these events from the early years of the ancient Near East?

As we research ancient history we begin to understand the answer to that question.

Those ancient events tell the story of the origin of a tradition of pagan religion that was consciously and bitterly opposed to the Hebrew God of creation.

This tradition was destined to affect the entire world. John clearly believed that the twin Babylonian cults of king and harlot would survive to become a great, mainstream religious tradition spread far beyond its original borders.

As John recorded: "The waters that you saw, where the harlot is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages" (Revelation 17:15).

Why was the invasion of ancient Iraq by the Sumerians recorded in Genesis 6?

Why would it *not* be? This is one of the most important events in all of human history.

In the next installment we will investigate how history confirms John's claim that Babylonian religion would become a great, international success.

* * * * *

Spirit of Antichrist is a 465-page paperback volume available from the author at the discount price of \$19 plus \$2.50 postage and handling.

Send check or money order, payable in U.S. funds, to Alan Knight, 2704 Summercrest St., Caldwell, Idaho 83607, U.S.A.