

The Prophetic Riddle of the Seven Kings

Revelation 17:10-11

Introduction: The prophetic riddle of the seven kings has illuded scholars for centuries. The riddle becomes obvious simply by knowing Roman history. Knowing this one riddle will help us put the rest of the Book of Revelation in prospective. Hope you like riddles.

I. "Seven kings" (Rev. 17:10)

A. During the Era of the Martyrs (A.D. 303-313), the Roman Empire literally had 7 emperors living at the same time (the seven headed beast). The seven emperors were Diocletian, Maximian, Galerius, Constantine, Licinius, Maxentius and Daia.

B. Four of these seven emperors were killing Christians at a tremendous pace.

II. "Five have fallen"

A. By the end of the Era of Martyrs, five of the seven emperors were dead which will serve as our historical point of reference in the riddle.

B. Notice the riddle doesn't say the five died. Fallen does not necessarily imply a physical death but it could also imply a spiritual condition (Rev. 2:5, 9:1).

C. When a person dies that has not received remission of sins through baptism (Acts 2:38), he has likewise fallen.

III. "One is"

A. The identity of the one that is would also be among the seven kings. The two surviving emperors after A.D. 313 were Licinius and Constantine.

B. The "one is" what? By contrast to the fallen five, he is not dead. He is also not the only one alive.

C. Historically, he may have been the only one of the seven that was a Christian.

1. The historian Lactantius depicts Licinius as a worshipper of God. When he defeated Daia, "he returned thanks to God, through whose aid he had overcome."¹

¹ Lactantius, Of the Manner in Which the Persecutors Died, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, ed., Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, Vol. 7, Pg. 320.

2. He co-authored the Edict of Milan that banished the persecution of Christians. In the edict it reads, “Thus the supreme Divinity, to whose worship we freely devote ourselves, might continue to vouchsafe His favour and beneficence to us.”²

3. Licinius’ wife was considered a devout Christian.

IV. “The other has not yet come”

A. Assuming the “one is” a Christian then the other had not yet become a Christian.

B. Constantine was literally baptized just days before his death in A.D. 337.

V. “And when he comes, he must continue a short time”

A. A literal translation reads, “The five fell, the one is, the other not yet came, and whenever he comes a little [while] him it behoves to remain.”³

B. In the original Greek, there is an urgency that Constantine (being the other) remain a Christian for a longer duration than He has been given to remain on the earth. It behooves him or it is in his best interest to remain alive but he purposely waited to be baptized wishing to remove his sins just before his death. He died a few days after his baptism.

C. Why does it behoove him to remain? The reason is simple. Constantine set up a false system of religious practice. Repentance at baptism would require him to denounce the Roman Catholic Church that he started (Lk. 3:3; Acts 2:38). However, Constantine did not repent of his sins, but he did get wet.

VI. The next verse (Rev. 17:11)

A. The verse identifies “the other” (the present subject) as the beast.

B. “The beast that was, and is not” mirrors the language in Rev. 17:8a.

C. The beast that was, meaning he died, and is not, meaning he is not on the earth, will ascend out of torment and end up in Hell for all eternity. (Chronologically, by chapter 17, Constantine is already dead.)

D. This verse says the beast is also the eighth. Constantine succeeded the seven emperors to become the sole emperor of the Roman Empire.

E. Notice he was also one of the seven emperors during the Era of Martyrs!

F. Constantine also subdued 3 of the 7 kings (Dan. 7:24). Historically, Constantine dethroned Emperor Maximian in A.D. 310, won a civil war against

² Ibid.

³ Alfred Marshall, The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament, Zondervan Publishing House, 1975, pg. 1007.

Emperor Maxentius in A.D. 312 and won a civil war against Emperor Licinius in A.D. 324.

G. The verse says he is also going to perdition! Interestingly, those who knew Constantine marveled when they see him in Torment with them (Rev. 17:8b). After all, they believed Constantine was the savior of the church, ending the persecution and funding his church from the Roman treasury that he called the Universal Church.

VII. Son of Perdition

A. Constantine (the other and the beast) is said to be going to perdition twice in our lesson (Rev. 17:8, 11).

B. The Apostle Paul identifies the son of perdition with a falling away (2 Thess. 2:1-3). Paul is stating that the world would not end until a falling away occurs first and the son of perdition was revealed. Constantine, the son of perdition started a great falling away via the Roman Catholic Church that has lasted until this day!

C. We also now know the identity of the Antichrist that John specifically mentioned (1 John 2:18).

D. Without a proper understanding of the Book of Revelation, we would not know the identity of the Antichrist as the son of perdition.

VIII. Lessons to take away

A. Barring any other interpretation that better explains this prophetic riddle (which hasn't occurred in 1900 years), we know the Book of Revelation was meant to be quite literally interpreted with an eye toward Roman history.

B. The preterist view is incorrect. The seven kings did not live prior to A.D. 70. This prophetic riddle does not correspond to anything prior to A.D. 70.

C. Catholicism is apostasy founded by the son of perdition (i.e. Constantine the Great). By extension all religions that split from that apostasy would also be apostate (i.e. all denominations).

D. Baptism only saves if you are repentant. Repentance is a continual virtue for a Christian, not a one-time act.

Conclusion: If you were baptized without a thought to correct your sins on an ongoing basis, you are not in any better shape than the son of perdition.