



Revelation - Chapter Seventeen

Summary of Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Seventeen begins with John being shown the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.

When John saw the woman she was seated on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names. The beast had seven heads and ten horns and was arrayed in purple and scarlet. The woman was adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. On her head was written 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations'. This woman was drunk with the blood of the saints.

VII Revelation 17:1-19:10 - Babylon the prostitute

This extended vision elaborates on the fall of Babylon, previously announced by an angel (14:8) and portrayed in the seventh bowl (16:18-19). The city appears as a woman, a prostitute; then an angel explains the meaning of the woman and the beast on which she sits. Finally, a series of voices comment on her fall – from the perspective of heaven, through earthly laments, and again from heaven's viewpoint.

The 'great prostitute' and 'Babylon the great' are synonymous, both depicting the empire of the beast. Many futurists think that Babylon represents a great religious entity, which is not identified more specifically, that will follow and support the Antichrist in the end times.

Historically, many Protestants identified Babylon with the Roman Catholic Church, but that view is not widely held today. Others foresee an actual restoration of ancient Babylon, while still others think this represents some kind of revived Roman Empire or similar political entity.

VII.a Revelation 17:1-18 - The Great Whore and the Beast

Babylon's sumptuous clothing and jewellery signify the allure of prosperity. Her name, 'mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations' (v.5), represents the

lust of godless societies for sensual pleasure and their rejection of all restraints. Her becoming drunk on the blood of the saints, and the beast on which she sits, reveals that, in cultures that defy God, an insidious conspiracy unites the relentless pursuit of wealth and pleasure and the ruthless exercise of political and coercive power.

¹ Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgement of the great whore who is seated on many waters, ² with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk.'

Revelation 17:1-2

I will show you the judgement of the great whore. The angel's language, focusing on the prostitute's punishment, confirms the notion that the vision extends beyond this chapter through to 19:10. Her punishment is not specified until v.16, and it then goes on to occupy Chapter 18, and concluding at 19:10. The prophet had issued a warning to another city kingdom that had opposed God: *<<At the end of seventy years, the Lord will visit Tyre, and she will return to her trade, and will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth>>* (Isaiah 23:17).

Many waters symbolises the many peoples and nations over which Babylon rules (v.15 and v.18). The contrast between the prostitute and the Lamb's bride is emphasised by similarities in the way they are introduced. In both cases, one of the seven angels with the seven bowls tells John: Come, I will show you, and then carries him away in the Spirit (21:9-10).

With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk. This universal apostasy does not affect just one class of people. This unfaithfulness is from the very rich and powerful, i.e. kings, to the very poor. The same way a drunken person naturally has no earthly idea what he is doing, this apostate group is so carried away with the world that they, too, do not realise the terribleness of what they are doing. God will judge this idolatrous church. Judgment begins at the house of God.

Fornication or sexual immorality and spiritual infidelity are interlinked; in Scripture the former often symbolises the latter, refer to Ezekiel 16:15-43 and Revelation 2:20-23. Babylon's wanton beauty seduces and intoxicates both heart and body.

³ So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns.

Revelation 17:3

Carried me away in the Spirit. John was transported by the Holy Spirit in a prophetic vision, as was Ezekiel: *<<Then the spirit lifted me up, and as the glory of the Lord rose from its place, I heard behind me the sound of loud*

rumbling>> (Ezekiel 3:12), and: <<*The spirit lifted me up and brought me in a vision by the spirit of God into Chaldea, to the exiles. Then the vision that I had seen left me*>> (Ezekiel 11:24). The apostle states that all prophecy is a move of the Holy Spirit: <<*First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God*>> (2 Peter 1:20-21), and John later confirms that: <<*the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy*>> (19:10b).

The wilderness is a place of spiritual protection (12:6 and 12:14), but also physical deprivation: <<*The troops are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness*>> (2 Samuel 17:29b), <<*Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished*>> (Matthew 4:1-2). There John could see through Babylon's surface beauty to her underlying ugliness. The beast of Chapter 13 is now a scarlet beast on which the woman was sitting. The woman is here the main focus and some understand the beast here to be the Antichrist, who both supports and rules Babylon.

Why the beast had seven heads and ten horns will be explained by the angel from v.8 onwards. In 13:6 it was revealed that: <<*It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven*>>; now it is shown to be full of blasphemous names.

⁴ The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; ⁵ and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations.'

Revelation 17:4-5

Both prostitute and bride are adorned in gold, jewels, pearls and fine linen. Babylon's apparel is opulent purple and scarlet, while the bride's is bright, pure white. As the beast portrays the state's power to coerce religious conformity through violence, so the prostitute symbolises the seductive appeal of a worldly economic system driven by the quest of affluence and pleasure (18:11-19). The disgusting brew that brims from her golden cup drives her lovers insane: <<*Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord's hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine, and so the nations went mad*>> (Jeremiah 51:7).

Purple and scarlet were colours the predominated in the design of the tabernacle, e.g. <<*You shall make a screen for the entrance of the tent, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, embroidered with needlework*>> (Exodus 26:36), and in the priest's clothing: <<*They shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, skilfully worked*>> (Exodus 28:6). They were symbolic of royal attire: <<*Then Mordecai went out from the presence of the king, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple, while the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced*>> (Esther 8:15), and it was in such robes that Jesus was mocked as a king: <<*And they clothed him in a*

purple cloak; and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on him>> (Mark 15:17).

The woman is a picture of wealth, extravagance, luxury and ease. John's attention is intently focused on this woman, and he identifies her by the name written on her forehead: Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations. She is called the mother of whores probably because she has led other cities, kings and their kingdoms into open rebellion against God.

^{6a} And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.

Revelation 17:6a

The woman was drunk with the blood of the saints. Pleasure-addicted society conspires with the power-addicted state to silence the testimony of the witnesses to Jesus by putting them to death (13:15-17).

^{6b} When I saw her, I was greatly amazed. ⁷ But the angel said to me, 'Why are you so amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her.

Revelation 17:6b-7

When I saw her, I was greatly amazed. John rarely describes his emotions in Revelation. He collapsed at the feet of the figure who appeared to him in 1:17 and began to weep bitterly when no one was found worthy to open the scroll (5:4-5), but here he cannot help but be astounded by the sight of the great apostasy that he is witnessing. Once again, however, John's anxieties are calmed for the angel goes on to say: Why are you so amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. In vv.7-18, the angel interprets the mystery portrayed in the prostitute and the beast.

What probably amazed John was also the fact that he would have expected to see Babylon in ruins. To see it symbolically restored to great power and influence would have made him realise just how much opposition there still was in the world to the Gospel message.

⁸ The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

Revelation 17:8

The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is to come; it had received a mortal wound yet came back to life (13:12-14). Although John's focus had been on the woman, for he was perhaps being drawn under her spell momentarily, the angel draws his attention back to the beast that supports her. This is a parody with Christ's designation of the one who was and is and is to come, but when applied in this way to the beast it shows his aspirations to be quite ridiculous. The Lord God

Almighty is from eternity to eternity, while the beast moves from being to nonbeing to being again, and finally goes to its destruction. God is the one who deserves astonishment, admiration and worship. However, foolish people will be astonished when they see the beast not although, but because he once was, now is not, and yet will come.

The prediction that the beast is about to ascend from the bottomless pit (11:7), and go to destruction means that its present power to persecute Christians is inhibited, and that its future appearance in unprecedented violence will be short-lived (19:19-21 and 20:7-10). When Jesus encountered a demon possessed man in the Region of the Gerasenes the demons were fearful of being returned to the bottomless pit: *<<They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss>>* (Luke 8:31). Even demons do not want to dwell in the domain of the beast and his closest associates!

The inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast. This is a clear reference to those who have chosen not to accept God's free gift of eternal life: *<<For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life>>* (John 3:16). It also indicates an element of predestination: *<<For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified>>* (Romans 8:29-30).

Words like foreknew and predestined seem to contradict the idea of humans having free will to choose God and then how to live their lives for God, yet with some element of their own input. I personally believe that God has given us free will to make choices, right or wrong, and then live with the consequences. God, of course, has a plan for our lives but he can also accommodate the choices we make. To understand this we need to try to think of it from God's perspective, which for humans is impossible of course. Unlike humans, God is not bound by any of the dimensional constraints; especially time. We tend to think in terms of time as the past, present and future; then perhaps on into eternity - a long time. But try to imagine that eternity is not a long time but just an instant. As God is outside of time he sees everything in that instant. Therefore, he knows what choices we make long before we make them and therefore it can be said that he foreknew them and chose us from the foundation of the world based on this knowledge.

This beast is by no means laughable and the note of ridicule is tempered with fear. The beast recalls that mythical monster, sometimes named Rahab and sometimes Leviathan, mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, that had reared up against God in primeval times and been subdued by him, and would do it again with the same result. Like the dragon or ancient serpent of 12:9, the beast is described as a figure out of the remote past that comes back to haunt the future. Yet ultimately it is doomed to destruction. Such archetypal figures may inhabit the subconscious memory or imagination, of individuals and as communities, and may therefore again conjure up some of the same fears they held for John's original readers.

⁹ 'This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings,
¹⁰ of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain for only a little while. ¹¹ As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction.

Revelation 17:9-11

This calls for a mind that has wisdom. As with 13:18, the believer's responsibility is not to know everything in advance, but to be faithful no matter whether the threat to faith comes from the final antichrist figure itself or from one of its many predecessors.

Rome, which many held to be Babylon, for in John's day she <<*rules over the kings of the earth*>> (v.18), rests on seven mountains or seven hills. In prophetic imagery, mountains symbolise the seat of power: <<*I will repay Babylon and all the inhabitants of Chaldea before your very eyes for all the wrong that they have done in Zion, says the Lord. I am against you, O destroying mountain, says the Lord, that destroys the whole earth; I will stretch out my hand against you, and roll you down from the crags, and make you a burned-out mountain*>> (Jeremiah 51:24-25), and: <<*Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, were all broken in pieces and became like the chaff of the summer threshing-floors; and the wind carried them away, so that not a trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the statue became a great mountain and filled the whole earth*>> (Daniel 2:35). Peter referred to Rome as Babylon in the conclusion to his first epistle: <<*Your sister church in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark*>> (1 Peter 5:13).



The Seven Hills of Ancient Rome

The beast's seven heads, symbolising both mountains and kings, show its power over earth-dwellers whose names are not in the book of life. Efforts to identify in history the five fallen kings or kingdoms, the sixth current king, i.e. one is living, a seventh future king, who would reign briefly, that is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain for only a little while; and the eighth that belongs to the seven, have yielded conflicting conclusions. Proposals have included several Roman emperors, several world empires, or simply numerical symbols standing for all worldly kingdoms that culminate in the beast. Even if they cannot be identified specifically, these details send the message that, although the dragon and beast's final assault has not yet begun, their **<<time is short>>** (12:12), for the beast goes to destruction.

It is true that, from the late 1st Century on, the popular Nero Redivivus superstition held that Nero would return after his death to take power again. In identifying one of the beast's heads as an eighth king who nevertheless belongs to the seven, the angel probably alludes to that superstition. He does so not to endorse it as true, but to make the point that the only figure from remembered history to whom the beast might be compared in its cruelty to the people of God was the ill-fated Nero. The point is not that the eighth king is actually Nero Redivivus, but that he is like Nero in his character and destiny.

¹² And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. ¹³ These are united in yielding their power and authority to the beast; ¹⁴ they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.'

Revelation 17:12-14

The beast's ten horns symbolise ten kings not yet in power and destined to reign merely for one hour, under the beast's control. These ten probably represent all of the earth's kings and not just ten specific kings or nations, who will be deceived and gathered by the dragon and the beast for a momentary, final, futile insurrection against the Lamb and an assault on his called and chosen and faithful followers.

The word kingdom is here defined by the phrase authority as kings. At the time John wrote, the ten were not yet kings because they had not yet received kingly authority. Like the seventh and eighth kings, they belong to the future, and they too will hold sway for an unspecified time, represented by the phrase one hour. These kings seem to have just one purpose. Instead of receiving their authority from the beast, as may have been assumed, they are united in yielding their power and authority to the beast.

They will make war on the Lamb. Unlike the seven kings of vv.9-11, the ten kings represented by the beast's ten horns are not a temporal series. They seem to be a confederation or alliance, probably the same alliance identified earlier as **<<the kings from the east>>** (16:12), or **<<the kings of the whole world>>**, gathered for battle at Harmagedon (16:14-16). Harmagedon, in fact, seems to be in view in the angel's pronouncement that these kings will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them just as he had told his disciples: **<<I have said this**

to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!>> (John 16:33). It should be noted that will conquer is singular indicating that the victory belongs to Christ and not his followers, i.e. those with him.

John will see the Lamb as the Word of God, Lord of lords, and King of kings, riding into triumph over the beast and its co-conspirators (19:11-21). Paul, too, used this designation for Jesus: *<<In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will bring about at the right time – he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords>>* (1 Timothy 6:13-15).

Some dispensationalists identify these ten horns with political entities represented by the ten toes of the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream: *<<As you saw the feet and toes partly of potter's clay and partly of iron, it shall be a divided kingdom; but some of the strength of iron shall be in it, as you saw the iron mixed with the clay. As the toes of the feet were part iron and part clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle>>* (Daniel 2:41-42), and the ten horns on the fourth beast that Daniel saw rising from the sea: *<<After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns>>* (Daniel 7:7).

¹⁵ And he said to me, 'The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.'

Revelation 17:15

The angel's account of the ten kings and their ill-advised alliance with the beast is interrupted by an abrupt mention of the many waters where the whore is seated (v.1). These waters, the angel tells John, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. This is another step toward interpreting the woman herself, just in case John missed the reference to the seven hills. The many waters identified her at first as ancient Babylon: *<<You who live by mighty waters, rich in treasures, your end has come, the thread of your life is cut>>* (Jeremiah 51:13), but the angel now reveals that they are only a metaphor. The woman is not an ancient city literally built beside many waters or canals, but a city of John's own time with many tributaries, that is, with many nations and races of people accountable to it politically, culturally and economically. The identification becomes explicit in v.18.

¹⁶ And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. ¹⁷ For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled.

Revelation 17:16-17

The ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore. The satanic alliance of prostitute and beast will disintegrate, and military power will ravage the economic system it once supported. When the beast and its allies strip the prostitute naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, they will imitate the judgment pronounced by God on Israel, his unfaithful bride: <<*I will deliver you into their hands, and they shall throw down your platform and break down your lofty places; they shall strip you of your clothes and take your beautiful objects and leave you naked and bare. They shall bring up a mob against you, and they shall stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords. They shall burn your houses and execute judgements on you in the sight of many women; I will stop you from playing the whore, and you shall also make no more payments*>> (Ezekiel 16:39-41).

For God has put it into their hearts is something that he does to those who are faithful to him, e.g. <<*But thanks be to God who put in the heart of Titus the same eagerness for you that I myself have*>> (2 Corinthians 8:16), as well as to those who oppose him, as here, where God sovereignly uses even his enemies to carry out his purpose and fulfil his words, both for the salvation of his own people: <<*You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law*>> (Acts 2:22-23), and: <<*When they heard it, they raised their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.” For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place*>> (Acts 4:24-28); and for the destruction of the enemies themselves.

¹⁸ The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.’

Revelation 17:18

The woman you saw is the great city is now formally identified with Rome in John’s day. By this time the identification is unnecessary, for every reader has figured out who the woman is. It is made explicit only to give immediacy and force to the repeated announcements of the woman’s doom in the next chapter. The clarity of the identification makes it impossible to argue that the book of Revelation is written in a kind of code to hide from Roman officials what the Christians of Asia Minor thought of them. No Roman citizen could read this verse and have any doubt that the prophecy was intended as an oracle against imperial Rome, the great city that rules over the kings of the earth. However, it can also be projected into the future to represent the final domain of the antichrist.