

Revelation - Chapter Seventeen

Chapter summary – Beginning in Revelation 17, John describes the Lamb’s step-by-step victory over “the beast” and his kingdom. In Revelation 17, the religious system is judged; in Revelation 18, the political and economic system fall victim. Finally, the Lord Himself returns to earth; judges Satan, “the beast,” and the false prophet (Rev. 19:19–20); and then establishes His kingdom.

One reason John used symbolism was so that his message would encourage believers in any period of church history. The true church is a pure virgin (Rev. 19:7–8; see also 2 Cor. 11:2), but the false religious system is a “harlot” who has abandoned the truth and prostituted herself for personal gain. In every age, there has been a “harlot” who has persecuted God’s people; and this will culminate in the last days in a worldwide apostate religious system.

Likewise, every age has featured a “Babylon,” a political and economic system that has sought to control people’s minds and destinies. Just as the contrast to the “harlot” is the pure bride, so the contrast to “Babylon” is the City of God, the New Jerusalem, the eternal home prepared for the Lamb’s wife (Rev. 21:9ff). Each generation of believers must keep itself pure from the pollution of both the “harlot” and “Babylon.”¹

Broadly speaking, this section may be subdivided as follows: Chapter 17 describes the nature and tells the history of the great harlot, Babylon. Chapter 18 shows us the inevitable, complete, and irrevocable character of Babylon’s fall. Chapter 19 introduces us to the rejoicings in heaven because of the complete overthrow of Babylon and because of the wedding of the Lamb. It also presents the Author of this victory, the Rider upon the white horse, who triumphs over Babylon, the beast, and the false prophet, and executes final judgment on all His enemies.²

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IV. the vision of the Final Days, (Chs. 6-22)

E. THE BABYLONIAN JUDGMENT - (17:1-18:24)

1. The harlot is described, (17:1-6a) - "A WOMAN TO AVOID AT ALL COSTS!"

1) Her prominence, (1)³

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COMMENTARY:

¹ Benson, *Revelation: The Grand Finale of History*, p. 68

² Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, p. 166

³ Four times in this chapter, the woman is called a “harlot” (Rev. 17:1, 5, 15–16); and her sin is called “fornication” (Rev. 17:2, 4). Her evil influence has extended to the whole world, reaching even into high places (“the kings of the earth”). Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Logos Library System.

 **INTERPRETATION:**⁴



¹ **Then** (after witnessing the completion of God's wrath and thus the end of the 7 year tribulation), **one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came** (over) **and talked with me, saying to me, "Come, I will show you the judgment** (God's punishment), **of**

the great harlot (which symbolizes the Babylonian religious system, [v. 18]), **who sits on** (has a position of influence over), **many waters**, (hordes of peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues [v. 15])

2) Her promiscuity, (2)

 **INTERPRETATION:**

² "**with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication** (religious harlotry by becoming an active member of the religious system), **and the inhabitants of the earth** (the subjects of the kings), **were made drunk** (intoxicated with the doctrines and practices of this religion and were thus rendered incapable of sober judgment), **with the wine** (elements), **of her fornication.**"⁵

F **APPLICATION:**

This is a religion that does not reverence and worship God, but de-thrones Him and lifts up man himself. Man becomes in love with himself rather than His Creator. This is another example of Satan trying to set up a kingdom of his own, above that of God's. We ourselves can do this if we endeavor to live our lives independent of God's Word and will concerning us. Doing what we want to do and having the things we want to have whether they are God's will for us or not.

3) Her predominance, (3)

 **INTERPRETATION:**

³ **So** (after describing the prominence and promiscuity of Babylon), **he carried me away in the Spirit** (probably in John's spirit, in the form of a vision), **into the wilderness**, (desert). **And** (there), **I saw a woman sitting on** (supporting and being supported by),

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⁴ Picture of harlot from Larkin, *The Greatest Book on Dispensational Truth in the World*, p. 112.

⁵ **Babylon city?** Dr. Alan Johnson (Wheaton College) suggests that Babylon city represents all historic expressions of idolatrous civilizations. He sees their characteristics as splendor combined with prosperity and overabundance and luxury (Jer. 51:13; Ezek. 16:13, 49; Rev. 18:3, 7); as self-trust or boastfulness (Isa. 14:12-14; Jer. 50:31; Ezek. 16:15, 50); as power and violence directed against God's people (Jer. 51:35; Ezek. 23:37; Nahum 3:1-3; Rev. 18:10, 24); as oppression and injustice (Isa. 14:4; Ezek. 16:49; 28:18; Rev. 18:5, 20); and as idolatry (Jer. 51:47; Ezek. 16:17, 36; 23:26, 30; Nahum 1:14; Rev. 17:4-5). Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion*, Logos Library System.

a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy

(full of blasphemous titles), **having seven heads and ten horns**, (the political power of the revised Roman Empire—prior to the middle of the tribulation period when the Roman Prince takes over).

4) Her prosperity, (4a)

INTERPRETATION:

⁴ **The woman was** (very wealthy), **arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls** (a striking, appealing and wealthy idolatrous organization),⁶

5) Her perversity, (4b)

INTERPRETATION:

having in her hand a golden cup full (to the brim), **of abominations** (things unlawful and forbidden), **and the** (utter), **filthiness** (foulness), **of her fornication**, (of her idolatrous practices—outwardly she is attractive, inwardly she is loathsome [*like the Pharisees of Jesus' time*]).

6) Her posterity, (5)

INTERPRETATION:

⁵ **And on her forehead a name was written: MYSTERY** (symbolizing a mystical or spiritual element of),⁷ **BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER** (or the source),⁸ **OF HARLOTS** (those who allure, tempt, seduce and draw people away from God, His truth and thus His blessings), **AND** (the source), **OF THE ABOMINATIONS** (foul, detestable idolatries), **OF THE EARTH**.⁹

⁶ Not so long ago, almost all Protestants believed this to be a representation of the church of Rome, as these are its colors, because of its wealth and aggressiveness, and the reference of the seven hills in verse 9.

⁷ **Mystery** (mustrion [*musteprion*]). Either in apposition with *ojnoma* [*onoma*] or as part of the inscription on her forehead. In either case the meaning is the same, that the name Babylon is to be interpreted mystically or spiritually... Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Logos Library System.

⁸ Symbolically, of Babylon, the source from which has proceeded the religious harlotry of mingling pagan rites and doctrines with the Christian faith. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Logos Library System.

⁹ The Bible is full of information about Babylon as the source of false religion, the record beginning with the building of the tower of Babel (Gen. 10-11). The name "Babel" suggests "confusion" (Gen. 11:9). Later the name was applied to the city of Babylon which itself has a long history dating back to as early as 3,000 years before Christ...

Babylon was important not only politically but also religiously. Nimrod, who founded Babylon (Gen. 10:8-12), had a wife known as Semiramis who founded the secret religious rites of the Babylonian mysteries, according to accounts outside the Bible. Semiramis had a son with an alleged miraculous conception who was given the name Tammuz and in effect was a false fulfillment of the promise of the seed of the woman given to Eve (Gen. 3:15).

Various religious practices were observed in connection with this false Babylonian religion, including recognition of the mother and child as God

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F APPLICATION:

God is taking John here, on a long history lesson. If we don't take

and of creating an order of virgins who became religious prostitutes. Tammuz, according to the tradition, was killed by a wild animal and then restored to life, a satanic anticipation and counterfeit of Christ's resurrection. Scripture condemns this false religion repeatedly (Jer. 7:18; 44:17-19, 25; Ezek. 8:14). The worship of Baal is related to the worship of Tammuz.

After the Persians took over Babylon in 539 B.C., they discouraged the continuation of the mystery religions of Babylon. Subsequently the Babylonian cultists moved to Pergamum (or Pergamos) where one of the seven churches of Asia Minor was located (cf. Rev. 2:12-17). Crowns in the shape of a fish head were worn by the chief priests of the Babylonian cult to honor the fish god. The crowns bore the words "Keeper of the Bridge," symbolic of the "bridge" between man and Satan. This handle was adopted by the Roman emperors, who used the Latin title *Pontifex Maximus*, which means "Major Keeper of the Bridge." And the same title was later used by the bishop of Rome. The pope today is often called the *pontiff*, which comes from *pontifex*. When the teachers of the Babylonian mystery religions later moved from Pergamum to Rome, they were influential in paganizing Christianity and were the source of many so-called religious rites which have crept into ritualistic churches. Babylon then is the symbol of apostasy and blasphemous substitution of idol-worship for the worship of God in Christ. In this passage Babylon comes to its final judgment. Walvoord, and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Logos Library System.

time at this juncture to examine the same history lesson, we are going to miss the significance of what God is saying here. (See footnote number 9 for the significance of this verse.)

7) Her persecution, (6)

INTERPRETATION:

⁶ **I saw the woman, drunk** (intoxicated), **with the blood** (the persecution), **of the** (true), **saints and with the blood of the martyrs** (witnesses), **of Jesus. And when I saw her** (understanding all that she represented), **I marveled with great amazement**, (I could hardly believe what I saw).

2. The harlot is destroyed, (17:7-18)

1) The instrument of destruction; the beast, (7-14)

(1) The identification of the beast

INTERPRETATION:

⁷ **But** (as I stood in amazement), **the angel said to me, “Why did you marvel? I will tell you the mystery** (the symbolism), **of the woman and of the** (political), **beast** (the Roman Prince), **that carries her, which has the seven heads** (literally, seven mountains or symbolically, seven major regions of the Roman Empire, or emperors [six of which existed in first Roman Empire, the seventh to come at the time of the Revised Roman Empire, [v. 9]),¹⁰ **and the ten horns**, (ten kings of the Revised Roman Empire, [Dan 2, 7, Rev. 13:1]).

⁸ **“The beast** (of the sea), **that you saw** (rise out of the sea, [Rev. 13:1]), **was** (alive and well, [Rev. 13:2, 5-8]), **and** (all of the sudden), **is not** (when he received his fatal wound, [Rev. 13:3a]), **and** (after that), **will ascend** (rise), **out of the bottomless pit** (Hell itself, [Rev. 13:3b-4, 12, 14]), **and** (in the end will), **go to perdition**, (torment and destruction, [Rev. 19:20; 20:10]). **And those** (unbelievers), **who dwell on the earth will marvel** (will not be able to believe their eyes), **whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world** (and are thus lost in their sin, not having placed saving faith in the work and resurrection of Jesus Christ on their behalf, but rather worshiped the beast—they will be dreadfully astounded), **when they see** (to their horror and total surprise, the ultimate end of), **the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.**

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¹⁰ This could be literal, possibly the seven hills that Rome is built upon; or it could be symbolical of the forms of Roman government. “Certainly in John’s day, the Roman Empire was living in luxury, spreading false religion, polluting the nations with its idolatry and sin, and persecuting the church.” Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Logos Library System.

⁹ (having identified the beast in verses 7-8) **“Here** (now), **is the**

mind which has wisdom (has insight on this matter of the harlot): **The seven heads are seven mountains** (of the Old and Revised Roman Empire), **on which the woman sits**, (is sustained as well as wields her influence).

¹⁰ “**There are also seven kings**, (or emperors). **Five have fallen** (possibly the five Roman Emperors who had fallen at John’s time),¹¹ **one is** (the sixth is ruling in John’s day; Domitian), **and the other** (that is mentioned above), **has not yet come**, (the seventh Roman emperor was yet future, i.e., the Roman Prince of the Revised Roman Empire). **And when he comes, he must continue a short time**, (3 ½ years).

F APPLICATION:

This, I believe, demonstrates that the Roman Prince gradually rises to power; obtaining full power at the middle of the tribulation period. I don’t believe that he has this kind of power and authority at the beginning of the seven year tribulation.

(2) The destination of the beast

INTERPRETATION:

¹¹ “**And the beast** (the Roman Prince), **that was, and is not, is himself also** (because of his death and resurrection), **the eighth, and is of the seven, and** (as was mentioned earlier, at the conclusion of his reign), **is going to perdition**, (eternal destruction).

¹² “**The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet** (as they will be 10 kings at the time of the beginning of the Revised Roman Empire), **but** (even then), **they receive authority** (independent power), **for one hour** (for a brief time), **as** (they will become), **kings with the beast**, (i.e., kings subject to the Roman Prince at the middle of the tribulation when he takes sole power of the Revised Roman Kingdom)

¹³ “**These** (kings at that time), **are of one mind** (they no longer think and act independently, but with the same view, intent, consent), **and they will** (willingly), **give their power and authority** (influence and support), **to the beast**.¹²

¹¹ Julius Caesar, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero. Jeremiah with Carlson, *Escape the Coming Night*, p. 176.

Some believe that the 7 kings represent seven forms of Roman government. The five which had fallen were kings, consuls, dictators, decemvirs, and military tribunes. The one that existed in John’s time was imperial government. The one to come would be the ten-kingdom confederacy. The eighth a sole dictatorial rule.

Others say the five kings represent five kingdoms, i.e., Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. The seventh would be the Revised Roman Empire. The eighth is a shift from the ten-kingdom confederacy to the sole dictatorial rule.

¹² The ten horns represent the ten kings who will precede the Roman prince (verse 12). They will rise to positions of authority at the beginning of the tribulation. During their administration they will ratify a formal treaty of defense with Israel. Conditions in Europe, however, will make it impossible for these ten kings to govern independently, and so they will collaborate with the Roman prince and give him absolute power (verse 13). At the end of

¹⁴ “**These** (10 kings and the beast), **will make war with** (against, in opposition to), **the Lamb** (the Lord Jesus Christ and His proph-

the tribulation they will all pit their strength against Christ Himself, but He will triumph (verse 14). Benson, *Revelation: The Grand Finale of History*, p. 72

esied program [Dan. 2:44, 45]), **and the Lamb will overcome them** (not vise versa), **for** (the reason being), **He is** (the sovereign), **Lord of** (all), **lords and** (the sovereign), **King of** (all), **kings; and those who are with Him** (the Lamb, those who are under His command), **are called** (not only to salvation, but thus to this spiritual warfare), **chosen** (fitted for it), **and faithful**, (in fighting it).”

F APPLICATION:

God will not only ultimately defeat all evil and every opposition to His power and authority, but all of His children are guaranteed ultimate victory as well over their enemies. The only overcomers will be God and His children. Read Romans eight.

3) The incident of destruction, (15-18)

 INTERPRETATION:

¹⁵ **Then** (after identifying and describing the beast), **he said to me**, **“The waters which you saw** (v. 1), **where the harlot sits** (where she finds her support and exerts her influence), **are** (over the world’s), **peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues**.

¹⁶ **“And the ten horns** (the 10 political leaders), **which you saw on the beast** (the Revised Roman Empire), **these** (leaders), **will hate the harlot** (possibly be cause she rides them, pushes them, prods them and as a result they will), **make her desolate and naked** (they will cast her from their back and strip her of all her wealth and influence), **eat her flesh** (they will consume or destroy her), **and burn her with fire**, (emphasizing the fact that this religious system will be completely obliterated—The Roman Prince destroys her at the middle of the tribulation when he takes full power and he will replace her with emperor worship. Satan does not like to share anything, thus he is not going to like being pushed or prodded.)

¹⁷ **“For** (the reason this will work out this way is that), **God has put it into** (i.e., directed), **their hearts to fulfill His purpose** (in destroying the harlot), **to be of one mind** (to be equally supportive of her destruction), **and to give** (surrender the power and authority of), **their kingdom to the beast** (the Roman Prince—even worship him), **until** (and only until), **the** (prophetic), **words of God are fulfilled**, (concerning this seven year period of time).

¹⁸ **“And the woman whom you saw** (the harlot sitting on the beast), **is that great city** (Babylon, from its religious standpoint), **which reigns** (exerts her influence), **over the kings of the earth**.”

F APPLICATION:

Who can ever hope to prevail against a God who can even use the most vile people and their most heinous crimes for His good?! How can you fight against someone who oversees your very plans in your attempts to conquer Him! Christ is the King of all kings and the Lord

NOTES:

or all lords; and we are the fool of all fools if we believe we can think

and act independent of Him—to say nothing of forge out our own destiny, (Prov. 16:9). We are but dust, and to dust we shall return; but God can even make something beautiful out of dust if we will yield ourselves to Him rather than fight against Him.

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