

# Living Word Fellowship Church

## An Expository Explanation of Revelation Chapter 17

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### Part II

A. Introduction: This chapter's emphasis is on the destruction of Babylonian. So, we need first to define who Babylon is in Revelation. There may be many evil nations that powerfully operate in our time; here is a good portrayal of how the Lord responds. So, when nations seem to be endlessly doing evil and God is silent, we can learn that the Lord's time is perfect. *"For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last."* (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16; NIV)

B. Background Information:

1. **Babylon** is set before us in these two chapters under two different aspects. In chapter 17, she is identified with the great harlot, a woman who does not appear as such in chapter 18. <sup>[1]</sup>

a) One-eighth of the entire book of Revelation, some fifty verses, is devoted to the subject of judgment upon Babylon (14:8-10; 16:17–19:5). Yet, the interpretation of Babylon in the Apocalypse has given rise to more differing opinions than any other major passage in this book. In the OT, the name *Babylon* originated from *Babel*, which, of course, has always symbolized revolt against God and confusion (Gen 10:8-12; 11:1-9). Babylon was the conqueror of the kingdom of Judah, the theocracy (II Kgs

24;25, etc.) With Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, began the “times of the Gentiles” (Jer 27:1-11; Dan 2:37, 38). Babylon occupies a large place in the prophecies of the nations in the OT (Isa 13; 14; 47; Jer 50; 51).<sup>[2]</sup>

b) 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. One of its famous rulers was Hammurabi (1728–1686 B.C.). After a period of decline, Babylon rose to great heights again under Nebuchadnezzar about 600 years before Christ. Nebuchadnezzar’s reign (605–562 B.C.) and the subsequent history of Babylon is the background of the Book of Daniel.<sup>[3]</sup>

c) 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.<sup>[4]</sup>

d) **17:5.** As “mother” (cf. 2:23) of “harlots” and “abominations” (perhaps idolatries), “Babylon” is pictured as the most terrible of them all. (In the East, where married women generally covered their hair, a “harlot’s forehead” [Jer 3:3; cf. Hos 2:2] might seem an obvious image in this period; of course, everyone in Revelation is identified by his or her forehead or hand anyway [Rev 7:3; 13:16]. Older Greek literature reports the slander that Babylonian women were all required to play the harlot once in life, but it is doubtful that this association was popular in the New Testament period; the imagery comes instead from the Old Testament.)<sup>[5]</sup>

e) Symbolizing Babylon as a “whore” connotes her alluring and seductive nature in attempting to draw people away from Christ. That she “sits” both here and in vv 3, 9, and 15 connotes that she is able to control the multitudes and the beast because of her powerful influence. 18:7 confirms this, since there Babylon is referred to as saying, “I sit as a queen.” At the least, her sitting implies the woman’s alliance with the world and the beast.<sup>[6]</sup>

- Part of the basis of Babylon’s judgment is that the kings of the earth “fornicated” with her, and the nations likewise came under her immoral influence. This implicit logical relationship between v 1 and v 2 is formalized in ch. 18, where

Babylon's judgment (18:2) is based on (ὅτι) her intoxicating and immoral influence over nations and kings (18:3). The kings' and the nations' acquiescence to "fornication" refers not to literal immorality but figuratively to acceptance of the religious and idolatrous demands of the ungodly earthly order. Their compliance is explained by the statement, "all those dwelling on the earth became drunk from the wine *causing [or "leading to" or "resulting in"] intercourse with her*" (τῆς πορνείας, "intercourse," taken as genitive of cause, purpose, or result; so likewise in 14:8). <sup>[7]</sup>

2. Harlot - Although the Old Testament usually reserved the designation "harlot" for God's faithless people (e.g., Lev 17:7; Is 1:21; Jer 3:1–14; Ezek 16, 23; Hos 4:15), it was also appropriately applied to mighty mercantile or military centers. Thus, Isaiah 26:16–18 portrayed Tyre as a harlot who served all the kingdoms of the world; Nineveh as capital of a world empire also was called a harlot and sorceress, who sold nations (into slavery) by both devices (Nah 3:4). (Sorcery and harlotry are also linked in Is 57:3; cf. 2 Kings 9:22.) The false prophetess portrayed earlier in the book appears to be an agent of the system (Rev 2:20). See comment on 18:23. <sup>[8]</sup>

3. That "**many waters**" in v 1 is directly associated with the "desert" in v 3 seems geographically contradictory. But this is symbolic geography. Already in 12:15–16 an overflowing river has appeared in the desert. There and here, persecutors of the church are associated with water because water is metaphorical for evil and for the dwelling place of evil (for the same significance of "sea" see on 4:6; 13:1; 15:2; 21:1). As noted, it is no coincidence that Isa. 21:1 MT, alluded to in 17:3a, begins with "the burden of the desert of the sea" (various LXX mss. have "*vision [ὄραμα] of the desert of the sea*"). <sup>[9]</sup>

∅ The "many waters" have already been seen to be an allusion to Jer. 51:13 (= 28:13 LXX), where they refer to the waters of the Euphrates and the channels and canals surrounding the city of Babylon. These waters helped Babylon flourish economically and provided security against outside attack. The multitudes of humanity that the waters now represent are the basis for Babylon's economic trade and her economic security. <sup>[10]</sup>

Ø The angel now interprets “the waters ... where the harlot sits” as “peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues.” This sort of formula of universality from Daniel (see on 5:9 for references in Daniel) occurs throughout the Apocalypse (also 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6). In Daniel 3–6 the formula is used of the subjects of the Babylonian king (e.g., Dan. 3:2 LXX; 4:37a, b, c LXX; 5:19; 6:26 Theod.). Likewise, here the formula identifies those under the Babylonian harlot’s influence. Isa. 17:12–13 also uses the metaphor of “many waters” for “many nations” (cf. likewise Isa. 8:7; 23:10; Jer. 46:7–9; 47:2; 4QpNah fragments 1 and 2.4; 3.8). <sup>[11]</sup>

#### 4. **There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast (17:3).**

a) The woman holds in her hand a “golden cup ... full of abominations and unclean things of her fornication.” This repeats the metaphor in 14:8 and 17:2, where Babylon makes the nations drunk with her wine. The metaphor symbolizes Babylon’s promise of a prosperous earthly welfare for its willing subjects, which intoxicates them. The intoxicating influence blinds them to Babylon’s evil nature and her ultimate insecurity and deceives them about God as her future judge and as the only true foundation for true prosperity (see on 14:8; 17:2). <sup>[12]</sup>

b) **Verse 5:** The nature of the woman is revealed in greater detail by the name written on her forehead. In the Apocalypse names written on foreheads reveal the true character of people and their ultimate relationship, whether to God (7:3; 14:1; 22:4) or to Satan (13:16; 14:9; 20:4). Likewise, the “name written on the forehead” of the whore reveals her seductive and idolatrous character, which further identifies her as on the side of the beast. <sup>[13]</sup>

5. Rev. 17:3, 7, 9–10 alludes to Daniel 7:4–7, 20, 24 in portraying the “seven heads and ten horns” of the beast. This is striking since Jewish writings also associated the desert with the Daniel 7 beasts. *Sifre* Deut., Piska 313 understood Deut. 8:14–16 to be related to the last days and identified “the great and terrible *wilderness*” with Daniel’s “four kingdoms” and with “evil spirits.” *Midr. Rab.* Lev. 13.5 links the “dreadful wilderness” of Deut. 8:15 with the “dreadful fourth beast” of Dan. 7:7. <sup>[14]</sup>

6. **The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet (17:4).** The woman dressed in bright, expensive clothing and adorned with precious jewels is a stock description of a prostitute in antiquity. God asked wayward Jerusalem: “Why dress yourself in scarlet and put on jewels of gold? ... You adorn yourself in vain. Your lovers despise you” (Jer. 4:30). Purple also signified wealth and nobility in the ancient world. Daniel was awarded the right to wear purple by King Belshazzar (Dan. 5:16, 29). Purple was a color associated with Thyatira (cf. Acts 16:14). A number of inscriptions attest to the presence of a guild of purple dyers in the city. Emperors wore togas entirely of purple. The woman’s purple dress symbolizes her connection to Rome and its political elite.<sup>111</sup>[\[15\]](#)

a) The scarlet color of the beast is probably related to the blood of martyrs with which it was stained (Rev 17:6), or to the ostentation of the wealthy or of prostitutes (cf. Jer 4:30). (The allusion to the red heifer of Num 19 suggested by some commentators would work better if the heifer could be conflated with the scapegoat sent into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement, bearing Israel’s sins—Lev 16; but there is no evidence that such a conflation is in view.) On the blasphemous names see comment on 13:1 and 5–6.[\[16\]](#)

b) True purple and scarlet required expensive dyes and were thus worn only by the wealthy, such as queens (18:7) like Jezebel, or by well-to-do prostitutes, who used purple attire to attract attention. Many ancient moralists reviled the ostentation of wealthy women, but John also intends a contrast between the earthly splendor of Rome, renowned throughout its provinces, and the true splendor of the heavenly woman (12:1) and heaven’s court (4:3–11; comparison of characters was a major feature of ancient speech and writing).[\[17\]](#)

c) Though closely associated with the beast, the woman is not to be equated with the beast. That she rides the beast connotes her alliance with the state. The woman must represent that part of the ungodly world that works together with the state, such as the social, cultural, economic, and religious aspects of the world. In this context the work that they agree to do together is that of persecuting Christians, implied by the “red” color of both (so 17:3b–4) and explicitly stated in ch. 13 and in 17:6; 18:24; and 19:2. They are also mutually involved in deception of ungodly multitudes throughout the earth (e.g., 14:8; 17:2, 8).[\[18\]](#)

**7. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things (17:4).**

First-century Jews well understood the meaning of abominations, for this unusual word (*bdelygma*) had a rich history in second-temple Judaism. Daniel prophesied about an abomination that would be set up and desolate the temple (Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11).<sup>[19]</sup>

**8. This title was written on her forehead (17:5).** The mark of the beast worn by the earth dwellers on their foreheads (cf. 13:16) reflects what the woman herself has on her forehead. The word “mystery” is probably not part of the title, as in the NIV, but rather describes the nature of the name that follows (see 17:7). This is the third and final mystery revealed in the book (cf. 1:20; 10:7). This woman, finally identified as Babylon the Great, is the mother of prostitutes and source of the earth’s idolatrous abominations. Again, she stands in contrast to the woman who bore the male child and the other offspring who followed him (12:13, 17). It is inevitable that the descendants of these two lineages would clash. John sees that this woman for the moment has the upper hand in the struggle, for she is intoxicated not with wine, but with the blood of the saints.<sup>[20]</sup>

**9. The Beast –** The beast is overtly active from chapter 13 all the way to chapter 20 when he meets his final demise (PRAISE THE LORD GOD!!!). Here are the number of passages you can find his activities which exposes how viciously evil he is, powerful and relentless in seeking to carry out his wicked schemes (13:1-8, 11-15, 16-17; 14:9,11; 15:2; 16:2, 10, 13; 17:3, 7-8, 11-13, 16-17; 19:19-20; 20:4, 10).

**10. 17:15–16.** The Roman Empire and its allies would eventually turn on Rome itself—a threat concerning the self-destructiveness and lack of faithfulness of those who pursue evil. The image is from the Old Testament (Jer 4:30; Lam 1:2; Ezek 23:9). The burning derives from Daniel 7:11. Although fire was the standard method for destroying captured cities in antiquity (Amos 1:4), some knowledgeable readers might have remembered the rumor that Nero burned down Rome in A.D. 64 and blamed it on the Christians: Rome thus ought to be wiser than to embrace a new Nero. (The suggestion that Rome was burned like a priest’s daughter guilty of harlotry in the Old Testament [Lev. 21:9] is also worthy of mention, although less likely than the interpretations just given.)<sup>[21]</sup>

### C. Key Words and Apocalyptic Definitions:

1. The desert is also where John witnesses the judgment both of Babylon (17:15–17) and of the beast and his allies (17:13–14). The evil nuance of “desert” is also suggested by the contrast with the Lamb’s bride in 21:9–10, where the “great and high mountain” is associated with heaven, especially because it is from there that John is able to see the divine city descending from heaven itself. <sup>[22]</sup>

2. Indeed, “mystery” has already been used with end-time connotations in 1:20 and 10:7. Both 10:7 and 17:5 overtly refer to the mystery as something that has been prophesied and will be (or is being) fulfilled according to God’s word (cf. 17:17). <sup>[23]</sup>

3. In the conclusion of 17:5 the woman, “Babylon the Great,” is given an additional description: “the mother of the harlots and of the earth’s abominations.” As in v 4, the combination of “abomination” and “harlot” (= one committing fornication) refers to idol worship (see above on 17:4). That the woman here is “mother” of idolaters connotes her authoritative influence over and inspiration of the system of idolatry, which is an integral part of economic involvement (Jer. 27:12 LXX [B] calls Babylon “a mother who bore you for prosperity” and who is judged). “Mother of the harlots” also suggests that she relates to harlots in the same way that the beast relates to his heads and horns (see on 17:9–12). She expresses herself throughout the ages in ungodly economic-religious institutions and facets of culture. <sup>[24]</sup>

4. Thus, “seven mountains” may refer to seven individual kings or kingdoms, and this identification is confirmed by the additional clause “they are seven kings” (for the interchangeability of “kings” and “kingdoms” see Dan. 7:17, 23). The identification is also confirmed by Dan. 7:4–7, where seven is the total number of heads of the four beasts (= kingdoms). Daniel 7 is also the source of the seven heads in Rev. 13:1. That kings who represent kingdoms are thought of is apparent from Dan. 7:17 LXX (“the great beasts are four *kings*”) and 7:23 (“the fourth beast will be a fourth *kingdom*”). <sup>[25]</sup>

5. **17:12.** Ten horns represented ten kings in Daniel 7:24, possibly successors of Alexander the Great's Greco-Macedonian kingdom (although most Jewish people in the Roman era read Daniel's fourth kingdom as Rome). It has been suggested that John reapplies the language for the fourteen Parthian satraps, but it would apply more naturally to Rome's client states in the East (cf. Rev 17:2). [\[26\]](#)

6. The kings' future reign with the beast will last "for one hour" (μίαν ὥραν). The time period echoes Dan. 4:17a (LXX: ὥρα μιᾶ), where it refers to the period during which God caused King Nebuchadnezzar to become like a beast. Here also God is sovereign even over the authority of ungodly kings who ally with the beast to oppose the Messiah (cf. vv 13–14). "One hour" is repeated in ch. 18 as the time in which "Babylon the Great" was judged by God (18:10, 17, 19), which is a combined allusion to the "one hour" of Dan. 4:17a LXX and to "Babylon the Great" in Dan. 4:30(= 27 MT). Likewise, here in Rev. 17:12 the focus of the period is the time during which "Babylon the Great" (v 5) is judged through the divine agents of the kings and the beast (vv 15–17). Here and in Daniel 4 "one hour" may merely refer to a brief period, since ὥρα apparently "was the shortest period of time known to the ancients." [\[27\]](#)

7. **The Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings (17:14).** The allied forces of the beast and the kings take the offensive against the Lamb by crossing the Euphrates and gathering at Armageddon (16:12, 16). However, they cannot prevail against the Lamb "because he is Lord of lords and King of kings." While God is called "God of gods and Lord of lords" in the Old Testament (Deut. 10:17; Dan. 2:47), the singular title "King of kings" does not occur until the intertestamental period (2 Macc. 13:4; 3 Macc. 5:35). Paul is the only other New Testament writer to use this dual title. Mentioning the Parousia, he writes that "God will bring [it] about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15). The allies of the Lamb in this last battle are his followers said to be called, chosen, and faithful. [\[28\]](#)

8. This is the only place in Revelation where believers are described as called and chosen, both familiar designations in the New Testament (cf. Rom. 8:28; Col. 3:12; 2 Tim. 2:10).

Faithfulness, commanded to the Christians in Smyrna about to suffer (Rev. 2:10), is rewarded by association with the Lamb at the end. [\[29\]](#)

9. 17:18. In John's day, no one in the Roman Empire could have doubted that the city that "reigns over kings" meant Rome, any more than anyone would have doubted that the seven hills (17:9) alluded to Rome. [\[30\]](#)

#### D. Conclusion:

God will always protect His own (17:14), and He will judge evil in His time. It is like a bad cold that we can medicate, but it has to run its course.

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