

REVELATION

Chapter 17

The Great Prostitute and the Beast

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, 2 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.” 3 And 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. 4 The woman was arrayed 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 sexual immorality. 5 And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations.” 6 And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. When I saw her, I marveled greatly. 7 But the angel said to me, “Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. 8 The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. 9 This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; 10 they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain 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. 12 And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. 13 These are of one mind, and they hand over 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.” 15 And the angel said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. 16 And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, 17 for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. 18 And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”

17:1–22:5† So far Revelation consists of five clearly defined divisions, each of which has seven parts: seven letters, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven visions, and seven bowls. It is possible to see in the remaining chapters two distinct series of visions: (1) the victory of Christ over antichrist (17:1–19:21); (2) the victory of Christ over Satan (20:1–22:5), followed by a conclusion (22:6–21). (CSB)

At the end of the third vision of events on earth (15:1–16:21), after the seventh censer-angel introduced the last scene, which depicted the End (16:17–21), John receives a vision in which he again sees the end of the present world (17:1–22:5). But this vision of the End does not give another dimension and emphasis, as do the first four scenes of the End. Rather, it is a lengthy vision which summarizes and concludes all that John has seen earlier in the previous four scenes concerning the End. This fifth, lengthy vision of the End draws to a conclusion the entire

prophetic message of Revelation. It does this by means of several scenes, each of which depicts a certain aspect of what will take place at the End. Each of these scenes in turn also brings to a conclusion certain other things that John has seen before, not only in the four earlier scenes of the End, but also what he has seen in other parts of the prophetic message. (CC)

The first thing that John sees in this concluding vision of the end of the present world is the judgment and destruction of the two henchmen of the dragon: the beast and the harlot, which together are called Babylon (17:1–18:24). Then in chapter 19 John receives a beautiful visionary depiction of a celebration, which includes a song of victory (19:1–4), the marriage feast of the Lamb (19:5–10), and the second coming of the Lord Christ (19:11–21). At the return of the Lord Christ and its attendant celebration, there appears a prophetic picture of the judgment and overthrow of the dragon himself—Satan, the mastermind of the beast and the harlot (20:1–10). This judgment of the dragon is presented to John by way of two scenes, that of the millennium, which represents the entire church era, the time between Christ’s first and second advents (20:1–6), and that of Gog and Magog (20:7–10). At the end of chapter 20 John receives a glimpse of the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment of the human race (20:11–15). Last of all, when lifted up by the Spirit, John is led by one of the censer-angels through a glorious picture of the new heaven and new earth, the heavenly city Jerusalem (21:1–22:5). This picture of the new heaven and earth concludes the prophetic message of Revelation. (CC)

17:1–18† The woman on the beast. This vision depicts the power of antichrist or Satan’s earthly agents. (CSB)

17:1 *seven angels*. Cf. 15:1; 16. (CSB)

The seven angels, who had the censers full of the plagues of God, emptied their censers and so introduced the seven scenes of the third and last vision of earthly events (15:1–16:21). One of those angels now invites John to follow him and view “the judgment of the great harlot” (17:1). It is quite fitting that one of these seven angels should show this judgment to John, for, if we are correct in our interpretative identification of them, they are the same angels as the angels of the seven churches, the angels to whom the seven letters are addressed in Revelation 2–3. Throughout the period of time from Christ’s ascension up to his return at the End, the harlot, riding the beast (17:7), is the great enemy of God’s saints on earth. As the angels of the churches were the mediators of the prophetic message of Revelation to the churches (See Rev. 1:4; cf. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14), which mediation they carried out and completed by way of the seven trumpets (8:1–11:19) and the seven censers (15:1–16:21), it is more than fitting that one of them now should show to John the judgment and overthrow of that enemy which had caused the church so much suffering. One of these same angels will also show to John the heavenly Jerusalem, the church finally at rest forever with God in the new heaven and earth (21:9; cf. 22:1, 8–9). (CC)

great prostitute.† See v. 18 for the angel’s own identification of this symbol. In 17:5 the harlot is named “Babylon the Great.” In this chapter she is the apostate church (cf. Isa 1:21; Jer 2:2, 20; Eze 16 and 23). – This is the first time the enemy of the church is called this. (CC p. 435) (CSB)

Later identified with Babylon (v 5), this likely personifies Rome (see note, 14:8). The original audience would have easily associated this great prostitute with the goddess Roma, whose image could be seen throughout the empire. The prostitute works hand in hand with the twin beasts of 13:1–8, 11–18. Note how this iniquitous woman is the counterpart to the righteous woman described in 12:1–6, 13–17. (TL SB)

For the first time the enemy of the church is called “the great harlot” (17:1). In 17:7 she is pictured riding on the beast “which has the seven heads and the ten horns.” The beast which bears the woman is clearly the beast from the sea in 13:1, which also has “ten horns and seven heads.” In 13:11–18 at the dragon’s bidding another beast arises which also plagues the church: the beast from the earth which has “two horns resembling a lamb’s [it imitates Christ], but it was speaking like the dragon [it speaks for Satan]” (13:11). This beast bears the number 666 (13:18). As the prophetic message of Revelation unfolds, this beast from the earth is later identified as “the false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). And now here in Revelation 17 that second beast, which bears the number 666, is further identified as “the great harlot” (17:1). (CC)

On the other hand, the beast from the sea, with the seven heads and ten horns, remains “the beast” throughout Revelation, bearing the same identification and designating symbol. But the beast from the earth, which bears the number 666 (13:18), changes its guise or form of presence from that of a beast which looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon (13:11) to that of a “false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10), and finally to that of a “harlot” (17:1, 5, 15–16; 19:2). (CC)

The first beast, which has the seven heads and ten horns, represents everything of the human sphere (society, government, economics) that the dragon uses in his warfare against the church. That so-called “political beast” does not evolve but remains the same. In contrast, the lamb-like beast, which speaks for the dragon represents every *spiritual* and *religious* entity that the dragon deceitfully uses against the true church of Christ. This so-called “religious beast” evolves and develops until it finally and especially represents false Christianity and the apostate church. Therefore what this second beast represents *changes* from *all* false religions and spirituality in general into the false prophet and the harlot, that is, pseudo-*Christianity* and the false *church*, the most deadly form of the religious beast. (CC)

In Revelation 17, the use of “harlot” to designate the apostate pseudo-church is reminiscent of God’s complaint that his people Israel had become a harlot because of their idolatry in the worship of false gods (e.g., the entire book of Hosea, especially Hos 4:10–15). The fertility religions practiced cultic prostitution and many other forms of sexual immorality as part of their worship. In contrast, Israel’s call to worship the one true God included the call to be pure and faithful sexually as well as spiritually (e.g., Ex 20:14; Leviticus 18; 20:10–24). Unfaithfulness was equated with harlotry and idolatry. Not just the idol-worship of the pagan nations, but especially that of the Israelite people was portrayed as such idolatrous harlotry (E.g., Ps. 106:36–40; Jer. 2–3; Ezek. 6:9; chapters 16; 23; cf. Judg. 2:17; 8:27; 1 Chr. 5:25). For example, in Is 1:21 (cf. Jer 2:20) the prophet in sorrow acknowledges how the people of God, called “the faithful city,” have become “a harlot.” Isaiah details how they demonstrated that they were such a woman by their ungodly living (Is 1:21–23). When comparing Rev 17:1 with 14:8, Victorinus (third century) in his Latin commentary interprets Babylon to be the Antichrist. John will combine these two entities (Babylon and the harlot) as symbolic representatives of the pseudo-church using political power to destroy the true church of Jesus Christ, exemplified in John’s own day by Rome and her empire (see 17:5, 9; 18:2–4, 19–20). It is therefore quite understandable that a harlot now becomes a visual representation of the *false* people of God, that is, those who outwardly appear or claim to be part of the Christian church but are inwardly and spiritually apostate. (CC)

By means of “the harlot” the pseudo-church is presented as an attractive woman (cf. 17:6). She offsets and counters the woman of Revelation 12, who represents the true people of God, also called the bride of the Lamb in 19:7. While the woman who bore the Child (Christ, 12:1–2, 5) is hunted down by the dragon and as a result suffers all manner of persecution and tribulations in the world (12:13–18), in contrast the harlot is honored and courted by the world (17:2, 4; 18:3).

Both women are set forth as representatives of the church of Christ, the harlot falsely so, the persecuted woman truly so. Until God's judgment at the End, the pseudo-church, which appears to be beautiful and attractive (the harlot), will be accepted and honored by the world, for she flatters and encourages the lifestyles of the ungodly. Now she enjoys the acclaim of the world (cf. 18:3, 9–15), but on that final day she will experience destruction and eternal ruin under the judgment of God (cf. 18:1–2, 5–6). On the other hand, the woman who even now is dressed in the glory of God and of her Lord Christ (12:1) is despised and rejected and persecuted by the people of the world under the motivation of the harlot and the beast (cf. 12:13; 13:7, 15–18), for she denounces the world and its lifestyles of unbelief and ungodliness as she witnesses to the only true God and Savior of the world (11:3–10). But in the End she will be claimed and acclaimed by God as the bride of his Son, Jesus Christ (19:6–8; cf. 11:11–12). (CC)

seated on many waters.† See Ps 137:1; Jer 51:13. A reminder that the apostate church may greatly outnumber the “little flock” (Lk 12:32; cf. Rev 17:15 for definition of “many waters”). (CSB)

Literally describes ancient Babylon, which had many canals and the world-famous floating gardens. Later on, however, John identifies these “many waters” with peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages.(TLSB)

The harlot “sits upon many waters” (17:1). Jeremiah's prophecy against Babylon (Jer 51:1–64) makes reference to Babylon as the city which “resides upon many waters” (Jer 51:13, the phrase quoted in Rev 17:1). Ancient Babylon was situated on the Euphrates River and was known as the city of many waters because of the system of canals which carried and distributed the waters of the Euphrates throughout the city and to the surrounding area. According to 17:15 the “waters” symbolize “the peoples and crowds and nations and tongues” over which she holds sway. Now here in Revelation 17 and 18 Babylon upon the “many waters” (17:1) is to be judged by God. (CC)

17:2 kings of the earth – Not just royalty, but rulers and important people of every kind. (TLSB)

The harlot has dominion over the nations. She is described as a harlot, “the mother of harlots” (17:5). The kings of the earth commit adultery with her, and the people under her influence become “drunk from the wine of her immorality” (17:2). The references to adultery and immorality refer to all manner of ungodly and licentious living, which is illustrative of the peoples' idolatrous adherence to the harlot. Examples of the followers of the harlot and of the beast in John's own time would be the nations which had been “enticed into idolatrous worship of [Rome].” But Rome, which was the harlot and Babylon of John's own age, is also the type of all future spiritual powers (especially apostate Christianity) and political powers which would war against the church and her witness to Christ. Again and again, the OT prophets used the imagery of adultery and licentious living to illustrate the idolatry of God's people as they were enticed by the pagan nations surrounding them (E.g., Jer. 7:1-11; 8:4-12; Ezek. 6:9-10; 20:30-32; Hos. 4:12-14; 5:4-5; 9:1). (CC)

committed sexual immorality – Refers not only to inappropriate sexual behavior but also to idolatry and hostility to God. The OT prophets frequently compare pagan cities to harlots (Ezk 16:15–16; Na 3:4) and identify apostasy with sexual misconduct. See note, Ezk 16. *drunk*. Intoxicated with political power, violence, economic clout, pagan religiosity, etc (TLSB)

wine of whose sexual immorality.† Secular rulers support her apostasy, and the unbelieving world cannot think clearly on these matters. (CSB)

The people become “drunk from the wine of her immorality” (17:2; cf. 18:3). In Jer 51:7–8 Babylon is pictured holding such a cup from which the whole earth drank and became intoxicated and as a result was in a stupor of mindlessness. “The kings of the earth” (Rev 17:2) as well as its inhabitants commune with her. They commit adultery and drink from her cup. They are under her influence. How often it happens that when the rulers of nations embrace immorality, their leadership encourages the people all the more in their godlessness, so that little hope remains to reclaim them from their drunken stupor. It is often true that as the rulers go, so go the people under their governance. (CC)

17:3 *in the Spirit*. In a state of spiritual ecstasy. (CSB)

While John is invited by an angel to come and see “the judgment of the great harlot” (17:1), it is by “the Spirit” that he is “carried ... into a desert” (17:3). This is the third time that John is caught up “in the Spirit” (ἐν πνεύματι). In 1:10 John “on the Lord’s day” (ἐν τῇ κυριακῇ ἡμέρᾳ) was “in the Spirit” (ἐν πνεύματι) when the exalted Son of Man appeared in order to commission him to receive and then to send the prophetic message of Revelation to the churches (1:9–11). In 4:2 John was carried “in the Spirit” (ἐν πνεύματι) into heaven to view the throne and presence of God. And now here in 17:3 it is by the Spirit that John in a vision is carried away “into a desert” in order to view and prophetically witness “a woman sitting on a scarlet beast.” One further time John will be carried by the Spirit, when he is shown the heavenly city Jerusalem (ἀπήνεγκεν με ἐν πνεύματι, “he carried me away in the Spirit,” 21:10). Here in 17:3 (as in 4:2 and 21:10) “in the Spirit” (ἐν πνεύματι) suggests that John was empowered by the Spirit of God in some kind of mystical experience so that he not only saw the woman in a desert but was actually “carried” to the place. That is, John entered and experienced the scene he was shown. This was a mystical revelatory experience in the Spirit by which he was lifted up, whether in the body or out of the body (cf. 2 Cor 12:1–4), and brought into the desert to view the woman. Possibly John’s experience was like that of Ezekiel, who was in Babylon when, he says, “the Spirit lifted me up between the earth and heaven and brought me to Jerusalem in visions of God” (Ezek 8:3; see also Ezek 11:24). (CC)

into a wilderness – Here, symbolizes the haunts of the demons. This imagery is the evil counterpart to the “great, high mountain, and ... holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (21:10). (TLSB)

John is brought “into a desert” (εἰς ἔρημον, Rev 17:3). While the harlot in 17:1 is pictured as sitting “upon many waters,” symbolizing the nations of the earth (17:15), here in 17:3 she is sitting on a beast in “a desert.” In 12:6, 14 the woman, after the birth of her Child, “fled into the wilderness/desert” (εἰς τὴν ἔρημον). There the desert is patterned after the wilderness experience of the Israelites in the exodus and symbolizes the current wilderness-like experience of the woman, that is, the church. For the church (and for individual Christians), life in this world is a pilgrimage through a desert in which only God can care for and sustain her (12:6, 13–14). While the dragon pursues the woman in the desert (12:13–18), here in 17:3 the harlot on the beast is stationed in the desert. But for what purpose? Is she stationed in the desert because she knows the woman of Revelation 12 (the true church) is also in the desert, that is, on her pilgrimage through this earthly life? Does this harlot also station herself in the desert *so that she can pretend that she is the true church and thus by her immoral deceptiveness wean people away from the church of Christ?* Where else but in the desert could the harlot be if she wants to offset the church of Christ, which is on a pilgrimage trek in the desert? It is for this reason that God comforts his people who are in the harsh desert with words of comfort like those of Jer 31:1–2: “ ‘They will be my people.’ Thus says Yahweh, ‘The people who are survivors of the sword will find grace in the

desert.’ ” Relevant too is the theme in Isaiah of a second exodus, when God will lead his people through the desert and provide sustenance for them (E.g., Is. 35; 42:15-16; 43:16-21; 49:8-26). (CC)

The imagery of the “desert” could also imply that this will be the end of the harlot, that is, she will end her life in the desolation and ruin of the desert. For the woman of Revelation 12 (the church of Christ) the desert only typifies her earthly life, but not her end. For her journey’s end will be in the glory of God as the bride of Christ (19:6–8). But for the harlot, her end will be desolation in the desert, as Isaiah similarly prophesied about ancient Babylon when, in “an oracle about the desert,” he spoke of her ruin (Is 21:1–10). Babylon in God’s judgment would be made totally destitute and ruined, and that desolation is symbolized by “the desert” (cf. Is 13:21; Jer 50:12; 51:43). So now the harlot and the beast face the judgment of God in total desolation in which they will be destroyed and will never again be able to rise up and hurt God’s people. (CC)

scarlet beast.† The beast that rose out of the sea in ch. 13. Now reappearing as a symbol of civil government in its antichristian aspects. Sitting on the beast refers to an alliance between antichristian forces in secular governments and the apostate church. (CSB)

The beast from the sea reappears (cf 13:1–10). (TLSB)

The beast upon which the woman is sitting is “scarlet” in color and has “seven heads and ten horns.” (Rev 17:3). The seven heads and ten horns clearly identify this beast as the beast from the sea in 13:1, which had ten horns and seven heads and which the dragon conjured up as one of his henchmen in his warfare against the woman (12:17–18; 13:1, 7). The dragon himself (“the ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan,” 12:9) originally had the “seven heads and ten horns” (12:3). But he delegated his wisdom and power to the beast that he brought up from the sea, the place of chaos and evil, and so now the beast bears the seven heads, symbolic of wisdom, and the ten horns, symbolic of power (13:1; 17:3). By the “seven heads” the dragon claimed *all spiritual* wisdom, and by the “ten horns” he arrogated to himself *supreme dominion* and power over *human* affairs. Now Satan’s deceptive claims are the boast of the beast. (CC)

The beast’s color is mentioned for the first time in 17:3: “scarlet.” Scarlet suggests “the ostentatious magnificence of the [Roman] Empire,” since in John’s day the beast was represented by Rome. Most likely the beast has this color because it is one of the colors of the harlot (17:4), and she has conferred it on the beast to indicate that she dominates it and that it acts on her behalf and for the purpose of magnifying her splendor. As mentioned in the commentary on 17:1, this is the political beast. (CC)

The fact that here the woman *rides* the beast suggests that, at the moment, *the beast serves the purposes of the harlot*. At other times, the relationship is reversed, and the harlot serves the beast. This happens when the harlot is in the guise of the beast from the earth with the number 666 (13:11–18) or in the guise of the false prophet (16:13; 19:20; 20:10), and she serves the beast with the seven heads and ten horns (13:13–14; 19:20; cf. 17:3, 7). At still other times these two minions of the dragon (who together with him make up the unholy trinity) seem to work as equals in tandem (16:13–14). And finally, at times they squabble and fight among themselves, as if the dragon is not always able to keep them in line, working only for him and not for themselves. This becomes evident when, near the End (and possibly at other times as well), the beast turns upon the harlot to destroy her (17:16), most likely as a part of God’s judgment on her. (CC)

blasphemous names. The beast is also described as “full of the names of blasphemy” (17:3). In 13:1 the beast’s seven heads bore the “name/names of blasphemy.” Here in 17:3 the “names of

blasphemy” cover its entire body. “The [Roman] Empire reeked with the blasphemous worship of the Emperors; not its heads only but the whole body politic did this dishonour to the Living God.” This idolatrous character of Rome had its epitome in the deification of the emperors. For they arrogated to themselves titles such as “Lord” (κύριος), “Savior” (σωτήρ), “divine” (θεῖος), and “Lord of the world” (κοσμοκράτωρ), in addition to encouraging emperor worship. Throughout the entire period covered by the prophetic message of Revelation, from Christ’s ascension to the End at his return, this political beast (represented by Rome in John’s era) will carry on and sponsor such a program of idolatry so as to deceive the peoples of the earth in the dragon’s warfare against the church of Christ. (CC)

17:4 arrayed in purple and scarlet – Picture of arrogance, opulence, and self-satisfaction. Rome’s affluence is thus trenchantly criticized, esp in 18:11–19. (TLSB)

The woman who sits astride the beast is dressed sumptuously; she is clothed in purple and scarlet and... gilded with gold and precious stone and pearls (17:4 cf. 18:12, 16). In ancient Rome “purple and scarlet” demonstrated the luxury and splendor of the empire. In the OT purple was used for royalty (e.g. Judg 8:26; Dan 5:7; cf. Mk. 15:17), and scarlet could signify royal splendor or luxury (2 Sam.1:24; Jer. 4:30;). The harlot’s pearls, costly jewels, and gold would exhibit the extravagant and profligate lifestyle into which she drew them. (CC)

full of abominations – Reinforces the characterization of this woman as drunk on wealth, power, violence, and vice (v 2). (TLSB)

In her hand the “golden cup full of abominable things, indeed, the unclean things of her immorality” (Rev 17:4) symbolizes all the immoral, evil, and corruptive attitudes, practices, and influences that she proffers to the peoples and their rulers (cf. Jer 51:17). She is quite successful in enticing the rulers and their peoples to drink of her cup, by which they themselves become inebriated in wealth, and in luxurious and sensual and immoral lives (cf. Rev 18:3, 9, 11, 15). All who are under her spiritual influence, a false substitute for Christianity, justify such immorality as godly and righteous. (CC)

17:5 MYSTERY. Possibly not a part of the title. The opening part of the verse would then be translated “This mysterious title was written on her forehead: BABYLON...” . (CSB)

The great harlot does not merely oblige her subjects to get a mark on their foreheads; she herself bears one. (TLSB)

Climactically, the woman is identified as “Babylon the great” and described as “the mother of harlots and of the abominable things of the earth.” The name of “Babylon” is written “on her forehead” (17:5). In 13:16 the adherents of the beast from the sea (the political beast) are forced by the beast from the earth (the religious beast) to have either on their “right hand” or on their “forehead” the “mark” (χάραγμα) of the beast to indicate that they belong to it (cf. 14:9; 20:4). Here in 17:5 the name of Babylon on the “forehead” identifies the harlot as the enemy of God’s people, just as ancient Babylon was the historical enemy of Israel of old. As ancient Babylon destroyed the temple and the holy city of Jerusalem and carried off its people into exile, so now the woman on the beast makes war against the saints of God in Christ in order to destroy them and carry them into the bondage of her immoralities. The harlot is thus the new Babylon and not Jerusalem, the holy city of God, as she would like all to believe. The name on the “forehead” demonstrates that she is not only *owned* by “Babylon,” she is “Babylon the great, the mother of harlots.” (CC)

The name “Babylon the great” is called a “mystery” (μυστήριον, 17:5). Literally the word means “secret” and can refer to a “secret rite,” “secret teaching or knowledge,” or a “mystery” in the sense of something that can be known only by a special revelation or initiatory wisdom. “Mystery” appears four times in Revelation (1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7). In 1:20, “the mystery” (τὸ μυστήριον) is the fact that the “seven stars” represent the “angels of the seven churches” and the “seven lampstands” represent the “seven churches.” Here the word is used in the sense of a symbolic representation. In 10:7 the plan of God’s relationship with the human race, in both salvation and judgment, is called a “mystery.” That plan was graciously proclaimed (εὐηγγέλισεν) to God’s “slaves, the prophets.” Though the prophets reveal it and God’s people know it by faith (see 1 Cor 2:1–9; Eph 3:2–5), that plan would not be fully made known to the human race until the seventh angel blew his trumpet and thus ushered in the end of the present world (Rev 10:7; 11:15–19). Here in 17:5 the word implies that the identification of the harlot as “Babylon the great, the mother of harlots” is a “mystery” because no one can know or understand that that is who she is unless given special knowledge or revelation (until Christ’s return and the End, when everything will be revealed publicly). That is, the fact that the woman should be called “Babylon the great” tells believers something about who she is and what she represents. But what does it tell? This “mystery” is now to be revealed to John in 17:7. Who the woman is, whom she represents, and why she is called “Babylon the great” will be made known to John by the angel. Perhaps also her designation as Babylon is called a “mystery” because to the world at large her true identity as the *false* church and great *enemy* of God’s saints on earth will not be fully disclosed until the End, when it will be revealed by her judgment by God (cf. 2 Thess 2:1–8). Until that time, most people believe her lie that she is the true church and the true bride of Christ, and not the harlot. (CC)

17:6 *drunk with the blood of the saints* – A measure of Babylon’s perversity is her bloodthirsty zeal for persecuting God’s people. (TLSB)

blood of the martyrs of Jesus. † See 6:9. An apostate church as an active persecutor of the true children of God. (CSB)

John next relates how he saw the woman in a state of intoxication, in a drunken stupor. She is drunk not from wine, but “from the blood of the saints and from the blood of the witnesses of Jesus” (17:6). Bloodbaths occur from time to time—all too often—throughout the history of the human race. But here the woman is not in an occasional drunken bout; rather, this is a description of a condition in her lifestyle that is constantly occurring. *Her steady diet is the blood of God’s people.* The “saints” and “witnesses of Jesus” most likely are not two different classes of God’s people, but rather a twofold description of all those who follow Christ on earth. For all Christians are saints and also witnesses of Jesus Christ (cf. 1:1–2, 5–6, 9). The “blood” that the woman drinks is the blood of those who have given their lives because of their testimony concerning Christ. The blood of martyrs is a metaphor for the sacrificial witness in which all the followers of Christ participate. And this witness incurs opposition from and persecution by the world (cf. 1:9). In her opposition to and persecution of the saints the woman indulges in this drunken orgy. And this is most painful and trying to the saints: that she who claims to be true godliness and the genuine church of God (though she is not) should drink the “blood of the witnesses of Jesus”—just as the unbelieving world does, but for her own reasons. (CC)

As the harlot sits on the beast, dressed in her finery and drunk from the blood of God’s saints, John is moved to marvel greatly (17:6). He is awestruck by the appearance of the woman and also apparently by the fact that she is in a drunken stupor. Though John is shortly to be shown the judgment and ruin of the woman (17:16; 18:2, 9, 19), of which judgment he had already been told (17:1–3), he sees for the moment the woman in all of her beauty and adornment and influential

power. Perhaps it is her seductive beauty and feigned spirituality that at first moves John to marvel. Maybe he is also struck by the fact that such a woman should have as her lifestyle and purpose for living the drinking of the blood of God's people. This must have been momentarily incomprehensible to John. Added to this could be the wonder of John, "Who exactly is this woman?" At any rate, John is awestruck by her presence and appearance. (CC)

17:7-14 The mystery of the woman bearing the name "Babylon the great" (17:5) is explained to John by "the angel" (17:7), one of the seven censer-angels (17:1) attending John in this vision of the description and judgment of the harlot (17:1-18:24). For John and his first readers the model after which the woman and the beast were patterned most likely was Rome, and during John's time they also represented Rome and her empire (see 17:9, 18). But the *religious* power (the harlot, an incarnation of the *religious* beast in 13:11-18) and the *political* power (the beast, which is the *political* beast in 13:1-10) represented by Rome and her empire are merely types of *all enemies* of God's saints and his witnesses, from John's day down to our own, and extending to the end of this world at Christ's return. This mystery is now to be explained to John. (CC)

17:7 *mystery*. Term Paul uses to denote God's eternal plan for saving the world, once hidden but now manifest through Christ and the Gospel. Here, however, a demonic counterfeit is in view. (TLSB)

The angel asks John, "Why were you amazed?" (17:7). Perhaps the angel "read St. John's amazement in his face" or heard "an exclamation" that John might have uttered. The angel treats his amazement as a legitimate question. The angel begins explaining the mystery of the woman by first referring to the beast. The heavenly messenger identifies the beast, by way of "the seven heads and the ten horns" (17:7), as the beast from the sea already seen by John in 13:1-10. And as John now looks at the beast, the angel further describes it as the beast that "was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss, and it goes away into destruction" (13:8). The first time that John saw this beast, one of its heads was mortally wounded, but then the head was healed (13:3; cf. 13:12, 14). (CC)

17:8 *and is not and is to come*.† An obvious imitation of the description of the Lamb (1:18; 2:8). Cf. the description of God in 1:4, 8; 4:8. Here the phrase seems to mean that the beast seeks to rival God (cf. 2Th 2:4) and to lay claim to divinity. (CSB)

This characterization of the beast, which appears twice within this context, is a perversion upon the title applied to God the Father (see note, 1:4). The beast is an impostor who passes himself off as the one true God (cf 13:16-17). (TLSB)

The ability of the beast, either partially with one of its heads or in its whole being, to be resuscitated or even resurrected time and time again moved the inhabitants of the earth to marvel and be awestruck. *The beast and what it represents come and go in one form or another throughout the entire period from Christ's ascension up to the End at Christ's return*. The beast disappears in one particular makeup or disguise—possibly because it has outlived its usefulness to the dragon and/or perhaps because God has brought it down—and then rises up in another form and entity to plague the church of Christ. Human institutions of every kind, and "-isms" of all sorts, come and go. As symbolized by the beast they last for a while as terrifying threats to the saints of God, but then they disappear, only to be replaced by other entities under the control of the dragon. (CC)

bottomless pit. The source of everything that is represented by the beast (as it comes and goes and is resuscitated again) is the abyss. While Satan, the dragon of Revelation 12, summoned the

beast from the sea (Rev 12:18–13:1 [ET 13:1]), it is ultimately from the abyss because Satan himself is from the abyss. In Rev 11:7 Satan is pictured as “the beast” that comes up from the abyss in order to make war with the two prophets, who represent all of God’s people, and the beast conquers them and kills them (cf. also 13:7). The abyss is the abode and place of origin of all demons (9:1–6) and of their leader, “the angel of the abyss” (9:11). (CC)

go to destruction. Although evil is real and persistent, there is no uncertainty about its ultimate fate. (CSB)

Another reference to the lake of fire, the final destination of the demonic host and enemies of God (19:20–20:10). (TLSB)

book of life. After the end of the present world, when Christ returns, the dragon and his two partners, the beast and the false prophet, will be thrown into “the lake of fire” from which they will never again arise to torment the followers of Christ (Rev 19:20; 20:10). Thus the abyss is both the place of origin and the final prison of the beast. While now it wars against God’s people, its destiny under God’s judgment is its own eternal destruction in hell. Although it seeks to destroy the saints, and it enjoys a measure of success in this world, ultimately it will be destroyed and its demonic, hellish intent to destroy the church will fail. Nevertheless, during its warfare in this world, the people of the earth whose names are not “written in the book of life stand in awe before the beast (17:8) because it, and what it symbolizes, has the ability to resuscitate itself time and again. But this awe and amazement of people will be short-lived, and unless repented of, it will be to their eternal ruin (see 13:8; 14:9–10; cf. 18:4). (CC)

17:9 *mind with wisdom* – He who has “the mind which has wisdom” can know the mystery of the “seven heads” of the beast, for they are “seven hills, upon which the woman is sitting” (17:9). Already in 13:18 John heard that the one who has “wisdom” (σοφία) and the “intelligence” (νοῦς) to use it can “figure out” (ψηφίζω) the number of the beast from the earth, the number 666, which number symbolically refers to the unholy trinity of that religious beast (identified later as the false prophet and still later as the harlot) together with the political beast (13:1–10) and the dragon (chapter 12), who is behind both beasts. Here the same wisdom is necessary to figure out what the seven heads of the beast, that is, the seven hills where the woman is sitting, symbolically represent. John and all readers of Revelation during the first and second centuries certainly would know that the “seven hills” pointed to the city of Rome. For Rome was known as the city of seven hills, as many of her authors and poets proudly declare. Early Christian authors also made the same identification. For example, Oecumenius (sixth century) in his Greek commentary interprets the “seven hills” as a designation pointing directly to imperial Rome. (CC)

seven mountains. It is perhaps significant that Rome began as a network of seven hill settlements on the left bank of the Tiber. Her designation as the city on seven hills is commonplace among Roman writers (e.g., Virgil, Martial, Cicero). (CSB)

Reinforces the identification of this great prostitute with Rome, since the city famously sits on seven hills. (TLSB)

It would seem that no special wisdom was needed to understand that the “seven hills” indicate Rome. But it might take special wisdom to make the connection between ancient Babylon and Rome, and in particular to understand that the seven heads and hills also point to seven kings, and to understand which kings. But more likely what 17:9 means is that *it takes special wisdom to understand what all this means for the saints of God (past and present) in their earthly*

17:10 *seven kings*. That seven heads symbolize both seven hills and seven kings illustrates the fluidity of apocalyptic symbolism, unless the hills are figurative for royal (or political) power. (CSB)

Likely refers to a series of first-century Roman emperors, though we cannot ascertain their identities with precision. (TLSB)

The “seven kings” (17:9) are described as if some had come and gone, and others are still to come. In 17:10 the angel says, “Five have fallen, one is [present], the other has not yet come, and when he comes it is necessary that he remain a little while.” Throughout the centuries since the writing of Revelation, commentators have attempted to identify these seven kings. For the most part Roman emperors have been matched with the seven kings, but not always the same emperors. (CC)

Among the earliest church fathers to make such identifications was Victorinus (third century) in his Latin commentary. These are the seven kings he listed (given here in historical order): Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, and Nerva. According to Victorinus the five that had fallen were Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, and Titus. The sixth who is present was Domitian, because he was the emperor (A.D. 81–96) when John wrote Revelation. Victorinus says the king who had not yet come (at the time when Revelation was written) was Nerva. But then he named Nero as the eighth (Rev 17:11), even though historically Nero was the first of these emperors to reign (A.D. 54–68). In identifying “the beast which was, and is not,” the “eighth” beast (17:11), as Nero, Victorinus thereby implied that Nero was a model or type of future tyrants who would persecute the church; they would be like Nero *redivivus*, come back to life again. (CC)

Later Oecumenius (sixth century) in his Greek commentary came up with a different list. He named Nero as the first, but then selected the remaining six not in strict chronological succession, but instead according to whether they had persecuted the church. For example, Domitian and Diocletian are included for that reason. (CC)

Other fathers included not only Roman emperors, but other kings or rulers from world history. For example, Andreas (sixth century) in his Greek commentary listed as the seven kings representative rulers from each of the seven ancient empires: first Assyria, then the Medes, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Macedonian/Greek Empire, the Roman Empire, and finally Constantine, who represented Christian Rome. From each of the empires he listed a ruler. For example, from the Babylonians he named Nebuchadnezzar, and from the Macedonian/Greek Empire, Alexander. To this day commentators carry on this attempt, usually using the Roman emperors for identifying the “seven kings.” As Ford points out, “The identity of these kings has exercised many scholars.” (CC)

Attempting to match a list of seven kings (from the Roman Empire or from world empires) with the seven kings in 17:9–10 does not yield a satisfactory result. One must seek elsewhere for a solution to the mystery of the seven kings and the beast itself as the eighth. The most that be can said for the above schemes is that, even if one could satisfactorily make such matching identifications, they would only serve as models or types of all such earthly rulers and the powers they exercise. That is, all oppressive earthly rulers that come and go throughout the entire period of time covered by the prophetic message of Revelation (Christ’s ascension to his return) are symbolized by these seven kings as well as by the beast itself. *The number seven is symbolic and represents all earthly powers and rulers who claim spiritual authority by which they justify and sanction their despotic dominion over their subjects, in particular as it is used in opposition to the church of Christ.* In the case of Rome as the model and type of such rulers, the seven kings

represent its imperial power under and together with the pretense of the spiritual and divine-like authority she claimed, as it was displayed, for example, by emperor worship. The emperors come and go, but each in turn continues to carry out the imperial and despotic rule of Rome. The fact that the beast itself is designated as the eighth king is perhaps best understood as a summary statement. That is to say, as the emperors come and go, and even at times when one is weak and ineffective because of “madness,” imperial Rome continues, for she herself is the power no matter who the emperor is. Thus imperial Rome herself could be designated the eighth king serving as a symbol of the “eternal” power of Rome which all emperors exercised. That the beast itself, under the designation of the eighth king, could be pictured as coming and going suggests that imperial Rome itself comes and goes, weakened and then strengthened again, until she together with all her emperors finally goes into eternal ruin and destruction. (CC)

For John, the beast represented Rome, but it must be remembered that for him the beast as Rome also served as a symbol and a type or model of all future ruling powers which, like Rome, would persecute the church. *The beast then, together with its seven heads, becomes and is for all time until the End a terrifying symbol that represents all earthly powers and dominions and rulers that exercise tyrannical authority under the pretense of divine sanction of some kind or other.* The outward form of this despotic governance will come and go, one form disappearing and being replaced then by another. It can even be severely wounded and weakened so much that at times it seems to have disappeared (to the relief of Christians). But then it arises again in similar or different guises to terrorize once again its subjects. And so it goes until in God’s judgment it is destroyed, at the End when Christ returns. (CC)

Five ... one ... the other.† Taken (1) as seven actual Roman emperors, (2) as seven secular empires or (3) symbolically as the power of the Roman empire as a whole. See Rev 17:10. A probable interpretation of this verse and the following one involves a combination of the above. The five that “have fallen” could be symbols of the five great world empires which in OT times threatened to wipe out the children of God: (1) Egypt, whose Pharaoh set out to destroy the children of Israel; (2) Assyria, which destroyed the northern kingdom; (3) Babylonia, which led Judah and Jerusalem into captivity; (4) Persia, whose king Xerxes gave the order to “annihilate all the Jews” (Est 3:13); (5) the empire of Alexander, which in the person of Antiochus Epiphanes came close to wiping out the worship of the true God among the Jews. The pattern in the history of the secular antichrist is: “He once was, now is not, and yet will be, and will go to destruction.” The sixth would be the Roman Empire (“one is”), which would suffer the same fate. A seventh (“the other”) would appear for a little while. The eighth is the beast, who also is “going to his destruction” (v. 11) and operates through the seven kings. (CSB)

17:11 *eighth.* The antichrist, who plays the role of a king (“belongs to the seven”) but is in reality part of the cosmic struggle between God and Satan. (CSB)

A caesar whose policies were particularly hostile to the Church. Many scholars see here a reference to the *Nero redivivus* myth, mentioned in Sibylline Oracle 4. This was a popular belief that the reviled and dreaded Emperor Nero would rise from the dead and lead a horde of foreign troops from the east in an attack on Rome. John may adapt this imagery much as the psalmists at times adapt the imagery of Canaanite myths (see note, Ps 68) without regarding them as true. The imagery of John’s visions should not be imposed over contemporary nations and events as though the *Nero redivivus* myth would be literally fulfilled or describe a modern Babylonian ruler. (TLSB)

While the origin of the beast can be traced back to ancient history, at the writing of John it had not yet made its appearance. But the beast is already considered as the eighth power. It is a

power that sprang up from the Macedonian dominion. The papal rule arose out of the Roman power, and so it became itself world power. Roman power is so great, that no one dares to cope with it. So the beast here obviously represents the world dominion of the Antichrist. But the Seer learns here that even this great power goes down into perdition. (Stoeckhardt)

Difficulties abound in attempting to identify the “seven kings.” Caird suggests that in matching emperors with the seven kings “we have been looking for the wrong sort of solution. After all, John did not arrive at the number seven by counting emperors; the monster Leviathan had seven heads centuries before the founding of Rome.” These difficulties only increase when in 17:11 the beast itself is described as an “eighth” king who also “was, and is not ... and goes away into destruction.” Similar to the seven kings, the beast as an eighth king comes and goes and comes again and then finally goes to destruction. Already in 13:3 one of the beast’s heads (that is, one of the seven kings) was mortally wounded. But the head was resuscitated, thus giving to some Christians credence to the legend of Nero’s return, and as a result Nero came to be identified as the eighth king, or the type of whomever that future king might be. If one were to match a name with this eighth king, Nero would be a likely candidate, for according to the legend he was to return and regain his power to reign as emperor. He thus would be the “head” of the beast which “had been fatally wounded unto death, but its wound of death had been healed,” as described in 13:3. To many pagan authors, and to some Christian ones, Domitian resembled Nero so much that Nero was almost personified in Domitian. Even among those who tried to identify the eighth king, confusion abounded, for as mentioned above Victorinus believed that Nero was a type of some future emperor other than Domitian. (Most likely this was because Victorinus’ thoughts were no longer linked to any historical king but to an eschatological ruler in the end times.) (CC)

17:12 ten horns – The picture of the political beast is not yet complete, for there are “the ten horns” which represent “ten kings who did not yet receive a kingdom” (17:12). What is the relationship between these “ten kings” and the seven heads which represent kings? While the seven kings symbolize ruling powers acting with wisdom as sanctioned under the pretense of divine authority, metaphorically depicted by the number *seven* (*divine* authority) and by the *heads* (*wisdom*), the ten horns would indicate ruling powers in all their naked might and total oppression, sanctioned not by the claim to divine authority but by the action of conquering power itself under its own authority. Because they do not claim spiritual and divine sanction for their ruling power and authority, these “ten kings” most likely are not Roman emperors. They could be lesser kings or rulers dependent on Roman sponsorship for their governing positions—for example, the Herodian kings of Palestine or the rulers of Egypt. (CC)

There could be many possible ways in which one might imagine the ten kings of the beast’s horns in relation to the seven kings of its heads on a historical plane at the time of the writing of Revelation. *Clearly they symbolically represent all earthly ruling powers, during the entire time period from Christ’s ascension to his return at the present world’s end, which do not claim any particular divine sanction or authority (as do the seven kings).* The ten rule instead under the authority that is gained or sanctioned by naked power. Only their *power* to rule legitimates their right and authority to rule. On occasion they may make cause with the seven kings who legitimize their right to rule under the pretense of divine sanction. But the ten kings maintain their rule by their tyrannical and fear-evoking power and it alone. *The beast then, with its seven heads and ten horns, symbolizes all earthly powers of whatever sort and makeup which are under the influence of the dragon (Satan) in his warfare with the followers of Christ* (see 12:13–18; 13:1, 11). This is the beast upon which the harlot sits (17:3), and as she does so she is called “Babylon the great” (17:5). (CC)

ten kings – Likely vassal kings, who could aid and abet a usurper (like *Nero redivivus*) in an attempt to seize power. Note in this regard that during the first century, numerous caesars ascended to the throne by intrigue and usurpation. (TLSB)

one hour.† A short time. The 10 (number for completeness) represent all the future secular enemies of the church. (CSB)

The ten kings “receive authority with the beast” for a short time (17:12). The beast, the Roman Empire, while recognizing the kings’ right to rule within the claims of the empire, allows them to do so only as clients. These ten kings “did not yet receive a kingdom” (17:12), for they do not possess their own authority and power to rule. However, the implication is that at any time in the future these ten kings may become independent of Rome and thus acquire their own kingship. Similar to the ten horns of the fourth beast in Daniel (7:7, 24), which is a prophetic prototype of the beast here in Revelation 17, they seem to be kings who are connected with the Roman Empire and then come out of it or come after it. (CC)

17:13 *one mind* – Such conspirators would really only be united temporarily, while their intrigues and bloody plots played out. (TLSB)

power and authority to the beast – These ten kings (as the seven, in their own way) “act with one mind,” and “they give their power and authority to the beast” (17:13). They agree in supporting the goal of the beast, which is to dominate and to destroy the church, the bride of Christ. (CC)

17:14 *they will make war* – All-out opposition against God and His people (cf 16:12–16). (TLSB)

In actuality, though, they “wage war with the Lamb” (17:14), for the conflict has always been between the dragon (Satan) and God. This war reached its climax at the cross on Calvary, for it was there that Jesus Christ, on behalf of God’s people, won the victory as the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29; 1 Pet 1:18–21; Rev 5:5–10). For when he was lifted up on the cross, “the prince of this cosmos” (ὁ ἄρχων τοῦ κόσμου τούτου) was cast out (Jn 12:31–32). Cast out of heaven at the glorious ascension of the victorious Lamb, the devil is never able again to accuse God’s saints before God’s heavenly throne (Rev 12:5–12; cf. Phil 2:5–11). The casting of the dragon out of heaven is described in terms of warfare: “Michael and his angels had to make war with the dragon. And the dragon went to war and also his angels” (Rev 12:7). As a result, “the great dragon ... the ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan,” was thrown out of God’s heavenly presence, never again to appear before him (12:9). The war between God and the dragon was over. But when the dragon realized that he could not continue his warfare against God in heaven and that he had failed to destroy the Christ Child (the male Child of the woman, 12:3–5), and also knowing that he could no longer stand before God and mock God’s saints (cf. Job 1:6–12; 2:1–7; Zech 3:1–4), he then took out his anger on the woman on earth and her seed. He set about to make war with the church of Christ on earth (Rev 12:13–18). (CC)

Since the ascension of Christ, the warfare between the dragon and God is now confined to that which takes place between Satan and God’s saints *on earth*. In this warfare with the woman and her seed, the dragon enlists two allies: the two beasts described in Revelation 13, the political beast with the seven heads and ten horns (13:1–10) and the religious beast with the number 666 (13:11–18). Much of what John sees in Revelation concerns this warfare on earth. Though the warfare is between this unholy trinity—the dragon and the two beasts—and the church, its ultimate purpose is to shame and belittle God and his Christ. The dragon can no longer defy God before his face, so now he attempts to do so, even though banished from God’s heavenly

presence, by shaming and destroying God's saints on earth and their witness to the Christ. But though the target of the battle is the church, actually the war is against the Lamb, for he is the champion and the defender of God's people on earth. In fighting against the church, the evil forces of the dragon (to their own astonishment) discover that they are really fighting against the Lord Christ himself. And in this contest the Lamb faces them not like a lamb that was led to slaughter in humility and weakness (Is 53:7; Acts 8:32–33) but as the mighty God who is “the Lord of lords and the King of kings” (Rev 17:14). His “called and chosen and faithful ones” (17:14), his followers, face the enemy always with the conquering Lamb before them. For it is through his victory of the cross and resurrection that the church is defended. And by the right of that victory the Lamb always stands between his witnesses and the evil forces of the dragon in order to keep his saints safe and finally to deliver them (cf. 14:1–5; 15:2–4). (CC)

Lord of lords and King of kings. Emphasizes the supreme sovereignty of the Lamb (cf. Dt 10:17; Ps 136:2–3; Da 2:47; 1Ti 6:15). (CSB)

Superlatives proper of the one true God. Remarkably, these epithets are here applied to the Lamb, which makes for a powerful affirmation of Christ's full divinity. Luth: “Thy kingdom will extend as far as the world, and yet this kingdom will be an eternal, heavenly kingdom. Thou art a King in heaven and yet Thou wilt have Thy kingdom on earth, yes, even under the earth in hell. For there will be nothing so high or deep, neither in heaven nor on earth nor under the earth, that Thou canst not have power over it and help it. Hence those on earth who preach Thy name in Thy kingdom, pray, praise, and thank Thee, will be in heaven, even though they live on earth, scattered through all the lands” (AE 12:104). (TLSB)

The Lamb here in 17:14 is identified as “the Lord of lords and the King of kings,” which is the designation the Son of Man will use when he comes in judgment at the End (19:11–16). Because of this identification, the victory of the Lamb over the beast and its kings (17:14) could be viewed as taking place at the End (cf. 16:12–16; 20:7–10). Certainly the final conflict in which the evil forces will forever be destroyed lies in the future, when Christ returns and the final judgment takes place. But also now and throughout the time of the church's mission on earth, the Lamb will prevail over the beast so as to enable his church to carry out and complete her mission. For throughout the history of the church, the enemies who on the human plane conquered the saints (13:7) at a given time were in turn overthrown and now lie in the dust heaps of history. It is a constant warfare in which enemies are always arising and falling, only to be replaced by others. *But throughout it all the Lamb defends his church and conquers her enemies.* Finally, at the Lord's return, the beast will be totally defeated, never again to rise in any form to threaten God's people. (CC)

17:15-18 When the angel first announced in 17:1 that he would show to John the judgment of the harlot, she was pictured as sitting on these “many waters.” That these waters are mentioned again in 17:15 seems to emphasize that she who was dominating the peoples of the earth is now to be judged. In 17:2–14 John does not yet see her judgment but instead is given an awesome and fearful description of her immoral reign, and that of the beast with her. But now in 17:15 the angel brings John back to what he had said in 17:1 about her judgment—only this time it will be described. And the description begins by referring again to the position of her dominance over the peoples of the earth, for the one who deceived the nations of the earth is now to be brought to her ruin and destruction. (CC)

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peoples, multitudes, nations and languages – After having seen the harlot on the beast in all of her amazing beauty, and after having received an explanation of the mystery about the woman (who she is and what she represents, together with her beast), the angel then tells John how the woman will be ruined and destroyed under God’s judgment. The angel first tells John that the waters upon which the woman is sitting are “peoples and crowds and nations and tongues” (17:15). This descriptive “grouping stresses universality” of the human race. She dominates, or at least desires to dominate, the entire human population. This way of designating the human race by means of such a grouping is used elsewhere in Revelation for the people of God, who have been brought out of the human race to be his saints (5:9; 7:9). It is also used to describe the pagan population of the world (10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6). Here in 17:15 it describes the peoples of all nationalities in the “teeming and mixed populations of the [Roman] Empire” at the time of John’s writing. As imperial Rome dominated all the peoples in the various classes and races, so the harlot now sits in dominion over the nations and peoples of the earth. Included in this grouping (it seems) are God’s own people, for when Babylon’s judgment comes, God calls his people out of her midst (18:4). (CC)

17:16 It is a telltale sign of her coming final judgment when the beast and the ten horns begin to “hate the harlot” and turn on her (17:16). It is interesting that the beast turns to hate the woman with its *ten horns* and not its seven heads. Historically, Rome was finally brought down not so much by her own emperors but rather by kings and ruling powers of her client states and from neighboring states with whom she flirted but whom she could never completely bring under her sway. The disintegration of the harlot’s false spiritual and Christ-like power begins not so much because of the political and ruling powers which legitimized their authority under the pretense of divine sanction (the seven heads, or seven kings, 17:9), but rather because of those ruling powers which seize and sanction their authority to rule by brute and naked force (the ten horns, or ten kings, 17:12). (CC)

When they turn against the woman in hatred, “they will make her desolated and naked, and they will eat her flesh, and in fire they will burn her up” (17:16). This certainly is a grisly description of how they will treat the harlot. It is reminiscent of the judgment of God that Ezekiel prophetically pronounced against the two adulterous sisters representing Israel and Judah (Ezek 23:1–34). In God’s judgment their former lovers would turn on them and, as described in graphic terms, would rip them apart. They would strip them naked (Ezek 23:10, 29) in their hatred (Ezek 23:29). They would cut off their noses and ears and burn them in fire (Ezek 23:25). The two adulterous sisters would drink of the cup to its utter dregs and then in drunkenness tear at their own breasts (Ezek 23:32–34). In a similar description, the harlot here in Rev 17:16 is prophetically pictured as being ripped apart by her former lovers, her associates in her immoralities by which she polluted the peoples of the earth. (CC)

17:17 *God has put into their hearts* – Evokes passages where the Lord is described as hardening Pharaoh’s heart (Ex 9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:4). Such mysterious expressions should not be taken as implying that God is the source of evil (Jas 1:13–14). Rather, they show that God can use even the evil behavior of the impious in order to further His good and gracious purposes. (TLSB)

fulfilled.† Even the wicked plans of the church’s enemies must help to carry out God’s plan and to fulfill his promises. (CSB)

The evil plans of the ten horns cannot succeed finally, since God has a greater plan. In due time, the saving promises He has revealed through His servants will come to fulfillment (cf Am 3:7; Zec 1:6; see note, Rv 10:7). (TLSB)

The beast and the ten horns act in this way toward the harlot because “God has given into their hearts” to carry out his will “until the words of God will be completed” (17:17). This is another instance of what has often happened in the past: that the powers of evil were used by God to serve his own purposes. For example, after ancient Babylon had served God’s purpose in the captivity and exile of Judah, Babylon in turn under God’s judgment was punished and brought to ruin by other pagan nations. So here in the judgment of the harlot, her former associates in evil turn against her and destroy her. In the end all such powers of wickedness will serve God’s ultimate purpose: the salvation of his people and their deliverance from all enemies. And this will happen according to “the words of God” (17:17) which were spoken by his prophets. (CC)

17:18 *great city.* Further confirmation that this monstrous woman represents Rome. (TLSB)

As the beast and its ten horns turn on the harlot, John is told again that she is “the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth” (17:18). As ancient Babylon was at one time mistress of the world, and as imperial Rome was such at the time of John’s receiving the message of Revelation, both are types or manifestations of the harlot sitting on the beast, the significance of whose meaning goes far beyond that of ancient Babylon and Rome, the city of the seven hills. As Swete declares, John’s “vision sounds a note of warning which may well be taken to heart by any great metropolis which prostitutes its wealth and influence to base or self-seeking ends. The city of the Caesars was the contemporary representative of Babylon; other ages may witness the rise and fall of other mistresses of the world not less magnificent and depraved.” This warning is relevant in particular for the Christian. There will always be such “magnificent and depraved” mistresses (whether cities or governing powers and nations) which will, even unknowingly, be under the control of the dragon (Satan) for the purpose of making war against the woman and her seed, the church (12:17). But all such “mistresses” will be brought to total destruction in God’s judgment, a judgment that God will execute on behalf of his saints (19:1–2). (CC)

Ch 17 John describes the great end-times battle between the dominant world power and God. This vision reminds us that earthly power structures, when built upon idolatrous worldviews and characterized by ungodly ambitions, are not morally neutral but rather stand in opposition to God and His Church. In the end, however, the King of kings and Lord of lords will get the victory and share it with the faithful, so that they reign with Him eternally. • Lord, cleanse our hearts, eyes, and ears. Give us sound judgment in all things, so that we may reject Babylon’s ungodly lure, remain faithful, and enter with You into glory! Amen.