**Revelation 17**

Chapter 16 ended with the 7th bowl telling us of the fall of Babylon. One of the 7 angels with the bowls takes a moment to show John the details of this sight. He shows John the great harlot and the beast she sits upon. In chapter 17, the angel is simply describing their meaning. Then in chapter 18 and the beginning of 19, John is shown their fall.

**Rev. 17:1-6**

**1** Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and talked with me, saying to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters, **2** with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk with the wine of her fornication.”  
**3** So he carried me away in the Spirit into the wilderness. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. **4** The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. **5** And on her forehead a name was written:  
 MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT,  
 THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS  
 AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS  
 OF THE EARTH.  
**6** I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And when I saw her, I marveled with great amazement.

v. 1

So there is a natural break in the content, and thus begins chapter 17.

The angel shows John the harlot and the beast. Angels are frequently the guides to apocalyptic events. He uses a similar format like that of the parable of the sower. Jesus told the parable, then stated, let me explain it to you. The angel gets to show John, and by proxy us, the overall story in verses 1-6, then explains in greater detail who these beings are through the rest of the chapter. He states, I will show you the judgment of the harlot.

The term harlot is frequently used symbolically for God’s people in the Old Testament when they chose to rebel, but it is not an exclusive term for them. There are plenty of other cities that it is used to describe. Jerusalem and Israel (Isa. 1:21; Jer. 2:20; 13:22; Ezek. 16 and 23; Hos. 1:2), Nineveh (Nah. 3:4), Tyre (Isa. 23:17), and Babylon (Isa. 47:5-15). And now it is used for another city that opposes God.

This harlot sits on many waters. The many waters are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues (v. 15).

v. 2

The angels says he will also show the kings of the earth who commit fornication with her. They choose not to follow God, but desire idolatry. Despite being called kings, they still were subservient to and required to please the woman.

Also, the inhabitants of the earth who become drunk with her fornication, with the pleasures of this life. Jeremiah makes the same comparison of Babylon (Jer. 50-51).

**Jer. 51:6-7**

**6** Flee from the midst of Babylon,  
And every one save his life!  
Do not be cut off in her iniquity,  
For this is the time of the Lord’s vengeance;  
He shall recompense her.  
**7** Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord’s hand,  
That made all the earth drunk.  
The nations drank her wine;  
Therefore the nations are deranged.

v. 3

So the angel carries John to the wilderness to see this woman. This is in contrast to a vision taking place in heaven. This is also similar to God taking the bride of Christ to the wilderness for safety. This woman and her beast have their own place in the world.

Once there, they see a woman sitting on a scarlet beast. This beast’s description is the same as in chapter 13; the beast’s names are blasphemy, he is once again described as having 7 heads and 10 horns, except now the scripture says he is crimson in color. Perhaps because of the power he holds, or the blood he has shed. This description is similar to Satan because his followers imitate him.

v. 4

The woman is dressed in the most luxurious clothing (finest colors only worn by the wealthiest [i.e., queens] or prostitutes) and jewelry (gold, stones, pearls) because she is trying to attract attention, be a temptation to all the world, to show off her wealth, and to get them to drink of her cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication. She certainly is in contrast to the brilliant woman of chapter 12, a completely different woman.

Her cup mirrors the cup on the Lord’s table.

**1 Cor. 10:16-17, 21-22**

**16** The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? **17** For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.

...  
**21** You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons. **22** Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?

So when people join her and drink, they are abominations in God’s sight, participating in the evil she has committed.

v. 5

On her forehead is her true name written. That imagery is used throughout the Bible for both good and bad reasons. She is a mystery now revealed. She is Babylon the great, a city which was a symbol of destructive power to the Jews because of the captivity. She is the mother of harlots and of abominations (perhaps idolatries) of the earth. She is the source of these evil things. She is the worst symbol of the dark side of mankind in existence.

v. 6

And she is drunk with the blood of saints and martyrs of Jesus. One picture should come to mind. When Christians were considered criminals, they provided a great increase to the shows in the coliseum, where they were killed for sport and entertainment. This was to satiate the appetites of the people for violence. They were martyred for their beliefs.

**John marveled** at the sight of her. He doesn’t know what to make of this sight. (NKJV “amazement”, wonder is better)

**v. 7-18**

There are 2 symbols that have confused many people in this section of chapters.

1. Who exactly is the woman? The apostate church? Rome? Jerusalem?

2. Who are these kings? The 7 and 10 kings. Literal kings or metaphorical for complete power over this world? If literal, then who? If metaphorical, then what does it mean?

**Rev. 17:7-11**

**7** But the angel said to me, “Why did you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns. **8** The beast that you saw was, and is not, and will ascend out of the bottomless pit and go to perdition. And those who dwell on the earth will marvel, whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is.  
**9** “Here is the mind which has wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits. **10** There are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come. And when he comes, he must continue a short time. **11** The beast that was, and is not, is himself also the eighth, and is of the seven, and is going to perdition.

v. 7

The angel asked why he marveled. He will show John the mystery of the woman and the beast that carries her.

v. 8

The beast was and is not, and yet is (mentioned in v. 8 [x2], 11). I think it is best explained after verse 11. The short version is that it is embodied by world empires.

He will ascend out of the bottomless pit [synonymous with the sea. Rev. 13:1], which is the residing place of Satan (9:1-2, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, 3). Many Jews believed this to be a physical place. Many believed that there were physical dungeons or rivers that evil angels were imprisoned in awaiting a time that they could come out and wreak havoc. But this is symbolic of the spiritual realm.

...and the beast will go to perdition (spiritual destruction). Those on earth will marvel at the sight of this beast. These are the people who are not written in the Lamb’s book of life. They are not God’s people. Some might have once been, but these are all who do not follow God.

I think it’s written this way to show us that God’s people should know better than to marvel at the beast in amazement. The world takes fascination with the beast, and desire it’s power, but this is something that God’s people should avoid.

v. 9

The angel then explains the meaning. You can tell because he states, “Here is the mind which has wisdom:” Here is the wisdom in this. You have to use wisdom to put these pieces together.

The 7 heads are 7 mountains. The woman sits on these.

So this is where we start getting into specifics. There are several major different beliefs on who the woman is. Is it the apostate church alone, or Rome, or Jerusalem? *(I can write a comparison later.)* The Preterist’s are split between Jerusalem and Rome. They make many arguments for both.

Yet I can’t help but notice that Jerusalem doesn’t quite fit for several reasons. Jerusalem is only built on 4 hills. It is the timing of when the destruction of Jerusalem happens and the writing of Revelation. Jerusalem’s destruction in 70 A. D. is before the writing of Revelation around 90 A. D. So when John states that these things will take place shortly, that doesn’t make it possible already having taken place. The only mention of the Jews after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A. D. is when it is stated that they will always be led away captive into all nations because of God’s wrath, all stemming from their rejection of the Messiah (Luke 21:23-24). When do the kings take apart Israel? Only Rome does that.

For those that say that the woman is referring to only the apostate church, it doesn’t take into account many of the details of the chapter. When do they interact with these kings? When have they reigned over the kings of the earth? The answer is usually the Catholic church and the Pope, which would have no meaning to the first century Christians. When has the church ever been referred to as having multiple kings? Physically or metaphorically?

So most people I know believe the view that the woman represents Rome, as a symbol of the Roman empire and the sin they lead all people to, like Babylon did in their day. Babylon was the first world power mentioned in Nebuchadnezzar's dream and Rome is that fourth and last. Rome was truly the last world spanning power the world has known. We could look at powerful groups throughout the past 1600 years, like the Roman Papacy, Britain, Napoleonic France, even America. None of these have ruled the entire known world. They have always had rivals, which Rome did not. So Rome was the perfect symbol of the abuse of power, by bullying, using slavery, oppression, and any other sinful behavior to control everyone. It is the perfect symbol of carnality versus spirituality.

So Johnny’s questions are phrased from the view of the woman representing Rome and all human vice.

Rome was built on 7 mountains. This was celebrated in Roman culture, being put on coins, in literature, and even celebrated in the festival of Septimontium. The angel uses hyperbole here *(an exaggerated claim not meant to be taken literally)*.

v. 10

So they also represent 7 kings in reference to the beast.

5 have fallen, one is, and another is yet to come. The last will continue for a short time.

Many people try to assign literal kings to fit this situation. One way of counting I came across multiple of times is from Augustus to Domitian (11), not counting the 3 between Nero and Vespasian (8), who altogether only reign for two years, but then the people expected Nero to return (7 or 8, depending on how you look at it). And you see how it starts to get complicated. *(In total, there were 11 Caesars or emperors. Julius, himself was a dictator. That is what most scholars say.)*

So when people do try to figure out the literal kings that could fit this situation they begin making the situation try to fit some sort of argument they are making. They also get into details that are pure speculation to us today.

We have to remind ourselves that the angel is still using hyperbole. These kings are symbolic of something. What really matters is the point being made. It is about timing.

This should remind us of the time the woman has left in existence. 7, of course, being the number for something complete, or completion. At the time of this writing it would be almost over, being the 6th out of 7 kings. This is figuratively showing the timing of events surrounding Rome’s power. 7 heads/7 kings represent all Roman emperors, like 7 churches represent all churches (Rev. 2-3).

v. 11

The beast is the eighth; he is “of” the seven. Meaning that in essence the beast is representing evil powers and will continue past the rule of Rome. On top of what the woman (Rome) brings to the world, the beast (governments opposing God) brings his own power. Despite both of them and what power they have or perceive that they have, the beast is eventually going to perdition.

So now is a good time to explain the description of the beast. He is described as the beast “that was, and is not, and yet is.” This is again mirroring the description of God and his eternal nature. God is, was, and is to come (Rev. 1:8). That is the way of the devil, isn’t it? To try to make us think he is an eternal power in the universe? And that he is all-powerful? That he can be a replacement for God?

It is true as far as the description of the kings went. Some have already passed, one now reigns, and another is yet to come. If the beast lives in them through their disobedience to God, the beast is essentially reigning and causing havoc in the world for God’s people. We don’t know the limits of that statement other than it has to fit into the limits that God has designed for this world and the devil. He is allowed to wreak havoc, but is on his way to perdition.

One commentator also described it like this, in reference to Rev. 13:3 where one head was mortally wounded, then it was healed. The beast existed, then a head died, and yet still exists. An interesting, yet different take. (Nero or Christ?)

That was the heads of the beast, now the angel explains the horns.

**Rev. 17:12-18**

**12** “The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have received no kingdom as yet, but they receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast. **13** These are of one mind, and they will give their power and authority to the beast. **14** These will make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings; and those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful.”  
**15** Then he said to me, “The waters which you saw, where the harlot sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues. **16** And the ten horns which you saw on the beast, these will hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire. **17** For God has put it into their hearts to fulfill His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. **18** And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth.”

v. 12

The 10 horns are 10 kings who have not received a kingdom yet. They receive 1 hour worth (a short amount of time) of authority as kings with the beast. 10 being a symbolic number for power, it shows that for limited amounts of time others were raised to power with the world power. Even in the Old Testament, frequently there would be 10 kings or kingdoms opposing God’s people (Gen. 15:19-21; Ps. 83:1-8). And, of course, Rome stood on the backs of all other nations, some assimilated, others were made slaves, but the use of others is what made Rome the world power that they were.

Imagine the beast without horns. It wouldn’t nearly be the frightening sight that a creature with so many horns appears to be. So they represent the rest of unfaithful mankind and perhaps more specifically mankind’s governing powers. They are in contrast with those who are ruled by Christ.

v. 13

They have the same mind, the same goals. They want power, so they go to the source where they can get it; Rome.

They give their power and authority to the beast; to the sinful governments or economic movements over them. Isn’t that the nature of mankind when they perceive that they can have a little power? They work with those with power to gain more. It was the same with Eve in the garden when she saw that the forbidden fruit could give her things she didn’t have, and those things she didn’t possess were made alluring by the devil. The beast works in the same manner helping the woman seem alluring. And, in turn, this beast gets all his authority from the devil. That’s also why he looks like the devil. He is mirroring how Christ looks like the Father.

v. 14

These groups make war with the Lamb. The Lamb will overcome them, though, because of who he is. He is King of kings and Lord of lords.

Those who are with the Lamb will overcome as well.

All men are called by the gospel to become children of God.

**2 Thes. 2:13-14**

**13** But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, **14** to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ

We are chosen by fulfilling God’s requirements for us to obtain salvation. (Eph. 1:4, 13)

**1 Pet. 2:4-5**

**4** Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, **5** you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

We are faithful to God because of his promises motivating us to overcome the world and it’s forbidden pleasures. We live righteously because he is righteous (1 John 2:29). It is a fact of life to live righteously for the Christian. (Eph. 6:10-18)

**1 Cor. 4:2**

Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.

v. 15

Then the angel brings it all together. How will these symbols interact as time goes on?

He explains that the harlot sits on many waters, which represent peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues. The Roman empire sits on many other peoples. They have taken power, ruled many nations around them, and put them into Roman service.

v. 16

But these 10 horns, kings that have served Rome, will hate the harlot. They will eventually hate Rome and pick her apart, making her desolate and naked. Showing to all the world what she really was.

In chapter 18:23 tells us that by her sorcery all the nations were deceived. Several places in the Old Testament link harlotry and sorcery (Isa. 57:3; 2 Kings 9:22). Both are vile professions. Both Nineveh and Babylon were said to use these two deceptive skills to sell other nations into slavery.

But for Rome, those ten kings are the ones who will tear Rome apart. Those they oppressed will rise up in judgment against them.

v. 17

For God has put it in their hearts. He uses his enemies to judge each other. This will fulfill God’s purpose for them. They will have one mind, the same goal to take power back from Rome. They will seemingly give their power to the beast (governments that oppose God) until God’s word has been fulfilled and he has determined another purpose for them.

v. 18

The woman is the great city with reigns over the kings of the earth. Rome.

So after seeing these things in his own Revelation, Daniel’s vision concludes by mentioning the second coming of Christ:

**Dan. 7:26-27**

**26** ‘But the court shall be seated,  
And they shall take away his dominion,  
To consume and destroy it forever.  
**27** Then the kingdom and dominion,  
And the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven,  
Shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High.  
His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
And all dominions shall serve and obey Him.’

**Conclusion**

So there are some great take-aways for us. All the history might not be interesting to everyone, but the point of studying world empires comes down to timing. The overall point is that God controls it all, and they are on his time-table. If he wants governments to rise or fall, that is what will happen.

And the beast (ch. 13 – governments opposing God) and the false prophet (ch. 14 – false religions) will always exist in this world, but God expects each of us to live righteously before him no matter what time we are from or area we live in, and there will be difficulties.

“While these descriptions of God’s enemies may seem either abstract or unrelated to the life of the believer, John makes his purpose clear in his letters to the seven churches. The warnings to the churches of Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis all contain language that mirrors the descriptions of the unholy Trinity and especially the Harlot. John warns Pergamum against false teaching and sexual immorality and reminds the Pergamum church of Christ’s war against the enemies of God (Rev. 2:14-16). The warning to the church at Thyatira is telling, since the description of Jezebel and the destruction that will come for those who follow her (Rev. 2:20-23) sounds like the description of the Harlot and her followers (Rev. 17). Finally, John’s warning to the church at Sardis reminds readers of the contrast between believers, who have white garments, and unbelievers, who wear soiled garments. In each of these contrasts, it is the Church who is pure and undefiled, while unbelievers are unrepentant, sexually immoral, and soiled by their sin. John warns these three churches in particular to flee from these practices and from the rebelliousness toward God that they signify. Destruction waits for those who do not turn from their idols and turn to the living God.” (*Between the Cross and the Throne* p. 54-55)

I found similarities between our study and what Paul writes to the Ephesians:

**Eph. 5:1-17**(1-7, 8-14, 15-21)

**1** Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. **2** And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.  
**3** But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; **4** neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. **5** For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. **6** Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. **7** Therefore do not be partakers with them.

**8** For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light **9** (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), **10** finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. **11** And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. **12** For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. **13** But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. **14** Therefore He says:  
 “Awake, you who sleep,  
 Arise from the dead,  
 And Christ will give you light.”

**15** See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, **16** redeeming the time, because the days are evil. **17** Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

That is our life long goal as Christians.

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