Revelation 17

Mystery Babylon: The Harlot on the Beast

OBSERVATION · INTERPRETATION · APPLICATION

"These were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so."
Acts 17:11

CHAPTER THEME

False religion looks rich, powerful and in charge, but it is a harlot riding a beast that will devour her. God turns His enemies on each other, and the Lamb wins.

Ed Smith · Started 10 October 2026

00 The Text

REVELATION 17 (KJV), MARKED

▲ Gold God — His character & actions
Green Command / instruction
Sky Key repeated word
⚠ Rose Sin / warning
★ Violet Promise / blessing
Amber Time / place / contrast

1 And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew unto thee the judgment of the ⚠ great whore that sitteth upon many waters:

2 With whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and the inhabitants of the earth have been 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 sit upon a ⚠ scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.

4 And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication:

5 And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, ⚠ BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

6 And I saw the woman drunken ⚠ with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration.

7 And the angel said unto me, Wherefore didst thou marvel? I will tell thee the mystery of the woman, and of the beast that carrieth her, which hath the seven heads and ten horns.

8 The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the ★ book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was , and is not, and yet is.

9 And here is the mind which hath wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth .

10 And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space.

11 And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven, and goeth into perdition.

12 And the ten horns which thou sawest are ten kings, which have received no kingdom as yet; but receive power as kings one hour with the beast.

13 These have ⚠ one mind, and shall give their power and strength unto the beast.

14 These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall ★ overcome them: for he is ▲ Lord of lords, and ▲ King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and ★ chosen, and faithful.

15 And he saith unto me, The waters which thou sawest, where the whore sitteth, are peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and tongues.

[16] And the ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire.

[17] For God hath put in their hearts to fulfil his will, and to agree , and give their kingdom unto the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled.

[18] And the woman which thou sawest is that great city, which reigneth over the kings of the earth.

Marked in the text

- **v1** great harlot
- **v1** great whore
- **v1** many waters
- **v1** harlot *(every occurrence)*
- **v1** whore *(every occurrence)*
- **v3** beast *(every occurrence)*
- **v3** wilderness
- **v3** scarlet
- **v5** BABYLON THE GREAT
- **v5** MOTHER OF HARLOTS
- **v6** with the blood of the saints
- **v8** wonder *(every occurrence)*
- **v8** book of life
- **v8** foundation of the world
- **v9** wisdom
- **v12** one hour
- **v13** one purpose
- **v13** one mind
- **v14** Lord of lords
- **v14** King of kings
- **v14** overcome them
- **v14** chosen
- **v17** in their hearts
- **v17** words of God
- **v18** great city

Marks are drawn on the KJV text. KJV "great whore" is the NASB95's "great harlot"; "perdition" is "destruction." Some quotations in the notes are given in the KJV and are labeled so.

01 Observation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?

KEY VERSE · REVELATION 17:3–5 (KJV)

3 So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. 4 And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: 5 And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

Setting

One of the seven bowl angels takes John aside: "Come here, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters" (v1). Chapter 16 announced Babylon's fall in a single verse (16:19); chapters 17–18 slow down and show it.

Who / what

- **The woman / great harlot** — sits on many waters (v1); the kings of the earth committed immorality with her, and the earth-dwellers got drunk on the wine of her immorality (v2).
- **The scarlet beast** she rides — full of blasphemous names, seven heads and ten horns (v3); the beast of 13:1.
- **Her appearance** — purple and scarlet, gold, precious stones and pearls; a gold cup full of abominations and the unclean things of her immorality (v4).
- **Her name** on her forehead — a mystery: BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH (v5).
- **Her drink** — the blood of the saints and of the witnesses of Jesus; John wonders greatly (v6).
- **The angel explains (vv7–18):**
  - The beast "was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to destruction" (v8). The earth-dwellers whose names are not in the book of life will wonder at him (v8).
  - Seven heads = seven mountains on which the woman sits, and seven kings: five have fallen, one is, one has not yet come (vv9–10). The beast is an eighth, yet one of the seven, and goes to destruction (v11).
  - Ten horns = ten kings who receive authority with the beast for one hour; they have one purpose and give their power to the beast (vv12–13).
  - They wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb overcomes them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings; those with Him are the called and chosen and faithful (v14).
  - The waters = peoples, multitudes, nations and tongues (v15).

- The ten horns and the beast will hate the harlot, make her desolate and naked, eat her flesh and burn her with fire (v16) — because God put it in their hearts to execute His purpose, until the words of God are fulfilled (v17).
- The woman = the great city that reigns over the kings of the earth (v18).

Repeated words

harlot / immorality (fornication); beast; kings; waters; wonder / marvel; "which you saw"; was / is not.

Contrasts

this woman (ch. 17) ⟷ the woman clothed with the sun (ch. 12) ⟷ the Bride of the Lamb (ch. 19, 21). The harlot rides the beast and seems in control ⟷ the beast turns and devours her. The kings make war on the Lamb ⟷ the Lamb overcomes. The earth-dwellers *wonder* at the beast ⟷ the called, chosen and faithful are *with the Lamb*.

Places

many waters; a wilderness; seven mountains; the abyss; the great city.

Time words

"was, and is not, and is about to come"; five fallen, one is, one not yet; "a little while"; "one hour"; "until the words of God will be fulfilled."

Chapter theme (my words)

False religion looks rich, powerful and in charge, but it is a harlot riding a beast that will devour her. God turns His enemies on each other, and the Lamb wins.

02 Interpretation

WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?

KEY VERSE · REVELATION 17:8 (KJV)

[8]The beast that thou sawest was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder, whose names were not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they behold the beast that was , and is not, and yet is.

What Babylon is (Guzik)

Babylon is mentioned more than any other city in the Bible except Jerusalem. It began as a real city (Babel, Gen 10–11) and became Scripture's symbol for organized human rebellion against God: idolatry, persecution of God's people, and the world-system. Guzik, quoting Tenney, calls it organized hostility to God. Guzik reads chapter 17 as **religious Babylon** and chapter 18 as **commercial Babylon**. They are intertwined, but they are judged at different moments.

The great harlot = false religion (vv1–6)

In the Old Testament, harlotry is God's word for spiritual adultery — idolatry (Jer 3:6–9; Ezek 16; Hos 2). Guzik traces a stream of false worship back to Babel, mentioning the Tammuz cult and the "queen of heaven" (Ezek 8:14; Jer 7:18; 44:17–19). She "sits on many waters," and v15 says the waters are peoples and nations, so she is global and multi-ethnic. Guzik says the harlot cannot be limited to Roman Catholicism, though it doesn't exclude any apostate Christendom. Hocking, quoted by Guzik: the woman pictures the false religion that will dominate the world in the Tribulation.

She rides the beast (v3)

Walvoord (in Guzik): she appears to direct the beast but is really subordinate to it. The Antichrist's system uses religion to unite the world and then discards it. Her clothing is royal and rich, while her cup is full of filth. Johnson (in Guzik): for all her glamour she is just a prostitute.

Drunk with the blood of the saints (v6)

John "wondered greatly." He wasn't surprised that pagan Rome persecuted believers, but he was stunned that the persecution came *from religion*. Walvoord, in Guzik: false religion is always the worst enemy of true religion. Remember that it was the religious leaders who handed Jesus over to be crucified.

The beast who "was, and is not, and will come" (vv8, 11)

This mimics God, "who is and who was and who is to come" (1:8). It also echoes the head with the fatal wound that was healed (13:3). The world wonders, but only those whose names are not in the book of life.

Seven heads, seven mountains, seven kings (vv9–11)

The angel answers John's question himself (v7), so the text speaks first: "Here is the mind which hath wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth. And there are seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he cometh, he must continue a short space. And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth, and is of the seven, and goeth into perdition" (vv9–11, KJV). So the heads are two things at once — seven *mountains* and seven *kings* — and "the mind which hath wisdom" tells me it takes discernment, not a quick read.

Mountains and kings are probably the same picture seen twice. The word is *orē*, "mountains," and in prophecy a mountain is often a kingdom: the stone becomes "a great mountain, and filled the whole earth" (Dan 2:35), and Babylon is a "destroying mountain" (Jer 51:25). Guzik grants that Rome sat on seven hills (as Clarke notes), but he reads the heads as seven seats of world power with a king at the head of each, and the woman riding all of them.

How the seven kings are counted — three readings

- **Seven world empires (futurist — Guzik leans here).** Five fallen by John's day: 1 Egypt, 2 Assyria, 3 Babylon, 4 Medo-Persia, 5 Greece. **6 Rome** — the one that "is." 7 a future kingdom, "not yet come… a short space" (often called a revived Roman-world kingdom). **8 the beast himself** — "the eighth, and is of the seven," the Antichrist's final kingdom growing out of the rest.
- **Rome and its emperors (preterist).** Rome was the city on seven hills, so the first readers heard Rome; the seven kings are a run of Roman emperors, though no one agrees where to start the

count or whether to skip the short-lived ones. Here Rome isn't one head — Rome is the whole beast.

- **Symbolic fullness (idealist).** Seven is completeness, so the heads are the full sweep of godless world power in every age, not seven countable rulers.

The heads run all through the book

The dragon has seven heads and ten horns (12:3), and so does the beast from the sea (13:1) — the beast carries his master's likeness. And Daniel's four beasts add up to seven heads: lion 1, bear 1, leopard 4, terrible beast 1 (Dan 7:4–7). John's one beast gathers all of Daniel's kingdoms into one body.

So what number is Rome, and what number is the heavenly kingdom?

In the empires count Rome is **six** — "one is." The heavenly kingdom has **no number at all**. It is not the eighth; the text gives eighth place to the beast. God's kingdom is not another head on the beast — it stands outside the count and ends it: "In the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed… it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever" (Dan 2:44, KJV), a stone "cut out without hands" (Dan 2:34). "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev 11:15, KJV). The beast's kingdoms are numbered because they are counted out. Christ's isn't numbered because it doesn't end.

Amir Tsarfati (*Revealing Revelation*, with Rick Yohn)

Futurist, pre-tribulation rapture (the church is gone before the Antichrist is revealed, from 2 Thess 2), premillennial — Christ returns bodily to the Mount of Olives and reigns from Jerusalem — and Israel stays central to God's plan. On chapter 17 he reads the harlot as a worldwide false religious system in the Tribulation that persecutes believers, Babylon as both a system and a city (religious here, commercial in ch. 18), and the beast as the Antichrist's government that rides with religion until the ten horns turn and burn her (v16), when he demands worship for himself alone. *I haven't confirmed his exact count of the seven heads — check his chapter on Rev 17 before teaching it in his name.* His framework fits the seven-empires reading.

I hold the count loosely; the point is certain — the beast "goeth into perdition" (v11), and "the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings" (v14, KJV).

Ten kings, one hour, one purpose (vv12–14)

These match the ten horns of Daniel 7:7, 24 and the ten toes of Daniel 2. They rule briefly ("one hour") and hand their authority to the beast, and then they make war on the Lamb. The outcome is never in doubt: the Lamb overcomes because He is Lord of lords and King of kings (19:16). Those with Him are called (by grace), chosen (by election) and faithful (proven in life).

The beast devours the harlot (vv16–17)

Guzik places this around the midpoint of the seven years, when the Antichrist no longer needs the religious system and demands worship of himself alone (13:15; 2 Thess 2:4; Matt 24:15). The striking theological line is v17: "God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose." Even wicked kings, acting freely and wickedly, end up carrying out God's judgment. That is why my workbook lesson calls this chapter *God Eradicates Religion*.

The great city (v18)

In John's day, the city that reigned over the kings of the earth was Rome (Mounce, in Guzik). In the end it is the capital of the world-system, wherever and whatever it is then.

Word study (Greek)

- **harlot — *pornē* (G4204):** a prostitute; with *porneia* (G4202) and *porneuō* (G4203), "immorality / commit immorality" — spiritual unfaithfulness here.
- **mystery — *mystērion* (G3466):** something hidden that God reveals. Her name is a symbol to be explained (v7).
- **drunk — *methuō* (G3184):** intoxicated. The nations are drunk on her wine (v2), and she is drunk on the saints' blood (v6).
- **wonder — *thaumazō* (G2296), with *thauma* (G2295):** "wondered with great wonder" — deep astonishment.
- **abominations — *bdelygma* (G946):** a detestable thing, especially an idol. It is the same word as Jesus' "abomination of desolation" (Matt 24:15).
- **abyss — *abyssos* (G12):** the bottomless pit, the prison of demons (9:1; 20:1–3).
- **destruction — *apōleia* (G684):** ruin, perdition; the beast's destiny (vv8, 11; 2 Thess 2:3, "son of destruction").
- **mountains — *oros* (G3735):** mountain; in prophetic imagery, a kingdom.
- **one purpose — *mia gnōmē* (G1520 + G1106):** one mind, one counsel — a unified world government.
- **called, chosen, faithful — *klētoi* (G2822), *eklektoi* (G1588), *pistoi* (G4103):** the full description of the Lamb's army.
- **desolate — *erēmoō* (G2049):** made a wilderness, stripped bare.

Cross-references

Gen 10:8–10; 11:1–9; Jer 51:7, 13, 25; Ezek 16; Hos 2; Dan 2; Dan 2:34–35, 44; Dan 7:4–8, 24; Rev 11:15; Rev 12:1–6; Rev 12:3; Rev 13:1–18; Rev 19:7–8, 16; 2 Thess 2:3–12.

03 Application

HOW DOES IT CHANGE ME?

KEY VERSE · REVELATION 17:14 (KJV)

14 These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall ★ overcome them: for he is ▲ Lord of lords, and ▲ King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and ★ chosen, and faithful.

Warning to heed — glitter is not godliness

The harlot wears purple and scarlet, gold and pearls, and holds a gold cup, and the cup is full of filth (v4). Religion can look rich, beautiful and powerful and still be spiritual adultery. I want to measure

churches, ministries, teachers — and my own work — by faithfulness to Christ, not by production value.

Sin to confess — the drink that intoxicates

"Made drunk with the wine of her immorality" (v2). False religion works like a drug: it numbs, flatters and makes people feel spiritual while they stay unchanged. I know men who traded the bottle for a religious high that never touched their heart. Lord, keep me sober in Your truth, not drunk on religious feeling.

Example to follow — John's honest astonishment

John "wondered greatly" (v6) that the persecution came from religion. I shouldn't be shocked when the fiercest opposition to the gospel comes from inside religious systems. Jesus was condemned by religious men. Expect it, forgive it, and stay with the Lamb.

Promise to trust — the kingdom without a number

Seven heads, an eighth, ten horns for "one hour" — every power in this chapter is counted, and everything counted runs out. Christ's kingdom isn't on the list because it never runs out (Dan 2:44; Rev 11:15). When I feel ruled by something — a habit, a past, a system, a cell block — I can ask: is this one of the numbered things? Then it has an end. My King has none.

Promise to trust — the Lamb wins

"The Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings" (v14). The world government gets "one hour" (v12); the Lamb gets forever. And God is sovereign even over evil men's hearts (v17). Nothing happening in the world today has slipped out of His hand.

Identity to embrace — called, chosen, faithful

Those with the Lamb are "the called and chosen and faithful" (v14). The first two are God's work — He called me and chose me. The third is my response: stay faithful. That's my word for the men in recovery and the men coming out of prison: you're already called and chosen; now be faithful one day at a time.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, Lamb of God, King of kings — keep me from the gold cup of false religion and from being dazzled by what glitters. Thank You for calling and choosing me. Make me faithful. When religion turns against Your people, help me stand with You and love my enemies. Amen.

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