

Babylon the Great and the Beast

Revelation 17 | Wednesday, October 7

"Come, I will show you the judgment of the notorious prostitute who is seated on many waters..." (17:1)
"These will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings." (17:14)

THE BIG IDEA

The seventh bowl announced Babylon's fall (16:19); chapter 17 reveals who she is. John sees a dazzling woman—purple, scarlet, gold—riding a beast, and the angel unveils what her splendor hides: corruption, exploitation, and the blood of the saints. The lesson: **evaluate power by its character, not its wealth, influence, or apparent permanence.**

I THE GREAT PROSTITUTE: BABYLON REVEALED (17:1–6)

An angel shows John "the notorious prostitute who is seated on *many waters*." The prostitute image is prophetic shorthand for a city that seduces nations (Tyre, Isa 23:15–17; Nineveh, Nah 3:4). "The kings of the earth committed sexual immorality with her"—idolatry, economic self-interest, and political compromise.

The "many waters" are interpreted in 17:15 as _____ — her reach is international. She attracts by offering advantage, luxury, and security, not by coercion alone.

The woman in the wilderness — a deliberate contrast

The scarlet beast, the clothing, and the golden cup

- The scarlet beast — seven heads, ten horns, blasphemous names: continuous with the sea beast (13:1) and the dragon (12:3). She rides it (dependence), yet stays distinct from it (crucial for v. 16).
- Purple, scarlet, gold, jewels, pearls — elite wealth (anticipating the merchants' cargo in 18:11–13). Not extravagance alone: an economy that hides exploitation, even trafficking in human lives (18:13).
- The golden cup — gold outside, "impurities" inside (Jer 51:7). Corruption that does not look like corruption. New Jerusalem also has gold and jewels (21:18–21)—the difference is the *source*: domination vs. the glory God gives.

"Babylon the Great" — a name on the forehead

On her forehead (Revelation's place of identity/allegiance; cf. 7:3; 13:16; 14:1): "Babylon the Great, the Mother of Prostitutes." The word _____ (mystērion) signals the name is symbolic—the ancient city was long gone; it now names another empire of the same character.

Finally she is "drunk with the _____" — the nations drank her wine; now she is drunk on the blood of the faithful. Viewed from earth she looks cultured; viewed from heaven she is bloodstained.

SUPPORTING SCRIPTURES Isa 23:15–17 • Nah 3:4 • Jer 50–51; 51:7 • Rev 12:3; 13:1; 16:19; 18:11–13; 21:9, 18–21

II THE SEVEN-HEADED BEAST (17:7–11) — COUNTERFEIT PERMANENCE

The beast "was, and is not, and is about to come" — a counterfeit of God, who _____ (1:4, 8; 4:8). It mimics the healed wound (13:3) and divine continuity, but its destination is apōleia, _____.

Many see the *Nero redivivus* tradition here—after Nero’s death (AD 68) rumors said he would return. A persecuting ruler dies, but the system that produced him can produce another.

Seven mountains, seven kings

“The seven heads are seven _____” — pointing clearly to Rome (famous for seven hills; cf. 17:18, “the great city that has royal power over the kings of the earth”). They are also “seven kings”—the rulers through whom the empire acts.

CLARIFYING THE DEBATE — “FIVE HAVE FALLEN, ONE IS” (17:9–11)

The language sounds chronological, yet no emperor list is uncontested. Where do you start counting? If Augustus: the five fallen are Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero—making Galba “the one who is” (AD 68–69). If Julius Caesar: Nero becomes the sixth. The Year of the Four Emperors (Galba, Otho, Vitellius) muddies any sequence—some count them, some omit them.

One arrangement (Augustus...Nero, then Vespasian, Titus, omitting the three) makes Titus the seventh who “must remain only a little while” (he reigned AD 79–81)—but it has to drop three recognized emperors.

The “eighth” (17:11) resists all arithmetic: the beast “is itself an eighth... but belongs to the seven.” **Safest teaching conclusion:** John expects his readers to see Roman succession behind the image, but the point exceeds naming seven Caesars—emperors rise and fall; the same beastly power persists; even when it seems to revive, it goes to destruction.

INTERPRETIVE OPTIONS — THE SEVEN KINGS

1) Seven specific Roman emperors. An actual sequence; “one is” = the emperor reigning as John wrote. **Strength:** “five have fallen, one is” sounds like historical succession. **Limitation:** no list stands without disputed assumptions about where to start and whom to include.

2) Symbolic completeness of imperial rule. Seven = the complete succession of imperial rulers, not seven men to name. **Strength:** fits Revelation’s pervasive symbolic “seven” and keeps focus on beastly power. **Limitation:** doesn’t fully explain the five/one/one-to-come distinction.

→ **Balanced:** the seven kings combine historical reference with symbolism. John is thinking of Roman succession, but the point is that emperors come and go while the beast persists through them—distinct heads, one beast.

SUPPORTING SCRIPTURES Rev 1:4, 8; 4:8 • Rev 13:1–3 • Dan 7:7–8, 20–24 • Rev 17:18

III THE TEN KINGS AND THE WAR AGAINST THE LAMB (17:12–14)

The ten horns are ten _____ who receive authority “for _____” with the beast (from Daniel 7). Their rule is real but brief and limited.

- They have “one purpose” — they hand their power to the beast (the political unity behind the gathering of 16:13–16).
- “They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will _____ them” — because He is “Lord of lords and King of kings” (cf. Deut 10:17). Their authority is subordinate to His.
- With Him are the “called, chosen, and faithful” — two allegiances in contrast: the kings give themselves to the beast; the faithful belong to the Lamb. The conflict is about sovereignty and allegiance, not just military force.

IV BABYLON DESTROYED BY HER OWN ALLIES (17:15–18)

- The image draws on Ezekiel 16 and 23—the unfaithful woman whose former lovers become her punishers. Alliances built on power and self-interest are unstable; the system destroys its own.
- Why the woman and beast stay distinct: the beast is coercive power; Babylon is the prosperous culture that rides it. When their interests diverge, the alliance collapses.

“God has put it into their _____ to carry out his plan... until the words of God are fulfilled” (v. 17). The kings pursue their own corrupt aims—for which they remain responsible—yet serve God’s purpose (cf. Assyria, Isa 10:5–15; Habakkuk). Evil’s time is bounded.

The woman is “the great _____ that has royal power over the kings of the earth” (v. 18) — Rome for John’s readers, named “Babylon” because it has assumed Babylon’s character.

SUPPORTING SCRIPTURES Ezek 16:35–41; 23:22–29 • Isa 10:5–15 • Habakkuk • Deut 10:17 • Rev 16:13–16; 17:18

V HOW THE MAJOR SYSTEMS READ REVELATION 17

THE FOUR SYSTEMS ON REVELATION 17

Preterist. Babylon = first-century Rome; the beast = Roman imperial power; seven mountains = Rome’s hills. **Strength:** gives full weight to the original setting; the hills, wealth, and persecution all fit Rome. **Limitation:** matching every king to a specific emperor stays disputed; the beast seems broader than one government.

Historicist. Babylon and the beast = corrupt political-religious power across church history (often the medieval papacy allied with the state). **Strength:** sees that the pattern recurs beyond the first century. **Limitation:** identifications often mirror the interpreter’s own era and can obscure Rome as the first referent.

Futurist. A climactic future Babylon—restored Babylon, a future Rome, or a global system—with ten kings as a future coalition under the Antichrist. **Strength:** takes seriously the chapter’s drive toward the final conflict of ch. 19. **Limitation:** becomes speculative when modern nations, unions, or leaders are read into the symbols.

Idealist. Babylon = the recurring world-city organized around wealth, idolatry, domination, and opposition to God; Rome was one instance. **Strength:** explains why John names Rome “Babylon” and why the chapter still speaks today. **Limitation:** pressed too far, it can detach from the concrete Roman world John addressed.

→ **Balanced:** Revelation 17 works at three levels at once—Rome is the immediate Babylon, “Babylon” is the recurring biblical pattern of imperial civilization, and the pattern drives toward a final concentration and destruction. The symbol extends beyond Rome without losing Rome.

VI WHAT THIS PASSAGE TEACHES US

- Evaluate systems by character, not success — wealth, influence, and permanence are not proof of righteousness.
- Recognize seduction as a form of power — the beast coerces; Babylon attracts. Opposition to God can arrive as opportunity, status, and advantage, not only as persecution.
- Ask what prosperity costs other people — Babylon’s luxury hides exploitation, even the trafficking of human lives (18:13).
- Don’t confuse political usefulness with faithfulness — the kings ally with Babylon only while it serves them.
- Corrupt alliances are inherently unstable — she rides the beast in v. 3; it devours her in v. 16.
- Look beneath appearances — the cup is real gold, its contents corrupt. Revelation is an unveiling.
- Keep confidence when unjust systems look permanent — Babylon appears invulnerable right before John is shown her fall, and even that fall unfolds within God’s sovereignty.

TAKE-HOME TRUTH

Babylon is dressed in purple and gold and seated on a beast—she looks invulnerable. But the golden cup is full of corruption, her prosperity is built on exploitation, and she is drunk with the blood of the saints. The power she rode will turn and devour her, and even that happens “until the words of God are fulfilled.” Wealth, influence, and apparent permanence cannot make a system just—or keep it standing before the Lamb who is Lord of lords and King of kings.