

Revelation 17 - A Woman Rides the Beast

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COURSE COMMENTARY



17:1 - the great harlot

- [the judgment](#)
The great harlot is associated with the city, Babylon ([Rev. 17:5](#), [18](#); [18:21](#); [19:2](#)). Her judgment has been predicted ([Isa. 13](#); [14](#); [Jer. 50](#); [51](#); [Rev. 14:8](#)).
- [the great harlot who sits on many waters](#)
Like Babylon in the Old Testament which dwelt by many waters ([Jer. 51:13](#)), but here the waters are explained as "peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues" ([Rev. 17:15](#)). In the confusion of languages and the scattering of mankind from Babel, her corruption was seeded into all other nations across the globe and throughout history.

17:2 - drunk with wine

- [with whom the kings of the earth committed fornication](#)
The kings of the earth throughout history were intimately involved with her. Fornication is *epo'rneusan* used of physical prostitution and sexual immorality, but also denoting spiritual idolatry ([Hos. 9:1](#); [Jer. 3:6](#); [Eze. 23:19](#); [1Chr. 5:25](#); [Ps. 73:27](#)). This aspect of the Harlot is identical with the city, Babylon ([Rev 14:8](#)). Her practices polluted all nations.
- [the inhabitants of the earth were made drunk](#)
Her practices were *intoxicating* to all the inhabitants of the earth. As went leaders (kings), so went the people. At the time of the end, her drinking partners are the *earth dwellers* which worship the Beast and take his mark. Because they refused to turn to God, He used Babylon against them, *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.* ([Jer. 51:7](#)).

17:3 - a woman on a beast

- [I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast](#)
We don't need to guess who the woman is, the angel tells us: *And the woman whom you saw is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth* ([Rev. 17:18](#)) -- Babylon. The beast is scarlet to identify him with the fiery red dragon ([Rev. 12:3](#)) who empowers him ([Rev. 13:2](#)).
- [having seven heads and ten horns](#)
The beast she rides arose from the sea in [Revelation 13](#) and is empowered by the dragon who also has the same seven heads and ten horns ([Rev. 12:3](#)). Later, we will be told that the heads are kings and that the horns are kings. How are they different? The heads are *sequential kingdoms*, whereas the horns are *contemporaneous kings*. All ten horns are on the *seventh* (last) head.

17:4 - a golden cup

- **purple, scarlet, gold, precious stones, pearls**
Her attire indicates her great wealth. Her wardrobe is mentioned again in the next chapter ([Rev. 18:16](#)). The Harlot is no different from the city. The woman's spiritual idolatry is coupled with materialism and wealth.
- **a golden cup full of abominations and the filthiness of her fornication**
She herself drinks from the cup and also serves it to the nations. Like the Pharisees, the outside of the cup is beautiful (golden), but the inside is "full of extortion and self-indulgence" ([Mat. 23:25-26](#)). Abominations are practices which God particularly hates ([Deu. 18:9-12](#)). "Filthiness" is *aka'tharta*, that which is *impure, unclean*. Her fornication leads to defilement, both of those who participate and their lands ([Ezra 9:11](#)).

17:5 - babylon the great

- **mystery**
"Mystery" is *myste'riion* indicating that which is unknowable by man until revealed by God. The angel will reveal the mystery of her identity and her relationship to the beast in the remainder of the chapter. "Mystery" is not part of her title which is merely "Babylon the Great" ([Rev. 18:2](#)).
- **mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth**
This is a very important verse: she is the *mother* of harlots. She **originated** worldwide harlotry in history. We must not confuse her with the many *daughter harlots* which resemble her. She polluted *them*, not the other way around ([Isa. 57:3](#)). This also speaks of *Babylon* in the sense of its original form as *Babel*, the site of the first king and kingdom under Nimrod ([Gen. 10:8-10](#)).

17:6 - drunk with blood

- **drunk with the blood of saints and... martyrs of Jesus**
The holy apostles and prophets are said to be avenged when she is destroyed ([Rev. 18:19](#)). In this, she identifies closely with the Beast and his image which persecute the saints ([Rev. 13:7, 15](#)). She sits on all nations and all nations are given blood to drink because *they have shed the blood of saints and prophets* ([Rev. 16:6](#)). She is guilty both historically and at the time of the end for her participation in the slaughter of the martyrs ([Rev. 18:24](#)).

17:7 - I will tell you the mystery

- **I will tell you the mystery**
The mystery involves what John sees in the *vision* and is not part of her title. The mystery involves both the woman ([Rev. 17:15-18](#)) *and* her relationship to the beast ([Rev. 17:8-14](#)). This provides the outline for the remainder of the chapter. He carries her now, but later he will throw her off and destroy her ([Rev. 17:16](#)).

17:8 - was, is not, will ascend

- **was, and is not, and will ascend... go to perdition**
The four phases of the king who will rule the seventh head (the last kingdom):
 - 1) *was* - his political rise prior to his wound ([Dan. 9:26-27](#)).
 - 2) *is not* - his death by a mortal wound ([Zec. 11:17?](#); [Rev. 13:14](#)).
 - 3) *will ascend* - his ascent from the dead in his miraculous recovery ([Rev. 13:3](#)).
 - 4) *to perdition* - his destruction at the hands of Christ at the Second Coming ([Rev. 19:20](#)).

- **out of the bottomless pit**
He ascends from the *abyss*, a compartment deep within the earth which is a holding place for demons ([Rev. 9:1](#)). This is his miraculous restoration when he overcomes the two witnesses and receives worldwide acclaim ([Rev. 11:7](#); [13:3](#)).
- **go to perdition**
"Perdition" is *apo'leian*, meaning *ruin, eternal destruction*. He is the *son of perdition* ([2Th. 2:3](#)) who is cast directly into the Lake of Fire by Christ ([Rev. 19:20](#)). He and the False Prophet bypass the Great White Throne judgment ([Rev. 20:12](#)).
- **whose names are not written in the Book of Life**
Perfect tense: *the name has not been written*. Their names were *never written* in the Book of Life (the Lamb's Book of Life, [Rev. 13:8](#)). They are doomed, irredeemable ([Rev. 14:9-11](#)).
- **when they see the beast that was, and is not, and yet is**
"When they see" is a present tense participle, *while presently seeing*. They marvel because they personally see his restoration from the dead. This speaks of the dramatic death and restoration of an individual, not an ages-long restoration of an old empire. It is their personal witness of this entire process--his original life, his death, and his restoration-- which results in their worship.

17:9 - seven heads are seven mountains

- **seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits**
The next verse reveals that the seven heads which are seven mountains are seven kings (representing historical kingdoms). Kingdoms are represented by mountains in Scripture ([Jer. 51:25](#); [Dan. 2:35](#); [Zec. 4:7](#)). These seven mountains will be destroyed by the stone (Messiah) and replaced by the Messianic Kingdom which is destined to become a "great mountain" and fill the whole earth ([Dan. 2:35](#)).
- **on which the woman sits**
The woman sits upon *peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues* ([Rev. 17:15](#)). Her "sitting" speaks of her influence (and possibly her support), not a geographic location--such as the seven hills of Rome.

17:10 - five fallen, one is, one to come

- **There are also seven kings**
The KJV and NKJV are misleading here. Even the Greek in the *Textus Receptus* is best translated like the NASB: "And they are seven kings." The heads = mountains = kings. These kings are not something different or separate from the mountains or heads. The seven are: **1**) Babel (or Egypt), **2**) Egypt (or Assyria), **3**) Babylon ([Dan. 2:38](#); [7:4](#)), **4**) Medo-Persia ([Dan. 2:32](#); [7:5](#)), **5**) Greece ([Dan. 2:32](#); [7:6](#)), **6**) Rome of John's day ([Dan. 2:33](#); [7:7](#)), **7**) Rome yet future ([Dan. 2:33](#); [7:8](#); [9:26-27](#)).
- **five have fallen**
At the time of John's vision, five heads have fallen: **1**) Babel (or Egypt?), **2**) Egypt (or Assyria?), **3**) Babylon, **4**) Medo-Persia, and **5**) Greece.
- **one is and the other has not yet come**
The one which is would be Rome in John's day. The one yet to come is the final form of Daniel's "terrible beast" prior to the Millennial Kingdom ([Dan. 7:19-22](#)).

17:11 - the eighth is of the seven

- **the beast that was, and is not, is himself also the eighth**
The seventh kingdom arrives as a global empire which shall, "devour the whole earth," and out of which, "ten horns... shall arise" ([Dan. 7:23-24](#)). The Beast himself, "shall rise after them" ([Dan. 7:25](#)). He initially reigns over the *seventh* kingdom (head) but after his death and restoration he represents an *eighth* kingdom -- the self-rule of the Beast. He is also an *eighth* horn having overthrown three of the other ten horns: the contemporaneous kings ([Dan. 7:20](#)).
- **he is of the seven**
He is from among the seven, ruling the seventh head (kingdom) before his death and restoration. As a result, he is the very same individual who will self-rule the eighth head (kingdom).

17:12 - ten horns are ten kings

- **the ten horns... are ten kings**
These are the same ten horns Daniel saw in his night vision ([Dan. 7:7, 20, 24](#)). They correspond to the ten toes of Nebuchadnezzar's image ([Dan. 2:40-43](#)). They are future contemporaneous kings which rise from the seventh head (kingdom), and among which the Beast rises as an eleventh ([Dan. 7:20](#)).
- **they receive authority for one hour as kings with the beast**
The horns arise before him, but then give their authority to him. He overthrows three of the horns for unspecified reasons ([Dan. 7:20](#)).

17:13 - power to the beast

- **they give their power and authority to the beast**
The ten kings, motivated by Satan and permitted by God, give their authority to the Beast so that he may be "all in all." The beast gains authority from accepting Satan's offer which Jesus refused ([Luke 4:6](#)). All power and authority and worship will go to the Beast. He will even proclaim himself as God ([2Th. 2:4](#)). Yet, for unknown reasons, he overcomes three of the kings ([Dan. 7:20](#)).

17:14 - war with the Lamb

- **these will make war with the Lamb**
"These will make war" is *peleme'sousin* which speaks of a protracted engagement, not a single battle. This is [The Campaign of Armageddon](#).
- **the Lamb will overcome them**
The Beast appeared to be an overcomer ([Rev. 6:2 13:7](#)), but ultimately the True Overcomer will prevail ([John 16:33](#); [1Jn. 4:4](#); [Rev. 3:21](#)). The kings participate in the ultimate fulfillment of [Psalm 2](#), *The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel against the LORD and against His Anointed saying, 'Let us break their bonds in pieces and cast away their cords from us.'* ([Ps. 2:2-3](#)).
- **those who are with him**
Jesus will return with his saints ([Joel 3:9-14](#); [Jude 14](#); [Zec. 14:4-5](#); [Rev. 19:14](#)). "Saints" is *hagi'ais* = holy ones. This can denote *men* ([Acts 9:13](#)), or *angels* ([Dan. 8:13](#)).

- **are called, chosen and faithful**
Angels are said to be *chosen* (elect), but not *called*. The same terms, *called* and *chosen*, are used of believers by Jesus, *many are called, but few are chosen* ([Mat. 20:16](#); [22:14](#)) by Peter ([1Pe. 2:9](#)), and by Paul ([Rom. 8:28-30](#)). Believers in heaven (raptured saints, tribulation martyrs) will return with Jesus.

17:15 - where the harlot sits

- **the waters... are peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues**
The waters were mentioned in [verse 1](#) and are now explained as a global populace. Her influence went out in the dispersion of mankind due to the introduction of languages in the judgment following the tower of Babel ([Gen. 11:9](#)). Her influence is both *geographic* (global) and *historic* (from early history). She rides the beast with seven heads which is identified with the dragon ([Rev. 12:3](#)) who has had dominion since the fall of man.

17:16 - hate the harlot

- **the ten horns on the beast... hate the harlot**
The MT and NU text have "the ten horns **and** the beast." Many expositors treat the destruction of the Harlot as a separate destruction from that of the city. But as we saw in our discussion regarding [The Great Harlot](#), the Harlot and the city of Babylon are *one and the same entity*. There is no real evidence to make the Harlot a separate ecclesiastical system when the angel tells us she is a city ([Rev. 17:18](#)).
- **make her desolate... burn her with fire**
She will be made "desolate," *just like the city* ([Rev. 18:17, 19](#)). She is burned, *just like the city* ([Rev. 18:8, 17-18](#) cf. [Jer. 51:58](#)).

17:17 - to fulfill His purpose

- **God has put it into their hearts**
God is sovereign over the affairs of history. He turns the hearts of kings according to His purposes--whether they know Him or not ([Deu. 2:30](#); [Ezra 7:27](#); [Ps. 105:25](#); [Pr. 21:1](#), etc.). *My counsel shall stand and I shall do all My pleasure* ([Isa. 46:9-11](#)). God's sovereignty does not negate human responsibility ([Acts 2:23-24](#); [Luke 21:21-22](#)).
- **until the words of God are fulfilled**
"Fulfilled" is *telesthe'sontai* meaning *be brought to completion*. His word is settled in heaven ([Ps. 119:89](#)) but is working out on the earth below. Scripture cannot be broken ([John 10:35](#)) because God stands ever ready to perform His word ([Jer. 1:12](#)). His word will not return without its intended effect ([Isa. 55:10-11](#)).

17:18 - the woman is that great city

- **the woman... is that great city**
The angel attempts to set us straight about the identity of the Harlot. She is not said to be an *ecclesiastical system* or *spiritual concept*, she is a **city** -- *that great city* which we know to be **Babylon** ([Rev. 14:8](#); [17:5](#)). When her identity is so clearly given by Scripture, why search for another? We ignore the definition given by the angel to our own folly.
- **which reigns over the kings of the earth**
Although literal Babylon is currently insignificant, this woman goes all the way back to Babel. Her

influence is flourishing and alive among all the nations, but she will once more become a *literal city* destined for destruction at the time of the end. For it is to the land of Shinar that "Wickedness!" is to be transported when the time is right ([Zec. 5:11](#)). See our discussion concerning the [Identity of Babylon](#).

For additional information on this topic, see the [commentary](#).