

**The Facebook Commentary on Revelation**  
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**Revelation Chapter 17**

**Rev 17 (Introduction)**— Like Daniel 2 and 7, Revelation 17 contains a clearly defined contrast between vision and explanation. The first two verses of the chapter are an extension of the vision in chapter 16. They serve duodirectionally, looking back to the bowl-plagues and looking forward to the vision of the women riding on the beast (Rev 17:3-6a). The rest of the chapter (Rev 17:7-18) involves an angel interpreting the visions of the first six verses to John. In the vision, John is carried to the time of the seven last plagues. In the explanation, he is addressed in terms of his own time and place.

The battle of Armageddon was introduced in a nutshell in the vision of the bowl plagues (Revelation 16:12-21) and aspects of it are then elaborated on in Revelation 17:1-6a. The prophet's reaction to the vision is given at the end of verse six (Revelation 17:6b). Then John's interpreting angel then offers a number of explanations of the vision, some of which leave us more confused than when we began (Revelation 17:7-18). Revelation 17 is as difficult as any passage in the book of Revelation, especially verses 7-11. So we will have to examine it with great care.

Tonstad points out that Revelation 17 builds on a number of scenes earlier in the book. As we will see, there are strong parallels between the woman of Revelation 17:3-5 and the woman of Revelation 12:14-16. The seven-headed, ten horned beast (Rev 17:3) also recalls the sea beast of Revelation 13. And the battle of Armageddon in the sixth and seventh bowl-plagues (Rev 16:12-21) is very important for understanding the battle in the latter part of chapter 17 (Rev 17:14-16). In fact, one could say that the announcement of Babylon's collapse (16:19) forecasts the main theme of Revelation 18, as well as 17, the final and complete fall of Babylon; first in the form of a woman/prostitute (chapter 17) and second in the form of a great city (chapter 18). Chapters 17 and 18 elaborate on how Babylon falls. Within chapter 17 itself, woman Babylon is joined as a central character by the beast. The two together are seen or described as interacting throughout the chapter. The woman is distinct from the beast (Rev 17:3), collaborates with the beast (Rev 17:1-3), and is destroyed by the beast (17:16).

**Rev 17:1-- One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who sits on many waters.** It is fair to wonder why the book of Revelation continues when you have such a climactic

expression as “It is done” in 16:17. As Tonstad points out, the story itself may be over, but the telling of the story is not over. In fact, plague angels stay in view (Rev 17:1; 21:9), offering interpretations of John’s visions as the book moves to its conclusion. The fact that the interpreting angel is identified as one of the seven bowl-angels indicates that the vision to follow will offer further information about one of the seven bowl plagues. But which of the seven angels is in view here?

Three of the bowl-plagues have something to do with water. The second bowl falls on the sea, the third bowl falls on the rivers and springs, and the sixth falls on the Euphrates River. Since the waters of verse one are associated with the woman, and she is later defined as Babylon (17:4-5) the most likely identification of the angel is as the angel of the sixth bowl, the angel who caused the Euphrates River to dry up. Ancient Babylon was a twin city divided by the Euphrates and often described in relation to it (Jer 50:33-38; 51:13, 36). That the woman represents a world power is evident from Revelation 17:18, where she “rules over the kings of the earth.” That she has religious concerns is evident from the parallels with the woman of chapter 12, echos of the High Priest’s vestments, and the fact that she persecutes the saints (Rev 17:4-6). See notes on those verses.

**Come, I will show you. . . .** The word translated “come” (Greek: *deuro*) is not the same in the Greek as the one used in the four horsemen (Greek: *erchou*—Rev 6:1, 3, 5, 7), even though they seem to function in the same way. The most exact parallel is found in Revelation 21:9. Once again, there is an unspecified angel out of the seven bowl-angels who gives the command. In Revelation 17:1 the command is followed by a description of the woman who is called Babylon. In Revelation 21:9 (ESV), the command is followed by a description of a city (the New Jerusalem) which is called “the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” The parallel between the two “women” is self-evident. There is a contrast between two types of women and two types of city. The prostitute is closely connected with the beast, and the bride is closely connected with the Lamb.

**. . . the great prostitute. . . .** The reference to Babylon as a prostitute recalls a long tradition in the Old Testament prophets. Prostitution is often used there as a metaphor for alliances among nations or syncretism in religion. In Isaiah 1:21-23 prostitution is a metaphor for Judah’s decline in faithfulness to Yahweh, exhibited in increasing unethical practices. In Isaiah 23:15-17 Tyre’s attempts to recover former glory through alliances with the nations of the world is derided as prostituting herself. Something similar is said of Assyria in Nahum 3:4. In Jeremiah, Israel and Judah’s worship at hill shrines instead of the temple is labeled prostitution (Jer 2:20-22; 3:1-8). Multiple references to Israel’s “prostitution” with the Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Assyrians, among others, occur in Ezekiel 16 and 23. In Hosea 2:1-5 prostitution represents Israel’s failure to be satisfied with just one God (cf. Hos 4:7-15).

The vision of Revelation is creative, however. Babylon in the Old Testament represented oppression and rebellion against God, but the metaphor of prostitution was not used in relation to her. The vision of Revelation 17 combines the imagery of historical Babylon with the imagery of prostitution, something the OT prophets never did.

Babylon itself features prominently in the Old Testament prophets. She symbolizes self-glorification and pride, through accumulated wealth, power and culture (Isa 13:19; Jer 50:31-

32; 51:13; Dan 4:29-30). She is also renowned for cruelty and oppression (Isa 14:3-6; Jer 50:15), she was called “the hammer of the whole earth” (Jer 50: 23, ESV). She was also known for idolatry and defiance of Yahweh (Jer 50:29, 38; 51:5). As a nation, Babylon was useful to God at one point as a discipliner of His people (Jer 25:9; 27:6-11), but as soon as Babylon over-stepped her commission, God responded in judgment against her (Jer 25:12). Babylon was a fitting image for the wealthy and the religious who would defy God in the final era of earth’s history. In her greatness and her hostility to Israel (Judah) she was a fitting type for the end-time opponents of the “saints”. Her first appearance in the book is in 14:8, where Babylon’s fall is announced in advance.

. . . **who sits on many waters.** . . . The phrase “many waters” builds on Jeremiah 51:13, where Babylon is called “you who dwell by many waters.” Since Babylon was located in a desert, the Euphrates River is the obvious choice for the “many waters” of Babylon. In Revelation 17:1, the reference to “many waters” in the context of a prostitute later named Babylon (17:5) clearly recalls the Euphrates River, previously mentioned in the sixth bowl (16:12). Babylon was constructed in such a way that the Euphrates was incorporated into the city’s defenses (like a castle’s moat). So Jeremiah 50 and 51, the waters of the Euphrates came to symbolize the support system of Babylon, that which made Babylon strong (Jer 50:35-38). Babylon included her officials and wise men (50:35), her prophets and warriors (50:36), her horses, chariots, mercenary soldiers, and her great financial resources (50:37). Similarly, the “many waters” support the prostitute of this verse, and they represent the civil and secular powers of the world that support end-time Babylon (17:15). If, as we will see, Babylon in Revelation represents a world-wide alliance of religious power in the end-time conflict, the waters of Babylon (Euphrates River) represent the civil, secular, military and economic powers of the world that throw their support behind end-time Babylon in the final conflict called Armageddon in 16:16.

**Rev 17:2-- With her the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and those who live on the earth have become drunk with the wine of her fornication.** “The kings of the earth” and “those who live on the earth” are parallel to the waters of the first verse, they are other ways of describing the end-time political alliance. The kings of the earth commit adultery with the prostitute and the people of the earth are drunk with her wine. The inhabitants of the earth are the unrighteous generally, “kings of the earth” refers to their political leaders. The combination of adultery and drunkenness builds on the first mention of Babylon in Revelation 14:8 (NIV) where she “made all nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries.” Lust and drunkenness have at least one thing in common. In both cases of lust and drunkenness, people don't think clearly. In that state they make bad decisions that do not form a long-term basis for relationship. When the lust or the drunkenness passes, people usually regret the decisions they have made “under the influence.”

This verse is not describing literal fornication, fornication here is a metaphor for a temporary union between the religious and political alliances of the end-time world. Calling it fornication expresses God’s disapproval of this union and also indicates something of the motives that unite prostitute Babylon with the political powers of the world. Adultery occurs

when both parties feel that their union would be a benefit to them. Both Babylon and the leaders of the nations expect good things to come from their union. The nations enter into agreements with the prostitute because they think they will be better off. The people are not as motivated as their leaders, but they go along with what is happening because they are not thinking clearly. As we will see before the chapter comes to an end, the union between Babylon and the nations will turn out to be short-lived.

In the Old Testament, the language of fornication and adultery was a metaphor for rebellious alliances between Israel and pagan nations. In Ezekiel 16, Jerusalem is a rejected infant who God raises, nourishes, and dresses. When she reaches the appropriate age He marries her, but she scorns the marriage covenant and unites with anyone who comes by--symbolized by other nations. She becomes an unusual prostitute willing to go to any lengths to get attention from the other nations, in terms of the metaphor, a prostitute who is willing to pay for sex. "Every prostitute receives a fee, but you give gifts to all your lovers, bribing them to come to you from everywhere for your illicit favors. So in your prostitution you are the opposite of others; no one runs after you for your favors. You are the very opposite, for you give payment and none is given to you." Ezekiel 16:33-34, NIV. The language of adultery is also associated with idolatry in Ezekiel 23:37.

There is a possible allusion to Jeremiah 51:7 in this verse. "Babylon was a golden cup in the LORD's hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine; therefore the nations went mad." Jer 51:7, ESV. In Revelation 14:8 and 17:2, it is Babylon which offers the cup to the nations of the world. In Jeremiah 51:7, on the other hand, the hand of the Lord is seen behind Babylon's cup. While Babylon is the author of the deceptive drunkenness, Babylon's actions are seen as accomplishing God's purpose (see Rev 17:17 and 2 Thess 2:11-12 for similar expressions). When the intentional actions of enemy nations accomplishes God's purposes in the world, they are often described as acting at God's direction.

The chapter implies that the nations of the world have made common cause with each other before this. Peace among the nations may be a good thing in most circumstances, but it is not necessarily so. One historical example would be the peace treaty signed between Hitler and Stalin in 1939. Each of them signed the treaty because it served their own purposes over the short run. Long-term outcomes were worse as a result. So Revelation 17 describes with many names (so far: "waters," "kings of the earth," and "those who live on the earth") a world-wide, political, military, and economic alliance ultimately in opposition to God and to those who follow God. This alliance is drawn into the support of Babylon through self-interest and confusion. Through the attention that Babylon lavishes on them, she gains control of the kings of the earth.

**Rev 17:3-- (The angel) carried me away into the desert by the Spirit. And I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, which was full of the names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns.** The angel implied here is the same as verse 1, the angel of the sixth bowl-plague. In this verse we move from an audition (where John hears from the angel) to a vision (in which John sees what the angel wants him to see). In this contrast, John once again pursues his literary strategy of "heard" and "saw". As in Revelation 1:10-12, 5:5-6, and 7:4, 9, what John

hears and sees are different, sometimes opposite (as in 144,000 Jews and a great multitude of Gentiles), yet they are two symbolic ways of highlighting the same basic idea. The trumpet and the voice of the Son of Man refers to the same thing (Rev 1:10-12). Both lion and Lamb refer to Jesus (Rev 5:5-6), and the 144,000 and the Great Multitude both refer to the end-time people of God (Rev 7:4, 99). See comments on those earlier verses. In Revelation 17 John hears of the prostitute sitting on many waters (17:1), but when he looks he sees a woman sitting on a scarlet beast. The woman and the prostitute are both descriptions of end-time Babylon, as is evident in verses 4-5. The many waters (Euphrates River—16:12; 17:15) and the beast both represent the civil, secular powers of the world. So the vision that was promised in verse 1 is transformed, but is essentially the same vision. The beast is the same as the kings of the earth and the inhabitants of the earth in verse 2. Revelation, particularly in this part, uses a variety of different symbols to represent essentially the same thing, thus simplifying the way that the symbols are interpreted.

. . . **(The angel) carried me away into the desert.** . . . Instead of seeing a prostitute sitting on waters, John is taken to a desert to see a woman sitting on a scarlet beast in the desert. The word scarlet (Greek: *kokkinon*—see also Matthew 27:28; Hebrews 9:19; Rev 18:12, 16). In the ancient world this color could only be obtained from a small insect found in Spain and in Western Asia, thus it was very expensive. Clothing in this color would only be worn by the very rich. The woman wears it in 17:4.

The woman is clearly distinct from the beast, so theories that both the woman and the beast represent Rome do not make sense. In the words of Josephine Ford, “Rome cannot be seated upon Rome” (Anchor Bible, *Revelation* [1975], 285). This woman is called Babylon the Great in Revelation 17:4-5, hence is the same woman as the prostitute of verse 1 sitting on the many waters of the Euphrates River, the river of Babylon. A woman in the desert recalls Revelation 12:14, NIV: “The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half time, out of the serpent's reach.” The parallel suggests that the woman of Revelation 12 is part of the history of end-time Babylon.

The serpent/dragon in Revelation 12 attempted to conquer the woman by force (Rev 12:15-16). Having failed by force, he refuses to give up (Rev 12:17) and appoints surrogates to utilize deception as well as force (Rev 13:13-14). The appearance of the woman in the desert here as Babylon suggests that the deception succeeded. It is no surprise, then, that John is astonished by what he sees (Rev 17:6). The great end-time opponent is in some way related to one of the symbols of the saints. The end-time enemy of God has characteristics of the people of God (see comments on Rev 17:4-5). This is likely an elaboration on the concept of end-time deception brought up earlier (Rev 13:13-14; 16:13-14). That the faithful woman of Revelation 12 could end up as a prostitute is no surprise to the careful reader of the Old Testament. In Ezekiel 16, Jerusalem is represented as a woman chosen and favored by God (Ezek 16:6-14), who abandoned her faithfulness to God and descended into adultery and prostitution (Ezek 16:15-19). This is echoed in Isaiah 1:21, NIV: “See how the faithful city has become a harlot.” This transformation qualifies as a “mystery” (Rev 17:5). From a New Testament perspective, the difference between a faithful Christian and a hypocritical one, is often indistinguishable (Matt

13:24-30), but it is not so with God (2 Tim 2:19). One of the strengths of Christian faith has been its ability, grounded in the biblical text, to critique itself, as seems to be the case here (see also Acts 20:29-31; 2 Thess 2:4; 1 John 4:1-2).

. . . **full of the names of blasphemy.** . . . The beast from the sea had a “name” (singular) of blasphemy on its head, the beast’s body is here **full of the names of blasphemy**, signaling an escalation in opposition to God over time. While a woman in the desert would lead the reader to suspect a symbolic reference to the faithful people of God, her close association with the beast and its blasphemies points in the opposite direction. The scarlet of the beast recalls the color of the dragon in Revelation 12:3. The color red is associated with sin and with blood in Isaiah 1:15-23. Babylon is drunk with the blood of the saints in Revelation 17:6. The blasphemous names, on the other hand, recall the sea beast of Revelation 13 (verses 5-7). The sea beast was a counterfeit of the work of Jesus Christ. That counterfeit work is carried on in Revelation 17 by both the prostitute Babylon and the scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns. But in this case, they are not two different symbols for the same thing, they are acting in consort, but represent very different entities. See Rev 17:1-3 (Excursis on the Three End-time Alliances in the Final Battle). Blasphemous names means that the beast is seeking to defame God’s reputation, just as the sea beast did. It seeks to take on prerogatives that belong to God alone.

. . . **by the spirit.** . . . This is the fourth time in the book of Revelation that John is carried away “in” or “by” the Spirit (see also Revelation 1:10, 4:2, and 21:10). He encountered the heavenly Jesus in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day (Rev 1:10ff.). He saw the enthronement of Christ in the Spirit in Revelation 4 and 5. He will yet be taken to a mountain top to view the bride of the Lamb, the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:9-10). Ezekiel had a similar experience (Ezek 8:3).

. . . **having seven heads and ten horns.** . . . The scarlet beast is described as having seven heads and ten horns. This recalls the dragon (Rev 12:3) and the beast from the sea (Rev 13:1), which also had seven heads and ten horns. But whereas the dragon had crowns on its heads and the sea beast had crowns on its horns, no mention of crowns is made with regard to this beast. It is possible that the beast has no crowns because it has given its sovereignty to the prostitute. The political powers of the world have given up their power for a short time in order to be in the service of end-time Babylon.

**Rev 17:1-3 (Excursis on the Three End-Time Alliances in the Final Battle)**—Revelation 17 is one of the most difficult passages in the whole Bible, particularly verses 7-11. I once ran a doctoral seminar on Revelation 17:7-11. We worked through the chapter in detail in the original language. Then I assigned each of the five students to do a major paper on some aspect of verses 7-11. When all had presented their research and critiqued each other, we concluded that we were LESS certain about the meaning of the passage than any of the five had been coming in to the class. One characteristic of a difficult text is that the more you study it, the more challenges to understanding you find.

One of the difficulties in Revelation 17 is the proliferation of images. Just in the first three verses you have a woman, a prostitute, many waters, the kings of the earth, the inhabitants of the earth, the scarlet beast and its seven heads and ten horns. Many related

images have been observed in the sixth and seventh bowl-plagues. In the verses that follow we will add Babylon, the saints, the martyrs of Jesus, seven mountains, and seven kings. If each of these images has its own unique meaning, this jumble of images would be indecipherable. But, fortunately, there are a number of interconnections between these images that simplify our understanding to some degree.

What is clear in Revelation 17:1-3 is that the images in these three verses portray forces in opposition to God and to those who will be loyal to Him. There is a prostitute that has relations with the kings of the world and a woman who rides on a scarlet beast. But, as we have seen, the woman and the prostitute are not images for different things, these are different images for essentially the same entity. John “heard” of a prostitute sitting on waters and committing fornication with the kings of the earth (Rev 17:1-2). Then he “saw” a woman named Babylon the Great sitting on a scarlet beast. What John hears and sees may be different in the vision, but they represent the same thing in reality (Rev 5:5-6). The woman is named “Babylon” and is also called “the mother of prostitutes” (Rev 17:5). So she is clearly not a different entity than the prostitute of verses 1 and 2.

The connections between woman Babylon and both the woman of Revelation 12 and the High Priest of the Old Testament tabernacle, as we will see, indicate that end-time Babylon represents a world-wide alliance of religious authority in opposition to God. It is a combination of three end-time entities; the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet (Rev 16:13-14, 19, cf. the unholy trinity of Revelation 13). It is a persecuting power that turns “the saints” into “the martyrs of Jesus” (Rev 17:6). This religious alliance is named by many names in the book of Revelation (woman Babylon, city Babylon, the Great City, the woman who rides the beast, the great prostitute), but all these images represent a single world-wide alliance of religious authority at the End.

There are four prominent women in the book of Revelation. There is Jezebel, a leader of the church at Thyatira (Rev 2:20). While she is a leader in the church, she is depicted as an opponent of what Jesus wants to accomplish there. There is the woman of Revelation 12. Since she is in opposition to the dragon, she represents the faithful people of God in the middle period of history between the birth of Jesus and the end of all things. There is the woman named Babylon, which we are talking about here, and there is the bride of the Lamb, the New Jerusalem (Rev 19:7-8; 21:9-10). Two of these female images are in opposition to God (Jezebel and Babylon) and two of the images are positive (the woman of Revelation 12 and the bride of the Lamb). So Jezebel as an earlier, negative female image in Revelation is a forerunner of Babylon. In the Old Testament, she represented forces within Israel that opposed the prophets of Yahweh and wanted to replace Yahweh with Baal as the God of Israel (1 Kings 16:30-31; 18:4, 13; 19:1-2; 21-25). She was a religious figure within Israel that operated against the worship of Yahweh within Israel. So in Revelation Babylon represents a worldwide alliance of religion in opposition to God at the end of time. Similarly, the woman of Revelation 12 is the forerunner of the bride of Christ.

Since there are parallels between the women of Revelation 12 and 17 and also parallels between Babylon and the New Jerusalem, as we will see, these female images all come together in the depiction of Babylon in this chapter. While Babylon the prostitute is parallel to

Jezebel, corrupt leader of the church at Thyatira, she is also in contrast to the end-time bride of Christ and the faithful woman of chapter 12. So like the other three women, she is a spiritual leader. She is associated in the context of Revelation with images of true, Christian faith. Babylon represents an end-time, worldwide confederacy of false religion. It is no wonder that John is astonished when he sees what Babylon has become (Rev 17:6). The great rival of God in the end-time crisis wears a Christian face. This is one of the most startling messages of Revelation. Mere membership in a Christian church or institution does not guarantee faithfulness to God at the end of time. Entities that have served God and responded to his leading in the past will place their power and influence into the service of evil at the end of time. Whether or not John perceived the woman of Revelation 17 as the same woman we saw in chapter 12 (after all, the end-time people of God is called the remnant of the woman's seed, not the woman [Rev 12:17]), the imagery of the great prostitute indicates that there is a Christian twist in the end-time opposition to God.

The religious nature of end-time Babylon is further underscored by her fate in this chapter. She is burned with fire. In the law of Moses the penalty for fornication was stoning (Deut 22:20-27). But there was an exception to this rule. If the woman involved was the daughter of a priest, she was not to be stoned, but to be burned with fire (Lev 21:9, cf. Gen 38:24; Rev 2:20). In the imagery of Revelation woman Babylon is not only dressed in the garb of the High Priest (Rev 17:4), she is treated as the daughter of a priest would be treated in similar circumstances. Babylon is clearly a religious figure in the book of Revelation. She represents a world-wide alliance of religious institutions that find themselves in opposition to the Lamb and those who are with Him (Rev 17:14). People and religious institutions who were once faithful to God now join those who are in opposition to Him and His people.

While such a worldwide, ecumenical religious confederacy will likely include the major institutions of non-Christian religion, the end-time religious confederacy has a particularly Christian face. A major piece of that deception is the degree to which historic Christianity will be co-opted in service of the designs of Satan. Those who have prided themselves in fidelity to the religious institutions of the world will one day find themselves in opposition to the very God they thought they were worshiping! In the End, Babylon masquerades before the world as the institutional representative of the true church of God. Everything is turned on its head.

There is a second world-wide alliance in opposition to the end-time work of God. In Revelation 17:1, prostitute Babylon is sitting on "many waters". We have noted that the waters of Babylon are the Euphrates River (Rev 16:12) and that these are defined later in the chapter as "peoples and multitudes and nations and languages" (Rev 17:15). The waters of Babylon represent the civil and secular powers of this world that support the end-time religious alliance. They are, therefore, parallel to the "kings of the earth" and "inhabitants of the earth" that commit fornication with the prostitute in verse 2. The scarlet beast of verse 3 reminds us of the sea beast of Revelation 13, a counterfeit of the work of Jesus Christ. But while the scarlet beast wears the names of blasphemy, it primarily represents another way of describing the worldwide political confederacy. This becomes clear from the explanation of the vision offered in Rev 17:7-18. The scarlet beast has seven heads and ten horns. The seven heads represent seven kings (Rev 17:9-10). The ten horns represent ten kings (Rev 17:12). So the beast itself is

the sum total of political and military power in the world (Rev 17:12-13). The Euphrates River and the scarlet beast are two different ways of describing the same thing. The blasphemy in which this beast engages occurs as part of its union with the aims and activities of Babylon.

The relationship between the prostitute and the political confederacy is the central feature of Rev 17:2 (NIV): “With her the kings of the earth **committed adultery** and the inhabitants of the earth were **intoxicated** with the wine of her adulteries.” The kings of the earth do not commit adultery with the prostitute in a literal sense. This relationship represents some sort of union between the worldwide religious and political confederacies at the end of time. The purpose of the union between the prostitute and the kings of the earth is worldwide dominance and control. In the Old Testament, the language of fornication and adultery was used for unhealthy alliances between Israel and the pagan nations around her (Ezek 16:33-34). Adultery in Revelation 17:2, therefore, not only represents the union between Babylon and the kings of the earth, it describes the political rewards the kings of the earth receive for accepting Babylon’s rule. Through the attention that Babylon lavishes on them, she gains control of the kings of the earth. These rewards include the economic benefits which the kings of the earth lose when Babylon falls (Rev 18:9-10, 19).

The “inhabitants of the earth” represent the opponents of God in general, not just the leadership. While the leaders of the political confederacy commit adultery with the prostitute, the inhabitants of the earth go along because they are intoxicated. Their condition is more one of drunkenness and confusion than it is one of conscious yielding to the political/religious alliance. Lust and drunkenness, therefore, are metaphors Revelation uses to describe the people of the world at the end of time (Rev 14:8). When it comes to lust and drunkenness, people don’t think clearly. They make bad decisions that don’t lead to lasting relationships. When the lust is over or when the alcoholic high is past, people usually regret what they have done. That will prove to be the case in Revelation 17 as well.

This worldwide political alliance has been named by other names in the sixth and seventh trumpets. In addition to “the Euphrates River” (Rev 16:12), they are “the kings of the whole inhabited world” in Revelation 16:14. They are “the cities of the nations” in Revelation 16:19. The political alliance is also featured in the explanation portion of chapter seventeen (Rev 17:7-18). It is represented by the seven heads and the seven mountains (17:9), and also the seven kings (17:10), the ten horns, and the ten kings (17:12). So the worldwide political alliance is named by many names in Revelation, but all these images represent a single, worldwide, political entity in the final crisis. The distinction between the religious and political confederacies is maintained in Revelation 18, where Babylon, the Great City, is distinguished from from “the kings of the earth” (18:9), “the merchants of the earth” (18:11) and the shipmasters and sailors (18:17); all of whom mourn the fall of Babylon.

So Rev 17:1-3 describes a pair of confederacies united in their opposition to God and His people. There are symbols of Babylon associated with symbols of secular, military and political power (beast, kings of the earth, and Euphrates River). That Babylon is the dominant partner is evident from three parallel images: The prostitute sitting on many waters--the Euphrates River (v. 1); the prostitute in union with the kings of the earth (v. 2); and, a woman riding on a scarlet beast (v. 3). For a short time Babylon is in a dominant position, using the rulers of the earth and

their resources to achieve her own ends of destroying the Lamb and those who are with Him (Rev 17:14). This is why the beast has no crowns, unlike the dragon of chapter 12 and the sea beast of chapter 13. At the time depicted by the vision, the beast has given its authority to Babylon for a short time. The political and military powers of the world have surrendered their authority to the worldwide institutions of religion.

There is also a worldwide unity of the “saints” in Revelation. That alliance makes no appearance in Revelation 17:1-3, but it is visible elsewhere in this part of Revelation. It comes into view in verse 6, where Babylon is described as drunk with the blood of the “saints” and of the “martyrs of Jesus”. Those “with the Lamb” are described as the “called, chosen and faithful” in verse 14. In Revelation 16:15, the faithful are called those who keep watch and hang on to their garments. The people of God in Revelation are elsewhere called the 144,000 (Rev 7:4; 14:1), the great multitude (7:9; 19:1), the remnant (12:17), those who follow the Lamb (14:4), and the saints (14:12). There is evidence that these are not discreet titles, but that they are many ways to talk about the one end-time people of God. For example, we have shown elsewhere that the 144,000 and the great multitude are two ways of describing the same group in chapter seven. Similarly, the 144,000 text in Revelation 14:1 alludes to Joel 2:32, where the same language applies to the “remnant”. So the 144,000 in Revelation 14 takes up the story of the remnant in 12:17. The end-time people of God in Revelation are named by many names, but these are different ways to describe essentially the one people of God at the end.

So according to Revelation 17, there will be three, great, worldwide alliances in the world at the very End, the alliance of the saints, an alliance of religious institutions, and an alliance of worldwide secular and political power. (1) The confederacy of the saints will probably not be organized in institutional terms. It is likely that any religious institutions which are truly faithful to God will be destroyed in the run-up to the battle of Armageddon. Any religious institutions that survive will do so on account of being co-opted into the aims of Babylon. The confederacy of the saints will be made up of kindred spirits that find each other out of every nation, tribe, language and religious institution (they will all have “come out of Babylon”; Rev 18:4). The confederacy of the saints will be distinguished by its unlikeness to all other confederacies on earth. Its “kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36-37). It will not fight as the institutions of the world fight (2 Cor 10:3-5). It will be made up of the sealed, the ones that God know to be His (2 Tim 2:19).

(2) The confederacy of religion is a worldwide alliance of religious authority. While the pope would be the logical choice to head such a confederacy, Babylon will in fact be much bigger than any single religion (Rev 16:13, 19). The union of religious institutions will occur out of a need to co-ordinate spiritual effort in the face of significant challenges. These challenges may include environmental issues (Rev 16:1-11) and the breakdown of law and order (terrorism and crime, cf. Rev 6:3-4), as well as spiritual opposition on the part of the true people of God. While not detailed in Revelation, these challenges must be considerable for the fractious institutions of religion to lay aside long-standing differences (just think of the barrier between the papacy and Islam on account of the Crusades!). But in a unique situation, the religious leaders of the world set aside their differences in the hope of changing the world in a direction they all hope to benefit from.

(3) The confederacy of secular and political power will be as great a surprise as the confederacy of religious institutions. For millennia, human beings have exercised corporate selfishness through their political institutions. Such institutions would rather experience the loss of great numbers of people, including women and children, than give up political leverage over against other political entities. Yet God will so orchestrate events (Rev 17:17) that the political powers of the world will find greater reason to work together than to fight one another. This would be a most encouraging development were it not for the opposition to God and His people that results when this political unity is placed in the service of Babylon. For a short time, the worldwide political alliance places its power and resources in the service of the great religious alliance. The final outcome of this grand alliance is addressed toward the end of Revelation 17.

**Rev 17:4-5-- And the woman was dressed in purple and scarlet and adorned with gold, precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand filled with abominations and the unclean acts of her sexual immorality. A name was written on her forehead, "Mystery, Babylon the Great, the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth."** Many English translators place the writing on her forehead in all capital letters, as one might do with a monumental inscription or title. John here is describing the woman who was riding on the beast in verse three and sitting on the waters in verse one. Her appearance here supports the idea that her riding the beast indicates a position of power over the beast, at least for a time. The scarlet (Greek: *kokkinon*) she wears also recalls the color of the beast in verse three (the dragon of 12:3, by way of contrast, is fiery red (*purros*) in color. The scarlet is also appropriate to the fact that Babylon is "drunk with the blood of the saints and of the martyrs of Jesus in 17:6. The word translated "adorned" above is actually the verb for gold, the prostitute is "gilded" (Greek: *kechrusômenê*) with gold, precious stones and pearls.

The prostitute's attire seems modeled on that of the High Priest of ancient Israel: The ephod contained purple, scarlet, and gold (Exodus 28:5-6); the ephod and breast plate contained precious stones (Exodus 28:9-13 and 17-21); the cup in this case may represent the drink offerings of the sanctuary (Exodus 29:40-41 and 30:9; Leviticus 23:13, 18, and 37); and, the forehead inscription resembles the title HOLY TO THE LORD on the High Priest's miter (Exodus 28:36-38). Babylon, wearing the garb of Israel's High Priest, represents an end-time reality, a people once faithful to Jesus Christ are now in opposition to Him and His people. Babylon represents God's people gone astray from their mission (Ezekiel 16). While end-time Babylon will include every institutional religion in the end-time world, her primary identity will be a Christian one. The proliferation of gold and jewels on Babylon is parallel to the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:11, 18-21. Babylon is the antithesis of the New Jerusalem. She is also the antithesis of the heavenly Jerusalem, which Paul says is the church's "mother" (Gal 4:26). Notice also the appearance of the King of Tyre (and by inference Satan) in Ezekiel 28:13. See also the description of a prostitute in the early Jewish work *Testament of Judah* 13:5. Babylon bears a mixture of positive and negative imagery.

The golden cup in her hand recalls the drunkenness of verse two. Her attraction to the people of the world is part delusion and part "sexual immorality." In Jeremiah 51:7-8, Babylon

is “a golden cup in the hand of the Lord”. While no mention of the cup is made in Revelation 14:8, 17:2, or 18:3, she makes the nations drink of her wine until they are drunk. So the cup is associated with the High Priest and with drunkenness, fornication, and persecution (17:6).

The concept “mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth” means she is the ultimate expression of the realities she portrays. The language of these verses shockingly combines priestly images with images of abominations and immorality. The term “abominations” (Greek: *bdelugmatôn*) is related to the emotion of disgust, it represents “revolting things”. In using the word “mystery” (Greek: *mystêrion*) to describe prostitute Babylon, the author of Revelation borrows a common term for the gospel in the New Testament (Rom 16:25-27; Eph 3:3-7; Col 1:26-27; Rev 10:7, see also Rev 1:20). The use here parallels 2 Thessalonians 2:7, which speaks of the “mystery of iniquity”. This is further evidence for a Christian-themed deception in John’s portrayal of Babylon here. She is presenting a counterfeit of the gospel, just like the three frogs of Revelation 16:13-14. What is shocking to John is not that a woman portrays sexual immorality, but that she bears such a resemblance to the pure woman of Revelation 12! And just as Babylon is seen here in close connection with the nations and people of the world, the mystery of Ephesians 5 is the close connection between Christ and the church (Eph 5:31-32).

The mention of an inscription on her forehead recalls the common practice in Rome of prostitutes wearing a placard on their foreheads displaying their “professional” name (see also Jeremiah 3:3). It is not clear grammatically if the word “mystery” (Greek: *mystêrion*—a neuter word) applies to the whole inscription or whether it is part of Babylon’s name—“mystery Babylon”. Since “Babylon” (Greek: *Babylon he megale*) is treated as feminine and “mystery” is neuter, I would be inclined to separate the terms. “Mystery” applies to the whole inscription on Babylon’s forehead. Her actual identity is a great surprise, given how she looks and where she is located (the desert). Only those with divine discernment will fully understand who Babylon is and what she stands for.

The concept of apostasy from the true faith goes back to the Tower of Babel where the descendants of Noah were scattered and given different languages (Gen 11:1-9). Just as ancient Babel (the Hebrew name for Babylon) was the place of great opposition to God after the Flood, end-time Babylon is the mother of prostitutes and the source of everything that opposes God at the end of history. From the beginning, Babylon has been associated with rebellion against God.

**Rev 17:6-- And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. And I was amazed, gazing at her with great amazement.** This verse represents a transition in the chapter. The first sentence of verse six concludes the vision of 3-6a, which was introduced in verses one and two. The second part of this verse describes John’s reaction to the vision of a woman (building on the woman of Revelation 12) who ends up turning on the true followers of Jesus. Verse seven moves into an explanation of the earlier vision. An angel comes to John and first explains the beast (Rev 17:8-11), then the ten horns (17:12-14), then the waters of verse one (17:15-16) and finally the woman herself (17:18). This “explanation” has proven even more confusing than the vision over the centuries. It may be the most difficult part of Revelation to interpret.

**And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.** The verse begins with a simple sentence in the Greek, “And I saw the woman” (*kai eidon tēn gunaika*). The rest of the sentence is a lengthy clause introduced by a Greek present participle, “drunk” (Greek: *methousan*). The participle functions like an adjective describing the woman. So John saw the “drunk with the blood . . . martyrs of Jesus” woman. So the word “drunk” pulls the rest of the clause together like a single adjective. In verses four and five John gives a visual description of the woman of verse three. In verse six he describes her behavior, she is acting like a person under the influence of too much alcohol. But in this vision, the drunkenness is not literal, it is a metaphor to express the relentlessness of her blood lust. While the woman has godly features (dressed like the High Priest, parallels to the woman of Rev 12), her actions are driven by hatred of the true God and of those who follow Jesus. Her true character is in the service of Satan, the Destroyer (Rev 9:11).

**. . . drunk with the blood of the saints. . . .** In verse two the woman made the inhabitants of the earth “drunk” (Greek: *emethusēsan*) with the wine of her fornication. In this verse the woman herself is “drunk” (Greek: *methousan*) with the blood of the saints. The implication in both cases is a lack of clear thinking. The inhabitants of the earth are confused about the prostitute’s identity and intentions. She herself likely thinks her destruction of the saints is doing God a favor (John 16:2—note the priestly implications of the Greek *latreian* in that verse). A parallel image is in Jeremiah 46:10, ESV, where the prophet describes the battle of Carchemish, in which Egyptian losses were so great that the poetic prophet writes metaphorically of “the sword” drinking “its fill of her blood.”

Although prostitute Babylon is in the desert and her dress resembles the High Priest, she is clearly described as a power that opposes the true people of God. She is the enemy of the end-time confederacy of the saints and destroys those who bear testimony to Jesus. This period of severe persecution is probably related to the death decree announced in Revelation 13:15.

**And I was amazed, gazing at her with great amazement.** The noun and the verb are based on the same root word in Greek. “And I was amazed (Greek: *ethaumasa*), gazing at her with great amazement (Greek: *thauma*).” Tonstad translates that John “was extremely horrified with a great horror.” The vision of prostitute Babylon upsets John as much as the vision of Daniel 8 disturbed Daniel (Dan 8:27). John does not reveal the cause of his extreme astonishment here. One possibility is that John is startled at the enormity of Babylon’s bloodshed (on that, see paragraph below). But that doesn’t fit with the text. He is amazed at what she looks like, not at what she has done. It is possible, then, that he was expecting to see the judgment of the great prostitute (Rev 17:1) and is startled to see her instead in all of her glory and attractiveness (17:4-5). But more likely than either of those options, he expected a woman in the desert to represent the faithful people of God and is startled to see the woman glorified as Babylon and in brutal opposition to the saints. It is, perhaps, telling that in Revelation 12:17 God’s faithful people are not called woman, but instead remnant. The greatest end-time opponent of the Lamb and His faithful followers turns out to have a Christian face, meaning that its surface identity in the world will be as the church. But in God’s eyes, her words and actions reveal an underlying hostility to God, the gospel, and the followers of the Lamb.

Many scholars see the persecution of the saints as evidence that Babylon should be

understood as the Rome of John's day. But studies by top-ranked scholars like Adela Yarbro Collins and Leonard Thompson point out that there is little contemporary evidence for massive persecution of Christians in the empire during the reign of Domitian (81-96 AD). While there is evidence of some persecution (such as possibly John's exile on Patmos), killing on a large scale does not seem to have occurred. And the reports of persecution in the 80s and early 90s that we do have come from historians in the court of Trajan (98-117 AD), who helped usurp the throne after Domitian's death. Such historians would have every reason to make Trajan's predecessor look as bad as possible. So seeing this persecution as a prophecy of conditions in the end-time (along with Rev 13:15-17) makes much more sense.

**Rev 17:7-18 (Introduction)**—This part of Revelation 17 moves from the vision (17:1-6) of the woman/prostitute/Babylon sitting/riding on the waters/beast to an explanation of the vision (17:7-18). Based on the history of interpretation of this chapter, it would appear that the explanation has raised more questions than it has provided answers. Revelation 17:7-11, in particular, is as difficult to interpret as any other passage in the Bible. The explanation is given in such an obscure manner that it can only be understood by minds possessed of special, divine wisdom (Rev 17:9). But there is one observation, about apocalyptic prophecy in general, that may prove to be particularly helpful in unraveling the complexities of this explanation. Normally, in biblical apocalyptic, a vision can take the seer to any time and any place, past, present or future. But the explanation, in order to make sense to the seer, must be grounded in the seer's time and place. The interpreting angel first explains some things about the beast (17:8-11), then the ten horns (12-14), then the waters of verse one (15), and finally the woman herself (16-18). This has important implications for the interpretation of the chapter.

In spite of numerous challenges, scholarship has tended to focus here on the idea of the beast as a resurrected Nero, coming from the east to reclaim his throne at the head of the Roman Empire. While there is evidence that such an idea existed at the time Revelation was written (so-called *Nero redivivus* myth), whether that idea fits the evidence of Revelation 17:7-18 is another matter. Tonstad points out that the beast that "was, is not, and yet is" is in deliberate contrast with the God of Revelation, who "is, and was, and is to come" (Rev 1:4, 8; 4:8). To contrast the threat of Nero with the God of the universe is a serious mismatch. Of all conceivable characters, would John choose Nero as God's ultimate opponent? The book of Revelation itself offers a much more appropriate candidate, Satan (Rev 12:9; 20:1-3). The "is not" of the beast (Rev 17:8, 11) more likely corresponds to the "went away" (Rev 12:17) of the dragon (who is Satan, the ancient serpent—Rev 12:9) earlier. Instead of working overtly, Satan goes undercover in Revelation 13 and now returns for one final attempt to undermine God's purposes in the final conflict (17:11). The one who works in the shadows of the world's great powers will come out into the open (or be exposed) for the concluding battle.

**Rev 17:7-- The angel said to me, "Why are you amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast who is carrying her, the one who has the seven heads and the ten horns.** The use of the article with "angel" (Greek: *ho angelos*) points back to the angel of verse one, the sixth bowl-angel (see notes on Rev 1:1). The same angel that introduced the vision of

Revelation 17:1-6 now returns to John to give an explanation of the vision. The angel responds to John's amazement (17:6) with a rhetorical question, implying somewhat of a rebuke. John should not be amazed. Explanation is coming. The angel will explain the mystery of the woman and the beast that carries her. The angel's question is parallel to the question of the elders in Revelation 7:13. Each question introduces an explanation.

The explanation here begins in verse eight with an explanation of the beast and its seven heads. John does not seem to have been as perplexed by the beast as he was by the woman, but the angel intends to explain both, because the two are inseparable in terms of the vision itself. Prostitute Babylon derives her power and authority from the support of the beast. So understanding the beast is an important key to understanding end-time Babylon.

**Rev 17:8-- The beast which you saw was and is not and is about to come up out of the Abyss and go to his destruction. Those who live on the earth, those whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world will be amazed when they see the beast which was and is not and is to come.** The interpreting angel begins to explain the beast here. We have seen that the beast of this chapter represents a worldwide, secular-political unity at the end of time. As with earlier beasts, he is identified—he once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss. A similar description--is, was, and is to come--applies to God (Revelation 1:4, 8 and 4:8). The combination--was, is not, and will come up--seems to be a counterfeit of the True God and His earthly government. As such, it may not necessarily indicate sequence. It may simply indicate a parody of the beast's pretensions to be like God. If this three-fold formula is intended to be sequential, it would be grounded in John's time (which is the normal expectation in apocalyptic explanations of prophetic visions). In that case, the beast John is describing would not actually exist in John's day. But that is hard to match up with the sequence of the seven heads on verses nine and ten. These heads represent the beast's repressive rule during different periods of history. But in verses nine and ten the sixth head of the beast is alive and well in John's day, as opposed to the "is not" of verse eight. We will have more to say about this issue when we get to the seven heads below.

The beast coming "up out of the Abyss" recalls Revelation 11:7 and also the locusts coming up out of the Abyss in Revelation 9:2-3. Then there is mention of the "angel of the Abyss", who is clearly Satan, the Destroyer (Rev 9:11, cf. Isa 14:20). So the Abyss is the headquarters of Satan and also the place where demons are restrained by God so that they cannot do what they want on earth (Luke 8:31). Given this background, Revelation 17 portrays a demonic element lurking behind the secular-political powers of the world. In the words of Tonstad, "Revelation seems to blend the identities of the dragon and the beast" (*Revelation*, 247). When the beast comes up out of the Abyss, the full end-time manifestation of Satan's character (as seen in Revelation 16) is unleashed on the world (see 2 Thess 2:8-12). He is seeking to regain his role as "prince of this world" (John 12:31). But this appearance is only for a short time and then he goes to his destruction. This last phrase anticipates Revelation 19:20, where the beast and the false prophet are thrown alive into the lake of fire.

The idea of a worldwide political union would be familiar to John from previous history. There were a series of four secular kingdoms (Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome) that largely

controlled the biblical world leading up to the time of Revelation and the fourth was a reality in John's day. The kind of "world-wide" political union John had experienced would cease for a time and be reconstituted in the final battle of Armageddon. The last period of earth's history would be largely a time of political division. But that time of division would end before the End. The beast would come back into view before its final destruction (Revelation 19-20).

In verse six John was "amazed (Greek: *ethaumasa*) with great amazement (Greek: *thauma*) as he gazed at the prostitute. The inhabitants of the earth, on the other hand, are "amazed" (Greek: *thaumasthêsontai*) at the beast. Those who view the resurrection of the beast will be just as astonished as John was when he viewed the woman riding on the beast. In today's world, world-wide political union is not a reality (or even close to it). A true "united nations" at the End will be a big surprise. This amazement finds a parallel in Revelation 13:3. When the beast is resurrected after his deadly wound, the whole world is "amazed" (Greek: *ethaumasen*) at its reappearance. The parallel with chapter thirteen is sealed by the language of "names . . . not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world" (see Rev 13:8). The resurrection of the beast of Revelation 17 is parallel to the resurrection of the beast in chapter thirteen. In either case, those whose names are in the book of life will find nothing admirable in either beast.

The concept "was, and is not, and yet is" occurs twice in this verse with an interesting difference. The first two parts ("was, and is not") are identical (Greek: *ên kai ouk estin*). It is the third part of the phrase where the difference lies. The beast who was and is not "is about to come up out of the Abyss" (Greek: *mellei anabainein ek tês abussou*). This is paralleled by the similar phrase at the end of the verse: The beast who was and is not "is to come" or "will be present" (Greek future indicative: *parestai*). This is different from Revelation 1:4, where God is also spoken of as "is to come", but with a different Greek word (Greek: *ho erchomenos*—present participle of "coming"). *Parestai*, instead, is a cognate of *parousia*, the most common term for the second coming of Jesus in the New Testament. If this was intentional on John's part, the resurrection of the beast is not an unremarkable future event, but will involve a counterfeit of the return of Jesus as an attempt to deceive the world in the final crisis (see also 2 Thess 2:8-10).

**Rev 17:9-- Here is the mind that has wisdom: The seven heads are seven mountains, the woman is sitting upon them. . .** The concept of "mind" (Greek: *nous*) represents the bodily organ of conscious life and understanding. Ideally, it is trained to control the actions of the body (Rom 7:23) and to discern good from evil (Eph 4:17-24). It is the part of the body where decisions are made (Rom 14:5).

The call for wisdom here (Greek: *hôte ho nous ho echôn sophian*) is a more expanded form of the similar sentence in Revelation 13:18 (Greek: *hôte hê sophia estin*—see also the use of *hôte* in Rev 13:10). The Greek word for wisdom (*sophia*) is a common female name in English, Sophia. In Revelation 13:18, this sentence represents a call to correctly interpret the number 666. In this verse it is a call to understand correctly the seven heads or seven mountains of the beast. It is interesting that a statement like this occurs in connection with two of the most challenging concepts in the entire book. But the phrase seems to tie these concepts

together in some way. The concept of 666, therefore, may have something to do with the seven heads of the beast in Revelation 17. Both seem to represent a final development of Satan's opposition to God in the last days of earth's history.

The Greek word for wisdom (*sophia*) played a special role in the Old Testament book of Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar directs his chief of staff to seek out Hebrew young people who are skillful in all kinds of wisdom (Dan 1:4-- LXX: *sophia*). In the Septuagint, the wisdom of Daniel and his three chosen friends is confirmed in Daniel 1:17, 20 and 5:11,14. But the key place in which the word appears is in Daniel 2. In Daniel's prayer, God is confirmed as source of all wisdom (Dan 2:20—LXX: *Sophia*, see also Rev 5:12; 7:12). But He also is the One who gives wisdom (LXX: *sophian*) to the wise (*sophois*-- LXX: Dan 2:21, 23). That wisdom does not belong to Daniel, it is given him by God (Dan 2:30). So the wisdom that occurs in the book of Daniel is not human wisdom but a special wisdom provided by revelation from God. That suggests that in Revelation 13:18 and 17:9, the solution to the exegetical problems will be based in revelation more than in calculation. Going to history may be part of the solution, but what one chooses out of that history must be compatible with divine revelation. It may be tempting for the English reader of Revelation to tie this wisdom to Daniel 12:10, where "the wise will understand." But in both Hebrew and Greek, different words are used for "the wise" (Hebrew: *hammaskilim*; LXX: *dianooumenoi*) Daniel 12:10.

Seven is the number of totality and completion in Revelation. Here there are both seven mountains and seven kings (17:10). In Greek, the word often translated "hills" in this verse is actually "mountains" (*orê/oros*). While the word for mountain (Greek: *oros*) can also be used for a hill, when the two are distinguished, as in Luke 3:5, the Greek word *bounos* is used for hill. So the meaning here is somewhat ambiguous. If seven hills are in view, it could be a reference to Rome, the city set on seven hills. In fact, during Domitian's reign, the festival of *Septimontium* celebrated that very geographical reality. But it is unlikely that this popular reference was John's intention here.

For one thing, the Greek word *opos* is translated "mountain" everywhere else it appears in Revelation (Rev 6:14-16; 8:8; 16:20; 21:10). That the mountains or hills here are not to be taken literally is clear from verse 10, where they are also seven kings. Secondly, the seven mountains/hills of Revelation 17 are sequential rather than contemporary (Rev 17:10). While most commentators are confident that they know what the seven "hills" mean, but they are all over the map as to what the seven kings mean. The two concepts are probably of equal difficulty. Third, if the understanding of the seven hills is that obvious, why is there a call for special wisdom in relation to their meaning? "Here is the mind that has wisdom" is another way of saying, "Don't fall for the obvious, think a little deeper here!" Fourth, elsewhere in the Bible each mountain refers to a nation or an empire in its own right (Isa 13:4; Jer 51:25; Dan 2:35, 44; Zech 4:7). The beast of Revelation 17 is an end-time kingdom or empire. But its seven heads/mountains represent various secular/political powers that have dominated the world over time.

The woman sitting (Greek: *kathetai*) on these seven mountains is certainly not intended to be taken literally. It is a much more awkward image than the woman sitting on a beast (17:3—Greek: *kathêmenên*) or even on the waters (17:1, 15). As we have noted earlier, all three

of these images are to be understood as different ways of saying essentially the same thing. The Euphrates River (Rev 16:12), the waters of verse one, the beast of verse three, and the seven mountains of this verse, are all parallel images, representing the secular-political powers of the world. When the governmental powers of the world lend their support to Babylon, the final conflict of earth's history is set in motion. The plainest meaning of these images is that end-time Babylon will rely on a visibly worldwide political alliance to accomplish her mission against God and His people at the End.

**Rev 17:10-- . . . and they are seven kings. Five have fallen, one exists now, and one is yet to come, and when he comes it is necessary that he remains for a short time.** The seven kings here are distinguished from the ten kings of verse 12. The seven are consecutive, the ten come to power together and pass off the scene together. Just as mountains often represented kingdoms in the Old Testament, kingdoms are often referred to in the person of their king (as is the case in Daniel 2 and 7. So the seven kings are parallel to the seven mountains. After introducing them the interpreting angel quickly offers a chronological explanation of the seven. They are placed in three groups, each introduced by a Greek article. First are "the" (Greek: *hoi*) five who have fallen, then comes "the" (Greek: *ho*) one who now is, then there is "the" (Greek: *ho*) one who is yet to come. Tonstad attempts to tie the latter two (the sixth and seventh heads of the beast) to the beasts from the sea and from the land in Revelation 13. His strongest evidence is Revelation 13:11. The beast from the land is "another" (Greek: *allo*). The seventh beast is "the other" (Greek: *ho allos*) who comes after the "one who is". I often find Tonstad's work both provocative and convincing. In this case the evidence seems a bit thin to me. But it is worthy of careful examination (see Tonstad, *Revelation*, 249-251).

The beasts of Revelation each come with something of a pedigree. The pedigree of the sea beast went back to the ancient kingdoms of Daniel 7, the lion, the bear, the leopard and the dramatic fourth beast with its ten horns and little horn (Rev 13:1-7). The pedigree of the land beast was described with milder imagery that has no roots in ancient prophecy (Rev 13:11). This verse contains the pedigree of the end-time beast. The seven hills/mountains and the seven kings are all consecutive, representing a series of world-wide political powers through history which are the model for the beast of the end-time. The beast itself belongs to no age in particular. It is a power that has risen up in some form in nearly every age. So the seven heads represent the successive culminations of the world power of the beast.

Can we identify the now—the "one is"? The biblical principle that I find most helpful in answering that question is that God meets people where they are. Prophecies are given in the time, place and circumstances of the prophet receiving the revelation. When the prophet gets an explanation of a prophecy, it is given in terms of his time rather than some point in the future, unless clear evidence in the explanation indicates otherwise. Explanations are not limited to the present, but where time is involved in an explanation, the time of the prophet is the reference point. For example, in Daniel 2 Daniel says to Nebuchadnezzar, "You are the head of gold" (Dan 2:38). It would be ridiculous to take from this exchange that Daniel was referring to some future king at some future time. Then in 2:45 Daniel says "The Great God has shown the king what will happen in the future." From Daniel 2:39-44, the explanation concerned the

future from Nebuchadnezzar's perspective, but the explanation was still grounded in Nebuchadnezzar's immediate understanding. God's purpose in the prophecy was to inform Nebuchadnezzar regarding his role in God's plans and what would follow his reign. Given that example, it is reasonable to conclude that unless a prophetic explanation gives a compelling signal that the time frame of the explanation has shifted away from the prophet's time, the "one is" of this verse would be the Rome of John's day.

If the "one is" represents the Rome of John's day, then the five that had fallen would be five great empires out of the Old Testament. Three candidates are ready to hand in Daniel two and seven; Babylon, Persia, and Greece. These were the great super powers of Daniel's prophecies. Two additional great powers dominated much of the biblical history of Israel. Egypt was the great power that enslaved Israel for hundreds of years. After the Exodus, Egypt was still the power with the greatest influence in the Levant. But in the time of the divided kingdom, after the reigns of Saul, David and Solomon, Assyria played an increasingly powerful role in Canaan and its surroundings. One could say that Assyria and Egypt were the original Kings of the North and South. So if the "one is" is the Rome of John's day, the five previous powers, in chronological order, would be Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece. What all five had in common was that they were oppressors of Israel. Egypt enslaved them, Assyria destroyed the northern ten tribes, Babylon took Judah into captivity, Persia almost wiped out the remnants of Judah during the time of Esther, and Antiochus Epiphanes of Greece sought to wipe the Jewish religion from the face of the earth. The Rome of John's day was little better.

According to the text, all five of these empires are "fallen" (Greek: *epesan*). The term for "fallen" in the LXX is consistently used for the violent overthrow of kings or kingdoms (Isa 21:9; Jer 50:15; 51:8; Ezek 29:5; 30:6). The fall of Egypt is outlined in a number of places in the Old Testament. A prominent one that describes Egypt's fall in prophetic poetry is Ezekiel 29:1 – 30:26. The fall of Assyria, on the other hand, is similarly described in graphic, prophetic poetry in Nahum 3:1-19 and other places. The fall of Babylon is forecasted in poetic detail in Jeremiah 50:1 – 51:64 and many other places. Daniel describes its fall in more narrative, historical terms in Daniel 5. The fall of Persia is predicted in Daniel 8:3-7, 20-22, 10:13 and 11:2. And the fall of the Grecian empire of Alexander is predicted in Daniel 11:4. So the rise and fall of these five candidates for the "five are fallen" are accounted for in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The one who "has not yet come" would come after the Roman Empire and be the equivalent of the beast from the sea in Revelation 13. The medieval church, though naming the name of Christ, was also a heavy persecutor of God's faithful people. All this history prepares the way for the introduction of the final manifestation of the beast, the "eighth."

To remain for a short time (Greek: *oligon auton dei meinai*) recalls the knowledge of the devil in Revelation 12:12. He knows that he has a short time (Greek: *oligon kairon echei*). That short time would run from the enthronement of Christ (around 31 AD) to the final battle of earth's history. So the "short time" of 12:12 should not be taken literally or quantitatively. It means that the devil's time is now limited. Similarly, the "short time" of 17:10 should not be taken literally or quantitatively. The time of the seventh head would also be limited, it would continue only as long as God allows it to. The mention of a little time (Greek: *mikron chronon*) in Revelation 20:3 is less helpful for Revelation 17 (see also *chronon micron* in Revelation 6:11

and also Rev 1:1, 3; 2:16). The period of 20:3 refers not to the thousand years, but the period after it, when Satan is released once more to deceive the nations. Revelation gives not hint as to how long that “short time” will last.

**Rev 17:11-- And the beast, who was and is not, he is an eighth, but he is one of the seven, and he will go to destruction.** The “was and is not” recalls verse 8, where the beast is twice described in terms of “was and is not”. David Aune (*Anchor Bible*) notes that this expression was widely used as an epitaph of those who were once alive and now no longer are. But in this case, the story is not over. In verse 8 the beast “will come” and “is about to come out of the abyss”. The expression “he is an eighth” is emphatic (Greek: *autos ogdoos estin*), perhaps an echo of the little horn of Daniel 7 and 8. The end-time power that comes after the seventh is called an eighth power, yet he is also one of the seven. The eighth is not actually another head, it is the beast itself. The lack of an article (“an eighth” not “the eighth”) shows this is not the eighth in a series (like the other seven), but similar to the others in character and quality. The presence of an eighth is surprising in a book that makes so much of the number seven. So in some sense this final, beast power is distinct from the other seven powers, something new, yet it is one of the seven. Ellicott suggests that the beast has been smitten in all seven heads of its power, but will arise in one final death throes at the end, seeming to be an eighth power. The beast does not “fall” as did the seven, he “goes into destruction.” There will be no more world powers like the ones that have fallen.

Tonstad suggests that we take the “is not” with a grain of salt in that the sixth head “now is”. The beast never lacked representation in the world even though there was a time when it “is not”. It might be absent from history in one sense, but it is not non-existent. There may be an intentional parallel here with the deadly wound of the sea beast in Revelation 13:3. And as noted earlier, the beast returns “from the Abyss” (Rev 17:8), so there is also a demonic element embedded in this imagery, a mimicking of the divine who is and was and is to come.

By now it should be evident that the more closely you look at the Greek of this passage (Rev 17:7-11), the more puzzling the imagery becomes. It may be helpful to see these verses as identification passages like the ones for the sea beast (Revelation 13:1-7); the land beast (Revelation 13:11); and the two witnesses (Revelation 11:3-6). When a new character appears in the book John often hits the pause button and describes the character visually, following by a brief outline of its history prior to the vision. What would be different this time around is that the identification passage does not come at the point of introducing the character (17:3), but somewhat after the introduction of the beast and its rider.

**. . . the beast, who was and is not, he is an eighth, but he is one of the seven. . .** The strange announcement of this verse immediately raises the question, which one of the seven is “re-incarnated” as the eighth? Is the beast of the end-time a renewed Babylon, a reborn Rome, or a resurrected Papacy? If the seventh head is parallel to the pre-history of the beast from the sea (Rev 13:1-7—and the Little Horn before it—Dan 7:21-25), the eighth would be parallel to the sea beast’s “re-incarnation” at the time of the End (Rev 13:12-18). Or since the beast is united with Babylon in the vision, the Babylonian head (the third in my accounting) might be the one being reborn. Since Rome dominates the world of John’s day (17:18), perhaps he is

seeing an end-time equivalent of the Roman Empire's role in persecuting the saints. The information in Rev 17 itself does not settle the issue between the three options. The parallels with Rev 13 seem the most helpful. The end-time beast would then be a re-incarnation of the seventh head, the beast from the sea. One thing is clear. The end-time beast reflects the character and functions of the earlier political powers, yet is distinct in point of time.

. . . **he will go to destruction.** The word for "destruction" (Greek: *apôleian*) is frequently used with "to" (Greek: *eis*), a directional term signifying an unwelcome destination. The "wide gate" of Jesus' analogy "leads to destruction" (Greek: *eis apôleian*). The same phrase is a synonym for death in Acts 25:16: "It is not the manner/custom of the Romans to deliver any man to die/destruction" (KJV/NKJV) before meeting his accusers face to face. Romans 9:22 speaks of vessels of wrath prepared "for destruction". Those who shrink back from faith end up in destruction (Heb 10:39). The man of lawlessness in 2 Thessalonians (2:3) is also called the "son of destruction" (Greek: *ho huios tês apôleias*), a phrase also applied to Judas in John 17:12.

In Rev 17, the phrase "goes to destruction" (*eis apôleian hupagei*) indicates that the great religious/political alliance symbolized by the beast is doomed from the start, in spite of the earthly impression that it is all powerful, and resistance is futile. The beast will appear for a time and then go to destruction. That destruction is likely a reference to what happens to these earthly powers in the context of the Second Coming (Rev 19:17-21, cf. 17:14). The beast's destructive purpose fails on account of the intervention of Christ.

**Rev 17:7-11 (Summary)**-- To summarize, this section begins with the announcement by John's angel interpreter that he will explain the vision (17:1-6) of the woman and of the beast with its seven heads and ten horns. Verses 8-11 focus on the beast and its seven heads. It may not be necessary to understand all the details of this passage to catch the main point. The passage describes the pedigree of a world-wide, end-time political power that functions much as the seven previous political powers did in the course of earth's history. John evidently lives in the period of the sixth, looks forward to the seventh, after which will come the eighth. In many ways, the explanation is more confusing than the vision itself was. Fortunately, the verses that follow seem to be somewhat simpler and clearer.

**Rev 17:12-17 (Introduction)**—Revelation 17:1-6 is a vision of a prostitute/woman/Babylon who sits on waters, rides a beast and colludes with the kings of the earth. Revelation 17:7-18 is an angelic explanation of the vision that often seems much harder to explain than the vision itself. The first part of that explanation (17:8-11) focuses on the beast and its seven heads. The latter part of the explanation focuses on the ten horns of the beast (17:12-14), the waters upon which prostitute Babylon sat (17:15) and finally gets to a brief explanation of the woman herself (17:18). Along the way there are cryptic references to a great end-time war between the beast/horns and the Lamb (17:14) and the final outcome of the conflict (17:16-17). We turn now to the role of the ten horns in these final events.

**Rev 17:12-- The ten horns which you saw are ten kings, these have not yet received a kingdom, but they receive authority as kings for one hour with the beast.** Over the last

chapter of Revelation we have encountered the kings of the east (16:12), the kings of the whole inhabited world (16:14), the kings of the earth (17:2), the seven kings (17:10), and now the ten kings (17:12)! Unlike the seven kings, the ten kings do not seem to be consecutive, they come to power together, they exercise dominion together, and they go out together. As one pictures the beast, with its seven heads and ten horns, one might get the impression that the ten horns are scattered fairly evenly across the ten heads. But whoever they are, they are not an entity that existed in John's day. They do not come into play on the world scene until the seventh head has passed off the scene. They are an end-time character without a pedigree. They receive their dominion along with the beast in the last period of earth's history, the time of the "eighth", earth's final crisis. It is not until the beast rises in support of Babylon that they come into play.

**. . . receive authority as kings for one hour. . .** The word "for" here is interpretive on my part. The Greek does not have a preposition here. It simply states "they are receiving (*lambanousin*—present indicative) authority as kings one hour (*exousian hês basileis mian hôran*) with the beast." The "one hour" serves as an adjective to "authority". The present indicative "receive" (Greek: *lambanousin*) expresses a duration of time in the present. At the time of their rising up, the ten horns receive "one hour authority" in alliance with the beast. There is a similar grammatical usage in Revelation 20:2, where Satan is bound "for" a thousand years (Greek: *edêsen chilia etê*). The one hour in 17:12 is a very short time in the prophetic picture, short in comparison with the long history of great powers on earth. This "one hour" is contemporary with the reign of the beast and their exercise of power is in conjunction with his. So the "one hour" applies to the beast's final reign as well as the ten horns. Whoever the ten horns are, their support of the beast is the linchpin in establishing the beast's worldwide authority.

What we learn in this verse is that, while the beast represents world-wide secular/political power in service of Babylon, it is not a true empire, but rather a collection of more regional powers that band together for a common purpose in the final crisis (Rev 17:13, 17). The beast and its ten horns together are an aggregation of major powers in the world rather than a single, universal empire. The worldwide political unity at the end of time may be something like the world unity that was achieved for a very short time after September 11, 2001. Sympathy for the United States after al Qaeda's brutal attacks led to surprising co-operation from nations like Russia and even Iran for a time. That unity did not last long, but it was very real for a period of a few months, at least. End-time movements are likely to be rapid ones, so interpreters of prophecy should be careful not to be too specific ahead of time, lest focus on prophecy obscure the real deal when it comes.

Who are these ten horns? At first glance this reference seems to be an echo or an allusion to the ten horns in Daniel 7:7, 24. In both places those ten horns seem to be an outgrowth of the old Roman Empire. These would be part of the sixth head or possibly the seventh. But the ten horns here are clearly end-time, much later than the ten horns of Daniel. So they should not be interpreted within the time frame of Daniel. In Revelation 17 they are end-time entities. Since Hebrew numbering is often rounded off, one should probably not make too much of the number ten. The actual grouping of nations the prophecy points to could be

more or less than ten. It is probably helpful to remember that prophecy is often best understood only during and after the time of its fulfillment (John 13:19; 14:29). The exact identity of the ten kings may prove obvious in the end-time context, but ahead of time it is probably speculative to be too certain of its meaning. What is reasonably clear is that it represents a sub-block of nations politically or economically powerful enough to swing the whole world one way or the other. Entities in today's world that come to mind are NATO and the G-7 nations. Each of these would be powerful enough to lead a world coalition but not powerful enough to act on its own in opposition to the rest.

**Rev 17:13—These have one purpose, and they give their power and authority to the beast.** As

I understand Revelation 17, the imagery is projecting three worldwide alliances at the end of time. An alliance of the "saints", an alliance of religious institutions, and an alliance of worldwide secular and political power. This verse describes how the secular/political alliance (represented earlier by the scarlet beast) comes together, forming a true united nations. That this alliance is against the Lamb and those with Him is clear in the next verse (17:14). But this alliance ultimately turns on the prostitute/Babylon (17:16).

The distinction between the beast and the ten horns may be carried over into Revelation 19:19. There the beast and the "kings of the earth and their armies" (Greek: *tous basileis tês gês kai ta strateumata autôn*) are listed. Whether the beast "and" (Greek: *kai*) the kings of the earth are distinct or identical in 19:19 is somewhat unclear. The Greek *kai* ("and") can express distinction ("and" or "also"), but it can also express identity ("namely"). The earlier reading (the beast and the kings of the earth are somewhat distinct, building on 17:12-13) seems more likely to me.

The concept of "one purpose" is a translation of the "one mind" (*mian gnômên*) in the Greek. I chose "purpose" because "one mind" here does not so much express common knowledge as it expresses agreement or common purpose. This interesting expression is paralleled exactly in 17:17 (*mian gnômên*). Both verses express the unity of purpose that the ten horns and the beast have. What makes verse 17 particularly interesting is the idea that the purpose of the ten horns is also aligned with God's purpose (Greek: *tên gnômên autou*). The actions of this verse, while performed by the intention of the ten horns, also fulfill the intention of God. Since the ten horns and the beast ultimately serve the purpose of Satan, this alignment with God's purpose is truly startling. The conclusion of the cosmic conflict fully respects the freedom and purpose of Satan while still in the end accomplishing God's purposes for this world and the universe.

The ten horns represent a special subgroup among the nations which provides the decisive move in the creation of the political unity. Its move to align with the political unity is the decisive moment in its creation. This gathering of secular/political power is parallel to the gathering of the kings of the whole inhabited world in Revelation 16:14. In that passage, the three frogs emanating from the unholy trinity are the precipitating force in the gathering. Here the precipitating force is of a sub-group of the world's political powers. If this understanding is accurate, time will eventually reveal the exact identity of these ten kings that give their power and authority to the end-time political confederacy represented by the beast. As mentioned

earlier, current groups like NATO or the G-7 would represent the kind of economic and political heft this passage seems to imply. This confederacy is the very last phase of the beast's power. It submits to the control of the prostitute/Babylon for "one hour", a short time.

**Rev 17:14-- These will make war with the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings-- and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.**

The battle described in this verse anticipates the fuller account in 19:11-21. There the ones with the Lamb are depicted as riding from heaven with Him (titled Faithful and True there) on white horses. The political alliance is described in Revelation 19:18 as kings, captains and mighty men. Here the ten kings (as the leading edge of the political alliance) make war with the Lamb, demonstrating exactly whose side they are ultimately on. This verse summarizes the final battle of earth's history in a nutshell, much as Revelation 12:17 did earlier. The ten horns and the beast, representing the dragon, Satan, make war with the Lamb and those who are with him (the equivalent of the remnant in 12:17). The final battle is outlined in other terms in 16:12-21 and 13:13-17.

While military language is used to describe this battle in 12:17, 16:12-21, and 17:14, chapter 13 suggests a different kind of war, one where the dividing line is not military or political, but is rather grounded in spiritual commitments and character development. The division in Revelation 13:13-17 is between two different kinds of character (the image of God or the image of the beast) and two different readings of the Bible's instructions on the day of worship. In the words of Stefanovic, the battle is theological rather than political, and spiritual rather than military.

Preparation for the war of this verse is described in 16:13-16, and the outcome is given in the seventh bowl (16:17-21). In this much briefer account, the end is not in doubt and the outcome of the battle is immediately clear. The Lamb wins and the powers of the world lose. In a way, this verse provides an answer to the mocking question of 13:4, "Who is able to wage war with (the beast)"? 17:14 answers, "The Lamb". But although the Lamb is seen to overcome the political alliance here, the description of the end-times is not finished. The war (Revelation 17:14) destroys the political confederacy, but the political alliance is mentioned again in Revelation 17:16 and also in Revelation 19:11-21. So while 17:14 summarizes 16:12-21, it is also a nutshell summary of 19:17-21. But the actions of 17:16, where the political powers of the world destroy Babylon, precede the description of this verse. As so often in Revelation, the narrative is not in a straight chronological line.

. . . **he is Lord of lords and King of kings.** . . . These phrases are appropriate to an emperor (Ezra 7:12; Ezek 26:7; Dan 2:37), who rules over many kings, and to God (Deut 10:17; Psa 136:3). The closest parallel outside Revelation is in 1 Timothy 6:15. What it means is that there is no higher authority in the universe than the Lamb. No one can oppose Him and ultimately win. Since it is the Lamb that wields this authority, the greatest power in the universe is self-sacrificing love.

The language of this verse is essentially reproduced in Revelation 19:16, but in reverse order: "King of kings and Lord of lords." This exact verbal parallel cements the strong relationship between the two descriptions of the final battle. At the time of writing this, I have

not come up with or seen elsewhere a convincing reason why the wording of 17:14 and 19:16 is reversed. It may indicate that the distinction between “kings” and “lords” is not significant for John. It may be more like a piling up of words to celebrate the greatness of the Lamb.

Those with the Lamb in 17:14 are the persecuted saints (17:6) who have been faithful to Christ in the turmoils of the End. Since “those who live on the earth” consistently describes the opponents of the Lamb throughout Revelation, the “armies of heaven” in 19:14 is likely a dramatic expression of the close bond between Christ and His faithful people on earth. In the final conflict they will prove faithful to Him here on earth.

. . . **and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.** . . . In Romans 1:7 Paul describes the believers as “called to be saints” (Greek: *klêtois hagiois*). The followers of Christ are elsewhere called “saints” (Greek: *tôn hagiôn*—Rev 14:12; 17:6). So it is not surprising that in 17:14 they are also “called” (Greek: *klêtoi*). This implies an invitation. The followers of the Lamb are those who have accepted the invitation into deep and lasting relationship with Him. The word “chosen” (Greek: *eklektoi*) is somewhat related to “called”. It emphasizes the choice of God to invite the saints into relationship with the Lamb. Such a choice by God in the New Testament is generally an “election” to a particular mission rather than an election to salvation. God does not desire any to be lost, but all to come to salvation. So “election” is either God’s general call to humanity or a more specific call to a particular mission of representing Him in this world. In John 15:16, for example, Jesus chose His disciples to be fruit bearers for Him. Perhaps there is a progression between the two terms. Those who respond to the general invitation (call) of God are chosen (election) for deeper engagement with Him. The faithfulness of the called and chosen, is grounded in the faithfulness of Jesus (Rev 14:12). Being called and chosen, the followers of the Lamb remain faithful. These three exact words, “called, chosen and faithful” (Greek: *klêtoi kai eklektoi kai pistoi*) are used only this once in Revelation.

**Rev 17:15-- (The angel) said to me, “The waters which you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples and crowds and nations and languages.”** The angel of this verse is the same as that of verses 1, 3 and 7. The combination of the Euphrates, Babylon and many waters indicates that this is the same angel that poured out the sixth bowl upon the earth (Rev 16:12). The angel first interprets the waters (17:15) and then the woman herself (17:18). The fact that the woman is sitting on the waters indicates enthronement, the authority that the woman is granted over the powers of the world for a time. This verse is the place that defines the waters of the Euphrates River as the secular, political powers of the world who collaborate for a time with Babylon to dominate the world and persecute the saints (17:6). Earlier in the chapter they are depicted as kings of the earth, the beast, seven heads, seven kings, ten horns and ten kings. Their character is clarified at this point because the very next verse describes the action that they take after their defeat at the hands of the Lamb and His called, chosen and faithful ones (17:14). This definition of the waters is consistent with the Old Testament, where waters are frequently represented the enemies of God and His people (Psa 18:4; 124:2-5; Isa 8:7-8; Jer 47:1-2).

The combination of peoples, crowds, nations and languages recalls both 13:7 and 14:6. In 13:7, at an earlier point in history, the beast from the sea has authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. In 14:6, the same entities are the recipients of the everlasting

gospel message of the first angel. So religious and political entities have united against the saints before, and Revelation 17 details their end-time collaboration to dominate the world. That all four terms are in the plural (Greek: *laoi*, *ochloi*, *ethnê*, *glôssai*) shows the great extent of end-time Babylon's power and influence at this time. The mention of languages (Greek: *glôssai*) may recall the confusion of the languages at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). The picture of this woman's control over the great powers of the world, however, does not last very long. In the next verse the same powers that supported her up until they are the very ones who will bring her to an end. The political powers thought she would ride them to ultimate victory, but their defeat by the forces of the Lamb leads them to see that in her high and lofty claims she was either deceptive or clueless. And when they discover they have been deceived (13:13-14), their rage knows no bounds.

The use of the term "crowds" (Greek: *ochloi*) indicates the earthly source of the woman and the beast's power. Circumstances and events are such in the end-time that the "fickle crowd" throws their full support to the woman and the beast. A combination of coercion and deception brings the bulk of the world's population (outside of the "saints") into full support of the religious and political alliances. September 11, 2001 is an example of quickly such support can be garnered. Al Qaeda was a virtually unknown entity before September 11, but the horrific events of that day so mobilized popular opinion that virtually the entire political and religious world threw its support behind the war on terrorism. That unity did not last long, but it was as complete as anyone had seen in a long time. A small counter-cultural group hiding in rocks and caves became the object of worldwide attention overnight.

**Rev 17:16-- The ten horns, which you saw, and the beast, these will come to hate the prostitute and they will make her desolate and naked and they will eat her flesh and burn her up with fire.** The beast and the ten horns together represent a worldwide unity of political power that willingly subordinates itself to the prostitute Babylon. They commit adultery and get drunk with her (17:2). They let her ride them and control them for a time (17:3). It was a unity of single-minded purpose. But in this verse the fever of lust and the stupor of drunkenness begins to wear off. In the end the political powers of the world will change their minds about their relationship with Babylon (as did Judah's supporters against Babylon-- Jer 4:30). The reason for this change of mind is not given, but may be inferred as a waking up from deception (Rev 16:14, cf. 13:13-14 and 12:9). In Revelation 16 that change of mind is described as the drying up of the Euphrates River. See comments on Rev 16:12. In the Old Testament the Euphrates River represented the resources of Babylon: her armies, her defenses, her wise men, her treasuries. These were the source of Babylon's strength, and when they were lost to her, she was quickly overcome.

In Old Testament eschatology, the enemies of Israel end up turning on each other (Ezek 38:21; Hag 2:22; Zech 14:13). In the final crisis, the worldwide political alliance turns on the worldwide religious alliance and brings her to ruin, destroying the religious confederacy with which they had been allied. While verbs in Revelation are often in the passive voice (Tonstad, 252), all the verbs here ("hate", "make", "eat", "burn") are conspicuously active, they bristle

with rage (Greek: *misêsousin, poiêsousin, phagontai, katakausousin*). From the perspective of Revelation, this occurs on a large, global stage.

In the book *The Great Controversy*, I believe Ellen White is describing the same picture as Revelation 17:16, but in more local terms. After describing the first four bowl-plagues on pages 628-629, she then describes the death decree that is mentioned in Revelation 13:15 (page 635). Because of that decree, there are simultaneous movements in different lands for the destruction of those who honor the law of God. It is determined to silence the dissenting voices in one night of savage violence. Local alliances of ministers and magistrates send “throng of evil men” (page 635) to finish off the people of God who have taken refuge outside of towns. Echoing the fifth through seventh plagues, God uses darkness (fifth plague) and a glorious rainbow and massive heavenly signs (page 636) to stop the angry mobs in their tracks. When they realize they have been deceived, the same angry mobs turn on the ministers who have deceived them (pages 655-656). This punishment is not the direct action of God, but the natural consequence of selfishness and sin.

A localized version of the worldwide perspective of Rev 17:16: “The people see that they have been deluded. They accuse one another of having led them to destruction; but all unite in heaping their bitterest condemnation upon the ministers. Unfaithful pastors have prophesied smooth things; they have led their hearers to make void the law of God and to persecute those who would keep it holy. Now, in their despair, these teachers confess before the world their work of deception. The multitudes are filled with fury. “We are lost!” they cry, “and you are the cause of our ruin;” and they turn upon the false shepherds. The very ones that once admired them most will pronounce the most dreadful curses upon them. The very hands that once crowned them with laurels will be raised for their destruction. The swords which were to slay God's people are now employed to destroy their enemies. Everywhere there is strife and bloodshed.” Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pages 655-656.

The destruction of the prostitute in this verse offers a strong allusion to Ezekiel 16: “Therefore, you prostitute, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because you poured out your wealth and exposed your nakedness in your promiscuity with your lovers, and because of all your detestable idols, and because you gave them your children's blood, therefore I am going to gather all your lovers, with whom you found pleasure, those you loved as well as those you hated. I will gather them against you from all around and will strip you in front of them, and they will see all your nakedness. I will sentence you to the punishment of women who commit adultery and who shed blood; I will bring upon you the blood vengeance of my wrath and jealous anger. Then I will hand you over to your lovers, and they will tear down your mounds and destroy your lofty shrines. They will strip you of your clothes and take your fine jewelry and leave you naked and bare. They will bring a mob against you, who will stone you and hack you to pieces with their swords. They will burn down your houses and inflict punishment on you in the sight of many women. I will put a stop to your prostitution, and you will no longer pay your lovers.” Ezekiel 16:35-41, cf. 23:22-29. In this passage, Judah attempts to gain favor with the nations through metaphorical “adultery” (seeking alliances out of distrust in God) but the nations she has turned to now turn on her. In 17:16 the support the nations give to Babylon “dries up” and she is destroyed.

. . . **they will make her desolate and naked** . . . This means that she will be “cancelled”, she will have no more friends among the powers of this world. The nakedness is in stark contrast to the fancy dress of 17:4 (cf. Isa 47:2-3).

. . . **eat her flesh and burn her up with fire** . . . According to Stefanovic, eating a person’s flesh is the savage action of an enemy. It is a final indignity visited upon a conquered people. The word for flesh here (Greek: *tas sarkas*) is oddly in the plural.

Also in the Old Testament, stoning was the usual punishment for sexual indiscretion, but if the daughter of a priest acts as a prostitute, she was to be burned with fire rather than stoned (Lev 21:9, cf. John 8:5). This is another indication that end-time Babylon will have a Christian face. In profession she appears to be a true follower of Jesus Christ, but in the end that claim is shown to be false.

Another factor in the imagery of Revelation 17 is the psychology of lust. In the story of Amnon and Tamar in the Old Testament (2 Samuel 13:1-19), Amnon lusted after his half-sister Tamar and confused that lust with love. But after he finished raping her, his feelings for her turned to hatred. The text says: “. . . the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her.” (2 Sam 13:15). Something similar is going on in Revelation 17. The line between lust and hatred is a fine one.

**Rev 17:17-- For God has placed it in their hearts to do His purpose, and to be of one purpose themselves, and to give their domain and power to the beast until the words of God are brought to completion.** As mentioned in the comments on Rev 17:13, the Greek of this verse is very interesting. While I have twice translated “purpose” here, the actual word here is “mind” (Greek: *gnômên*), a word that can also express intention or purpose. God has placed it in their hearts to “do His purpose” (Greek: *poiêsai gnômên autou*) and “to be of one purpose themselves” (“to be of one mind”—Greek: *poiêsai mian gnômên*). The concept of “one purpose” is a translation of the “one mind” (*mian gnômên*) in the Greek. I chose “purpose” because “one mind” does not so much express common knowledge as it expresses agreement or common purpose. This interesting expression is paralleled exactly in 17:13 (*mian gnômên*). Both verses express the unity of purpose that the ten horns and the beast have. What makes verse 17 particularly interesting is the idea that the purpose of the ten horns is also aligned with God’s purpose (Greek: *tên gnômên autou*). The actions of this verse, while performed by the intention of the ten horns, also fulfill the intention of God.

The book of Revelation is filled with expressions of intention and purpose on the part of the characters like the dragon, the beasts and Satan himself (Rev 9:15; 12:4, 15; 13:12-17). The ten horns and the beast will think that they are operating throughout with conscious intent and in their own self-interests. But this verse underlines the point that God is in control of the ultimate outcome even in the midst of the Satanic deceptions (cf. Rev 9:1-5). This verse echoes Paul’s language in 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12. Even more detail is given there. God’s purpose in the end-time deception is to expose the motivations of all who reject the gospel. In Revelation 17, both the temporary unity of the world’s political and religious powers (Rev 17:1-3, 12-13, 15) and the dissolution of that unity (17:16) ultimately accomplishes God’s purposes to bring the cosmic conflict to a conclusion. God never forces anyone, yet his character and methods

persuasively win the day in the end (Rev 15:3-4). The opponents of God can ultimately accomplish only as much as He allows. In the words of Tonstad, God allows His earthly opponents to “stage their own defeat” (Tonstad, 253).

To the eyes of the news media, Babylon’s fall will appear to be the natural consequences of political actions and reactions at the visible level. But this verse assures us that behind the scenes God is at work to bring about the outcomes necessary to ultimately restore the peace and security of this world and also of the universe. In thinking about the “mind” (Greek: *gnômên*) of God, one must keep a much larger picture in mind. The final events of Revelation concern temporal events on earth, but they are not limited to them. The mind of God is concerned with a much larger war than the Mediterranean battles that scholars often see in the imagery of Revelation. Behind the earthly conflicts lurks a much larger conflict over the character and government of God in the whole universe. But things on earth must be settled before that larger conflict can be settled.

**Rev 17:18-- The woman which you saw is the great city which has rulership over the kings of the earth.** At the heart of this verse is the Greek verb “to be” or “is” (Greek: *estin*). Since both the woman and the great city are in the nominative case, this verb signals a predicate nominative, which functions much like an equals sign in mathematics. On one side of the equation is “the woman” (Greek: *gunê*), otherwise known as the prostitute (Rev 17:1, 5) and Babylon (17:5). On the other side of the equation is “the great city” (Greek: *hê polis hê megalê*). The latter concept was first associated with Babylon in Revelation 16:19 and is mentioned repeatedly in chapter 18 (Rev 18:10, 16, 19). The phrase is also applied to the unnamed city of Revelation 11:8 (Greek: *tês poleôs tês megalês*). Babylon is also called “the great” (Greek: *hê megalê*) in 14:8.

Revelation 17:18 is a duodirectional text that forms a natural bridge between Revelation 17, where Babylon is a woman and a prostitute, and Revelation 18, where Babylon is described as a great city. Prostitute and city Babylon are the same entity--a religious confederacy at the end of time--but her destruction as a prostitute is now described as the destruction of a city (Rev 18). The image of woman was never intended to be taken literally. In Revelation 17, the fall of Babylon is caused by the secular, political powers of the world, in the next chapter, Babylon’s fall is mourned by the same powers. In the rage of a moment, they destroy Babylon. Afterward, they realize how much that destruction has cost them.

. . . **which has rulership over the kings of the earth.** . . “Which has rulership” (Greek: *hê echousa basileian*) involves a present participle (Greek: *echousa*), which is one of the most continuous expressions in the Greek language. The Babylon of Revelation 17 is an end-time entity, but it is more than just end-time Babylon. In some sense it was in continuous operation in John’s day, and it is constantly in operation throughout history. This is reminiscent of the concept of AntiChrist, which we saw in Revelation 13 is both a historical and end-time entity and is also an operating principle present at many eras of Christian history. In the “great city” Babylon symbolizes all the satanic powers that have ever supported Satan’s purpose to ultimately be a recipient of human worship. Babylon, in various forms, rules continuously over the kings of the earth. It lies behind all the political powers that have tried to coerce and move

people away from their allegiance to God. So early Christians would not have been in error if they applied Babylon to Rome (see also 1 Peter 5:8), but the principle of Babylon is much larger than any specific entity. In applying the principle of Babylon to the medieval church, it becomes a poster child of all that can go wrong with the church and will again go wrong at the end of history.

**Rev 17 (Summary and Conclusion)**—Chapter seventeen opens with an explanation from one of the bowl-plague angels, the angel of the sixth bowl. That angel comes to explain the meaning of the drying up of the Euphrates River and how end-time Babylon will fall. So Revelation 17 is an extended elaboration on the sixth and seventh bowls. The sixth bowl is the judgment on Babylon that occurs when the political powers of the world withdraw their support from Babylon. The seventh fall describes the fall and destruction of Babylon. A vision (Rev 17:1-6) and an explanation (17:7-18) provide the elaboration.

The last verse of chapter seventeen sets the stage for a second elaboration on the fall of Babylon, this time not as a woman/prostitute, but as a great city. This entire section of Revelation is grounded on the fall of Babylon theme in the Old Testament. There Cyrus the Persian dried up the Euphrates River to conquer Babylon, deliver Judah from captivity, and rebuild Jerusalem. In this part of Revelation, an end-time Cyrus dried up an end-time Euphrates River, defeat end-time Babylon, delivered God's end-time people, and set in motion a New Jerusalem.

Based on the symbolism of Revelation 17, three worldwide alliances draw in the entire human race. There is an alliance of religious institutions, called Babylon and including the unholy trinity of Revelation 13 (cf. 16:13). There is an alliance of secular, political powers, which includes the ten horns of the beast and the kings of the earth. The beast itself is the last of series of similar powers in service of Satan. There is also an alliance of the saints (Rev 17:6), including the kings of the east. These are more kindred spirits than an organized institution. The united religious and political alliances make war with the Lamb and the saints and are defeated (Rev 17:14), after which they turn on each other (17:16), inadvertently doing the will of God in the process (Rev 17:17).

**Rev 17 (Spiritual lessons)**— 1) A concluding theme of this chapter is that God is in control no matter what happens. He knows ahead what will happen and the choices even His enemies make can be made to serve His purposes (Revelation 17:17). The key here is whether or not God can be trusted. If through evidence and experience we have come to trust that God is both powerful and gracious, we can have confidence in difficult times that with God's help things will turn out all right in the end.

2) A purpose of this chapter is a warning of the consequences of evil. Evil can be amazingly attractive at times. It can use sexuality, spectacular miracles, and social pressure to move us away from God's ideals. Chapters like this pull the curtains back and show the unattractive outcome of sin. By keeping our focus on a higher reality we can avoid thinking and behavior that ruins our potential and ultimately steals our joy. Many of the ways that seem right to us are ultimately the ways of death.