

The Twitter Commentary on Revelation
Jon Paulien

Revelation Chapter 17

Rev 17 (Introduction)—

Like Dan 2 and 7, Rev 17 contains a clearly defined contrast between vision (Rev 17:1-6) and explanation (7:7-18).

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.

In Rev 17 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--

The announcement of Babylon's collapse (Rev 16:19) forecasts the main theme of Rev 17 and 18, the final and complete fall of Babylon; first in the form of a woman/prostitute (Rev 17) and second in the form of a great city (Rev 18).

Since the waters of this verse are associated with a woman who 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.

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. The parallel draws attention to the contrast between two types of women and two types of city.

Prostitution in the OT is often used as a metaphor for alliances among nations or syncretism in religion.

The vision of Revelation 17 combines the imagery of historical Babylon with the imagery of prostitution, an association the OT prophets did not make.

In the OT prophets, Babylon represents self-glorification and pride (Isa 13:19; Jer 50:31-32; 51:13; Dan 4:29-30), cruelty and oppression (Isa 14:3-6; Jer 50:15), idolatry and defiance of Yahweh (Jer 50:29, 38; 51:5).

The phrase "many waters" builds on Jeremiah 51:13, where Babylon is called "you who dwell by many waters," the Euphrates River (see also 16:12; 17:5; 17:15).

Rev 17:2--

“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.

Fornication here is a metaphor for a temporary union between the religious and political alliances of the end-time world. Adultery occurs when both parties feel that their union would be a benefit to them.

In the OT, the language of fornication and adultery was a metaphor for rebellious alliances between Israel and pagan nations. The language of adultery is also associated with idolatry in Ezekiel 23:37.

Jer 51:7 sees God’s hand behind Babylon’s “cup.” While Babylon is the author of the deceptive drunkenness in Rev, Babylon’s actions are seen as accomplishing God’s purpose (see Rev 17:17 and 2 Thess 2:11-12 for similar expressions).

Rev 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.

Rev 17:3--

In Rev 17 John hears of the prostitute sitting on many waters (17:1), but when he looks (17:3) he sees a woman sitting on a scarlet beast. The hearing/seeing device indicates these are parallel images.

The woman is clearly distinct from the beast, so theories that both the woman and the beast represent Rome do not make sense.

A woman in the desert recalls Rev 12:14. The parallel suggests that the woman of Rev 12 is somehow part of the history of end-time Babylon.

The dragon in Rev 12 failed to conquer the woman by force (Rev 12:15-16). He then applied deception as well as force (Rev 13:13-14). A woman in the desert named Babylon suggests that the deception succeeded.

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.

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).

The dragon had crowns on its heads (Rev 12:3) and the sea beast had crowns on its horns (Rev 13:1), no mention of crowns is made with regard to this beast.

Rev 17:1-3 (Excursis on the Three End-Time Alliances in the Final Battle)—

One of the difficulties in Revelation 17 is the proliferation of images. If each of these images has its own unique meaning, this jumble of images would be indecipherable.

The woman of verse three 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 woman here (end-time Babylon) 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 Rev 13).

There are four prominent women in the book of Revelation. There is Jezebel, the woman of Rev 12, prostitute Babylon (Rev 17) and the bride of the Lamb (21:9-10).

Since there are parallels between the women of Rev 12 and 17 and also parallels between Babylon and the New Jerusalem, these female images all come together in the depiction of Babylon in this chapter.

In the law of Moses the penalty for fornication was stoning (Deut 22:20-27), unless the woman involved was the daughter of a priest (Lev 21:9, cf. Gen 38:24; Rev 2:20). Babylon is clearly a religious figure in Rev (see Rev 17:16).

The beast is the sum total of political and military power in the world (Rev 17:12-13). The Euphrates River and the scarlet beast, therefore, are two different ways of describing the same thing.

The relationship between the prostitute and the political confederacy is the central feature of Rev 17:2. Through "immorality" and "drunkenness" she gains control of the "kings of the earth."

The "inhabitants of the earth" represent the opponents of God in general, not just the leadership. The leaders of the political confederacy commit adultery with the prostitute, the inhabitants of the earth go along because they are intoxicated.

The worldwide, political alliance at the End is named by many names in Rev 16-18, beginning with the Euphrates River in 16:12.

Prostitute Babylon sits on many waters (v. 1); is in union with the kings of the earth (v. 2); and rides on a scarlet beast (v. 3). This portrays Babylon in a dominant position, using the nations to achieve her own ends.

A worldwide unity of the "saints" makes no appearance in Rev 17:1-3, but comes into view in verses 6 ("saints", "martyrs of Jesus") and 14 (Jesus' called, chosen and faithful followers).

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. Those that survive will do so on account of being co-opted into the aims of Babylon.

The end-time union of religious institutions will occur out of a need to co-ordinate spiritual effort in the face of significant challenges. They set aside their differences in the face of overwhelming crisis.

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--

Many English translators place the writing on her forehead in all capital letters, as one might do with a monumental inscription or title.

Babylon's attire seems modeled on that of the High Priest of ancient Israel (Exodus 28:5-6, 9-13, 17-21, 36-38; 29:40-41; 30:9; Lev 23:13, 18, 37).

The golden cup in Babylon's hand recalls the drunkenness of verse two (see Jer 51:7-8). Her attraction to the people of the world is part delusion and part "sexual immorality."

The word translated "mystery" 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 mention of an inscription on prostitute Babylon's forehead recalls the common practice in Rome of prostitutes wearing a placard on their foreheads displaying their "professional" name (see also Jer 3:3).

Rev 17:6--

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.

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.

Although prostitute Babylon is in the desert and her dress resembles the High Priest, she is here clearly described as a power that opposes the true people of God.

John's amazement is likely caused by expecting a woman in the desert to represent the faithful people of God, and instead seeing the woman glorified as Babylon and in brutal opposition to the saints.

Recent studies have shown that there is little contemporary evidence for massive persecution of Christians in the empire during the reign of Domitian (81-96 AD). Rev 17 is not about the Roman Empire of John's day.

Rev 17:7-18 (Introduction)—

This part of Rev 17 is an explanation of the audition/vision of 17:1-6. But given the history of interpretation, this explanation has raised more questions than it has answered.

While much scholarship focuses on a resurrected Nero behind the beast of this chapter, a more appropriate candidate for the power behind the beast is Satan.

Rev 17:7--

The same angel that introduced the vision of Revelation 17:1-6 now returns to John to give an explanation of the vision. The explanation here begins in verse eight with an explanation of the beast and its seven heads.

Rev 17:8--

The combination--was, is not, and will come up—contrasts with Rev's description the True God. As such, it may not necessarily indicate sequence. It may simply be a parody of the beast's pretensions to be like God.

In mentioning the Abyss, Rev 17 portrays a demonic element lurking behind the secular-political powers of the world (see Rev 9:2-3, 11; 11:7).

The kind of "world-wide" political union John had experienced with the Roman Empire

would cease for a time at the End and would be reconstituted in the final battle of Armageddon.

The amazement here recalls John's amazement at his vision of prostitute Babylon. It also recalls the amazement of the world at the resurrection of the beast of Rev 13 (13:3).

The second of the "was and is not" phrases includes a cognate of the Greek word "Parousia", the most common word used for the Second Coming of Jesus.

Rev 17:9--

The call for wisdom here is an expansion of the one in 13:18. The concept of 666, therefore, may have something to do with the seven heads of the beast in Revelation 17.

In Dan 2 God is the source of all wisdom (Dan 2:20). But He also is the One who gives wisdom to the wise (Dan 2:21, 23). Rev 17 is not talking about human wisdom but a special wisdom provided by revelation from God.

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.

The woman sitting on seven mountains is a much more awkward image than the woman sitting on a beast. End-time Babylon relies on a worldwide political alliance to accomplish her mission.

Rev 17:10--

The seven kings are parallel to the seven mountains and 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.

The beasts of Revelation each come with something of a pedigree. This verse contains the pedigree of the end-time beast.

Unless the 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" 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.

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, Assyria, Babylon, Persia and Greece are all either described or predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The "short time" of Rev 12:12 runs from the time of the First Advent to the Second Coming. In Rev this phrase should not be taken literally or quantitatively.

Rev 17:11--

The beast of this chapter is both similar to ("one of the seven") and distinct from ("an eighth" not "the eighth") the seven heads.

This verse reads like a “character introduction” to the beast, giving a brief outline of its history before its appearance in the vision of 17:3-6.

The “eighth” is “one of the seven.” Which one? Babylon? Rome? The seventh head of the medieval church? Parallels with Rev 13 lean me in the direction of the latter.

The phrase “to destruction” is a way of describing an unwelcome future destination, often a synonym for death. Here it is applied to a worldwide political alliance in service of end-time Babylon.

Rev 17:7-11 (Summary)--

This 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.

Rev 17:12-17 (Introduction)—

The latter part of the explanation (17:7-18) 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).

Rev 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.

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.

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 briefly for a common purpose in the final crisis (Rev 17:13, 17).

The ten kings represent a sub-grouping of nations politically or economically powerful enough to swing the whole world one way or the other. Something like NATO or the G-7.

Rev 17:13—

The distinction between the beast and the ten horns may be carried over into Revelation 19:19. There it seems to be saying that the beast “and” the kings of the earth and their armies can be distinguished.

The concept of “one mind” here does not so much express common knowledge as it expresses agreement or common purpose. This expression is paralleled exactly in 17:17. Both verses describe the unity of purpose that the ten horns and the beast have.

The move of the ten horns to align with the worldwide political alliance 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 Rev 16:14.

Rev 17:14--

While military language is used to describe the final battle in 12:17, 16:12-21, and 17:14,

13:13-17 suggests a different kind of war, one where the dividing line is not military or political, but is rather grounded in spiritual and character developments.

This verse summarizes 16:12-21 and 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.

The language here is reproduced in Rev 19:16, but in reverse order: “King of kings and Lord of lords.” I have not come up with or seen elsewhere a convincing reason why the wording of 17:14 and 19:16 is reversed.

These three exact words, “called, chosen and faithful” (Greek: *klêtoi kai eklektoi kai pistoi*), are used only this once in Revelation. They summarize key facets of relationship with Christ in the NT.

Rev 17:15--

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).

The combination of peoples, crowds, nations and languages recalls both 13:7 and 14:6. So religious and political entities have united against the saints before, and Revelation 17 details their end-time collaboration to dominate the world.

The use of the term “crowds” 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.

Rev 17:16--

In this verse the fever of lust and the stupor of drunkenness (Rev 17:2-3) begins to wear off. This is the drying up of the Euphrates River (Rev 16:12). The political powers of the world change their minds about their relationship with Babylon.

In OT 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.

Rev describes the final clash between religion and government in worldwide terms. In GC 628-656, Ellen White describes the same moment in more local terms, mobs vs. ministers.

“The very ones that once admired (deceptive ministers) most will pronounce the most dreadful curses upon them. The very hands that once crowned them with laurels will be raised for their destruction.” GC 655-656.

Strong allusions here to Ezek 16 and 23, where 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 the OT, stoning was the usual punishment for sexual indiscretion, but if the daughter of a priest acted as a prostitute, she was to be burned with fire rather than stoned (Lev 21:9, cf. John 8:5). End-time Babylon will have a Christian face.

Rev 17:17--

What makes this verse particularly interesting is the idea that the purpose of the ten horns is also aligned with God's purpose.

Rev is filled with expressions of intention and purpose on the part of the characters like the dragon, the beasts and Satan himself. But this verse underlines the point that God is in control even in the midst of the Satanic deceptions.

To the eyes of the news media, Babylon's fall will appear to be the natural consequence of political actions and reactions at the visible level. But this verse assures us that behind the scenes God will be at work.

Rev 17:18--

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.

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.

"Which has rulership" involves a present participle (Greek: *echousa*), which is one of the most continuous expressions in the Greek language. The Babylon of Rev 17 is an end-time entity, but it is more than just end-time.

Rev 17 (Summary and Conclusion)—

This entire section of Rev is grounded on the fall of Babylon theme in the Old Testament.

Based on the symbolism of Rev 17, three worldwide alliances draw in the entire human race. The 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).

Rev 17 (Spiritual lessons)—

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.