



## **REVELATION 17 STUDY GUIDE**

### **17:1-2**

Revelation 17:1-19:10 serves as an extensive analysis of the sixth and seventh bowls, predicting the judgment of Babylon. This judgment is depicted as a response to the prayers of the saints in Revelation 6:10, seeking God's judgment on their persecutors. The portrayal includes a vivid description of the harlot, emphasizing her seductive influence and the use of the term "sitting" four times, signifying her authority and control over people and the beast.

The harlot's presence on "waters" symbolizes her influence over diverse populations, as explicitly stated in verse 15. The concept of "many waters" in the Old Testament often signifies chaos and disorder in conflict with God. While Babylon is identified with Rome, it transcends a specific city, religious system, or individual leader. Babylon, as explained by Alan Johnson, represents the epitome of worldly resistance to God, encompassing various historical manifestations of idolatry and deception (Revelation 17:15).

Babylon is portrayed as the mother of all idolatrous manifestations, reflecting a pervasive culture opposing God throughout history. The harlot's judgment is linked to the kings of the earth engaging in "fornication" with her, symbolizing their acceptance of the ungodly earthly order's religious and idolatrous demands. This figurative language is consistent with the Old Testament's use of "fornication" to depict Israel's spiritual unfaithfulness and lapses into idolatry (Revelation 17:2).

The economic dimension of the harlot's influence, promising prosperity and security, is highlighted in Revelation 18:3, 9-19. Despite attempts to identify the harlot exclusively with the Roman Catholic

Church, it is better understood as a broader symbol representing all religious entities that endorse idolatry and oppose the kingdom of Christ. The harlot embodies any form of religious, moral, or philosophical opposition to Christ's rule, encompassing various historical and contemporary manifestations (Revelation 18:3; 19:2).

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### 17:3

John's experience "in the Spirit" is reminiscent of Ezekiel's encounters (Ezekiel 2:2; 3:12,14,24; 11:1; 43:5). The mention of the "desert" alludes to Isaiah 21:1-2, a vision of judgment against historical Babylon.

Although the presence of "many waters" (Revelation 17:1) in the "desert" (Revelation 17:3) may seem contradictory, it is important to recognize that this is symbolic geography. This concept aligns with the earlier depiction of an overflowing river in the desert (Revelation 12:15-16).

The description of the "beast" closely mirrors that of Revelation 13:1. The beast's scarlet or red color links it with the dragon (Revelation 12:3), suggesting the bloody nature of the persecution it inflicts on the people of God.

The fact that the woman (i.e., the harlot mentioned in Revelation 17:1) rides the beast implies some form of alliance between the apostate religious world system and the tyranny of the state. According to Beale, "The woman must represent that part of the ungodly world that works together with the state, such as the social, cultural, economic, and religious aspects of the world" (Revelation 17:853).

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### 17:4-6

Several characteristics of the woman/harlot illuminate her identity and nature:

**1. She is adorned in purple, scarlet, gold, precious stones, and pearls, reminiscent of Babylon's description in Revelation 18:16 (Revelation 17:4).** This attire symbolizes her worldly beauty and economic prosperity, enticing unbelievers into her immoral practices. This stands in stark contrast to the Bride of the Lamb, depicted as a city adorned with purity and splendor (Revelation 21:2,9-23).

**2. In her hand, she holds a golden cup filled with "abominations" and "unclean things of her immorality" (Revelation 17:4b), representing the various forms of idolatry she and her followers engage in.** This juxtaposition of beauty and wickedness underscores the allure and depravity associated with her.

**3. A name is inscribed on her forehead, with "Mystery" possibly modifying "Babylon" to form "Mystery Babylon."** This signifies the unveiling of a deeper truth previously unknown. The mystery

lies in her role as the "mother" of all harlots and abominations of the earth, representing the origin and source of resistance to God's will (Revelation 17:5).

#### **4. The woman is implicated in persecuting believers and witnesses of Jesus (Revelation 18:24; 19:2).**

John's reaction to this image is a mix of fear, perplexity, and perhaps a hint of admiration for her beauty and power. While temporarily captivated and awestruck, John is ultimately repulsed by her fundamental nature.

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#### **17:7-8**

The description of the beast (Revelation 13:1) and the book of life (Revelation 13:8) have been explored elsewhere. Here, we observe the beast described as one who "was and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss" (Revelation 17:8). This is clearly a mockery of God, who has been described as the one "who was and who is and who is to come" (Revelation 4:8; Revelation 1:4,8).

**1. The negative assertion "is not" and the anticipation of "coming up" likely mock Christ's death and resurrection.** The beast's "is not" signifies the ongoing impact of his defeat at the cross. Despite being decisively defeated, the beast continues to persecute God's people, leading the earth-dwellers to marvel and follow after him. However, while Christ's resurrection leads to eternal life, the beast's resurrection results in his eventual destruction (Revelation 17:8; Revelation 1:18).

**2. Alternatively, Bauckham argues that the mention of the beast's "coming up" parodies not Christ's resurrection but his *parousia* (second coming).** Just as God's "coming" refers to Christ's return to judge the world, the beast's "coming up" from the abyss is a mockery of Christ's eschatological return. While Jesus descends from heaven (Revelation 19:11), the beast ascends from the abyss.

3. A significant contrast exists between chapters 13 and 17. In Chapter 13, the beast appears triumphant, recovering miraculously from divine judgment, waging war on the saints, and seemingly conquering them. However, from the perspective of the beast and his followers, this is considered victory, whereas John portrays the saints' faithful witness unto death as their victory over the beast (Revelation 15:2). In Chapter 17, the beast's inevitable downfall is depicted. Unlike his resurrection, his eschatological return fails to vindicate his divinity, leading only to his destruction.

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#### **17:9-11**

The Revelation chapter 17 passage presents two primary interpretive approaches: the historical view (which contains two variations) and the symbolic view.

## The Historical Interpretation:

**1. The First Approach: focuses on Rome and its empire.** The "seven mountains" (v. 9) are seen as the seven hills of Rome (Revelation 17:9). These hills are associated with seven kings, with debates over which Roman emperors are referenced. Various schemes are proposed based on historical reigns, starting from Julius Caesar. However, no scheme convincingly aligns with Domitian as the sixth king during John's writing of Revelation (Revelation 17:10). Moreover, the straightforward identification of Rome seems too simple for a text requiring deeper theological and symbolical understanding.

**2. The Second Approach: interprets the seven mountains as representative of seven oppressive world empires throughout history.** Rome represents the sixth empire, with the seventh yet to emerge, possibly as a revival of Rome. However, this view faces challenges in omitting certain historical empires and accounting for the persecutions endured by the church across centuries.

## The Symbolic Interpretation:

Many scholars propose a more symbolic interpretation, consistent with John's use of numerical symbolism in Revelation.

- **John likely uses "seven" figuratively to denote fullness or completeness, rather than as a literal count of kings or empires.** Rome, as the context of John's day, may influence the use of "seven" – but represents more than just Rome.
- **The seven heads of the beast symbolize complete blasphemy and evil.** Five heads have fallen, one is, and one is yet to come, indicating the ongoing struggle against oppressive powers. The short duration of the seventh head suggests the imminence of the end times (Revelation 17:10).
- **The mention of an "eighth" head is likely symbolic, representing a final excess of evil or an attempt to mimic Christ's resurrection.** It may also denote completeness turning into excess or evil reaching its peak.

In essence, while various interpretations exist, the precise meaning of Revelation 17:9-11 remains elusive and nothing to "plant your flag in." This reflects the complexity and mystery inherent in apocalyptic literature.

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## 17:12-13

The next step is to discern who or what constitutes the "ten horns." Those who adhere to the historical interpretation often believe these are ten actual rulers of the Roman provinces or possibly

ten specific nations in what they think will be a revived Roman empire. This is why some were excited in January 1981 when the European Common Market admitted its tenth member nation.

**However, the number "ten" is likely symbolic, similar to "seven."** It probably represents the various sovereignties united in strength that empower the beast.

Johnson suggests that the "ten" symbolizes the spiritual forces of evil described by Paul in Ephesians 6:12, rather than specific historical rulers. These forces, representing Satan's full attack against Jesus' followers, work through earthly means but have a broader reality.

I'm more inclined to interpret the ten horns as symbolizing all kings, representing the collective power of all nations aligning with the beast in a final effort to suppress the church. Their unified support for the beast stems from God's providential control, leading to the fulfillment of His eternal prophetic purpose.

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### **17:14 -15**

These verses address the inquiry posed in 13:4, "Who is able to wage war with him (the beast)?" The Lamb is capable! Alongside his "called and chosen and faithful" followers, he will triumph over the one who, at first glance, seemed to have achieved victory (Revelation 17:14).

For a good exercise and devotional, look up the cross references for 17:14:

- **Called:** Matthew 20:16, 22:14; Romans 1:6,
- **Chosen:** Matthew 20:16, 22:14; Colossians 3:12;
- **Faithful:** Luke 16:11-12; Acts 10:45; 1 Tim. 6:2; Rev. 21:5, 22:6

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### **17:16-18**

The scene depicted in verses 16-17 is remarkable. Apparently, at the end of the age, the nations of the earth (referred to as the "ten horns = ten kings") will collaborate with the beast to annihilate the harlot.

Beale interprets this as indicating that "the political aspect of the ungodly world system will turn against the core of the social-economic-religious aspect and eradicate it." The harlot, symbolizing the apostate church along with all false religious institutions or systems, will be obliterated by a combination of political and/or military forces. The language from Ezekiel 23:25-29,47 is invoked to illustrate the downfall of the harlot: she is exposed like a prostitute, devoured like prey of a fierce beast, and consumed like a city in flames.

What's astonishing is that the ten kings are motivated and empowered to do this by God (v. 17)! This intense internal conflict between the religious and political realms of the ungodly world system is so foolish, short-sighted, and ultimately self-destructive that only God's intervention could explain it.

This presents a profoundly intriguing theological assertion. Clearly, it goes against God's will for anyone to support or align with the beast, as the beast's ultimate goal is to wage war against the Lamb. Nevertheless, the angel states (literally), "God gave into their [the ten kings] hearts to do his will, and to perform one will, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled" (v. 17).

In short, God intended (in one sense) to influence the hearts of the ten kings so they would act against His will (in another sense). It's a perplexing concept!

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### Discussion Questions

1. What was John invited to see at the beginning of chapter 17?
2. What repeated words or phrases stand out to you in chapter 17:1-6?
3. What reoccurring sin has prostitution/harlotry been used to symbolize throughout the Bible? (Helpful examples: Isaiah 1:21, Isaiah 23:16-17, Nahum 3:4)
4. Describe the woman sitting on the scarlet beast. With what city is the woman associated?
5. Read Genesis 10:8-11 & Genesis 11:1-9. What are some of the historical facts about the original city of Babylon?
6. John is given an explanation of all the symbols in Revelation 17:7-18. Write the given meaning of the symbol below:
  - a. The woman:
  - b. The beast:
  - c. The seven heads:
  - d. The ten horns:
  - e. The waters
7. What can be learned about God's sovereignty from v. 17?
8. How have you seen Satan subtly use elements of God's truth to create counterfeit religious systems?
9. What does the beast do to the very prostitute that it carries? What does that teach us about the ultimate outcome of participating in Satan's work?
10. What helps a person discern the subtleties of Satan's work?

### Application

1. God made a way out of being enslaved by idolatry through Jesus. In what ways have I experienced freedom because of Jesus?
2. What are the things of the world that tend to look appealing to me, but will never truly satisfy?
3. In what ways does God's sovereignty comfort me, and/or challenge me?
4. Rather than seeking self-glory, in what ways can God be glorified through me today?