

OBSERVATION STUDY SERIES

REVELATION

JUDGEMENT OF THE
GREAT HARLOT

17:1-18

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Revelation 17

Judgment of the Great Harlot

The next two chapters in Revelation seem like an interlude, and they are... kinda...

At this point in Revelation the Lamb has broken all the seals of the book, and the very last seal (the seventh seal *is* the seven trumpets and the seventh trumpet *is* the seven bowls) has been fully revealed (the seven-sealed scroll has been completely read, so to speak). The final bowl (which we just observed in Revelation 16:17-21) included Babylon the great being remembered before God—she is given the cup of the wine of His fierce wrath!

The timing of the great harlot's judgment is this: it takes place during the seventh bowl, but before the second coming of Christ and the ensuing battle for Jerusalem (remember that the gathering for this war takes place during the sixth bowl).

Now John is going to go into detail for us about the great harlot's judgment and fall. Chapter 17 shows the judgment, while chapter 18 is more focused on her destruction or fall; a slight delineation, but important nevertheless.

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters with whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality, and those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality."
Revelation 17:1-2

John has just watched the seventh angel pour out his bowl upon the air and heard a loud voice from the throne in the heavenly temple declaring that the wrath of God is finished. John saw flashes of lightning and heard sounds and peals of thunder. The greatest earthquake in history split Jerusalem into three parts and caused the cities of the nations to fall. The earthquake changed the topography of the earth and, while being hit with 100 pound hailstones, men blasphemed the God Who sent the hail. In the midst of this cataclysmic event, Babylon is finally, and forever, judged by God.

Why was it one of the seven "seven bowl" angels who spoke to John? Because the destruction of Babylon happens during the seven bowls (the seventh, to be precise) so he seems to still be "on stage".

The angel from the seven bowls tells John to come with him because he is going to show him the judgment of the great harlot—the one who sits on many waters. In other words, the angel is going to take John closer in for a bird's eye view. He's going to see a

lot more details than what he saw when the seventh bowl was poured out (and, of course, he is going to write it all down so we can have the same information!).

The great harlot sits on many waters. What does that mean? Well, before the text identifies the great harlot (don't worry, it will in just a little bit), it tells us who the many waters are—they are the kings of the earth. (Waters oftentimes represent peoples and nations in prophecy.) We are also told these kings committed acts of immorality with her and that the earth dwellers were made drunk with the wine of her immorality.

We can easily see that “sitting” on the many waters pictures the great harlot as having some form of control over the kings of the earth. They seem to come under her power voluntarily, though, because they participate in her acts of immorality. Eventually, however, they (and the peoples of the nations under them) are made drunk with the wine of her immorality—trapped and held captive by their own desires and actions, just as the trailer to the seventh trumpet already informed us, *“And another angel, a second one, followed, saying, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who has made all the nations drink of the wine of the passion of her immorality.’”* Revelation 14:8

And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness; and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names, having seven heads and ten horns. Revelation 17:3

John willingly went with the angel, who carried him away in the Spirit into a wilderness. Don't confuse this with *the* wilderness where God nurtured His people—this is a wilderness, a desolate, solitary desert such as the area around the literal city of Babylon in Iraq. What does John see in this wilderness? He sees the great harlot. The angel says, *“Come here, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot”* and he shows him a woman sitting on a scarlet beast; the woman *is* the great harlot.

Revelation 17:1 told us the woman sits on many waters (the kings of the earth); here, we are told she also has the position of sitting on a scarlet beast; he supports her and she directs him. Before we are given more information about the woman, we receive a description of the scarlet beast. He is full of blasphemous names, has seven heads and ten horns. Hmmmm... Does that sound a little bit familiar? It should. Let's recall...

And the dragon stood on the sand of the seashore. Then I saw a beast coming up out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads, and on his horns were ten diadems, and on his heads were blasphemous names. And the beast which I saw was like a leopard, and his feet were like those of a bear, and his mouth like the mouth of a lion. And the dragon gave him his power and his throne and great authority. I saw one of his heads as if it had been slain, and his fatal wound was healed. And the whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast; they worshiped the dragon because he gave his authority to the beast; and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who is able to wage war with him?” There was given to him a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies, and authority to act for forty-two months was given to him. And he opened his mouth in blasphemies against God, to blaspheme His name and His tabernacle, that

is, those who dwell in heaven. It was also given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them, and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him. All who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain. If anyone has an ear, let him hear. If anyone is destined for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone kills with the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints. Revelation 13:1-10

The beast which comes up out of the sea has the same number of heads as the scarlet beast—seven, and the same number of horns—ten. The beast from the sea has blasphemous names on each of his heads—the scarlet beast is full of (covered with) blasphemous names, as well. Friends, the sea beast of Revelation 13 and the scarlet beast of Revelation 17 are one and the same beast.

Does that help us? Yes, we already know the relationship between the dragon, the beast and the false prophet. Now we can see the relationship of the great harlot to the unholy trinity. She sits in authority over the kings of the earth who are under the authority of the beast; in other words, the beast is under her authority in some way, as well.

The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality... Revelation 17:4

We are told that the woman (the great harlot) is clothed in purple and scarlet—luxurious and royal colors, which fits perfectly with the idea of her authority and position over the kings of the earth. She is adorned (gilded or decked out) with gold and precious stones and pearls; she seems to have a very healthy financial portfolio, don't you think? We will see in the next chapter that she is the seat of financial power for the world.

She holds a gold cup full of abominations and full of the unclean things of her immorality in her hand. The next chapter will also show us just how unclean her actions really are. In prophecy, the idea of a cup typically refers to the will of God being forced upon a person or peoples—more often than not, disaster as a direct result of rebellion. Here, it is the great harlot who holds the cup, enticing all the peoples of the earth, unbelievers, that is.

The book of Jeremiah gives us an amazing amount of information concerning the fall of Babylon, including this very pertinent cross-reference. *“Babylon has been a golden cup in the hand of the Lord, intoxicating all the earth. The nations have drunk of her wine; therefore the nations are going mad.”* Jeremiah 51:7 Thanks to this passage our understanding is extended to the “before and after” of the actions of the peoples in relation to Babylon. (Other clear and significant passages on Babylon include Isaiah 13-14; Isaiah 47; Jeremiah 50-51; and Zechariah 5:5-11.)

The great harlot might be personally holding the cup as far as the world is concerned, but ultimately a sovereign God dispenses its contents from the purity of His perfect will and judgment. Although drinking out of a gold cup might first sound appealing, in this case it will be a disastrous decision. Those who consume the contents of the harlot's cup will find themselves filled with abominations and filth... and eventually... madness. They will also be the recipients of the final destruction of those who are so filled.

...and on her forehead a name was written, a mystery, "Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth." Revelation 17:5

A mystery is written on the forehead of the great harlot. (The mystery will be revealed to us in verse 7 so I will leave that for now.) Her name was, "*Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth*". As the bond-servants of God bear written identification in the form of a seal on their foreheads, so will the great harlot—the prostitute and whore. She is called Babylon the great—although this has been fairly clear from earlier passages (Revelation 14:8 and Revelation 16:19); we can now know for certain! Plus, she will be identified once more for us in Revelation 18. Additionally, Daniel 4:30 is the only other Scripture which uses the phrase, "Babylon the great" and refers to the literal city of Babylon.

Let's take a moment and acquaint ourselves with the origins of the city of Babylon. Sin began in the Garden of Eden—the same geographical area where the city of Babylon would one day wickedly reign over the world. A mother gives birth to something else. Babylon the great is the mother of harlots—the mother of those who commit adultery against their God, the mother of the abominations of the earth. Babylon gave birth to the abominations of the earth.

Babylon's history is filled with infamy. It is first mentioned in the book of Genesis where we find Nimrod, a mighty hunter against God, beginning his kingdom in Babel, located in the land of Shinar, This is the place where the peoples of the earth rebelled against their Creator's command to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and defiantly said, "*Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.*" Genesis 11:4 All forms of paganism find their origin in ancient Babylon where the tower, or ziggurat, was intended to hold zodiacal signs to assist in their worship of the creation; the stars, the moon and the sun rather than their Creator.

It stands to reason that when God scattered the people of the earth abroad over the face of the earth (when He confused their languages), they took all their forms of idolatry with them. Who is the domineering matriarch of harlots and the abominations of the earth? There is no doubt. She is Babylon.

And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. When I saw her, I wondered greatly. Revelation 17:6

The woman (Babylon the great, the great harlot) is drunk; she is out of control, impaired, and exhilarated. Her choice of drink? The blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. She enjoys murdering God's people; she is obsessed with slaughtering them. Babylon's final judgment will be ruinous, she will be laid waste in perfect alignment to her deeds. There will be an unrestrained increase in the number of martyrs of the true God and His Son, Jesus Christ, in the last days; the days which are arriving daily in our modern world.

Interesting consideration... Could the blood of the saints be referring to the Jews, while the blood of the witnesses of Jesus be a reference to Gentiles or the church? Quite possibly.

John wonders greatly when he sees the great harlot drunk and continuing to drink on the blood of those who follow the Lord. She was originally shown to him as a woman in charge of all around her, sitting royally and luxuriously on the peoples and the one they worshiped—antichrist. Now he sees her hideousness in its stripped bare state, all of this to prepare him to view her ultimate judgment (Revelation 17:1 *"Come here, I will show you the judgment of the great harlot"*) which will be detailed in Revelation 18.

And the angel said to me, "Why do you wonder? I will tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns." Revelation 17:7

As John stared at the woman, royal and majestic, formidable and commanding, opulent and lavish, he was faced in stark contrast with a grotesque monster, blood dripping from her mouth, staggering uncontrollably, emitting an overpowering foul stench. No wonder John wondered greatly.

The angel answered John with a question, "Why do you wonder?" That's a good question. Why *didn't* John expect this from the system of false religion that had been around since antiquity? Why was he *shocked* to find this creature so loathsome? Indeed, why are *we* so complacent ourselves with the true nature of idolatry? Why don't *we* see the heinousness of worship directed at anything other than the One True Living God, the God of the Bible?

The angel promised to tell John the mystery of the woman and also of the seven-headed, ten-horned beast that carried her. He begins by explaining the mystery of the beast. Be prepared, this is not going to be super simple; after all, it's a mystery! But, be encouraged, you *can* understand it because God wrote the book of Revelation to *show* His bond-servants the things which must soon take place. He wrote it so that *you will know!* Let's listen closely to what He has written for us:

The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth, whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will wonder when they see the beast, that he was and is not and will come. Revelation 17:8

The woman is sitting on a scarlet beast full of blasphemous names. The beast *was*, and *is not now*, and *is about to come up out of the abyss*, and *will go to destruction*. (We will wait until we observe a few more verses before we try to gain more understanding on what this means.)

Those who dwell on the earth will wonder when they see the beast—that he *was*, and *is not*, and *will come*. The earth dwellers are unbelievers; their names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world. The earth dwellers were defined for us earlier in Revelation 13:8. “*All who dwell on the earth will worship him* (the beast or antichrist), *everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain*.” (We will learn more about the book of life, and other books belonging to God, when we observe Revelation 20.)

Here is the mind which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits and they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while. Revelation 17:9-10

We are told quite plainly that we need to engage our minds in order to understand the following explanation. The Greek word for “wisdom” is *sophia* and means skill, ability, and knowledge.

“Lord, right now I ask you to give each of us the skill, ability, and knowledge to understand your Word. Help us, please. Thank you, Lord. Amen.”

We are told the seven heads (the ones on the scarlet beast) are seven mountains and that the woman sits on them. The seven mountains are seven kings. This is not surprising because in prophecy, mountains always point to kingdoms. Kings always go with their kingdoms. So, who rules over these seven kingdoms? The woman, the great harlot, Babylon the great, the mother of harlots, the mother of the abominations of the earth. She is the one who “sits” on them; she has power over them.

Five of the mountains (kingdoms, kings) have fallen (are no more) and one is (exists at that time). Five plus one makes six. The seventh (kingdom, king) has not yet come. These seven kingdoms are the seven heads on the scarlet beast on which the woman sits.

When the seventh head (mountain, kingdom, king) comes, it is necessary for him to remain a little while.

Let me walk you through that one more time quickly. There are seven kingdoms connected with the beast (his heads), five of which, at the time John writes, are in the past. The sixth head is a literal kingdom at that time and another kingdom will come after it. The seventh kingdom will need to exist for awhile, but only for a brief time.

Here is where we use wisdom! Israel is obviously the main character in the book of Revelation (apart from the Lamb, of course). What is the first kingdom that ruled over Israel? Yep, Egypt. What is the second kingdom that ruled over Israel? Assyria. Babylon was the third kingdom that ruled over Israel and the Medo-Persian empire was the fourth and Greece was the fifth. Hmmmm... The angel tells John that five have fallen. At the point in history when John wrote the book of Revelation we know that five kingdoms which previously ruled over Israel were no more... Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece... 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and each one of them had fallen by that time.

The angel tells John that “one *is*”. The kingdom that ruled over Israel at that point in history was Rome. The next kingdom to rule over Israel had not yet come at that time and John is told that when it comes it will be necessary for it to remain for a little while.

The Bible’s historical books make the first six kingdoms pretty simple to figure out, but, the angel is not done with his explanation of the mystery of the beast that carries the woman; in fact, he hasn’t even begun to explain the woman, herself!

Hang on! This is where it gets a little harder to keep things straight. Let’s just walk through the text slowly, asking God to open our minds to behold wonderful things from His Word!

The beast which was and is not, is himself also an eighth and is one of the seven, and he goes to destruction. Revelation 17:11

The beast, which *was* but no longer *is*, (at that time) is also an eighth—in other words, an eighth king/kingdom. After the seven kingdoms, there will be an eighth kingdom, and we know whose kingdom that is, right? It’s the kingdom of the beast. We are told that the beast (and his kingdom) will be destroyed. Hallelujah!!!

Think how perfectly this fits with Revelation 13:3, “*I saw one of his heads as if it had been slain, and his fatal wound was healed. And the whole earth was amazed and followed after the beast*”. The beast (*which was*) receives a fatal wound (*is not*) from which he comes back to life (*is*) and wows the world into following him.

The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour. Revelation 17:12

The angel moves unexpectedly from the seven heads to the ten horns and tells us they are ten kings—ones who have not yet received a kingdom, but they receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour.

These have one purpose, and they give their power and authority to the beast. Revelation 17:13

The ten kings (the ten horns of the beast) who have not yet received a kingdom, (although they receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour) have one purpose. They are united in their goal and they give their power and authority to the beast.

Let's back up and take another jab at this. (Review is a very good word.) The first five heads are the nations which ruled over Israel from her creation—Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. The sixth head, the kingdom that was ruling over Israel at that time, was Rome, the one that “*is*”. A seventh kingdom had not yet come. (And still has not come, by the way. It will be the divided kingdom prophesied in Daniel 2, known as the revived Roman Empire.)

The angel informs us there will be an eighth kingdom (after the seven heads), which is the kingdom of the beast, itself. The beast will come from the revived Roman Empire. There will be ten kings, three of which he will eliminate (Daniel 7) leaving only seven. He gains ascendancy using the revived Roman Empire but becomes a king all by himself.

These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful. Revelation 17:14

Back to the ten kings who are united in their goal and give their power and authority to the beast. What is their ultimate goal? They will wage war against the Lamb.

Let's take a deep breath and use our wisdom again.

Chapter 17 is a close up, or zoomed in view of the judgment of the great harlot (woman, Babylon the great) which takes place in the seventh bowl. Chapter 17 actually goes beyond the seventh bowl and points forward to the time when the ten kings will wage war against the Lamb. (The seventh bowl happens before the Lamb comes back.) The gathering (in Har-Magedon) for this war happens during the sixth bowl, which is before the Lamb has come back to save Jerusalem (where the war will actually take place). Yes, you read that right. The gathering will take place in Har-Magedon but the war will be in Jerusalem.

When Revelation 17:14 speaks of the war waged against the Lamb, it points to the time when the Lamb takes on His role as the King of kings and the Lord of lords! This takes place *after* Babylon's demise. When the Lamb comes, He will put an end to the Great Tribulation, and the antichrist, and the false prophet, etc. (Stay tuned—we will be given much more detail about this glorious event in Revelation 19!)

And he said to me, “The waters which you saw where the harlot sits, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues.” Revelation 17:15

The waters upon whom the great harlot sits (Revelation 16:1) are definitively listed; they are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues, all the people on the planet!

Remember, just as mountains commonly represent kingdoms (and kings) in prophecy, so too, waters commonly are figurative of peoples and nations.

And the ten horns which you saw, and the beast, these will hate the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire. Revelation 17:16

Let's back up and think again. God will dry up the Euphrates River and send out spirits of demons to bring the kings of the earth together at Har-Magedon for the great day of the war of God. (Partly, He does that, because He is punishing Israel for her disbelief and rebellion against Him and partly because He is punishing the earth-dwellers for theirs. He accomplishes both of His purposes.)

When the gathering of the armies takes place in Har-Magedon, north of Jerusalem, a flank (three of the ten kings under the orders of the beast) will go east to Babylon (the harlot) and destroy her. Why? Because they hate her. Evidently they have had enough of her ruthless, tyrannical rule over them. They will make her desolate and naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her up with fire. We will see the specifics of this in Revelation 18 and that it is actually part of the seventh bowl being poured out from Revelation 16:17-21. Daniel 7 also gives us details about this amazing insurrection.

God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose by having a common purpose, and by giving their kingdom to the beast until the words of God will be fulfilled. Revelation 17:17

Whose hearts? The ten horns. They have a common purpose, they give their kingdom to the beast, but, they are actually executing God's purpose! He is the One Who puts it in their hearts to do such a thing to Babylon.

The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah confirm the sovereignty of the Lord. He is the One Who destroys Babylon, using the beast and his evil minions. What words of God will be fulfilled when Babylon is finally destroyed? There are others, but chew on the following passages for awhile and then bow your knee in submission and lift your voice in praise to the Lord Most High!

The oracle concerning Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw. Lift up a standard on the bare hill, raise your voice to them, wave the hand that they may enter the doors of the nobles. I have commanded My consecrated ones, I have even called My mighty warriors, My proudly exulting ones, to execute My anger. A sound of tumult on the mountains, like that of many people! A sound of the uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathered together! The LORD of hosts is mustering the army for battle. They are coming from a far country, from the farthest horizons, The LORD and His instruments of indignation, to destroy the whole land. Isaiah 13:1–5

For behold, I am going to arouse and bring up against Babylon a horde of great nations from the land of the north, And they will draw up their battle lines against her; from there

she will be taken captive. Their arrows will be like an expert warrior who does not return empty-handed. Jeremiah 50:9

Really! Isn't this just so amazing? Kings and kingdoms and peoples. They are simply chess pieces on a board. God can move any game piece on the board that He chooses, wherever and whenever He wishes. The beast and the horns may *think* they are attacking Babylon because they hate her, but the ultimate truth is that God will put it in their heart to *purpose* to kill her. Their purpose serves the purpose of God.

The woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth. Revelation 17:18

Lots and lots and lots and lots of commentators and people believe that the city Babylon (and thus the woman who rides the beast) is actually Rome, specifically the Roman Catholic Church. They see the history of the Catholic Church persecuting the Protestant Church and interpret it how they want to see it.

In doing this they not only replace Babylon with the Catholic Church or Pope, but they also replace the Nation of Israel with the Protestant Church. This is, in essence, Replacement Theology. The Jews and Jerusalem (God's city) are the ones whose opponent from antiquity is Babylon, not the Protestants and the Catholics. Babylon is *not* Rome!

Just as many others believe that the woman, the great harlot, Babylon the great is... well... the United States of America. Let me make this perfectly clear; Babylon is *not* the United States of America. Babylon is *not* America!

How can I know for sure that Babylon is not Rome? How can I be so certain that Babylon is not America? It's very simple... because God *tells* us that *Babylon* is Babylon! The great harlot is the woman and the woman is Babylon the great and Babylon the great is Babylon! Verse 18 could not say it any more clearly—“*the woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth.*” Scripture is the only trustworthy interpreter of Scripture, so let it do so...

Let's reason together for a moment. Right now, in our present day and age, is Babylon ruling over all the kings of the earth? Then what can you know is going to happen? Babylon is going to become a major world city once again. Babylon is going to be built up because she will eventually become (we will see in chapter 18) the economical center of the world. At the present, which nation has that position? The United States of America.

What does that tell us? Either the United States will not exist during those days... or we will have lost our power in the world. America will someday, maybe very soon, lose its position in this world, one way or another. Sorry! God's Word is final... Babylon is the one who will rule during the time of the antichrist, not the United States.

But she won't stay on top for long...

Years ago, during the Iraqi war, Operation Desert Storm, I saw the front page of a newspaper, the title of which was "Baghdad Burned in One Day". In the next chapter we will see that Babylon will be burned in one day; only she will be completely razed to the ground. Remember, Revelation 17 is the *judgment* of the harlot, whereas Revelation 18 is the *destruction* of the harlot.