

Revelation 17

I. The fall of Babylon/Rome

- While this section is connected to the larger narrative of Rev by the role of one of the angels who pour out the bowls of God's wrath, the focus of Rev 17 shifts to the ultimate downfall and destruction of Rome depicted by Babylon in the symbolic world of the letter.
- The two major critical symbols of Rome in Rev are the beast and the prostitute.
- The beast is a symbol of military power, while the prostitute is a symbol of economic power. The primary critique of Rome in Rev 13 is political, the critique in Rev 17 is economic.

II. Prostitution in the OT

- Prostitution is a common symbolic convention in the OT, depicting cities marked by godlessness, idolatry, and the trappings of wealth.
- See Isaiah 23 and 47, Nahum 3, Jeremiah 50-51; Ezekiel 16, 23, and 26-27.
- Many have connected the Prostitute of Babylon to the harlot-queen Jezebel.

III. Identity of the Prostitute

- Again, the Prostitute symbolizes the arrogant wealth of Rome/Babylon, as an indictment of arrogant humanity.
- John's descriptions of the woman depict her as one like the goddess Roma, but very quickly these descriptions give way to the imagery of a common Temple prostitute.
- The Italian NT scholar Eugenio Corsini posits that Rev has nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus' second coming, but with the period immediately following Jesus' death and resurrection.
- In his perspective, Jerusalem is the prostitute because it put Jesus to death and persecuted Christians, and is later devoured by the Roman beast (Temple destruction). At times, the OT depicts Israel as a whore.

IV. The Beast

- The first beast of Rev 13 seems to appear again in Rev 17. We might recall some of the symbolic meaning of the beast.
- The number 7 symbolizes the seven hills of Rome, and the seven kings of Rome. Those Kings differ depending on whether one starts counting with Julius Caesar or Augustus Caesar, but the list ends with Domitian in one way or another.
- Ten horns is an OT symbol of power, but who are the ten future kings?
- **Is Nero the Beast?** In keeping with the symbolic world of Rev where the mark of the beast spells Nero Caesar, might Nero be the beast? This interpretation could make sense of the cryptic description of one who "was and is not and is about to/was is not and is to come." In this interpretation, John is playing on the common fears of Christians in the Roman world that Nero was not actually dead,

and was going to return to power in a parody of the resurrection. “Was and is not and is about to” sounds very much like common Christological language about the one who was, is, and is to come.

V. Joining the symbols together

- Why does the prostitute ride on the beast? Because Roman economic power is carried by Roman military power, they depend on one another. Rome is wealthy because of Rome’s military might.
- The allure of the prostitute speaks to the allure of Roman power: contrary to our anachronistic projections onto ancient people, many of Rome’s citizens enjoyed the stability and prosperity of Roman power (Pax Romana).
- That promise of stability and prosperity may be symbolized by the gold that adorns her chalice, while inside one drinks only abominations.
- At the end of the day, while these two forms of power depend on one another, they ultimately devour one another.

VI. The theology of *Revelation* and critique of power

- Revelation is the English translation of the word “apokalypsos,” which means revealing something hidden.
- John’s purpose is to reveal what is hidden about the Roman Empire: on the outside it is beautiful and appealing, but inside it is demonic, destructive, and a cheap parody of the power of God.

VII. The theological imagery of cities/women

- As has already been said, the prostitute of Babylon refers back to the OT convention of depicting great cities as prostitutes for adorning themselves in wealth and power.
- But there is another purpose to the prostitute’s presence as a symbol of arrogant cities: she prepares us for a great contrast in the final section of Rev.
- On the other side of the section of Rev that 17 begins, we will glimpse into another city and meet another woman: the city of the New Jerusalem, and the bride of Christ, who is her church.

VIII. Final reflection: this is a hard passage

- Not only because of the imagery, but because of its implications.
- All of John’s first readers lived in great cities, and it was impossible to belong to a Roman city without participating in its public life. John’s opening address to the seven churches suggests that its members were having trouble doing this without participating in the idolatry and immorality of Roman public and civic life?
- I believe that one reason why we are inclined to fantastical, bizarre interpretations of Rev is because its true message is far too difficult to stomach: following Jesus must always make us aliens in any and every culture and nation.