

9. The Babylon Appendix

Revelation 17:1–19:10

I. Literary Structure

Two literary features mark this as a new literary unit:

A. Change of location

Chapters 4–16 have been under the rubric of 4:2, “immediately I was in the spirit (ἐν πνεύματι).” In Chapter 17, John is carried away ἐν πνεύματι “in the spirit” into the desert (17:3).

B. Intermediary angel

The interaction between John and the intermediary angel—“one of the angels who had the seven bowls”—produces a clear parallel between the Babylon Appendix (17:1–19:10) and the Jerusalem Appendix (21:9–22:9).

Babylon Appendix	Jerusalem Appendix
17 ¹ Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, ² with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.”	21 ⁹ Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.”
³ And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns.	¹⁰ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God,
19 ¹⁰ Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.” For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.	22 ⁸ ...And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, ⁹ but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.”

This literary structure draws a sharp contrast between the character and fate of the two cities: Babylon and New Jerusalem.

Babylon	New Jerusalem
the great city prostitute seated on waters/beast dressed in luxury orgy	the holy city bride descends from heaven dressed in purity wedding

Structure of the Babylon Appendix:

1. Invitation to witness judgment upon the Prostitute (17:1-2)
2. Vision and interpretation of the Great Prostitute and the Beast (17:3-18)
3. Judgment: the fall of Babylon (18)
4. Response in heaven to execution of judgment (19:1-8)
5. Epilogue (19:9-10)

II. The Prostitute and the Beast (17:3-18)

John sees a woman sitting on a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns. The angel tells John that he will explain the mystery of the woman and of the beast (17:7).

A. The Vision (17:3-6)

1. Vision of the Beast

- blasphemous names (cf 13:1): the nature of world rulers, cf. the little horn with “a mouth speaking great things” (i.e. boastfully, Dan 7:8). Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar had spoken boastfully. The Roman emperors claimed blasphemous titles:
 - revered one (Lat. *Augustus*, Gk *Sebastos*)
 - divine (Lat. *divus*, Gk *theios*); God (Lat. *deus*)
 - savior (Gk *soter*)
 - lord (Lat. *dominus*, Gk *kurios*)
 - *pontifex maximus* (high priest; chief bridge-builder between earth and heaven)
 - *princeps* (first citizen)
- seven heads and ten horns (cf 13:1): the total of the four beasts of Dan 7. This beast seems to have total power (horns) and authority (heads).

2. Babylon the Great Prostitute

- the great prostitute: based on OT symbolism of God’s taking his covenant people in marriage, and his equation of idolatry with adultery.
- sits (enthroned) on many waters: Cf. Babylon described as “you who live by many waters” (Jer 51:13). The Euphrates flowed through Babylon, the city was surrounded by a canal, and canals criss-crossed the surrounding countryside. On a coin (Fig. 1) Rome is depicted beside the Tiber river god. These many waters are interpreted as “peoples, multitudes, nations and languages” (17:15).
- sits (enthroned) on the beast: the Roman imperial system.
- dressed in purple and scarlet, etc.: colors of royalty and luxury.
- holds a golden cup filled with her abominations: the “kings of the earth” and the “inhabitants of the earth” get drunk on this (cf. 18:3,9).
- name on forehead: Babylon the Great. Since Genesis 11, Babylon has been symbolic of the city that lives in autonomy from God.
- drunk with the blood of the faithful martyrs: the harlot city is opposed to God and his people.

B. The Interpretation (17:7-18)

1. Identity of the Beast (17:8-17)

- a) The one who was, is not, and will come

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Three times the beast is identified in a similar manner:

- “he was and is not and is about to rise from the Abyss” ἦν καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν καὶ μέλλει ἀναβαίνειν ἐκ τῆς ἀβύσσου (17:8).
- “he was and is not and will be present” ἦν καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν καὶ παρέσται (17:8).
- “he was and is not...and goes to destruction” ὃ ἦν καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν...καὶ εἰς ἀπώλειαν ὑπάγει (17:11).

This is a parody (counterfeit) of the divine name:

- “the one who is and who was and who comes” ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος (1:4, 8; 4:8)
- “the one who is and who was” ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν (11:17; 16:5)—used when God is present in judgment.

This is perhaps a reference to *Nero redivivus*, Nero returned to life (see comments below). This could mean one of four things:

1. The myth of *Nero redivivus* (Nero revived): Nero who committed suicide in AD 68, was popularly believed to be in hiding in Parthia, whence he would lead a great army to destroy Rome.
2. The Roman Empire recovering under the Flavian dynasty after the chaos of the “year of four emperors” (AD 68-69) following Nero’s suicide.
3. Domitian restoring Nero’s tyrannical rule.
4. Ability of tyrannical kingdoms to rise phoenix-like from the ashes of previous ones.

Pastoral counsel:

“This calls for a mind with wisdom” (ὧδε ὁ νοῦς ὁ ἔχων σοφίαν 17:9; cf. 13:10, 18; 14:12). Parallels show this is a response to v 8 not v 9. The earth-dwellers wonder (θαυμάζω) at the beast. The saints are not to be deceived into worshiping the beast. The saints know his destiny: he goes to destruction (ἀπώλεια 17:8, 11).

b) Seven heads

The seven heads of the beast represent seven hills (17:9). Hills symbolize power or rule: 7 kings on 7 hills = total rule.

Rome was the current manifestation. It really was built on seven hills: Capitoline, Palatine, Aventine, Caelian, Esquiline, Viminal, Quirinal.



obverse

IMP CAESAR VESPASIANVS AVG PM TP PP COS III
= Emperor Caesar Vespasian Augustus, Pontifex
Maximus (Greatest Priest), Tribunicia Potestas (Tribunal
Power), Pater Patriae (Father of the Fatherland), Consul
for the Third Time

reverse

SC = senatus consultum (resolution of the senate)

Fig. 9-1: A Roman coin minted in the Roman province of Asia, AD 71¹

The seven heads also represent “seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while” (17:10). The seven-headed beast is himself “an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction” (17:11).

Most assume this is a reference to the Roman emperors. But which ones?

1. David E. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 vols., Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997-1998), 3:920..

- should one start with Julius, the first Caesar and progenitor of the first dynasty, or with Augustus, the first emperor?
- should one include Galba, Otho, Vitellius the three short-lived emperors of the post-Nero Year of the Four Emperors.
- should one only count emperors deified by the Senate or claiming divinity?
- should one count Nero a second time as *Nero redivivus*?

Table 9-1: The Twelve Caesars

		A	B	C	D	E
Julius Caesar	-44 BC	1	1			1
Augustus	31 BC-AD 14	2	2	1	1	2
Tiberius	14-37	3	3	2	2	
Gaius (Caligula)	37-41	4	4	3	3	
Claudius	41-54	5	5	4	4	3
Nero	54-68	6	6	5	5	
Galba	68-69	7		6		
Otho	69	8		7		
Vitellius	69			8		
Vespasian	69-79		7		6	4
Titus	79-81		8		7	5
Domitian	81-96				8	6
[Nero <i>redivivus</i>]						7

A: traditional enumeration of the emperors.

B: omitting the 3 short-lived emperors of 68-69.

C: starting with Augustus, the first to be called emperor (Julius Caesar was dictator).

D: starting with Augustus and omitting the three short-lived emperors of 68-69.

E: emperors deified by Roman senate, followed by Domitian who claimed divinity while alive, and mythical Nero revived.

There has been no successful identification of the five, the sixth, the seventh and the eighth from this list. But John's imagery is too fluid to be tied to one individual. Furthermore, it is highly likely that 7 is a symbolic number, representing the fullness of beastly government at all times and as then incarnated in the Roman empire.

Since our problems are not due to any lack of historical information, there is no reason to think that John's first-century readers would have been in any better case than we... John did not arrive at the number seven by counting emperors; the monster Leviathan had seven heads centuries before the founding of Rome ... the seven kings are a symbolic number, representative of the whole series of emperors, and they would remain seven no matter how long the actual list happened to be.²

Though the beast's power seems total (7 heads, 10 horns), his empire is near an end: five of seven kings have fallen. The beast rises only to go to destruction (17:8, 11).

c) Ten horns

2. Caird, "The Revelation of St John the Divine," 218-219..

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Futurist interpreters assume this is a future reconstituted Roman Empire in Europe consisting of 10 nations; assumed to be the European Community. EEC, founded in 1958 with 6 nations, expanded to 9 in 1973, fuelling such speculation. Had 10 nations for 5 years (1981-86); now 27.

Just as wrong to look ahead for ten nations as to look back for 7 historical rulers. 10 horns symbolize total power. These rulers make war against the Lamb (cf. Ps 2:1), but the Lamb effortlessly conquers (νικάω).

With him is his army (cf. 14:4; 19:14).

The kings have one purpose (γνώμη 17:13), but really they are doing God's purpose (γνώμη 17:17).

Like the seven heads, ten is also most likely a symbolic number, representing the totality of earthly counterfeit rule.

The beast and the kings wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb easily overcomes them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings. So they turn against Babylon and wage war on her. But even in this, it is God who is at work, using pagan nations and kings as his instruments of judgment, just as in the OT.

2. Identity of the Woman (17:18)

The interpreting angel explains the woman as simply “the great city.”

1. The first city-builder was Cain after he “went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Gen 4:16).
2. The first builder of the great city was Nimrod: “The beginning of his kingdom was Babel [Babylon], Erech [Uruk], Accad [Akkad], and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. From that land he went into Assyria and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city (הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה)” (Gen 10:10-12). These were the mighty cities of southern (Shinar) and northern (Assyria) Mesopotamia. These cities with their founders and rulers were exalted, e.g. Gilgamesh in Uruk, Hammurabi in Babylon. The Bible considers them built by Nimrod (נִמְרוֹד “we shall rebel”).
3. Wandering east of Eden, humanity gathered at Babel: “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves” (Gen 11:4). God intervened to prevent this concentration of evil. The Babylonians called their city *Bab-ili*, “the gate of god”; the Bible calls it Babel, the city of confusion.
4. Three OT cities are the great city: Nineveh, Babylon, Tyre.

Characteristics of the great city: lives in autonomy from God; proud and arrogant; self-secure. Opposes God and his people; therefore takes his people captive. OT portrays the great city as a harlot: she is idolatrous and she seduces the world with her abominations.

III. The Fall of Babylon (18:1-24)

Chapter 18 is a prophetic taunt song (a threnody: OT קִינָה LXX θρηνηος *lament*) over the Fall of Babylon the Great, derived from OT laments over Babylon (Isa 21:9; Jer 51:8) and Tyre (Ezek 26-27). The great city (18:2, 9, 15, 19, 21) is brought to ruin because of her pride (18:7) and her role in the death of the saints (18:24).

The chapter is structured as three speeches by three angels: 1-3, 4-20, 21-24.³

3. NASB, NIV treat 18:4-20 as a single speech; NRSV, ESV, HCSB, NET do not.

1. First angel (18:1-3)

Pronounces Babylon's demise: "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" (= Isa 21:9; cf. Jer 51:8), previewed in 14:8; 16:19 (the seventh bowl triggered the eschatological earthquake which split the great city and felled the cities of the world). This is the judgment on the great prostitute which the angel had invited John to witness (17:1).

Babylon's crime here is to have intoxicated the world with her adulterous cup (cf. 14:8).

2. Second angel (18:4-20)

Multiple speeches addressed to different audiences.

1. Call to flee (18:4-5). In OT this heralded the imminent release of God's people from captivity and Babylon's imminent fall. Here the saints are called to keep themselves pure from Babylon's seductions.
2. Call for judgment (18:6-8). Babylon is sensual, self-centered, self-secure (cf. Isa 47:7-10).
3. Three-fold lament by those who profited from Babylon (18:9-19), modeled on lament over Tyre by kings, merchants of the earth and mariners (Ezek 27). Each party weeps and mourns, stands far off, laments, "Woe, woe, O great city," and observes that doom required but "one hour."
 - a. the kings of the earth (18:9-10)
 - b. the merchants of the earth (18:11-17a). "Everything you've lived for, gone!" (18:14, The Message)
 - c. the merchants (18:17b-19): "Who is like the great city?" (18:18, cf. Ezek 27:32), cf. "Who is like the beast?" (13:4).
4. Call to rejoice (18:20): 2-fold call addressed to heaven (cf. Isa 44:23; 49:13; Jer 51:48) and to her new residents (as opposed to the earth-dwellers).⁴ This rejoicing is later depicted in a four-fold Hallelujah (19:1-8).

3. Third angel (18:21-24)

Whereas heaven is filled with song, there is silence in Babylon. The good things are no longer found or heard (οὐ μὴ εὐρεθῆ / ἀκουσθῆ / φάνη ἐν σοὶ ἔτι). Babylon is judged for what is found in her: the blood of the saints.

IV. The Response in Heaven (19:1-9)

In response to the fall of Babylon, the Hallelujah chorus is sung:

1. Rejoicing over the fall of Babylon (19:1-4): God has condemned the great prostitute and avenged the blood of his servants (cf. 6:10).
2. Rejoicing in anticipation of the wedding supper of the Lamb (19:5-8). Babylon's feast had been an orgy of intoxicating seduction.
3. Beatitude (19:9)

V. Epilogue: John's Response (19:10)

John is so overwhelmed by the sequence of visions (17:3-19:8) that he falls down at the feet of the interpreting angel to worship him. The angel's response serves as a motif for the whole book: Worship God.

4. NIV (1984), NRSV, ESV, HCSB incorrectly identify v. 20 as a continuation of the mariners' speech in v. 19; NASB, NET and more recent editions of NIV (TNIV, 2011) correctly terminate the mariners' speech at the end of v. 19.