

# REV. 15:1 – 19:10

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X. Details of wrath accompanying sounding of seventh trumpet - the seven bowls or cups of wrath (15:1 - 16:21)

## A. Review of context

1. The final judgment of God, the fire thrown down to the earth by the angel in 8:5, is symbolized in the punishments meted out in the sounding of the seven trumpets. They are not seven separate judgments but the portrayal of the one final judgment as a seven-fold judgment, seven being the number of perfection or completeness.

2. You recall that the first woe that accompanied the sounding of the fifth trumpet was described in detail as the terrible assault of demonic locusts that tormented people. The second woe that accompanied the sixth trumpet was likewise described in detail as the vast horde of demonic horsemen that slaughtered people as it swept across the earth. But the third woe of the seventh trumpet that was sounded in chapter 11 was not described. Instead, as I have noted, the vision jumps to a time after the outpouring of God's wrath is completed, a time when God's wrath and the judging of the dead had already come (11:18).

3. With a number of commentators (e.g., Ladd, Mounce [tentatively], Aune, Johnson, Michaels), I think the seven bowls of wrath that are introduced in chapter 15 are the delayed description of the third woe of the seventh trumpet.

a. According to 10:7, when the seventh trumpet is sounded the *mystery of God will be fulfilled* as he announced to the prophets. In keeping with that, we see in 11:15-18 that the sounding of the seventh trumpet includes the consummation of the kingdom and the completion of divine wrath that precedes that consummation.

b. It is clear from 15:1 and 16:7 that the plagues of the seven bowls complete the outpouring of God's wrath. Since the seventh trumpet includes the completion of God's wrath, it seems the punishments of the seven bowls are the unreported "third woe" that accompanies the sounding of the seventh trumpet. As the final woe associated with the final trumpet, it is magnified through its own series of seven.

## B. Preparation for outpouring of seven last plagues (15:1-8)

1. John sees a "great and amazing" sign in heaven: seven angels with the seven last plagues that complete God's wrath. The emphasis is on God bringing history to a close, which is an amazing thing to see.

2. In chapter 7 the faithful are assured of their future glory before the depiction of the final judgment that begins with the trumpets in chapter 8. In chapter 14:1-5

they are assured of their future glory before the final judgment that is summarized in 14:6-20. So here in 15:2-4 they are assured of the joy and blessing of faithfulness prior to the completion of God's wrath that is symbolized in the outpouring of the seven bowls of wrath.

3. In vv. 2-4 he sees the faithful, represented by those who expressed that faith in the extreme circumstance of the final generation, standing on what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire. In 4:6 a sea of glass like crystal was before the throne of God. This imagery depicts the majesty and brilliance of God. The mention of fire here may be an allusion to God's judgment which is often portrayed in terms of fire.

4. This great picture again reinforces the truth that the blessings of faithfulness are worth any price. It is imagery of the concept Paul expressed in 2 Cor. 4:16-18: <sup>16</sup>Therefore, we do not lose heart, but even if our outward man is being wasted away, yet our inward man is being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup>For the lightness of our affliction, which is momentary, is producing for us far beyond all measure an eternal weight of glory, <sup>18</sup>as we focus not on the things that are seen but on the things that are not seen, for the things that are seen [are] temporary, but the things that are not seen [are] eternal.

5. The victorious saints are described simply as "having harps of God."

a. If I may detour briefly, the text does not say anything about these harps being "held" or being "in their hands"; those are interpretive glosses based on the assumption that "harps of God" refer to a mechanical instrument that has either come *from* God (e.g., oranges *of Florida*) or is to be used *for* God (e.g., the sacrifices of God).

b. I am not convinced this is correct. Though literal harps, along with bowls of incense, were used in 5:8 as static symbols of prayers, they are not there called harps *of God*. I think this qualification is more significant than is usually recognized.

c. I think "harps of God" is probably a metaphorical reference to their voices, which were already said in 14:2 to be *like the sound of harpists playing their harps*. It is the human voice consecrated to God in the expression of praise that is "God's harp," the instrument that is uniquely suited for the worship of a God who is spirit. The voice is the immediate and ultimate expression of the inner man, the human spirit, which when under the influence of the Holy Spirit is beautiful and pleasing to God. As Everett Ferguson explains:

Vocal expressions are peculiarly well suited to the expression of spiritual worship, to the expressing of what comes from the human spirit and through the Spirit of God. They are rational, not in the sense of non-emotional, but as proceeding from and appealing to the highest of human nature. The whole self (including the emotions) is involved in Christian worship, but the mind (reason) is to be in control. Instrumental music can express feelings and emotions. Vocal music can express the will and intellect. The latter is better suited for the communion of spirit with Spirit. In vocal music there is an immediate contact. In instrumental music there

is an intermediary. The voice is much more a matter of one's self than any other gift of praise can be. Vocal music thus best corresponds to the nature of one's relationship to God.

d. Certainly such a metaphorical reference would not be out of place in a book like Revelation. About a century after Revelation was written, Clement of Alexandria described the tongue as "the psaltery of the Lord" and said the kithara (harp) was "the mouth struck by the Spirit, as it were by a plectrum."

e. In addition, there is no mention of these harps being played. The text merely reports that those having God's harps are singing. Given the persuasive evidence that the church never used musical instruments in worship and saw the human voice as the instrument best suited for worshiping a God who is spirit, it would be primed to understand "God's harps" as a metaphor for the singing capacity of the Spirit-filled Christian.

f. Of course, if I am wrong and these singing saints are indeed pictured as holding harps it would not mean that instrumental music is appropriate for the earthly worship of the church. In Revelation there is incense in golden bowls and golden censers (5:8, 8:3), a golden altar (8:3), a temple (11:19), and the ark of the covenant (11:19), but almost no one believes it would be appropriate to introduce these items into Christian worship.

#### 6. They are singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.

a. This is probably one song with a double title. It is a song of praise for God's deliverance, a deliverance made possible by God's sovereignty. The deliverance of which Moses and the people sang in Ex. 15:1-18 prefigured the greater deliverance brought about by the Lamb.

b. God is so great that ultimately every nation will fear and glorify him, acknowledging his sovereignty, his unique holiness, and his absolute power. The promise of texts like Ps. 86:9 that all nations will come and worship him is now fulfilled *because* his righteous judgments (KJV, RSV, NKJV, NRSV; or acts) have been revealed. In other words, all nations, whether eagerly or under compulsion, whether happily or unhappily, will give God his due when his righteous judgment falls on the earth. Even the rebellious will bow down, "bend the knee" (Phil. 2:9-11), in forced acceptance of the reality of God's glory. (The word "worship" here, προσκυνέω, can be used of bowing and kneeling before another even if one does not have a heart of worship. See, e.g., Mk. 15:19 where those mocking Christ are said to have been worshiping him.)

#### 7. Seven angels with the seven last plagues (vv. 5-8)

a. The temple (or sanctuary) in heaven is referred to in v. 5 as the tent or tabernacle of the testimony. The tabernacle of Israel's early history was called the tabernacle of the testimony because it housed the ark of the covenant, which in turn held God's testimony in the form of the stone tablets on which the ten commandments were

written (Ex. 32:15-16, 34:28; Deut. 10:5). I think this is a reference to God as the source and standard of mankind's moral obligation and thus a reference to him as the one who judges sin.

b. Seven angels emerge from the heavenly temple wearing pure bright linen with golden sashes across their chests. Their coming from the temple is indicative of the divine origin of their commission. Their appearance symbolizes their purity and importance.

c. One of the four living creatures gives a golden bowl to each of the seven angels. The bowls are full of the wrath of God. In 5:8 the golden bowls symbolized the prayers of the saints. This may suggest a relationship between prayer and divine retribution.

d. The temple is filled with smoke, which symbolizes the presence of God in all his glory and power to carry out his judgment upon wickedness. Until the seven plagues are finished, no one can enter the temple. I think this suggests that nothing will alleviate or cut short the punishment God is meting out in the final judgment; it will be completed in full. In the imagery of Lk. 13:24-27, the owner of the house has closed the door. The subject is closed.

#### B. Outpouring of the seven last plagues (16:1-21)

1. Perhaps this is a good time to repeat the earlier quote from Bruce Metzger:

“We must remember that the objects and events seen in a vision are not physically real. As was mentioned earlier, Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37) and Peter's vision of a great sheet let down from heaven and filled with all kinds of unclean creatures (Acts 10) were perceived in a trance. Such things seen in a vision are not physically present. So too, in the book of Revelation the descriptions are not descriptions of real occurrences, but of symbols of the real occurrences. The intention is to fix the reader's thought, not upon the symbol, but upon the idea that the symbolic language is designed to convey.”

2. And note that the horrible punishment that is symbolized in the bowls is reserved for those who chose Satan over God (16:2b), those who opposed the saints and were thus culpable in the shedding of their blood (16:6). They curse God as he punishes them into submission and vindicates the faith of his servants. The people of God are exempt from his punishment as made clear in their being sealed in chapter 7 and in other ways.

3. The first bowl poured out on the earth (v. 2). The followers of the beast receive ugly and painful sores reminiscent of the boils that God through Moses brought on the Egyptians, the enemies of his people (Ex. 9:9-11). These are the kinds of sores that plagued Lazarus in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16.

4. The second bowl is poured out into the sea (v. 3). The sea became like the blood of a corpse (coagulated and rotting), and every living thing in the sea died. This is reminiscent of the first plague on Egypt (Ex. 7:20-21) and of the punishment that accompanied the second trumpet (8:8-9), but here we see the full picture of this aspect of the final judgment. As horrific as it was in 8:8-9 to have a third of the sea turned to blood, a third of the sea creatures die, and a third of the ships destroyed, that was merely a weigh station in the unfolding picture of God's final judgment. Whatever hope the inhabitants of the earth may have harbored that the punishment had peaked short of complete devastation is dashed. The cup of God's wrath will be emptied.

5. The third bowl is poured out into the rivers and springs (v. 4-7).

a. This is reminiscent of the punishment that accompanied the third trumpet, but there is again a completion of that aspect of the punishment that dashes any hope that the worst was over. Now all the inland waters, the entire supply of fresh water, are involved, not just one-third, and they are turned to blood instead of simply becoming bitter.

b. The angel attests to the righteousness of God's action. His judgment is grimly appropriate: those who have shed the blood of God's people, depicted in 17:6 as having drunk the blood of the saints, which includes all who were complicit in that bloodshed through their siding with Antichrist, deserve to have blood to drink.

6. The fourth bowl is poured out on the sun (v. 8-9). The sun is allowed (by God) to scorch the beast's followers with intense heat, a horrifying picture indeed.

a. When this judgment falls, they are hardened in their hostility to God. As indicated with regard to the second woe of the sixth trumpet (9:20-21), there is no repentance. Instead God's enemies are hardened in their sin; they curse (blaspheme) his holy name. Mounce remarks (p. 297): "Like Pharaoh, their hearts have become hardened and repentance is out of the question. Caird says, "They have wholly taken on the character of the false gods they serve." As Beale said about the sixth trumpet, the plagues "were not intended to have a redeeming effect but a damning effect."

b. They will not glorify God through repentance, through turning to him for salvation; that time has passed. They will, however, ultimately glorify him through their forced acknowledgement of and submission to his supremacy.

7. In the imagery, the fifth bowl is poured out on the throne of the beast (v. 10-11) which results in his entire kingdom being plunged into darkness.

a. As I said regarding the fourth trumpet, supernatural darkness is a form of divine punishment, as in the ninth plague on Egypt (Ex. 10:21-23) where there was three days of absolute darkness. God symbolizes the final judgment with repeated allusions to the Egyptian plagues to say that at the final judgment he will powerfully punish the hostile forces that oppose and oppress his people as he punished the Egyptians

who did the same. Note that the Israelites in Egypt are specifically said to have had light during this time of darkness (Ex. 10:23).

b. It is possible that part of the symbolism of this darkness is separation from God. Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish writing from the latter part of the first century B.C., understands the darkness of the Egyptian plague in Exodus 10 as symbolizing spiritual separation from God (Wisdom 17:2).

c. Those who chose Antichrist are gnawing their tongues in anguish, both from the terrifying darkness and the pain of their sores. It is again pointed out that they do not repent; they are set in their sin and hostility toward God. They curse him as they are being dragged to submission.

8. The sixth bowl is poured out on the great Euphrates River (v. 12), and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the east. I think this probably symbolizes punishment being meted out on Babylon the great, the center of Antichrist's empire, through an allusion to the fall of the ancient city of Babylon to Cyrus the Persian.

a. Both Herodotus, a Greek historian of the mid-fifth century B.C., and Xenophon, a Greek historian of the fourth century B.C., recount that Cyrus captured Babylon in 539 B.C. by diverting the Euphrates River so that his troops could enter the city through the now passable river bed that ran through it. There may even be allusions to this in the Old Testament (Isa. 44:27-28; Jer. 50:38, 51:36). This was, of course, the victory by which God freed his people from Babylonian captivity.

b. Cyrus is described in Isa. 41:2 and 46:11 as one "from the east" and as one "from the rising of the sun," meaning the east, in Isa. 41:25. He led a coalition of Medes and Persians, as indicated in Dan. 5:28, which was in keeping with prophecies that the Medes would play a part in the destruction of Babylon (Isa. 13:17, 21:2; Jer. 51:11, 28). In Jer. 51:11, 28 God refers to bringing "kings of the Medes" against Babylon. So Babylon fell at the hand of a plurality of "kings" being led by one "from the east."

c. So this bowl not only removes from "Babylon" its essential water supply (viewed separately from the consequence of the third bowl) but is preparation for its destruction, which climaxes with the pouring out of the seventh and final bowl of wrath.

9. I am with a minority of commentators (e.g., Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Brian Blount) in thinking verses 13-16 are an interlude prior to the outpouring of the seventh bowl. Between the breaking of the sixth and seventh seals, there was the interlude of the sealing of the saints in chapter 7. Between the sounding of the sixth and seventh trumpets, there was the interlude of the little scroll and the two witnesses in 10:1-11:14. So here I think there is an interlude between the sixth and seventh bowls of wrath.

a. John sees three demonic spirits, described as unclean and froglike, issue from the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. Frogs were unclean animals under the Law (Lev. 11:10-11) and generally are regarded as unattractive. The fact

they come out of the mouths of the dragon, beast, and false prophet may symbolize the deceptive speech that is used by this trinity of evil.

b. These evil spirits employ miraculous signs, presumably through the false prophet (13:13-15), to gather the kings of the whole world (not kings "from the east" as in as in 16:12) for the battle on the great day of God the Almighty. They are assembled for that battle, the great day of Christ's return when he will execute God's final judgment, having come together in their attack on the Lord's church as indicated in 11:7-10 and in chapter 13.

c. In other words, this interlude, in my judgment, resets the scene of the world coming to the point of the final judgment. Prior to the depiction of God's wrath being completed in the seventh bowl, we are taken back to the state of the world when that judgment fell. There is a resetting of the world being organized against God and his people under the leadership of Antichrist through the performance of miraculous signs wrought by demonic power. It was at that time, when the world was aligned, assembled as it were, against God through its persecution of his people, when the number of martyrs was completed (6:9-11), that the final judgment was launched. It is that final judgment that has been depicted in various frightening images since the hurling of fire to the earth in 8:5.

d. Verse 15 refers expressly to Christ's coming in this context of the world aligned against God in the days of the dragon, beast, and false prophet. As Paul indicated in 2 Thess. 2:8, the lawless one, Antichrist, will be on the scene when Christ returns. Jesus pronounces as blessed those who, in light of the deception and persecution of those days, stay faithful, those who remain ready to meet him as symbolized by keeping their garments on.

e. The site at which God's enemies are said to be assembled against him for battle on the great day of God the Almighty is in Hebrew called "Harmagedon" (or "Armagedon").

(1) Most see this as a reference to Megiddo, either as the "mountain (or hill) of Megiddo" or the "city of Megiddo." The former seems closer to the Hebrew, but there is no mountain of Megiddo (in John's day the tell of Megiddo was only about 70 ft. high).

(2) Megiddo was an ancient city in north central Israel (Galilee in Jesus' time) on the southern edge of the Jezreel Plain. Although Megiddo is rarely mentioned in connection with battles, Deborah and Barak's defeat of Sisera being a significant exception (Jud. 5:19), many major battles had been fought in its vicinity. This could make it an appropriate symbol for the eschatological battle.

(3) Some interpret "Harmagedon" as the "mount of assembly" (Bruce) or as "his place of gathering troops" (Johnson). This would be an allusion to God's gathering of the nations for judgment.

(4) In any event, the name is symbolic and probably does not refer to any geographical location. It is symbolic of the final resistance by and overthrow of all the forces of evil by the might and power of God.

#### 7. The seventh bowl is poured out into the air (vv. 17-21)

a. With this bowl God, the voice from the throne, announces "It is done!" The outpouring of his wrath is completed, as indicated in 15:1. Antichrist and his associates waged war against God through their organized and ferocious persecution of the church, but God punished them on earth, and as we will see, cast them into "the lake of fire that burns with sulfur" (20:20), which is the place of eternal torment.

b. As with the opening of the seventh seal (8:5) and the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11:19), the outpouring of the seventh bowl is accompanied by lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and an earthquake. These are apocalyptic images of God's intervention in judgment. Here, in keeping with its finality, the earthquake is described as the most violent ever.

c. The great city, Babylon, is completely destroyed (split into three parts), and with it, the cities of the nations, which were under its control. It is emphasized that God remembered Babylon and gave her "the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath." Babylon, as the center of the beast's empire, represents that empire. It is the embodiment of human pride and rebellion against God; it is mankind in organized opposition to God. That is why its destruction is given such elaboration in chapters 17-18.

d. God's final wrath is so awesome that the islands and mountains are described as fleeing, perhaps the effect of the tremendously violent earthquake. The storm of divine wrath climaxes with the "exceedingly great" plague of hundred-pound hailstones falling on people. As I said in the discussion of the first trumpet, hail was a means of God's judgment as early as the plague on Egypt in Ex. 9:13-35, which destroyed the vegetation. God hurled huge hailstones on the Amorite army in Josh. 10:11 and said in Job 38:22-23 that he reserves "storehouses of hail" for the day of battle and war. Despite the severity of God's punishment, the enemies of God are so defiant that they curse him as they are being brought to submission.

e. This devastating final judgment that has been pictured in different ways and in an unfolding scheme throughout much of Revelation occurs in association with the return of Christ. As indicated in 2 Thess. 1:7-8 and Jude 14-15, he will return with mighty angels and will take *vengeance, inflict punishment*, on the unbelievers of the world. But Christ's role in this victory at Harmagedon is not really brought out until 19:11-21. There he is seen as the King behind the destruction of the powers opposing God. He overthrows the beast with the splendor of his coming (see, 2 Thess. 2:8; Rev. 19:17-19). The focus from 16:17 - 19:10 is on God the Father's role in the judgment.

#### XI. Details of judgment on Babylon depicted in the seven bowls or cups (17:1 - 19:10)



## A. The Great Whore and the Beast (17:1-18)

### 1. Description of the great whore (17:1-6)

a. One of the seven angels with the seven bowls says he will show John the judgment of the "great whore." This is almost certainly the same angel who in 21:9 shows John the bride, the wife of the Lamb.

(1) This whore is specifically identified as "Babylon the great" (17:5) and as the great city that rules over the kings of the earth (17:18). It is the center of Antichrist's empire, the center of human pride and rebellion expressed in its organized opposition to God. It is the Rome of the end time.

(2) The image of a whore is common in O.T. prophecy. It is applied to pagan cities in Nahum 3:4 (Nineveh) and in Isa. 23:16-17 (Tyre). It represents one who sells what should not be sold, who abandons what is right and noble in exchange for the false values of the world, things like money, power, and luxury.

(3) God's judgment on Babylon was symbolized in 16:19; his wrath on Babylon has been poured out. In the words of 16:17, "It is done!" Chapters 17-18 are an elaboration of that destruction, a different symbolic portrayal of the same reality.

b. The great whore is seated on many waters (17:1). These waters represent peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages (17:15). Her influence has flowed to all parts of the world. The kings of the earth committed fornication with her in that they joined in her idolatrous worship and in her other evils. The inhabitants of the earth, those whose names are not written in the book of life (17:8), likewise became intoxicated by these practices, meaning they came under their influence.

c. John is carried away "in the Spirit" (reiterating his prophetic state) into a wilderness and sees a woman, the whore ("mother of whores," v. 5), now seated on a scarlet beast.

(1) This beast seems to be the same beast presented in chapter 13. It has seven heads, ten horns, and is covered with blasphemous names, which is how the beast of chapter 13 is described. The color scarlet probably points to the luxury in which the beast lived. The association of "scarlet" with luxury is seen in 17:4 and in 18:12 and 18:16, but it also could represent sin (Isa. 1:18 – "though your sins are like scarlet") or possibly be an association with the "red" of the dragon.

(2) The woman is clothed in luxurious garments, adorned with gold and costly jewels, and holds a gold cup. She is the image of luxury, splendor, and wealth, a symbol of the worldly or carnal attractions that lure people away from devotion to God. What she offers in her cup, however, is idolatrous worship, something abominable in the sight of God. She is a gilded death trap.

(3) Written on her forehead was a name of mystery, a name with a deeper meaning or significance than is apparent on the surface. (There is some evidence that certain Roman prostitutes would wear on their foreheads headbands inscribed with their names.) Only those to whom the meaning is revealed (v. 7) will grasp the full significance of the title. The name was "Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations." She is the ultimate manifestation of humanity in organized opposition to God, the center of the end time, anti-God political empire.

(4) She was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the witnesses to Jesus. This portrays the wanton slaughter of a significant number of believers along with the intoxicating effect it produced on the murderous harlot. It speaks of a lust for violence against God's people.

d. John is greatly amazed by the sight of the woman. Perhaps it was because her situation seemed in such contrast to the judgment the angel had promised to show (v. 1).

## 2. Interpretation of the scene (17:7-18)

a. The angel offers to explain the mystery of the woman and the beast. It is a single mystery involving both figures, but the explanation centers on the beast. I incorporated some of what is said here into the discussion of chapter 13. As you know, the beast, in my view and in the view of a fair number of commentators, is Antichrist, the end-time, Satan-inspired ruler of a powerful, worldwide, and violently anti-Christian empire (11:2, 7; 13:1-10; 17:3-6, 12-14).

b. He *was, is not, and is yet to come* in that Antichrist was not on the scene when John wrote ("is not") and when he comes in the future ("yet to come") he will in some sense be a reappearance of the Christ-hating Nero who killed himself with a sword in A.D. 68 ("was"). This reappearance is also indicated in the statements that the beast had a fatal sword wound, one that killed him, from which he was healed (13:12, 14).

c. He is from the Abyss or bottomless pit (11:7, 17:8), also referred to as the sea (13:1) because the "bottomless depths" of the sea is the origin of the concept of Abyss or bottomless pit, in that he is closely associated with Satan and the demonic realm. This is indicated by his similar appearance to the dragon, by the dragon giving him his throne and authority, and by demonic miracles fostering the worship of him.

d. Verse 8a can be translated either that the beast "is about to" come up from the Abyss (as in most translations) or simply that he "will" come up with an implication of certainty (as in KJV, NKJV, RSV, NJB, NIV – see BDAG, 628). If "about to" is the correct sense, then it is another way of indicating that Christians are to live in the expectation that the end is always near (as in 17:9-11).

e. He goes to destruction (17:8, 11) in that his fate is the lake of fire into which he will be thrown at Christ's return (19:20, 20:10; 2 Thess. 2:8).

f. The unbelievers, the inhabitants of the earth whose names are not in the book of life, will marvel *when* (instead of *because*) they see Antichrist, the beast that was and is not and will be present (following KJV, NKJV, and CSB view of final clause). They will be impressed by him and flock to him like moths to a flame.

g. The seven heads are first said to represent seven mountains on which the whore sits. In the Prophets, mountains are sometimes used as a symbol for world powers or kingdoms (Jer. 51:25; Ezek. 35:3), and seven, as you know, symbolizes completeness or perfection.

(1) I think this symbolizes the worldwide scope and influence of "Babylon the great," the representation of Antichrist's defiant kingdom. In 17:18 the woman is described as "the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth."

(2) It is true that Rome was known in the ancient world as the city on seven hills, but I do not think this is a straightforward identification of the woman, Babylon the great, with Rome. As Leonard Thompson notes (p. 161), the more common phrase for referring to Rome was the adjectival form "seven-hilled." In addition, v. 9a says that wisdom is called for in grasping the meaning, which suggests it involves something deeper than a well known geographical identification.

(3) So in my view Babylon the great sits on seven mountains in that Antichrist's empire encompasses all the kingdoms of the earth. That symbolism serves a secondary purpose of portraying Antichrist's empire as a kind of Rome, a city that shares, but surpasses, the power, godlessness, and anti-Christian hostility of the Rome of John's day.

h. The seven heads of the beast are also said to represent seven kings, five of which have fallen, one is, and the other, who must remain a short time, is yet to come (vv. 9-11). As I said in the discussion of chapter 13, I think the seven kings probably are symbolic of the full number of blasphemous earthly rulers (those claiming divine status), which set culminates in Antichrist. If that is correct, then this is an apocalyptic way of indicating that Christ is at the door. Though the time of his coming is uncertain, Christians are to live in the expectation that the end is always near. Being to the sixth king of the complete set of blasphemous earthly rulers means that the seventh and final one, Antichrist, who will stay only a short time before being taken out by Christ, may arise at any time.

i. The beast belongs to the seven (17:11) in that he shares their blasphemous claim of divinity, their opposition to God, and their persecution of God's people – he is the completion of that set of rulers – but he is "an eighth king" in the sense he is distinct from the others of that set, presumably by virtue of his greater embodiment of Satanic power. It is also possible that he is an "eighth" king in the sense he is a reappearance, a resurrection so to speak, of an earlier blasphemous king. The number eight could symbolize a new beginning based on Sunday, known as the "eighth day," being the start of a new series of days (and also being the day of Christ's resurrection).

j. The horns of the beast are here said to symbolize ten future kings (they have not yet received authority) who, with the beast, will receive authority for a short time. They represent the "kings of the whole world" (16:14) who cast their lot with the beast (17:13) and make war on the Lamb in the great persecution of his church. As Marvin Pope notes in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962), 3:565-66, the number "ten" is often used to express completeness, perhaps stemming from the fact ten is the full number of our fingers (see also, Beale, 59). So the seven mountains represent the kingdoms of the world and the ten kings represent the kings of the world in solidarity with the beast.

k. Verse 14b says, "and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is the Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called the chosen and faithful." In one sense, of course, Christ has already conquered all enemies through his atoning death and resurrection, but there is another sense in which he will conquer those who will make war against him. Christ is returning in judgment with his holy angels, when the number of martyrs is complete (6:9-11), and he will mete out punishment and vengeance on his enemies. Those who are with the Lord are called "chosen and faithful"; those who stand steadfast with him will hear "Well done my good and faithful servant."

l. The many waters on which the great whore was seated in 17:1 are said in 17:15 to represent peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages. Her influence has flowed to all parts of the world, not only to rulers and their kingdoms but to people from all groups on earth.

m. Virtually all commentators see in vv. 16-17 an indication that the beast and his allies turn on Babylon and destroy it in some kind of civil strife, but I am not convinced that is correct.

(1) As I said, I believe the ten kings (17:12) represent the "kings of the whole world" (16:14) who cast their lot with the beast (17:13) and make war on the Lamb in the great persecution of the church. If that is correct, they cannot have turned against Babylon and actively destroyed her (v. 16b) because the kings of the earth mourn her destruction in 18:9-10.

(2) Also, since the whore represents Babylon the great (17:5), the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth (17:18), it is a symbol of Antichrist's empire, the center of humanity in organized rebellion against God. Certainly God could cause Antichrist to self-destruct, to actively and directly attack his own empire, but given how unusual that would be I need less ambiguous language to reach that conclusion. The fact Babylon's destruction is elsewhere portrayed as coming through God's direct action with no hint of Antichrist serving as his agent (16:19-21; 18:7-8, 20-21; 19:2) reinforces my uneasiness with that interpretation.

(3) I think the point of vv. 16-17 is that the beast and the kings of the world who unite with him "hate" the beast's empire, represented by Babylon the great, in the sense that their uniting against God precipitated God's destruction of Babylon. They are responsible for that terrible destruction, but God put it in their hearts to unite in

their hostility against him because it was his purpose to have them be the ones in whose day his words about the final judgment would be fulfilled.

## B. The Fall of Babylon Elaborated (18:1-19:10)

### 1. The fall portrayed (18:1-24)

#### a. Announcement of Babylon's certain fall (vv. 1-3)

(1) John sees an angel coming down from heaven who has great authority; he is an agent of God Almighty. The earth is made bright from the angel's glory, which suggests he has come directly from the divine presence.

(2) The angel announces with a mighty voice Babylon's inescapable destruction. As Leon Morris (p. 208; and others) points out, "The city's doom is still future but it is so certain that it can be spoken of as already accomplished." Note, for example, the future tense used in vv. 8-9, 15, 21.

(3) In words reminiscent of God's condemnation of ancient Babylon (Isa. 13:19-22; Jer. 50:39, 51:37), the angel portrays Babylon the great as a city left desolate. This thriving center of a world empire is depicted as a wilderness void of human inhabitants. It is left with only the non-human symbols of its hostility and alienation from God, unclean spirits and various unclean animals.

(4) The reason for her judgment is her role in leading the world in its rebellion against God. It drew the nations and rulers into its idolatry, its worship of the beast, which is unfaithfulness to the Creator, and from that idolatry flowed all kinds of literal sexual misconduct. Part of its lure was its wealth, the opportunity it offered those willing to sell their souls to share in her luxury.

#### b. Call for Christians to separate themselves from the city (vv. 4-8)

(1) Another voice from heaven, perhaps of the Lord Jesus, commands his people to come out of Babylon. This is an echo of Jeremiah's words in Jer. 51:44-45.

(a) It is a call to protect oneself from the divine judgment coming on Babylon the great. They are to "come out" of her in the sense they are to pull away from whatever ties they have to that godless society and culture that give it a grip to pull them from allegiance to God. It is a way of saying they must steel themselves against the temptations to compromise their faithfulness to Christ that Babylon presents. If they are drawn into her sins, if they are pulled from the Lord Jesus by her seduction, they will share in her plagues.

(b) This is a message for all times not only because one can never be certain that the evil of one's own day is not the rise of Babylon the great but also because, as I have said repeatedly, the demand for faithfulness in the extreme of the final generation applies with even greater force in the lesser extremes of prior generations. Though we are *in* the world we must be vigilant not to be *of* the world. Surrendering our loyalty to the Lord Jesus, joining in the sins of the world, will put us with the world on the Day of Judgment.

(2) The punishment of plagues that the saints are urged to avoid are because Babylon's sins are heaped high as heaven and God has remembered her iniquities. Human history has climaxed in rampant evil. But instead of a universal flood and a restart in this fallen creation, it will be a judgment and renewal of all things.

(3) The addressee shifts in v. 6 to God's agents of judgment. Babylon is to be paid back with justice, in a way that is in keeping with her conduct. Many commentators are convinced that the words (verb and cognate adjective) translated "double" in v. 6b ("repay her *double* for her deeds") and 6c ("mix a *double* portion for her") are better translated something like "match" and "matching." Thus, Beale translates the clauses (p. 901), "give the very equivalent according to her work; in the cup in which she mixed, mix for her the equivalent." Whether that is correct or not, v. 6a and 7b set the theme of just recompense; v. 6b and 6c may serve to emphasize the severity of that just payment.

(4) Babylon's pride, arrogance, wealth, and sense of invincibility, while engaged in all-out-war against God, are cited as reasons that she must be destroyed. Note verse 8 says "her plagues (plural) will come in a *single day*" (and see vv. 10, 17, and 19c "For in a *single hour*"). That is not necessarily the impression one would get from a literal reading of the prior accounts of the plagues, which highlights the fluid nature of apocalyptic imagery. Even here, the plagues that will come in a single day include famine, not something that normally occurs in a day.

(5) Babylon's delusion notwithstanding, her terrible fate is sealed. *For mighty is the Lord God who has judged her!*

#### c. Laments for Babylon's fall (vv. 9-20)

##### (1) Lament of kings of the earth (vv. 9-10)

(a) The kings of the earth had given their allegiance to Antichrist, which involved them in idolatry and the various forms of immorality that flowed from it. They reaped great material benefits from their alliance with Antichrist, sharing in the luxury that characterized his empire.

(b) When the hammer of God's judgment falls, they are pictured here as weeping and wailing over Babylon. They see that the source of their luxury is gone, and they realize they have backed the wrong power. They stand far off, in fear of the city's great torment, and confess that, despite her greatness, she has been brought

to judgment. Part of the wailing is the realization of what it means for them to have opposed the one who brings this great judgment. That facet is depicted in 19:19-21.

(2) Lament of merchants (vv. 11-17a)

(a) The merchants who prospered from the empire's booming international trade – represented here by first-century items in the categories of precious stones and metals, luxurious fabrics, expensive wood and building materials, spices and perfumes, food items, and animals and slaves – weep and mourn her destruction. They grew rich from serving the whore, and they now see it vanish in her collapse.

(b) Verse 14 is a statement of the merchants about how Babylon lost all the material luxuries it had once craved. Among other things, Babylon represented the love of money over the love of God. That was part of its corrupting influence.

(c) Like the kings, these merchants are shown here as standing far off, in fear of the city's great torment, weeping and mourning the devastating collapse of such an affluent city/empire. All of its wealth was laid waste.

(d) And like the kings, part of the wailing is the realization of what this judgment bodes for them, people who have given to Antichrist the worship that belongs only to God. They chose the material profits of idolatry rather than suffering on the side of Christ, despite the powerful preaching of the olive trees and lampstands during those dark days, and as v. 23b suggests, were full of their own importance and self-sufficiency instead of giving glory to God (note Jas. 4:13-16). They will be among those who, in the imagery of 19:18, 21, have their flesh eaten by birds.

(3) Lament of seamen (vv. 17b-20)

(a) The seamen likewise prospered from the empire's booming trade as the means of transporting the various goods demanded. When they see the city burning they cry out, "What city was like the great city?" It was the epitome of worldly grandeur, and yet it was laid waste by God Almighty.

(b) Their awareness that this is God's judgment is clear from v. 20. They acknowledge that God was thereby giving judgment in favor of his people – the saints, apostles, and prophets – against those who despised and persecuted them. It was God's vindication of their faithfulness through it all.

(c) As with the merchants, they loved money rather than God and thus chose to serve the whore. They too will be among those who, in the imagery of 19:18, 21, have their flesh eaten by birds.

d. Destruction of Babylon depicted (vv. 21-24)

(1) A mighty angel hurls a great stone into the sea and declares that Babylon will thus be thrown down with violence. It will be found no more in that it is going to be permanently destroyed. Human rebellion is going to be eliminated. Verses 22-23a reinforce this permanent destruction by listing various elements of normal life and declaring that they will be found no more.

(2) The reasons given here for Babylon's destruction are the arrogance and self-sufficiency of her merchants, her deceiving the nations *through sorcery* (probably in the figurative sense of having "cast a spell" over a large segment of humanity through demonic deception – 13:13-15, 16:14, 19:20), and her murder not only of the prophets and saints but also of the others she killed throughout the world.

## 2. Rejoicing in heaven (19:1-10)

a. John hears what sounds to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven shouting praise to God for the judgment of Babylon (vv. 1-5).

(1) This is the celebration of the saints in heaven. In 7:9-12 there was a *preview* of this great multitude, a picture of the state of blessing that awaited them after the terrible judgment of God that was about to be portrayed beginning with the trumpets in chapter 8. Here we see the same state of blessing but from the other side of that judgment. In the perspective of the vision, the celebration is no longer a preview but a *fait accompli*.

(a) As I said when we were looking at chapter 7, though 7:14 specifically states that those robed in white had come out of the great tribulation, it is possible that all the faithful of all generations are pictured and described as those who came out of the great tribulation because the nature of their faith was the same as the faith of those who came out of the great tribulation. The faith of that final, most severely tested generation was a display of the faith of all generations. As the church of their day and time, they represented the church of all time. That would explain the emphasis on the great number and also why this post-judgment scene, which one would expect to include all saints, echoes 7:9-12.

(b) But again, even if the multitude pictured in chapter 7 was only the last generation of saints, their blessedness still implies blessedness for the faithful of all generations. And that is what we are seeing here.

(2) The word "hallelujah" appears only four times in the New Testament, all of which are in 19:1-6. It is a Greek transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning "praise [you] the Lord." It is found frequently in the Psalms and is a directive to worshipers. Over time, the word morphed into an independent exclamation of joy, so that it was simply transliterated into Greek rather than translated (as we might transliterate rather than translate a word like "hooray" or "yay").



(3) God is praised as the one to whom belongs salvation and glory and power as shown by the fact his judgments are true and just. To answer Abraham's rhetorical question (Gen. 18:25), the Judge of all the earth will do what is right. That truth is demonstrated most immediately in his punishment of the great prostitute, Babylon the great, which was a moral cancer on earth and a murderer of Christians, God's servants.

(4) There is rejoicing over their vindication by God, over his punishing Babylon for murdering Christians. In keeping with Paul's words in Rom. 12:19, they had not avenged themselves but had left it to God to deal with their abusers. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord," and on that Day he is setting all things right. It is only through our trust in his faithfulness, power, and just nature that we can accept mistreatment. Because God is who he is, we can rest with leaving our despisers in his mighty hands.

(5) We desire our persecutors to repent, to turn to God to receive the mercy with which he has blessed us, but we will celebrate the rightness of God's judgment against those who refused to do so. We will stand with God, seeing as never before the absolute horror of disobeying him, and we will praise him for the rightness of the eternal punishment he metes out. As Grant Osborne notes (p. 665), the smoke of Babylon that "goes up forever and ever" is the "eternal 'smoke of torment' that accompanies the lake of fire (19:20; 20:10, 14-15)." In 14:11 this language referred to the ungodly individuals whose lives were inseparably linked to that evil empire, those who had cast their lot with the beast rather than the Lord.

(6) The 24 elders and the four living creatures, these important angelic or heavenly beings, fall down before God and "Amen" what the saints have been shouting. They also repeat the saints' expression of rejoicing, "hallelujah."

(7) In v. 5 a voice from the throne commands God's servants, described as those from all walks of life (great and small) who fear him, to praise him. The voice is probably that of a heavenly creature who is very close to the throne, perhaps that of one of the four living creatures, and the command to praise is directed to all Christians. I think this voice steps out from the perspective of the vision, comes out from behind the camera so to speak, and addresses the readers directly in light of what was just revealed about God's vindicating judgment and what is about to be revealed about the consummation that is associated with that judgment. The church is to praise God now for what he is without question going to do in the future.

b. John hears what sounds to be the voice of a great multitude shouting even louder the joyful praise of God for the consummation of the kingdom, the church's full experience of God's blessings in Christ (vv. 6-10).

(1) With the NEB, REB, NJB, and CSB and with many commentators (e.g., Aune, Osborne, Beale, Smalley, Boxall, Blount), the cry of the last clause of v. 6 is better translated "For the Lord our God the Almighty *has begun* to reign." The verb needs to be understood in the same way (ingressive or inceptive) it is in 11:17. As

the seventh trumpet, the symbol of the completion of God's wrath, is there associated with the beginning of God's reign, so here the elaboration of the completion of that wrath is associated with the beginning of God's reign.

(a) As I have explained before, the Old Testament ends on a note of unfulfilled hope. It was clear that in one sense God always had ruled the world from the time of creation. He was on his heavenly throne (e.g., Ps. 11:4; Isa. 6:1) and reigned over all (e.g., 1 Chron. 16:31; Ps. 93:1, 96:10). But there was some sense in which his kingly rule was not being fully expressed. He was allowing creation to go on out of step with his ultimate intention for it, to continue in a state of sin and suffering that was contrary to his ultimate purpose and vision.

(b) But the prophets saw that a day was coming in which God would express his rulership of creation in such a way that all things would be brought into harmony and conformity with his ultimate will and purpose. On that day God would express his authority over creation in a way he was not doing at present; he would in his sovereign power bring his creation to its ultimate fulfillment. At that time, he *will be* king over all the earth (Zech. 14:9) in a manner unlike the present.

(c) The Jews expected the kingdom to come suddenly and decisively. They thought God's final intervention would be a one-shot deal – the Day of the Lord – where the old age would be terminated abruptly and the new, glorious age would begin. You remember in Lk. 19:11 where the people supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately upon Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem.

(d) Jesus explained in a number of parables and elsewhere that the kingdom comes in two stages. It is introduced or inaugurated, then there is an interval of time, and then there is a decisive intervention when the kingdom is consummated or finalized. The statements in Rev. 11:17 and 19:6 that God *has begun* to reign refer to his reigning in that final, fullest sense. This is consummation language.

(2) There is great rejoicing and glorifying of God because the punishment of the final judgment comes in association with the consummation of the kingdom, here expressed as the wedding or marriage of the Lamb.

(a) Through the grace of God (v. 8), his bride was prepared for that occasion. It was *granted her* to clothe herself with fine linen, attire suitable for the wedding, which in the last clause of v. 8 is described as the righteous deeds of the saints.

(b) We who have put our faith in the Savior not only have been cleansed from sin; we have been transformed into people who live righteously, who do righteous deeds. We were created in Christ Jesus for good works (Eph. 2:10), and God produces those works in us as we abide in his Son (Jn. 15:5). As has been said, one is saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.

(3) John is told to write "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper, the wedding celebration feast, of the Lamb."

(a) Beale remarks (p. 945):

Verse 9 presents a different perspective on the wedding metaphor from vv 7-8. There the bride, the corporate church, was viewed as about to wed the Lamb, but now individual Christians are portrayed as guests at the marriage banquet. Both pictures portray the intimate communion of Christ with believers, but the first focuses on the corporate church and the second on the individual members of the church.

(b) Osborne states (p. 675), "In 19:7 [the believers] are the bride of the Lamb, while here they are . . . those invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb. Thus, the saints are both the bride and the invited guests. Such mixing of metaphors was common in the ancient world to add richness to the imagery."

(c) In Mat. 26:29, Mk. 14:25, Lk. 22:16-18, and Lk. 22:28-30, Jesus ties the supper he instituted, the Lord's Supper, to this eschatological messianic banquet. He said he would not eat it until it was fulfilled in the kingdom of God and that he would not drink the fruit of the vine of that meal until the kingdom of God comes (Lk. 22:16-18). He assigned his disciples a kingdom that they may eat and drink at his table in his kingdom (Lk. 22:29-30). The Lord's Supper is a foretaste of our participation in the Lamb's wedding feast that symbolizes the consummated kingdom. We eat it in expectation of that Day, a day to which we look forward because of the death he died in our place. Thus, Paul says in 1 Cor. 11:26, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death *until he comes*."

(4) The fact Christians, those invited to the wedding celebration of the Lamb, are blessed is confirmed by the solemn declaration "These are the true words of God." Brothers and sister, it will be the deepest, richest, most joyful, most rewarding, and most fulfilling existence that you can possibly imagine. Indeed, it is beyond present human comprehension – But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1Cor. 2:9 ESV).

(5) John falls at the feet of this heavenly being to worship him, but he is immediately told not to do that.

(a) Whatever John may have thought about the identity of this being (v. 9 begins simply "And *he* said to me"), the being makes clear to John that he is not divine and thus is not a proper object of worship. Rather, he is a servant of the one God, as are John and his Christian brothers. Worship may be offered only to God (e.g., Mat. 4:10; Lk. 4:8).

(b) The message to the church is unmistakable. If even God's heavenly agents, the mighty angels who convey his glorious message, cannot be worshiped, then there certainly is no room for worshiping sinful human beings like the beast and all his predecessors. And that applies as well to any human being who is serving God (Acts 10:25-26, 14:13-15).

(c) The same thing happens again in 22:8-9, which seems odd in light of the rebuke in 19:10. Perhaps John mistook the first-person statement in 22:7 being reported by the angel ("I am coming soon") as words of the angel himself, which led him to think this was a theophany of some kind. In any event, the angel makes clear that he is not divine.

(6) The last clause of v. 10 ("For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy") seems to be a parenthetical comment on the wisdom and propriety of John and his fellow Christians in holding firm to the gospel, the testimony about (objective genitive) or from Jesus (subjective genitive). The gospel message, the embrace of which marks the servants of God, is worthy of being held firmly because it is the spirit of prophecy in the sense it is a manifestation or expression of that Spirit. In other words, the gospel message is from God not man and is therefore absolutely trustworthy.