

Revelation 17:1-11 – Babylon, the Great Harlot

Verse 1

I shall show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters – Harlotry is often used in the Bible as a picture of spiritual adultery. It is used of Israel and other nations who claim to know God but in reality worship and serve false gods. The great harlot is the Babylonian system of false religion that has existed throughout history. The “*many waters*” will be explained in verse 15.

Verse 2

With whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality – These are world leaders who unite and follow the system the great harlot symbolizes.

And were made drunk with the wine of her immorality – Her false religious system has a controlling influence on all who do not know Christ. Her deception causes them to believe the lie (2 Thess. 2:10-11).

Verse 3

In the Spirit into a wilderness – This could be the desert area near literal Babylon or an allusion to the spiritually desolate condition of the harlot.

A woman sitting on a scarlet beast – The woman sits in a position of control over the beast.

A scarlet beast – The description of the beast is the same as in 13:1 and refers to Antichrist.

Verse 4

Clothed in purple and scarlet – Purple is symbolic of royalty and scarlet is symbolic of luxury.

Adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls – This pictures vast wealth and the attire of a queen.

Having in her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality – Outwardly she is very appealing, but she is a counterfeit beauty. Inwardly she is full of uncleanness and immorality.

Verse 5

On her forehead a name was written, a mystery – Harlots often wore their names on a headband. It was mystery in the sense that it was previously not revealed but is now made clear.

Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth – From the first mention of in Genesis 10 throughout the Bible, Babylon stands for the world system of false religion.

Verse 6

Drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witness of Jesus – The Babylonian system hates and seeks to destroy true believers in Jesus Christ and rejoices (*drunk*) in their deaths.

And I wondered greatly – John was amazed that a system that purported to honor God was actually killing His faithful followers.

Verse 7

I will tell you the mystery of the woman and the beast – More information about the beast is given in verses 8-14 and more information about the woman is given in verses 15-18.

That carries her – The beast supplied the woman’s power and purpose.

Which has the seven heads and ten horns – Explained in verses 8–13.

Verse 8

The beast you saw was and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and to go to destruction...he was and is not and will come – The beast is Antichrist (11:7). It appears here he is referenced as the power behind a political empire. It is the beast as a world government that is revived. This will be detailed in verses 9-13.

Those who dwell on the earth will wonder, whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world – This statement has often been used to promote hard determinism yet that is not John’s purpose here. Clearly in 22:17 a universal appeal is given to all to “*take the water of life without cost.*” This is a statement of God’s omniscience and omnipotence which are different from determinism.

Verse 9

Here is the mind which has wisdom – (13:18) It appears that many will incorrectly identify these seven heads as can be seen by the many interpretations of this section of scripture.

The seven heads are seven mountains – Many expositors refer this to Rome. Seven hills formed the nucleus of the ancient city on the left bank of the Tiber. A better explanation follows.

Seven mountains – A mountain is a common scriptural representation of a kingdom (Psalm 30:7, Jeremiah 51:25, Daniel 2:35). As will be explained in verse 10, the seven mountains are a personification of seven kingdoms.

On which the woman sits – The Satanic, Babylonian system has influenced all these kingdoms. They are all an illustration of the world system.

Verse 10

They are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come – The one that “is” in John’s day was the Roman Empire. The five that have fallen are most likely Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece. The seventh kingdom that is to come is the kingdom of the beast. The beast’s kingdom will only last for a short while.

Verse 11

And the beast...is himself also an eighth, and is one of the seven – The revived Roman empire, the seventh kingdom, will be the government when the tribulation begins. When the beast declares himself to be God, and takes his seat in the temple in the middle of the tribulation he becomes the eighth king that rules for only a short time but whose end is destruction.