Before looking at Revelation chapters 17 and 18, to go back and recap what happened in bowl number seven. We saw that with bowl number seven like in the other series of sevens, the seven seals and the seven trumpets, the seventh bowl brings us to the very end. Notice the language in bowl number seven of Revelation 16 and starting verse 17, the language of lightning and rumblings and thunder and a severe earthquake. That language drawing on the theophany in Exodus chapter 19 appears several times throughout Revelation, indicating or anticipating judgment. Now, the mention of an earthquake that has not occurred before or no one has seen an earthquake of this magnitude before indicates once more that we are at the end. So this is the final judgment; this is end time judgment at the very end of history in the form of God coming in his theophanic presence now to judge the entire earth.

Note also then, that at this point what is labeled the Great City, or Babylon, is now also subject to judgment. God pronounces judgment of Babylon, saying that God remembered Babylon, that is, remembering her crimes and he now judges Babylon. But, as you read the text that’s all it says, that God remembers Babylon and gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath, which is language coming out of the Old Testament again. We saw that this language of a cup filled with wine, a symbol of God’s judgment on wicked humanity. Bowl number seven ends with not only a picture of end time judgment, also in the context of that, a mention of the judgment of Babylon itself. So seal number seven, then is going to get unpacked in more detail in chapters 17 and 18. And chapters 17 and 18 give us more detail as to the nature of Babylon and an account of its judgment according to bowl number seven.

So chapters 17 and 18, and actually, this is a section where we need to go beyond just chapter 18 and probably ignore the chapter division after 18 and include at least the first five verses of chapter 19. We’ll see that chapter 19:1-5 is the response of the saints
to the judgment of Babylon in chapter 18. So this section is chapters 17 and 18, but also includes 19:1-5. Now we’ve already noted that the judgment on and the fall of Babylon has already been anticipated back in chapter 14:8 where we find the pronouncement, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon!” Then in bowl number seven that we just looked at in chapter 16 we saw another anticipation of and brief summary of God remembering Babylon in preparation for its judgment. Now chapters 17 and 18 will give us a more thorough exposition of that fall and now will divulge more detail of what those other two texts anticipated.

One of the things we’ve seen, and I’ve suggested that chapters 18 through 22 are now going to depict in more detail what has already been anticipated in numerous occasions throughout Revelation, actually all the way back in chapter 6 where the sixth seal brought us to the Day of the Lord. Chapter 7, for example, is a rather detailed and descriptive account of the 144,000 or an enumerable multitude standing before God’s throne and now participating in their eternal inheritance. So we’ve seen anticipations of both judgment and salvation throughout all the book of Revelation. Now we find the author sort of opening up the floodgates, starting in chapter 17. He will pull out the stops and give us the full picture. So it’s almost as if the author has been whetting your appetite for a fuller disclosure of final judgment and final salvation and the reader is scarcely disappointed when he or she gets to chapters 18 through 22.

So chapters 17 through 18 more specifically, and again I’ll refer to chapters 17 through 18, but I’m also including the first five or six verses of chapter 19, which are a response and conclusion or sort of the culmination of chapters 17 through 18 and the destruction of Babylon. Chapter 17 actually provides us with a detailed description of the prostitute Babylon that is, the woman who is described as a prostitute is equated with or symbolizes the city of Babylon. We’ll note in a moment what the city of Babylon indicates. But in chapter 17 we find a description of Babylon, and at the very end of the chapter, there is a brief description of its downfall.

Then chapter 18 will give us far more detail concerning the actual judgment and downfall of Babylon itself, which was anticipated back in chapter 14 and also chapter 16.
as well in the seventh seal. In other words, another way to look at it is chapter 17 will tell us specifically why Babylon was judged. Then chapter 18 will describe its judgment as promised and anticipated earlier in the book.

Babylon the Harlot Versus New Jerusalem the Bride

So chapters 17 and 18, before we look at it in detail, not only is it important to see it in light of the previous anticipations in chapter 14:8 and 16 in the seventh trumpet, but it’s important also to see chapters 17 and 18 as part of a paired section, a section that consists of a pair. By that I mean, in chapters 17 and 18, we find a mention of the harlot Babylon or the prostitute Babylon, which stands in direct opposition to chapter 21:9 to 22:5, which is a description of the bride, New Jerusalem. So, in chapters 17 and 18 and again in the first few verses of chapter 19 as well, John is taken by an angel. What I want you to notice if you look at the two texts, you’ll note those two paired sections have similarities at the very beginning of each section and at the very end. Also in between, the description of the prostitute of Babylon is supposed to parallel the description of the bride, New Jerusalem in 21:9 through 22:5.

So, for example, you’ll notice at the beginning of chapter 17, John says, “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute.’” And then verse three, “Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into the desert. There I saw a woman.” Now, notice chapter 21 in verse 9, notice the identical language, “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls,” same angel or same type of reference as back in 17:1-3, “Seven bowls of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great mountain and I saw,” and he describes the Jerusalem that he sees. So note that both sections begin with one of the angels holding one of the seven bowls. It doesn’t tell us which one or whether they’re the exact same, presumably it’s the same one, but an angel comes to him and tells John, “I’m going to show you something,” and then carries him away in the Spirit and he shows him a woman. In one case, it is the prostitute Babylon, in the other case it is the bride, New Jerusalem.
So they both have similar beginning points, but also note that they end the same way as well. Both sections end with a command to write and also an interesting account that we’ll look at a little bit later on, but this interesting account of John bowing down to worship the angel and the angel says, “Don’t do it, I am only a servant, worship God only.” So, for example, in chapter 19:9-10, “Then the angel said to me, ‘Write these things: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb.’” And then verse ten, “At this I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, ‘Do not do it, I am a fellow servant, worship God.’” You find that identical wording in chapter 22 verses 6 through 9 that comes at the very end of the New Jerusalem/bride image or vision.

So, these two sections form a contrasting pair that sort of, dominates the rest of the book. A number of interpreters have, incorrectly labeled these as an appendix, so the Babylon appendix and the New Jerusalem appendix. But they’re anything but an appendix; they’re the climax and heart of the entire end of the book of Revelation. So rather than being the appendix, they’re the goal, a pairing of a final vision of judgment in terms of Babylon and now the final reward of God’s people in terms of the bride New Jerusalem. So rather than appendix these are to be seen as the goal and climax of the entire book.

Now the other thing to notice about these latter chapters is note the movement that takes place from the prostitute Babylon to the bride New Jerusalem. Back in chapter 18 in verse 4 in the section that describes the destruction of Babylon, right at the beginning in verse 4, the author, utilizing Old Testament texts that we’ll look at later, the author calls on his readers to come out of her, that is, to remove themselves or to come out of Babylon. So, in order not to participate in or share in her judgments, the implication seems to be that if they come out of her they must have somewhere to go. So those who come out of her now find themselves moving to and entering the New Jerusalem in chapter 21 and 22. This in fact, is the move that John is calling on his church to make in chapters 2 and 3. That is, they will inherit the blessings for overcoming; they will inherit the blessings of the new creation. And we’ll see, we’ve seen already, we’ll reiterate the
fact that every one of the seven churches ends with a promise to those who overcome and the promise is almost always linked to something in chapters 20 through 22.

So now John’s calling the churches in chapter 17 and 18, this is this movement from the prostitute Babylon to the bride New Jerusalem, this is the movement for his churches to make. That is by coming out of her, by overcoming, by refusing to compromise, by remaining pure and retaining their faithful witness they will come out of her and instead they will enter into their inheritance, the New Jerusalem--if they overcome. This is all indicated by this vision of two contrasting women and two contrasting cities. In each one, both entities are described as both a woman and a city. A prostitute Babylon and a bride New Jerusalem and even in that language it’s not hard to see the contrast that John sets up here at the end.

Babylon

So let’s begin by looking at chapter 17. Chapter 17 is full of all kinds of issues and we don’t have time to look at every single last detail but I want to touch on the more significant details in the text and some of the sections that are seen as problematic and try to make some suggestions that make a little bit of sense out of them. In chapter 17 of Revelation John first describes the destruction and the removal of the prostitute Babylon, or begins to describe it in chapter 17. The question is why does John describe Babylon as being judged?

Babylon is one of those words that has a long history going all the way back to Genesis. Most scholars trace it all the way back to Genesis 11 and the tower of Babel as a sign of godless, arrogant, prideful humanity. Also in the Old Testament, Babylon is one of the places of the exile of God’s people, Israel, and again Babylon, especially if you go back and read Daniel, Babylon is described as an idolatrous prideful and oppressive people. So, given this history, Babylon then becomes almost a symbol of, almost an indicator of, any nation or any people that is so characterized. It is a people that is idolatrous, who is prideful and arrogant, who usurps God’s authority and demands the worship that only belongs to God, pridefully sets themselves over God, and who oppresses the people of God as well. So that’s what is signaled by Babylon. Now
Babylon has become a model for any other city or people who would be characterized that way. So the question is, why does John use Babylon here, rather than what does Babylon signify? Babylon is a symbol indicating a prideful, arrogant, oppressive, idolatrous people.

Some have suggested that Babylon here indicates an end time city that is going to be set up. Some have even suggested that Babylon will literally and actually be rebuilt in the future in literal fulfillment of not only Old Testament texts, such as Jeremiah 50 and 51 we’ll look at briefly as one of the key texts John draws on for his Babylon imagery, but also in light of Revelation chapters 17 and 18. Those approaches see Revelation as exclusively future, chapters 4-22 as only happening in the future. It hasn’t happened yet and is yet to be fulfilled. They sometimes read this as an anticipation of a literal interpretation of a rebuilt Babylon. But if not a literal Babylon in its literal geographical location, many still anticipate a literal rebuilt city in the future.

Babylon as a Code Word for Rome

Now I hope to demonstrate, and I would side with those who argue that most likely Babylon is like a code for the city of Rome. This fits the context of Revelation very well. John is addressing seven churches living within the context of the Greco-Roman empire and under the pressure of, under the thumbprint of Roman imperial rule, then it would make sense for the first readers to read this and think in terms of Babylon or think in terms of Rome as Babylon. That is, Babylon as a symbol of an idolatrous, godless, oppressive people who persecute the people of God, a city that sets itself up over God and absolutizes its power and usurps God’s authority, arrogates and claims authority that belongs only to God himself. Rome itself is characterized that way and Babylon becomes a perfect fit for Rome.

We see evidence of this already. It appears, at least by this time in the first century, Babylon could be used as sort of a code for Rome. For example, the very end of 1 Peter, the letter written by Peter in 1 Peter chapter 5 in verse 14 at the very end of the letter, actually verse 13, 1 Peter 5:13, “She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings and so does my son Mark.” Most people recognize, that 1 Peter
was written to Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire but within the wake of Roman rule. 1 Peter 5:13 I think provides compelling evidence of Peter’s using Babylon that at least some Christians would have seen Babylon as sort of a code for the city of Rome. So I think John is kind of following suit here, although he’s not using Babylon solely because it was a designation for Rome in the first century, he uses it because of its Old Testament background and because he finds now in Rome the ultimate expression of what Babylon embodied during that time in the Old Testament. Now he finds that resurfacing and reemerging in an even greater way in the city of Rome. So I find it difficult to think that John’s readers would not have read this and thought that John was describing the judgment of Rome itself, on Rome and its empire.

Furthermore, later on in the text, in chapter 17 especially in verse 9, part of John’s vision is, in the beginning section we’ll see, he sees a woman riding on a beast and the beast has seven heads. Notice how he identifies the seven heads later on, in verse 9 he says, “This calls for a mind of wisdom, the seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits.” That notion of seven hills probably reflects a common understanding historically in some historical literature of Rome’s association of seven hills. In fact, there are a number of coins and if you have access to David Aune’s commentary, his third volume, on chapter 17 to 22, he actually has a picture of a coin where you have Rome portrayed as a goddess who is seated on seven hills. So once more the description of it, the seven hills, along with the common designation for Rome among Christians seems to suggest to me that John intends for Babylon here to be identified with the first century city of Rome. Indeed his readers would have made that connection. John himself drops clues in the text such as portraying the woman as sitting on seven hills to suggest that that’s the identification we should make.

So now John is going to develop in more detail the description of the dominant empire under which Christians found themselves in the first century, not only the city of Rome but its empire and all the provinces it ruled over. Verses 1 and 2 of chapter 17 probably function as the setting for the entire vision. That is, chapter 17 verses 1 and 2 function as the setting or introduction for chapters 17 and 18 as well. The angel tells
John, “I’m going to show you the punishment of the harlot, the prostitute Babylon,”
which we’ve suggested signifies the city of Rome. Then chapters 17 and 18 describe that.
Chapter 17 will primarily demonstrate why it is that Babylon, Rome, is guilty and why it
is subject to judgment and then chapter 18 will describe its judgment.

The other difference between the two chapters is that chapter 17 is largely
visional. It’s largely a vision that John of that’s a woman riding this beast and then an
interpretation of that vision. Chapter 18 does not contain nearly as much visionary
material, it’s primarily auditory. Most of chapter 18 is a construction of laments, speeches
or sayings that function to describe or interpret the downfall of Babylon. So again chapter
17 is more vision and its interpretation, chapter 18 is more auditory in the form of
laments, songs and speeches and things like that.

Text of Revelation 17

Before we look at the text, at least a few details, let me read it, and starting in
chapter 17:1, this introduces us to the climax of the book, beginning then with the
judgment of Babylon/Rome. “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came
and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits
on many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of
the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.’ Then the angel carried me
away in the Spirit into a desert. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was
covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was
dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls.
She had a golden cup in her hand, filled with the abominable things and the filth of
adulteries. This title was written on her forehead: ‘Mystery, Babylon the Great, Mother of
Prostitutes and of the Abominations of the Earth.’ I saw that the woman was drunk with
the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. When I saw her I
was greatly astonished. Then the angel said to me: ‘Why are you so astonished? I will
explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that she rides, which has the
seven heads and ten horns. The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not and will
come up out of the Abyss and go into his destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose
names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast because he once was, now is not, and yet will come. This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five of them have fallen, one is, and the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for a little while. The beast who once was, and now is not, is the eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction. The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not received a kingdom, but for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is the Lord of lords and King of kings--and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers. Then the angel said to me, ‘The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations, and languages. The beast and the ten horns you saw hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule, until God’s words are fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.’”

So verses 1 and 2 then sort of set the tone for and I think are an introduction to the entire vision. That is, even chapter 17 has to do with the destruction of Babylon and is setting you up for the ultimate downfall and destruction of Babylon which happens in 17, 18, and again we should include 19 in at least the first five or six verses as the clear response to the judgment upon Babylon. Just to point out again that most likely John is, as I’ve argued before although I hold to the fact that John actually had a vision and saw a vision, he interprets that vision by linking it, by describing it through Old Testament texts that resemble and further describe and fit exactly what he saw.

We’ll see that one of the most important texts that John calls upon over and over again for his description of the downfall and judgment of Babylon is Jeremiah chapter 50 and especially Jeremiah chapter 51. And so, for example, when he describes Babylon as sitting on many waters, in Jeremiah chapter 51, in verse 13, we’ll back up and read verse
12. “Lift up your banner against the walls of Babylon!” He’s describing the destruction of Babylon, “Reinforce the guard station and the watchmen, prepare an ambush. The Lord will carry out his purpose, his decree against the people of Babylon and addressing the people of Babylon” in verse 13. “You who live by many waters and are rich in treasure.” Now notice how John describes Babylon, Rome in chapter 17 as, “The great prostitute who sits on many waters.” Then later on he will describe her as decked out in treasure in verses 3 and 4, especially verse 4, and she’s glittering with gold and precious stones and pearls. So John is clearly drawing upon Old Testament depictions of Babylon, historical Babylon, and its judgment now to describe another Babylon-like city and its judgment as well.

The Great Prostitute

The fact that she is called a prostitute in verse 2, right away John is told, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute,” already indicates the nature of Babylon-Rome, or the nature of this city, and by calling her a prostitute this anticipates one of the crimes that John is going to accuse Babylon of later on in chapter 17 and that is that she has caused the nations to commit adultery with her. So Rome is going to be pictured as a prostitute and other nations, and other people, are those that she will seduce into committing adultery with her. In the Old Testament we often find this language of prostitution or adultery, particularly depicting the Old Testament nation of Israel. Throughout the Old Testament Israel is portrayed as the wife or the bride of Yahweh and for Israel to go after idols, for Israel to break the covenant relationship to God then is seen as spiritual adultery. So when the nation of Israel goes after other idols, when they go after foreign gods, when they break the covenant, then that is often portrayed as they are adulterous; they play the role of a prostitute. Through adultery they have strayed from their covenant relationship with God and they have gone after idols; they’ve been unfaithful to their covenant.

But it’s interesting at least in two texts we find the language of a prostitute or committing adultery in relation to pagan foreign nations, not just the nation of Israel. For example, in the Old Testament in Isaiah chapter 23:15-17 is one important text, chapter
23:15-17, “At that time Tyre,” and this is a lament over Tyre in anticipation of the judgment upon Tyre, “At that time Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the span of a king’s life. But at the end of these seventy years it will happen to Tyre as the song of the prostitute: ‘Take up the harp, walk through the city, O prostitute forgotten; play the harp well, and sing many a song, so that you will be remembered.’ At the end of the seventy years, the Lord will deal with Tyre. She will return to her hire as a prostitute and will ply her trade with all the kingdoms of the earth.”

The other text that I won’t take time to read now, is Nahum, actually I have it right here, Nahum chapter three. In Nahum chapter 3:4, “All because of the wanton lust of a harlot, alluring, the mistress of sorceries, who enslaved nations by her prostitution.” So in both of these texts you have not the nation of Israel, but foreign nations compared to a prostitute who seduced or enticed or enslaved other nations to commit adultery with her, to participate in her prostitution.

So, with this background of pagan nations that could be described as prostitutes that could cause other nations to commit adultery and fornication by participating in their idolatrous practices. These texts have become a model for creating a fitting background for what’s going on in Rome. The author is drawing on these texts to describe Rome as a prostitute who seduces other nations to commit adultery with her. So the emphasis here is not on Israel committing adultery, but it’s on Rome as a prostitute convincing other nations to commit adultery with her in reflecting texts like Nahum chapter 3 and also Isaiah the 23 text.

The other thing significant about the Nahum and the Isaiah texts that fits so well here is in both Nahum and Isaiah, the nature of the prostitute city’s activity in causing others to commit adultery is economic, that is, primarily getting other nations to commit adultery not so much by worshipping their gods, although that probably would have been included, but primarily by participating in their ill-gotten gained luxury. So, in chapter 17 of Revelation, and we’re going to see this even more clearly in chapter 18, one of the crimes of Rome is that she is a prostitute who seduces other nations to commit adultery by basically living off, or making a living off of her wealth and off her excessive luxury.
That is the crime leveled against the foreign cities in Nahum and Isaiah and that is the crime now that is now leveled against the city of Babylon/Rome. She has caused other nations to commit adultery by entrapping them in her economic system by which they gain wealth and luxury and probably that would have been associated with idolatrous practices as well. Although the primary point is the luxurious lifestyle that they had that turned into by colluding with, by participating in the economic system of Rome. They’ve made a living and gained luxury and wealth because of that. The fact that Rome is also called a prostitute not only has Old Testament background, but certainly is fitting because it suggests seduction and control. By calling Rome a prostitute, not only does she seduce nations with her economic practices, but she also then exercises control over them by, again, getting other nations to participate in her idolatrous practices but especially her economic practices to gain wealth. So the nations are depicted as relying on Rome for their wealth and for their security and Revelation 18 will make this even more clear and spell out in detail how that happened and how that took place.

But, again, John is primarily dependent on Old Testament texts and Jeremiah chapter 51 for the language of the judgment of Babylon. But it’s important to understand, John will draw on other Old Testament texts that also condemn or pronounce judgment on other godless cities such as Nineveh and particularly Tyre so that his picture is sort of a composite one. Though Jeremiah 50 and 51 play a dominant role in that it describes in detail specifically the judgment of Babylon which is the exact term used to refer to Rome here at the same time John will draw on other godless, idolatrous, luxurious cities that manifest a lust for luxury and wealth and in doing so, have set themselves up as God and as having divine authority. John will use other cities to portray Babylon/Rome as well, so he’ll draw on another Old Testament text such as Isaiah and the portrayal of the downfall of Tyre.

We’ll see too that one of the reasons he uses other texts is because Jeremiah 50 through 51 largely does not say much about Babylon’s wealth. But Tyre we’ve seen part of the reason why John critiques Rome is because of its wealth, because of its excessive luxury, entrapping other countries to participate in that in their economic system and their
economic practices and seducing them to be involved in that, make a lot of and basically accumulate wealth in association with Rome. The only place John finds that, then is in other cities such as Tyre, and so the oracles against Tyre in the Old Testament also play a role in condemning the wealth and the commercial activity of Rome which Jeremiah doesn’t explicitly do in relationship to Babylon.

So what we’re going to see then is a composite picture from the Old Testament texts starting with the Babylon judgment in Jeremiah, but including other texts as well. Now, in the rest of this section, starting with verse three, we are introduced to the vision proper and it consists of two parts. Chapter 17:3 to the very end of the chapter is going to consist of two parts; verses 3 through 6 are a description of the vision that John had the vision of the prostitute Babylon and also verse 6 ending with John’s response to that vision. Then starting with verse 7 to the end of the chapter we will find an interpretation of that vision by the angel, perhaps you picked that up when we read the text.

Angelic Tour

In other apocalypses, in other Jewish apocalypses, we often find this feature where an angel will take a seer on kind of a tour and show him different places of a vision and then sometimes the angel will interpret that vision. It’s interesting that you find that rarely in John’s apocalypse. The only place you find that to any extent is here, we saw briefly back in chapter 1:20 where the seven lampstands and the seven stars were interpreted for John. We saw this briefly back in chapter 7 where John asked, “Who are these people dressed in white robes?” and the angel said, “These are the ones that have come out of the great tribulation.” Now here is the only place where in any detail, we find an angelic being interpreting the vision for John. However, what is intriguing is the angel’s interpretation doesn’t help us out all that much. It probably would have helped John and the first readers quite a bit, but for us it really has not resolved it in much more clarity.

In fact, the interpretation is almost as problematic to understand as the vision itself. So we need to spend a little bit of time talking about a possible, I certainly don’t want to be dogmatic and say this is the way we have to read it, but a possible
understanding of the vision also an interpretation of the vision given to John by the angel, but first of all the description of the vision. When the angel, one of the seven angels that had the seven bowls came to John and told him he would show him the vision of the destruction of the prostitute, the first thing the angel does in verse 3 is show him a vision of the prostitute itself. We said one of the functions of this section, all of chapter 17 is to set the scene for chapter 18; that is, to demonstrate why it is the prostitute deserves judgment. So the angel takes John on sort of a visionary tour, not really a tour, other apocalypses often take a seer to different locations. John doesn’t get that, but he is taken to one location here and he’ll be taken to another location in chapter 21 when he’s taken to a high mountain to see the bride New Jerusalem. Here he’s taken to the desert, which becomes the setting for his vision. Probably this mention of the desert is once more dependent on the Old Testament and John might have in mind Isaiah chapter 21. Isaiah 21:10, is the background for this backdrop of John’s vision in the desert. The main point is the background of a desert though elsewhere, John has used the desert with connotations of protection and preservation. For example, back in chapter 12:14, the desert was the place to which the woman was taken, where she was preserved and nourished and protected for a period of time. But here “desert” clearly has negative connotations; that is, the desert is a place of evil, it’s a place inhabited by wild animals and demonic beings. So the desert clearly has negative connotations in this context. When John’s taken into the desert, it’s not for a place of testing, it’s not to show preservation or protection; it’s meant to indicate that this vision has foreboding connotations. It’s meant to say something about Babylon. It will end up, in chapter 18, being the haunt of demons. It will end up being the dwelling place of all kinds of unclean animals. So already the desert suggests connotations of judgment that will get spelled out in more detail in chapter 18.

Beast and the Woman

Now the vision centers around two figures, two dominant figures. One is a beast; the other is a woman who rides on the beast. Now, the beast that we’ve already been introduced to, in fact, the description of the beast makes it clear that it is the beast that
you have already encountered in chapter 11, but especially in chapter 13. The beast is described as dressed in scarlet, having blasphemous names on it, which we read in chapter 13 in the first beast and also seven heads and ten horns, resembling the first beast back in chapter 13. The woman however is described as characterized by great wealth; she’s dressed in purple and scarlet, gold and precious stones indicating, at least here, not only the wealth and luxury that belongs to Rome, but also probably is meant to portray the dress of a prostitute. This simply affirms that Rome is now pictured as a prostitute as John was introduced to her back in chapter 1. He’s about to see the prostitute, now here she is decked out in her garb, consisting of and reflecting her extreme wealth and excessive luxury by which she will seduce the nations in her economic practices. These two are the elements that John mentions, the woman riding the beast, the beast and his seven heads and ten horns; these are the elements that will get explained in more detail in the interpretation of the vision, starting in verse 7.

Now, one additional feature of the vision in verse 6 is she is also responsible for the persecution of the saints; that is, she is drunk with the blood of the saints. She is responsible for putting the people of God to death. Now, two further interesting features of the vision to draw your attention to and before I do that, just to back up, by the way, these verses have already introduced us to, even before the interpretation. John has already introduced us to the primary crimes of Babylon/Rome. That is, they’ve introduced us to the two or three main reasons why Babylon will be judged. One of them is simply because she has seduced nations; she has caused nations to commit adultery with her. She has caused nations to, through their economic association and entrapment, she has caused them to commit adultery by their becoming rich and wealthy off of Babylon/Rome. Second, she herself is portrayed as arrogant and extremely rich and extremely wealthy and with excessive luxury and now we just saw in verse 6 she’s also responsible for violence, violently putting to death the people of God who are described as those who bore the testimony of Jesus. This is a common theme throughout Revelation for what the church is supposed to do, and a common reason why we find persecution of God’s people, because of their faithful witness and testimony.
But these are two other features of this vision that are important. First of all, it appears now that the beast and the woman are separate, and maybe we shouldn’t make too much of this. It’s interesting that the woman rides on the beast, suggesting that perhaps the woman controls the beast or that the beast’s authority underlies it and the beast is the true motivating factor for the woman who is identified as Babylon/Rome. Now the beast is the true power behind it that could be the picture as well. Although there could have been different suggestions, some say that the beast is more sort of the military power behind it, maybe the woman is more the economic and the religious part of Rome.

I wonder if another way to look at it is that perhaps this suggests that the beast, elsewhere in Revelation has been identified with Rome such as in chapter 13 and chapter 11 as well. Now I wonder if John is not telling us that while the beast can be identified with Rome, now John wants to say the beast is far more than just Rome. The beast is the same beast as the past that we saw in Old Testament texts. The same beastly figure, the same monster that underlies other empires such as Egypt and other godless foreign empires now supports Rome as well. Now it has manifested itself in Rome. So I wonder if this is simply not another way of suggesting that the beast is far more than just Rome, that is, it extends into the past and it could also extend into the future. But for John’s purposes, he sees the beast that comes with a long history of the beast representing idolatry and satanically inspired nations that suppress God’s people, that arrogates God’s authority. Now that same beastly figure is surfacing again and manifesting itself in Rome as indicated by the beast supporting the woman. So, I’m not certain that that’s the case, but I think it would be a valid explanation and seems to make good sense. The beast has roamed elsewhere but John wants to be clearer that the beast is more than Rome. Now he’s portraying its true power and the source of authority behind the prostitute Babylon, the city of Rome.

Second is, in this vision the author is also making clear, I think, that it’s the attractive and seductive nature of Rome that allows it to cover up its evil and violent nature. That is what enables it to seduce other nations. So they, the other nations are described as intoxicated with the adulteries of Rome that is due to the attractive and
seductive nature of Rome. Now the nations are blind to the true nature of Babylon/Rome. Rome covers up its evil hideous nature, its violent nature. Again, we may see a little bit of an unraveling of Roman myths such as Roma Eternal, eternal Rome, or Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, and what John wants to demonstrate now is in true apocalyptic fashion, Rome is not all it’s cracked up to be. Rome is not all it appears. Behind its alluring, attractive, seductive nature lies a hideous beast, lies a violent, idolatrous, and hideous empire. Also, I wonder too if this imagery, at least in chapter 17 as a preparation for chapter 18, the attractive nature of Rome covers up that it is going to be judged. So this is what causes nations to be involved in it and this is what causes nations to be seduced.

Now, in other words, it’s as if John is saying this is how sin works. I think if we look at this text in relationship today, this is a perfect picture of how sin works. Sometimes people say sin is awful and horrible and you don’t want to do it. Certainly that’s true, but the point is that sin does not come across as awful and horrible. Sin hides its consequences. Sin hides its hideous nature as a violation of God’s character and it hides its dreadful and deadly consequences of judgment behind a façade of attraction and allurement. Sin comes to us as attractive and alluring, hiding its consequences, hiding its hideous nature and that’s how sin works and that’s how John sees Babylon/Rome working here. It hides its hideous nature as a godless, idolatrous being that is intent on destroying and causing harm. It hides its consequences, that is, the fact that it is going to bring judgment. That’s how the nations are seduced, that’s also how God’s people are seduced too to participate in Babylon.

Two other features of this text, first of all, the fact that she is described as a woman dressed in expensive linen but also dressed in gold and precious stones, this is another description of New Jerusalem in chapters 21 and 22. The bride is all prepared and dressed and she’s decked out in gold and precious stones as the rest of the New Jerusalem vision describes in more detail. So this is not only portraying her as a seductive harlot and a prostitute, not only portraying her wearing the luxury and wealth of Rome by which she will seduce other nations, but now also in direct contrast to the wedding garb and the gold
and precious stones of chapter 21, the prostitute Babylon is now also portrayed in similar light to further bring out the contrast between the two.

One further issue is note in chapter 17:5, “On her forehead she has something written which is ‘Babylon the great, mother of all prostitutes,” may also be the image of a prostitute having a band or something on her forehead. This is simply to reveal her true nature, her true character that she is a seductive, idolatrous prostitute who now comes. Furthermore, she is the mother of all prostitutes and also of all the abominations of the earth. By calling her a mother, that may suggest once more her control over all things but also the fact that she gets others to participate in her prostitution and to also participate in her idolatrous practices and in her abominations.

So up until this point Rome has been portrayed as a prostitute who seduces others, who seduces and entices the other nations to commit adultery with her by being involved in not just her idolatrous practices, although that is involved, but by being involved in her economic system that is built on a lust for wealth and built on excessive luxury. Furthermore, she is also portrayed as one who is guilty of violence; guilty of the blood of the saints, and so now we’ve seen Babylon in her true colors, Babylon/Rome. What John is going to do now is interpret this vision. So the vision has portrayed Babylon in its true colors and she is now ripe for judgment.

Now John has told us why it is Babylon is guilty of judgment. So, starting with verse 7 now, John will begin to interpret this vision in more detail for his readers.