

**The Revelation to John**  
**Chapter Seventeen**  
**The Triumph of Almighty God**

Leon L. Combs, M.A., M.Div., Ph.D. originally written in 2008

Chapter 19 chronologically follows chapter 16 but John first takes us on a parenthesis or an aside as he amplifies on God's judgment on the false church and humanism. We will see details that God gives us to help us understand what we have faced, what we face, and what we will face regarding the perturbation of the church and the impact of humanism on all aspects of man's life. Before anyone wants to give a false interpretation of the identity of this "woman" discussed in this chapter, **please read verse 18 first**. There we see that the "woman" is actually a great city and really is a representative city of all of man's cities.

One's interpretation of this chapter sets the tone for the entire book. The majority of exegetes consider that Babylon represents the actual city of Rome and the beast stands for the entire Roman Empire. These people see the seven hills as being seven dynasties of Roman emperors from Augustus to Domitian. The ten kings are then representative of the smaller states that want to be free from Roman rule. They then see the impending doom of Babylon to represent the dissolution of the entire Roman Empire. Certainly Rome was a great city built on seven hills and by the rule of Domitian it was known for its persecutions and killing of the saints. Probably many of you are familiar with this interpretation.

However this interpretation does not seem satisfactory when one considers other references to Babylon and in context with the entire book. When we allow this popular interpretation to be dismissed, there is a revealing of comparison between the system of God and the system of man as will be better understood after John reveals the New Jerusalem as the City of God (chapters 21-22). Expanding our understanding of "Babylon" allows us to understand that God is revealing the entire organization of mankind's evil system that fits any past city such as Sodom, Gomorrah, Tyre, Nineveh, and Rome as well as any city now existing or that will exist. We will then take Babylon to be an eschatological symbol of satanic deception and power that transcends any geographical area and so extends over the entire world. The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> chapters then deal with the judgment of God on this "Babylon" so that we identify the woman of chapter 17 and the city of chapter 18 both with this system of government.

**Rev 17:1 "And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me, saying, "Come here, I shall show you the judgment of the great harlot who sits on many waters,"**

John seems to use this introduction to show that this section is an extension of the previous section and not some new event. We are not told which angel this is but a similar wording is used for the angel showing John the wife of the Lamb in Rev 21:9. It seems that God is showing the destruction of evil and the appearance of the New Jerusalem via the same means and probably the same angel. He asks John to come,

although we do not know the place he goes. From verse three, it seems that he is being led to a wilderness. There will be some preliminary information given but the actual judgment will not be given until the next chapter. The great harlot or great prostitute will be seen as the influence away from God (spiritual adultery) on the cities of the world. Unfaithfulness to God has often been likened to adultery:

- *Ezek 16:31-32* “When you built your shrine at the beginning of every street and made your high place in every square, in disdain of money, you were not like a harlot. *“You adulteress wife, who takes strangers instead of her husband!*”
- *Isa 1:21* “How the faithful city has become a harlot, She who was full of justice! Righteousness once lodged in her, But now murderers.”

The best background of understanding the language of this chapter is to read the description of Jerusalem the harlot in Ezekiel 16 and 23 and Babylon the harlot in Jeremiah 51. After reading these chapters the parallels used in John’s language will be better understood. God is not then comparing the world’s situation with any particular Roman situation but with His particular judgment on His chosen people. He is merging His descriptions of harlotry with Jerusalem and ancient Babylon. We see the following:

- Royal dignity and splendor combined with prosperity and luxury (Jer 51:13; Ezek 16:13; Nah 2:9; Rev 18:3, 7, 6-17)
- Self-trust or boastfulness (Isa 14:12-14; Jer 50:31; Ezek 16:15, 50, 56; 27:3; 28:5; Rev 18:7)
- Power and violence against God’s people (Jer 51:35, 49; Ezek 23:37; Nah 18:5, 20)
- Oppression and injustice (Isa 14:4; Ezek 16:49; 28:18, Rev 18:5, 20)
- Idolatry (Jer 51:47; Ezek 16:17, 36; 23:7, 30, 49, Nah 1:14, Rev 17:4-5; 18:3; 19:2)

This “Babylon” can be seen present in many past, present, and modern cities such as Nazi Germany, Idi Ammion’s Ugandan rule, Soviet Russia, Mao’s China, British colonialism, and many aspects of modern American life. We see the broad applications in verse 15 when he refers to “peoples, multitude, nations, and languages”.

Saying that the woman sat on many waters could refer to the actual city of Babylon for the Euphrates ran through it. However the meaning is probably much broader since the Old Testament frequently uses rivers to symbolically mean many people such as: “*Egypt rises like the Nile, Even like the rivers whose waters surge about; And He has said, ‘I will rise and cover that land; I will surely destroy the city and its inhabitants.’”* (Jer 46:8)

John is thus describing a world government over many different nations and people as he further comments on in verse 15 of this chapter.

**Rev 17:2 “with whom the kings of the earth committed acts of immorality, and those who dwell on the earth were made drunk with the wine of her immorality.”**

Since we know that the woman represents the worldly cities and John tells us that she has affected the kings of the earth, we know that she represents civil corruption. We see that

the worldly leaders participated in the humanism and the people under the leaders also were intoxicated by the byproducts of the religious immorality. This indeed was an evil time when the thoughts of men were only on their own needs and desires and totally absent from any desires to please God. This reminds us of Jesus' prediction as well as what had previously transpired in Israel:

- Matt 24:37-38 *“For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark,”*
- Judges 17:6 *In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.*

The people were drunk on their self fulfillment. With the advent of “the pill” the “sin” of fornication and adultery were considerably reduced and with the pill to remove the problems of ED, men and women were free to engage in sex as they pleased. We have seen TV advertisements advising people not to think but just to go to Las Vegas and do as they please. We seem to be heading into this era prophesied by John even faster than did ancient Rome, which led to their downfall.

**Rev 17:3 “And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness; and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, full of blasphemous names, having seven heads and ten horns.”**

When John reports that he was carried away in the Spirit he means that he was in a mental state especially receptive to things of the Spirit. The wilderness is a very special place. It is the place outside of the cities of the world where God's people can see the worldly places as they truly are. When the people identify with the cities of the world they cannot see their reality. The beast is the same beast that John revealed to us in chapter 13. Remember the beast comes out of the waters and here the woman is being carried by the beast to do its bidding. The beast is full of blasphemous names since its major purpose is to curse God and do as much damage as possible in the time left for it to function on earth. Please refer to the comments of Rev 12:3 relating to the heads and horns. The angel will also amplify the meanings in later verses of this chapter. The color red is probably to symbolize the beast's blasphemy in contrast to white purity of others (19:8, 11, 14). The description could also be to make the beast similar to the first beast of chapter 13 that is also inseparable from the seven-headed dragon of chapter 12.

**Rev 17:4 “And the woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls, having in her hand a gold cup full of abominations and of the unclean things of her immorality,”**

The dyes producing the colors worn are very expensive. The woman was royally dressed and had expensive stones and pearls attached. [Remember that she is representative of the cities of the world.] The cup is also regal and one would expect wonderful rewards in such a cup. However the cup is filled with items against God and full of the immorality

that she is offering from a royal cup. The picture then is of what appears to the untrained eye to be very enticing but the reward is an abomination to the Lord. She offers the people what their eyes see as wonderful but what will prove to be evil. This is indeed the way most sin functions. We think that it will please us but the result is destruction. The main reference is to spiritual adultery. It seems pleasing to want to do what our sinful nature desires and if we are not God's children we will practice what she offers. If sin did not appear appealing to the sinful nature then there would be no temptation! We see a similar description of Israel in Ezekiel 16: 6-26 as they are described as clothed in beautiful fashion but even offering their young as sacrifices to idols. She is seen as having an outward beauty and attraction as in: *"And you, O desolate one, what will you do? Although you dress in scarlet, Although you decorate yourself with ornaments of gold, Although you enlarge your eyes with paint, In vain you make yourself beautiful. Your lovers despise you; They seek your life."* (Jer 4:30) The word translated "unclean" can also be translated as "filthy" and is a word often associated in the NT with evil spirits (Matt 10:1; 12:43) and idolatry (2 Cor 6:17).

**Rev 17:5 "and upon her forehead a name was written, a mystery, "BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH."**

**Rev 17:6 And I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. And when I saw her, I wondered greatly."**

The name was a mystery, which means that nobody could know what it said unless it was revealed to them. The angel revealed the mystery to John but the ordinary people would not have known its meaning. The name would have made people not flock to her! She was the great wicked cities of the world and she spawned other people (cities) who would draw people to themselves to commit atrocities before God. In the eyes of God and His people the atrocities committed by the inhabitants of the cities would be horrible blasphemies. Romans actually described their city in such ways and so do cities in the world today such as Las Vegas, Amsterdam, New Orleans, and others.

John saw that the woman was intoxicated with the excitement and enjoyment of the horrors she had committed, and with anticipation of more of the same. Religions of the world, false religions, and false Christians have killed many saints over time. Six million Jews and ten million Christians were killed during World War II. Many more Christians have been killed since in many countries of the world. Many more Christians have been tormented but not killed. The religion of humanism has destroyed many churches and the spiritual adultery of false Christianity is rampant in the world today. John was aghast at what he saw. Perhaps he wondered why he was seeing the "woman" satisfied rather than judged as the angel had promised. Perhaps he was wondering how so many people had been deceived. Today there are large humanistic "churches" being developed that do not even pretend to be based upon worship of God but of man. We know from secular writings that prostitutes would wear their names in the fillet encircling their brows and the OT refers to the peculiar brow of the prostitute (Jer 3:3). Probably what is the real mystery in that she is referred to as the "mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth". She is thus the fountainhead of all this evil that pours forth over the world. She

cannot then just be some particular city because these are her children and she is the mother of them all.

**Rev 17:7 “And the angel said to me, “Why do you wonder? I shall tell you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, which has the seven heads and the ten horns.**

**Rev 17:8 “The beast that you saw was and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and to go to destruction. And 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, when they see the beast, that he was and is not and will come.”**

Verses 7-18 contain an extended interpretation of the vision. First the beast is described and identified (vv. 7-8), then the seven heads (vv. 9-11), the ten horns (vv. 12-14), the waters (v.15) and then the woman (v. 18). The woman and the beast are symbiotically connected. The woman does what the beast commands and they soulfully feast off of each other. What follows is very difficult to understand when one incorrectly attempts to apply this section to the Roman emperor succession (the seven heads), the Nero redivivus myth (“once was, now is not, and will come”) and the succession of world powers. The vision is just showing the evil influences behind every action against God and His people. So fundamentally the beast is the servant of Satan (the great red dragon) and does his commands in different ways and in different times. The beast existed at one time and did his awful deeds. He then seemed to die but then will return. However his return will lead to his destruction. John is clear to his readers that the evil will not continue to exist. But mankind does not have the knowledge that the beast will be defeated so they marvel at his power and resiliency. The ones who do not understand the truth are made clear by John as the ones who had not had their names written in the book of life since from the foundation of the world. But God’s bondservants will not be deceived and they will not marvel at the beast. Again we are reminded of: *“But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.”* (1 Cor 2:14)

Isaiah refers to the beast as “Rahab the Do-Nothing”: *“Even Egypt, whose help is vain and empty. Therefore, I have called her “Rahab who has been exterminated.”* (Isa 30:7) The beast, in all of his actions through many nations, is rendered inactive by Sovereign God. The beast in John’s vision is defeated at Calvary by the Lamb, and so he “is not”. Satan once had power over all the earth, even death:

- *Luke 4:6 “And the devil said to Him, “I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish.”*
- *Heb 2:14-15 “Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, (15) and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.”*

Now he is a defeated power but he has been given a “little time” to oppose God and His people (John 12:31; Rev 12:12; 13:5; 20:3).

**Rev 17:9 “Here is the mind which has wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman sits,  
Rev 17:10 and they are seven kings; five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain a little while.”**

Many writers have inferred that the seven mountains represent Rome since it was famous for having been developed on seven hills. Some have then said that the woman is the Roman Catholic Church. However this interpretation is too narrow a view since the reign is worldwide and the woman is the city representation. Mountains are used in Scripture to represent a ruler or some power such as:

- *Isa 2:2 “Now it will come about that In the last days, The mountain of the house of the Lord Will be established as the chief of the mountains, And will be raised above the hills; And all the nations will stream to it.”*
- *Jer 51:24-25 “But I will repay Babylon and all the inhabitants of Chaldea for all their evil that they have done in Zion before your eyes,” declares the Lord. “Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, Who destroys the whole earth,” declares the Lord, “And I will stretch out My hand against you, And roll you down from the crags And I will make you a burnt out mountain.”*

Notice that Jeremiah also described Babylon and all inhabitants of Chaldea as a mountain just as John’s vision saw the city as a Babylon. The mountains here represent seven kings. He is told that five had already ruled, one is ruling, and one has not yet ruled. It could be then that the five nations that had already ruled against God’s people were Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. The one that was ruling at the time would be Rome and the one that had not yet come would be the one that we are still waiting to arrive. John is then told that the ruler yet to come would only rule for a short time. The short time may be only relative to God’s time measurement or he may mean short by our standards.

I can’t help but think that this last one may be the United States of America as our country continues to rapidly move toward humanism and it is still relatively young and may only rule for a short time. Remember that the seven heads belong to the beast and that the woman sits on them, meaning that she rules over them. If the seven heads represent seven successive Roman emperors then obviously the woman did not rule over all of them unless “she” represents the evil system that is controlled by the beast. Seven also represents completeness or wholeness and, in this instance, represents the fullness of blasphemy and evil. Resisting any preconceived interpretation allows us to interpret this section as the beast has seven representations, each of which is ruled by the world system controlled by the woman who is really the system itself and not some specific geographical city.

**Rev 17:11 “And the beast which was and is not, is himself also an eighth, and is one of the seven, and he goes to destruction.”**

He returns to a description of the beast of verse eight. How can the Antichrist be an eighth but also one of the seven? The only obvious interpretation seems to be that he is

the power behind all of the seven even though he is a distinct person. Thus he is a separate agent of evil that will be present after all the seven have had their rule through him. The really important point being made is that the Antichrist will be destroyed. Thus the message for the churches of all time is that evil may seem to prevail for a long time but it will be destroyed by the Lord God Almighty.

**Rev 17:12 “And the ten horns which you saw are ten kings, who have not yet received a kingdom, but they receive authority as kings with the beast for one hour.”**

Now we are told the identity of the horns. They represent ten kings who will come later as rulers with the beast for a short time. These cannot be representative of any previous kings but are beings who will receive their authority from the beast at the end time. There may be a literal ten of these beings or the number may just mean a complete number of them. These may be literal people or they may be demons who will rule with the beast. Saying that they will rule for one hour is probably just meant to say a short time, perhaps the same short time period as mentioned in verse ~~eleven~~ ten since that reference is to the Antichrist. Some popular writers have stated that this is a revision of the Roman Empire with ten component nations such as the European Commonwealth that recently emerged. Excitement about this application faded quickly when the number of nations exceeded ten. However the number ten should be taken symbolically and not literally as appears frequently in Scripture such as:

- Neh 4:12 *When the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times, "They will come up against us from every place where you may turn,"*
- Dan 1:12 *"Please test your servants for ten days, and let us be given some vegetables to eat and water to drink.*
- Rev 2:10 *'Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

These “ten” kings then represent the rulers of darkness described by Paul as the true enemies of God’s people:

*Eph 6:12 “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”*

**Rev 17:13 “These have one purpose and they give their power and authority to the beast.**

**Rev 17:14 These will wage war against the Lamb, and the Lamb will overcome them, because He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those who are with Him are the called and chosen and faithful.”**

These kings will have only a very distinct purpose of serving the beast as they devote all of their resources and authority to the beast. The purpose of this great gathering will be to wage war with Jesus Christ. The battle will be short as nobody or nothing can stand

against the Lord of lords and King of kings! Christ will not be alone as He will be accompanied by His followers who are wonderfully characterized:

They are **the called**:

- *Rom 8:30 "and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified."*
- *John 6:44 "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day."*

They are **the chosen**:

- *Eph 1:4 "just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love"*

They are **the faithful**:

- *Eph 1:1 "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus, and who are faithful in Christ Jesus:"*

**Rev 17:15 "And he said to me, "The waters which you saw where the harlot sits, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues.**

**Rev 17:16 "And the ten horns which you saw, and the beast, these will hate the harlot and will make her desolate and naked, and will eat her flesh and will burn her up with fire.**

**Rev 17:17 "For God has put it in their hearts to execute His purpose by having a common purpose, and by giving their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God should be fulfilled."**

As we mentioned earlier, the angel now explains to John that the waters on which the harlot sits are representative of people all over the earth. The woman has a great empire but the beast and his minions will take over all that she has so that they will control it all. They will take away any power held by the cities of the world and take it all as their kingdom. The kingdom of Satan will then be divided among itself and that will indeed be what Jesus said would happen:

*Luke 11:17-18 "But He knew their thoughts and said to them, "Any kingdom divided against itself is laid waste; and a house divided against itself falls. (18) "If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that I cast out demons by Beelzebul."*

This statement is made by Jesus in reply to accusations that He was casting our demons by the power of Satan but I can't help but wonder if He was also looking forward to what would happen to the kingdom of Satan. The fire is the judgment of God on them. The reference to the punishment of the harlot is remindful of the OT prophets descriptions of divine judgment on the harlot cities of Jerusalem and Tyre:

- *Ezek 16:38-40 "Thus I will judge you like women who commit adultery or shed blood are judged; and I will bring on you the blood of wrath and jealousy. (39) "I will also give you into the hands of your lovers, and they will tear down your shrines, demolish your high places, strip you of your clothing, take away your*



*jewels, and will leave you naked and bare. (40) "They will incite a crowd against you and they will stone you and cut you to pieces with their swords.*

- *Ezek 23:25-27 'I will set My jealousy against you, that they may deal with you in wrath. They will remove your nose and your ears; and your survivors will fall by the sword. They will take your sons and your daughters; and your survivors will be consumed by the fire. (26) 'They will also strip you of your clothes and take away your beautiful jewels. (27) 'Thus I will make your lewdness and your harlotry brought from the land of Egypt to cease from you, so that you will not lift up your eyes to them or remember Egypt anymore.'*
- *Ezek 28:18 "By the multitude of your iniquities, In the unrighteousness of your trade You profaned your sanctuaries. Therefore I have brought fire from the midst of you; It has consumed you, And I have turned you to ashes on the earth In the eyes of all who see you."*

We also see the self-destroying power of evil in action.

Note carefully that God has put this goal in their hearts so that they will act together to control all that is against Him. God has plan A acting perfectly so that all evil will be united where He can easily destroy it all. God has often used the forces of evil as instruments of His judgment and this end will be more evidence of His divine actions.

- *Jer 25:8-14 "Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Because you have not obeyed My words, (9) behold, I will send and take all the families of the north,' declares the LORD, 'and I will send to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land and against its inhabitants and against all these nations round about; and I will utterly destroy them and make them a horror and a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. (10) 'Moreover, I will take from them the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. (11) 'This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years. (12) 'Then it will be when seventy years are completed I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation,' declares the LORD, 'for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans; and I will make it an everlasting desolation. (13) 'I will bring upon that land all My words which I have pronounced against it, all that is written in this book which Jeremiah has prophesied against all the nations. (14) '(For many nations and great kings will make slaves of them, even them; and I will recompense them according to their deeds and according to the work of their hands.)'"*
- *Luke 20:17-18 But Jesus looked at them and said, "What then is this that is written: 'THE STONE WHICH THE BUILDERS REJECTED, THIS BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone'? (18) "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust."*

**Rev 17:18 "And the woman whom you saw is the great city, which reigns over the kings of the earth."**

He ends this section by explaining what we inferred above. The woman was representative of all the great cities of the world and was a unit of power over all the kings of the world. It is the mother city that is representative of every evil system that has

opposed God and His people. It is much more than just some historical city. The cities in Revelation are communities representing two vantage points: The City of God or the New Jerusalem (Rev 3:12; 21:2; 22:2) and the city of Satan (Rev 11:8; 14:8; 16:19; 18:4, 20).