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THE REVELATION OF SAINT JOHN

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apocalyptic tapestry also pays attention to the individual scene. Hence the narrative will now pause to provide a description of this city and its fall in the next two chapters.

The violence of God's theophanic earthquake has cosmic effect: **Every island fled, and no mountains were to be found.** Such a statement, echoing other descriptions of apocalyptic disaster (e.g. *1 En.* 1:6; *T. Mos.* 10:4), particularly reflects the perspective of the Patmos exile. Stranded on the small Aegean island, John's visible world would be that of islands in a threatening sea, and in the distance the mountains of Samos and the mainland. It is as though the whole of John's physical landscape is swallowed up. Finally, there is a torrential downpour of **great hailstones**, explicitly called a **plague**, reminiscent of the seventh Egyptian plague (Exod. 9:13-35; cf. Josh. 10:11; the word *πληγή* is used at Exod. 11:1; 12:13 LXX). The sheer destructive force of these hailstones is expressed by their unnatural weight: **weighing about a talent each**, that is, approximately ninety pounds.

Yet tragically, even this ultimate action against wickedness and injustice is presented as incapable of penetrating and remoulding hardened human hearts. The reaction here is only too reminiscent of the reaction to the fifth and sixth bowl-plagues, and in possible contrast to the human response following the preaching, death and vindication of the two witnesses (11:13): **the people blasphemed against God because of the plague of hailstones, for terrible indeed was that plague.**

Detailed Vision: Babylon

(17:1—19:10)

Description of Babylon the Great

(17:1-18)

(1) One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and spoke with me: 'Come, I will reveal to you the condemnation of the great prostitute, who has her seat over many waters, (2) with whom earth's kings have been sexually unfaithful, and on the wine of whose sexual immorality those who make their home on the earth have become drunk.'

(3) He carried me away in a spiritual trance to a wilderness, and I saw a woman seated on a scarlet monster, full of names that blaspheme against God. It had seven heads and ten horns. (4) The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and gleamed with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a gold cup in her hand which was full of detestable things, the uncleanness of her sexual immorality. (5) On her forehead there was a name written, a secret: 'Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes and earth's detestable things.' (6) Then I

saw that the woman was drunk on the blood of the holy ones, that is, of the witnesses of Jesus.

When I saw her, I was utterly amazed. (7) But the angel said to me: 'Why are you amazed? I shall tell you the secret of the woman and the monster with seven heads and ten horns which is carrying her. (8) The monster that you saw once was, but does not now exist, and yet is about to ascend from the Abyss and go off to destruction. Those who make their home on the earth – whose names have not been written in the scroll of life since the foundation of the world – will be amazed when they see the monster that once was, but does not now exist, and yet will come again.

(9) 'This calls for understanding with wisdom! The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman has her seat. They are also seven kings, (10) of whom five have fallen, one is now reigning, and the other has not yet come. When he comes, he must remain for only a short time. (11) As for the monster which once was but does not now exist, he is an eighth and one of the seven, and is going off to destruction. (12) The ten horns which you saw are also ten kings, who have not yet received royal power; they will receive authority as kings, along with the monster, for one hour. (13) These are of one mind in giving their power and authority to the monster. (14) They will wage war with the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings. Those who accompany him are called, chosen and trustworthy.'

(15) Then the angel said to me: 'The waters which you saw, on which the prostitute is seated, are large numbers of peoples, nations and languages. (16) But the ten horns which you saw, and the monster, they will hate the prostitute; they will lay her waste, leave her naked, eat up her flesh and burn her with fire. (17) For God has put it into their hearts to fulfil his purpose, to be of one mind in giving their royal rule to the monster until God's words have been brought to completion. (18) The woman whom you saw is the great city whose royal rule extends over earth's kings.'

The literary parallels between the visions relating to Babylon (17:1–19:10), which conclude the seven-bowls section, and that of the new Jerusalem (21:9ff.), which concludes the series of final visions, are striking. Both are introduced by the same phrase describing one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls (17:1; 21:9). This angel will function in both sections as the *angelus interpretis* who will expound the mysteries of what the seer sees. Both visions conclude

17:1-18

with a failed attempt on the part of John to worship this angel (19:10; 22:8-9). But this Babylon section is no mere 'appendix' to the bowls section (pace Farrer 1949: 55). Rather it represents the detailed climax to those bowls of judgement: **the condemnation of the great prostitute, Babylon the great** (whose demise has been prepared for at 14:8 and 16:19). In the description of this idolatrous city and its ultimate downfall, the Apocalypse sets before its hearers the full drama and pathos of the Day of Judgement and the salvation that Day brings for God's people.

This opening vision of Babylon falls into several sections: an introductory statement from the angel (verses 1-2); a detailed description of a prostitute, identified as Babylon (verses 3-6); an explanation of the details of this vision by the interpreting angel (verses 7-18). The angel's interpretation can itself be subdivided: the monster (verses 7-8); an interjected call for wisdom, which lies at the centre of the whole vision (verse 9a); the seven heads and ten horns (verses 9b-14, 16-17); the waters on which the woman sits (verse 15); the woman herself (verse 18). As noted earlier, interpreting angels play a crucial role in a number of other apocalypses (see especially Daniel 7-12 and 4 Ezra, both of which combine vision and interpretation in a fairly systematic way). Such step-by-step interpretation is relatively rare in Revelation, however (elsewhere only at 1:20; 7:13-17), which should caution us against adopting a 'decoding' method as the appropriate reading strategy. The general fluidity and polyvalence of its visions and images suggests that, even in this vision with its clear allusions to the first-century political climate, the symbolism must be allowed wider resonances.

Indeed, the detailed explanations given by the angel are themselves complex and may suggest a process of ongoing reflection by the seer (e.g. in verses 9-10 the seven heads of the monster are revealed as both seven mountains and seven kings). Combined with the diverse associations of Babylon and harlot-cities, this has given Revelation 17 a very rich reception history indeed. Over the centuries, Revelation's 'Babylon' has been associated both with imperial Rome and with historical fallen Jerusalem. It has been viewed in non-historical terms as a symbol of the human tendency towards idolatry, the antithesis to the City of God, or as the personification of luxury and indulgence. Dürer's woodcut of this scene portrays Babylon in the guise of a seductive Venetian woman, reflecting Venice's political and commercial influence in the late fifteenth century and its dominance on the seas.

Once the Church was transformed from a vulnerable minority within the empire to the majority stakeholder in political as well as religious power, elements in this vision that warned of Christian compromise came to the fore in interpretation: Babylon as the

apostate church, the church of heretics or even of Antichrist himself. Following seeds sown by the radical Franciscans of the late Middle Ages, a full-blown anti-papal reading of this vision served a potent polemical purpose during the Reformation. Ancient associations with the city of Rome were revitalised, but this time stressing not so much its imperial past as its papal present. Within a few decades of the publication of Dürer's Apocalypse woodcuts, German illustrated Bibles began to portray 'Babylon' wearing the papal triple tiara, while the Pope's residence of Castel Sant'Angelo joined the pagan Capitol among the collapsing buildings in depictions of Babylon's fall (Scribner 1981: 174–75). This anti-Catholic, anti-papal interpretation has come to be regarded as the most natural by generations of Protestant Christians ever since. John's vision of Babylon has represented a dire warning of 'the drunken bliss of the strumpet kiss of the Jezebel of Rome' (Walsh 1899: 372). The two main sixteenth-century Catholic responses, either to stress the identification of Babylon with historical, imperial Rome, or to focus the vision on a city of the eschatological future, both have their followers among contemporary interpreters (for further details of this chapter's reception history, see Boxall 2001; Kovacs and Rowland 2004: 177–89). We shall return to this question of Babylon's identity as the commentary proceeds.

- 1–2 The opening of the vision (paralleling the new Jerusalem vision at 21:9) introduces John's heavenly guide: **one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls**. Just as nothing was said at 15:1 to clarify whether the seven bowl-angels are to be identified with the seven archangels who blew the trumpets (8:2), so no further identification of this particular angel is made here. All that is implied is that he is an *angelus interpres*, who fulfils for John the role played by Uriel for Ezra (e.g. 4 Ez. 4:1; 5:31), Yahoel for Abraham (*Apoc. Abr.* 10:3–9), and Gabriel for Daniel (Dan. 8:15–27; 9:22–27; cf. Rev. 5:5 and 7:13–17, where this role is performed by one of the twenty-four elders).

His invitation to John is to **Come**, echoing the command of the heavenly voice to ascend into the heavenly throne-room at 4:1 (cf. 21:9). What the angel promises to reveal to him is **the condemnation of the great prostitute**: this is not actually the subject of this chapter (though hinted at in verses 16–17), but is reserved for Revelation 18. Nevertheless, this introduction sets the scene, bringing in a note of impending judgement which hangs over the description of this woman in what unfolds. The imagery of the prostitute may have been influenced by Israel's prophets, who use this of Jerusalem (e.g. Isa. 1:21; Jer. 13:27; Ezek. 16:15ff.; 23:1–4) and Tyre (e.g. Isa. 23:16). At this stage we are not told even the symbolic name of this prostitute; rather, a portrayal of the woman is built up which seems set to evoke a negative response when that name is

finally unveiled. A description is given of illicit sexual relationships, evoking the metaphorical use of **sexual immorality** for idolatry (e.g. Hos. 3:3; Ezek. 6:9). But there are subtle clues provided as to her true identity. Hints of a political dimension are implied by the reference to **earth's kings**, the earthly rulers not yet responsive to the Kingdom of God (cf. 1:5; 6:15; 17:18; 18:3, 9; 19:19), and the statement that the prostitute **has her seat over many waters** (a phrase used of Babylon at Jer. 51:13). The mention of her **wine** recalls the announcement of Babylon's fall at 14:8. The seductive nature of idolatry, and its alcohol-like ability to desensitise the faculties, are parodied in a dramatic fashion. Revelation's literary strategy is clearly designed to shock. Like an astute political cartoon, which satirises its target by juxtaposing unexpected and often unlikely images, Revelation's vision is setting Babylon up to look at best ridiculous, at worst downright destructive.

Reliving the experience of his mentor Ezekiel, who was carried off 'in spirit' to the place of exile in Chaldaea (Ezek. 11:24; cf. 37:1, 9), John describes how the angel **carried me away in a spiritual trance** (literally 'in spirit': cf. 1:10; 4:2) to a **wilderness**. It is unclear whether the wilderness is the location of the prostitute, or simply the vantage point from which John views her (cf. 21:10, where John views the new Jerusalem from a high mountain). The woman clothed with the sun was pursued by the dragon into the wilderness, but she encountered it as a place of refuge and nourishment (12:6, 14). If the wilderness is the location of the prostitute here, it does not have the same positive connotations. If it is John's situation, then it is the place to which he must go in order to learn true discernment, albeit with angelic assistance (some might detect parallels with Jesus' wilderness experience, and that of the Exodus people of Israel). Even he will have some difficulty resisting the allurements of the prostitute (see verse 6b).

John's first view of the prostitute is of a **woman seated on a scarlet monster, full of names that blaspheme against God**. Scarlet is a vivid variant of red, already associated with the bloodshed unleashed by the second horseman (6:4), and with the Satanic dragon (12:3). It also had connotations of luxury, being an expensive pigment (it is one of Babylon's luxury imports listed at 18:12). This monster will be the cause of bloodshed, and is associated with Satan; it also undergirds the opulence of the woman who rides it. The fact that it is **full of names that blaspheme against God**, and that it has **seven heads and ten horns**, identifies it as the 'monster from the sea' of 13:1 (verse 8 states that it will 'ascend from the Abyss': cf. 11:7). The monster of Revelation 13 symbolised the rebellious and arrogant empire, in which John particularly saw the features of imperial Rome

and its emperors. Its reappearance here will renew visionary interest in at least some of its imperial rulers.

The attire of the woman accentuates her seductive appearance as a prostitute. Extravagance and opulence are the order of the day. Like the monster on which she rides, she is wearing expensive scarlet, as well as the equally rare **purple** (cf. 18:12, 16), which had associations with royalty (e.g. Dan. 5:7; 1 Macc. 10:20; cf. Mk 15:17). This ostentatious clothing is meant to contrast with the simple but gleaming white clothing of victorious Christians (3:4, 5, 18; 6:11; 7:9, 13, 14; 19:14) and the twenty-four elders (4:4). The participle *κεχρυσωμένη* (literally 'gilded' or 'covered in gold') could mean that her whole body is painted with gold. However, that would render the additional **with gold** (*χρυσίῳ*) superfluous, and also upset the balance it creates with the two further phrases **precious stones and pearls**. We are probably to think of her as wearing jewellery made of all three. This accentuates the close similarities between her and the new Jerusalem, which will be made of pure gold, its walls founded on twelve precious stones, and its gates composed of twelve pearls (21:18–21). This means that Revelation's difficulty with Babylon cannot be with material wealth per se, but rather the exploitative means by which it is achieved, and to which it is put. It will be taken up, redeemed, along with so much else of human culture and creativity, in the new heavens and new earth. But the similarities between the two women underscores the Apocalypse's claim that what is evil and unjust can so easily be taken for what is good and beneficial. It requires an apocalyptic unveiling such as this to reveal the true state of affairs.

The shocking features of the prostitute are religious as well as economic. The **gold cup in her hand** (cf. 14:8, 10) is full of **detestable things** or 'abominations' (*βδελύγματα*), a word clearly associated with idolatry. In Daniel, the singular form refers to the pagan altar to Zeus set up by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the Jerusalem Temple (LXX Dan. 9:27; 11:31; 12:11; cf. Mk 13:14). This idolatrous association is reiterated by the metaphorical use of sexual imagery: **the uncleanness of her sexual immorality**. The woman is being held responsible for the powerful human drift away from the true God to that which can only be a pale and unsatisfying imitation. Again, there are echoes of historical Babylon, who is described by the prophet Jeremiah as a gold cup in the Lord's hand, making the whole earth drunk (Jer. 51:7).

Hence it comes as no surprise when the prostitute's name is confirmed, written **on her forehead** (contrast 14:1, where the one hundred and forty-four thousand have the name of God and the Lamb written on their forehead; cf. 13:16): **Babylon the great**. But deeper insight is required, marked by the fact that the name is a

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secret or 'mystery' (μυστήριον). The word has been used elsewhere of the secret of the seven menorahs (1:10), and of the secret eschatological purposes of God (10:7). It suggests that the name Babylon too has a secret, hidden meaning (see verse 7, where μυστήριον introduces the interpretation of both the woman and the monster). This is confirmed by two additional statements. First, she has a universal role as **the mother of prostitutes and earth's detestable things**, a 'metropolis' in the true sense of the word. Second, she is **drunk on the blood of the holy ones, that is, of the witnesses of Jesus** (taking the καὶ as epexegetical). While the first phrase could apply to historical Babylon, responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and its first Temple, that city cannot be so easily associated with the witnesses of Jesus. The reference is plainly to those who have died for their testimony; the genitive of Jesus in this case (unlike the related μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ at 1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4; cf. 6:9) is probably an objective genitive: they are witnesses to Jesus through the shedding of their blood. The word μάρτυς comes very close here to its later meaning of 'martyr'.

In the light of all this, who does Babylon symbolise? Given her name, she clearly represents a city, for which the ancient world conventionally used feminine imagery and pronouns. Leaving aside the ancient city and empire of Babylon, by John's time a shadow of its former glory (cf. Dio Cassius, 68.30), and the Egyptian military outpost of the same name, there are three main possibilities. First, Babylon is a symbol for Jerusalem. This has had a number of defenders (e.g. Ford 1975; most recently Barker 2000: 279-87). A number of the prophetic oracles which seem to have influenced John here are portrayals of unfaithful Jerusalem as a prostitute (see on verse 1). Further, Babylon is seated on, and therefore to be differentiated from, the monster which bears the features of Rome. Indeed, it is sometimes claimed, on the basis of *1 Enoch* 24, that Jerusalem is appropriately described as seated on 'seven mountains' (verse 9).

This is not as decisive as at first appears, however. The 'great city whose royal rule extends over earth's kings' (verse 18) is not the most obvious description of Jerusalem. Moreover, there are other antecedents of Revelation's 'prostitute', not least the pagan city of Tyre (Isaiah 23, an oracle which seems to have influenced Revelation 18). In Enoch's vision, Jerusalem is strictly speaking built on one mountain, and surrounded by the other six; there is, however, a better explanation of the 'seven mountains'.

This second interpretation, which represents the consensus view of contemporary critical scholars, picks up on the virtually unanimous conclusion of patristic exegetes that she is to be equated with ancient Rome. Her location on 'seven mountains' reflects the ancient designation of Rome as the city built on seven 'hills' (see Virg. *Georg.*

2.535; Horace, *Carm. Saec.* 7; Propertius, 3.11.57) or 'mountains' (*de septem montibus*: Tibullus, *Eleg.* 2.5.55; Ovid, *Trist.* 1.5.69). The memory of Babylon as foreign oppressor of God's people (e.g. Jeremiah 51, which seems to underlie this chapter; Isaiah 47), and as place and instrument of exile (e.g. Ps. 137:1), could have appropriately been applied by a Jewish Christian to imperial Rome, even prior to Rome's Babylon-like destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13). Babylon's location 'over many waters' (verse 1), although not a literal description of Rome, expresses well Rome's dominance over many peoples. Indeed, from John's vantage point of Patmos, her control over the waters would have been only too visible. The description of a woman seated on seven hills, moreover, mirrors the iconography of the goddess Roma, the personification of the city worshipped enthusiastically throughout proconsular Asia. Roma was often portrayed seated, occasionally on Rome's seven hills. First-century Christians would pick up on these resonances, only to be shocked by their juxtaposition with the description of a drunken prostitute. Finally, the claim that this prostitute is intoxicated on the blood of the witnesses of Jesus probably betrays knowledge of the memory of what Nero did to Roman Christians in 64 CE, as a dire warning of what Rome had the capacity to become in the future.

However, to say that Babylon equals Rome is to fail to do justice to the richness of John's vision. More satisfying is the third interpretation, which acknowledges the echoes of imperial Rome, but does not regard such echoes as exhausting the meaning of this woman-city. Babylon is not Rome; rather Rome represents the latest incarnation of the oppressive and idolatrous city, 'the great city', which originally bore the features of Mesopotamian Babylon. The image of 'Babylon' has a long history in the biblical tradition: the author of Daniel saw her resurgence in the kingdoms of the Greeks, not least in the idolatrous activity of the Seleucid Antiochus IV; John the visionary is given insight from his island exile to recognise her once again, clothed this time in the garb of Roma. But take away the Roman attire, and Babylon remains. Ultimately, Revelation is confronting its hearers with two visionary cities which promise very different destinies to humanity: 'the great city' enthroned over the waters of chaos, and 'the holy city' or City of God, in which flows the river of the water of life (22:1).

- 6b–8 John tells of his response on seeing her: **I was utterly amazed.** The use of the verb θαυμάζω elsewhere in the book (13:3; 17:8) would strongly suggest that John is not simply perplexed by what he sees, or astounded that such evil could exist (contra Smalley 2005: 433), but on the verge of succumbing to her charms. Even though he has been warned that this is a scene of condemnation, and he has described

Babylon (at least with hindsight) in shocking terms, even he wavers momentarily. Thus he receives an angelic rebuke: **Why are you amazed?** This question provides the prompt for the interpreting angel to perform his role, explaining the alluring vision step by step (again it is described as a **secret** (μυστήριον)). Mentioning first the woman and then the monster, his interpretation is given in reverse order.

In addition to the interpretation of the monster as the rebellious and arrogant empire, particularly manifest in imperial Rome, the apocalyptic angel unveils another. This alludes once more to the myth of returning Nero, which in its most sinister form proclaimed that the emperor had died but would return from the dead (Klauck 2001; cf. 13:3): **The monster that you saw once was, but does not now exist, and yet is about to ascend from the Abyss and go off to destruction.** The Nero connection is an early one, already picked up in Victorinus' Latin commentary (Dulaey 1997: 106-07). It is further clarified in verse 11, where the angel tells John that the monster is one of the seven kings represented by its heads, and also an eighth (i.e. one to rule in the future). Hence it appears that the monster has a dual identity. First, it is the satanic imperial power which supports the 'great city' Babylon. Second, it symbolises that emperor who particularly manifested its monstrous nature, Nero himself. The reiterated description at the end of verse 8 – **the monster that once was, but does not now exist, and yet will come again** – sets Nero up as a monstrous parody of the one who is, who was and who is coming (1:4, 8; 4:8). Yet there is a further revelation in the claim that this monster is to **go off to destruction**. Christians are warned not to be seduced by a monstrous counterfeit whose days are already numbered. To be so seduced is a mark of those who **make their home on the earth** (for the scroll of life, see on 13:8).

Before the angel goes on to interpret the heads and horns of the monster, there is a call for **understanding with wisdom**, either from the angel himself or from an unnamed heavenly voice (cf. 13:10, 18; 14:12). Though this could refer back to what preceded, it is probably a call to careful attention and discernment of what is about to be divulged (as at 13:18). The interpretation of **the seven heads**, as of the monster itself, is twofold. First, they are **seven mountains**. The allusion, as stated above, is almost certainly to the *septem montes* of Rome, providing a local colouring to John's vision. Second, they are also **seven kings** or emperors (the Greek βασιλεύς can denote either). The much-debated explanation which springs from this has been important in discussions of the dating of Revelation: **five have fallen, one is now reigning, and the other has not yet**

come. The number seven is clearly symbolic, as it has been throughout the book: the number of perfection and completeness. Hence, a group of seven kings is not unexpected. But the fact that the angel further subdivides them has led to the conclusion that Revelation has a particular set of Roman emperors in mind (for a similar linkage of body-parts to successive rulers, see Dan. 7:7-8; 4 Ezra 11), and that John is providing clues as to the time of writing. Five are former emperors, presumably dead (they have 'fallen' from their thrones); the sixth is now reigning; the seventh yet to come **must remain for only a short time** (because another, **an eighth and one of the seven** – also to be equated with the monster itself – will return shortly to bring the complete sequence of seven to an end: another allusion to Nero returning, signalled by the shift to the masculine pronoun **he**). There are a number of different ways of understanding this verse, of which (a) is preferable:

(a) John is describing a succession of Roman emperors within the expected set of seven, in the knowledge that he himself is writing in the reign of the sixth, who is **now reigning**. This is the most obvious interpretation; however, commentators differ widely as to where the list should begin, and whether any rulers should be left out of the list. Should one begin with Julius Caesar, whom Suetonius includes in his *Life of the Twelve Caesars* (cf. *Sib. Or.* 5:12), or with Augustus (Octavian), with whom, strictly speaking, the empire began? Or should one start later in the list, perhaps with Gaius because of his idolatrous pretensions, or with Nero, given his identification with the **monster** in verse 11? Should one include the short-lived Galba, Otho and Vitellius (these are also included among Suetonius' twelve Caesars)? Such strategies are often employed in order to tally this passage with Irenaeus' claim that the visions of the Apocalypse were seen during the end of Domitian's reign, i.e. the mid-90s (*Iren. Adv. Haer.* 5.30.3). Victorinus' Latin commentary, for example, starts counting with Galba, thus arriving at Domitian as the current, sixth emperor (Dulaey 1997: 104-07). However, the most straightforward approach is to begin with Augustus, and count each emperor in turn (see Table 5): this would make Galba (68-69) the sixth king, reigning when John is writing. If the three short-lived rulers are omitted, the sixth king would be Vespasian (69-79).

(b) John is using an apocalyptic convention of 'antedating' his prophecy to make it look as if it had been received at an earlier stage. If this is the case, the passage in question will only reveal the seer's fictional dating (akin to the author of Daniel locating his hero during the Babylonian exile rather than the second century BCE).

(c) John has reused an earlier apocalyptic interpretation, incorporating it into a text written at a later date (this explanation is sometimes appealed to by those who wish to maintain Irenaeus'

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Table 5: Succession of Roman Emperors

[d. 44 BCE	Julius Caesar]
27 BCE-14 CE	Augustus
14-37	Tiberius
37-41	Gaius (Caligula)
41-54	Claudius
54-68	Nero
68-69	Galba
69	Otho
69	Vitellius
69-79	Vespasian
79-81	Titus
81-96	Domitian
96-98	Nerva
98-117	Trajan

Domitianic dating at all costs). But one should only appeal to this kind of explanation if alternatives present insurmountable difficulties. That is not so in this case.

(d) John intends no allusion to specific emperors but highlights the symbolic significance of seven as a complete or perfect set. However, while the number seven surely does have such significance, this explanation on its own fails to do justice to the urgency of the call in verse 9, and the careful subdivision of those seven in verse 10.

After an identification of the monster (see on verse 8), attention turns 12-14 to the monster's **ten horns**. These are also **kings** (cf. Dan. 7:24), though these ten **have not yet received royal power**. Given that they are horns of the monster, one might assume that they too are Roman emperors (although their natural round number, ten, lacks the precision of the five-one-one of verse 10 and suggests that particular individuals are not in mind). However, these ten seem to be kings who will rule simultaneously, for they are **of one mind in giving their power and authority to the monster**. Furthermore, they will **receive authority as kings, along with the monster**, whether in its present form as imperial Rome, or as its returning head. Another possibility therefore makes good sense: these are close allies of Rome, or (in the light of verse 16) of the returning Nero. This agrees with certain strands in the Nero myth, which saw Nero and his allies from beyond the Euphrates as a threat to the dominance of Rome (e.g. *Sib. Or.* 5:93-110). Echoes of expected Parthian allies (the 'kings from the rising sun' of 16:12) may well have been detected by first-century audiences.

Yet there is more here than first-century political allusion. Rather, these horns, like the monster itself, are part of the final onslaught of

evil, the conspiring of the nations against the Lord and his Anointed (Ps. 2:1-3). The nations are amassing for the final battle in which they will wage war with the Lamb (the battle which has been announced at 16:14, 16, and which will be described at 19:11-21 and 20:7-10). However, the outcome of this battle is assured from the outset: **the Lamb will conquer them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings.** This is surely an allusion to Christ's victorious death and resurrection, by which he was crowned as King (cf. 12:5, 10) and received the name of Lord (Κύριος: e.g. Acts 2:36; Phil. 2:9). The title 'Lord of lords and King of kings', a variant of which is used of Christ at 19:16, is probably influenced by the LXX of Dan. 4:37 (Beale 1985; cf. 1 En. 9:4). Because of Christ's victory, the influence of these kings will be short-lived (they will receive authority only for **one hour**, the time of the judgement of Babylon: 18:10, 17, 19). But Christ does not win his victory alone; rather he is accompanied by his great band of faithful witnesses, who form his powerful army: they are described as **called, chosen and trustworthy.** They too are victorious over the monster and its allies, even if in human terms their victory initially appears as defeat (see 11:7, where the two witnesses are conquered and killed by the monster).

- 15-18 Finally the interpreting angel returns to the woman. In verse 1 he has described her as having her seat 'over many waters'. **The waters** evoke the waters of chaos, the realm from which the monster she rides has emerged. Here further precision is given to them: they are **large numbers of peoples** (literally 'peoples and multitudes'), **nations and languages.** Rome of the first century was supreme not only over the waters of the Mediterranean and beyond; Rome was also supreme over large sections of the earth's population, **the great city whose royal rule extends over earth's kings.** Yet Rome's dominance simply continued the political and religious dominance of Babylon throughout history. But the perceptive listener will recall that it is from the peoples, nations and languages that the Lamb has redeemed people for God (5:9). Babylon's dominance is not a foregone conclusion.

On the contrary, in a description which recalls Ezekiel's portrayal of the destruction of the prostitutes Samaria and Jerusalem (Ezekiel 23), **the ten horns and the monster turn on the prostitute** out of hatred and destroy her. Few can fail to be shocked and embarrassed by the highly charged sexual language here, which takes the visual form of the violent rape and murder of a woman by a collection of bloodthirsty male rulers, not without a hint of cannibalism: **they will lay her waste, leave her naked, eat up her flesh and burn her with fire.** Of course, one must appreciate that the feminine description of Babylon reflects ancient conventional language which

portrayed cities in female terms. One needs also to bear in mind the metaphorical use of the language of harlotry and sexual immorality in relation to idolatry. The scene is not one of literal sexual assault. Yet contemporary readers cannot be blind to this passage's 'history of effects', nor the ongoing negative potential inherent within it. The violent sexual aspects are vividly portrayed in certain artistic representations of this scene (e.g. the sixteenth-century engraving by Jean Duvet). In large part, the scene functions on the association of the female with the alluring, seductive whore (see Additional Note 3 below).

Yet this analysis, while correct so far as it goes, scarcely does justice to the complexity of John's vision. First, both Babylon and the ten kings are presented as victims of the monstrous system with which they are associated. The scene is essentially one of the self-destructive nature of evil, a truth which has been proclaimed throughout the Apocalypse from the four horsemen onwards. Evil and injustice bear within themselves the seeds of their own destruction, and ultimately the whole edifice will come tumbling down. Second, there are also echoes of the story of Jezebel's demise (2 Kgs 9:30–37), just one of a number of echoes in Revelation 17–18 (compare 2 Kgs 9:22 with Rev. 17:1–6; 18:23). These establish a triangular link between the Old Testament queen, Revelation's Babylon, and the prophetess of Thyatira, who is likewise accused of sexual immorality/idolatry (2:20). This does not mean (*pace* Duff 2001) that Thyatira's 'Jezebel' and Babylon are one and the same. But it does represent a warning to Christians of how easily Babylon's influence can impinge even on the churches, and a wake-up call to reassess their own commitments as a result. Third, the unholy onslaught on the woman is itself set within the wider frame of God's purpose, the **completion of God's words** of judgement (especially those explicitly connected with the fall of Babylon: e.g. 14:8; 16:19). In the theological vision of the Apocalypse, all is ultimately held within the controlling hand of God – even, paradoxically, evil itself.

Additional Note 3: The Women of Revelation

An issue which has received heightened attention in recent decades is the portrayal of women in the Apocalypse. On the one hand, female *dramatis personae* play substantial roles in the action (the woman clothed with the sun of Revelation 12, the great prostitute Babylon of Revelation 17–18, the bride of the Lamb/heavenly Jerusalem of Revelation 21–22). On the other, feminist critics have argued that these characters are little more than androcentric stereotypes which encourage the perpetuation of misogynist attitudes (e.g. Fiorenza 1991; Pippin 1992, 1994, 1999; Thimmes 2003). Those feminine

figures presented by the text in positive terms are those whose identity is defined by the male other: the passive pregnant woman, whose role as 'mother' is central and whose male child will take centre stage; the new Jerusalem, who has been prepared for her husband and waits patiently for the wedding day to be announced (19:6–8; 21:2). Those who attempt to assert their own independence over men, however, are condemned as whores, like the sinister Babylon, portrayed in terms at once comical and shocking as a drunken prostitute and a vampire-like sorceress. This negativity is found not simply in the visionary sections of Revelation: John's prophetic rival in the Thyatiran congregation is cast as a second 'Jezebel', whose sexual immorality parallels that of Babylon herself (2:20–23), and who is threatened with the same fate as her Old Testament namesake. We listen in vain, however, for this Jezebel's voice to be heard (see Boxall 2004), or indeed the voice of any of these female characters. In Fiorenza's words, the only positive female characters are 'silent, passive, powerless, sexually controlled, and pure' (Fiorenza 1991: 13).

In addition, scholarly interest in the 'history of effects' or *Wirkungsgeschichte* has made readers acutely aware of the negative as well as the positive effects of biblical texts, particularly pertinent to these passages from Revelation (on this in relation to Revelation 17, see Boxall 2001). Contemporary readers are consequently more likely to regard the description given of Babylon's destruction at 17:16–17 as bordering on the pornographic. The potential negative effects of this passage are thrown into sharp visual relief by the sixteenth-century engraving of this scene by Jean Duvet, in which a bare-breasted woman is thrown from the monster on which she sits and violently attacked by male onlookers. On the other hand, Duvet's depiction needs to be set alongside more standard visual portrayals of this scene, in which Babylon is clearly a collapsing city (e.g. his contemporary Dürer; the fourteenth-century Angers Tapestry).

Such reflections highlight the extent to which Revelation, marked like all texts by the assumptions and constraints of its human author, is open to negative as well as positive consequences. Nevertheless, other considerations place this in a broader perspective. Fiorenza and others, for example, have developed reading strategies which recognise the presence of conventional generic language, and refuse to identify grammatical gender with 'natural' gender (Fiorenza 1991: 12–15). When Rev. 14:4 speaks of the 144,000 as an army of priest-soldiers who have not defiled themselves with women, for example, this need not be read in a literal sense as gender-specific, such that only males will be able to enter into the new Jerusalem, but can be construed as a symbolic presentation of the Christian vocation as participation in a holy war (see the commentary on this verse above).

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Further, the ancient convention of describing cities and nations in female terms need not be understood as presenting Babylon and the new Jerusalem as literally female (though the negative effects of such description should not be ignored).

Similarly, the language of sexual infidelity or 'playing the whore' throughout Revelation is not literal but metaphorical. Drawing upon Old Testament usage, it uses such language to speak of idolatry, the seduction and attraction of commitments to that which is not God and therefore cannot ultimately satisfy. It points to the single-hearted commitment demanded of those who follow God and the Lamb (e.g. 14:4), which applies to male characters no less than female. Indeed, 'Jezebel' of Thyatira is not rejected because she is a literal prostitute, still less because she is a woman; rather, her compromise with Roman culture is such that she is guilty of idolatry, and therefore a false prophet (like the masculine 'Balaam' in Pergamum and the equally masculine 'false prophet': 2:14; 16:13).

Moreover, there is greater complexity in Revelation's portrayal of feminine figures than at first appears. The woman clothed with the sun (12:1) is presented as exhibiting the same quality of 'perseverance' (ὑπομονή, 1:9) as any of her children, whether male or female. This is vividly portrayed in Diego Velázquez's *St John the Evangelist on the Island of Patmos*, in which the lone woman figure confidently confronts the dragon. Nor is the bride a wholly passive figure (indeed, it is possible that she is the same figure as the woman in Revelation 12): at 19:7 we learn that she has prepared herself, rather than being passively prepared by others (and see commentary on 19:8). Moreover, unlike Thyatira's 'Jezebel', she does have a voice, and it is the cry not only of the Spirit but of all faithful followers of the Lamb, whatever their gender (22:17). Finally, there is another, often overlooked, female figure in the book. The 'earth' who comes to the aid of the woman at 12:16 is personified in female terms, probably influenced by traditions about the Greek goddess Ge or Gaia. Here we have a female figure who, like the woman she protects, plays an active role in the Lamb's battle against the forces of chaos and destruction.

Judgement of and Lament over Babylon

(18:1-24)

(1) After this I saw another angel descending from heaven, possessing great authority; the earth was illuminated by his glory. (2) He cried out in a powerful voice:

'She has fallen! Babylon the great has fallen!
She has become the haunt of demons,
a prison for every unclean spirit,
for every unclean bird,