

SCM CORE TEXT

The Book of Revelation

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The Forces of Evil

There are four key images utilized in Revelation to denote the evil one: the Devil and Satan are spoken of in the first part of the book up to Chapter 12, before disappearing from the narrative until Chapter 20 when in their place John depicts the great red dragon, also known as the ancient serpent. There are two key verses that serve to tie these different images together. In Chapter 12 John describes the casting of the dragon from heaven in the following terms: 'The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' (12.9). This is almost exactly mirrored in Chapter 20, where John describes the binding of the dragon and his casting into the bottomless pit: 'He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years' (20.2). The key to understanding the character of Satan in the book of Revelation is found in his capacity to mislead people (12.9; 20.3, 8-10). The dominant power that John ascribes to him is that of deception, leading the nations of the world away from the one seated on the throne in heaven into idolatrous worship.

In addition to the imagery that symbolizes the evil one, there are a significant number of characters within the narrative scheme of Revelation that represent the forces loyal to Satan or the dragon. These are to be distinguished from those humans who are deceived into offering their allegiance to the beast. Rather, the forces of the evil one are either depicted as satanic angelic beings, or as earthly power structures. In either case, they function on behalf of Satan to bind, oppress and mislead the nations of the world into worshipping the beast, and into persecuting and opposing the army of the Lamb.

Satan/'The Devil'

The first use of the name Satan in the book is found in the letter to the church in Smyrna where those 'who say that they are Jews and are not' are described as 'a synagogue of Satan' (2.9)¹ – language which is also in the letter to the Philadelphian church (3.9). These 'synagogues of Satan'

clearly pose a threat to the Christian communities to which John is writing. Although their precise identity remains uncertain,² John's intent in describing them using such strong polemic is clear; they are those who have sold their souls to Satan, who have bought the satanic deception, and who are thus in opposition to the faithful witnesses of the Church. The nature of this opposition in Smyrna is seen in the following verse, when John predicts imminent and severe persecution for those in the church, identifying this as the work of the Devil (2.10). In this way, those who act against the Christians are once again cast as the agents of the Devil. In the Philadelphian letter, John assures his audience that those in the 'synagogue of Satan' will one day realize that it is actually the Church who enjoys God's true approval (3.9).

Satan's next mention is found in the letter to the church in Pergamum. The city is described as being 'where Satan's throne is' (2.13), and the congregation there are commended for their faithfulness to God despite the satanic context in which they live. Given the nature of Satan as the one who lures people away from worshipping the one on the throne in heaven, it is significant that John speaks here of Satan's throne.³ He clearly has in mind the temptation to offer idolatrous worship, and is concerned to encourage those in the congregation to remain faithful in their devotion to the one seated on the throne in heaven alone.

In the letter to Thyatira, John accuses those who have followed the teaching of 'jezebel' (2.20) as having 'learned what some call "the deep things of Satan"' (2.24). This language is used to describe a group within the church at Thyatira who are following an alternative teaching to that which John has taught. This characterization of the false teaching is designed to portray those who follow it as having been led astray by the deceptions of the evil one.⁴

Satan is not mentioned again until Chapter 12, where the story of his expulsion from heaven is told. He is identified as the Devil, the dragon, and the ancient serpent, thrown down to the earth (12.9; cf. 20.2).⁵ The expulsion of Satan to the earth gives rise to great rejoicing on the part of those whose who live in heaven, as well as to a warning aimed at those on the earth who are about to experience the wrath of the Devil, whose deceptive activity is enhanced because he knows that he only has a short time to deceive the nations (12.12).

The identification of Satan, the Devil, the dragon and the serpent is repeated in 20.2 (cf. 12.9), where Satan is bound for a thousand years, and thrown into the bottomless pit that is locked and sealed over him.⁶ Thus the statement that his time is short is seen to be fulfilled, as the faithful witness of the martyrs leads to the curtailing of Satan's power. He is then released from his imprisonment in the pit at the end of the thousand years (20.7), and once again deceives the nations, leading them in their final assault on God's people and surrounding the camp of the

saints and the beloved city, before being consumed by fire from heaven (20.8–9). The Devil is then thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, joining the beast and the false prophet, being tormented day and night for ever and ever (20.10). Satan is therefore seen to be judged, imprisoned and destroyed, resulting in humanity being finally freed from his deceptive wiles.

The great red dragon/The ancient serpent

The great red dragon is introduced in the story of the pregnant woman, and is described in cosmological terms as an astrological constellation (12.3). The background to this image in the Old Testament is to be found in the Leviathan, a mythical sea-dwelling serpentine dragon that represents the primeval forces of evil arising from the deep in opposition to the people and purposes of God.⁷ The dragon as depicted by John in Revelation has seven heads and seven diadems, indicative of its appearance of perfection,⁸ and ten horns, indicative of its power (12.3).⁹ Its tail drags a third of the stars from heaven down to the earth (12.4),¹⁰ anticipating the result of the fight with Michael where the dragon and his angels are cast from heaven to the earth (12.7–9).¹¹

The dragon positions itself for an unsuccessful attack on the Christ-child (12.4), recalling the attempt by Herod to take the life of the infant Jesus (Matt. 2.1–12). Following the battle with Michael, the dragon is cast to the earth together with his angels, and is identified as Satan (12.7–9). This sets the context for the relationship between the evil one and those in John's churches. The dragon pursues the woman, who symbolizes the people of God (12.13), and attempts to sweep her away with a flood that issues from his mouth (12.15–16). He eventually becomes angry that she keeps escaping, and sets off to make war on her other children (12.17), taking a stand on the seashore (12.18). In this way, the persecution facing the congregations to which John is writing is presented as the angry attacks of the dragon as he deceives the inhabitants of the earth into opposition towards the people of God.

The strategy employed by the dragon as he seeks to attack the army of the Lamb is made explicit in the following chapter, where the dragon gives his power, throne and authority to the beast from the sea (13.2). Significantly, the beast has the same number of heads and horns as the dragon, emphasizing the closeness of the relationship between the two. In this image, John portrays the dragon investing power in the political and military might of Rome, in order to attract the idolatrous worship of the nations of the world. This tactic is successful, as the whole earth is seen worshipping the dragon (13.4).

The narrative moves away from the dragon at this point, following not

the underlying force of evil, but rather its manifestation in the form of the beast. However the dragon comes back into view alongside the beast and the false prophet when three frogs issue from their mouths (16.13). These frogs represent demonic spirits, working in the world to deceive the nations still further into idolatrous worship of the beast (16.14), in contrast to the double-edged sword of God's word which issues from the mouth of Christ (1.16; 2.12, 16; 19.15, 21).

The dragon returns to view in Chapter 20, where he is once again identified as Satan, and is seized by the angel with the key, bound for a thousand years, locked and sealed in the pit, and prevented from deceiving the nations until the end of the thousand years (20.2–3). From this point onwards in Revelation, the dragon is no longer differentiated from Satan, and is therefore ultimately destroyed in the lake of fire (20.10).

The three horses with riders

As the Lamb opens the first four seals on the scroll, each of the four living creatures cries out in turn, 'Come!' and a rider on a coloured horse comes into view (6.1–7). The background to this imagery is found in the book of Zechariah. The post-exilic prophet's opening vision begins with the angel of the Lord riding a red horse, with further red, sorrel and white horses behind him (Zech. 1.8). Although the colours of the horses here have no obvious significance for Zechariah,¹² the importance of the vision is that these angelic horsemen have patrolled the earth and found it 'at peace' (Zech. 1.10–11). However, this is not a peace that comes from God, but from indifference on the part of the nations to the plight of the people of God (Zech. 1.14–15). Consequently, God promises to act in order to restore Israel and Zion following the Babylonian exile, bringing true *shalom* to the land in place of the apathetic inaction of Zechariah's time (Zech. 1.16–17). Coloured horses recur later in Zechariah's vision, when he sees four war-chariots pulled by horses coloured red, black, white, and dappled grey (Zech. 6.1–4). The four chariots represent the four winds of heaven, going out into the world to do battle on behalf of the people of God, replacing the false peace of indifference with the justice and *shalom* of God's universal sovereignty (Zech. 6.5–8). John adapts this imagery in his description of four horsemen riding coloured horses. He shares Zechariah's frustration that the world remains indifferent to the plight of the people of God, and he longs for the sovereignty of God to be recognized throughout the earth. The four horsemen he describes go forth into the world to execute judgement on the evil nations. While a case can be made that the first rider, on the white horse, represents Christ going forth with the gospel to do battle against evil,¹³ the other three riders represent the unleashing of satanic forces on the

earth, as the evil deeds of humanity attract their appropriate judgement. In each case, the riders are summoned by the living creatures within the divine throne room, emphasizing the fact that everything that follows in terms of judgement upon the earth has its origin with Christ himself.

The second rider to emerge is introduced with the phrase, *καὶ ἕτηλθεν ἄλλος* ('and out came another' 6.4) in contrast to the phrase *καὶ εἶδον, καὶ ἰδὼν* ('I looked, and there was' 6.2, 5, 8) used to introduce the other three riders. If the identification of the first rider with Jesus is correct, the use of the word 'another' here serves a significant rhetorical function: Jesus has just entered the world triumphantly, but then to the reader's surprise he is followed by 'another', indicating that the battle, far from being over, is merely just beginning.¹⁴ This second rider arrives on a bright blood-red horse, a fitting colour for his role in the drama, which is to take peace from the earth and to cause great slaughter (6.4). Significantly, it is not the rider himself who kills people, rather it is the people of the earth who kill each other: the result of the nations of the earth involving themselves in the satanic empire is war and death on a grand scale. The 'great sword' given to the rider symbolizes the divine permission that results in humanity's experience of judgement through warfare, as God allows the effects of evil to work themselves out in the lives of those who have embraced the beast.

The third rider to be summoned is seen riding a black horse, and carrying in his hand a pair of scales (6.5). The scales in the hand of the rider are indicative of the need to distribute food according to strict rationing during a time of starvation.¹⁵ The colour of the horse here is symbolic of the scorched earth and decaying bodies of famine and death, which is emphasized as the Lamb's voice is heard from among the four living creatures proclaiming: 'A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!' (6.6). The cost given here for grain is exorbitant for a quantity amounting to only basic starvation rations,¹⁶ and the implication is that those living under the empire of the beast will eventually face famine as its systems of exploitation set in place unsustainable levels of consumption. Howard-Brook and Gwyther note the Roman system of *latifundia*, where land was taken from smallholders and placed in the control of city-based landowners, making those who farmed the land become tenant-farmers. To cater for the spiralling demands of profitable luxury goods at the heart of the Empire, the landowners directed ever-increasing sections of land to be turned over to oil and wine production at the expense of grain, leading to a shortage of staple foods and a surplus of luxury items.¹⁷ This provides a convincing explanation for the inflated prices of grain, coupled with a protected supply of oil and wine, as is reflected in the statement from the Lamb. On this understanding, the voice of the Lamb at this point can be understood as a cry of ironic

judgement on the system which allows the poor majority to starve while the rich continue to enjoy their lavish lifestyles. The inequalities reflected in the system described here are at odds with the system of food distribution found in the Old Testament, where grain, oil and wine are seen as symbols of God's blessing and provision.¹⁸

The fourth rider appears on a pale green horse, and is the only rider to be positively identified by name: this rider is none other than Death, and he is followed by Hades (6.8). This personified duo have already been mentioned in Revelation, with the 'one like a son of man' holding the keys to Death and Hades (1.18), signifying that he has the power to release those held captive by them. This release is seen at the final judgement, where Death and Hades surrender those they have been holding before they themselves are cast into the lake of fire (20.13–14).¹⁹ Such a personification of Death and Hades is not unique to John, but rather draws on both Greek and Jewish mythology.²⁰ They come into the world at the invitation of the fourth living creature (6.7), and are given authority over a quarter of the earth²¹ to claim souls for their realm (6.8).²² Death inevitably follows war and famine, sealing the hold of the satanic empire on the nations of the earth, a hold that is broken only at the final judgement.

The four angels who had been given power to damage earth and sea

Four otherwise unidentified angels come into view at the beginning of Chapter 7. They are initially seen standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds (7.1),²³ and are described as those who have been 'given power to damage earth and sea' (7.2). They are restrained from doing so by the angel from the sun until the servants of God have been sealed (7.3), before they are finally released to wreak their havoc on the world after the sealing of the 144,000 (cf. 8.7).²⁴ The background for destructive angels such as these is to be found in Jewish apocalyptic material, where they function to execute judgement on the wicked.²⁵ Within John's scheme, this image functions to reassure his audience that while they may have to live through the coming judgements on the earth, nonetheless such events are ultimately within the overall control of God, and that as the people of God they are secure against its eternally destructive effects.

Wormwood

The Jewish tradition of fallen angels lies behind John's image of a great star who falls from heaven to the earth at the blowing of the third trumpet

(8.10-11).²⁶ This is presumably one of the angels who serve Satan, whose expulsion from heaven is described in the story of the pregnant woman (12.9). The name given to this angel is Wormwood, a bitter-tasting plant commonly used in ancient times for treating intestinal worms. It is mentioned in the Old Testament to describe bitterness,²⁷ and John's use of the name to describe this angel is indicative of the poisonous effect that the angel has on the waters of the earth.²⁸ In contrast to Moses' sweetening of the bitter water at Marah (Ex. 15.23-5), Wormwood makes the waters of the earth fatally bitter, highlighting the way in which the satanic empire poisons the earth.

Abaddon/Apollyon/the angel of the bottomless pit

Following the sounding of the fifth trumpet, a further instance is recounted of a star which, like Wormwood, has fallen from heaven to the earth. As with Wormwood, this angelic being is best understood as one of Satan's angels (9.1; cf. 12.9).²⁹ He is given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit, which he proceeds to open (9.1b-2). This is the first mention of the bottomless pit in Revelation, and it is seen to be the dwelling place of the locusts who emerge to torture those who are not sealed with the seal of God (9.2-10); it is also the place from where the beast emerges (11.7; 17.8), and the place where Satan is imprisoned for a thousand years (20.1, 3). The locusts have as their king a being named Abaddon (Apollyon in Greek),³⁰ who is described as the angel of the bottomless pit (9.11), although it is a matter of some disagreement among commentators as to whether the angel of the bottomless pit (9.11) should be identified with the angel holding the key to the bottomless pit (9.1).³¹ If they are not the same, then Abaddon emerges from the pit with the locusts, whereas if they are the same, he takes control of the locusts after they have emerged. In either case, John depicts the locusts as being led by a satanic servant in their attack on the earth. It is significant that the key is passed to the fallen angel (9.1) as Jesus has already been seen to be in possession of the keys of Death and Hades (1.18); it is therefore presumably Jesus who passes the key to the fallen angel so that the bottomless pit can be opened.³² This serves to reinforce to John's audience once again that the judgements on the earth originate within the throne room of heaven.

The locusts

The locusts that emerge from the bottomless pit following the fifth trumpet form a terrifying sight as they torture all those who are not sealed

with the seal of God (9.3-10). Plagues of locusts were feared in the rural societies of the Mediterranean basin, as they have the ability to strip crops from the fields in a matter of hours, and John's use of the image draws on the plague of locusts visited by God upon the Egyptians (Ex. 10.4-19).³³ The description that John gives of the locusts involves layer upon layer of imagery, building up a picture of unearthly, horrifying creatures with stings like scorpions (9.5, 10), armoured like horses for battle with human faces, women's hair and lion's teeth (9.7-9). This description evokes the Parthian invaders, who were famously superb horsemen with their heavily armoured horses, the *cataphracts*, and whose warriors wore their hair long.³⁴ Those living in the seven churches to which John was writing would remember the various battles fought between Rome and Parthia, in which the Romans frequently sustained heavy losses.³⁵ John plays on this fear of Parthian invasion to describe the incursion of the satanic forces upon the earth.

The four angels who are bound at the Euphrates

Following the sounding of the sixth trumpet, a voice from the horns of the altar in heaven³⁶ commands the release of four angels who are bound at the river Euphrates (9.14). John hears the number of their cavalry as two hundred million (9.16), and they ride forth at the appointed time to kill a third of humankind (9.15). Once again, just as with the image of the locusts, John has in mind here the invading Parthian hordes; the Euphrates marked the boundary between the eastern edge of the Roman Empire and the kingdom of Parthia.³⁷ The description John provides of the mounted army has strong similarities with his previous description of the locusts from the bottomless pit (9.17, 19; cf. 9.7-10).³⁸ The mounted forces of evil are pictured by John as sweeping over the earth like an innumerable army of Parthian horsemen invading the Roman Empire.

From the perspective of those in John's churches this image is both terrifying and comforting: its terror lies in the horror and severity of the damage that the evil empire attracts, yet the comfort is to be found in the assurance that the judgements John describes have their origin within the throne room of God. The destructive angels are released by a heavenly voice, at the appointed time, indicating that evil will not be allowed to rule the earth for ever, and that due judgement will in time come upon the satanic empire. The actions of humanity in its idolatrous worship of the beast are seen to be storing up judgement, with the agents of this judgement bound, awaiting the appropriate time for their unleashing. The pastoral message here is that evil will not be allowed to rule the earth unjudged for eternity; but rather the time will come when

the consequences of humanity's idolatrous actions will be visited back upon the people of the earth. So it is that a third of humankind are killed (9.15, 18), but even despite this, those who survive fail to respond to the warning implicit in the judgement, and they continue in their idolatrous and wicked actions (9.20-1).

Three foul spirits like frogs

Following the pouring out of the sixth bowl, two things happen: first, the river Euphrates dries up, to prepare the way for the invasion from the east (16.12), and second, three 'foul spirits like frogs' are seen by John emerging from the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet (16.13). This parallels two scenes from the Old Testament narrative of the exodus: the parting of the waters of the Red Sea (Ex. 14.21-2), and the plague of frogs in Egypt (Ex. 8.1-15). The three demonic frogs assemble the kings of the world for the battle at Harmagedon (16.14, 16), indicating that the mobilization of earthly forces against the people of God has a satanic origin and motivation. Just as Pharaoh's heart was hardened and he refused to repent after the plague of frogs (Ex. 8.15), with his forces eventually meeting their doom in the waters of the Red Sea (Ex. 14.22-8; 15.4-5), so in Revelation the nations of the world set their hearts against the people of God, and meet their final judgement on the plain of Harmagedon.

Babylon

The name 'Babylon' appears six times in the book of Revelation (14.8; 16.19; 17.5; 18.2, 10, 21), and it represents for John the satanic empire which seeks to promote itself as an idolatrous alternative to the kingdom of the one who is seated on the throne in heaven. Within John's context, the current manifestation of Babylon is Rome and her all-conquering Empire.³⁹ However, John's use of the language of 'Babylon' to describe the Empire indicates that, in his view, Rome is simply the latest expression of the underlying tendency of humanity to offer worship and allegiance to institutionalized evil rather than to God himself.

The city of Babylon and the Babylonian Empire were ancient enemies of the people of God. The Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem in 587 BC, destroying the temple and taking many Jews into exile in Babylon. Even after the restoration of the exiles to their land in 537 BC, Babylon continued to function as a symbol of both oppression and God's judgement.⁴⁰ The similarities between Babylon of old and the Roman Empire of John's day were easy to draw, with both exhibiting characteristics of

corruption and luxury (cf. Isa. 13.1-22; Dan. 4.30), and both actively oppressing the people of God. Smalley observes:

Babylon, in John's visions, symbolizes the secular and unjust spirit of humanity which, in any age, forces others to compromise with the truth, to worship idols rather than the Creator (13:15; 14:7), and to behave as followers of the devil rather than of Christ (13:16-17).⁴¹

There are a number of images utilized within Revelation that refer to Babylon, and these will now be examined.

The great city

Each time Babylon is referred to in Revelation, it is in conjunction with the adjective 'great' (cf. Dan. 4.30).⁴² In addition to this, there are also references to 'the great city' which function as a cipher for Babylon. The first occurrence of 'the great city' in Revelation is also the most contentious. The dead bodies of the two witnesses lie in the street of 'the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified' (11.8). This description has led many commentators to identify 'the great city' in this instance as Jerusalem, rather than Babylon/Rome. Boxall's observations are particularly helpful here:

It is not Jerusalem, nor is it Rome, though its citizens can be found in both locations. Revelation's great city can never be located on a terrestrial map, though its characteristics are those of Sodom and Egypt, both symbols of rebellion against God and, in the case of Egypt, oppression of God's people. The great city can manifest itself in any city in the world where God's sanctuary is attacked, where the Church is giving faithful witness: from Jerusalem to Rome, from Ephesus to Laodicea, from London to Beijing to New York.⁴³

It is not without significance that Babylon is repeatedly referred to as 'great'; the city is seen by John as being 'great' in terms of power, influence, splendour, wealth, and might. In so many ways though, Babylon provides an idolatrous alternative to God himself, laying claim through its 'greatness' to the worship and adoration of the nations of the world. So it is fitting that the first reference to 'Babylon' in Revelation is to 'Babylon the great', who is proclaimed by an angel as 'fallen' (14.8).⁴⁴ Babylon is described as having 'made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication' (14.8); like Satan himself, the satanic empire symbolized by Babylon is seen to be complicit in the deception of the

nations of the world (12.9; 20.3, 8-10). John wants his audience to realize that Babylon, great and mighty though the city may be, is ultimately under the judgement of God, and will not endure eternally. For John's audience, living within the Roman Empire, this assurance that 'the eternal city'⁴⁵ was actually living on borrowed time was a matter of great importance to them as they sought to disassociate themselves from the ensnaring temptations of the Empire.

There are a number of passages that describe the downfall of the great city. Following the outpouring of the seventh bowl, the great city is seen to split into three parts (16.19). Just as Babylon has made the nations drink the wine of her fornication (14.8; cf. 18.3), so she in turn drinks the wine of God's wrath (16.19). The splitting-apart of the great city also destroys those other cities of the world that have built their success on that of Babylon (16.19). Further on, an angelic voice repeats the refrain that Babylon is 'fallen', saying that the city has become 'a dwelling place of demons' (18.2).⁴⁶ A picture is then painted of the relationship between Babylon and the nations of the world, who are depicted as having participated in Babylon's pleasures, becoming intoxicated with the city's success (18.3). The people of God are instructed to come out of the great city (18.4)⁴⁷ because of its great sinfulness (18.5-7). The kings and merchants of the earth, however, mourn the destruction of Babylon, because their wealth and power is built on the economic and political success of the great city (18.9-19). The description of the great city as 'clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls' (18.16), compares with the clothing of the great whore (17.4) and contrasts with that of the bride of the Lamb (19.8).⁴⁸ The seafarers lament when they see the great city burning, crying out in despair, 'what city was like the great city?' (18.8). The final destruction of the great city is symbolized when a mighty angel takes a great millstone and throws it into the sea, proclaiming: 'With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more' (18.21).

The great whore

While the identification of 'the great city' with Babylon is clear, it is not so immediately obvious that a similar identification should be made for the great whore. However, as John's description progresses, it becomes clear that she is a dramatic and vivid representation of Rome.⁴⁹ In the background to John's presentation of the great whore is the goddess Roma, the deified personification of the city of Rome.⁵⁰ Roma had become particularly associated with the imperial family, to the extent that a number of temples were built in the first century AD dedicated

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jointly to both Roma and Augustus Caesar (63 BC-AD 14).⁵¹ John, however, reinvents the goddess Roma as a temple prostitute.⁵² The shocking effect that this would have had on John's audience should not be understated, with its invitation for them to re-imagine the Rome-dominated symbolic world that they had inherited. John's association of the sexual promiscuity normally expected of a prostitute with the goddess who personified Rome and the imperial family was a deeply subversive act.

John first encounters the great whore in his vision when he is invited by the bowl-angel to witness her judgement. He is told that she is seated on 'many waters' (17.1), which symbolize the peoples, multitudes, nations and languages of the world (17.15). The picture is thus created of Rome sitting astride the earth, dominating all of humanity. John is told that the whore has committed fornication with the kings of the earth, and that the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk with the wine of that fornication (17.2; cf. 14.8; 18.3). Having been introduced to the whore thus, John catches his first glimpse of her sitting on the scarlet beast (17.3).⁵³ She is herself clothed in imperial purple and scarlet, dripping with jewels (cf. 18.16), and holding a golden cup containing both abominations and the impurities of her fornication (17.4). The inhabitants of the earth are described as having become intoxicated by their consumption of the contents of this cup (17.2), thus creating the powerful image of the cup as a symbol of all the sinful yet seductive attractions of Babylon.⁵⁴

Only at this point is the whore positively identified, when John sees written on her head, 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations' (17.5). It becomes clear from this point that the 'great whore' is the 'great city', and that both of them together represent Babylon, the ancient enemy of the people of God, manifest in John's time as the city and Empire of Rome. The great whore is seen to be drunk with the blood of the saints (17.6), a reference to the bloody martyrdoms of Christians carried out by the Emperor Nero. While the nations have been drinking the wine of the great whore's fornication, the whore herself has been drinking the blood of the martyred people of God.

The identification of the great whore with Babylon/Rome then continues. The seven heads of the beast that she is riding are identified as seven mountains and seven kings (17.9-10); Rome was famously the city seated on seven hills, and the seven kings of whom 'five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come' (17.10) almost certainly represent seven Roman emperors.⁵⁵ The great whore is once again explicitly named as the 'great city' (17.18), and then in the description of the fall of Babylon (18.2-19.3) the imagery of the great city is interspersed with descriptions appropriate to the great whore, as the following table illustrates.